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Style—and the Light Touch

HUMOR, CIRCA 1890

Brooklyn Eagle: A Westerner, on returning from an extended visit in Boston, became excited when his bedroom caught fire. Dashing into the street, he gave this alarm, "Conflagration! Conflagration! Hasten hither with the mechanical apparatus designed for the suppression of combustion."

Philadelphia Record: A gushing Arch Street lady just back from her first visit in New York asked how she liked that city. "Oh, it's just grand." was the enthusiastic reply. "I was nearly run over twice."

A GOOD COLUMN STYLE comes from much writing, plus an ability to learn from the effort. It is closely related, of course, to the kind of personality the writer possesses, and to his conversational powers. Lacking an incandescent spark of genius, a writer improves his choice and arrangement of words by imitation, by unconscious acquisitions through selected reading, and by choosing subjects which he knows well. One paragraph catches fire from another when enthusiasm is natural and honest.

Style is much like the personality, although it does not follow that the life-of-a-party can be equally entertaining in print. Spoken humor, which is enhanced by winks, shrugs, leers, and laughter, must in written form convey these overtones by clever choice of phrasing.

Column style is not a matter of following formulas. It consists of choosing words and sentence arrangements suitable to a given subject. Because newspaper columns touch on many subjects, a competent columnist is a man of many literary moods. And, since every man is more eloquent in some moods than others,

columning involves selection of materials which elicit from his writing hours the materials which please readers.

Some columnists are by nature argumentative. Their style is direct, challenging, and persuasive. Others, by nature retiring, prefer a quietly expository style in which they teach, rather than preach or demand. To the extent that columnists write what is demonstrably true and generally believed, they can omit the finer points of logic and concentrate on factors which chiefly amuse. But while readers may be pleased to know the columnist agrees with them, they are only bored on discovering nothing to inflate their ego further. Most columnists, therefore, do not drive their typewriters with mathematical directness between two points.

Column style demands frequent changes of pace. Appeals to readers are the familiar ones: use of names, which substitute personalities for abstract qualities; concrete data, filled with mention of earthy, environmental objects known to all; mention of human frailties, which are among the basic realities; and mention of the unique, the heroic, the tragic, the utterly foolish, and the fantastic.

One's style is quickly affected by the viewpoint from which he writes, and by the personality he imagines himself to be. This explains, in part at least, the fad for assuming personalities bordering on the rustic. A waggish columnist not only has greater freedom in selection of colloquial prose, but he escapes another thought which galls him—that of appearing to be writing down to readers. And, afraid of making one mistake, he may deliberately make many.

Furthermore, a small-town editor who most of each day carries his responsibilities with dignity and speaks in dignified language cannot, at the stroke of 4 o'clock, or 8, become a lively columnist without some

VERBS

Verbs not only express action; they carry connotations beyond their literal meanings. They give readers a sense of reality. Passive verbs, especially the "to be" derivatives, slow reading tempo. We associate strong verbs with conflict, such as war and sports, but they also are useful in telling of every-day affairs. A worker moving cautiously along a lofty beam may literally inch his way, like a measuring worm. Something of his caution is conveyed to the readers. . . . Verbs are aided by other parts of speech, if not overloaded with them. Clauses expand or limit their meaning, but slow their pace. Clever phrasing enlivens even the garden variety of verbs—those which describe our routine movements. . . . Verbs stand out more strongly in short sentences. Simple verbs are generally preferred. Most people merely die, rather than pass away; they are buried, not interred.

WHICH LANGUAGE?

Most persons, educated or not, have several types of oral and written expression. They talk freely, spontaneously with daily companions; more formally with new acquaintances, even in the presence of old friends; rather stiffly, perhaps self-consciously, to strangers they hope to impress, or people older or more successful than themselves. Like a public prayer, formal conversation is likely to be phrased carefully before utterance. Similarly, many persons change style of expression when they sit down to write. Such stiffness is fatal to good columnning. The trick of writing with seeming spontaneity is worth learning. In learning, beware of trying too hard. Your best, brightest conversational style is probably what you need in the column.

kind of mental transition. But in time a column becomes so fixed in style that it is a writer's habitual manner of speaking. Such mellowness comes with experience.

Consciously or not, most persons adapt their style of speaking or writing to those addressed. A moment's listening to a telephone conversation often gives a clue to whether the person at the other end of the line is young or old, male or female, liked or disliked. Columnnists sometimes think of certain persons while writing, so that their product has something of the sparkle of repartee.

The fear of every columnist should be dullness. And nothing is duller than monotony of sentence structure, abstract phrasing, and always saying the expected thing in the expected way. People who would not use worn out expressions still manage to be dull. Well educated people may be boresome because of their weighting of sentences with complex words and their omission of personal mentions. The United Press told how the London Transport Company campaigned against archaic syntax. Plain English, the Company said, is good English. Examples:

Old rule: Small dogs may, at the discretion of the conductor and at owner's risk, be carried without charge.

New rule: You may take your dog with you. It travels free at your risk.

Old rule: The London Passenger Transport Board can not be held responsible for failure to adhere to the scheduled time of the buses, nor can they guarantee the running of the services to be as stated although every effort will be made to maintain them. In inclement weather, on Sundays, certain buses are liable to be canceled without notice.

New rule: You can not hold London Transport responsible if your bus is late or does not run. London Transport does not guarantee that its services will keep to the timetable or will run at all, although it does its best to see that they do.

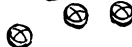
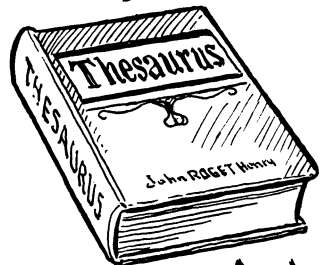
London Transport had discovered, it said, that “simple and homely language is not only more easily understood; it is frequently shorter.” Its new signs were filled with “you’s” and “your’s” and other person-to-person approaches.

Small-town columnists also adapt their style to the people’s wishes. Vocabularies of columns are those of the persons met on the streets and in the shops. Hometown language is picked up, polished a bit perhaps, and handed back in paragraphs, anecdotes, jokes, verse, and other standard forms. Hobbies are written about in the hobbyists’ vocabulary. Talk about golf is golfers’ talk. It is a form of intellectual bungling to talk about another person’s chief interest with less than his enthusiasm. It is amateurish, or worse, to retell a story poorly. The columnist is not a ditch-digger; he is a worker with words. He should study how to use his tools. Experimentation is fundamental in all study. In the words of an old advertisement, “How do you know you can’t write?”

If you must have a few guideposts along the road to acquiring a better column style, consider these:

1. Really know your readers.
2. Write animatedly to them.
3. Be yourself, but try to make that self interesting by much reading and careful listening.
4. Seek individualism in your style by observing the mannerisms of others and adapting some for your own use. This is not dishonesty. Originality is almost nonexistent.
5. Don’t be afraid to confess human weaknesses or to apologize for the whole human race. Localize and humanize. But stoutly stand for good taste, tolerance, and good neighborliness.
6. Be consistent in your inconsistencies, so that when you put thunder and lightning in your words the readers will not be more shocked than impressed.
7. Learn what stuffed-shirtism is and avoid it as you would a plague.
8. Develop a light touch.

He should study how to use his tools.



NOUNS

Nouns are names; nothing is more fundamental in language. They identify and define. They have dignity and poise. Sometimes they are misused. We hear of name-calling in politics. Such names condemn; they are adjective in effect. But the writer who is clever in choosing nouns can be sparing in use of adjectives. Columnists vary their language by thinking up similes, metaphors, and other figures. There are many synonyms for man. At appropriate times, these alternative nouns are more effective than festooning the word with adjectives. The man may be a lion—or a mouse.

A LIGHT TOUCH PERMEATES COLUMN STYLE

In the years of Fourth of July oratory, editors often blustered and thundered in a pretense of unchallengeable wisdom. They had little to lose but the pretense, for newspaper plants were not worth much and libel actions were rare.

Better times have brought humanness to the small-city press. Reasonableness is both practiced by editors and conceded to be a quality of readers. It is a more honest journalism. It depicts readers as they are—friendly, kind, and generous. But not perfect. Rather than expecting perfection in his people, a small newspaper's editor is not ashamed to report their activities in perspective—the good, the bad, the heroic, the trivial, and the absurd. He finds some of their antics nothing short of hilarious. He mines nuggets of interest in the commonplace. With a deft hand and a light touch he makes life seem an interesting adventure.

In their glass-house simplicity, small-town people must be prepared to face life's triumphs and tragedies without emotional excesses. Maudlin accounts of deaths and funerals have largely disappeared from small papers. People are now conditioned for personal tragedies—children killed by traffic accidents, for example. Perhaps the shock is not much softened, but the reaction to it is less pagan. People take their cues from editor's reporting and philosophizing about events.

The editor's light touch is nowhere better developed than in his personal column, although it also may be found in some editorials and headlines and in feature stories. His lightness of style should not be confused with shallowness. The basic ingredient of the light touch is good will. It exudes good humor. It is the spirit of camaraderie. It is the small-city touch where there are few strangers. For it is in the small town that one finds the neighborly spirit,

the harmless prank, kidding without rancor, repartee without bitterness, and laughter that is spontaneous and unposed. People talk roughly, but “smile when they say that.”

The light touch may involve both wit and humor, but usually it is not a straight presentation of either. It is a literary stance. It is based, in practice, on the idea that while people in the mass are pretty swell folks, as individuals they run the gamut of human characteristics. In most individuals are capacities for both heroics and plain darned foolishness. Yet the average man, non-existent though he is, is recognized as a long-suffering, home-loving, kindly soul who laughs through his tears. He squeezes some kind of laugh from every situation because he feels an obligation to keep other people from sharing his woes. He loves his comics, laughs with radio and movie wags, and repeats the quips which he finds in newspapers and magazines. He regards long sermons and long articles as stuffy and in general ignores them. He rewards those who make him laugh and may be suspicious of those who make him think. But appeals to his sense of humor and his sympathy bring quick responses. He picks his prejudices and attitudes on the run and therefore has to be speared with barbed bits which he absorbs without realizing it.

Small-town column humor is without sophistication and largely without real or implied vulgarity. Localized, it is lively with mention of people. When a small-town man tells a barber joke his hearers think of a real barber, not a stereotype. Stimulation of the intellect is possible, but incidental. Pegged to current events, column yarns are short-lived. Printable small-town humor is hard to find. But its effectiveness at the moment of publication should not be underestimated. The simple, earthy quality of the small-paper column makes it easy to read by any definition of readability. Often it is the first read

WORDS

While the language of columns is conversational, in general, rather than literary, many writers like to play with words. Punning continues popular among the paragraphers. Twisting words and using unusual expressions delights the newspaper essayists. Words are columnists' tools; right well do they add new ones and polish their skill in using old ones. Effective words release the shades of meaning which give readers an appreciation of a writer's thoughts. Such words need not be long; they should be familiar to readers or the meaning should be apparent. The history of a word may be worth a day's column. New words can be recognized as they are heard in cafe conversation. Or country club.

SENTENCES

With verb beginnings or subject beginnings, sentences tend to arrange themselves in monotonously regular structures. If this results from too-careful attention to notes or diction, this fault is probably habitual, and serious. Writing with abandon, largely without reference to notes, promotes good column style. Careful editing and rewriting can be done to shift sentence elements. That is not to say, however, that an ungifted writer can put style and charm in dull prose. But few are the writers who cannot improve their sentences by study and application of a pencil. Improvement of speech, especially through story-telling, may carry over into columning. Gradually, long neglected figures of speech and sentence forms can come into natural use.

department of a paper. It is regarded as personal — a person speaking — in contrast to the detachment of news stories.

Many editors have failed to understand the power of the light essay or witty barb as compared to the serious editorial. Yet they are quick to concede that Will Rogers could deflate a duke, an issue, or an argument with a phrase. Many decry the hiring of newspaper humorists by movies and radio. To a man they recognize the power of the conversational tone in an after-dinner speech, a sermon, or an advertisement. They now concede that the big-name columnists won their place in the press because that place was a void. Readers demanded not only facts, but interpretation. And editors have recognized that readers want material that is a pleasure to read, that has, in short, the light touch that is so descriptive of a small-town man's attitude toward life and his fellows.

Today's small-town columnists use all the familiar devices to achieve the light touch. Some prefer the barbed paragraph, others the anecdote. The news-and-comment method is popular. Comic verse is less common. The light, one-subject essay is well done by many.

Although the quiet tempo of small-town life does not inspire all columnists to distill their ideas into proverbs and sparkling figures of speech, the summations of their philosophy often are quotable. And in increasing numbers they are improving their skill as paragraphers. They are learning the effects of understatement, exaggeration, faint praise, irony, and incongruous comments. Whereas brief wisecracks have the taint of innuendo, light essays permit a writer to choose a subject and turn all its interesting facets to public gaze. Common defects, such as wordiness and leaving too little to the readers' imagination, disappear with experience.

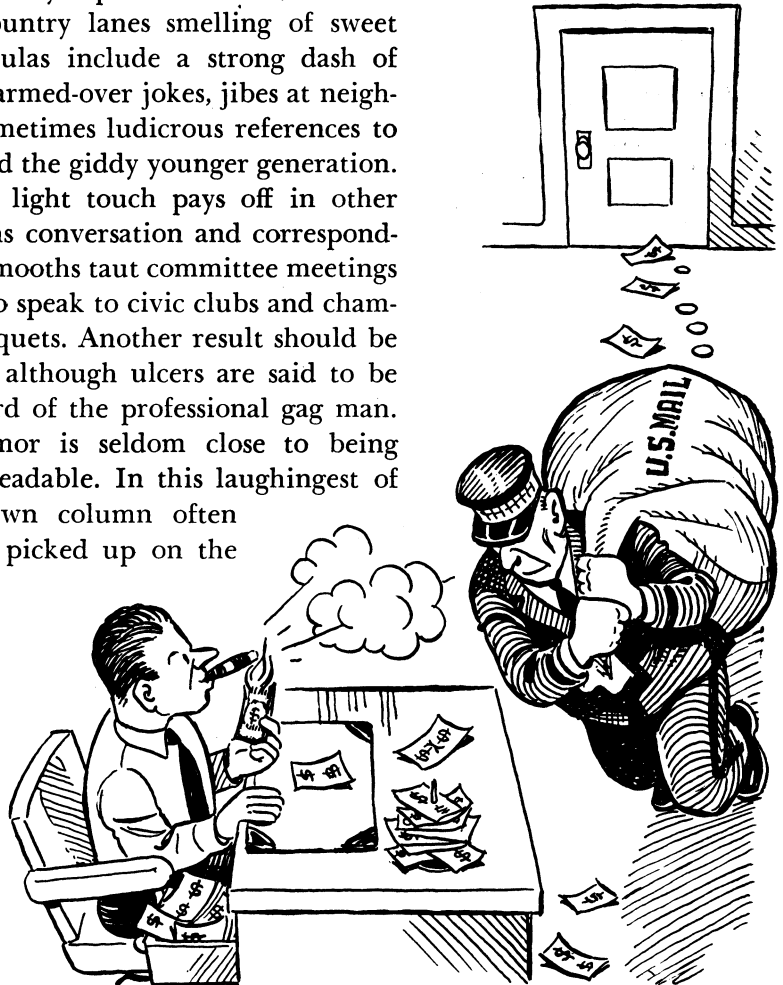
The lighter columns keep readers coming back for more entertainment—and renewing subscriptions. Scolding, prosy columns reverse this readership trend. William Allen White wrote many gay editorials which he called the “foam on the daily newspaper editorial tide.”

Variety columns, which well fit the editor's week of contacts, may include news items and comment, doggerel verse, jokes, descriptions of nature, odes to everything from windmills to bobby pins, witty paragraphs, flights of the imagination, nostalgia, and references to concrete things such as the smell of saddle leather, of freshly upturned earth, and of hay meadows and country lanes smelling of sweet locust. Column formulas include a strong dash of whimsy, plenty of warmed-over jokes, jibes at neighboring towns, and sometimes ludicrous references to husband-wife spats and the giddy younger generation.

Cultivation of the light touch pays off in other ways, too. It brightens conversation and correspondence—sells goods—smooths taut committee meetings—brings invitations to speak to civic clubs and chamber of commerce banquets. Another result should be an absence of ulcers, although ulcers are said to be an occupational hazard of the professional gag man.

Relaxed good humor is seldom close to being literature, but it is readable. In this laughingest of nations, the small-town column often merely reports yarns picked up on the street, at conventions, and in normal business contacts. The popularity of donkey ball games is proof of the boyishness of the average American businessman.

... lighter columns keep readers renewing subscriptions.



ADJECTIVES

For reasons too involved to discuss fully here, young women often object to being called "good girls." It is the adjective which offends. Aside from the fact that good in this sense may mean only social approval, it also fails to define in more flattering terms. Perhaps the girls are not only good, but pretty, clever, talented, and witty. Indeed, an adjective—this one—may be spoken in tones which reverse part of its root meaning; girls may be good but dull. . . . When we read of good attendance, we may suspect it was only fair, or worse, but "good under the circumstances." Adjectives may hide facts. It is possible to overhaul one's habitual use of adjectives. Lazy, indefinite modifiers can be spotted in even a casual study of recent columns.

"The Editor's Report" column of the Henrietta (Tex.) *Leader* carried this item:

The Boots and Saddle Club boys really enjoy themselves. For example, Sunday afternoon Harry was roping. He looped a calf. Started to dismount. His horse stopped suddenly. Harry didn't. He rolled about fifteen loops on the ground before skidding to a stop. The audience roared.

Much of the humor of this item is lost unless you know Harry as the Henrietta people do.

Many columns have picked up this advertisement credited to the Danville (New York) *Breeze*:

WANTED—Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet woman around 30 who owns a tractor. Please enclose picture of tractor.

The unexpected ending is one of the most effective of column devices. One columnist solemnly reported that a young lady in his town was flirting with all the men she met. He mentioned the names of several local men who had been favored in her glances. He chided the parents. But local readers were not scandalized when he mentioned the name of the young lady—age 30 months.

From Three Forks to Broadway, the gently chiding column is filling newspaper space. Henry McLemore rode the light touch to his present eminence through items like this one from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*:

There is one job on earth I wouldn't have under any circumstances. It's the world's worst. Before I'd take it I would try to make a living by diving off a 100-foot tower into a thimble (with a matinee on Wednesdays), or even by accepting a position that required me to tattoo "Semper Fidelis" on cobras' chests.

The job I refer to is that of saleslady or salesman in a women's hat shop. Why the jails aren't crowded with people who sell hats to women is beyond me. How they resist banging their customers over the head with the handiest and bluntest weapon available shows either great respect for the law or greater control over their tempers. . . .

A small-town version on the same theme comes from the "Russeling Around" column of the Belton (Tex.) *Journal*:

A certain department store in Dallas — and why should we mention its name and provide a thousand dollars worth of free publicity — has hit upon a most humanitarian idea. Presumably to protect the defenseless males from the ravages of competing woman shoppers, it has set aside a special night for men shoppers only. The arguments in favor of this plan are endless. For one thing, men, have you ever been in a store purchasing certain items of clothing for a woman and felt about six hundred eyes, mainly feminine, focused on you in silent ridicule? And have you ever competed with women shoppers in a crowded, impolite city? If you are a gentleman, or weigh under 200 pounds, you haven't a chance. Next year maybe they'll not only segregate the women and men shoppers, but set special hours according to weights.

Random selections from a columnist's reading are presented in a form like this item from the Roncerverte (W. Va.) *News*:

An American insurance statistician traveling in Iran on vacation, but ever conscious of his trade, received a down-to-earth answer when he asked a native chief what the mortality rate in his village was. "Since it is the will of Allah that all men die," the chief replied gravely, "our rate is 100 per cent."

Such stories also appear in dialogue form. This one was found in several columns, credited to *Exchange*.

Jones—How do you spend your income?

Smith—About 30 per cent for shelter, 30 per cent for clothing, 40 per cent for food, and 20 per cent for amusement.

Jones—But that adds up to 120 per cent.

Smith—That's right.

The queer lightness of O. O. McIntyre's first person confessions was typically apparent in this excerpt

ADVERBS

What the adjective is to the noun, the adverb is in less degree to the verb. It qualifies, describes, and gives color to the action. Strong verbs may need no such help. The most over-used adverb is probably *very*. People have been described as *very* dead. But unless an adverb has a job to do, why use it? Change the accent to the verb—a verb with full meaning and overtones to most readers. One might say a halfback made 47 yards, running brilliantly. But did he pivot, dodge, spurt, stiff-arm his way, or reverse the field? Another man might be said to move slowly; actually, was it mincingly, crazily, deliberately, or hesitatingly? Say which.

CHANGE OF PACE

Good writers, like good speakers, change their pace—in tone, length of idea development, and in flights of description, narration, exposition, etc. Paragraph length is varied partly to keep the reader alert. Columnists who always throw out a topic sentence then develop it in obvious fashion give readers no thrills. Why struggle through prosy stuff when it might have been characterized by variety, example, punch lines, and flashes of verbal audacity?

PARAGRAPHS

In a 12-pica column, paragraphs longer than two inches usually are avoided. However, a single offender may be justified by its content and structure. It is the monotony of successive long paragraphs, one hundred words or more in each, that repels readers. In another direction, the staccato effect of short paragraphs may be distasteful unless the subjects and comments conform to such brevity.

from a column in the Seattle (Wash.) *Post-Intelligencer*:

All my life I've had a terror of policemen. Today, scanning a fresh edition along the street, I bumped into one. I expected to be clubbed silly and thrown into a patrol wagon. Instead, he smiled, stood pleasantly chatting a while, and finally began to tell me a joke he had just heard. At which I rocked and fairly screamed with mirth. I never realized until a block away that I was hysterical.

The late beloved Joe Taylor, a small-town editor whose witty writings carried him to the editorship of the *Dallas News*, wrote for many years a "State Press" column of excerpts from other papers, with his inimitable comments. He also liked to answer letters from readers, often twisting the meaning with mischievous abandon. Example:

A young lady who seems to be hard worked at some university, but who has an inquiring mind and kind disposition, sends to this column a request for an analysis of laughter. The best we can make out of it is that she wishes to know why one laughs when he is amused instead of crying or sneezing. Or why one weeps when heart-stricken instead of sneezing or laughing. The answer must be that the emotions are divided into ganglia or nerve nodules and respond according to which mental filament is twanged. The brain, dear young lady, is like a stringed harp. The tone depends upon which chord is touched. When we weep it signifies that the filament or chord of pity has been struck by the unseen hand. When we laugh it means that chord of comedy has been thumbed. Of course, we sneeze without any consideration of mental pressure. Sneezing is a nasal titillation and is indulged in without regard to mental urge. Laughter is an emotional expression and is accompanied by facial distortion which, fortunately, vanishes after the moment of amusement. It is a response of the same general nature as that which occurs when the nose is tickled by a feather or a straw, except that the nose has to be physically tickled, while the laugh needs only to be mentally touched. Here we find psychology and physiology working in combination. The psychic impression flits from the brain to the face and the latter

responds with laughter, which is like a pool being stirred into waves by the wind.

Laughter is, in a sense, a ripple across the physiognomy like a wavelet across a pond. Sometimes laughter becomes audible, but its audibility is only an extraneous factor and has no connection with the source or initial impulse of the laugh. A silent smile is a laugh reduced to its least laborious term, while a giggle is a compromise between the smile and the loud guffaw that bespeaks the vacant mind. This is the best we can do for you, young lady, even if it does sound too simple for belief.

As may be surmised from the example, Joe Taylor had a dead-pan humor which was the delight of small-town publishers at their conventions. With his witticisms, however, Mr. Taylor combined well chosen bits of advice and homey philosophy. He was a favorite of women delegates, with whom he danced with gallantry and grace, and of the men also, who respected his ready wit and appreciated his championing of small-town life. He was a master of the grandiloquent phrase but in general preferred direct speech. Back in the careful 1920's some of his stories were considered daring, but nevertheless in passable taste. Example:

Young woman: Doctor, can you vaccinate me where it won't show?

Doctor: My dear young lady, I think you'd better see your dentist for this service.

William Allen White is remembered for his famous editorial, "What Is the Matter With Kansas?" and for his books and influence, but many who read the *Emporia Gazette* and saw the dumpy little man daily liked to comment on his humanness. His was the light touch, and life roughed him but lightly except in the tragic death of his daughter. He wrote these thoughts at 65:

I have been shaving this funny old face every Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday for years and years.

IDIOMS

Although small-town writing is more colloquial than some readers prefer, the historians probably will wish it had been even more idiomatic. As history, small-town articles would then reflect how people talked, not how the editor wrote. Idiomatic sayings are like some old wine; approved more by reason of age than merit. Columnists can be more alert to spot current sayings. Newspaper writers in general have belonged to the "purist" group. Yet language is a living, growing thing. People like to see their characteristic expressions in print. How they say things should interest columnists, whose affection is not limited to words as words, but as expressions loaded with pungent but not always literal meaning.

JOKES

Columnists who are not joke-smiths can see their dentists several times a year—or their doctor, or lawyer, or butcher. Men of professions and trades usually know printable jokes on themselves, or others. They may know local anecdotes. Ministers excel as story tellers. Columnists who regularly pick up these jokes develop dependable sources. Dull columns are written only by dull people—and poor reporters. Everyone hears jokes, but many columnists do not print them.

I have come to look on it as a mask behind which the reality that is I has to hide. It is getting a bit battered and shopworn. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to cast it off and let dust return to dust and if there is any salvage "with God the rest."

In the meantime life has been good, a tremendously interesting adventure. I have never had a bored hour in my life. I get up in the morning now wondering what new, strange, gorgeous thing is going to happen, and it always happens at fairly reasonable intervals. And generally, and this is a part of the unbending curve of my life, adventure comes from afar, from the outside, from things over which I have no control. Lady Luck has been good to me. I fancy she has been good to everyone, only some people are dour and when she gives them the come hither with her eyes they look down or turn away and lift an eyebrow. But me, I give her the wink and away we go.¹

We'd like to repeat that statement from William Allen White, the small-city newspaper man: "I have never had a bored hour in my life."

It reminds one of another remark by Will Rogers of Oklahoma, another master of the light touch. Will said, "I never knew a man I didn't like."

¹ *Forty Years on Main Street*, p. 30. Used by permission of Rinehart & Company, Inc. Copyright, 1937.