



A SUCCESSOR TO MARK TWAIN

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By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

"The prizes shall not be confined to academic subjects . . . the new, the unusual, and the radical shall be especially encouraged."

—Avery Hopwood's instructions
for his bequest.

IF I were to speak of an American writer who was raised in a village near the Big River, who had relatively little formal education, worked in a country printing shop, drifted from city to city as a newspaper reporter, wrote his first book in rustic Middle-West dialect about an ignorant foundling boy who ran away and went trouping with patent medicine doctors and county fair showmen, you would know to whom I refer.

Suppose I were to add that this writer, whose faculty of self-criticism is only vestigial, by some sure instinct reached his best vein in dealing with outcasts, freaks, ham actors, dogs, boys, kings and queens, newspaper men, drunkards, and Shakespeare—in fact anyone on the losing side of society but still alert to the bewildering absurdity of life. That he was always infatuated with theology, and profoundly reverent in spirit, but united with this so potent a vein of mother-of-pearl blasphemy and—shall we say—verbal frowardness, that his private correspondence will remain mostly unquoted. In his own person a creature of such high and simple charm that it would be no exaggeration to call him, in his own circle, the best loved man of his time. If I add further, though trying to remain this side unseasonable intimacies, a man af-

flicted in private by tragedy's most savage strokes, you would certainly recognize him. A writer who fulfills with singular exactness the most vital native tradition of American letters; whose grotesque and ironic humor was often put in parables too blunt for intellectuals to perceive; a man whose work bears on almost every page the stigmata of its origin, conceived under compulsion, blotted before the ink was dry. Of course, you would say, Mark Twain.

But he is not Mark Twain.

The most precious capacity of criticism is the intuition of excellence near at hand, while it still lives and hopes and hungers. It is easy to praise established renown; perhaps a little too much of our academic energy is devoted to that. Do you remember Stephen Leacock's delightful passage where he says that the classics are only primitive literature, and there is no reason why we should revere primitive literature more than primitive machinery or primitive plumbing. But, he says, wrap that message round a stone and throw it through the window of the nearest university, and watch the professors buzz. It is commendable to say, for instance, that La Rochefoucauld was a great master of moral maxims, but that knowledge should also fit us to recognize a man writing with the edge of La Rochefoucauld in the afternoon newspaper. It is often by their living analogues that we get our keenest relish of the great minds of the past. I remember that once when I wrote something in praise of the verse of a contemporary poet, I had a letter from a friend.

He wrote: "I'm glad you said what you did about Bill, while he's alive and can enjoy it. I don't think anything is ever quite the same to us after we're dead."

I had intended to withhold a little longer the name of my hero, but since I find myself quoting him already, I'll tell you now. I am talking about Don Marquis. I will try to speak as simply and judiciously as possible. There cannot be time, on such an occasion, to trace in full detail my thesis that he is our closest spiritual descendant of Mark Twain. (The Old Soak would say, descended off of Mark Twain.) That will remain to some extent implicit in these remarks. I suggest the idea to anyone who desiderates a rewarding study in literary ramification. I attempt here only to give something of the psychic background for such an essay.

I had a queer dream about Don once. In that dream he and I were riding in a taxicab, furiously driven along Wabash Avenue, Chicago, in a roaring hurry of traffic under the dingy L trestles of the Loop. We were escaping, or trying to escape, from some vast calamity that pressed close behind. What, I don't exactly know—whether fire, flood, storm, earthquake, or—perhaps more likely in Chicago, what insurance policies call "civil commotion." At any rate we were fleeing desperately, looking over our shoulders through the back window of the cab to see whether the terror was gaining on us. And I vividly remember Don saying "If we can get out to the Dunes it'll be all right." He meant

of course the famous sand-hills of Indiana, along the shore of the Lake.

In our obsession of horror they symbolized a clean escape into sunlight and open spaces and peace. How often I have said to myself: Dear old boy, he never got out to the dunes. Few of us ever do. Every imaginer dreams of that perfect equilibrium, where pure sensibility of reception is balanced by the joyful pulse of accomplish-

ment. (The physics department would have a less pedantic phrase for it. They would probably say where stress divided by strain is constant.) There is always one more bit of hackwork to be ground out before we can get at the great masterpiece. More ironical still, when we deliberately sit down to tackle the announced masterpiece, how often it goes wooden in our hands. The journeyman job we drudged at day by day, and grimly estimated as potboiling, perhaps was the big thing after all. I'm sure



DON MARQUIS

dear old Dr. Johnson, as he ground away at his *Lives of the Poets*, cursed them as hackwork; yet in every paragraph they show the volume and pressure of that leviathan intelligence, breaching in the white foam of humor. So it was with Don Marquis. In the recurrent hodiernity of the *Sun Dial*, from 1913 to 1922 in the *New York Evening Sun*, six days a week, bedevilled by a million interruptions and beclomored by all the agreeable rattles, the social riveters who gang round a man trying to work, Marquis created something utterly his own. It was as racy of our day

as Addison and Steele's *Spectator* of theirs. I have said before, the American press has much to apologize for—more all the time with its increasing elements of what Lewis Carroll called Uglification, Distraction, and Derision—but much can also be forgiven when you think of the newspapers, the *Sun*, and the New York *Tribune*, that saw Don's quality and gave him free hand.

I speak feelingly, for when I came to work in New York in 1913 as a boy fresh from Oxford—how fresh, you would have to have been a pre-War boy to realize—the *Sun Dial*, then less than a year old, was the first journalistic specialty I noticed. Its freakish pungency, offhand gusto, bewildering alternation of seriousness and buffoonery, of delicate lyric and prattfall slapstick, how different from the prim journalism I had been trained to esteem. Contagion was immediate. I had lately passed through the fevers of an early Stevensonian influenza, and was ripe for new inoculations. Literary beginnings are always imitative. At once I wanted, if not necessarily to write like Mr. Marquis, at least to get a chance to try to run a column of that kind. Eventually I did, and if anyone were to embarrass me by studying the matter they would see how admiringly I followed Don's technique. I don't think anyone noticed it, because I started in a Philadelphia paper, the most perfect form of secrecy.

I must have absorbed the Marquisian style fairly well, because some years later he and I planned to do a novel in collaboration. We mapped out the story in alternate sections to be told by two narrators: he to impersonate one and I the other. Then Don was prevented by illness from doing his share, so I wrote the whole thing; but the portions that had been allotted to him I tried to write as I thought he would have done. The book was published over both our names, and almost every reviewer remarked how easy it was to tell where Morley stopped and Marquis began. That book gave me one of my few opportunities to break even with Don for many practical

japes; I sent him a copy inscribed "With regards from the author."

Don's own literary beginnings were dangerously close to mimicry. His first book, *Danny's Own Story*, published in 1912, is much too obviously Mark Twain material. It is written with savor and charm, but the memory of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer keeps blurring the reader's focus. And there's another interesting influence to be noted. Marquis worked as a young man in close association with one of America's very greatest geniuses, Joel Chandler Harris. In his late years Harris conducted *Uncle Remus's Magazine*, of which Marquis became assistant editor. If you take a man who has the natural bent of Mark Twain, and then have him trained by Uncle Remus, you needn't be surprised if the result is remarkable (it's rather astonishing that he can write conventional English at all). Also Marquis's formative years as a short story writer were during the meteor passage of O. Henry. All these three can be divined in some of his work. But, as I say, almost every writer begins on borrowed capital. The important thing is to be able to pay it back, in due course, with earnings of your own.

I suppose we should have some biographical data. It is always disconcerting to realize how little we know, even in our intimate friends, of the factors that have been really operative. In the case of one who becomes to any degree a public figure, legend quickly coalesces; and sometimes the legend is truer than the fact. A good many years ago (in 1916) Don wrote out at my request a sketch of his life up to that time. It is obviously jocular, but the jocularities are sincere and reveal more of the man than you might suppose.

Born July 29, 1878, at Walnut, Bureau Co., Ill., a member of the Republican party.

My father was a physician, and I had all the diseases of the time and place free of charge.

Nothing further happened to me until, in the summer of 1896, I left the Republican party to follow the Peerless Leader to defeat.

In 1900 I returned to the Republican party to accept a position in the Census Bureau, at Washington, D.C. This position I filled for some months in a way highly satisfactory to the Government in power. It is particularly gratifying to me to remember that one evening, after I had worked unusually hard at the Census Office, the late President McKinley himself nodded and smiled to me as I passed through the White House grounds on my way home from toil. He had heard of my work that day, I had no doubt, and this was his way of showing me how greatly he appreciated it.

Nevertheless, shortly after President McKinley paid this public tribute to the honesty, efficiency and importance of my work in the Census Office, I left the Republican party again and accepted a position as reporter on a Washington paper.

Upon entering the newspaper business all the troubles of my earlier years disappeared as if by magic, and I have lived the contented, peaceful, unworried life of the average newspaper man ever since.

There is little more to tell. In 1916 I again returned to the Republican party. This time it was for the express purpose of voting against Mr. Wilson. Then Mr. Hughes was nominated, and I left the Republican party again.

This is the outline of my life in its relation to the times in which I live. For the benefit of those whose curiosity extends to more particular details, I add a careful pen-picture of myself.

It seems more modest, somehow, to put it in the third person:

Height, 5 feet 10½ inches; hair, dove-colored; scar on little finger of left hand; has assured carriage, walking boldly into good hotels and mixing with patrons on terms of equality; weight, 200 pounds; face slightly asymmetrical, but not definitely criminal in type; loathes Japanese art, but likes beefsteak and onions; wears No. 8 shoe; fond of Francis Thompson's poems; inside seam of trousers, 32 inches; imitates cats, dogs and barnyard animals for the amusement of young children; eyetooth in right side of upper jaw missing; has always been careful to keep thumb prints from possession of police; chest measurement, 42 inches, varying with respiration; sometimes wears glasses, but usually operates undisguised; dislikes the works of Rabindranath Tagore; corn on little toe of right foot; superstitious, especially with regard to

psychic phenomena; eyes blue; does not use drugs nor read his verses to women's clubs; ruddy complexion; no photograph in possession of police; garrulous and argumentative; prominent cheek bones; avoids Bohemian society, so-called, and has never been in a thieves' kitchen, a broker's office nor a class of short-story writing; wears 17-inch collar; waist measurement none of your business; favorite disease, hypochondria; prefers the society of painters, actors, writers, architects, preachers, sculptors, publishers, editors, musicians, among whom he often succeeds in insinuating himself, avoiding association with crooks and reformers as much as possible; walks with rapid gait; mark of old fracture on right shin; cuffs on trousers, and coat cut loose, with plenty of room under the arm pits; two hip pockets; dislikes Roquefort cheese, "Tom Jones," Wordsworth's poetry, absinthe cocktails, most musical comedy, public banquets, physical exercise, Billy Sunday, steam heat, toy dogs, poets who wear their souls outside, organized charity, magazine covers, and the gas company; prominent calluses on two fingers of right hand prevent him being expert pistol shot; belt straps on trousers; long upper lip; clean shaven; shaggy eyebrows; affects soft hats; smile, one-sided; no gold fillings in teeth; has served six years of indeterminate sentence in Brooklyn, with no attempt to escape, but is reported to have friends outside; voice, husky; scar above the forehead concealed by hair; commonly wears plain gold ring on little finger of left hand; dislikes prunes, tramp poets and imitations of Kipling; trousers cut loose over hips and seat; would likely come along quietly if arrested.

There was always a sort of pleasing astonishment to me in the name of Don's birthplace: the village of Walnut, in Bureau County. It will take some searching before you find it on the map (even in the latest census the population was only 833). Don once described it as one of those towns that prop two corn-fields apart. It's in Northwestern Illinois, about on a line with Rock Island and only some thirty miles from the nearest bend of the Mississippi. I've always wanted to make a pilgrimage to Walnut, which would excite me every bit as much as my boyhood excursion on a bicycle to Stratford on Avon. I've never

even seen photographs of the place, because all the Marquis family souvenirs were destroyed by fire a good many years ago. It must have been a very Tom Sawyerish boyhood. What I would particularly like to see is if there isn't a big swamp somewhere near by, so many of Don's stories deal with queer people and happenings in a sort of wild morass on the outskirts of town. I was thrilled a couple of years ago to find myself on a Rock Island train going through that part of the country, but Walnut itself is not on a main line and I missed it. I remember sitting in a swaying club car writing a poem to Don about it; he complained afterward that the handwriting was so bad he never could read it. As a matter of fact the train rolled and pitched so that we were across the Big River before I could get my rhymes firm on their feet, so for my refrain I used Iowa instead of Illinois. The last stanza went like this—

O plant the flat feet, porter,
As firmly as you may;
O sleeper, cleave to mattress,
O waiter, clutch your tray.
Past Mark Twain's Mississippi
That flows dark brown with clay
We're swinging, clinging, singing
Our Middle-West hurray:
We ride the old Rock Island
That goes to Denver's highland,
The rockety Rock Island
That rolls through Ioway!

I mention this doggerel only as an incentive to Middle Western patriotism: for Marquis remains the greatest writer of that origin who has not really been discovered by his own country.

In later years Don used to insist on a family tradition that he was born during a total eclipse of the sun. Considerable stress was to be laid on this in a book he and I sometimes meditated, which was to be ostensibly a life of Shakespeare but actually a sort of double autobiography of ourselves. We were struck, as everyone must have been, by the extraordinary number of our own intimate thoughts that Shake-

spere had expressed—often rather better than we could. He must have been somehow spying on us; and the idea was to see what episodes in our own experience might account for or confirm what Shakespeare had written. To avoid any possible embarrassment we would each attribute to the other any behavior that might seem discreditable; or if necessary ascribe it to Shakespeare. We had heard rumors that there was doubt among scholars as to Shakespeare's identity, or even whether there ever was any such person; we felt that if he had used so much of our own private circumstance we had as good a right to him as anyone else. We were astonished and grieved when we learned presently that Mark Twain had done something along this line, though certainly not so carefully thought out: I think it was called *Is Shakespeare Dead?* So the Life of Shakespeare—Marquis—Morley was abandoned, but it started Don thinking about an "egobiography" of his own. He made a good many starts at it, and the later versions I never saw, but I have here the very first, Codex A. I think I must share a little of it.

Dear Kit:

I am engaged upon writing a Biography of Don Marquis, which will (or may if I don't get tired of it) some day appear as if it had been written by Perry Gordon. The first few pages I have just written in the last few minutes. It will be the literal truth about my life, but it will always have the double feeling, Well, believe it or not! Many won't. That's where the joke will come in. I'm going to put into it a lot of letters which Mr. Marquis wrote to various people; some of which he just wrote as he wrote the book. I enclose a sample of it; there will be a number of these letters to you, and if the point ever comes up—I don't see how it could—you must swear I wrote them to you.

Yours as per eternally,
DON

The Biography of Don Marquis
by
Perry Gordon
Chapter One

Any biographer of Don Marquis is assailed at once by the initial difficulty that Mr. Marquis

has always taken a perverse delight in mystifying people with regard to himself. Christopher Morley charged him with it, ten or twelve years ago, when Mr. Morley was preparing a biographical essay concerning him, and Marquis wrote in reply:

It is quite true that I have invented for myself a good many experiences which I never really had. But they were all experiences which belonged to me by right of temperament and character. I should have had them, if I had but had my rights. I was despoiled of them by the rough tyranny of Circumstance. On the other hand, I have suppressed a number of incidents which actually happened, because I did not, upon mature reflection, find them in consonance with my nature as I like to think it is—they were lies that were told about me by the slinking facts of life. Evangelists of various descriptions assure us that we can make the future what we will, if we can but attain a sufficient degree of spirituality. It has been my endeavor to attain such a degree of spirituality that I may be able to influence the past as well as the future. You may think the aspiration is a trifle too optimistic, but you can scarcely deny that it is a worthy aspiration. I should not care to have any notes written about my life at all, unless they were notes that had a tendency to redress these balances. If there are numbers of people, sufficient to justify a biographical paper, who wish to know the truth about me, I must insist that it is the truth which they get, and not merely a series of dislocated facts—facts which, but too frequently, have no logical relation to my character as I know it to be. And who should know it better than myself?

There is always the doubt as to whether a man is the best judge of himself. And it is almost certain that he will not show the figure to the world that he sees in his bright moments of self-appreciation—and Marquis is a queer mixture of flamboyant self-appreciation and really humble self-depreciation. I never knew a man who devoted more time to thinking about himself; I never knew a man who thought of himself more variously, or who was less capable of a steady clarity in looking at himself. So I have made it my business to investigate every incident recorded in this book, wherever possible; and sometimes with surprising results.

The difficulties go as far back as the date of

the man's birth, and even include his proper name.

"I was born (Mr. Marquis habitually told this to his friends for many years; he put it in print several times, and he wrote it in a number of letters to friends which I have seen)—I was born during a total eclipse of the sun, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of July 29th, 1878."

The fact is, that Mr. Marquis does not know whether he was born during the eclipse, or merely on the same day. There is no doubt of the day and year, but there is no one now living who can testify to the exact hour. Not that it makes any great difference; but it shows the character of the difficulties which confront a biographer; difficulties which Mr. Marquis, as often as not, refuses to take seriously—although he can usually be made to confirm the literal fact in the end if it is presented to him and enough insistence made. I wrote him, asking him how he knew he was born during the eclipse itself, for I had received a hint from other quarters to the effect that he did not know, and was romancing. I quote from the reply which I received:

Don't take that eclipse from me! I have always loved that eclipse. It makes me seem more remarkable to myself. I've told about it and written about it so often that it would make me look like a liar if it should not turn out to be literally true; and while I don't mind lying now and then I always hate to look like a liar. How do you know it isn't true? How do I know it isn't true? The fact is, I was born on July 29th, 1878, and there was an eclipse that day—you can go and look that up, if you don't believe it—and it may very well be that I was born just at the time the eclipse was going on. Poems have been written about it; and anything that a poem has been written about becomes true at once, if it is a good poem. Look at the seige of Troy! How much truer that story is because we do not know the literal truth of those skirmishes which Homer sang into immortality. I do not want my life related with a dribble of cold facts; I want it sung, as Homer would sing it. I insist on the eclipse. To me it has always seemed a portent from the gods. I would like you to say: "The sun retired, brooded apart, thought, shadowing his forehead in his hands; and then, his mind made up, tossed Marquis upon the surface of this planet." This is the thought at the center of

my life which has enabled me to survive many discouragements and traverse many vales of vicissitude; this thought that, after all, I was *intended* by the sun himself. Do not take it from me." How do I know that it was not literally true? Even in the face of a definite literal record (which does not exist) I should continue to believe it. I must. It is a necessity of my nature to connect myself with the core of the universe by every possible strand. I am either a child of the gods, or I am nothing at all. I believe in gods, and I love gods; an honest god is the noblest work of man. "I will have my eclipse!"

The definite literal record does not exist; this is the one definite literal fact which we get from Mr. Marquis's rhodomontade. And the present biographer has had no end of trouble winnowing such small facts from such overflowing measures of chaff.

That subtle psychological observation that the things that actually happen to us are often wretchedly unrepresentative of our true selves is one to which Marquis often recurs. But I want to make plain that I think the twelve years of column-writing in New York, theoretically the worst possible vehicle for a finely imaginative talent, were in fact magnificent. There, with increasing power, his essential originality came through. From those newspaper files most of his best books have been scissored out—or, to be exact, photostatted. As a note for bibliographers, I suppose Marquis is one of the few authors whose original book manuscripts exist chiefly in the form of tall albums of newspaper columns photographed from the Public Library. I remember one time he came out to our house for dinner, and as he entered the door took out a narrow roll of newsprint from his pocket, trailing it behind him. He crossed all the rooms on the ground floor, emitting this ribbon of paper, and then, as it was still uncoiling, started upstairs. Finally of course came the question he was playing for. What do you think you are, a spider? It's the manuscript of my new play, he said. It had been running in his column, at irregular intervals, for months. He had cut

out all the sections, and pasted them together endways.

From the files of the column came his book of *Prefaces*; then that notable series of philosophic ruminations called *The Almost Perfect State*; the volumes of verse; the soliloquies of the Old Soak; and the adventures of archy and mehitabel. These things were born in the rough and tumble of a newspaper office; I remember that in the early days of the *Sun Dial* when the paper moved from Park Row to Nassau Street, Don's typewriter desk got lost in the skirmish; so for some years he rattled out his daily stint with his machine perched on an up-ended packing case. This box had stenciled on it the statement I GROSS TOM CAT, which meant Tomato Catsup, but became by legend the first suggestion of mehitabel.

In a daily column, necessarily a great deal of matter is of ephemeral reference. A great deal of Marquis's most brilliant work in those years was in the form of oblique comment on public affairs; it requires the current event to make it understandable, and has not come through into book publication. But with sufficient lapse of time it becomes again important as a part of historic record. I have often been astonished that the chroniclers of national temper during the War years, and during the steadily heightening tension before 1917, have mostly drawn their newspaper quotation from the solemn editorialists. But in those days, when anything important happened I give you my word most of us didn't consult the leading editorials to know what to think. The almost universal reflex, in New York at any rate, was Let's see what Don says about it. I'm not saying that I always agreed, then or now, with Don's notions; but every now and then he would turn on some particular fog of hooley and cut it with a blade that would divide floating silk. Some of those old clippings, yellowed with more than twenty years, I still keep. One was at the time of the great revolution in Russia. The bolshevik coup

d'état was accompanied, as the bloodiest revolutions usually are, by paregoric announcements of universal brotherhood and peace. Don's comment was brief and piercing. "A kind word was seen on the streets of Petrograd, attempting to butter a parsnip." And though it ran counter to my own private hero worships, I chuckled and still do at a comment on Woodrow Wilson about the time of the Peace Conference:

An ocean rolls all pebbles interned within it or abutting upon it; but it may be difficult for an ocean, upon request, to roll any one particular pebble a measured and certain twenty inches north or west on any particular beach. President Wilson (with his great tides) may move all the pebbles of mundane statesmanship, and trace with his ebbs and flows impressive and cryptic and everchanging symbols upon the agitated sands; but we have often felt that when it comes to picking up any one designated pebble and putting it into any one designated little red pail upon a beach President Wilson fumbles. (*Sun Dial*, August 7, 1919.)

There is a whole generation of newspaper readers around New York who will remember as long as brain cells hold together those occasional flashes of magnesium. With a magic that seemed like that of Alice going through the mirror, suddenly we saw the whole furniture of affairs from the other side. When President Wilson brusquely dismissed his Secretary of State, Mr. Lansing, for instance, and Marquis burlesqued it by dismissing archy. Or when Mr. Henry Ford was catechized on his knowledge of history by a Congressional Committee. There had been no such commentator on public affairs since Mr. Dooley; they don't come often.

But it is only too characteristic of the Solemn Skullworkers that because many of Marquis's most pungent comments on the human comedy were put in the form of soliloquies by the Old Soak or by archy the roach, they could not recognize their high coefficient of seriousness. I was amazed to discover that Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Laughter*, a book with a depressing

picture on the jacket showing the author roaring with mirth, and including diagrams analyzing the various phases of a joke, made no mention whatever of the most philosophical humorist of our time. That was, to me, the biggest laugh in the book.

I remember from college days that there was someone called Democritus, of Abdera, nicknamed the Laughing Philosopher. What was there about Abdera that encouraged humor? Was it the fact that its inhabitants became proverbial for stupidity? Perhaps it was there that someone first became aware of the deep truth that the great things, even the best laughs, happen unpremeditated. The notion of the office cockroach butting the typewriter with his head was not, to begin with, very promising or even very original. (John Kendrick Bangs tried a similar idea with a June bug a good many years ago, and abandoned it as unpromising.) The use of nothing but lower-case font, and no punctuation (because the roach couldn't manage the shift key) once adopted had to be continued, and was probably worth while as a stunt, though that—like the typographical tricks in *Tristram Shandy*—is a primary kind of waggishness. It has resulted in some of Don's subtlest comment and some of his most humorous bits of verse being buried in irregular strips of print not easy to read. I think for instance of the superb fragment of Shakespearean criticism "The Parrot and Shakespeare," in *archy and mehitabel*. I succeeded some time ago in getting this adopted as practically required reading in a Shakespeare course at Smith College; but it is still too little known.

pete says he used
to belong to the fellow
that ran the mermaid tavern
in london then i said
you must have known
shakespeare know him said pete
poor mutt i knew him well
he called me pete and i called him

bill but why do you say poor mutt
 well said pete bill was a
 disappointed man and was always
 boring his friends about what
 he might have been and done
 if he had only had a fair break
 two or three pints of sack
 and sherris and the tears
 would trickle down into his
 beard and his beard would get
 soppo and wilt his collar
 i remember one night when
 bill and ben johnson and
 frankie beaumont
 were sopping it up
 here i am ben says bill
 nothing but a lousy playwright
 and with anything like luck
 in the breaks i might have been
 a fairly decent sonnet writer
 i might have been a poet
 if i had kept away from the theatre
 yes says ben i ve often
 thought of that bill
 but one consolation is
 you are making pretty good money
 out of the theatre
 money money says bill what the hell
 is money what i want is to be
 a poet not a business man
 these damned cheap shows
 i turn out to keep the
 theatre running break my heart
 slap stick comedies and
 blood and thunder tragedies
 and melodramas say i wonder
 if that boy heard you order
 another bottle frankie
 the only compensation is that i get
 a chance now and then
 to stick in a little poetry
 when nobody is looking
 but hells bells that isn t
 what i want to do
 i want to write sonnets and
 song and spenserian stanzas
 and i might have done it too
 if i hadn't got
 into this frightful show game
 business business business
 grind grind grind
 what a life for a man
 that might have been a poet

well says frankie beaumont
 why don't you cut it bill
 i can t says bill
 i need the money i ve got
 a family to support down in
 the country well says frankie
 anyhow you write pretty good
 plays bill any mutt can write
 plays for this london public
 says bill if he puts enough
 murder in them what they want
 is kings talking like kings
 never had sense enough to talk
 and stabbings and stranglings
 and fat men making love
 and clowns basting each
 other with clubs and cheap puns
 and off color allusions to all
 the smut of the day oh i know
 what the low brows want
 and i give it to them
 well says ben johnson
 don t blubber into the drink
 brace up like a man
 and quit the rotten business
 i can t i can t says bill
 i ve been at it too long i ve got to the place
 now where i can t write anything else
 but this cheap stuff
 i m shamed to look an honest
 young sonneteer in the face
 i live a hell of a life i do
 the manager hands me some mouldy old
 manuscript
 and says bill here s a plot for
 you this is the third of the month
 by the tenth i want a good
 script out of this that we
 can start rehearsals on
 not too big a cast
 and not too much of your
 damned poetry either
 you know your old
 familiar line of hokum
 they eat up that falstaff stuff
 of yours ring him in again
 and give them a good ghost
 or two and remember we gotta
 have something dick burbage can get
 his teeth into and be sure
 and stick in a speech
 somewhere the queen will take
 for a personal compliment and if

you get in a line or two somewhere
 about the honest english yeoman
 it s always good stuff
 and it s a pretty good stunt
 bill to have the heavy villain
 a moor or a dago or a jew
 or something like that and say
 i want another comic welshman in this
 but i don t need to tell
 you bill you know this game
 just some of your ordinary
 hokum and maybe you could
 kill a little kid or two a prince
 or something they like
 a little pathos along with
 the dirt now you better see burbage
 tonight and see what he wants
 in that part oh says bill
 to think i am
 debasing my talents with junk
 like that oh god what i wanted
 was to be a poet
 and write sonnet serials
 like a gentleman should

archy the roach began as a “dee-vice” of scoff against the vers libre poets who were pallidly conspicuous some twenty years ago. But that idea was soon forgotten. Mehitabel the corybantic cat, with her doctrine of *toujours gai*, came on the scene to provide lyric spasms; archy became less the clown and more the skeptical commentator. I don’t propose to maxeastman the matter by *avoirdupois* analysis, nor insist that these two grotesque false-faces provided just the mechanism Marquis’s genius required. We could suggest that archy is the Mickey Mouse of the highbrows, but the kind of people who have enjoyed him do not need to have it rubbed in on them that there is much more there than sheer enjoyment. The right sort of reader, unspoiled by painful palaver, feels that sort of thing by sensitive instinct—and resents pedestrian footnotes.

Anyhow, the roach and the cat, by their humble station in life and the lowliness of their associates, provided an admirable vantage for merciless joshing of every-

thing biggity. Those who only noted archy’s doings in the hasty reading of the daily papers, or in *Collier’s* which he afterward infested, may scarcely have realized the precision of his best spoof. The last book of the three (*archy does his part*, 1935) though it contains some of the best stuff also was more carelessly edited, or photostatted, than the others. A lot of irrelevant matter got in that obviously should have been dropped; but as a journeyman student of such affairs I do not regret this. It shows the author laboring, as everyone in such a task must often labor, under the stress of deadline and fatigue; mechanically going through the motions of assembling a batch of copy—and then there used to happen to Don what only happens to the man gifted by the gods. The automatic motions were replaced by the authoritative inward heat; his magical and stupendous fecundity took charge, and some totally unexpected gorgeousness would explode. As an instance I offer the whinnying absurdity of archy climbing Mount Everest, in the course of which he meets the Dalai Lama, Mehitabel, the Taj Mahal, and the Czar of All the Russias (who is living on canned heat). Among any number of exquisitely abominable belly-laughs in this piece the one that most cruelly besets me is the Czar’s explanation why the sun never set on his dominions. “They were too cold to hatch.” Archy discovers a “virgin gold mine.” How do you know it is virgin, Mehitabel wants to know; she is expertly skeptical in such matters. “Give it the benefit of the doubt,” says the Dalai Lama, but archy is sanguine—

it seems reasonable said i
 there is a snow slide
 over it every twenty minutes

Or, in the precious album of things that Really Are Funny, see archy’s radio interviews on the Roach Paste Hour, or his ribbing of the Experts in Washington.

Like all old troupers, Don has always been delightfully shameless to use a

familiar chestnut when (in the words of Mehitabel in one of her best pieces) He Doesn't Feel it Here (putting paw on bosom). He has the unerring instinct for things that are universal sure-fire, recognized all the world over as comic. Green vegetables are always funny, and bad poets, and winter underwear, and feet. He does not scruple, in extremity, to use the dreadful antique of the passenger who takes off his shoe just as the street-car is passing the glue factory (the first glue factory was probably in Abdera) and he uses again and again certain little whimwhams of his own of which he has grown fond. The flea that brags about having bitten the lion and made him cower; the bullhead that learns to live out of water; the man who pulls out his glass eye in the subway car and eats it, explaining that it's a pickled onion—what frolic the sedentary psychologist might have in computing some soul-dynamic on the frequent reappearance of these episodes. (Freuds rush in where angels fear to tread, as archy once said.) The practising journalist smiles affectionately and says Good old boy, that day he was hard up for copy. And then, among routine comedy there stream rockets of cold fire—

that stern and rockbound coast
felt like an amateur
when it saw how grim the puritans
that landed on it were

Or the egotistic lightning bug that said

all I need is a harbor
under me to be a
statue of liberty

But archy took him down:

youve made lightning for two hours
little bug but i dont hear
any claps of thunder

If you want to see archy in his best philosophic vein, examine the fable called "The Robin and the Worm," in *archy and mehitabel*. Like the Uncle Remus fables of Don's old boss, it has superb social analogies that are being illustrated all around us

every moment. Exactly like the absorption of the worm (both gastric and psychic) a placid economic peristalsis is now taking effect in the United States: almost unsuspected by some digestees.

So I ask myself again, what was the happy quiddity of Abdera that gave its first citizen this richest gift of all; this incalculable, unpredictable joy of the grotesque, the magic to show us truth in the very shout of laughter. First the mirthquake, as Don said long ago, and then the still small voice. In a riotously absurd piece of kidding, the "Preface to the Prospectus of a Club," Don was talking about Brooklyn:—

Walt Whitman used to live over there and edit the *Eagle* and go swimming in Buttermilk Channel, two points off starboard bow of Hank Beecher's church. Once an old Long Island skipper sunk a harpoon into Walt's haunch when he came up to blow, and the poet, snorting and bellowing and spouting verse, towed the whaler and his vessel clear out to Montauk before he shook the iron loose. Is there a bard in Greenwich Village that could do that?

What I'm suggesting, and the whole gist of this little tribute, is that this casual comic paragraph, in the very guts and gusto of its Munchausenism, contains more shrewd criticism of Walt than many a whole solemn tome by the serious little people who write books about Moby Walt.—If you don't discern that, there's no use your reading Don Marquis; or Walt Whitman either.

I want to say a word of Mr. Marquis as divinity student. This came back to me the other day when a friend told me he was going to attend a kinsman's graduation from theological seminary. The thought occurred to me—but I did not say it, for it would have required some explanation—that the ideal graduation gifts for a young parson (with a sense of humor) would be two of Don Marquis's books: *The Old Soak's History of the World*, and *Chapters for the Orthodox*.

The Old Soak became folk-lore during the Bootleg era. He was not merely the

denizen of "a nose-red city, pickled half the time," if Bartlett will pardon us. You will remember that beautiful portrait (as pathetic as comic) of the old boozier's fumbling mind, his incoherent attempts to express the simple kindness and good humor he had known in the reputable saloon—to say nothing of its stimulus to art ("hand-paintings"), politics, and home life. Mr. Clem Hawley was also no mean student of Holy Writ. His retelling of Old Testament stories, in his *History of the World*, is to me some of the most genuinely laughable stuff ever written. And in the course of his exegetics the Old Soak makes a profound remark which must be remembered by those who find themselves shocked by Mr. Marquis's apparent levity. The Old Soak vigorously objects to Mr. Hennerly Withers, the "dam little athyiss," laughing at the fable of Jonah. "Only its friends," he says, "got a right to laugh at that story." The laughter in *Chapters for the Orthodox* is sometimes cerebral, sometimes violently of the midriff, but those who will take pains to explore under the superficial shock will find it always the laughter of a friend.

The Old Soak, incidentally, always stood up for his trinity of fundamentals: the Bible, calomel, and straight whiskey. Mr. Marquis himself has been equally conservative in his choice of apostolic matter. It has come down to us by unbroken laying on of hands. The literary genealogy of Mr. Hawley was suggested with gorgeous impudence when Mrs. Quickly's death-watch for Falstaff was echoed in the hired girl's epitaph on the parrot. I'm ashamed to say I had forgotten this colossal jape until I heard it again recently in the talking picture. They've been trying Al's home-made hootch on the parrot:

He's gone, Mr. Hawley. He's d-d-d-dead! Seriously dead! It happened a half hour ago. I think it was his constitution undermined itself with that hootch Al brought here the other night, and I never will forgive myself, I won't. But he kept coaxin' and coaxin' for it that pretty that I couldn't refuse him. . . . And he kept

drinking of it till he deceased himself with it. He called out to me about a half hour ago, he did. "Fair weather," he says, and then he laughed. Only he didn't laugh natural. Mr. Hawley, he luffed kind of puny and feeble like there was somethin' furrin weighin' onto his stomach. "I can't give you any more Peter," I says to him, "for there ain't no more," I says. And then he stretched his neck out and bit the wire on his cage and squawked, for he says in a kind of sad voice: "Nellie was a lady, she was," he says. And them was the last words he ever give utterings to. (*Exit Hired Girl, weeping.*)

Chapters for the Orthodox, perhaps Marquis's most brilliant and least known book, I have always felt restricted from discussing on account of the author's affectionate partiality exhibited in the dedication. However, the formal phobias mean less and less as time shortens, and because I am fond of parsons and wish them well I set scruple aside. A man who has been through the anxieties of the seminary, and emerged with his Bachelorhood of Sacred Theology, is surely grounded in faith to stand a few jolts. That book was timidly published (1934) and timidly dealt with by the Trade. My own feeling about it was that its only chance was to be offered as a translation from some other language, in which case it might perhaps have been a sensation. It would be hard to find anything more in the spirit of Voltaire than the first story—*Miss Higginbotham Declines*—with its glorious opening sentence:

It was Jehovah's custom, when he came to New York, to put on the material appearance and manner of a member of the Union League Club; indeed, he used the club itself a great deal.

I remember offering (don't laugh) to translate that story into French and try to get it published in that language, but could persuade no one—not even the author. But its delicate and reverent ribaldries would shock no one under the screen of a different tongue. The barb of the parable, as the new Bachelor will soon perceive, is a prickly one. Jehovah, brooding on the problems of humanity (and especially New York City)

decides that what the world needs is anxiety of finding for the purpose . . . but perhaps you'd better read it yourself.

In short, the book is devout to the point of scandal. Semi-religious people are another Begotten Son. This implies the necessities horrified by completely religious people; ethical ideas, as every philosopher has observed, are loaded with dynamite and perilous indeed for every kind of establishment. The world (said Santayana in a fine passage) is always a caricature of itself, always pretending to be something quite other than what it actually is. And to pretend to take those pretences literally is always horrifying. Nothing disturbs, or surprises, man so much as the discrepancy between his professions and his actual behavior; in that discrepancy lies the mother-lode of intellectual comedy. Marquis once remarked that he had a great idea: he was going to dramatize some of Bernard Shaw's plays. What he did in *Chapters for the Orthodox* had something of the same double-edged riposte: by taking ticklishly beautiful things with simple seriousness he explodes (in shattering laughter) the towering falsehoods of our genteel imposture. —And then humorously rebuilds them, knowing well that by make-believe we live. This book, which ranges from tender and moving fable to the most outrageous cat-calls and trombone raspberries (uproarious, deplorable, with such blasphemous farcing as a Police Commissioner would not tolerate for even one performance) does actually come somewhere near expressing the blaze and bellylaugh of life. The prosecution of Jesus by the swine-dealer of Gadara (for having damaged the pork business), with Jehovah on the bench and Satan as prosecuting attorney, and a number of well-known contemporaries as jurymen, is a fair example of Marquis's audacious method. As a characteristic spoof of Britain, one of the demons (when called on to testify) speaks in a strong cockney accent. But it is impossible to give any idea of a book like this without frightening or scandalizing the

casual reader. Are they so few, I have sadly asked myself, who can see beneath this cosmic clowning the flash of its genial piety? Indeed, as Don said in his preface, he sports "in spiritual essence like a porpoise in the Gulf Stream."

It is in this book, à propos of nothing in particular, that Marquis pays his great—I wish I could say famous—tribute to Mark Twain. I can think of nothing truer to say of *Chapters for the Orthodox* than this: it is the book Mark Twain must often have talked, and would have liked to write, but was too canny to do so.—That one-act skit of Faust in Hell . . . really Mr. Marquis, really. . . .

Welladay! (as Don says in the sonnets)—it's futile to try to suggest—in the cold sobriety of the platform—the quick-change paradoxes, the chameleon flicker, of a sultry mind.

Let me mention one more noble paradox. Marquis's finely realized play of the crucifixion, *The Dark Hours*, was produced, largely at his own charges, from profits made on the hokum of the dramatized *Old Soak*.

Briefly to recapitulate, for the benefit of our imagined research student, the lines of parallelism where you will find in Marquis and Mark Twain temperamental affinity. You will observe it in their fundamental comedian's instinct to turn suddenly, without warning, from the beautiful to the grotesque, or vice versa. You will find it in a rich vein of anger and disgust, turning on the genteel and cruel hypocrisies with the fury of a child or an archangel. You will find it in a kindly and respectful charity to the under dog: they are both infracaninephiles. You will find it in their passionate interest in religion and philosophy—with which is joined a blandly mischievous delight in shocking those for whom shocking is good. You will find it—though I can't help you in this just now—in their habitual employment of a devastating Anglo-Saxonism of speech and epithet. And finally you'll observe that

both had a keen (and somewhat ham) dramatic sense, which Marquis expressed in plays and Mark Twain in his superlative performances on the lecture platform.

But there is one quality in Don that Mark never had—or at any rate it was only latent in Mark. Don is a poet, and a poet of high technical dexterity. He remarked once that publishing a volume of verse was like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canon and waiting for the echo. One reason why the echo has been little audible is that he has puzzled the critics by writing verse of so many different kinds. His gamut has run from lyrics of the most serious and tender mood to the genial fooling of *Noah an Jonah an Cap'n John Smith* or the farcical *Famous Love Affairs* or the sardonic ferocity of the *Savage Sonnets*. The sensitive little folks who make a business of collecting and admiring current poetry don't understand such chameleon shifts of color—also Don has made a lifelong habit of spoofing the Poetry Societies and anything that had the aroma of cult. You remember that lovely verse of Ralph Hodgson—

Reason has moons, but moons not hers
Lie mirrored on her sea,
Confounding her astronomers,
But O! delighting me.

Read Don's "Preface to a Book of Poetry" (in the volume called *Prefaces*) if you want to see how he used to harpoon the solemn self-appointed custodians of the Muse.

"Write sonnet serials as a gentleman should" he said in the Shakespeare piece. I assign you as home work the reading aloud of the sequence called Sonnets to a Red Haired Lady—whereafter 32 stinging cocktails of song he turns on us with four concluding sonnets that—as William Rose Benét has said—might well have been written by the earliest of our great sonneteers, Wyatt or Surrey—

The poet blots the end the jester wrote:
For now I drop the dull quip's forced pretence,
Forego the perch'd fool's dubious eminence—

Thy tresses I have sung, that fall and float
Across the lyric wonder of thy throat
In dangerous tides of golden turbulence
Wherein a man might drown him, soul and
sense—

Is not their beauty worth one honest note?

And thee thyself, what shall I say of thee?
Are thy snares strong, and will thy bonds endure?
Thou hast the sense, hast thou the soul of me?
In subtle webs and silken arts obscure
Thou hast the sense of men, but canst thou bind
The scornful pinions of my laughing mind?

"Thou hast the sense of me, but canst thou bind

The scornful pinions of my laughing mind"—I tried once in verse of my own to bind those pinions. This was written more than a dozen years ago: I'll quote briefly:

Well-mingled spirit, rich with savory earth
Of humor; poet, jester of fecund mirth
So masterfully simple that it shows
No minim speck of sham, pretence, or pose—
So lit and winged with antic mimicry
That conies of the upper cults, or casuals of the
press

Are scarcely competent to guess
Behind that gusty offhand ribaldry
The full control and pressure of great art—
Satire so waggishly disguised
Its victims would have been surprised
To know themselves were being satirized—
Satire that loved them even while it skinned
them,
And chloroformed them first, before it pinned
them. . . .

A reverent doubtful spirit
And opal-minded, where an inward red
Burns in the milk and moonlight of the gem—
Humble and defiant as all men are,
(Falling, as we do, from star to star),
Droll tragedian, lip pouted to consider
Life's technicals, so crooked and so slidder,
With such strange prizes for the highest bidder—
Old curly cherub, with the poker face, not
always shaven,

But with such prankish pensiveness engraven,
You, in an age when almost everyone is clever,
Never declined—No, never—

Into the easy triumphs of the smart,
Old Goldenheart.

. . . I think that those inherit
The bitter coronal, who can most finely wear it:
Shuddering and abased,
But not disgraced;
Proud, proud to have outfaced
The champion stroke, the merciless dirty wit
Of the Player Opposite.
And honor, wine and sunlight yet remain,
Clean wind and washing rain,
And that gigantic mirth that men so need,
And loneliness indeed,
Loneliness, which I rate high,
And the love of friends,
And by and by
Silence, the end of ends.

There's an infinitely touching little poem,
toward the end of *The Almost Perfect*

State, called *Lines for a Gravestone*. It
concludes as follows:

Speed, I bid you, speed the earth
Onward with a shout of mirth,
Fill your eager eyes with light,
Put my face and memory
Out of mind and out of sight.
Nothing I have caused or done,
But this gravestone, meets the sun:
Friends, a great simplicity
Comes at last to you and me.

On this note of lovely kindness, humility,
courage and laughter, I should like to
close. Of this man, more than of any I
have known, the great seventeenth century
words apply—words three centuries old this
year and still the most expressive of mas-
culine love and fellowship. I change only
the name—*O rare Don Marquis*.

