

Robert C Benchley



*My Ten Years
in a Quandary*

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The Lost Locomotive

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The day that Mr. MacGregor lost the locomotive was a confusing one for our accountants. They didn't know whom to charge it to.

"We have an account here called 'Alterations,'" said the head accountant (Mr. MacGregor). "We might charge it to that. Losing a locomotive is certainly an alteration in something."

"I am afraid that you are whistling in the dark, Mr. MacGregor," I said quietly.

"The point is not what account we are going to charge the lost locomotive to," I continued. "It is how you happened to lose it."

"I have already told you," he replied, with a touch of asperity, "that I haven't the slightest idea. I was tired and nervous and—well—I lost it, that's all!"

"As a matter of fact," he snapped, "I am not at all sure that the locomotive is lost. And, if it is, I am not at all sure that I lost it."

* * * * *

"I don't think that we need go into that point," I replied. "When a man takes a locomotive out and comes back without it, and is unable to explain what has become of it, the presumption is that he, personally, has lost it. How did you like those tangerines we had for lunch?"

"Only fair," MacGregor answered.

"You see?" I said. "You are getting cynical."

We have had a great deal of trouble about Mr. MacGregor's growing cynical. He looks at things with a bilious eye. It is bringing down the morale of the office force, and there are whole days at a time when we don't sell a thing.

* * * * *

"How often do you take that medicine I gave you?" I asked him.

MacGregor winced slightly. "Hot-diggidy!" he replied.

"That is not an answer to my question," I said, sternly.

"What were we just talking about?" he asked.

"You mean the tangerines?" I said, his cynicism still rankling in my mind.

"No," he replied. "Before that."

We both thought for a minute.

"Well, it couldn't have been very important," I said, laughing. This got him in good humor and we swung forward, double-time, along the road to work.

"Take the Witness!"

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Newspaper accounts of trial cross-examinations always bring out the cleverest in me. They induce day dreams in which I am the witness on the stand, and if you don't know some of my imaginary comebacks to an imaginary cross-examiner (Doe vs. Benchley: 482-U.S.-367-398), you have missed some of the most stimulating reading in the history of American jurisprudence.

These little reveries usually take place shortly after I have read the transcript of a trial, while I am on a long taxi ride or seated at a desk with plenty of other work to do. I like them best when I have work to do, as they deplete me mentally so that I am forced to go and lie down after a particularly sharp verbal rally. The knowledge that I have completely floored my adversary, and the imaginary congratulations of my friends (also imaginary), seem more worth while than any amount of fiddling work done.

During these cross-questionings I am always very calm. Calm in a nice way, that is—never cocky. However frantic my inquisitor may wax (and you should see his face at times—it's purple!), I just sit there, burning him up with each answer, winning the admiration of the courtroom, and, at times, even a smile from the judge himself. At the end of my examination, the judge is crazy about me.

Just what the trial is about, I never get quite clear in my mind. Sometimes the subject changes in the middle of the questioning, to allow for the insertion of an especially good crack on my part. I don't think that I am ever actually the

defendant, although I don't know why I should feel that I am immune from trial by a jury of my peers—if such exist.

I am usually testifying in behalf of a friend, or perhaps as just an impersonal witness for someone whom I do not know, who, naturally, later becomes my friend for life. It is justice that I am after—Justice and a few well-spotted laughs.

Let us whip right into the middle of my cross-examination, as I naturally wouldn't want to pull my stuff until I had been insulted by the lawyer, and you can't really get insulted simply by having your name and address asked. I am absolutely fair about these things. If the lawyer will treat me right, I'll treat him right. He has got to start it. For a decent cross-examiner, there is no more tractable witness in the world than I am.

Advancing toward me, with a sneer on his face, he points a finger at me. (*I have sometimes thought of pointing my finger back at him, but have discarded that as being too fresh. I don't have to resort to clowning.*)

* * * * *

Q—You think you're pretty funny, don't you? (I have evidently just made some mildly humorous comeback, nothing smart-alecky, but good enough to make him look silly.)

A—I have never given the matter much thought.

Q—Oh, you haven't given the matter much thought, eh? Well, you seem to be treating this examination as if it were a minstrel show.

A (*very quietly and nicely*)—I have merely been taking my cue from your questions. (*You will notice that all this*

presupposes quite a barrage of silly questions on his part, and pat answers on mine, omitted here because I haven't thought them up. At any rate, it is evident that I have already got him on the run before this reverie begins.)

Q—Perhaps you would rather that I conducted this inquiry in baby talk?

A—If it will make it any easier for you. (*Pandemonium, which the Court feels that it has to quell, although enjoying it obviously as much as the spectators.*)

Q (*furious*)—I see. Well, here is a question that I think will be simple enough to elicit an honest answer: Just how did you happen to know that it was eleven-fifteen when you saw the defendant?

A—Because I looked at my watch.

Q—And just why did you look at your watch at this particular time?

A—To see what time it was.

Q—Are you accustomed to looking at your watch often?

A—That is one of the uses to which I often put my watch.

Q—I see. Now, it couldn't, by any chance, have been ten-fifteen instead of eleven-fifteen when you looked at your watch this time, could it?

A—Yes, sir. It could.

Q—Oh, it *could* have been ten-fifteen?

A—Yes, sir—if I had been in Chicago. (*Not very good, really. I'll work up something better. I move to have that answer stricken from the record.*)

* * * * *

When I feel myself lowering my standards by answering like that, I usually give myself a rest, and, unless something

else awfully good pops into my head, I adjourn the court until next day. I can always convene it again when I hit my stride.

If possible, however, I like to drag it out until I have really given my antagonist a big final wallop which practically curls him up on the floor (I may think of one before this goes to press), and, wiping his forehead, he mutters, "Take the witness!"

As I step down from the stand, fresh as a daisy, there is a round of applause which the Court makes no attempt to silence. In fact, I have known certain judges to wink pleasantly at me as I take my seat. Judges are only human, after all.

My only fear is that, if I ever really am called upon to testify in court, I won't be asked the right questions. That *would* be a pretty kettle of fish!

The New Strokes

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It will be interesting to see what the new season will bring out in the way of novel swimming strokes. I'll bet it involves the use of an auxiliary motor strapped on the shoulders. When I was learning to swim, people just swam. The idea was to keep afloat and, in an orderly fashion, to get somewhere if possible. If there was nowhere you wanted to get to, you just swam quietly 'round and 'round until your lips got blue. Then you went in.

The stroke that I was first taught was known as the "breast, or gondola, stroke." High out of the water by the bows. It was dignified and stately and went something like this: "One-two-three-sink! One-two-three-sink!" The legs were shot out straight behind, like a frog's, except that they were not good to eat.

Then the more sporting among the swimming crowd took to swimming tipped over on one side, with one ear dragging in the water. This was considered very athletic, especially if one arm was lifted out of the water at each stroke. But even then the procedure was easygoing, pleasant, and more of a pastime than a chore. It was considered very bad form to churn.

But with the advent of the various "crawls," swimming took on more the nature of a battle with the elements. You had to lash at the water, tear at the waves with your teeth, snort and spit, kick your feet like a child with tantrums and, in general, behave as if you had set out deliberately to drown yourself in an epilepsy. It became tiring just to watch.

I never learned the names of the new strokes as they came along, but I gather that the instructions for some of them must read:

The Australian Wrench: Place the head under water up to the shoulder blades. Bring the left arm up, over and around the neck until the fingers of the left hand touch the right cheek (still under water). Shove the right arm sideways and to the left until the right shoulder touches the chin. Then shift arm positions suddenly, and with great splashing, propelling the body through the water by lashing upward and downward with the feet and legs. The head is kept under water during the entire race, thereby eliminating both wind-resistance and breathing. It is bully fun.

The Navajo Twist: Rotate the entire body like a bobbin on the surface of the water, with elbows and knees bent. Spit while the mouth is on the up-side. Inhale when it is under. This doesn't get you much of anywhere, but it irritates the other swimmers and makes it difficult for them to swim.

The Lighthouse Churn: Just stand still, in water about up to your waist, and beat at the surface with your fists, snorting and spitting at the same time. This does nothing but make you conspicuous, but, after all, what is modern swimming for?

Contributors to This Issue

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Unfortunately the current issue of our magazine has had to be abandoned because of low visibility and an epidemic of printers' nausea, but we felt that our readers would still want to know a little something of the private lives of our contributors. At any rate, here we go:

ELWOOD M. CRINGE, who contributed the article *Is Europe?* is a graduate of Moffard College and, since graduation, has specialized in high tension rope. He is thirty-two years old, wears a collar, and his hobbies are golf, bobbing for apples, and junket.

HAL GARMISCH, author of *How It Feels to Be Underslung*, writes: "I am young, good-looking and would like to meet a girl about my own age who likes to run. I have no hobbies, but I am crazy about kitties."

MEDFORD LAZENBY probably knows more about people, as such, than anyone in the country, unless it is people themselves. He has been all over the world in a balloon-rigged ketch and has a fascinating story to tell. *China Through a Strainer*, in this issue, is not it.

* * * * *

ELIZABETH FEDELLER, after graduation from Ruby College for Near-Sighted Girls, had a good time for herself among the deserted towns of Montana and writes of her experiences in a style which has been compared unfavorably with that of Ernest Hemingway. She is rather unattractive looking.

On our request for information, GIRLIE TENNAFLY wrote us that he is unable to furnish any, owing to a short memory. He contributed the article on *Flanges: Open and Shut*, which is not appearing in this issue.

We will let ESTHER RUBRIC tell about herself: "Strange as it may seem," writes Miss Rubric, "I am not a 'high-brow,' although I write on what are known as 'high-brow' subjects. I am really quite a good sport, and love to play tennis (or 'play at' tennis, as I call it), and am always ready for a good romp. My mother and father were missionaries in Boston, and I was brought up in a strictly family way. We children used to be thought strange by all the other 'kids' in Boston because my brothers had beards and I fell down a lot. But, as far as I can see, we all grew up to be respectable citizens, in a pig's eye. When your magazine accepted my article on *How to Decorate a Mergenthaler Linotype Machine*, I was in the 'seventh heaven.' I copied it, word for word, from Kipling."

DARG GAMM is too well known to our readers to call for an introduction. He is now at work on his next-but-one novel and is in hiding with the Class of 1915 of Zanzer College, who are preparing for their twentieth reunion in June.

We couldn't get IRVIN S. COBB or CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND to answer our request for manuscripts.

Dog Libel

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A friend of mine who calls himself a dachshund is furious over an article he has just read in a scientific paper purporting to give the essential qualities of a good dachshund. He finds himself libelled by implication.

"I think I could sue," said my friend. "This man here has said, in effect, that I am not a real dachshund."

"I wouldn't sue," I advised, cautiously. "In the first place, you would have to show that you had been damaged by the publication of the article. Your standing in this household is just the same as it was before the article was written. We won't go into just what your standing is, but it remains unchanged at any rate.

"Furthermore," I added, sagely, "the magazine, pushed to the wall, might dig up a lot of ugly stories which you might not relish having told in court. You are not immaculate, you know. Remember that Seelyham named 'Arthur.'"

"That was just wrestling in fun," my friend said. "I meant him no harm."

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"Just the same," I warned, "it wouldn't look very well in the tabloids. And, anyway, the case wouldn't come up for a year or so, and even then it would drag on, with appeals and reappeals, until you were flat broke. I couldn't do very much to help you out with the costs, you know."

This rather sobered him up, I thought. He had evidently been more or less counting on me to back him in this crack-brained suit of his.

"Listen to this!" he said, trying to swing me into his own irrational state of mind. He spread the paper out on the floor with his paw and adjusted his spectacles. (He wears them only for very fine print.)

I am afraid that this account is getting to sound just a mite whimsical, what with dogs wearing spectacles and talking like people. My only excuse is that it is an actual stenographic account of a conversation and is designed only to show the futility of libel suits.

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"Listen to this," he said (we will leave out the spectacles this time): "'The special work of a dachshund is to enter a badger hole and hold the attention of the animal until it can be dug out.'"

"I never saw a badger," he said, without looking up from the paper, "much less try to hold its attention. How do you hold a badger's attention, anyway?"

"I shouldn't think that it would be very hard," I said. "You could make faces, or just say 'Look, badger!' I don't imagine that a badger's mind wanders easily, once the badger has caught sight of something."

"That is beside the point, anyway," he said, crossly. "The point is that I do not go into badger-holes myself. Does that, or does it not, imply that I am not a real dachshund?"

"You are too touchy," I said. "There must be plenty of real dachshunds in this country who don't go near a badger-hole from one year's end to the other. No jury in the world would count that as a personal slur on you."

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"Very well, then-here is another crack: 'The hind legs should be strong and capable, and viewed from behind must go down straight and by no means show the turning in at the heel known as cow-hocks. This is very common and very bad.' Why doesn't he mention my name and be done with it? Why doesn't he come right out and say Friedel Immerman is not a genuine dachhund?"

"Could you prove in a court of law that you are a genuine dachshund?" I asked, trying not to be brutal about it.

He turned in disgust and walked away without deigning a reply. As he disappeared through the door I distinctly saw the "turning in at the heel known as cow-hocks. Very common and very bad."

It probably is just as well that he dropped the suit.

The Rope Trick Explained

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In explaining this trick, I need hardly say that it is known as "the Indian rope trick." That is the only trick that everyone explains, as well as the only trick that no one has ever seen. (Now don't write in and say that you have a friend who has seen it. I know your friend and he drinks.)

For readers under the age of three (of whom, judging from several letters at hand, I have several) I will explain that "the Indian rope trick" consists in throwing a rope into the air, where it remains, apparently unfastened to anything, while a boy climbs up to the top. Don't ask me what he does then.

This trick is very easy to explain. The point is that the boy gets up into the air somehow and *drops the rope down to the ground*, making it look as if the reverse were true. This is only one way to do it, however. There are millions of ways.

* * * * *

While in India, a friend of mine, a Mr. MacGregor, assisted me in confusing the natives, in more ways than one. We dressed up in Indian costume, for one thing. This confused even us, but we took it good-naturedly.

Then I announced to a group of natives, who were standing open-mouthed (ready to bite us, possibly) that Mr. MacGregor and I would perform the famous Indian Rope Trick under their very noses. This was like stealing thunder from a child.

Stationing myself at the foot of a rope which extended upward into the air with no apparent support at the other end, I suggested to Mr. MacGregor that he climb it.

"Who—me?" he asked, hitching his tunic around his torso.

This took up some time, during which part of our audience left. The remainder were frankly incredulous, as was Mr. MacGregor. I, however, stuck to my guns.

"Up you go, MacGregor!" I said. "You used to be in the Navy!"

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So, like a true yeoman, Mr. MacGregor laid hands on the rope and, in a trice, was at its top. It wasn't a very good trice, especially when viewed from below, but it served to bring a gasp of astonishment from the little group, many of whom walked away.

"Come on in—the water's fine!" called Mr. MacGregor, waving from his pinnacle (one waves from one's pinnacle sideways in India).

"Is everything fast?" I called up at him.

"Everything fast and burning brightly, sir!" answered Mr. MacGregor, like a good sailor.

"Then—*let 'ergo!*" I commanded, sounding Taps on a little horn I had just found in my hand.

And, *mirabile dictu*, Mr. MacGregor disappeared into thin air and *drew the rope up after him!* Even I had to look twice. It was a stupendous victory for the occult.

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"Are there any questions?" I asked the mob.

"What is Clark Gable like?" someone said.

"He's a very nice fellow," I answered. "Modest and unassuming. I see quite a lot of him when I am in Hollywood."

There was a scramble for my autograph at this, and the party moved on, insisting that I go with them for a drink and tell them more about their favorite movie stars. There is a native drink in India called "*straiter-i*" which is very cooling.

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It wasn't until I got back to our New York office that I saw Mr. MacGregor again, and I forgot to ask him how he ever got down.

Toddling Along

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What is the disease which manifests itself in an inability to leave a party—any party at all—until it is all over and the lights are being put out? It must be some form of pernicious inertia.

No matter where I am, if there are more than four people assembled in party formation, I must always be the last to leave. I may not be having a very good time; in fact, I may wish that I had never come at all. But I can't seem to bring myself to say, "Well, I guess I'll be toddling along."

Other people are able to guess they'll be toddling along. One by one, and two by two, and sometimes in great groups, I watch them toddle along, until I am left, with possibly just my host to keep me company. Sometimes even my host asks me if I mind if he toddles along to bed. When this happens, I am pretty quick to take the hint.

I have often thought of hiring a little man to go about with me, just to say to my host:

"Well, old Bob thinks he'll be toddling along now." It's that initial plunge that I can't seem to negotiate. It isn't that I *can't* toddle. It's that I can't *guess* I'll toddle.

* * * * *

I suppose that part of this mania for staying is due to a fear that, if I go, something good will happen and I'll miss it. Somebody might do card tricks, or shoot somebody else. But this doesn't account for it all. It is much deeper seated than that.

The obvious explanation to an analyst would be that I have an aversion to going *home*, because I have a sister fixation or am subconsciously in love with my parrot and am seeking an escape.

This, as I am so fond of saying to analysts, is not true. I would much rather be at home than at most parties. In fact, I don't go to many parties, and for that very reason.

My diagnosis would be that it is a sign of a general break-up. I have difficulty in starting to do anything, but once started, I can't stop. I find myself at a party and I have to stay at a party until I am put out.

The next step is, I am afraid, that I won't be able to find myself at all.

Oh, well.

No Pullmans, Please!

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I suppose that it is just looking for trouble on my part, but what are they going to do with all the old Pullman cars when the streamliners come into general use? I hope that they don't try to palm one of them off on me.

I simply couldn't take care of an old Pullman. I haven't got the space, in the first place. It's all I can do to find room for my big bag after I have unpacked it. Imagine trying to crowd a pullman in, too!

Neither have I the inclination. I see no reason why I should be made to take over something that I really don't want, do you? And yet I have a horrible premonition that some day soon they are going to drag around a car named "Gleeber's Falls" or "Angostura" and ask me to give it a home.

* * * * *

The first time I read about the advent of the new type of sleeping car, I said, quick as a flash: "Here it comes! I get the old ones!" They've got to do *something* with all those "Laburnums" and "Latvias." And I always seem to get things like that. "Give it to old Bob," people say, when they are tearing down their houses. "It will be just right for his room!"

I am to blame, in a way, for a long time ago I set out to furnish a room in a sort of knickknack fashion. I even invited contributions from my friends. But what I meant was contributions that I could use. I didn't mean that I was starting a whaling museum or that I planned to build more

rooms. I had more or less in mind a mid-Victorian study of the "what-not" variety. Well, I got my "what-nots."

* * * * *

It began with little articles to line up on top of a bookcase, miniature geese, little men with baskets, shells with eggs in them and broken stags. I also was not averse to hanging oddments on the walls. My friends entered into the spirit of this admirably. Every one had fun but the lady who dusted.

Then people began looking around town for heavier gifts. It got to be a game. Trucks began arriving with old busts of Sir Walter Scott, four-foot statues of men whose shirtfronts lit up when attached to an electric connection, stuffed owls and fox terriers that had lain too long at the taxidermist's. This phase ended with the gift of a small two-headed calf in a moderate state of preservation.

From then on the slogan became: "Send it to Benchley!" Wrecking concerns were pressed into service, and chipped cornices from the old Post Office, detached flights of stairs, hitching posts and railings began pouring in. Every day was like Christmas in Pompeii. The overflow went into the bedroom and I started sleeping under an old spinet, covered over with a set of bead-curtains which had been brought to me from a bordello in Marseille.

* * * * *

The friendly mood in which the game started changed gradually to one of persecution. The idea began to embarrass me and to make it impossible for me to move about. On several occasions it became a matter for the police, and once the Missing Persons Bureau took a hand in