I got the breaks. Starting from nowhere in the corn belt, I helped edit a country weekly, then was jack-of-all-departments on an obscure daily, so that when I arrived in a big city everything I tackled in the line of column conducting and syndicate peddling and playwriting had to bring promotion, because I had no social standing which could be endangered, no reputation to toss away and no pride which might suffer a setback. Everything I acquired had to be velvet. You cannot lose your silver spoon if you are brought up on pewter.

George Ade sent the above night letter to Ashton Stevens in reply to the drama critic’s request for an autobiographical sketch to insert in his Chicago Herald and Examiner column, April 30, 1930. The night letter to Stevens illustrates the image Ade manifested throughout his career—the down-to-earth, common-sense, breezy character who remains unaffected even after achieving tremendous success. The image made this satirist a most palatable American figure. When a writer points up the foibles of his contemporaries and maintains the doctrine of rugged individualism, and if his observations possess pungency, he often makes enemies. Ade’s writing made him more friends than foes, because his satire was general rather than personal and his humanity softened his criticism, making his audience feel he was laughing with them.

Ade’s mirth-provoking topics were frequently classic: the city versus the country, the battle of the sexes, pomposity, and materialism have ever been grist for humorists. Ade’s manner of presentation of these subjects was particularly suited to him and to his audience. A specialist in irony, parody, and verbal pyrotechnics, he incorporated these devices into pieces which entertained a city and then a nation. Incisive treatment of familiar subjects expressed in natural-sounding language indicated that intelligence lurked ready to back
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up flippancy. This made his readers wish they had made the writer’s suffering remarks, and they often paid him the compliment of appropriating his statements. Feeling “like thirty cents” and “the cold gray dawn of the morning after” became part of the American idiom. The public recognized Ade’s objective presentations of the ordinary as true, but his genial irreverence economically expressed was new. Ade was a blend of satirist and philosopher, who could entertain and enlighten in a few words which often unveiled pre-tense but never denuded the reader.

Ade frequently denied that he was a humorist; during his most productive years he considered himself a realist. While a journalist in Chicago, Ade became one of the more astute chroniclers of the daily preoccupations of ordinary people who were living through the “watershed period.” In his column, “Stories of the Streets and of the Town,” he produced daily reportage and feuilletons of a caliber which warranted Edmund Wilson’s ranking him with Henry Mayhew. Chicago Record columns such as “The Junk-Shops of Canal Street,” July 6, 1894, are vivid bits of city history. Ade varied his “Stories of the Streets” with sketches such as “Effie Whittlesey,” March 13, 1896. This short story, which William Dean Howells included in his anthology, The Great Modern American Stories, 1920, recounts the plight of a hired girl who loses her job because she knew her employer before he could afford servants. This piece encapsules Ade’s sentiments about origins:

“. . . I’d hate to have her go back to Brainerd and report that she met me here in Chicago and I was too stuck up to remember old times and requested her to address me as ‘Mister Wallace.’ Now, you never lived in a small town.”

“No, I never enjoyed that privilege,” said Mrs. Wallace dryly. “Well, it is a privilege in some respects, but it carries certain penalties with it, too. It’s very poor schooling for a fellow who wants to be a snob.”

As a recorder of the post-fire generation of Chicago, Ade was without peer. He prowled the bustling city, which was comprised of numerous rural transplants too busy with the business of living to establish traditions. Having come from a small town himself, Ade understood his fellow citizens and recorded fragments of their lives with perception bred of fascination. The place he called his workshop was a sprawling town. Its constant change gave the writer ever-fresh concepts. Chicago had a number of other good writers who provided the interchange of ideas. In addition to Ade’s “hall bedroom twin,” John McCutcheon, his circle in the nineties included
Ray Stannard Baker, James O'Donnell Bennett, Finley Peter Dunne, Eugene Field, Kirk LaShelle, Amy Leslie, Frank Vanderlip, and Brand Whitlock. The period which would become known as the Chicago Renaissance had started, and Ade was a star in the mid-west pleiad. As he accurately recorded the city's people and places, he developed a pared-down style suited to his material and his métier. Ade set down his observations simply and realistically. His prose seemed imitable, yet he adorned his sentences with aphoristic home truths which were fashioned with the same precision as the illustrations his closest friend, John McCutcheon, drew to accompany the "Stories of the Streets." In "Il Janitoro," April 2, 1896, Ade observed, "There is nothing so irritates a real enthusiasm as the presence of calm scorn." In Single Blessedness and Other Observations, 1922, the bachelor noted, "The more you camp by yourself the more you shrivel." In this book he included the essay, "Advice," which Ade defined as the "cream of all jobs . . . perching on the fence and telling the other fellow how to saw wood."

Ade was influenced by the genteel realism advocated by William Dean Howells; McCutcheon was influenced by the crisp drawings of Charles Dana Gibson. Both Ade and McCutcheon simplified their models and developed styles sufficiently distinctive to be recognizable without signature. Writer and artist collaborated with such skill that selections from the column comprised eight paperback collections of Stories of the Streets and of the Town between 1894 and 1900.

The columnist varied his daily output by creating characters who entertained readers because they felt acquainted with the types depicted. Artie, 1896, the portrait of a brash office boy, Pink Marsh, 1897, a pioneer drawing of an urban Negro, and Doc' Horne, 1899, a sensitive rendering of a middle-aged hotel raconteur, all grew out of "Stories of the Streets." Like the McCutcheon drawings which illustrated these books, the concept of profile is sure. There is relatively little shading, however, and the caricatures, while devoid of the grotesqueries of cartoon, fall short of the rounded characters found in novels. Although these gatherings from the columns between hard covers lack the architectonic skill of long fictional works, these near-novels of the nineties brought Ade to the notice of the literary world which recognized his potential as a novelist.

Ade's talent did not lie in the creation of the realistic novel; his forte was recounting the incident. Ade said that he hit upon the fable by accident, but his columns, which frequently consisted of
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commentary upon human foibles, pointed to his parables. The fable was suited to his temperament, talent, and training. The brief and simple form provided opportunity for satire. Relation of a common occurrence to convey a truth appealed to the journalist. The fable’s limitations of probability encapsulated Ade’s view of writing and life. Since college days Ade had been more adept at concentrated prose, which contained several memorable lines, than lengthy discourse. His Anglo-Saxon Protestant background of strictly observed rural Sabbaths, and his education, which included large doses of copying pious sayings in notebooks, bred a distaste for the traditional homily, but not for instructing by exposing hypocrisy and uncovering frailty. His agnostic reaction provided the impetus for viewing a near random universe with tragic proclivities. “We are all wisps,” said Ade, “and the winds of chance blow in many directions.” His shyness, which he masked with dry wit, gave the impulse for comic treatment.

On September 17, 1897, Ade published his first fable in the Chicago Record. He reworked this as “The Fable of Sister Mae, Who Did as Well as Could Be Expected.” The tale of two sisters, the good, hardworking “Lumpy Dresser” Luella and the slothful, stupid, shapely Mae, possesses the irony of Ade’s better parables. Mae’s progress in society to “Vogner” concerts enables her to hire her sister as her assistant cook at a raise in pay. This development leads to the moral: “Industry and Perseverance bring a sure Reward.” On December 9, 1899, Fables in Slang was announced for publication. The collection of secular sermons on the human condition in all its absurdity, each ending with an incongruous moral tag, captured a nation embarking on a new century, seeking different modes of expression, and willing to trade new morals for old. Unlike Ade’s previous books, which possessed sufficient local color to puzzle some Eastern seaboard reviewers, The Fables, for all their provincialism and “barbarities of language,” were immediately popular with a generation which had been nurtured on the fables of McGuffey’s readers. The fables were often criticisms of tenets held by an America of small towns, made by a critic who held the village dear. “The Fable of the Unintentional Heroes of Center-ville” gently gibes at the ceremonies held to welcome home veterans. “The Fable of How Uncle Brewster Was Too Shifty for the Tempter” recounts the penury responsible for a farmer’s remaining virtuous on a trip to the big city. “The Fable of the Honest Money-Maker and the Partner of His Joys, Such As They Were” tells of a rural skinflint who worked his wife to her grave. “The Fable of
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What Happened the Night the Men Came to the Women’s Club” describes a group out “to cut a seven-foot Swath through English Literature from Beowulf to Bangs.”

Ade had learned what made readers laugh during his decade on the Chicago newspapers. The prejudices and penchants of the writer seemed to be those of the nation. The country laughed with Ade at the host of people he invented. Readers knew neighbors just like the village belle, the sissy, the high falootin’ preacher, the lady martyr, and the other characters whose likenesses accompanied Ade’s sallies. The fine line of realism was supplanted by the heavier strokes of woodcut. The broader comic delineations were immediately recognizable because the writer included only what was necessary. By selection of detail, Ade showed his sensitivity. More important, his decorous fables boasted the magic element humorous writers seek—the common touch. The common touch devolves upon the ability to treat familiar subjects in a manner which elicits a similar response from the majority of the audience. For an America in rapid transit from rural to urban, Ade assumed the pose of the man who knows city and country and finds foolishness in both locales. His humorous skepticism which valued horse sense and distrusted intellectualism was healthy. At his best Ade manufactured types found in town and country. The social climber, the luckless suitor, the money grabber were sufficiently universal to be recognized by readers anywhere. If types such as the Bohemian or the phrenologist were outside the realm of the reader’s experience, a picture abetted the fable. Illustration of fables had been common practice since the eighteenth century, but no previous fabulist had relied so heavily on graphics. In most of Ade’s books pictures are an integral part of the text. His imagery is frequently visual, for the reader must see situations in which the characters are placed to relish the absurdity. The types are static but their predictable behavior produces unpredictable consequences. Because the reader does not learn enough about these caricatures to take them seriously, he laughs. Frequently the inability to change is of tragic dimension, but the manner of presentation is comic. Ade’s fables illustrate Leontinus’ principle that humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor.

The popularity of the fables freed Ade from the grind of producing a daily column, and he began syndicating the short pieces. Between 1900 and 1939, when the last fable appeared, Ade produced over five hundred fables, about half of which were collected in book form. More Fables, 1900; Forty Modern Fables, 1901; The
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*Girl Proposition*, 1902; *People You Know*, 1903; *Breaking Into Society*, 1904; *True Bills*, 1904; *Knocking the Neighbors*, 1912; *Ade’s Fables*, 1914, and *Hand-made Fables*, 1920, attest to the viability of Ade’s treatment of the form, although the later fables are strained and inferior to the spontaneous creations which first appeared in his *Chicago Record* column. By 1920, when the last collection appeared, Ade had entered the ranks of the select, whose writing the public is preconditioned to consider funny.

While the fabulist was at his zenith, he succeeded in a different branch of comic writing. Ade had been infatuated with the theater since childhood, and after several attempts at writing theatricals, succeeded with *The Sultan of Sulu* in 1902. Oriental fantasies were popular, and Ade’s operetta in the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition was more proficient than most of the American offerings of similar inspiration. The satire of McKinley’s policy of “benevolent assimilation of the little brown brother” nudged the audience to question the wisdom of imperialistic policies. The plot was no less probable than most operettas at the turn of the century, and Ade’s lyrics were more articulate.

In less than a year after *Sultan* opened, Ade rushed another musical, *Peggy from Paris*, which was first performed in 1903. *Peggy*, a Pygmalion–Cinderella plot, contained ingredients such as yokel pageantry and clever vaudeville bits, which Ade did well, but the creation of incident was superior to the overall theatrical product.

The season after *Peggy from Paris* he gave Broadway *The County Chairman*, his first full length hit play without music. This political satire, softened by an 1880s setting, presented a parade of corn-fed citizens who sped through a number of bits which captivated an audience enamored of vaudeville. While theatergoers were applauding *The County Chairman*, Ade’s second play of the 1904 season opened. *The College Widow*, which introduced football to the American theater, was the prototype of the Saturday’s hero story. Ade’s depiction of the campus crowd as fresh, clean-cut, wise-cracking adolescents, delectably free of responsibilities, who are concerned with games rather than grades, established the pattern of collegiate comedies and musicals for two generations.

*The Sho-Gun* was Ade’s third offering of the 1904 season. This satire of “benevolent association” derived inspiration not only from the British masters of light opera but from his previous Oriental operetta. The formulae which Ade devised for fabling were sufficiently adroit to admit variations; his prescription for theatricals...
was not. Authentic atmosphere, some scintillating lines, inspired comic moments, and insertion of variety turns at the expense of pervasive unity may entertain once, but a vaudeville formula does not produce lasting comic drama. Ade tried to write too much too fast. He was called the most successful American playwright in 1904. The following season Ade’s comedy *The Bad Samaritan* failed dismally. The eye which had seen so accurately, and the ear which had heard the language as it was spoken, did not help *The Bad Samaritan*, for its basic premise was not comic.

Ade continued to turn out comedies for Broadway for the rest of the decade, but *Just Out of College*, 1905; *Artie*, 1907; *Father and the Boys*, 1908; *The Fair Co-Ed*, 1908; *The Old Town*, and *U.S. Minister Bedloe*, 1910, form a long and painful denouement. Ade did shows for the Harlequin Club of Purdue University; he also wrote one-act plays, such as *The Mayor and the Manicure*, 1913, and *Nettie*, 1914, which proved popular with little theater groups, but his career as a dramatist was over.

Theatrical failure was a great disappointment, for Ade loved the glamor of the stage, although his reserve seems to have prevented his full immersion in the Broadway scene. His commercial successes in the theater enabled him to become financially independent, and Ade chose the lifestyle with which he was most comfortable. He delighted in the color of the city, but he sent his money home to Indiana where he invested in land. With the royalties from his plays he built Hazelden Farm, and moved into his Tudor-style mansion in Brook. At the height of his dramatic career he went back to the region which had inspired much of his writing.

In 1903, the year before Ade returned to the village from which he had never really revolted, he published *In Babel*, an assortment of the better short stories which had appeared in his column. H. L. Mencken and other critics praised highly “Effie Whittlesy,” “Mr. Payson’s Satirical Christmas,” and “Why ‘Gondola’ Was Put Away.” Ade took greater than usual pains revising this collection. The result was spare and polished fiction. In 1906 he edited pieces written during several trips to Europe and Africa, and issued *In Pastures New*, a Twainian travel book. The following year *The Slim Princess*, a Graustarkian burlesque, appeared.

Ten books, nine full-length plays, assorted articles, and ephemeral publications constitute an impressive output for a decade. A number of Ade’s collections, which came out during the 1900–1910 period, consisted of work which had appeared originally in the 1890s. Most of the stories and fables were published originally in
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newspapers or magazines; Ade made few changes for their republication in book form. He was a facile writer who seldom revised extensively. The man who frequently finished a fable at a sitting resented the rewrites required in comedy. Ade's bibliography during the first decade of the century is as extensive as the entire corpus of many other authors. His prolific output jeopardized his health on several occasions. His trips abroad during this period were necessary respite from feverish productivity. Ade's writing relied heavily on timing the topical, and he no doubt realized that he was drawing increasingly from the past, and wished to capitalize on his popularity which he knew to be a fickle commodity. He had set The County Chairman in the days of his youth. Ade required distance. The future, because it is unknown, did not lend itself to his brand of humor. Treating the present requires familiarity. The country squire became concerned with local affairs which ultimately limited his range, as his opportunities for observation and immediate contact with a variety of subjects lessened.

Ade certainly retained his interest in the national scene; America, however, continued to change at a breakneck pace which was to become a hallmark of the twentieth century. Yet Ade's writing during the second decade followed earlier-established patterns and focused on the past. Ade did become involved in a new medium. He devised captions and advised film makers on the adaptation of slang fables into one-reelers. In the history of film, Ade's early silents are considered more important contributions than his later feature-length talkies, because the fable films represent some of the better attempts to provide family entertainment to quell the reaction against suggestive episodes such as How Bridget Served the Salad Undressed. Although Ade was as attracted to the movies as he was to the stage, he became disenchanted with studio scenario changes and business methods.

During the twenties Ade concentrated on philosophical articles and recollections for magazines. In Single Blessedness and Other Observations, 1922; Bang! Bang! A Collection of Stories Intended to Recall Memories of the Nickel Library Days When Boys Were Supermen and Murder a Fine Art, 1928, and The Old-time Saloon, Not Wet, Not Dry Just History, 1931, Ade appealed to readers who had been gay blades rather than to the current crop of sheiks.

With the Depression, demand for Ade's contributions diminished. His primary interest had always been writing, and he satisfied this urge by increasing his correspondence. One of his admirers, Carl Sandburg, observed that writing letters is writing, too. Ade
dictated or wrote as many as thirty missives a week, thus making correspondence an avocation which filled the mornings of his later years. He often disclaimed the notion that he was an entertainer, and throughout his life seems to have been uncomfortable on the lecture platform. He belonged to many clubs and organizations, but enjoyed the White Chapel Club, the Forty Club, the Committee of One Hundred and other groups as an observer rather than as a participant. He was interested in politics, and almost certainly could have won a state election during the pre-World War I era, but refused all suggestions that he run for office. Writing was Ade's business.

The author's voluminous correspondence fills some gaps found in his autobiographical articles. Ade's compliance to requests is legendary. Friends, writers, and curious strangers wrote the Hoosier sage, who responded promptly with answers which shed light on numerous subjects, and, at times, the writer himself. But the man who worked furiously to produce copy that conveys an insouciance associated with leisure frequently wore the same mask in letters which he donned for publication. The only satirist who ever founded a country club was a more complex personality than is generally supposed. He was gregarious—on his own terms. He entertained frequently, preferring the role of host to guest. Ade deplored sentimentalism, yet kept a vast amount of memorabilia. He neglected to preserve copies of all of his writings, yet carefully filed menus, souvenir booklets, and programs. During his heyday Ade saved the letters he received from prominent people, but unfortunately preserved few carbons of the missives he sent. He did keep a number of letters which outline ideas for publications which never appeared in print. The writer who put newspaper columns between book covers, then recast the pieces for the movies and even a comic strip, was loath to part with a conception. There are, in his extant letters, comparatively few indications of his more fruitful ideas.

Ade kept copies of letters which contain autobiographical reflections, although he discouraged a number of would-be biographers. He never collected his own series of autobiographical articles, presumably because he felt there would be little market for his memoirs, but more probably because he relished privacy, even as he enjoyed clipping his own press. The author's reactions to his career and his observations about people and events which shaped the twentieth century form a patchwork of popular history and autobiography. George Ade was sufficiently formal in the preponderance of his letters to warrant speculation that he envisioned
their eventual publication. The formality, which manifested itself in complete signatures to members of his family and his addressing long-time acquaintances by title, indicates a reticence reminiscent of letter writers born earlier in the Victorian period. Ade's earliest-known quasi-epistolary expressions exemplify strains found in the man and the writer who had a high regard for nineteenth-century tradition, but possessed sufficient individuality to rebel against its more restraining precepts. On April 10, 1878, he inscribed the autograph book of Annie, the sister of his future brother-in-law, Warren T. McCray:

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Friend Annie:

Fear in mind,
A little word or kindness spoken,
A motive or a tear,
Has often healed a heart that's broken,
And made a friend sincere
Yours truly

George Ade
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On April 1, 1881, the sixteen-year old boy wrote a forthright yet reserved message in Ella Ade's memory book. His penmanship was much the same as that found in his literary manuscripts. The message expresses a viewpoint which would become customary.

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Be true to yourself
is the wish of
Your brother
Geo. Ade
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No letters have come to light which Ade wrote before his Chicago decade. His college publications, while not addicted to furbe-
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the 1880s. There are other gaps in Ade’s papers which point to the author’s disposal of certain letters he did not wish to be published. In 1941, Franklin Meine, while editing *Stories of the Streets*, queried Ade about the publication of his letters. He complied by sending Meine a list of his most frequent correspondents, but with typical modesty doubted that many would wish to read his letters.

As with most inveterate letter writers Ade often wrote when he had little to say, and as with many who make their living by being funny, yet deplore the label humorist, he was remarkably serious in much of this writing. Ade used everyday people and events in his publications; his letters also reflect his interest in the commonplace. Often he discussed climate. In his cub reporter days he had written weather reports in sufficiently creative fashion to make Chicagoans read more than the temperature. Forty years later he could still come up with a striking figure on the subject. In a letter to Mildred Gilman, April 25, 1936 (InLP), Ade wrote that “winter continues to linger in the lap of spring until the scandal is really beginning to cause talk.” Weather affected Ade’s disposition. His dislike of the midwestern winter drove him to Florida to avoid the cold.

At home or away, Ade associated with a male circle which included journalists, politicians, writers, actors, athletes, and businessmen. Franklin P. Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Grantland Rice, George M. Cohan, Chick Evans, John Hertz and other notables figured in Ade’s life and letters. When he received a copy of Elmer Ellis’ *Mr. Dooley’s America A Life of Peter Finley Dunn*, 1941, Ade marked the names of people he had known or met. He checked 147 entries in the index. He was cordial, helpful, and generous to his many associates, but appears to have been intimate with very few. Reserve impeded relationships which would have given much pleasure to Ade. Detachment produced the laughter which gave much pleasure to the nation. The trait which gave him literary strength circumscribed his private life. Ade rarely expressed his sentiments in letters, and yet there is an underlying sadness, particularly in his wintry serenity, which gives the career of The Man on the Chicago Papers Who Got the Breaks and Made it Big a fabled quality. Ade, like his characters, has often been typed in a phrase—“slick slang slinger,” “warmhearted satirist,” “literary rotarian.” No label can encompass this complex man. The letters trace a multi-faceted career of an uncommon writer interested in the common; they show a man who knew many but was known by few. Frequently his correspondence conceals more than it reveals. Moral: George Ade Wanted It That Way.