

The Story of a Famous Hoax

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Richard Adams Locke

The First Instalment of "The Moon Hoax"

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago this month both America and Europe were buzzing with excitement. An English astronomer had invented a wonderful new telescope and with it had "made the most extraordinary discoveries in every planet of our solar system; had discovered planets in other solar systems; had obtained a distinct view of objects in the moon, fully equal to that which the unaided eye commands of terrestrial objects at the distance of 100 yards; had affirmatively settled the question whether this satellite be inhabited, and by what order of beings; had firmly established a new theory of cometary phenomena; and had solved or corrected nearly every leading problem of mathematical astronomy."

It was an American newspaper, the New York Sun, which made this astounding revelation. The Sun had been founded by Benjamin H. Day in 1833 as the first of the penny newspapers in the United States.

On August 21, 1835, the second page of the Sun carried this small news item: "CELESTIAL DISCOVERIES—The Edinburgh Courant says—'We have just learnt from an eminent publisher in this city that Sir John Herschel at the Cape of Good Hope, has made some astronomical discoveries of the most wonderful description, by means of an immense telescope of an entirely new principle.' It was true that Sir John Frederick William Herschel, the greatest astronomer of his time, had gone to South Africa in January, 1834, and established an observatory near Cape Town to complete the first telescopic survey ever attempted of the whole surface of the visible heavens. So that much of the story was true.

On August 25 three columns of the first page of the Sun were devoted to an article which appeared under a modest headline of "GREAT ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES—Lately Made by Sir John Herschel, LL.D., F.R.S., &c.—At the Cape of Good Hope." This article was credited to the "Supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science." It was true that there had once been an Edinburgh Journal of Science but the readers of the Sun did not know that it had suspended publication several years previously.

This first article was devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the importance of Sir John's discoveries. He had "paused several hours before he commenced his observations, that he might prepare his own mind for discoveries which he knew would fill the minds of myriads of his fellow men with astonishment. And well might he pause! From the hour the first human pair opened their eyes to the glories of the blue firmament above them, there has been no accession to human knowledge at all comparable in sublime interest to that which he has been the honored agent in supplying. Well might he pause! He was about to become the sole depository of wondrous secrets which had been hid from the eyes of all men that had lived since the birth of time."

All of which was an excellent "build-up" to what the interest of the Sun's readers in what was to follow. But it did not give any definite information about the astronomer's discoveries so there was nothing for its readers to get excited about yet. But on August 26 the Sun printed four columns of vivid description of what was to be seen on the moon. The astronomers reported:

"In the shade of the woods on the southeastern side we beheld continuous herds of brown quadrupeds, having all the external characteristics of the bison, but more diminutive than any species of the bos genus in our natural history. Its tail was like that of our bos gruniens; but in its semi-circular horns, the hump on its shoulders, the depth of its dewlap, and the length of its shaggy hair, it closely resembled the species to which we have compared it."

"It had, however, one widely distinctive feature, which we afterward found common to nearly every lunar quadruped we have discovered; namely, a remarkable fleshy appendage over the eyes, crossing the whole breadth of the forehead and united to the ears. We could most distinctly perceive this hairy veil, which was shaped like the upper front outline of the cap known to the ladies as Mary Queen of Scots cap, lifted and lowered by means of the ears. It immediately occurred to the acute mind of Dr. Herschel that this was a providential contrivance to protect the eyes of the animal from the great extremes of light and darkness to which all the inhabitants of our side of the moon are periodically subjected."

On that day the moon story in the Sun became the talk of New York. But more was to follow for the next day's account introduced the Sun's readers to new regions of the moon—the Vagabond mountains, the Lake of Death, craters of extinct volcanoes and luxurious forests divided by open plains "in which waved an ocean of verdure, and which were probably prairies like those of North America." Of animals there were classified "nine species of mamma and five of



Benjamin H. Day
Founder of The Sun

quite of the opinion that this was the amiable moral which the writer had in view. Other readers, however, construed the whole as an elaborate satire upon the monstrous fabrications of the political press of the country and the various genera and species of its party editors. In the blue goat with the single horn, mentioned as it is in connection with the royal arms of England, many persons fancy they perceive the characteristics of a notorious foreigner who is the supervising editor of one of our largest morning papers." This "notorious foreigner" was James Gordon Bennett, born in Scotland, who had shocked not only the conservatives of New York but some of his journalistic contemporaries by the sensationalism of his Herald.

The "Moon Hoax" had the curious effect of spoiling a promising tale by a man destined to become one of America's greatest writers. Edgar Allan Poe had started a fanciful tale of a similar nature under the title of "Hans Pfaal." But when he "found that he could add very little to the minute and authentic account of Sir John Herschel," he tore up the second instalment of his story. In later years he took pleasure in picking to pieces the Sun's moon story. He wrote:

"That the public were misled, even for an instant, merely proves the gross ignorance which, 10 or 12 years ago, was so prevalent on astronomical topics. And yet it was, on the whole, the greatest hit in the way of sensation—of merely popular sensation—ever made by any similar fiction either in America or Europe. From the epoch of the hoax, the Sun shone with unmitigated splendor. Its success firmly established the 'penny system' throughout the country, and (through the Sun) consequently we are indebted to the genius of Mr. Locke for one of the most important steps ever yet taken in the pathway of human progress."

If Poe's estimate is correct, then Richard Adams Locke is deserving of better than the obscurity into which his name has sunk, except when occasionally his famous hoax is recalled. He was born September 22, 1800, at East Brent, Somersetshire, England, and he was a descendant of John Locke, the famous English philosopher. Locke was educated by his mother and by private tutors until he was nineteen when he entered Cambridge. As a student there he began his writing as a contributor to the Bee, the Imperial Magazine and other publications. Becoming interested in the experiment in democracy which was being tried by England's erstwhile colonies across the Atlantic, he founded the London Republican to spread the doctrines of the new democracy. But it soon failed.

Devoting himself to literature and science, he next established a periodical called the Cornucopia. In the meantime he had married and when the Cornucopia failed after six months he resolved to seek his fortune in America. In 1832, accompanied by his wife and daughter, he came to New York and went to work for Col. William Watson Webb of the New York Courier and Enquirer. While covering the murder trial of a religious fakir named "Matthias the Prophet," Locke became acquainted with Benjamin H. Day, the founder of the Sun.

Finding that Locke was the best reporter there, Day hired him to write a series of feature stories on the religious fakir for the Sun. As a result Webb discharged him for working "on the side" for the lowly penny rival of his paper and Locke was glad to go to work for Day as an editorial writer on the Sun at \$12 a week. After the Matthias trial ended it was rather a dull time for the New York newspapers. So Locke went to Day with a plan for "stirring up something" and Day readily agreed to what his star writer proposed. The result was the moon story of a century ago, perhaps the most famous hoax of all time and certainly the most important. For, as Poe says, it firmly established the cheap newspaper in this country then Americans, who enjoy the benefits derived from this "university of the people," as the newspaper has been called, can remember gratefully Richard Adams Locke.

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Little Lights on LIVING

By MARIA LEONARD
Dean of Women, University of Illinois
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THE SUN-LIT TOPAZ

ONCE when leaving France, I received as a gift a charming little necklace of silver and lapis lazuli. With the gift came to me the story of the maker of the necklace. A little Frenchman who owned a tiny shop in the Latin quarter of old Paris always informed his patrons, I am told, that he made his jewelry with gold, silver and love.

One day an American lady asked to see the most beautiful thing in the shop. Without hesitation he brought from a high shelf a tiny box, and showed his visitor a necklace containing a marvelous topaz, which he had bought after the war from a noble French family. "I wish I could buy it," the lady said. To her surprise he responded, "I am so happy that you cannot. Though I need money badly, I need its beauty more. Always when I am tired and disheartened," he said, "I hang my topaz in the window, the sunlight comes through it on my work bench, then can I make things more beautiful."

If that would sing in all hearts each day—"to make things more beautiful," what a different world we could make of this old planet. Wars would cease. Hearts of selfish greed would change and share with their neighbors.

We can make more beautiful the lives of those we meet each day.

Early one morning some time ago I was walking up the beautiful embowered walk on the university campus. The day was glorious. There was still that untouchable freshness in air, trees and grass that only spring mornings have. It made one's spirit dance. I met a professor with his accustomed cane and brief case going to meet his eight o'clock class. One look at his frowning unhappy face, with mouth drooped and self-centered downward look, and my spirit halted, surprised that here was one, while walking under God's vaulted elms, constantly looking down, "No topaz in the window of his soul," thought I. A few steps further I met a freshman girl, whom I knew was having a hard financial struggle, working long hours after school, but, oh, what "a morning face" she had, radiant and lovely!

When the sunlight comes through the topaz of happiness, it will illumine not only our lives, but others as the sun-lit topaz made radiant the tired heart of the little shop-keeper.

COMING LEISURE

NOT long ago a young graduate of two years declared that now her college days were over, life held little for her, as she did not need to work, and she was tired of play. "I am bored with society in particular and with life in general," she added with a sigh.

Here she was, talented, with a wealth of leisure time on her hands and had made of it only an idling time, instead of a growing time. "One's leisure is time to invest," I told her, "it is not time to spend. Time spent is gone, time invested is saved." Leisure is not "unoccupied time"—the dictionary notwithstanding! What an irretrievable mistake for countless generations to have been brought up on.

Too long have we been training our children to think and plan their lives in terms of dollars rather than time investment. Money spent can always be re-earned. Time should be budgeted like money now is budgeted. Children should be taught to expect the largest possible dividends from each day of 24 hours.

Parents lose an opportunity for giving their children an early life lesson on successful living when they fail to keep on training them in their play time, as we hear so often "run away and play." Play time in childhood becomes leisure in adulthood.

Leisure in America is coming; leisure that in the past has been a gift to the rich only will soon be part of an average man's day. In order to spread the work of the world to more heads and hands, some folk will be forced to work less hours so that others may work at all, for every one who has to live ought to have a chance to work. Work is a blessed privilege, so is leisure. Only the man who appreciates work can fully appreciate leisure, and I am beginning to think, can appreciate life to its fullest.

The true test of an educated person is that he can enjoy himself when alone and not have to pay another to amuse him. Life holds no boredom for the man who can recreate his soul in his leisure time. Life's enrichments come to us not through the use of our money, but through the use of our time. Since the American goal has been riches rather than enrichment, what are we going to do with this coming leisure?

Teach Children Pride in Father and Mother

By HELEN GREGG GREEN, National Kindergarten Association, New York.

"Clyde, as you know, Aunt Emmy Lou, is president of the Hi-Y and he's to be the toastmaster Friday evening. He's so diffident about standing up before people and 'being featured', but I think he'll get along nicely. Our neighbor, Mr. Jeffries, the attorney, will help him get his little 'speech' ready, I know."

"Why, Marjorie," Aunt Emmy Lou expostulated, "if he needs any help, why doesn't he have his father help him? His extremely capable father!"

"His extremely capable father." Clyde's mother looked a little puzzled. "I know I have an especially good husband, but I have never thought of him as particularly brilliant."

"That's just it," laughed Aunt Emmy Lou. "A prophet is without honor in his own home," she misquoted. "Do you know that's a mistake so many parents make? They don't thoroughly appreciate each other, and they don't impress their children with the talents that make Father or Mother shine in the outside world. Oh yes, I understand, we let the boys and girls know of Mother's goodness and Father's honesty. All the 'cardinal virtues' are acknowledged. These are most important, of course, but you know boys and girls get so much 'kick' as they call it, out of having able, attractive parents. And, in nine cases out of ten, the display of these 'assets' is 'saved for our adult friends.'"

"I had never thought of that, Aunt Emmy Lou," admitted Clyde's very attractive mother. "Now that you mention it, my husband does write an unusually well-worded letter, and those advertisements he prepares for his company are gems. He certainly has a remarkable gift in this direction, but I've just taken it for granted. I'm positively ashamed—I don't believe I ever told him how interesting they are."

"Well, my dear," the little auntie continued, "that's a mistake easily remedied. But you know when husbands and wives treat each other with the same considerate courtesy and appreciation that they give to the smartest, most interesting outsider they know, soon the children behave the same way. And when Father, Mother or children do things worth praising, they should be praised. It's easier to discipline boys and girls if they admire their parents, as well as respect them."

"We save most of our 'charms' for our friends," answered Clyde's mother thoughtfully. "Why don't we try to be more attractive to those we love

best and so win their admiration? Well do I remember how very proud I always was when Mother and Father were dressed for an evening party. I would lie awake long after they had gone, thinking how fortunate I was to have such fine-looking parents. And now that I think of it, I always listened more attentively and made more effort to please my mother when she smiled at me, wearing a particularly becoming dress."

"That's true, every word of it," Aunt Emmy Lou agreed.

"And I think I'll go right home and suggest to Clyde that he get his father to help him with his talk to the boys. Now that you have started me to thinking about it, I've decided his father is the smartest man I know."

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