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FIRST SEPTEMBER POPULAR ON SALE AUGUST 7th

The Retroactive Existence of Mr. Juggins

By Stephen Leacock

A parable, rather than a story. It may fit you, or one or more of your friends. But if you pass it along, we earnestly recommend you first to run back over your own actions and see if the truth of the parable isn't applicable, at least to some extent, to yourself. We confess to a liking for this sort of thing—it sets us thinking, and anything that does that is good for us.

I FIRST met Juggins—to really notice him—years and years ago as a boy out camping. Somebody was trying to nail up a board on a tree for a shelf, and Juggins interfered to help him.

"Stop a minute," he said; "you need to saw the end of that board off before you put it up." Then Juggins looked around for a saw, and when he got it he had hardly made more than a stroke or two with it before he stopped. "This saw," he said, "needs to be filed up a bit." So he went and hunted up a file to sharpen the saw, but found that before he could use the file he needed to put a proper handle on it; and to make the handle he went to look for a sapling in the bush; but to cut the sapling he found that he needed to sharpen up the ax. To do this, of course, he had to fix the grindstone so as to make it run properly. This involved making wooden legs for the grindstone. To do this decently Juggins decided to make a carpenter's bench. This was quite impossible without a better set of tools. Juggins went to the village to get tools, and, of course, he never came back.

He was rediscovered, weeks later, in the city, getting prices on wholesale tool machinery.

After that first episode I got to know Juggins very well. For some time we were students at college together. But Juggins somehow never got far with

his studies. He always began with great enthusiasm, and then something happened. For a time he studied French with tremendous eagerness. But he soon found that for a real knowledge of French you need to first get a thorough grasp of old French and Provençal. But it proved impossible to do anything with these without an absolutely complete command of Latin. This Juggins discovered could only be obtained, in any thorough way, through Sanskrit, which, of course, lies at the base of it. So Juggins devoted himself to Sanskrit until he realized that for a proper understanding of Sanskrit one needs to study the ancient Iranian, the root language underneath. This language, however, is lost.

So Juggins had to begin over again. He did, it is true, make some progress in natural science. He studied physics, and rushed rapidly backward from forces to molecules, and from molecules to atoms, and from atoms to electrons, and then his whole studies exploded backward into the infinities of space, still searching a first cause.

Juggins, of course, never took a degree, so he made no practical use of his education. But it didn't matter. He was very well off, and was able to go straight into business with a capital of about a hundred thousand dollars. He put it at first into a gas plant, but found that he lost money at that because of

the high price of purchasing the coal to make gas. So he sold out for ninety thousand dollars, and went into coal mining. This was unsuccessful because of the awful cost of mining machinery. So Juggins sold his shares in the mine for eighty thousand dollars, and went in for manufacturing mining machinery. At this he would have undoubtedly made money but for the enormous cost of gas needed as motive power for the plant. Juggins sold out of the manufacture for seventy thousand, and after that he went whirling in a circle, like skating backward, through the different branches of allied industry.

He lost a certain amount of money each year, especially in good years when trade was brisk. In dull times when everything was unsalable he did fairly well.

Juggins' domestic life was very quiet.

Of course, he never married. He did, it is true, fall in love several times, but each time it ended without result. I remember well his first love story, for I was very intimate with him at the time. He had fallen in love with the girl in question utterly and immediately. It was literally love at first sight. There was no doubt of his intentions. As soon as he had met her he was quite frank about it. "I intend," he said, "to ask her to be my wife."

"When?" I asked. "Right away?"

"No," he said; "I want first to fit myself to be worthy of her."

So he went into moral training to fit himself. He taught in a Sunday school for six weeks, till he realized that a man has no business in divine work of that sort without first preparing himself by serious study of the history of Palestine. And he felt that a man was a cad to force his society on a girl while he is still only half acquainted with the history of the Israelites. So Juggins stayed away. It was nearly two years before he was fit to propose. By the time he was fit, the girl had already married a brainless thing in patent-leather boots who didn't even know who Moses was.

Of course, Juggins fell in love again.

People always do. And, at any rate, by this time he was in a state of moral fitness that made it imperative.

So he fell in love—deeply in love this time—with the eldest Miss Money-cuft. Naturally he did; who wouldn't? She was only called eldest because she had five younger sisters; and she was very poor, and awfully clever, and trimmed all her own hats. Any man, if he's worth the name, falls in love with that sort at first sight. So of course Juggins would have proposed to her, only when he went to the house he met her next sister; and of course she was younger still, and, I suppose, poorer, and made not only her own hats but her own blouses. So Juggins fell in love with her. But one night when he went to call the door was opened by the sister younger still, who not only made her own blouses and trimmed her own hats, but even made her own tailor-made suits. After that Juggins backed up from sister to sister till he went through the whole family, and in the end got none of them.

Perhaps it was just as well that Juggins never married. It would have made things very difficult, because of course he got poorer all the time. You see, after he sold out his last share in his last business he bought with it a diminishing life annuity, so planned that he always got rather less next year than this year, and still less the year after. Thus if he lived long enough he would starve to death.

Meantime, he has become a quaint-looking elderly man, with coats a little too short and trousers a little above his boots, like a boy. His face, too, is like that of a boy with wrinkles.

And his talk now has grown to be always reminiscent. He is perpetually telling long stories of amusing times that he has had with different people that he names.

He says, for example:

"I remember a rather queer thing that happened to me on a train one day——"

"And if you say 'When was that, Juggins?'" he looks at you in a vague way, as if calculating, and says: "In

eighteen-seventy-five, or eighteen-seventy-six, I think, as near as I recall it—”

I notice, too, that his reminiscences are going farther and farther back. He used to base his stories on his recollections as a young man; now they are farther back.

The other day he told me a story about himself and two people that he called the Harper brothers, Ned and Joe. Ned, he said, was a tremendously powerful fellow.

I asked how old Ned was, and Juggins said that he was three. He added

that there was another brother not so old, but a very clever fellow, about—here Juggins paused and calculated—about eighteen months.

So then I realized where Juggins' retroactive existence is carrying him to. He has passed back through childhood into infancy, and presently, just as his annuity runs to a point and vanishes, he will back up clear through the Curtain of Existence, and die—or be born—I don't know which to call it.

Meantime, he remains to me as one of the most illuminating allegories I have met.

