

UNIT TEN: HUMOR AND SATIRE

**KING JOHN¹ AND
THE ABBOT² OF CANTERBURY**

Anonymous (England, before 1695)

AN ancient story I'll tell you anon,
Of a notable prince, that was called King
John;
He ruled over England with main and
might,
But he did great wrong, and maintained
little right.
And I'll tell you a story, a story so merry,



¹ King John (1166-1216) reigned in England in the years 1199-1216. He is the evil monarch portrayed in *The Legend of Robin Hood* and he plays an even more central role in Sir Walter Scott's novel, *Ivanhoe*. He was involved in a long dispute with the Pope, a dispute that foreshadows Henry VIII's more successful revolt against papal authority over England (that is why most English people today are Anglican, not Catholic). However, lovers of freedom remember King John with mixed feelings, for his unscrupulousness, unpopularity, sexual transgressions, and defeats in war led, in 1215, to the Great Charter (*Magna Carta*), an important milestone on the Western road to a system of checks and balances. Winston Churchill wisely said: "When the long tally is added, it will be seen that the British nation and the English-speaking world owe far more to the vices of John than to the labours of virtuous sovereigns."

² *Abbot*: Head of monastery. Nowadays, the archbishop of Canterbury is the head of the Anglican church.

Concerning the Abbot of Canterbury;
How for his housekeeping and high renown,
They rode³ post to bring him to London town.

A hundred men, as the King heard say,
The Abbot kept in his house every day;
And fifty gold chains, without any doubt,
In velvet coats waited the Abbot about.

"How now, Father Abbot? I hear it of thee,
Thou keepest a far better house than me;
And for thy housekeeping and high renown,
I fear thou work'st treason against my crown."

"My liege,⁴" quoth the Abbot, "I would it were known,
I am spending nothing but what is my own;
And I trust your grace will not put me in fear,
For spending my own true-gotten gear."

"Yes, yes, Father Abbot, thy fault is high,
And now for the same thou needest must die;
And except thou canst answer me questions three,
Thy head struck off from thy body shall be."

"Now first," quo' the King, "as I sit here,
With my crown of gold on my head so fair,
Among all my liegemen of noble birth,
Thou must tell to one penny what I am worth."

"Secondly, tell me, beyond all doubt,
How quickly I may ride the whole world about;
And at the third question thou must not shrink,

³ *Ride post*: Carry messages on horseback. Since such riders were fast, "to ride post" meant to do something quickly and expeditiously.

⁴ *Liege*: high-ranking individual in feudal England.

But tell me here truly, what do I think?"

"O, these are deep questions for my shallow wit,
And I cannot answer your Grace as yet;
But if you will give me a fortnight's space,
I'll do my endeavor to answer your Grace."

"Now a fortnight's space to thee will I give,
And that is the longest thou hast to live;
For unless thou answer my questions three,
Thy life and thy lands are forfeit to me."

Away rode the Abbot all sad at this word;
He rode to Cambridge and Oxenford;
But never a doctor there was so wise,
That could by his learning an answer devise.

Then home rode the Abbot, with comfort so cold,
And he met his shepherd, a-going to fold:
"Now, good Lord Abbot, you are welcome home;
What news do you bring us from great King John?"

"Sad news, sad news, Shepherd, I must give;
That I have but three days more to live.
I must answer the King his questions three,
Or my head struck off from my body shall be."

"The first is to tell him, as he sits there,
With his crown of gold on his head so fair
Among all his liegemen of noble birth,
To within one penny, what he is worth."

"The second, to tell him, beyond all doubt,
How quickly he may ride this whole world about;
And at question the third, I must not shrink,

But tell him there truly, what does he think?"

"O, cheer up, my lord; did you never hear yet
That a fool may teach a wise man wit?
Lend me your serving-men, horse, and apparel,
And I'll ride to London to answer your quarrel."

"With your pardon, it oft has been told to me
That I'm like⁵ your lordship as ever can be:
And if you will but lend me your gown,
There is none shall know us at London town."

"Now horses and serving-men thou shalt have,
With sumptuous raiment gallant and brave;
With crosier⁶, and mitre,⁷ and rochet,⁸ and cope,⁹
Fit to draw near to our father, the pope."¹⁰

"Now welcome, Sir Abbot," the King he did say,
"Tis well thou'rt come back to keep thy day;
For if thou canst answer my questions three,
Thy life and thy living both saved shall be."

"And first, as thou seest me sitting here,
With my crown of gold on my head so fair,
Among my liegemen of noble birth,
Tell to one penny what I am worth."

"For thirty pence our Saviour was sold¹¹

⁵ Like: The shepherd and the abbot look alike

⁶ Crozier: A staff (walking stick) carried by bishops and abbots as a symbol of office.

⁷ Mitre: A headdress worn by bishops and abbots

⁸ Rochet: A white linen ceremonial robe with close-fitting sleeves worn especially by bishops

⁹ Cope: Robe worn by church officials

¹⁰ Pope: In the 13th Century, England was still subservient to Rome

Among the false Jews as I have been told;
And twenty-nine is the worth of thee;
For I think thou are one penny worse than he."

The King, he laughed, and swore by St. Bittle,
"I did not think I was worth so little!
Now secondly tell me, beyond all doubt,
How quickly I may ride this world about."

"You must rise with the sun, and ride with the same,
Until the next morning he riseth again;
And then your Grace need never doubt
But in twenty-four hours you'll ride it about."

The King he laughed, and swore by St. Jone,
"I did not think I could do it so soon!
Now from question the third thou must not shrink,
But tell me truly, what do I think?"

"Yea, that I shall do, and make your Grace merry:
You think I'm the Abbot of Canterbury.
But I'm his poor shepherd, as plain you may see,
That am come to beg pardon for him and for me."

The King he laughed, and swore by the mass,
"I'll make thee Lord Abbot this day in his place!"
"Now nay, my Liege, be not in such speed;
For alas! I can neither write nor read."

"Four nobles¹² a week, then I'll give to thee,
For this merry jest thou has shown to me;
And tell the old Abbot, when thou gettest home,

¹¹ *Sold*: Jesus Christ and his twelve apostles were Jews, living in what is now the states of Israel and Palestine. Jesus was betrayed, for thirty shekels, by one of his apostles, Judas Iscariot.

¹² *Noble*: an old English gold coin.

Thou has brought a free pardon from good King John."

THIRD THOUGHTS

E. V. Lucas (England, 1868-1938)

THIS story was told to me by a friend.

It is my destiny (said he) to buy in the dearest markets and to sell—if I succeed in selling at all—in the cheapest. Usually, indeed, having tired of a picture or decorative article, I have positively to give it away; almost to make its acceptance by another a personal favour to me. But the other day was marked by an exception to this rule so striking that I have been wondering if perhaps the luck has not changed and I am, after all, destined to be that most enviable thing, a successful dealer.

It happened thus. In drifting about the old curiosity shops of a cathedral city I came upon a portfolio of water-colour drawings, among which was one that to my eye would have been a possible Turner,¹ even if an earlier owner had not shared that opinion or hope and set the magic name with all its initials (so often placed in the wrong order) beneath it.

“How much is this?” I asked scornfully.

“Well,” said the dealer, “if it were a genuine Turner it would be worth anything. But let’s say ten shillings. You can have it for that; but I don’t mind if you don’t, because I’m going to London next week and should take it with me to get an opinion.”

I pondered.

“Mind you, I don’t guarantee it,” he added.

1. *Turner*: A well known English painter (1775-1851).

I gave him the ten shillings.

By what incredible means I found a purchaser for the drawing at fifty pounds there is no need to tell, for the point of this narrative resides not in bargaining with collectors, but in bargaining with my own soul. The astonishing fact remains that I achieved a profit of forty-nine pounds ten and was duly elated.² I then began to think.

The dealer (so my thoughts ran) in that little street by the cathedral west door, he ought to participate in this. He behaved very well to me and I ought to behave well to him. It would be only fair to give him half.

Thereupon I sat down and wrote a little note saying that the potential Turner drawing, which no doubt he recollected, had turned out to be authentic, and I had great pleasure in enclosing him half of the proceeds, as I considered that the only just and decent course.

Having no stamps and the hour being late I did not post this, and went to bed.

At about 3.30 a.m. I woke widely up and, according to custom, began to review my life's errors, which are in no danger of ever suffering from loneliness. From these I reached, by way of mitigation, my recent successful piece of chaffering,³ and put the letter to the dealer under both examination and cross-examination. Why (so my thoughts ran) give him half? Why be Quixotic?⁴ This is no world for Quixotry. It was my eye that detected the probability of the drawing, not his. He had indeed failed; did not know his own business. Why put a premium on ineptitude?⁵ No, a present of, say, ten pounds at the most would more than adequately meet the case.

2. *Elated*: Very happy.

3. *Chaffering*: Bargaining, haggling, bartering (nowadays, this word is rarely used).

4. *Quixotic*: Impracticably idealistic (after Cervantes' literary character, Don Quixote, who gallantly and mistakenly fights such things as windmills).

5. *Ineptitude*: Incompetence.

Sleep still refusing to oblige me, I took a book of short stories and read one. Then I closed my eyes again, and again began to think about the dealer. Why (so my thoughts ran) send him ten pounds? It will only give him a wrong idea of his customers, none other of whom would be so fair, so sporting, as I. He will expect similar letters every day and be disappointed, and then he will become embittered and go down the vale of tears a miserable creature. He looked a nice old man too; a pity, nay a crime, to injure such a nature. No, ten pounds is absurd. Five would be plenty. Ten would put him above himself.

While I was dressing the next morning I thought about the dealer again. Why should I (so my thoughts ran), directly I had for the first time in my life brought off a financial *coup*,⁶ spoil it by giving a large part of the profit away? Was not that flying in the face of the Goddess of Business, whoever she may be? Was it not asking her to disregard me—only a day or so after we had at last got on terms? There is no fury like a woman scorned;⁷ it would probably be the end of me. City magnates⁸ are successful probably just because they don't do these foolish impulsive things. Impulse is the negation of magnatism. If I am to make any kind of figure in this new role of fine-art-speculator (so my thoughts continued) I must control my feelings. No, five pounds is absurd. A *douceur*⁹ of one pound will meet the case. It will be nothing to me—or, at any rate, nothing serious—but a gift of quail and manna from a clear sky to the dealer, without, however, doing him any harm. A pound will be ample, accompanied by a brief note.

6. *Coup*: Great success.

7. *No fury like a woman scorned*: A quotation from Shakespeare: no greater anger (fury) is possible than the anger shown by a woman whose amorous advances have been rejected.

8. *Magnates*: Wealthy and powerful people; millionaires.

9. *Douceur*: A conciliatory gift (nowadays, this French word is hardly ever used by English speakers).

The note was to the effect that I had sold the drawing at a profit which enabled me to make him a present, because it was an old, and perhaps odd, belief of mine that one should do this kind of thing; good luck should be shared.

I had the envelope in my pocket, containing the note and the cheque when I reached the club for lunch; and that afternoon I played bridge¹⁰ so disastrously¹¹ that I was glad I had not posted it.

After all (so my thoughts ran, as I destroyed the envelope and contents) such bargains are all part of the game. Buying and selling are a perfectly straightforward matter between dealer and customer. The dealer asks as much as he thinks he can extort, and the customer, having paid it, is under no obligation whatever to the dealer. The incident is closed.

10. *Bridge*: A popular card game, often played for small stakes in clubs. Like chess and backgammon, playing bridge well requires both talent and practice.

11. *Disastrously*: Here meaning that his playing brought on him a "disaster," that is, a great loss of money.

SCIENCE AND THE “SPIRITS”

*John Tyndall¹ F.R.S (England,
1820–1893)*

Their refusal to investigate “spiritual phenomena” is often urged as a reproach against scientific men. I here propose to give a sketch of an attempt to apply to the “phenomena” those methods of inquiry which are found available in dealing with natural truth.



Some years ago, when the spirits were particularly active in this country, Faraday was invited, or rather entreated, by one of his friends to meet and question them. He had, however, already made their acquaintance, and did not wish to renew it. I had not been so privileged, and he therefore kindly arranged a transfer of the invitation to me. The spirits themselves named the time of meeting, and I was conducted to the place at the day and hour appointed.

Absolute unbelief in the facts was by no means my condition of mind. On the contrary, I thought it probable that

¹ John Tyndall (1820-1893) rose from humble circumstances in class-conscious Britain to the pinnacle of 19th century science, making remarkable contributions to physics and biology. Besides, he was a popularizer of science and a champion of the idea that the critical spirit of science could be profitably applied to non-scientific questions. One of his minor achievements involved measurements of urban air pollution. He was an accomplished mountain climber as well.

some physical principle, not evident to the spiritualists themselves, might underlie their manifestations. Extraordinary effects are produced by the accumulation of small impulses. Galileo set a heavy pendulum in motion by the well-timed puffs of his breath. Ellicott set one clock going by the ticks of another, even when the two clocks were separated by a wall. Preconceived notions can, moreover, vitiate, to an extraordinary degree the testimony of even veracious persons. Hence my desire to witness those extraordinary phenomena, the existence of which seemed placed beyond a doubt by the known veracity of those who had witnessed and described them. The meeting took place at a private residence in the neighborhood of London. My host, his intelligent wife, and a gentleman who may be called X., were in the house when I arrived. I was informed that the "medium" had not yet made her appearance; that she was sensitive, and might resent suspicion. It was therefore requested that the tables and chairs should be examined before her arrival, in order to be assured that there was no trickery in the furniture. This was done; and I then first learned that my hospitable host had arranged that the *séance* should be a dinner-party. This was to me an unusual form of investigation; but I accepted it as one of the accidents of the occasion.

The "medium" arrived—a delicate-looking young lady, who appeared to have suffered much from ill-health. I took her to dinner and sat close beside her. Facts were absent for a considerable time, a series of very wonderful narratives supplying their place. The duty of belief on the testimony of witnesses was frequently insisted on. X. Appeared to be a chosen spiritual agent, and told us many surprising things. He affirmed that, when he took a pen in his hand, an influence ran from his shoulder downward, and impelled him to write oracular sentences. I listened for a time, offering no

observation. "And now," continued X., "this power has so risen as to reveal to me the thoughts of others. Only this morning I told a friend what he was thinking of, and what he intended to do during the day." Here, I thought, is something that can be at once tested. I said immediately to X.: "If you wish to win to your cause an apostle, who will proclaim your principles to the world from the housetop, tell me what I am now thinking of." X reddened, and did *not* tell me my thought.

Some time previously I had visited Baron Reichenbach, in Vienna, and I now asked the young lady who sat beside me whether she could see any of the curious things which he describes—the light emitted by crystals, for example? Here is the conversation which followed, as extracted from my notes, written on the day following the *séance*.

Medium.— "Oh, yes; but I see light around all bodies."

I. — "Even in perfect darkness?"

Medium.— "Yes; I see luminous atmospheres round all people. The atmosphere which surrounds Mr. R. C. would fill this room with light."

I.— "You are aware of the effects ascribed by Baron Reichenbach to magnets?"

Medium.— "Yes; but a magnet makes me terribly ill."

I.— "Am I to understand that, if this room were perfectly dark, you could tell whether it contained a magnet, without being informed of the fact?"

Medium.— "I should know of its presence on entering the room."

I.— "How?"

Medium.— "I should be rendered instantly ill."

I.— "How do you feel to-day?"

Medium.— "Particularly well; I have not been so well for months."

I.— "Then, may I ask you whether there is, at the present moment, a magnet in my possession?"

The young lady looked at me, blushed, and stammered, "No; I am not *en rapport* with you."

I sat at her right hand, and a left-hand pocket, within six inches of her person, contained a magnet.

Our host here deprecated discussion, as it "exhausted the medium." The wonderful narratives were resumed; but I had narratives of my own quite as wonderful. These spirits, indeed, seemed clumsy creations, compared with those with which my own work had made me familiar. I therefore began to match the wonders related to me by other wonders. A lady present discoursed on spiritual atmospheres, which she could see as beautiful colors when she closed her eyes. I professed myself able to see similar colors, and, more than that, to be able to see the interior of my own eyes. The medium affirmed that she could see actual waves of light coming from the sun. I retorted that men of science could tell the exact number of waves emitted in a second, and also their exact length. The medium spoke of the performances of the spirits on musical instruments. I said that such performance was gross, in comparison with a kind of music which had been discovered some time previously by a scientific man. Standing at a distance of twenty feet from a jet of gas, he could command the flame to emit a melodious note; it would obey, and continue its song for hours. So loud was the music emitted by the gas-flame that it might be heard by an assembly of a thousand people. These were acknowledged to be as great marvels as any of those of spiritdom. The spirits were then consulted, and I was pronounced to be a first-class medium.

During this conversation a low knocking was heard from time to time under the table. These, I was told, were the spirits' knocks. I was informed that one knock, in answer to

a question, meant "No;" that two knocks meant "Not yet;" and that three knocks meant "Yes." In answer to a question whether I was a medium, the response was three brisk and vigorous knocks. I noticed that the knocks issued from a particular locality, and therefore requested the spirits to be good enough to answer from another corner of the table. They did not comply; but I was assured that they would do it, and much more, by and by. The knocks continuing, I turned a wine-glass upside down, and placed my ear upon it, as upon a stethoscope. The spirits seemed disconcerted by the act; they lost their playfulness, and did not recover it for a considerable time.

Somewhat weary of the proceedings, I once threw myself back against my chair and gazed listlessly out of the window. While thus engaged, the table was rudely pushed. Attention was drawn to the wine, still oscillating in the glasses, and I was asked whether that was not convincing. I readily granted the fact of motion, and began to feel the delicacy of my position. There were several pairs of arms upon the table, and several pairs of legs under it; but how was I, without offence, to express the conviction which I really entertained? To ward off the difficulty, I again turned a wine-glass upside down and rested my ear upon it. The rim of the glass was not level, and my hair, on touching it, caused it to vibrate and produce a peculiar buzzing sound. A perfectly candid and warm-hearted old gentleman at the opposite side of the table, whom I may call A., drew attention to the sound, and expressed his entire belief that it was spiritual. I, however, informed him that it was the moving hair acting on the glass. The explanation was not well received; and X., in a tone of severe pleasantry, demanded whether it was the hair that had moved the table. The promptness of my negative probably satisfied him that my notion was a very different one.

The superhuman power of the spirits was next dwelt upon. The strength of man, it was stated, was unavailing in

opposition to theirs. No human power could prevent the table from moving when they pulled it. During the evening this pulling of the table occurred, or rather was attempted, three times. Twice the table moved when my attention was withdrawn from it; on a third occasion, I tried whether the act could be provoked by an assumed air of inattention. Grasping the table firmly between my knees, I threw myself back in the chair, and waited, with eyes fixed on vacancy, for the pull. It came. For some seconds it was pull spirit, hold muscle; the muscle, however, prevailed, and the table remained at rest. Up to the present moment, this interesting fact is known only to the particular spirit in question and myself.

A species of mental scene-painting, with which my own pursuits had long rendered me familiar, was employed to figure the changes and distribution of spiritual power. The spirits, it was alleged, were provided with atmospheres, which combined with and interpenetrated each other, and considerable ingenuity was shown in demonstrating the necessity of *time* in effecting the adjustment of the atmospheres. A rearrangement of our positions was proposed and carried out; and soon afterward my attention was drawn to a scarcely sensible vibration on the part of the table. Several persons were leaning on the table at the time, and I asked permission to touch the medium's hand. "Oh! I know I tremble," was her reply. Throwing one leg across the other, I accidentally nipped a muscle, and produced thereby an involuntary vibration of the free leg. This vibration, I knew, must be communicated to the floor, and thence to the chairs of all present. I therefore intentionally promoted it. My attention was promptly drawn to the motion; and a gentleman beside me, whose value as a witness I was particularly desirous to test, expressed his belief that it was out of the compass of human power to produce so strange a tremor. "I believe," he added, earnestly, "that it is entirely the spirits' work." "So do I," added, with heat, the candid and warm-

hearted old gentleman A. “Why, sir,” he continued, “I feel them at this moment shaking my chair.” I stopped the motion of the leg. “Now, sir,” A. exclaimed, “they are gone.” I began again, and A. once more affirmed their presence. I could, however, notice that there were doubters present, who did not quite know what to think of the manifestations. I saw their perplexity; and, as there was sufficient reason to believe that the disclosure of the secret would simply provoke anger, I kept it to myself.

Again a period of conversation intervened, during which the spirits became animated. The evening was confessedly a dull one, but matters appeared to brighten toward its close. The spirits were requested to spell the name by which I was known in the heavenly world. Our host commenced repeating the alphabet, and when he reached the letter “P” a knock was heard. He began again, and the spirits knocked at the letter “O.” I was puzzled, but waited for the end. The next letter knocked down was “E.” I laughed, and remarked that the spirits were going to make a poet of me. Admonished for my levity, I was informed that the frame of mind proper for the occasion ought to have been superinduced by a perusal of the Bible immediately before the *séance*. The spelling, however, went on, and sure enough I came out a poet. But matters did not end here. Our host continued his repetition of the alphabet, and the next letter of the name proved to be “O.” Here was manifestly an unfinished word; and the spirits were apparently in their most communicative mood. The knocks came from under the table, but no person present evinced the slightest desire to look under it. I asked whether I might go underneath; the permission was granted; so I crept under the table. Some tittered; but the candid old A. exclaimed, “He has a right to look into the very dregs of it, to convince himself.” Having pretty well assured myself that no sound could be produced under the table without its origin being revealed, I requested our host to continue his questions. He did so, but in vain. He

adopted a tone of tender entreaty; but the "dear spirits" had become dumb dogs, and refused to be entreated. I continued under that table for at least a quarter of an hour, after which, with a feeling of despair as regards the prospects of humanity never before experienced, I regained my chair. Once there, the spirits resumed their loquacity, and dubbed me "Poet of Science."

This, then, is the result of an attempt made by a scientific man to look into these spiritual phenomena. It is not encouraging; and for this reason. The present promoters of spiritual phenomena divide themselves into two classes, one of which needs no demonstration, while the other is beyond the reach of proof. The victims like to believe, and they do not like to be undeceived. Science is perfectly powerless in the presence of this frame of mind. It is, moreover, a state perfectly compatible with extreme intellectual subtlety and a capacity for devising hypotheses which only require the hardihood engendered by strong conviction, or by callous mendacity, to render them impregnable.

The logical feebleness of science is not sufficiently borne in mind. It keeps down the weed of superstition, not by logic but by slowly rendering the mental soil unfit for its cultivation. When science appeals to uniform experience, the spiritualist will retort, "How do you know that a uniform experience will continue uniform? You tell me that the sun has risen for six thousand years: that is no proof that it will rise to-morrow; within the next twelve hours it may be puffed out by the Almighty." Taking this ground, a man may maintain the story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" in the face of all the science in the world. You urge, in vain, that science has given us all the knowledge of the universe which we now possess, while spiritualism has added nothing to that knowledge. The drugged soul is beyond the reach of reason. It is in vain that impostors are exposed, and the special demon cast out. He has but slightly to change his shape,

return to his house, and find it “empty, swept, and garnished.”

Since the time when the foregoing remarks were written I have been more than once among the spirits, at their own invitation. They do not improve on acquaintance. Surely no baser delusion ever obtained dominance over the weak mind of man.

Lesson 25

1. Read pp. 200-3 ("King John and the Abbot of Canterbury").
2. Listen to and recite: Pronunciation Guide, Unit P (p. 358).
3. With the book closed, listen to "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury" on CD (track 5).
4. Identify a few key words in "King John" whose meaning in context is not entirely clear to you.
Note: Because this ballad is very old, you might be unsure about the meaning of more than just two words. This is OK. Never look up the meaning of every unfamiliar word; only look up a few key words which would help you understand the texts or which arouse your curiosity.
5. In one paragraph, retell the plot of "King John."
6. "King John" recounts a conflict between the king and the abbot.
 - a. Describe this conflict.
 - b. Explain the reasons for this conflict.
 - c. How is it resolved?
 - d. Describe a similar conflict you may have had with a friend, stranger, child, or parent.
7. Poets usually try to teach us a lesson, share with us a vision, make us see things their way. So, to understand literature, we must move beyond the literal meaning. For this part of the assignment:
 - a. State what, in your opinion, are the points the poet is trying to make.
 - b. Explain the reasons which lead you to believe that these are the points he or she is trying to make.
 - c. Support your argument with illustrations from the poem.
8. Defend the statement: "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury" and the Biblical story, "Ahab and Naboth" (see unit II, pp.) can be interpreted as giving us the exact same warning. What might that warning be?
9. *One-Act Play:* Please divide into groups of 3-5. Each group converts "King John" into a one-act play.

Whenever possible, use words in contemporary English, not in the archaic English of the ballad. After the play is written, each group should rehearse until it can perform the play. When ready, four groups should get together, with each acting out its version of the play, and choosing the best overall production. From now on, the losers are spectators and judges. The process of elimination continues until the transcription/performance of a single group emerges as best.

Throughout the process, the class should also decide who the eight best individual actors are. These people will become the class actors and alternates. They will prepare for, and perform, a larger one-act play later on for the entire class (see Lesson 23, p. *).

10. “King John and the Abbot of Canterbury” suggests that an illiterate poor shepherd can be more resourceful, and perhaps more intelligent, than a rich and learned Bishop. Please compare this to Isaac Asimov’s (pp. *) contention that, in some situations, an exceptionally erudite man may not be as smart as he thinks.
11. Many cultures recount tales where impossible riddles are bypassed through brute force, guile, or humor.

A story about Alexander of Macedonia provides one example. On his way to Persia and India, in the year 333 B.C., Alexander passes through Phrygia (part of what is now Turkey). There he is told about the existence of a famous knot that no one, so far, had been to untangle. What especially attract Alexander’s attention is the claim that whosoever unties that knot will rule Asia, Alexander tries to solve that puzzle. Alas, he is too obtuse to even attempt such a complicated problem. He is not, however, considerate enough to deprive other people of the opportunity of solving this intriguing puzzle, and simply cuts the knot with his sword. Like other spoiled brats in such situations, he now claims to have “solved the puzzle.” The people who make a living

writing histories have been taking that “solution” seriously ever since, and thus, in English, *cutting the Gordian knot* does not mean being a bully or an impatient fool, but means, rather, *solving an intractable problem with one bold stroke*.

Another tale taking place in Turkey concerns Nasreddin (1208-1284), Turkey's best-known trickster. In one story, the Sultan is entertaining three foreign visitors who promise to convert to Islam if they receive satisfactory answers to three questions. No man in the realm can answer the questions, so the Sultan calls upon Nasreddin. The second question gives us an idea of the intellectual caliber of the proceedings. On his turn, the second traveler steps forwards and asks: “Most worshipful effendi, how many stars are there in the heavens?” and receives the reply: “As many stars as the number of hairs on my donkey.” “Can you prove it?” asks the second traveler. “If you don’t believe me,” rejoins Nassreddin, “you are welcome to count the hairs on my donkey and the stars in the sky. If there is one



star or hair too many, everyone in the city of Ak Shehir will know that you are a much wiser man than I am." And such answers, according to this ancient tale, sufficed to convert the simple-minded three travelers to Islam!

Now, we recounted these tales because we wanted to ask you a question: Can you find similar tales in oral or literary traditions of the world, and, particularly, of Nepal?

Reading for Pleasure

An online prose version of “King John and the Abbot of Canterbury,” and a link to many other English folktales, is available at:

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/meft/meft30.htm>

John Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (1820) and Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798) are two well-known literary ballads.

LESSON 26

1. Read pp. ** (“Third Thoughts”).
2. Listen to an essay on CD: “Third Thoughts.”
3. “The point of this narrative resides,” the narrator says, “in bargaining with my own soul.” Document and explain this statement.
4. The narrator says: “Buying and selling are a perfectly straightforward matter between dealer and customer. The dealer asks as much as he thinks he can extort, and the customer, having paid it, is under no obligation whatever to the dealer.”
 - a. Does this describe prevailing commercial practices in England?
 - b. In Nepal?
 - c. Can this story be interpreted as a criticism of these practices?
 - d. Would the world be a better place without them? Please explain and document your answers.
5. The last sentence says: “The incident is closed.” Explain whether, in your view, it is really closed. Is the narrator fully reconciled to his decision not to send the dealer a part of his profit? Why or why not?

6. *Class Debate:* Divide into small groups and debate the following hypothetical situation for a few minutes: Your neighbor sold you a house for one million rupees. A week later you sold that very house for five million rupees. Should you share your profits with him, or should you behave like the narrator of the story?
7. Now, one eloquent advocate of each respective position should step forward and both should debate this question in front of the entire class. The instructor, or a third person, should serve as a moderator of this debate. Each of the two contestants should be given, in turn, two minutes to state their position, two minutes to attack their opponent's position, and one minute to summarize their position. The class as a whole should then vote on the proposition: "I should share my profits with my neighbor, and not behave like the narrator of the story." Yes / No / Undecided.
8. It is important that people understand what you say when you speak English. For instance, if you say *sir* instead of *share*, or if you say *ellow* instead of *yellow*, people will have a hard time understanding you. So listen to the first sentence of "Third Thoughts" a couple more times, then be prepared to say this sentence aloud to the class. The class as a whole will decide which student sounded most like the cassette (or CD).

Reading for Pleasure

This essay has been taken from E. V. Lucas's (1868-1938) *The Phantom Journal* (1919).

John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Essays* (1991), and Wendy Martin, ed., *Essays by Contemporary American Women* (1996), are fine collections.

LESSON 27

1. Read pp. ** ("Science and the Spirits").
2. In Tyndall's day and down to the present day, *séances*—sessions where people allegedly communicate with spirits or ghosts from the other world—were fashionable. In this brief essay, Tyndall faithfully captures the proceedings of just one such session, showing that most people could benefit from the application of critical thinking to their own belief system. Do you agree?
3. One student's closed-book summary of Tyndall's paper is given below. Does this summary capture the key points? Is it well-written? If not, can you offer some corrections? Do you have anything to add to, or subtract from, this summary?

Dr. John Tyndall receives an invitation to attend a dinner party where a *séance* is being held. There he applies his scientific training to investigate the feasibility of communication with spirits. Throughout the course of the evening, a few participants claim to possess supernatural powers and several incidents occur that are attributed to the spirits. Yet, each claim fails to pass simple empirical tests. For instance, Tyndall asks a man who claims to be able to read minds: "What do I think?" and receives no answer. Although Tyndall proves that the alleged messages originate from some of the participants, all the participants stick to their beliefs that interactions with spirits are taking place. This experience of wishful thinking and resistance to rational arguments leads Tyndall to a deep "despair as regards the prospects of humanity."

5. Did Tyndall approach the *séance* with an open-mind about the existence of spirits, or did he make up his mind in advance?
6. What is your overall view of humanity: Are people interested in truths or are they interested in believing what they wish to believe? Do you agree with Tyndall that human beings have weak minds?
7. A friend of yours claims that he can read the thoughts of others. Following Tyndall, how would you test her

- claim? How would you test her claim that she can sense the presence of magnets?
8. At one point, Dr. Tyndall gets under the table? Why? What is the outcome of that particular experiment?
 9. Is Tyndall correct in saying that “science has given us all the knowledge of the universe which we now possess”?
 10. Would John Tyndall share Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s belief that “an error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because no one sees it. Truth stands, even if there be no public support. It is self-sustained.”
 11. What do you find particularly humorous about Tyndall’s essay? Does the humor contain within it some elements of satire? If so, who are these elements directed against?
 12. *One-Act Play:* Please divide into groups of 3-5 participants. Each group converts "Science and the Spirits" into a one-act play. Whenever possible, each groups makes use of words of contemporary English, not of the old English of the Tyndall’s essay. After the play is written, each group should rehearse and get ready to perform the play.
 13. Let us write an essay which revolves around "Science and the ‘Spirits.’”
 - a. We first read Tyndall’s essay and get a clear idea of what it is all about. If we cannot understand a key passage because we don't recognize a word, we look this word up and try to grasp its meaning in that particular context.
 - b. We close the book, and start working on our essay.
 - c. We begin with a good title, which in turn is based on the thesis we choose for our essay—the main point we wish to make. Let’s say that our key goal is to apply Tyndall’s scientific approach to other common misconceptions. The title can then be either descriptive (e.g., “An Application of Tyndall’s Approach to the Choice of Wedding Dates in Nepal”) or creative (“John Tyndall’s Reflections on Auspiciousness”).
 - d. Next, we write an outline.
 - e. Following the outline, we write the essay quickly without consulting the text.

- f. When the first draft is finished, we may consult the text to check for accuracy and additional facts. We also edit our essay, looking specifically for errors we know we often make—long-winded sentences, misuse of words, misspellings—all the things we were told about but only, until then, half-listened to.
- g. We now write the next draft, staple it to the first draft, and hand both to class instructor.

Reading for Pleasure

Tyndall, J. *Fragments of Science for Unscientific People: A Series of Detached Essays, Lectures, and Reviews* (1871).

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a well-known "cyberpunk," a form of science fiction in which the events take place in virtual reality.

POSTSCRIPT

*In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear
And none has quite escaped my smile.*

Elinor Wylie

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