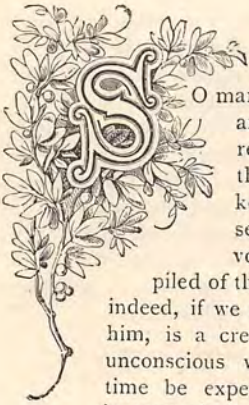


AMUSING JUVENILE ANSWERS.



SO many and varied are the amusing answers given by juveniles in reply to questions either beyond them, or so well within their ken as readily to lend themselves to their fun, that a volume could easily be compiled of them. The modern school-boy, indeed, if we are to believe all we hear of him, is a creature from whom flashes of unconscious wit and humour may at any time be expected; and these flashes are, in general, so interesting that they deserve a better fate than to sink into oblivion. To rescue a few of them from that fate is the purpose of this paper.

It is, it appears, at examinations rather than during ordinary lessons that these gems of original thought are elicited. It was at such a ceremony, for instance, that a cape was described by one boy as "a piece of land and rock joining the sea and its tributaries;" and by a second as "a point adjoining the ocean for putting lighthouses, &c., on." By another bright youth continents and volcanoes were described as follows:—"A continent is a portion of land partially surrounded by water, with mountains and plains in it; a volcano is a mountain with a basin on the top, spitting out fire and brimstone." Besides these items of geographical information, we are told that "Africa is called the Dark Continent because the negroes in it are black;" and that "a fort is a place to put men in, and a fortress a place to put women in."

In English literature some of the answers are calculated, if not to overthrow established notions, at least to make us wonder at the state of mind by which they could have been prompted. "Who was Sir Walter Scott?" was an examination-paper question; and the reply, which would have delighted Mark Twain, was: "He was the last minstrel seen in Wales, and was killed by Llewellyn for giving money to those who captured wolves. Among his poems are *Ivanhoe* and *Shakspeare!*" This, however, is capped by our next example, which displays a curious state of mixed knowledge, the effect, let us charitably suppose, of a system of cramming. "Milton was the novelist who wrote *Killing no Murder* against King James II., who put out his eyes for it, when Milton said: "Had I but served my God as well as I have served my king, He would not have forsaken me in mine old age." According to other original thinkers, Byron was imprisoned for twenty years in the Castle of Chillon; Wordsworth was called a Lake poet, because he drowned himself in a lake owing to money difficulties; and the reason of Chaucer being termed the father of English poetry is that he invented printing!

With the text of our literature liberties are sometimes taken by erring juveniles, as when a boy in an

advanced class at a public school rendered the concluding lines of the first act of *Hamlet* thus:—

"Let us go in together;
And keep your fingers on your lips, I pray,
Whose arm is out of joint with cursed spite,
And he is never born to set it right—
Nay, come, let's go together."

A reference to the play will show how extraordinarily the words of the immortal bard have been perverted. At the same school one of the tasks in an examination-paper was to write out the combat scene in the fifth canto of *The Lady of the Lake*; and the version given of some of the lines by one boy was almost as remarkable as the above. He wrote:—

"I thank thee, Roderick, for the word:
It nerves my heart, it *steals* my sword;
* * * * *
We try this quarrel *kilt* to *kilt*."

In the domain of history we have several answers more amusing than instructive. "The Crusaders," according to one rising genius, "were the men who conquered America and Peru, and were so called because they were the first to cross the Atlantic." By a second historian we are told that "Edward the Confessor was the first English monarch to embrace the Popish religion, for which he was deposed by William the Conqueror, and forced to flee to France." Perhaps it was the same youth who was of opinion that "Robert the Bruce was the son of Sir William Wallace, of Scotland, and when he was in a hut he saw a spider swinging seven times, and he said, 'I will yet be king.' So he gathered his men, and defeated the English by driving them into the *Fourth*, after which he died fighting with the Black Prince against the Moors, who flung his heart among his enemies, and cried, 'Go, thou faithful heart, and I will follow thee.'"

But the gem of the historical answers is that given in reply to the question, "Who was Queen Elizabeth?" "Queen Elizabeth was the last of the Roses, and, fearing that Mary Queen of Scots would marry her husband, Sir Walter Raleigh, she beheaded her, and in remorse sent Raleigh to discover the United States. When he returned without doing so, he was executed by Elizabeth's son, James I., after gaining time to write his long and varied biography in the Tower." Other interesting items tell us that Julius Caesar was a Frenchman who rose to be king; that "Ireland's *pattern* saint is called St. Patrick because he killed all the snakes with a stick;" and that the French Revolution was caused by the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo!

Turning now to grammar, we find that there is a practical side even to that prosy science. This was displayed by the boy who, when asked the future of "he drinks," replied, "He is drunk." Somewhat similar but still more to the point, is the story of the little girl who was of opinion that the future of the verb "to

love" was "to marry." The fitness of things was not so apparent as in these instances to the scholar who figures in the following dialogue. At a *vivâ-voce* examination a little fellow was asked, "What is a monarchy?" to which he replied, "A country governed by a king." "Who would reign if there was no king?" was the next interrogation. "The queen." "And if the queen should die?" This was a poser, but, after a minute's thought, the boy gave the astounding answer, "The knave!"

From whatever cause it may be, there can be no doubt that the young people of London evince a sharpness not shown elsewhere. For example, who other than a London Board-school boy could have given such "a short account of the Conquest of Ireland" as "The Conquest of Ireland was begun in the year 1170, and is still going on"? Nor is this talent confined to the boys, as a writer in a London newspaper demonstrated some time ago. One girl, when asked how beef-tea was made, answered, "Buy a pot of beef extract, and follow the directions on the lid;" and a second gave "Cayenne pepper and Jamaica ginger" in reply to "What are warmth-producing foods?" But it was a boy, I think, who was asked what celerity was, and who, perhaps from experience, defined it as "something to put hot plates down with."

A pretty and sensible answer was returned to an inspector the other day by a little girl, when asked to explain what was meant by "bearing false witness against your neighbour." "It was," she said, "when nobody did nothing, and somebody went and told of it." Another gentleman of the same class was examining some country lads, and asked one of them if he knew what vowels were. "Fowls, sir?" answered the boy—"why, fowls be chickens!" Equally naïve was a little boy whose uncle inquired of him how he liked going to school. "I like going well enough," was his ingenuous reply, "but I don't like staying when I get there." Still more amusing was the retort made by a small boy to an old gentleman who, on his twelfth birthday, hoped that he would "improve in wisdom, knowledge, and virtue." "The same to you, sir," said the little fellow, totally unconscious of the sarcasm implied by his words.

So much for short answers; and, before concluding, I may be allowed to give a few examples of juvenile composition, the first two of which came under my personal notice. In reply to "Give a short description of the pig," a youthful Buffon wrote: "The pig is an animal. He is useful in many ways, because he is easily fed on stuff not needed, also mud. His skin is thick and dirty, and his head ugly, with cutted (*sic*) ears, and a short tail on it. When he is a mail

he is called a bore; and a femail, sow. He likes spirits."

Another natural history subject was "the dog," and it was announced that extra marks would be given to those who introduced into their essays a couplet on that animal. This, as may be supposed, proved an insurmountable obstacle to most; but one of the boys got over the difficulty in this manner:—"The dog is a noble animal, being of several kinds, such as Newfoundland, collie, pup, mastiff, and mongrel. It is called the friend of man, because on the Alps they carry bottles round their necks to save the lives of travellers who are lost in the snow. Also the friend of women, like the poetry which says—

'Old Mother Hubbard, she went to her cupboard,
To give her poor dog a bone.'

but she hadn't any. The dog has usually a hairy coat, though some haven't, like hounds and such. Hairy ones are best for watching."

But even this must give way in precocity to our next, and last, example. All the boys at a certain school being ordered to compete for a prize offered for the best composition, one of them, named John, refused to do it on the ground that he could think of nothing to write about. Nevertheless, he was obliged to compete, and when the day of trial came he was asked in turn to read his essay. He began:—

"My composition is about spring. Spring will soon be here. How do I know that? Because it came last year, and the year before that, and the year before that.

"The grass will soon grow green, and the trees will put forth leaves. How do I know that? Because the grass grew green, and the trees put forth leaves, last year, and the year before that, and the year before that.

"And the lambs will come, and they will gambol and play and have a good time. How do I know that? Because the lambs gambolled last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. And——"

Here the reader was interrupted by his teacher, who, tired of the iteration, told him that he need read no more; and John triumphantly returned to his seat amid the laughter of the audience. Needless to say, however, his composition did not gain the prize.

This last instance and others will show that the scholars were not in every case influenced merely by a desire to make the most of their subjects according to their lights, but were, in a manner, led out of their way by a prospect of mischief. But, of course, most of the replies here chronicled are quite ingenuous and free from guile; and from them I trust a little entertainment and amusement may be had.

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