

**THE TREASURY OF MODERN
ANECDOTE: BEING A SELECTION
FROM THE WITTY AND
HUMOROUS SAYINGS OF THE
LAST HUNDRED YEARS**

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The Treasury of Modern Anecdote: Being a Selection from the Witty and Humorous Sayings of the Last Hundred Years by W. Davenport Adams

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THE TREASURY
OF
MODERN ANECDOTE

BEING A

*SELECTION FROM THE WITTY AND HUMOROUS SAYINGS
OF THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS.*

Edited with Notes and Introduction

BY

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P R E F A C E

THE present collection of Anecdotes differs from its predecessors in several particulars.

To begin with, it is strictly a Treasury of Modern Anecdotes. It does not profess to dish up for the delectation of present-day readers stories which have been familiar to them all their lives, and which are, in fact, the commonplaces of ordinary conversation. There is a certain sprinkling of old favourites,—of time-honoured tales which no one likes to see omitted from any collection, however fresh it be in aim and character. But these are anecdotes of the perennial kind,—anecdotes which, the more they are known the better they are liked—which are so excellent in themselves that they never pall upon the taste. For the most part, however, the Anecdotes in this collection are emphatically modern,—modern in so far that they are drawn from modern sources, and refer to modern people. They do not, for the most part, go farther back than Walpole's "Letters," and they come down as far as the latest stories and reminiscences, such as those of Crabb Robinson and J. R. Planché. It has seemed to the editor and to the publishers that the public is tired of the old stories that generally do duty in such collections, and that it is ready to welcome a work which shall put before it the cream of the spoken wit and humour of the last hundred years.

Again: the Anecdotes in this volume are, as far as can possibly be ascertained, authentic. The object of the editor and publishers has been to avoid as much as possible the old indefinite stories about "a

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lawyer," or "a doctor," or "a certain judge," and to confine this work chiefly to anecdotes for which some authority can be given, and which can be attributed with reasonable safety to particular individuals. It is not pretended that every authority given in this book is the ultimate or original authority, but an endeavour has honestly been made, in the majority of cases, to get at the origin of the anecdote, and to be sure that the witty and humorous saying quoted has been ascribed to the proper person. It is possible that, in this way, certain of our readers may notice the absence of pet anecdotes which have been attributed to different persons, and which, in the absence of sufficient evidence for identification, have been deliberately omitted from this volume. On the other hand, they will find many anecdotes apportioned for the first time to the individuals with whom they are actually connected. They will find the stories not only modern, but authentic.

Another feature of the work is the classification to which the Anecdotes have been subjected, those on "Men of Letters," or "Men of Society," or "Lawyers," or "Actors," and so on, having been grouped together on a plan which will be appreciated by the reader.

Further than this, the Anecdotes relating to particular individuals have been brought together and carefully arranged after a system which, it is hoped, will be equally useful and agreeable.

Where anecdotes have been fathered upon more than one individual on equally good authority, mention has been made of the fact; and notes have been appended in those cases where additional explanations appeared necessary. A full index has also been added.

W. D. A.

INTRODUCTION.

THE entertaining nature of a Book of Anecdotes will be freely conceded. It will be acknowledged that, for whiling away a dull afternoon or a spare half-hour, few things more suitable could be devised. It is at once amusing and fragmentary; and whilst its inherent fun excites the fancy and relieves the mind, the brevity of the matter allows it to be taken up again and again without any weariness being felt. A photograph album, we all know, is sometimes made to do duty on these occasions, but the superiority of a Book of Anecdotes will readily be allowed. The former palls upon the taste jaded by pictures of people either unknown, or else too familiarly known; whilst an anecdote, even if old, is, if good, perennially new, and, if it is wholly new as well as good, it is welcomed as a "thing of beauty," and mentally recorded as a "joy for ever." A Book of Anecdotes has, however, a further ground of superiority over most other forms of parlour amusement. It is as useful as it is entertaining. A poor observer is he who regards a good authentic anecdote as being entertaining merely. To be sure, the first duty of an anecdote is to amuse, but this is by no means all it does. A witty or a humorous saying is not only interesting in itself; it is interesting in reference to the circumstances that called it forth, and to the man who uttered it. It may shed light upon the character or the life of that man, and it may, by so doing, illustrate the history of the world. It enlightens for us not only individual character, but human nature.

Elaborate histories are all very well, and profound essays are all very well; but if you want to get at the heart of a man, a woman, a people, or an event, is not a thoroughly authentic anecdote much more to the point? Does it not tell more, in the compass of a half-a-dozen lines or sentences, than the history in so many chapters, or the essay in so many pages or paragraphs?

An anecdote is valuable in two ways—in relation to the individual as a member of a class, and in relation to the individual as an individual. In the present volume, the anecdotes are so arranged that they may be regarded from both points of view—the men of society being grouped together, and the men of letters, and so on. Unfortunately, this classification does not altogether satisfy; as, for example, in the case of Sydney Smith, who was at once a man of society, a man of letters, and a clergyman; of Sheridan, who was a man of society, a man of letters, and a politician; of Theodore Hook, who was a man of society and a journalist; of Jekyll, who was a man of society and a barrister. In such cases, we have endeavoured to determine in which of these characters each of those we have named was most a wit or a humorist, and have ranged him accordingly under the heading to which he seemed most obviously to belong. The final decision was of the less importance that very few of the best wits and humorists were distinctly “shoppy” in their sayings. Unquestionably, however, there is a wit and there is a humour which pertains specially to special classes and professions, and the peculiar manner of which is very clearly discernible. There is a lightness and flippancy about society talk which cannot but be reflected in the recorded anecdotes of the men who frequented society. There is a sort of frivolity and vapidness, for example, about the witticisms of Luttrell and of Jekyll, of Selwyn, D’Orsay, and Alvanley, which at once stamp them as the production of members of the “fashionable” world. It is noticeable, again, in the jokes narrated of famous men of letters, that their wit and humour is decidedly tinged by the nature of their occupation. They deal largely in quotations, and in literary allusions

generally; their repartees have an unmistakeable flavour of the study and the desk. With lawyers there is just that quickness and that recklessness of retort which you would naturally expect from men whose chief stock-in-trade has so often been their readiness and unscrupulousness of wit. The sayings of academic humorists have an obviously academic tinge; the epigrams of a Parr, a Porson, and a Davidson, are the evident product of the scholarly life. And so with doctors and divines, with statesmen and with politicians, with business men, with tradesmen, and with women generally: there is a peculiarity, or rather a class character, about the anecdotes narrated of them, which, though not always obtrusive and easy of detection, is nevertheless observable by the attentive reader. A man is very much what his surroundings make him, and according to the atmosphere in which he lives will be the general nature of his outcome.

We say "the general nature," because, when all is said and done, class training and class association are not everything. If wits and humorists can be divided into classes, they can be still further subdivided according to their personal idiosyncrasy. Take the men of society, for example. The distinctive peculiarity of Sydney Smith was the exuberant character of his humour,—the enormous amount of fun which his ever-working fancy was able to accumulate round whatever subject he took up. Here was a humorist in the true sense of the term, who, hitting on a comical idea, dwelt upon it and expanded it until it was scarcely capable of any further expansion at his hands or at anybody else's. In Hook, again, we have a wit pure and simple, whose distinctive peculiarity consisted in rapidity and pungency of repartee,—generally in the way of pun, often in the way of felicitous quotation. This was very much the case with Luttrell and with Jekyll. Alvanley was more particularly a type of the young nobleman of fashion, whose wit was to a great extent impertinence tempered by urbanity. Selwyn's wit, again, was that of an originally morbid fancy modified by the pressure of society. Lord Dudley's was almost wholly part and

parcel of his uncommon personality, though we cannot help thinking that much of his absent-mindedness was purposely assumed, for the sake of the results which it produced. Among men of letters, again, we have the biting sarcasm of Jerrold and the humorous *bonhomie* of Charles Lamb. Both were slaves of the pen; yet how different were their modes of thought, how distinct their manner of expression! There is, in the same way, quite a different flavour about the *bons mots* of a Sheridan and those of, say, a Thackeray. The former are delightfully brilliant and laughable; in the latter there is always something more than the mere wit or humour in which they are enshrined. Equally characteristic of the men are the anecdotes recorded of Curran and of Erskine, of Lord Eldon, Lord Norbury, and the old Scotch judges who have been so graphically described to us by Cockburn. You can tell a Curran saying directly you hear it or see it; it is hardly necessary for it to be authenticated; it bears the heal-mark of the author. So, too, with Lord Eldon, whose sayings are almost as individual as those of the great lexicographer himself. Among actors, one at once thinks of the admirably and prolifically witty Foote, whom no one could ever take at a disadvantage. Among divines, one thinks at once of Whately—surely the most epigrammatic of all clerics, past and present. Among foreigners, again, who but recalls to mind the numerous and pungent sayings of a Talleyrand—the French Douglas Jerrold, with even more than the neatness of his British prototype,—the wit, *par excellence*, of France, unless you think he is run close by Chamfort and by Rivarol. It is not necessary, however, to run through the whole list of wits and humorists. It is sufficiently clear that if there is a certain family likeness among the anecdotes of certain classes, there is also a large measure of individuality in the stories related about particular persons. Those persons are members of classes, we confess; but they are nevertheless themselves. Neither they nor their wit and humour are wholly absorbed in the various categories with which they are connected.

Hitherto we have had to do with the wit and humour of classes and