

The Tompkins Laughorium

By EDWARD BOLTWOOD.



"Old Charlie Dogcollar offers Tompkins a buffalo-hide and two squaws for the Laughorium."

ON an August afternoon, John Heffren sat with me in a dismal passenger-car, which dangled at the tail of a freight-train crawling sulkily across the Wyoming desert. Our only companion was a wrinkled Indian woman. She declined conversation, and stolidly presented, with a fine, Miltonic effect, the sainted visage of distant Melancholy.

"Alongside this here coach, a morgue at midnight would be a steady roar of merriment!" groaned John.

We tried in vain to talk, to leap to quarrel, and at length we were driven to smoke in moody silence. The aged Indian kept her expressionless eyes fixed on the grimy floor. Suddenly, without an instant's warning, or an apparent cause, she broke into a ringing peal of mirthful and mighty laughter. I could not but have been more amazed had a party of pall-bearers suddenly performed the Virginian reel.

"Well, Mrs. Langtry, what's the joke, ma'am?" said Heffren. The squaw nursed her chin, and then, as abruptly as she had laughed, she relaxed again into dreariest gloom. John Heffren nodded wisely.

"But what was the joke?" I asked him.

"You can search me," he replied. "Why does an Injun laugh? That's a hard one. Injuns is rigged casual for laughin', Injuns is." He paused reflectively and rolled a cigarette. "And that's a fact," he went on. "And nobody knows it better'n me, and Jigstep McHenry, and Professor Socrates Tompkins, a scientific man. I never told you about that time, did I? Well, pass the matches."

Heffren lit his cigarette and plunged into his story.

II.

"This McHenry and me was wintering in the town of Scalded Butte," said John. "We was financially non compos, and had to stand off the Widder Briggs, our board-lady, for grub and room-rent. So we spread ourselves to be as poplar with her as a pink fashion-sheet. McHenry, he'd rode in a circus once, and he could fiddle the widder with moss-covered clown stories and comic songs, and consequently, we was livin' higher'n a couple of murderers under sentence."

"The div, over the beef-stew, the widder says: 'What do you think?' she says. 'There's goin' to be minstrels at the schoolhouse, for the benefit of the Ladies Aid Society,' she says."

"Now, we knew how the widder herself was big chief of that Ladies Aid caucus, so Jigstep McHenry gave me a quiet wink.

"Minstrels?" he says. 'Well, Mrs. Briggs, if I can help to assist, just you hold'er. When it comes to minstrels, I've got 'em all trimmed, from Dock-stader to Richard Mansfield.'

"Oh, that'll be perfectly dear of you!" said the widder. 'Spoon up some more of that job, Mr. McHenry,' she said.

"Then Jigstep and me had a private war-talk about the minstrels, and McHenry, he's sure exultant.

"Why, I'll be the head pin of this performance, Heffren!" he says. 'I'll thereby solidify us with the widder till the spring round-up. There ain't a comedian in Scalded Butte that's on the same reservation with me.'

"But after we'd scouted round, things began to look some different, and Jigstep McHenry sees he'd been quite so some too numerous.

"It was this way. There was a secretary to the Ladies Aid, which her name was Ann Lily Mott, and she was fearful jealous of the Widder Briggs, and aimed to grab the president's belt next election. So, when the minstrel scheme loomed up, and Mrs. Briggs threw out her chest, public cause of her star comedian McHenry, this Ann Lily Mott dug up a cousin, who lived in Deadwood, and had took first money, three amachour nights a running, at the Deadwood Vandeville Opera-House Theater. He's a plumber by trade, the cousin, but he writes to Ann Lily how he'll win over to Scalded Butte for the Ladies Aid show, and make any other minstrel on the platform look like a counterfeited two-bits.

"You see, a cow-town in winter fevers up easy, and this manoeuvre tore Scalded Butte wide apart. It warn't so much Jigstep ag'in the plumber, as it was the Mrs. Briggs gang ag'in the Ann Lily Mott adherents, and what you'd call the social atmosphere of the settlement would 'a' fried eggs.

"Well, here it was a fortnight afore the minstrels.

"McHenry," says I, 'if you disgrace the widder in this show, the next performance we give will be in the county jail, for owin' a board-bill.'

"Jigstep, he laid on our bed, learnin' jokes out of a almanac, while I sat on the bureau, and Professor Socrates Tompkins roosted on a chair.

"Tompkins! Oh, he was a new boarder—a narrow-built old trout, with a plume on his face. He allowed he was a scientific man, and the last science he had worked was at a phonograph he-wag in a Cheyenne restaurant.

"McHenry," says I, 'two weeks from this evenin' Ann Lily's cousin will get more laughs in a minute than you will from supper to sun-up, and we'll be ditched.'

"Jigstep is scared, and he'll 'a' backed

out, only for being a pile more scander of Mrs. Briggs.

"Heffren," he says, 'you'll have to laugh for me, anyhow, and that'll kind of coax a giggle out of the others—kind of start 'em.'

"Me laugh, I says. 'What good'll that do? They'll suspicion me. I wisht to gracious, I says, 'that Sniggerin' Miller was around to help you!'

"Who's he?" said Tompkins.

"He's a friend of mine," said I. 'He's got the coxiniest laugh, for a crowd, in the Black Hills,' said I. 'Sniggerin' Miller's laugh, said I, 'would coax a grin out of the cold side of a tomb-stone.'

"At that the professor looks wiser'n blazes.

"Ah! I see," he says. 'A contagious laugh, it must be. This Miller's laugh hits a fundamental note,' says Tompkins. 'Yes, it's funny enough,' I said.

"Then the professor's lingo gets too many for my intellect. Near's I can remember, he claims how everythin' in nature, from a cathedral to a pill-box, has got a different fundamental note of music, and that if you can strike up that note—bingo, the thing will fly to smithereens. He said a fiddler could leave down the Cheyenne city hall, if he fiddled the right note in front of it, and that what Miller's laugh does was to hit the fundamental note of your diaphragm, or somethin', and cause you to cackle, joyous.

"Well, me and Jigstep passes up that scientific stuff.

"What's the use of such loony talk?" said McHenry. 'I don't much guess we can fetch Sniggerin' Miller to the show, anyway.'

"No," said I. 'Seein' how he's on a promenade through Mexico, with three sheriffs after him, I don't much guess we can.'

"But the professor bounced out of his chair, sudden, and his whiskers bristled lik' a cactus.

"I never thought of it before!" he shouted. 'Boy,' said he, 'I'll help you ag'in the plumber. Why shouldn't a contagious laugh, same as Miller's, be imitated?' said he.

"With what?" I said.

"With science," said he.

"Science be darned!" yelled McHenry, a heap disgusted.

"So little Socrates Tompkins got awful warm in the collar, and pranced about.

"If I only had the makins' of a graphophone," he jabbered. 'I'd show you in'rant sheep some science that'd drive your wisdom-areth out o' the top of your heads!'

"With that he banged the door, and we could hear him in the next room, rummagin' in his trunk and snortin' to himself.

"Well, sir, we didn't see Socrates Tompkins for 'most a week, barrin' meat-times. But, after a couple of days, the cus-dest noises began to emigrate out of his room that ever you bid your ears fo! Mrs. Briggs, her nerves were on end 'ready, 'count of A. L. Mott, and the minstrels, and she told Tompkins how that racket would have to quit. But Soc said he was workin' for her own good, so 'a' ruin the Ann Lily crowd, and advised of her to wait. Accordingly, we waited, till one night, sure enough, here comes Tompkins down to the par-

lour with somethin' under his arm. He plants it on the table.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Briggs.

"Tompkins's Universal Laughorium," he said. It was a tin squeegee, about the size of your boot-leg. "Guaranteed," said Tompkins, 'to vibrate the laughin' muscle of the young and old, suitable for theaters, humorous lectures, and church sociables. Hide her under a seat, and set the audience in a roar, when desired.'

"Wind her up," I said.

"The professor wound up a spring contraption, and turned her loose. And by the jumpin' catfish! You can believe me or not, but that phonograph dizgus certainly had a powerful queer laugh to her! She took right Lolt o' you, somehow, down where you live, and sort o' wobbled you. Yes, sir, the queerest, quietest, laughin' noise stu made! Human too. 'Haw-ruh-haw! Haw-ruh-haw!'—somethin' like that.

"But Jigstep, he didn't laugh back none, nor I didn't, nor Mrs. Briggs, although the widder's face kind of puckered some.

"The professor is cast down for a minute, but he chirks up, speely.

"I know why she didn't get a laugh out of you all," he said. 'You-all guess I what was expected of you, so you naturally held off, and leened back ag'in the breechin'-strap; and he begs the widder's pardon for that sim'lee. 'The only fair test of the Laughorium,' said Tompkins, 'is to try her on parties that ain't warned of her, none whatever.'

"How in time can we manage to do that?" said McHenry. 'We can't go blatin' around promise-ous with the contraption now, or we'll give away the game afore the night of the minstrels,' said Jigstep.

"All right there, sir when McHenry said that—right there's where me, John Heffren, makes one of the chief misplays of my whole misplayed career.

"Listen to me," said I. 'There's a cabin full of Injuns, just over the divide. What's the matter with packin' the Laughorium over there?' said I. 'We can spring her unbeknownst among the aborigines, and if she goes a gurgle out of an Injun, it's a good bet that she'll erupt mirth out of Scalded Butte like a Yellowstone geyser.'

"Well, the fool deal went through that same evenin'. The four of us, widder and all, we gum-shod over the divide, sly as the Standard Oil Company, and we sneaks up to a window of the Injun shack, without makin' a sound. There sat the Injuns, solemn and rocky, the way they do. You'd 'a' thought a dozen deaf-and-dumb orphans was holdin' the ob-sequies of a walfed parent.

"Then Tompkins cranked up the Laughorium.

"I'm tellin' you the truth, straight as we're settin' here in the car. One of the bucks dove for the door, but afore he made it, he'd begun to titter! Then another laughed, and another; and the squaws they giggled, and the yapnooes crowded continuous. 'Gaffy! Gaffy! Don't talk! If Tompkins hadn't choked off the machine when he did, we'd 'a' had a dozen merry maniacs trailin' us for life, so help me! As it was, old Charlie Dogcollar, who was the head buck, offers Tompkins a buffalo-hide and two squaws for the Laughorium, 'cause



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