

## HUMOR, A LIBRARIAN'S ASSET

High up on the list of human and super-human attributes that library school officials fancy that aspirants to the library world possess naturally, is a sense of humor. Along with their bidding to have it, or to cultivate it generously, comes the serious charge that all due heed should be given to the Pauline admonition to become all things to all men, modified perhaps to include only library patrons.

This advice is irrefutably sound. However, the young librarian is often left to his own devices to discover that these two qualities are not necessarily compatible; that at times it may require a bit of juggling to fit humor and sympathy into a single situation; at others the sore need for an immediate increase in intellectual stature to meet a request lacks all of the elements of amusement.

Another common omission on the part of the library school officials is their failure to warn would-be university reference librarians that their ambitions will probably land them in situations in which the unpredictable becomes the normal. The academic atmosphere of the usual university reading room is subjected to extremes and charged often with speed-like changes. The befogged freshman, shut in by a constraining horizon, and the faculty member who understands atomic mysteries are two of them. Somewhere in between currents blow in which the average librarian may draw a natural breath.

Within this intellectual atmosphere where areas of high and low pressures follow each other in swift succession, a mental bifocalism, as it were, is developed. The focal point of interest may skip a half-dozen centuries in a short period, or move rapidly from the subject of rabbit breeding to Tocharian without pause for a short period of mental identification. One is reminded of the rapid metamorphosis of Shelley's *Cloud* and hopes that his passing from one stature to another may also be made with laughter.

This is the setting in which one's sense of humor plays, the testing field of one's ability to adapt oneself to another individual.

The unholy alliance of knowledge and ignorance existing in close propinquity is always a source for humorous encounters. The ability, however, to pass rapidly from one level to another in changing one's stature as needs be demanded an added element, some talisman perhaps akin to Alice's mushroom which one may nibble when the elbow rubbing of the scholar and the freshman requires a quick adjustment to meet the needs of both. In lieu of a special charm, an untrammelled will-o-the-wisp imagination is a great help. A charm, whatever it may be, is necessary to enable the librarian to perform the mental gymnastics necessary in passing from a confident mentor into a lowly devotee of the arts and sciences with sanity and amusement.

In this meeting ground of those who know and of those who don't, amusing episodes occur rather frequently. Some are stored away to be pulled out during dull moments. One of these is the case of a student who wanted a copy of the Bible. His call slip had *God* written convincingly in the author's space. Perhaps no one would gladly censure the impish desk assistant for his demure question as to whether or not an autographed copy was desired.

The undergraduate's heartfelt "Gosh! It's written in Italian," when he was shown a volume of the Italian encyclopedia at his request; the freshman's request for an Old English dictionary in order to "translate" Keat's *Belle Dame sans Merci*; the diligent

search in a biographical dictionary for the "guy, named 'Ibid,'" the unquestioned author of quotations located in Bartlett; the request to settle an argument concerning the authorship of the *Lord's Prayer*; and the graduate student's deep concern over the jumbling of the "i's" and the "j's" in a seventeenth-century dictionary come from this collection.

Nor, are the faculty remiss in supplying their share of amusement. This, however, falls into an entirely different category. Their contribution is more subtle by far; sometimes it is unconsciously generous and gracious; at others, some may rightfully question its inclusion as humor.

Probably all campuses have, or have had, their absent-minded professors, who could easily have been the prototype for many professional jokes. If you have, then you too have aided in the hunt for misplaced hats, watches, or any detachable possession as well as to have spent countless hours in chasing a bit of information from elusive clues. You too have learned to produce upon demand the unidentified reference book that had been a constant source of joy or help, or to reorder an interlibrary loan, described merely as the book once borrowed for another graduate student's use. The task of remembering the necessary, time-saving clue was no chore at all. It was repaid many times through the genuine amusement received in watching a scholar wind his way happily through the library, brushing aside all of the sacred cows that impeded his progress. One cheerfully produced "Miss Paues's" bibliography for him and generations of his students without suggestion to him that the volume was officially the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, sponsored by the sober Modern Humanities Research Association, and that his friend, "Miss Paues" gave up the dull job of compiling it after only a year or so try at it. The drab little volume really gained a more approachable character.

Instances, such as the following, may not be considered humorous by many. Nevertheless, the response they evoke is definitely shot through with amusement. Among the faculty are members whose entire beings are so permeated by the breadth of their learning that it is apparently most difficult for them to realize that scholarly odds and ends can be bandied around without finding soil sufficiently fertile for them to take root if not, to spring up as full grown research. Occasionally, it becomes necessary in such cases in requesting material from other libraries or in asking for assistance in checking bits of information, for these scholars to confide some fragments of their carefully guarded research. The solemnity with which they seek assurance that neither you nor your fellow librarians at the other end of the line will betray their confidence or alert the scholarly world that some moot point is in the process of being cleared, never ceases to come as a surprise. Consciousness of one's inability to fit these odd bits of learning into any recognizable design, makes it a very simple matter to give complete assurance that the scholarly secret will be kept inviolate.

The humor provided in such situations is not all-together easy to explain. The atmosphere of the room has been stirred by a draught of rarefied air from an ivory tower. The formula for adding the needed cubit to one's intellectual stature is no longer applicable. The situation has been reduced, as it were, to a personal equation of incommensurate ratio in which a variable source of knowledge has encountered a constant. One has no other recourse, perhaps, but to meet the situation with amusement.

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