

***STEPHEN  
LEACOCK***



***SHORT  
CIRCUITS***

**Stephen Leacock**

# **Short Circuits**

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FINIS

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# **SHORT CIRCUITS IN THE SOCIAL CURRENT**

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# ***OLD JUNK AND NEW MONEY***

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# A LITTLE STUDY IN THE LATEST ANTIQUES

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I went the other day into the beautiful home of my two good friends, the Hespeler-Hyphen-Joneses, and I paused a moment, as my eye fell on the tall clock that stood in the hall.

"Ah," said Hespeler-Hyphen-Jones, "I see you are looking at the clock--a beautiful thing, isn't it?--a genuine antique."

"Does it go?" I asked.

"Good gracious, no!" exclaimed my two friends. "But isn't it a beautiful thing!"

"Did it ever go?"

"I doubt it," said Hespeler-Hyphen-Jones. "The works, of course, are by Salvolatile--one of the really *great* clockmakers, you know. But I don't know whether the works ever went. That, I believe, is one way in which you can always tell a Salvolatile. If it's a genuine Salvolatile, it won't go."

"In any case," I said, "it has no hands."

"Oh, dear, no," said Mrs. Jones. "It never had, as far as we know. We picked it up in such a queer little shop in Amalfi and the man assured us that it never had had any hands. He guaranteed it. That's one of the things, you know, that you can tell by. Charles and I were terribly keen about clocks at that time and really studied them, and the books all agreed that no genuine Salvolatile has any hands."

"And was the side broken, too, when you got it," I asked.

"Ah, no," said my friend. "We had that done by an expert in New York after we got back. Isn't it exquisitely done? You see, he has made the break to look exactly as if some one had rolled the clock over and stamped on it. Every genuine Salvolatile is said to have been stamped upon like that.

"Of course, our break is only imitation, but it's extremely well done, isn't it? We go to Ferrugi's, that little place on Fourth Avenue, you know, for everything that we want broken. They have a splendid man there. He can break anything."

"Really!" I said.

"Yes, and the day when we wanted the clock done, Charles and I went down to see him do it. It was really quite wonderful, wasn't it, Charles?"

"Yes, indeed. The man laid the clock on the floor and turned it on its side and then stood looking at it intently, and walking round and round it and murmuring in Italian as if he were swearing at it. Then he jumped in the air and came down on it with both feet."

"Did he?" I asked.

"Yes, and with such wonderful accuracy. Our friend Mr. Appin-Hyphen-Smith--the great expert, you know--was looking at our clock last week and he said it was marvelous, hardly to be distinguished from a genuine *fractura*."

"But he did say, didn't he, dear," said Mrs. Jones, "that the better way is to throw a clock out of a fourth story window? You see, that was the height of the Italian houses in the Thirteenth Century--is it the Thirteenth Century I mean, Charles?"

"Yes," said Charles.

"Do you know, the other day I made the silliest mistake about a spoon. I thought it was a Twelfth Century spoon and said so and in reality it was only Eleven and a half. Wasn't it, Charles?"

"Yes," said Charles.

"But do come into the drawing room and have some tea. And, by the way, since you are interested in antiques, do look please at my teapot."

"It looks an excellent teapot," I said, feeling it with my hand, "and it must have been very expensive, wasn't it?"

"Oh, not *that* one," interposed Mr. Hespeler-Hyphen-Jones. "That is nothing. We got that here in New York at Hoffany's--to make tea in. It *is* made of solid silver, of course, and all that, but even Hoffany's admitted that it was made in America and was probably not more than a year or so old and had never been used by anybody else. In fact, they couldn't guarantee it in any way."

"Oh, I see," I said.

"But let me pour you out tea from it and then do look at the perfect darling beside it. Oh, don't touch it, please, it won't stand up."

"Won't stand up?" I said.

"No," said Hespeler-Jones, "that's one of the tests. We know from that that it is genuine Swaatsmaacher. None of them stand up."

"Where did you buy it?" I asked, "here?"

"Oh, heavens, no, you couldn't buy a thing like that here! As a matter of fact, we picked it up in a little gin shop in Obehellandam in Holland. Do you know Obehellandam?"

"I don't," I said.

"It's just the dearest little place, nothing but little wee smelly shops filled with most delightful things--all antique, everything broken. They guarantee that there is nothing in the shop that wasn't smashed at least a hundred years ago."

"You don't use the teapot to make tea," I said.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Hespeler-Jones as she handed me a cup of tea from the New York teapot. "I don't think you could. It leaks."

"That again is a thing," said her husband, "that the experts always look for in a Swaatsmaacher. If it doesn't leak, it's probably just a faked-up thing not twenty years old."

"Is it silver?" I asked.

"Ah, no. That's another test," said Mrs. Jones. "The real Swaatsmaachers were always made of pewter bound with barrel-iron off the gin barrels. They try to imitate it now by using silver, but they can't get it."

"No, the silver won't take the tarnish," interjected her husband. "You see, it's the same way with ever so many of the old things. They rust and rot in a way that you simply cannot imitate. I have an old drinking horn that I'll show you presently--Ninth Century, isn't it, dear?--that is all coated inside with the most beautiful green slime, absolutely impossible to reproduce."

"Is it?" I said.

"Yes, I took it to Squeziou's, the Italian place in London. (They are the great experts on horns, you know; they can tell exactly the country and the breed of cow.) And they told me that they had tried in vain to reproduce that peculiar

and beautiful rot. One of their head men said that he thought that this horn had probably been taken from a dead cow that had been buried for fifty years. That's what gives it its value, you know."

"You didn't buy it in London, did you?" I asked.

"Oh, no," answered Hespeler-Jones. "London is perfectly impossible--just as hopeless as New York. You can't buy anything real there at all."

"Then where do you get all your things?" I asked, as I looked round at the collection of junk in the room.

"Oh, we pick them up here and there," said Mrs. Jones. "Just in any out-of-the-way corners. That little stool we found at the back of a cow stable in Loch Aberlocherty. They were actually using it for milking. And the two others--aren't they beautiful? though really it's quite wrong to have two chairs alike in the same room--came from the back of a tiny little whiskey shop in Galway. Such a delight of an old Irishman sold them to us and he admitted that he himself had no idea how old they were. They might, he said, be Fifteenth Century, or they might not.

"But, oh, Charles," my hostess interrupted herself to say, "I've just had a letter from Jane (Jane is my sister, you know) that is terribly exciting. She's found a table at a tiny place in Brittany that she thinks would exactly do in our card room. She says that its utterly unlike anything else in the room and has quite obviously no connection with cards. But let me read what she says--let me see, yes, here's where it begins:

". . . a perfectly sweet little table. It probably had four legs originally and even now has two which, I am told, is a

great find, as most people have to be content with one. The man explained that it could either be leaned up against the wall or else suspended from the ceiling on a silver chain. One of the boards of the top is gone, but I am told that that is of no consequence, as all the best specimens of Brittany tables have at least one board out.'

"Doesn't that sound fascinating, Charles? Do send Jane a cable at once not to miss it."

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And when I took my leave a little later, I realized once and for all that the antique business is not for me.

# ***"SPEAKING OF INDIA--"***

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# WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR HUSBAND TELLS IN COMPANY HIS SAME OLD STORY

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I was at a dinner party the other night at which one of the guests, as guests generally do, began to tell an old story of his, already known to us all.

"What you say of India," he said, "reminds me of a rather remarkable experience of mine in California--"

"Oh, James," interrupted his wife, "please don't tell that old story over again."

The narrator, a modest man, blushed and came to a stop. There was a painful silence which lasted for some moments. Then somebody said, "Speaking of Mayor Thompson of Chicago--" and the party went on again.

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But the incident left behind it a problem in my mind. Should a wife, or should a wife not, interrupt her husband to stop him telling one of his wearisome old stories. . . .

If the husband could speak (most husbands are inarticulate) he could certainly put up a good defense. He could say:

"My dear Martha, you think this is an old story. But if you knew some of the ones that will be told by the other men if I don't tell this, you'd think it brand new. You think the story wearisome for *you*. But their wives think their stories wearisome for *them*. All the stories we are all going to tell tonight are old. Of course they are. What do you think we

are,--Shakespeare? We can't sit here and make up *new* stories. If we could, we'd black our faces, call ourselves coons and draw a hundred dollars a night in a New York Revue.

"Moreover--listen to this as a second point. An old story has certain great advantages over a new one. There's no strain in listening to it. You know just when it is all coming, and you can slip in an extra oyster and bite off an extra piece of celery in between the sentences, take a drink of dry ginger ale and be all set for the big laugh at the end.

"And get this also--if you don't have stories at a dinner table somebody will start Statistics. And Statistics are worse than stories in the ratio of eight to one. There is, you must remember, a certain type of man, who goes round filling himself up with facts. He knows how many miles of railway track there are in the United States and the number of illiterates in Oklahoma. At any dinner party this man may be there: if he is, conversation turns into a lecture. Worse still there may be two of these men. If there are, conversation becomes an argument."

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Now, this is the worst of all. Argument at a dinner party ruins the whole evening for everybody. One man says something,--let us say,--about the Civil War,--and some one else contradicts him.--"You'll pardon *me*--" he says, and they're off. They start politely. In two minutes they are speaking with warmth. In four minutes they hate one another worse than hell. First they ask themselves to pardon one another. Then they begin referring one another to books.--"Pardon me," says one, "if you consult any history of

the war, you'll see that Lincoln *never* meant to set free the slaves."--"Excuse me," says the other, "if you consult any biography of Lincoln you'll see that he *did*. . . ."

Now you notice that this point about Abraham Lincoln can't be settled without at least a year's work in a library--and not even then.

So the argument gets warmer. The opponents refer one another to books, then they tell one another to go to Washington and hunt it up for themselves. Finally they tell one another to go to hell.

Meantime there is a maid behind one of them trying to give him a creamed celery out of a dish which he keeps knocking over, and a maid pouring hot asparagus with drawn butter over the other one's shirt front.

And the dinner party is a failure. Those two men will carry their quarrel right on after the men are left alone; they'll fetch it up to the library, they'll keep it all through bridge and take it home with them.

Think how much softer and easier if some one had said, "Talking about California, reminds me of an episode in India." . . . How quietly the asparagus would have circulated then.

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And there is more to it than that. There is, it seems to me, a sort of humble pathos surrounding the gentle story teller wanting to get his little anecdote in, and generally having to try several times for an opening.

He begins among the oysters.

"Speaking of India--" he says. But a wave of general conversation washes over him.

Somewhere in the middle of the fish, there is a lull in the talk and again he says,--"Speaking of India--" "Now you really *must* have some of that fish," interrupts his hostess. And a burst of talk about fish blows his topic into nothingness. He tries next at the roast. "Speaking of India--" he says, and a maid drops gravy over him.

And at last, at the happy last, he gets a real chance.--"Speaking of India," he says, and then his wife breaks in with "Oh! James!"

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Madam, do you think it's fair? It is, of course, a great trial for a brilliant woman like you to have to drag around a husband like him. Of course he's a dud. You ought really to have married either Bernard Shaw or Mussolini.

But you didn't. You just married an ordinary plain man like the rest of us, with no particular aspirations to be a humorist, or a raconteur, or a diseuse, or anything of the sort: anxious just to take some little part in the talk about him.

So, next time, when he begins "Speaking of India--" won't you let us hear what it was that happened there?

# ***HOW TO BORROW MONEY***

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# THE PROCESS IS QUITE EASY, PROVIDED YOU BORROW ENOUGH

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Have you ever, dear readers, had occasion to borrow money? Have you ever borrowed ten dollars under a rigorous promise of your word of honor as a Christian to pay it back on your next salary day? Have you ever borrowed as much as a million at a time?

If you have done these things, you cannot have failed to notice how much easier it is to borrow ten thousand dollars than ten, how much easier still to borrow a hundred thousand, and that when you come at last to raising an international loan of a hundred million the thing loses all difficulty.

Here below are the little scenes that take place on the occasion of an ascending series of loans.

### TABLEAU NO. I

*The Scene in Which Hardup Jones Borrows Ten Dollars Till the First of Next Month from His Friend, Canny Smith*

"Say, look here, old man, I was wondering whether perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me have ten dollars till the end of the month--"

"Ten dollars!"

"Oh, I could give it back all right, for dead sure, just the minute I get my salary."

"Ten dollars!!!"

"You see, I've got into an awful tangle--I owe seven and a half on my board, and she said yesterday she'd have to have it. And I couldn't pay my laundry last week, so he said

he wouldn't leave it, and I got this cursed suit on the installment plan and they said they'd seize my trunk, and--"

"Say, but Gol darn it, I lent you five dollars, don't you remember, last November, and you swore you'd pay it back on the first and I never got it till away after New Year's--"

"I know, I know. But this is absolutely sure. So help me, I'll pay it right on the first, the minute I get my check."

"Yes, but you won't--"

"No, I swear I will--"

And after about half an hour of expostulations and protests of this sort, having pledged his soul, his body, and his honor, the borrower at last gets his ten dollars.

#### TABLEAU NO. II

*The Scene in Which Mr. McDuff of the McDuff Hardware Store in Central City (pop. 3,862) Borrows \$1,000 from the Local Bank*

The second degree in borrowing is represented by this scene in which Mr. John McDuff, of McDuff Bros. Hardware Store (Everything in Hardware), calls on the local bank manager with a view to getting \$1,000 to carry the business forward for one month till the farmers' spring payments begin to come in.

Mr. McDuff is told by one of the (two) juniors in the bank to wait--the manager is engaged for the moment.

The manager in reality is in his inner office, sorting out trout flies. But he knows what McDuff wants and he means to make him wait for it and suffer for it.

When at last McDuff does get in, the manager is very cold and formal.

"Sit down, Mr. McDuff," he says. When they go fishing together, the manager always calls McDuff "John." But this is different. McDuff is here to borrow money. And borrowing money in Central City is a criminal act.

"I came in about that loan," says McDuff.

The manager looks into a ledger.

"You're overdrawn seventeen dollars right now," he says.

"I know, but I'll be getting my accounts in any time after the first."

Then follows a string of severe questions. What are McDuff's daily receipts? What is his overhead? What is his underfoot? Is he a church-goer? Does he believe in a future life?

And at last even when the manager finally consents to lend the thousand dollars (he always meant to do it), he begins tagging on conditions:

"You'll have to get your partner to sign."

"All right."

"And you'd better get your wife to sign."

"All right."

"And your mother, she might as well sign too--"

There are more signatures on a country bank note for one month than on a Locarno treaty.

And at last McDuff, of Everything in Hardware, having pledged his receipts, his premises, his credit, his honor, his wife, and his mother--gets away with the thousand dollars.

TABLEAU NO. III

*How Mr. P. O. Pingpoint, of the Great Financial House of Pingpoint, Pingpong and Company, New York and London, Borrows a Million Dollars before Lunch*



Here the scene is laid in a fitting setting. Mr. Pingpoint is shown into the sumptuous head office of the president of the First National Bank.

"Ah, good morning," says the president as he rises to greet Mr. Pingpoint, "I was expecting you. Our general manager told me that you were going to be good enough to call in. Won't you take this larger chair?--you'll find it easier."

"Ah, thank you. You're very comfortable here."

"Yes, we rather think this a pleasant room. And our board room, we think, is even better. Won't you let me show you our board room?"

"Oh, thanks, I'm afraid I hardly have the time. I just came in for a minute to complete our loan of a million dollars."

"Yes, our executive Vice-President said that you are good enough to come to us. It is very kind of you, I'm sure."

"Oh, not at all."

"And you are quite sure that a million is all that you care to take? We shall be delighted, you know, if you will take a million and a half."

"Oh, scarcely. A million, I think, will be ample just now; we can come back, of course, if we want more."

"Oh, certainly, certainly."

"And do you want us to give any security, or anything of that sort?"

"Oh, no, quite unnecessary."

"And is there anything you want me to sign while I am here?"

"Oh, no, nothing, the clerks will attend to all that."

"Well, thanks, then, I needn't keep you any longer."

"But won't you let me drive you up town? My car is just outside. Or, better still, if you are free, won't you come and eat some lunch with me at the club?"

"Well, thanks, yes, you're really extremely kind."

And with this, quite painlessly and easily, the million dollars has changed hands.

But even that is not the last degree. Eclipsing that sort of thing, both in case and in splendor, is the international loan, as seen in--

#### TABLEAU NO. IV

*The Scenes Which Accompany the Flotation of an Anglo-French Loan in the American Market, of a Hundred Million Dollars, by the Right Hon. Samuel Rothstein of England and the Vicomte Baton Rouge de Chauve Souris of France*

This occurrence is best followed as it appears in its triumphant progress in the American press.

NEW YORK, Friday--An enthusiastic reception was given yesterday to the Right Hon. Mr. Samuel Rothstein, of the British Cabinet, and to the Vicomte de Chauve Souris, French plenipotentiary, on their landing from the *Stacquitania*. It is understood that they will borrow \$100,000,000. The distinguished visitors expect to stay only a few days.

NEW YORK, Saturday--An elaborate reception was given last evening in the home of Mrs. Bildermont to the Right Hon. Samuel Rothstein and the Baron de Chauve Souris. It is understood that they are borrowing a hundred million dollars.

NEW YORK, Monday--The Baron de Chauve Souris and the Right Hon. Samuel Rothstein were notable figures in the

Fifth Avenue church parade yesterday. It is understood that they will borrow a hundred million dollars.

NEW YORK, Tuesday--The Baron de Chauve Souris and the Right Hon. Samuel Rothstein attended a baseball game at the Polo Grounds. It is understood that they will borrow a hundred million dollars.

NEW YORK, Wednesday--At a ball given by Mr. and Mrs. Ashcoop-Vandermore for the distinguished English and French plenipotentiaries, Mr. Samuel Rothstein and the Baron de Chauve Souris, it was definitely stated that the loan which they are financing will be limited to a hundred million dollars.

NEW YORK (Wall Street), Thursday--The loan of \$100,000,000 was subscribed this morning at eleven o'clock in five minutes. The Right Hon. Mr. Rothstein and the Baron Baton Rouge de Chauve Souris left America at twelve noon, taking the money with them. Both plenipotentiaries expressed their delight with America.

"It is," said the Baron--"how do you call it?--a cinch."

#### EPILOGUE

And yet, six months later, what happened? Who paid and who didn't?

Hardup Jones paid \$5.40 within a month, \$3.00 the next month and the remaining one dollar and sixty cents two weeks later.

McDuff Bros. met their note and went fishing with the manager like old friends.

The Pingpoint Syndicate blew up and failed for ten million dollars.

And the international loan got mixed up with a lot of others, was funded, equated, spread out over fifty years, capitalized, funded again--in short, it passed beyond all recognition.

And the moral is, when you borrow, borrow a whole lot.

# ***LIFE'S MINOR CONTRADICTIONS***

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# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THINGS AS THEY ARE AND AS THEY SEEM

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Isn't it funny how different people and things are when you know them from what you think they are when you don't know them?

For instance, everybody knows how much all distinguished people differ in their private lives from what they appear to the public. We all get used to being told in the papers such things as that in his *private* life Signor Mussolini is the very gentlest of men, spending his time by preference among children and dolls; that in his *private* life Dean Inge, the "gloomy Dean" of St. Paul's Cathedral, is hilariously merry; and that Mr. Chesterton, fat though he appears in public, is in private life quite thin.

I myself had the pleasure not long ago of meeting the famous Mr. Sandpile, at that time reputed to be the most powerful man in America, and giving public exhibitions of muscular strength of a most amazing character. I was surprised to find that in his private life Sandpile was not a strong man at all, but quite feeble. "Would you mind," he said to me, "handing me that jug? It's too heavy for me to lift."

In the same way, I recall on one occasion walking down a street in an English seaport town late one night with Admiral Beatty--I think it was Admiral Beatty, either Beatty or Jellicoe. "Would you mind," he said, "letting me walk behind you? I'm afraid of the dark." "You mean of course," I said,