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# A comedy of errors

*by Anthony Daniels*

I was about eleven when I was first made aware that there were "classic" authors and that reading them was good for me, in the same way that my grandmother thought that a weekly dose of castor oil was good for me. The first classic author I was given to read was W. W. Jacobs (1863–1943), who is now almost entirely forgotten. Even people with an above-average knowledge of literature do not recall his name, though the title of his most famous story, "The Monkey's Paw," sometimes rings a bell.

Jacobs was very popular in his day, however. His day was a long one, as he flourished from the end of the Victorian Era to the beginning of the First World War. Jacobs's name was then something of a brand. His several publishers—Methuen, Hurst and Blackett, Harper & Brothers, George Newnes Ltd., Hodder & Stoughton, Lawrence & Bullen—issued his books in an instantly recognizable format: a brown cover with an illustration on the front and the spine, imitating the style of woodblock prints by the artist William Nicholson. For an habitué of secondhand bookshops such as myself, these volumes are still instantly recognizable as being by Jacobs and no one else.

In 1906, in the middle of Jacobs's period of greatest productivity and popularity, G. K. Chesterton wrote an essay that began thus: "Mr. Jacobs is in a real sense a classic." He meant by this not that he would still be read in a hundred or a thousand years, but that he had certain classic qualities, chief among them a deep humor, which Chesterton distinguished from mere wit. Not that he was without a sense of the tragic. When Jacobs wrote in that vein, his form of tragedy was, according to Chesterton, "classic tragedy, because, however heartrending it is, it leaves the heart more strong."

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William Wymark Jacobs was born in 1863 in Wapping, in the East End of London, his father being a wharf manager on the docks. Jacobs's early life was one of nagging poverty, but as a child he

absorbed the strong atmosphere of dock life and the stories told by the ever-shifting cast of characters of the ships and boats that constantly came and went. He was also sent on vacation to his relatives in a village in East Anglia, where he learned about village life. Two ways of life—that of the docks and that of the village in the flatlands adjacent to the coast of the North Sea—were to form the subject matter of his work. First, though, he obtained a position as a bureaucratic drudge in the civil service, in which he worked until growing literary success enabled him to give it up in 1899.

One of Jacobs's first editors was Jerome K. Jerome, to whom he remained ever grateful. Jacobs's first collection of stories, *Many Cargoes* (1896), was to go through scores of reprintings. Although he subsequently wrote novels, the bulk of his work, and the best, consists of short stories. They are unjustly forgotten.

Occasionally he wrote horror stories. The most famous of these—much anthologized and, for a while, often filmed—is "The Monkey's Paw," in which a soldier returning from India brings with him a dried monkey's paw that has the property of granting its owner three wishes. The soldier gives it away to a couple, warning them that it is a curse rather than a blessing, but they do not heed him. Their first wish is for £200, at the time a large sum, almost unimaginably so to the new owners of the paw. The next day, a representative of the factory in which their beloved son works tells them their son has been mangled and killed by a machine in the factory and offers them £200 in compensation.

Their second wish, that of the boy's mother, is that he return from the grave, but his condition is so horrible that the third wish, that of the father, is that he should return whence he came. The upshot of the three wishes is that the couple have lost their son and gained nothing. Beware, then, of what you wish for, for the wish's fulfilment will have consequences that you will never foresee.

Jacobs's best horror story, however, turns out at its end not to have been a horror story at all—as the author until then leads us to believe—but rather a piece of the most tragic social realism. In "Three at Table," a group of men in the coffee room of a hotel are telling ghost stories, in which "opinions ranged from rank incredulity to childlike faith." An old sailor, asked if he had ever seen a ghost, embarks on an episode from years before.

The sailor was on a walk one day in the flatlands near the sea when he lost his way. A fog descends and he finds himself in the marshes. He crosses paths with a sturdy countryman and asks the way; the man tells him that there is a village three miles thence, but, having spent all day walking, the sailor is now too tired to cover the distance. He sees a cottage with a dimly lit window and wonders whether he might stay there. "You won't get no good there," says the sturdy countryman. "Why not?" he asks. "There's a something there, sir, what 'tis I dunno, but the little 'un belonging to a gamekeeper as used to live in these parts see it, and it was never much good afterward. Some say it's a poor mad thing, other's say it's a kind of animal; but whatever it is, it ain't good to see."

Nevertheless, when the countryman is out of sight, the sailor goes to the cottage. There he is welcomed warily by an old couple, who nevertheless invite him to dinner. "We're not going to lose you now that we've got you," laughs the old man, not altogether reassuringly. The couple have a son, they say, who will dine with them, but in the dark because his eyes are so weak that he cannot stand the light. During the dinner, which is good but difficult to eat on account of the darkness, the narrator catches a glimpse of "a pair of wild eyes shining through the gloom like a cat's." He pushes his chair back, overturns the fireguard, and by the light of the flickering fire catches a glimpse of the face of the son. "With a sharp catch of my breath I left my chair and stood with clenched fists beside it. Man or beast, which was it?"

The son, it turns out, had his face horribly disfigured in a fire from which he rescued several children, but his disfigurement has given rise to so much local fear and superstition that his parents and he now live in total isolation. In the scope of fewer than twelve pages, Jacobs has masterfully demonstrated and made us feel viscerally the terrible power of prejudice, ignorance, and superstition.

Yet Jacobs is mostly a very jolly author who is far from overwhelmed by his awareness of the tragic dimension of life. His stories are often related through the voice of a night watchman on a wharf in the docks, an old sailor now retired from the sea, or alternatively an old man who sits drinking on a bench outside the Cauliflower, the inn in a fictional village called Claybury, where many of Jacobs's stories take place. The small dramas of the life of sailors ashore, or of the inhabitants of an isolated village, are told with an artlessness that conceals art.

One of Jacobs's great skills—a rare one—is to convey the demotic speech of the time with clarity, accuracy, and good humor, but also completely without the condescension of the educated towards the uneducated. Indeed, his writing displays the richness, expressiveness, and underlying fund of good sense that anyone who has had authentic contact with that speech knows it to hold. This is all done so well that one hardly realizes that it is done at all, it seems so perfectly natural.

Many of the stories begin with a pronouncement by the night watchman and are, to me at least, a source of immense delight:

> "Sailormen 'ave their faults," said the night watchman, frankly. "I'm not denying of it. I used to 'ave myself when I was at sea, but being close with their money is a fault as can seldom be brought ag'in 'em."

Another:

> "Every sailorman grumbles about the sea," said the night-watchman, thoughtfully. "It's human nature to grumble, and I s'pose they keep on grumbling because there ain't much else they can do. There's not many shore-going berths that a sailorman is fit for, and those that there are—such as a night-watchman's for instance—wants such a good character that there's few as are equal to it."

Another:

> "Gratitoode!" said the night-watchman, with a hard laugh. "*Hmf!* Don't talk to me about gratitoode; I've seen too much of it. If people wot I've helped in my time 'ad only done arf their dooty—arf, mind you—I should be riding in my carriage."

Another:

> "Speaking o' money," said the night-watchman, thoughtfully, as he selected an empty soap-box on the wharf for a seat, "the whole world would be different if we all 'ad more of it. It would be a brighter and a 'appier place for everybody."

Yet another:

> "Dreams and warnings are things I don't believe in," said the night watchman. "The only dream I ever 'ad that came anything like true was once when I dreamt I came in for a fortune, and next morning I found half a crown in the street."

And one last:

> "Dogs on board ships is a nuisance," said the night-watchman, gazing fiercely at the vociferous mongrel that had chased him from the deck of the *Henry William*; "the skipper asks me to keep an eye on the ship, and then leaves a thing like that down in the cabin."

Remark how a simple change of monosyllable transforms a banal sentence into a glorious utterance: compare "Dogs on board ships *are* a nuisance" with "Dogs on board ships *is* a nuisance." And Jacobs doses verbal errors very precisely, so that one delights in them rather than grows tired with them as a signal of the author's supposed superiority to his character. Dull must he be of soul who does not delight in the replacement of the word *prognosis* by *prognotice*.

The night watchman relates the adventures of Ginger Dick, Sam Small, and Peter Russet when they come ashore after their voyages. They involve various, but invariably unsuccessful, intrigues by which they hope by means of quick money never to have to go to sea again. For example, there is the widowed landlady of a pub, supposedly rich, who lost her ginger-headed son at sea many years before. Having learned something about the son from the widow, Sam Small and Peter Russet suggest to Ginger Dick that he impersonate the long-lost boy. The problem is that her son was heavily tattooed and Ginger Dick does not want to be tattooed. However, they get him blind drunk, in which state he agrees to the tattoos. He then goes to the widow intending to impersonate her son and extract money from her. Unfortunately, he learns that her son was not only tattooed, but had lost a finger in an accident. Discretion is the better part of imitation, and the scheme falls through.

The name of the fictional village of Claybury was, perhaps not coincidentally, also the name of a vast mental asylum not very many miles away. The local scoundrel in Claybury is Bob Pretty, and unlike the sailors he always gets away with his small dishonest schemes. For example, when a tiger is mistakenly thought to have escaped from a traveling circus, Bob Pretty manages to turn the

general terror to account. He induces many people to claim that they have seen and bravely faced the nonexistent tiger, whereafter their chickens, ducks, and pigs disappear, supposedly taken by the tiger—but really taken by Bob Pretty, who uses the villagers' unretractable tall tales as his alibi.

Not all the stories are either recounted by the night watchman or take place in Claybury. One of my favorites of these others is titled "Back to Back." A man called Scutts claims to have injured his back in a slight railway accident and is brought home supposedly unable to walk, hoping for compensation from the railway company. Published on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War, the story is a witness to the development of what might be called "compensation culture." In the year before the publication of this story, a doctor who specialized in insurance claims, Sir John Collie, published his textbook, *Malingering and Feigned Sickness*, "Dedicated to my friend the British workman to whom I owe much." In a much longer medical textbook of 1917 on malingering by A. Bassett Jones and Llewellyn J. Llewellyn, titled *Malingering, or the Simulation of Disease*, we read "It is easy to complain of 'pain in the back,' difficult to establish or refute the truth of the assertion—a fact of which the fraudulent-minded are well aware."

And so Scutts retires to bed and awaits compensation from the railway doctor who is coming to examine him. But he soon gets tired of waiting and goes down to the pub, substituting his neighbor for himself in the bed in the meantime. Unfortunately for him, it is precisely at this time that the railway doctor arrives and offers forty golden sovereigns in compensation (equivalent to about $18,000 today), which his neighbor happily takes, tossing five of them contemptuously to Scutts.

Jacobs, by all accounts a charming, gentle, and somewhat retiring man, is clearly amused rather than outraged by his Scutts. He takes the view that Bassett Jones and Llewellyn took at the end of their massive textbook: malingering is as old as lying and coeval with the history of man. Scutts merely exhibits human nature, or at any rate one aspect of it—and it indeed contains multitudes.

Jacobs's attitude to life is ironic, and his characters, especially the night watchman, are likewise ironic. Though tragedy exists, comedy in Jacobs's world is the more prevalent. Perhaps this explains why he is so largely forgotten today (and we hardly live in a golden age for irony) and why 1914 was such a watershed in his literary career. After the mass slaughter, Jacobs's approach to life must have seemed trivial, irresponsible, and insensitive at best, callous at worst. From now on—or at least many of his readers must have thought at the time—life would be a heavy and solemn matter, to be taken seriously.

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In addition, the moral, economic, and social worlds Jacobs describes have now disappeared completely and irrecoverably, such that, among people brought up with multicultural pieties, they

are now literally unimaginable. (Multiculturalism, by its claim to have found the final truth about how life should be lived, impedes both imagination and curiosity about how others live and think, or have lived and thought).

This is a great shame, and Jacobs's descent to literary oblivion is a serious loss. His style and craftsmanship are admirable. His humor, as Chesterton says, is without the bitterness of wit but runs deep. He exudes enjoyment of the human comedy, and he communicates it to the reader. One is the happier for having read him, though he is quite without the sentimentality often associated with uplift. If nothing else, he reconciles us to life and persuades us that it is good. All this, and literary qualities too!

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