Chicago, here he came!

George Ade’s bibliographer, Dorothy Ritter Russo, wrote in 1947 that “[Ade’s] contributions to Lafayette newspapers have not been clearly identified, nor have his published advertisements for Harry Kramer’s patent medicine company been found. His literary career, then, begins with The Chicago Record. He came to work in Chicago in June 1890. The Daily News changed its name to The Chicago News-Record in 1892 then, until 1900, the Chicago Record. The paper saw a prolific output from his mind and pen” (Russo, vii).

Ade himself has recorded that “in 1890, having risen to a weekly income of fifteen dollars [in Lafayette] I lit out for Chicago.” McCutcheon met him at the train station and escorted Ade to the third floor hallway room they would share in a house on Peck Court near Michigan Avenue, later the site of the Stevens Hotel.

In some ways, McCutcheon saw a better future for George than George saw for himself at the age of twenty-four. McCutcheon recognized in Ade “a wonderful memory, an X ray insight into motives and men, a highly developed power of keen observation, four years of literary work in college. He had lived in the country and retained the most comprehensive impressions of country life. He knew the types, the vernacular and the point of view of country people from the inside. He had lived in a small town [Kentland] and acquired a thorough knowledge of the types and customs of that phase of life. He had learned college life after four years of observation [Purdue] and learned the life of the medium-sized town [Lafayette]. And with an intelligence great enough to use this
knowledge he was ready to learn what a great city could teach” (Kelly, Ade, 77).

Now in the great city, George nervously tried out for a spot on the staff of the Record for twelve dollars a week. McCutcheon drew illustrations in the Record’s Art Department. Ade took his entry-level weather-writing job seriously. After his first story, his work began making the front page. Chicagoans were sweating out a summer heat wave at the time. George asked people—even “nobodies”—how they were standing the temperature. He talked to hotel clerks about how the heat affected guests. He asked headwaiters how the heat changed what people ate. He asked draymen and liverymen how their horses were making out. When the forecast called for a cool-off, Ade wrote:

The Chicagoan who places faith in the weather bureau put the heavy counterpane at the foot of the bed last night on the assurance that a cool wave with icicles in its hair and a claret punch in each pocket was approaching at a respectable gait...and would at least kiss its hand to us in passing.

Such freshness, thoroughness, and imagination caught on. One night in July, a telephone caller tipped the Record that an explosion had rocked the freight steamer Tioga in the Chicago River. George, the only reporter at hand, leaped to the sudden order to go find out about the story, which turned out big. A boiler blast had killed fifteen men. George called the office for reporting help. The Record rushed three more men to the Tioga, but George already had the story. The managing editor liked George’s good judgment in asking for help and told the others to turn their notes over to George so that he could write the entire article. Ade’s front-page account the next day earned general praise for being the best in Chicago. The Record raised him to fifteen dollars per week.
In August, George wrote to a friend back in Lafayette that “I like the job first rate and am getting some good hard newspaper experience that will be of advantage to me no matter what business I should ever go into...The streets are so full of cable-cars, hansom, drays, express wagons, chippies, policemen and other public nuisances that a man doesn’t know when he starts downtown in the morning whether he will get back at night or land up at the morgue” (Kelly, Ade, 81).

Chicago in the 1890s, having doubled its population in ten years, was home to more than a million people—more Poles, Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Bohemians, Dutch, Croatians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, and Greeks than anywhere else in America. George learned about them all. His writing jobs took him into their lives, and to Irish picnics, German beer fests, strikes, inquests, police court trials, city council and county board meetings, charity balls, conventions, rallies, and sermons. By the end of 1891, George was the best on the Record and drew top assignments.

Among his jobs in the late summer of 1892 was a prizefight of national interest. The undefeated John L. Sullivan would face a former bank clerk from San Francisco named James J. “Gentleman Jim” Corbett down in New Orleans, Louisiana. Another assignment for Ade was the Columbian Exposition, commonly called the Chicago World Fair that opened in May 1893.

The Record assigned Ade and McCutcheon as a writer-artist team to fill two columns each day headlined “All Roads Lead to the World’s Fair.” Ade’s job was to write what he saw. His work was not intended to have great or timeless news value. He was told to touch upon true-life incidents among the swarms of fairgoers. Ade found stories about the 365-foot Ferris Wheel, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, the great buildings, and a Sousa Band concert.

Ade and McCutcheon both reached the twenty-dollar-per-week salary level but tried to stay rooted in good sense. They did splurge by wearing thirty-five-cent chrysanthemums when Purdue beat the University of Chicago twenty to ten in football down in West Lafayette that fall.
The Columbian Exposition closed in October 1893. George returned to the Record reporting staff, but to his usual assignments he continued adding little stories of everyday people. “You can imagine what happened to my placid little yarns about shop girls and stray dogs and cable-car conductors,” he said. “I would turn in a third of a column about a cooperative attempt to start a balky horse in Wabash Avenue. The copyreaders were instructed to keep every story down to the essentials. But they were helpless when they tackled something [of mine] that had no essentials, being unalloyed ‘guff.’” The Record shortly gave Ade and McCutcheon the empty two-columns of post-Exposition space to use for their unique “guff.” The editors marked their work “hands off” for copyreaders.

“I eventually became father of a department called ‘Stories of the Streets and of the Town,’” Ade said. “I had to fill those two columns, which meant from twelve hundred to two thousand words a day.” This feature and colleague Eugene Field’s “Sharps and Flats” columns steadily raised the newspaper’s acceptance.

By this time, Ade and McCutcheon each carried walking sticks on their daily hikes to work. “I became addicted to the walking stick habit all of my life, not because I needed support but because when I carried a cane I always knew what to do with at least one of my hands,” Ade said. “Each of us usually spent ten cents every morning for a white carnation and tried to put a little brightness and sentimental decoration into the murky atmosphere surrounding us” (Tobin 197).

In his daily stories, Ade set a goal “to be known as a realist with a compact style and a clean Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and the courage to observe human virtues and frailties as they showed on the lens.” He aimed to write about people as he knew them and tried never to caricature, stretch, or “embroider fancy situations.” Ade and McCutcheon roved Chicago together. George called his daily writing “hand made” because he composed with a pencil.

Ade wrote about the problems of a streetcar conductor, small shops in the city, the search for a good boardinghouse, of storybook versus real detectives, junk shops, odd vehicles, sidewalk
merchants and their wares, restaurant signs, a Pullman porter’s story, and what occurs in the coroner’s office.

The first of the “Stories of the Streets and of the Town” appeared in the Record on November 20, 1893, and the last on November 7, 1900. “Stories” became so popular that starting in April 1894, the Record reissued a booklet-size series of collections that it sold for a quarter.

The first of eight collections, all titled “The Chicago Record’s Stories of the Streets and of the Town Copiously Illustrated,” came out on April 1, 1894. It contained forty-two stories having first appeared in January, February, and March 1894 issues of the Record.

The second collection published on July 1, 1894 offered sixty-seven stories. The third issued from April 1, 1895 contained eighty-six. The fourth came out on October 1, 1895 with sixty-nine.

At one point, Ade and McCutcheon accepted expense-paid trips to represent the Record at a Midwinter Fair in San Francisco. The California jaunt ignited their interest in travel. Because neither ever had ventured far from Indiana soil, they dreamed up a plan to get to Europe. When they received ten-dollar raises to thirty-five per week, they pledged to save those bonus tens until further notice.

Meanwhile, Ade also became his paper’s “assistant drama editor” and began writing reviews. This gave him free tickets to theaters and the chance to interview stage stars. It also added to his rapidly filling storehouse of people, especially the “characters” he found.

Ade and McCutcheon estimated that, by April 1895, they would have saved $520 apiece and could then start to Europe. They expected to quit the Record, but to their surprise, the Record wished to go on paying them in exchange for two illustrated travel articles each week they were gone.

Readers enjoyed the ensuing articles printed under the heading “What a Man Sees Who Goes Away from Home.” In the articles, Ade avoided writing what he termed “guidebook stuff.” His stories told what food cost in restaurants and the pay of performers in London variety shows and so on.
The two travelers spent about $1,800 apiece while visiting Ireland, England, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and France. Ade “began to see things from a new angle,” adding that “the planet you are now visiting may be the only one you’ll ever see. Even if you get a transfer, the next one may not have a Grand Canyon or a Niagara Falls” (Kelly, Ade, 120).

On April 1, 1896, the Record selected and reprinted a collection of the “What a Man Sees Who Goes Away From Home” stories. The paper attributed this work to an unnamed “Chicago Record Staff Correspondent in Europe.” The collection contained sixty-four stories the Record had printed between May 20 and December 2, 1895.

Back home in Chicago, Ade began to sense that his readers might enjoy his “Stories of the Streets and of the Town” even more if they found familiar characters recurring. He started this approach in December 1895 when he invented a brash, good-hearted youngsters he named “Artie” Blanchard. For this character Ade borrowed the colorful street talk and slang used by a real Art Department employee at the Record named Charlie Williams. “Artie” was designed to be a young man of sound morals, decent manners, and little flashes of wisdom. Before long, Ade pushed the idea further, creating likeable characters he named “Pink” Marsh and “Doc” Horne.

At one point, a Chicago foreign-language paper, the Danish Pioneer, commented, “We do not hesitate to compare George Ade with Dickens; indeed, he generally surpasses his great predecessor in his almost incredible power to give the most trivial things of life a new and fresh human interest” (Kelly, Ade, 122).

Early in 1896, Ade pondered a “moonlight job” offer of an extra twenty-five dollars each to write short books for children. A Chicago publisher wanted to put out six of them, each two inches square, to be sold as a set for one dollar. Over one weekend, Ade wrote and McCutcheon illustrated Circus Day. Ade then wrote an-
other he called "Stories From History" about Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and others. However, the publisher wanted to promote a variety of authors for the series, so for *Stories From History*, Ade devised and used the pen name “John Hazelden.” A Hazleton branch of his family tree inspired the pseudonym.

In late August 1896, both *Circus Day* and *Stories from History* appeared in a Little Folks Library series. The first bore the credits “Written by George Ade, Illustrations by John T. McCutcheon.” The miniature history book said “Written by John Hazelden, Illustrations by John T. McCutcheon.”

As early as May 1896, the Chicago publishing house of Herbert S. Stone and Company had wished to publish a book of the “Artie” sketches. Ade put together enough of them to make *Artie, a Story of the Streets and Town* for Stone to publish on September 24, 1896. Again, Ade and McCutcheon formed the creative team.


A tobacco company named a cigar for “Artie.” The popular book also caused Ade to be “discovered” by William Dean Howells, foremost New York literary critic. Of *Artie* Howells wrote, “On the level which it consciously seeks I do not believe there is a better study of American town life in the West.”

From the end of 1896 through May 1897, Ade produced the “Pink” Marsh stories about an African-American bootblack in a basement barbershop. In these yarns, Ade caught the talk and character of the sophisticated northern Negro. “Pink” told his stories in conversations with a fictitious Morning Customer. The Stone Company published a collection of twenty-one of them in *Pink Marsh* on May 22, 1897.

Ade’s books impressed more than critics. Mark Twain wrote to Howells:
Thank you once more for introducing me to the incomparable Pink Marsh... My admiration of the book has overflowed all limits, all frontiers. I have personally known each of the characters in the book and can testify that they are all true to the facts and as exact as if they had been drawn to scale... It is as if the work did itself, without help of the master’s hand. And for once—just this once—the illustrator [McCutcheon] is the peer of the writer. The writer flashes a character onto his page in a dozen words, you turn the leaf and there he stands, alive and breathing. (Kelly, Ade, 125-126)

Meanwhile, the Record siphoned more money—at a quarter a pop—out of its ongoing series of “Stories of the Streets and of the Town.” The fifth collection appeared on July 1, 1897. It contained forty-three pieces reprinted from the Record. The sixth came out on July 1, 1898. The contents included forty-one stories. The seventh appeared on April 1, 1899 with fifty-five stories.

Next, Ade wrote stories about “Doc” Horne, a gentlemanly liar, and Horne’s pals at the “Alfalfa European Hotel.” The Horne stories ran in the Record through 1898. By June 29, Stone brought out Doc’ Horne. The book contained twenty-seven chapters, rewritten in part from stories that had run between April 15 and June 9, 1897. For the last five chapters, Ade “wrote for the book, weaving a simple plot for the concluding chapters” (Russo, 30).

But Ade’s work did not—as Mark Twain supposed—“do itself.”

“I used to get desperate for ideas,” Ade said. “One morning I sat at the desk and gazed at the empty paper and realized the necessity of concocting something different. The changes had been wrung through weary months and years on blank verse, catechism, rhyme, broken prose, the drama form of dialogue and staccato paragraphs. Why not a fable for a change? And instead of slavishly copying Aesop why not retain the archaic form and the stilted manner of composition and, for purposes of novelty, permit the language to be ‘fly,’ modern, undignified, quite up to the moment?
I [also] had learned from writing that all people, especially women, are fond of parlor slang. So in cold blood I began writing fables to make my columns go, but had no idea that those fantastic things would catch on the way they did” (Kelly, Ade, 136).

In saying “fantastic things” Ade modestly referred to “Fables in Slang,” his runaway hit series of columns launched for the Record but also syndicated, reprinted, and read in many papers nationwide. “My first one [September 17, 1897] was about ‘The Blonde Girl who Married a Bucket Shop Man,’” Ade said.

In the column, Ade made it obvious that he was just playing around. He hyphenated the syllables in the long words and capitalized the key words:

Once there were two Sis-ters. They lived in Chi-ca-go. One was a Plain Girl, but she had a Good Heart. She was stu-di-ous and took first Hon-ors at the Gram-mar School.

She cared more for the Graces of Mind that she did for mere Out-ward Show. Her Sis-ter was a Friv-o-lous Girl...

The Friv-o-lous Girl who had naught to com-mend her except a Beauty which fad-eth, became Cashier in a Quick Lunch Es-tab-lish-ment and the Pat-ron-age increased largely. She chewed Gum and said “Ain’t,” but she be-came pop-u-lar just the same.

When Ade rewrote this little story he called it “The Fable of Sister Mae Who Did As Well As Could Be Expected.” In the rewrite he dropped all the hyphens and made other changes but kept the plot.

Luella was a good girl, but her features did not seem to know the value of Team Work. Her clothes were an intermittent Fit. She was a lumpy Dresser. She worked in a factory, and every Saturday Evening when Work was called on account of Darkness, the Boss met her as she went out and crowded Three Dollars on her. Sister
Mae was different. She was short on Intellect but Long on Shape. She became Cashier in a Lunch Room and was a Strong Card. Her Date Book had to be kept on the Double Entry System. She married a Bucket-Shop Man who was not Handsome but was awful Generous. Mae bought a Thumb Ring and a Pug Dog and the Smell of Cooking made her Faint. But did she forget Luella? No indeed. She took her away from the Factory and gave her a Position as assistant cook at Five a week.

Fables were supposed to end with a moral. The moral of this first one was: Industry and Perseverance bring a sure Reward.

Ade had liked the revision best, but the original had pleased his readers. “Next day,” he said, “the score-keepers told me I had knocked a home run. The young women on the Record staff told me the piece was ‘just killing’” (Kelly, Ade, 138).

Ade claims to have had no intention of writing other “Fables in Slang,” calling that first one “simply a little experiment in outlawry.” However, a month later another Fable appeared minus any Slang, then another without Slang, then no more until July 1898. Ade then devoted space to two columns clearly labeled “Fables in Slang.” “It was a great lark to write in slang—like gorging on forbidden fruit,” he admitted. “The bridle was off and all rules abolished” (Kelly, Ade, 139).

And yet Ade himself imposed certain rules: “I never referred to a policeman as a ‘bull’ because that word belongs in the criminal vocabulary, and mother and girls are not supposed to be familiar with the cryptic terms of yeggmen. I never referred to a young girl as a ‘chicken.’ The word originated in the deepest pits of white slavery. A young girl may be a flapper, a bud, a peach, a pippin, a lollypaloozer, a nectarine, a cutie, a queen, a daisy, even a baby doll without being insulted, but never a ‘chicken.’ There [also] are words of popular circulation that don’t sound well in the mouth or look pretty in type. ‘Slob’ has always been one. Our fellow citizen may be a dub or even a lobster, possibly a mutt, but let us draw the line on ‘slob’” (Kelly, Ade, 154).
Then Ade’s book publisher closed in. The Stone Company gave up on him ever writing a novel the house could publish, but Stone now expressed interest in publishing a *Fables in Slang* book. “Closed in upon by frantic advisers,” Ade narrated with tongue in cheek, “the harried young author began to write Fables in Slang with both hands. In vain did he protest that he was not a specialist in the easy-going vernacular, and that he wanted to deal with life as it is instead of verbal buck dancing and a bizarre costuming of capital letters. The friends told him to take the gifts that were falling into his lap, and not crave the golden persimmons that grow on the hilltops. So the crazy Fables became a glaring feature of our newspaper department” (Kelly, *Ade*, 139-140).

Before long, the *Record* asked Ade to finish and turn in the Fables a few days ahead of publication. It seemed that some papers in other cities had been reprinting them and now offered to pay for them if they could get and use them on the same day as the *Record*. Nothing was said about extra money for Ade.

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The team—but never the friendship—of Ade and McCutcheon ended late in 1897, never to be resumed on the *Record*. A mutual friend who had risen to Assistant U.S. Secretary of the Treasury offered them and a Chicago *Tribune* man a chance to travel around the world on the government’s new revenue cutter named *McCulloch*. McCutcheon and the *Tribune* chap went. Ade declined, because there would be “too many days at sea and too few ports.” The ship arrived at the Philippines in time to join Admiral George Dewey’s fleet at the Battle of Manila Bay. The coincidence drew McCutcheon into an important new career as war correspondent, author, and traveler.

Ade traveled, too, in 1898. He sent back travel stories from France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Syria. The trip gave Ade new material for articles that appeared in the *Record* until the end of June 1899. While the Spanish-American War was going on in 1898, the *Record* asked
Ade to go and write about Spain. Ade replied that it would not be a good place for an American. “Pass yourself off as an Englishman” came the order. But Ade insisted, “I couldn’t fool even a Spaniard into thinking I’m an Englishman. They would know I’m from Indiana” (Kelly, Ade, 133).

As a Chicago newspaper figure, Ade peaked when the Record began putting “By George Ade” on his stories in 1898. Meanwhile, he again ducked behind “John Hazelden” for thirty pieces he wrote to secretly help two friends launch a new Saturday paper, the Evening Lamp. The “Hazelden” efforts appeared in the Lamp between January 28 and mid-November 1899.

Shortly thereafter, Ade also helped Alfred “Alf” Ringling compile a Ringling Brothers Circus Yearbook, a record of one season on the road. In the book, Ade called the elephants “a ponderous pyramid of primitive pachyderms.” The alliteration made Ringling beam, “You have struck the keynote of circus advertising!”

During 1899, Ade, feeling that he had “passed the limit of usefulness in the ‘Streets’ department,” prepared to leave the Record and be “at liberty for an indefinite period.” The Record management cordially asked him to reconsider. Ade consented to stay with the paper a little longer, but he still pledged to become a freelance writer by the end of his tenth year with the paper in early summer of 1900. He now was receiving top pay of sixty-five dollars per week.

The Stone Company brought out its first Fables in Slang collection in book form. The book contained Fables from the Record including the first one published September 17, 1897 and twenty-some others. Fables in Slang hit the bookstores in January 1900 and sold sixty-nine thousand copies that year. Ade suddenly became famous beyond Chicago. People of every taste, age, and profession
talked about the book. A noted editor from Kansas told Ade in a letter that he “would rather have written Fables in Slang than be President” (Kelly, Ade, 144).

Jumping somewhat on the Ade bandwagon, the Record, in July 1900, brought out the eighth (and last) of the “Stories of the Streets and of the Town” collections. There were just thirty-six of them this time.

The Baltimore journalist and writer H. L. (Henry Louis) Mencken wrote that “those phrases [in Ade’s Fables] sometimes wear the external vestments of a passing slang, but they were no more commonplace or vulgar at bottom than the ‘somewhere east of Suez’ of Kipling. They light up a whole scene in a flash. They are the running evidences of an eye that sees clearly and of a mind that thinks shrewdly...How easy to imitate Ade’s manner—and how impossible to imitate his matter” (Kelly, Ade, 149).

Ade himself said the idea behind the Fables “was to tell the truth about what is going on and get a little fun out of the foibles and weaknesses and vanities of a lot of our neighbors without being brutal or insulting.”

While readers from coast to coast chuckled at the Fables book, a New York publisher, F. H. Russell, proposed selling a syndicated series of Fables once a week to newspapers, the first to be released on September 30, 1900. The income seemed promising, so Ade felt justified in planning to spend some of it on a vacation trip to China and Japan and to visit his old friend and partner McCutcheon in the Philippines when he left the Record. At first only thirty-nine papers bought the syndicated Fables, but soon sales began to rise. Quality magazines sought rights to them, too, and the Fables would be a syndicate feature off and on for the next thirty years. Ade began depositing checks for up to one thousand dollars each week in the safest place he knew, his father’s bank in Kentland.

In 1900, Ade thought that he would break away from Fables. “The idea,” he wrote, “was to grab a lot of careless money before the reading public recovered its equilibrium and then, with bags of gold piled in the doorway to keep the wolf out, return to the
consecrated job of writing long and philosophical reports of life in the Middle West.”

He wrote Howells, however, that “four times I have given my ultimatum, ‘no more of this sickening Slang,’ and on each occasion Mr. Russell [publisher] has shown me the balance sheet and painted for me a picture of the mortgages being lifted from the old homestead in Indiana, and my resistance has become more feeble” (Kelly, Ade, 156).

Another penalty for Ade’s growing fame came from having quips falsely attributed to him. A friend he knew as “Biff” Hall once sent a weekly letter from Chicago to the Dramatic Mirror in New York, putting in anecdotes he had picked up or invented. To end one letter, he wrote that Ade had been talking with a lady who gushed, “Isn’t it wonderful how many bright people come from Indiana?” And Ade was supposed to have replied, “Yes, and the brighter they are the faster they come.” Indiana papers published indignant rejoinders. Knowing that Hall had meant no harm, Ade did not embarrass his friend by denying the quote, but it took years for him to live it down.

On his trip to the Far East, when Ade stayed for some time in Manila with McCutcheon, the Philippine Islands started to interest him. He wrote a series of columns on “Stories of Benevolent Assimilation” that satirized America’s imperialistic policies since winning the war with Spain and occupying the islands. From Filipinos, he heard stories regarding U.S. negotiations with the Sultan of Jolo, the main island of the Sulu Archipelago. Ade could see that this situation “had all the ingredients of comic opera and I believed that a good satirical musical play could be built around the efforts of our American civilizers to play ball with the little brown brother” (Kelly, Ade, 164).

Remembering The Mikado in Lafayette’s Grand Opera House in 1885, Ade opted to use the lilting Gilbert and Sullivan approach to tell his own story in songs. He set to work on his first light opera.