

## HISTORICAL WITTICISMS.



AMID her darker and sterner chronicles, History has preserved not a few jests likewise—more, perhaps, for the sake of those who uttered them than of the utterances themselves; but it is noteworthy how many of these mere verbal jingles have actually taken a permanent place in the world's annals, not unfrequently to the exclusion of the very term that produced them. The now forgotten

Ougours of Siberia (whose grim visages Ammianus Marcellinus, in his blunt, soldierly way, defined as “not a face, but a bun”) live again in the *Ogres*

whose child-devouring exploits are the terror of every nursery. The “*Non Angli sed Angeli*” of St. Augustine is imperishable as the Anglo-Saxon race itself. The great Athenian teacher's true name of Aristocles has lost itself altogether in his punning cognomen of Plato (the Broad). St. Leo, watching the goblin rout of Attila's Huns sweeping over the plains of Lombardy, prayed, in a form of wit hardly worthy a Bishop of the Empire, that “these *Tartarean* demons might be sent back to their native Tartarus;” and thus the word *Tartar*\* sprang into being, to be a symbol for evermore of cruelty and terror. Early in the second half of the fifth century, a young Gothic warrior entered the cell of a Christian monk to beg his blessing, announcing himself as the Herulian chief Haud-y-Wacker (Hold-ye-Stout). The recluse laid his hand on the bowed head of the towering figure before him, and said—

“*Stout* shalt thou be to win, and firm shalt thou *hold* what thou winnest.”

The listening Goths laughed grimly at the uncouth jest; but they had reason to recall it fourteen years later, when, amid the ruins of imperial Rome, Haud-y-Wacker took his place in history as *Odoacer*.

The Middle Ages, however, were undoubtedly the era of punning *par excellence*. Grave divines, learned schoolmen, stately prelates, kings and princes—nay, the august wearer of the Triple Crown himself—indulged, without stint, in the form of wit stigmatised by Dr. Johnson as the lowest of the low. Even heraldry, in its own opinion the most exalted science on earth, tortured three languages to swell the number of the verbal juggles in which it delighted—writing on the Vernon crest “*Ver non semper viret*;” and on that of the Custs, “*Qui Cust-odit, metuat*.” Indeed, in an age when books existed only as scarce rolls of dusty parchment, transcribed by the life-long toil of some laborious monk, a caustic jest of this kind, levelled at some familiar abuse or some tyrant in high places, flew

from mouth to mouth like a watchword, stirring the souls of men in a way which our colder century can but faintly appreciate. More than one Pope directed all his spiritual thunders against the unknown authors of the biting epigrams placed in the outstretched hands of the statue of Pasquin at Rome—a circumstance which has given to this form of satire its modern name of “Pasquinade.” The University Statutes of England teem with ordinances against “the drawing of caricatures or writing of scurril verses against the collegiate officers, to the bringing into contempt of their lawful authority.” The caustic hits of those mediæval Saturday Reviewers, the court fools, more than once changed the purpose of their despotic masters. Sir Walter Scott, and other writers of equal renown, have borne ample testimony to the effect of the old anti-Romish ballads in paving the way for the Reformation. Scandinavian chroniclers tell us that a Norwegian king, who had maltreated some Iceland traders, was informed by their indignant countrymen that they intended making as many lampoons upon him as there were promontories in his dominions—a threat which one glance at the jagged coast-line of Norway will show to be a very terrible one indeed! It is easy to conceive what encouragement the hard-pressed followers of John Huss must have found in the dying prediction of their martyred leader, which, strongly as it savours of *ex post facto* invention, is attested by many competent witnesses:—“Ye may burn the goose [Huss] if ye will, but not the swan [Luther] that shall come after me!”†

Even in an age of such universal pleasantry, however, it is somewhat strange to find the saturnine Charles V. uttering such a flagrant pun as that of “I could put Paris in my glove” (*gant*), with which he answered the vaunts of Francis I.—a rude play upon the name of Gand or Ghent, then the largest town in the Netherlands. A much neater, as well as more practical rebuke, was given to the factious Duke of Orleans, in the preceding century, by his rival Jean “*Sans-Peur*” of Burgundy, who, seeing on the Orleans banner the figure of a knotty club, significantly adorned his own with a *carpenter's plane*.

Amid the countless affectations of the sixteenth century stood pre-eminent the fashion of jesting by anagram—*i.e.*, by inverting or transposing the letters of a proper name. Every schoolboy (as Lord Macaulay would have said) is familiar with Henri of Navarre's appropriate anagram upon the beautiful Marie Touchet, “*Je charme tout*.” The Huguenots extracted “*Vilain Herodés*” from the name of their sworn enemy, Henri de Valois (Henry III. of France); and the Romish ecclesiastics, smarting under the sarcasms of Erasmus, satirised his humble origin with the taunt of “*Eras mus*” (Thou wert a mouse).

The courtly and artificial witticisms which the Louis

\* The real name is “*Tatârin*” in the singular, and “*Tatâré*” in the plural.

† In Huss's native Bohemian dialect, this prophetic pun holds good as above.



Quatorze era prescribed to all Europe as an unalterable fashion are too well known to need repetition; but a few manly spirits were found to resist the intellectual as well as the physical tyranny of the Grand Monarque. Few rebukes have ever been better merited than that which William III.'s envoy administered to a French courtier who showed him the gallery of battle-pieces in the Louvre, boastfully asking whether the English king could display the like.

"My master's deeds, sir," said the ambassador, "are seen everywhere, *except* on his own palace-walls."

A similar check was once given to Louis himself by the famous Dunkirk privateer, Jean Bart, whom the king greeted, on his return from a successful cruise, with the flattering announcement:—

"M. Jean Bart, I have made you admiral of my fleet."

The rough-hewn veteran, instead of being overpowered by the royal condescension (as the brilliant circle around him doubtless expected), answered bluntly—

"Sire, vous avez bien fait.\*"

The quiet intensity of this rebuke can be paralleled only by the famous repartee of Prince Esterhazy in our own time, when, hearing a Spanish grandee boasting that he had "fifty thousand sheep," the great Hungarian remarked quietly—

"Curious coincidence—that's just the number of my shepherds."

The historical pleasantries of the eighteenth century, like every other form of contemporary wit, followed the bias given to them by the formidable renown of a single name. Voltaire, though in reality the topmost bough rather than the root of that fatal "Encyclopædist" tree which was one day to overshadow all Europe, reigned as absolutely in life as after death, and extended through every land the use of those verbal stilettoes wherewith the wits of the day poignarded friend and foe alike. All the best sayings of D'Alembert, Diderot, Pope, Bolingbroke, Horace Walpole, and Frederick the Great bear the unmistakable stamp of the great master of mischief; Frederick's close intimacy with Voltaire himself rendering the likeness doubly conspicuous in his case. On one occasion, however, the "soldier-king" was fully matched at his own weapons. After his conquest of Saxony, in 1756, the indignant nation altered the inscription on the newly-introduced Prussian coinage—*Ein Reichs-thaler*—into *Ein Reich stahl er* (He stole a kingdom), a gibe keenly resented and terribly avenged.

\* To the credit of Louis, he was sensible enough to take this reproof in good part, his only remark being: "Here, gentlemen, is a man who knows what he can do, and means to do it to the utmost."

It may be remarked, in passing, that the word "thaler," or dollar, is in itself a kind of historical pun. The silver yielded by the valley of Joachims-thal was formerly so much esteemed that the country-folk, in taking payment for their wares, were wont to say, "Give me a Joachim's Dale one" (Joachims-thal-er); and this, shortened to "thaler," gave rise to a world-wide name.

The sanguinary pleasantries of the French Revolution have been immortalised by its greatest historian, Mr. Carlyle; but the most perfect sarcasm of that terrible period is now almost forgotten. The old Marquis de Cazotte, almost the only remaining representative of the destroyed *noblesse*, seeing "Brotherhood or Death!" chalked on a wall, remarked that it should be translated, "Be my brother, or I kill you."

Of Napoleon I. (certainly the most unlikely source from which to expect a pun) one such utterance is recorded—perpetrated, too, in the very height of one of his most splendid campaigns—that of 1796-97—which ended in the expulsion of the Austrians from Italy and the Treaty of Campo Formio. Hearing an Italian lady observe that he seemed very young to have achieved such wonderful successes, he answered sharply—

"Demain j'aurai Milan" (mille ans).

As for the countless historical jests of the present century, our remaining space will only permit us to indicate one or two of the best. The headlong frenzy of ambition has seldom been more keenly rebuked than in Talleyrand's criticism on the career of Napoleon:—

"His watch was fast, while the rest of mankind had the right time."

Not less happy was the jest of a veteran Parisian wit on Louis Napoleon's gift of a hotel a-piece to two of his marshals:—

"Ah, oui! ils défendront le trône et l'hôtel"—an admirable travesty of the oath of allegiance, "to defend the throne and the altar" (*l'autel*).

The remark attributed to the Emperor Nicholas on his visit to Sobieski's statue at Warsaw, although probably due in reality to his court jester, Prince Menschikoff, has a grim significance when viewed by the light of subsequent events:—

"That man and I are the two greatest fools of history, for we both saved Vienna."

Prince Bismarck's prophecy that the war of 1870 would cost France "two Napoleons" is well known; and Tacitus himself might have envied the caustic terseness of the definition of Russia (a definition, happily, all but obsolete at the present day) as "a despotism *tempered* by assassination." D. KER.