Foreword

by Paul Fatout, professor emeritus of English, Purdue University

I remember an occasion more than forty years ago when the guest speaker at a Purdue literary dinner was Elmer Davis, then coming into prominence as a capable writer and reporter. The man who introduced the speaker was George Ade. Although he was on record as saying "I do not choose to make speeches or listen to speeches," he was called upon, as a celebrated citizen, to make and listen to a good many speeches at testimonial dinners and convivial get-togethers.

On the evening I remember he looked the part of the assured performer. Iron-grey hair, still plentiful at sixty-odd, a countenance serious yet benign, distinguished bearing complemented by resplendent dinner jacket, immaculate shirt front and black tie—all gave the impression of a seasoned diner-out accustomed to delivering entertaining sentiments without a qualm. Notwithstanding many public appearances, however, he may have found such assignments irksome, for a slight suggestion of tension implied that he was not entirely at ease.

Evidently uncertain of his ability to extemporize, he read from a manuscript. The voice was the familiar twang of the midwest, flat, without resonance, faintly nasal, though never harsh or loud. The conversational tone was so subdued that the unobtrusive touches of Ade humor, which emerged like casual afterthoughts, took the audience by surprise, delaying the ripple of laughter. In his autobiography he says, "I never wanted to be a comic or tried to be one," but he did not have to try hard to be amusing because the wryly humorous observation came as naturally to him as it did to Kin Hubbard or James Whitcomb Riley or Mark Twain.

The offhand witticisms I have forgotten, but I recall the change in the manner of George Ade when he identified the man he was introducing. His whole attitude quickened into life, and his voice
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became animated as he made capital of the name “Elmer.” Ade was delighted with it, remarked upon the fitness of such a name for a country boy born and bred down there in Dearborn County, Indiana, and rolled the syllables around his tongue like rare old brandy. “Ell-mer,” he said slowly, “Ell-mer,” and paused to savor the fine homely sound.

The name was in congenial company among the gallery of bucolic characters who populate the Ade stories and fables. On the roster are Jethro, Clarence, Ezry, Bert and Willie, Lutie, Mabel, Effie, Aunt Mehely, Flora and Myrtle, Lem and Minnie, Arvy Harriman, best horseshoe pitcher at the state fair, and Jasper Wilkins, champion checker player of the seventh congressional district. All of them are as indigenous to Indiana as the popping noises of growing corn on hot summer nights, as native as succotash, giblet gravy, and young cabbage slaw smothered in sharp cream dressing.

The brief dinner episode illuminated what seems to me the most engaging Hoosier attribute of George Ade: his lifelong alliance with the mid-country small town and surrounding farmland. In spirit he remained a countryman, no matter how far afield he traveled or to what great metropolis. Of Chicago he says, via Artie

Jethro and Lutie, courtesy of Dover Publications, Inc.
Blanchard, “When you come to know the town it’s as common as plowed ground.” He was acting in character when, at the age of thirty-eight, famous as the author of stories and plays, he bought property fifteen miles from his Kentland, Indiana, birthplace and built the big house he called Hazelden, which became a home base. He was an intermittent rural squire, still wandering over the world but always returning to be a good neighbor to the entire populace of Newton County, as well as to all others who enjoyed his open-handed hospitality.

In picturing life in the cornbelt of the last century, Ade is superb, none better. We see the village, bogged down in half-frozen winter mud, deep in summer dust, wooden sidewalks, coal-oil lamps, lace curtains and marble-topped parlor tables, high-crowned derby hats, and the feminine bustle, an extraordinary rear extension that looked, he says, “like an aft-deck or rumble seat . . . the most unbelievable item in human history.”

We hear of stereopticon lectures, medicine shows, Swiss bell ringers, barnstorming troupes staging “East Lynne,” “Lady Audley’s Secret,” “Ten Nights in a Bar-Room.” Elocutionists were in vogue, “tall, brunette ladies of intense personality,” who would “collect their victims into halls and goose-pimple them with ’Rum’s Maniac’ or ‘Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight.’” Popular preachers were “those who could make the most noise while picturing hell-fire. A really successful funeral could be heard a mile away.” Among inhabitants are “the elderly man whose side whiskers were a tower of strength in the community,” the citizen who was “a marked man because it was rumored that he kept bottled beer on ice,” the four Saxby boys, “all of whom can move their ears,” and the fellow who wrote to Sears, Roebuck for a package of macaroni seed.

Measured by the computerized frenzy of the late twentieth century, fraught with neuroses and coronaries, the sedate tempo of two or three generations ago may seem to have been sleepy and dull. George Ade did not find it so. “Was existence drab or the hours empty?” he asks. “No indeed! Life was one grand, sweet song.”

The remark accurately defines his attitude toward all experience, which he accepted with a tolerance shaded by satirical reflections, more kindly than vicious, on the foibles of mankind. At the age of 73 he said: “It’s a great world and most of the people are worth knowing. I am glad to have been among those present.”

He knew a large number of the world’s people, as this collection of letters attests. Still, as a discriminating man, somewhat reserved, he surely concluded that some were more worth knowing than others.
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He was not a joiner, a professional booster, or an uncritical champion of his society. Nevertheless, keen observation, tempered by humor, allowed him to relish the human circus without being depressed by its stupidities or moved to carry the torch of the fanatical reformer. He said he wanted to be known as “a realist with a compact style . . . and the courage to observe human virtues and frailties as they showed on the lens.”

He succeeded admirably in achieving these objectives. The charm of George Ade lies in his good-natured contemplation of our species, which he delineates, not with malice or with condescension, but with the gusty enjoyment of a spectator entertained by a continuous variety show.

The compact style—simple, unadorned, often relying on understatement—is capable of telling effects. Consider the quiet deflation of pretense in such remarks as “He traveled with a cowhide bag that must have used up at least one cow,” or “He was so democratic he was ready to borrow from the humblest.” Of an actor, down on his luck and down-at-heel, the description is: “His attire and bearing suggested the pathos of a summer pavilion with snow on the roof.” A comment startlingly appropriate to our troubled times is this one: “The cardboard motto in the dining room said ‘Love One Another,’ but they were too busy to read.”

This Foreword may indicate my admiration for the man as a writer and as a human being thoughtful and generous. The tribute he paid his father and mother by saying that they were “plenty good enough for this speckled world” may be said of him as well. I cherish the memory of that long-ago evening when I saw and heard George Ade.