

THE AUTHOR OF 75,000 JOKES

Edwin A. Oliver of the Yonkers Statesman is Father of Conversational Witicism.

Edwin Austin Oliver, who attended the fourth annual convention of the American Press Humorists in Philadelphia this week, has written more jokes than any other man in the history of the world, says the Kansas City Star. He admits himself that he has written "about 75,000 jokes." He is the dean of the jokesmith craft. Let all other jokes forever hold their peace.

Mr. Oliver is "The Yonkers Statesman man." Practically all of his jokes have been assigned and the world at large waits not of his identity. But his brother craftsmen know him and love him well.

To the men throughout the country who make more of a business of joke writing, Mr. Oliver is known as "the father of the conversational joke." As he is unmarried, this form of joke is his only child; but its progeny has become innumerable, so that the Yonkers bachelor has more grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on than any other man in history. His joke family has increased and multiplied to the point even to the ultimate ends thereof. Many of his jokes have been translated into German, French, Italian and other tongues, but to mention the fact that they have been republished in England where they always secure a sort of semi-translation, because being American, they are not understandable to the British mind. And the conversational joke written by the thousand and not other jokes, upon the original model, which were neither patented nor copyrighted—well, they reach up into the millions.

What is the conversational joke, does the lay mind ask? Perhaps the term needs elucidation. It being a technical expression known only to the trade. Here is a sample of the conversational joke:

Smith—What would you do if you knew positively that you were going to die 24 hours from now?

Jones—I'd drop dead at once.

Infinite variations are possible. Sometimes the conversers are merely "He" and "She," or "Hubby" and "Wife," or "Hobbs" and "Nobs," but now and then since the birth of the Oliver original, other joke writers have created certain characters, using them over and over as the vehicle through which to spring upon the unsuspecting world any joke that lends itself to the conversational form of expression. Mr. Oliver, for many years, has used certain character couples which have become household words. Notable amongst these are "Mr. Crimmonbank" and "Yeast," "Church" and "Gotham," and "Patience" and "Patrice."

It would be difficult to find in the United States a person who has not read in some newspaper a joke credited to the Yonkers Statesman. Mr. Oliver is responsible for all of these, and the exchange clippings throughout the country have clipped them with glee. He has written from six to ten jokes a day, six days a week, for 29 years, with very little vacation. His annual output averages 2,500 jokes. These facts furnish a sufficient reason for unveiling the identity of "The Yonkers Statesman Man," now and here first made public.

Mr. Oliver does not resemble the funny man of more or less popular tradition. He shaves regularly and patronizes the hair cutter at brief inter-

vals. In the matter of dress he is something of a Beau Brummel. He dresses correctly, though not flashily. When he attends the annual sessions of the American Press Humorists he takes his trunk with him, though the jokesmith usually has but four or five days. The jokesmith carries clothes suited to every change of the weather and to every possible function. At Baltimore, three years ago, Oliver had a steamer trunk hauled to his hotel, Strickland W. Gillman, then of the Baltimore American, he wrote "Off again, on again, gone again, Finnigan," observed the porter carrying this baggage and turned to the Yonkers man.

"Oliver," he said, "what in the world did you bring that steamer trunk for?"

"Well," replied Oliver, "they told me that Baltimore was a hot town, so I thought I'd bring my steamer trunk and let it do some cooling."

It was at the same Baltimore meet, that Mr. Oliver revealed his character as "Father of the Conversational Joke." The humorists agreed, without a dissenting vote, that Oliver was the father of that type of joke—nobody else admitted himself to be old enough to claim the fatherhood—when at the humorists' banquet luncheon in the New Willard hotel at Washington, during a side trip to the capital city, the Yonkers man modestly declined to make a speech after every body else present had then in the occasion. S. K. Kiser of the Chicago Record-Herald broke forth with the song, "Everybody Works for Father!" Then "Father" stepped down the house with a speech of laughter.

"Father" Oliver does not reveal his age in plain figures, nor in looks, for he appears to be about 40, but he has confessed that he was "just of age" when the conversational joke was born, and the files of the Yonkers Statesman show that this joke is now 29 years old. Expert mathematicians have been able to approximate the age of Oliver.

At the inside inn in St. Louis, during the convention of the humorists at the World's fair, a young man from the

St. Louis Star approached Mr. Oliver, pad and pencil poised menacingly. "Mr. Oliver," said the reporter, "I have been assigned to interview you. Ah—uh—what do you consider your best joke?"

The author of 75,000 jokes, who had forgotten all of them but the one he was then germinating, staggered slightly under the impact of this startling query and looked blankly at the form of the young reporter. Then he replied solemnly: "You—yourself."

Pressed further, he asked the reporter: "Where was Moses when the light went out?"

"In the dark," replied the young man, promptly.

"Well, so am I," said Oliver. When I called upon the joke-father in his sanctum at Yonkers I found him sitting at a table writing his daily batch of jokes, which he runs under the heading of "Whim Whams." Mr. Oliver finished a Crimmonbank essay and submitted to an interview from a humble inquirer of his unpublished right.

"How did you happen to become a joke writer?" I inquired.

"When I was a very young boy," said Mr. Oliver, "my father got the western fever and talked of moving to Kansas. I was rejoiced at the idea, and one day dropped into 'poetry,' something like this:

"Away, away to Kansas!
Then you'll see
The dance the landers—
But not to Tennessee."

"That may not be epoch-making poetry, but it made my father and all the household laugh. My father looked the stuff up in his desk and it was shown to everybody who happened in. Everybody who saw the doggerel laughed. Soon after that I made up my mind that my mission in life was to try to make people happy—to make them laugh. That is why I took up joke writing on the side."

"I began newspaper joke writing in

1877, on the Statesman, and have been at it ever since. I was at the case learning the trade of a printer. I thought up the jokes while going to and from the office and at night. My first day I had fourteen jokes in the paper. Under my heading, 'Whim Whams' each day I have from six to ten jokes. I never use a typewriter. Typewriters are pretty—some of them—but I have no particular use for them except now and then to talk to them when they get lonesome. I write my jokes with a steel pen, but I don't steal them. My ideas seem to flow more copiously with a drop of ink. I often think up my jokes in bed, and in church, or at funerals—or just any old place. I write my jokes in the morning. After going over my mail I devote about an hour to my jokes. If my joke-books are not working any particular morning I fall back on a little book I always carry with me, in which are 'meme' for plenty of jokes to use in emergencies."

"I think I must have written at least 75,000 jokes in my life—probably more than that. I contributed at one time to Puck, Judge, Life and several other papers. I now write jokes exclusively for the Statesman, of which I am part proprietor. I write jokes because I can't help it. They come to me, and I must get rid of them. I get my ideas for jokes from reading papers, from people I meet, from things I see and from things which never existed."

"There is no special history that I can narrate about Mr. Crimmonbank. I wanted a name which would fit jokes about men who look upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth its color to the proboscis. Of course, Red-nose might be all right, but it didn't suit me, so I thought over the matter until I evolved Crimmonbank. My character of Yeast was suggested by a friend whose name was Yeast. My characters of Patience and Patrice were taken from two ladies with whom I often joked. Church and Gotham, of course, are imaginary residents of Brooklyn and New York City."

Mr. Oliver related an amusing incident which he turned to account in defense of the joke maker's trade. Several years ago he was introduced to

Low Dockstader, just prior to one of the minstrel's performances. The night being stormy there were prospects of a poor house. Low was doing some tall thinking, and felt blue. Oliver was introduced to him as a newspaper man and the minstrel opened up on the newspapers.

"The papers make me tired," he said, "they hurt our business by their continual statements that there is nothing new in minstrelsy. They say the jokes one hears at the minstrel shows were printed in Joe Miller's Joke Book, or were told further back than that. The papers say that kind of rot. Why, I'd pick up a newspaper tomorrow morning and I'd see a lot of jokes in it a great deal older than any you ever hear in a minstrel show. And yet they say the minstrel jokes are old."

Oliver listened patiently to the great minstrel, who had no liking as to his identity as the father of the conversational joke and the papa of 75,000 wandering little ones. He felt that Dockstader was knocking him pretty hard, and that he ought to try to get back at him.

"Tell me, Mr. Dockstader," the anonymous joke writer inquired, "where do you get your jokes from? You don't originate them, do you?"

"No, not generally. I see a good thing going about and I take it, sometimes changing it, and use it."

"You get them out of a newspaper frequently, I suppose?"

"Yes. Well, then, tell me, if you get your jokes out of the newspapers, and you say the jokes the newspapers print are so old, why in the name of all that's humorous aren't your minstrel jokes old?"

Low winced a little, but Oliver made it warm by sitting right down and writing him, on the spot, three new jokes which never had seen a newspaper no, the light of day. He gave the jokes to Dockstader, who sprung them that night on his audience. They "took," and next day Dockstader sent Mr. Oliver a written forgiveness.

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