

Spotlight

BY WINIFRED JOHNSTON, '24

«COLLEGE-COMIC COLLEGE»

Norman, December, 1930

I should like to suggest that the next batch of catalogues shipped out to high-school students be accompanied by a fine little booklet in modern dress containing the collected student essays on the University of Oklahoma.

Three of these essays now have received some national circulation. There may be others. William Cunningham's "Notes of Student Life," published in the *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly* of April, 1927, was as far as I know the first. Virginia Nelson's "Holding No Grudge" was included in the volume *College Students Speak Out* published by the *New Republic* in 1929. George Milburn's "Oklahoma," published in the October issue of this year's *College Humor*, was the last to bring on a young intellectual's head the suspicion and revilement of fellow-students.

Since America is what it is, these literary intellectuals are doing their university no dis-service. Oklahoma profits from much free advertising—as did Barnum's Museum. Like Texas, Oklahoma is rich in connotations. Young, bizarre, and vigorous, it exists in the mind of the world as many an older state does not. "Anything may happen in Oklahoma," Edna Ferber said recently. "And many things do." It is this spirit of history in the making that attracts and holds those who love the state. Oklahoma shares more than a little in the nature of the "Greatest Show on Earth."

So, also, does the university. It too is in the making. It stimulates reaction. It spurs its people into print. Like the state it represents, the University of Oklahoma possesses a legend that makes it conspicuous. And every time the title "University of Oklahoma" appears in

print the legend grows. Every time that location appears at the end of a scholarly article the sphere of influence of the institution has been widened. Every time the institution is discussed or described, it matters little in what terms, the institution is better defined against the sun.

Yet in the midst of so much student writing on the "college-comic college in a comic opera state" some observers may have had a moment's wonder as to how this institution compared with other and older ones in its students and its student-intellectuals' opinions of their almaters. This fall, reading in the libraries of the University of Chicago during that school's rushing season and the other activities incidental to its autumn opening, I had opportunity to observe one individual who may be accepted as typical enough to present some answer to this question.

I saw "Louie" first in the "Dirty Spoon" of the campus section.

It was Sunday morning. Louie was reading a *Theatre Arts Monthly* while waiting for his fellows to join him in a cup of coffee. When they arrived they waited for him to finish his article and give them the jag that the Sunday coffee lacked. Louie was the clown, as well as the dilettante, of his little group of college *intelligentsia*: he made a business of kidding the universe; and the show that he and his friend David staged for the delight of all beholders was invariably a good one.

On occasions Louie could look very handsome in a suit of blue serge. But in the early dawn of Sunday morning as on days throughout the week he appeared serviceably and comfortably clad

in brown corduroys. His speech was what first attracted my attention with a's and strong "ree-ally" and "cahn you fawncy that?" Only the last few days of our acquaintance was I to learn that Louie had seen a production of *Journey's End* the year before.

Louie was a student in philosophy. The second time I saw him he was playing High-Low-Jack with David's recent call on the head of the philosophy department. Unfortunately David was showing himself impressed.

"Ree-ally, Dyvid, my lad," Louie was saying, "you're not so young as not to know that the wild men always feed their victims before devouring them?"

And then I got the low down on that department. . . . Their fellow-student Blank had the best brain in the lot, not the best among the students only but in the whole department; old Anon could always be counted on to stress the "close relytion" between philosophy and morals; Whositt would bring credit on the institution, but in spite of the department rather than because of it. . . . And so on, to the coffee dregs.

Among his contemporaries Whositt was justly famous for the coining of that phrase describing a certain house-mother as "taking refuge in the epistemological situation" and "not being able to live in the phenomena of the world."

This not unusual creature I heard annihilated in another of Louie's high moments, when he had reinforced the morning spirits by bringing a second cup of coffee from the kitchen of a certain favorite tearoom.

By what connection or audacity Louie had succeeded in getting the run of this kitchen I do not know. But here he always served his friends' meals as well as his own, the whole group profiting by the cajolery of a cook known to the rest of us only by the carrying power of an occasional laugh.

This morning for the first time I heard the cook's voice. "The trouble with you university graduates," I heard her say to Louie, "is that the whole bunch of you is atheists. You have no religion left to you."

"And have you a religion?" I heard Louie ask.

"I have that."

"And may I ask what it is?"

"I was born in Ireland," responded the owner of that infectious laughter. "Do you know what it is?"

Balancing in amateurish fashion a plate of eggs and two cups of coffee, the irrepressible came back smiling. But his smile deserted him when David questioned him regarding present relations with the omnipresent house-mother.

"Intolerable," he said, "simply intolerable. Understand me please. I would

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not deny that a certain conformance to proletarian standards is necessary to myntyne the social equilibrium. But one cahn go too far in that. The good of the institution demands that one retyne some measure of experimental freedom."

"I know Mrs Ryder," David assured him.

"Yesterdye morning," Louie continued, "when I cyme in from breakfast the woman followed me down the hall—you kneow, in that serious, this-pynes-me-more-than-it-does-you manner of hers, and syd:

" 'Mr Martin! Mye I speak to you?'

"Then the female cyme into my room and syd: 'Mr Martin, what is the meaning of this—and this?' And she began going around the room pointing out white rings on the polish of the tyble and the mantel-piece.

" 'Rec-ally, Mrs Ryder,' sys I, 'how should I kneow what these things mean?'

" 'Mr Martin!' sys she. 'These rings can be myde only by two things.'

" 'And those are?' sys I.

" 'One of those, Mr Martin,' sys she, fixing me with her eye, 'is hot water. The other I think I do not have to nyme.'

"And thereupon she delivered a monologue on the pity it was that the gentlemen left in the house could not conduct themselves as gentlemen during the vycytion.

"As fyte would have it, last night Blank and Whositt wandered in. I towld them the story. Blank took up some of the vawses in the room and began trying to fit them to those white circles. And, cahn you fawncy, he actually succeeded!

"This morning I saw the woman in the hall.

" 'Mrs Ryder,' sys I. 'Mye I speak to you?'

"And when she cyme into the room, I sys: 'Mrs Ryder, are you acqynted with Mill's methods of inductive reasoning?'

" 'I discover,' sys I, 'that you overlooked a possible causal factor in your little demonstrytion of yesterdye.' And then I took the vawses in my hand and fitted them to the circles on the tyble and the mantel-piece. 'Mrs Ryder, these rings can be myde by at least three agents. In the realm of possible causation there are doubtless others.' "

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The next evening Louie had a date. While he went to the tearoom kitchen for sandwiches the girl read. Louie had chosen well. She was beautiful; modern

from tip to toe; and no more ashamed than he at being seen with book in hand.

With her, Louie seemed subdued in spirits. But toward the end of the meal when David dropped over to their table the usual stride was struck by asking David how he had busied himself that day. In a matter-of-fact enumeration, David answered. In the morning he broke a record by studying a bit; in the afternoon he had a bath—

He was not allowed to finish.

"Ah! have you *seen* Dyvid in his bawth?" Louie asked the girl. . .

I looked at Louie sadly. It was my last evening in Chicago. And farewells to the Comic Spirit should be tinged with sadness.

Yet was it farewell? I was leaving the University of Chicago. But, after all, I was going home: to Norman, and the University of Oklahoma.

I paid my check with equanimity and went home to pack my bag.

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