FOLK LANGUAGE IN HALIBURTON'S HUMOUR

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A GREAT DEAL OF THE FRESHNESS of Haliburton's comic view of life comes from his turn of phrase and imagery describing the world of Sam Slick, as the latter sees it, in earthy, colloquial language which comes from the farm, the workshops, the kitchens and the wharves. It *smells* of the farm, the workshops, the kitchens and the wharves, and provides much of the reason for the enormous Sam Slick vogue, which made Haliburton a notable rival of Dickens. It is no longer the imagery of today, which may explain why few read Sam Slick now. It is the common language of not-so-ordinary men; men who had had to struggle with the unpromising soil in an unpromising climate and who enjoyed their own salty, free-and-easy form of conversation and words for their own sake. It is the folk language of the time, strong, apt and often beautifully bathetic. It rarely tells a round, unvarnished tale, but it often delivers a character neatly and humorously revealed. Sam's character and attitude is plain, for instance, in "... Britishers won't stay in a house, unless every feller gets a separate bed, ..." Haliburton's New Englanders and Nova Scotians had their own (very similar) idiom just as distinctively as Synge's Irishmen or Burns' Scotsmen. Consider, for instance, Sam's approach to a professor from whom he wishes a quick summary of a learned work: "... now larned men in a general way are all as stupid as owls, they keep a devil of a thinkin', but they don't talk. So I stirs up old Hieroglyphic with a long pole; for it's after dark, lights is lit, and it's time for owls to wake up and gaze."

One sees the comic force of this idiom, when Sam says to the Reverend Hopewell, who has been shocked at Sam's typically materialistic reaction on his first sight of the grandeur and majesty of Niagara Falls which to the minister represent the voice of Nature and the power of God:

> ... it does seem kinder grandlike — that 'are great big lake does seem like an everlastin' large milk-pan with a lip for pourin' at the falls, and when it does fall head over heels, all white froth and spray like Phoebe's syllabub, it does look grand, no doubt, and it's nateral for a minister to think on it as you do; but still, for all that, for them that ain't preachers, I defy most any man to see it without thinkin' of a cotton mill.

Haliburton here uses with great effect the language of the farm, the kitchen and the workshop, when he makes Sam talk of "an everlastin' large milk pan with a lip for pourin' ", "Phoebe's syllabub", and observes the obvious connection to an industrially-minded Yankee of "that voice of Nature in the wilderness", as the Reverend Hopewell had called it, with a "cotton mill". Each man thinks in terms of his character and experience. Commonsense furthermore says that a roar is a roar and that Niagara and a cotton mill have at least that in common. Haliburton knew very well the value of contrast to communicate his comic view of life, and the above example illustrates the part played in it by his use of down-to-earth folk language and imagery (in dialect of course). The total result is more than mere amusement at the unexpected comparisons of Niagara with "an everlastin' large milk-pan" and "Phoebe's syllabub", and at the idea suggested by the awe-inspiring power in front of Sam's eyes flowering into a "cotton mill". A cotton mill roaring with all its machinery going at full speed is the poetry and song of the industrialist, the practical, cynical and acquisitive man.

It is however far more comprehensive than that. The characters of the two men are also thrown into relief; the spiritual old man with a sense of beauty who sees the power of God in all Nature, and the Yankee materialist who immediately sees industry and profits. By means of such imagery one sees in a flash, in the exchange between Sam and the Reverend Hopewell, two types of humanity, both of which have had a great part in the founding and development of the United States (not to mention Canada) and without either of which it would have been a very different country. One feels that these two kinds of American had a greater effect upon the national character than any two similar representative types from the South. These are both strong and influential characters, frequently met with in the early days. One sees also that both are basically good

men, though their views and opinions and characters are widely divergent, if not opposite. One is interested in this world, the other in the next. There is in fact a thumbnail sketch here of the whole early history of the United States in the language, reactions, and characters of these two men. Furthermore there is undoubtedly a touch of satire on both humanity in general and the New England character in particular.

THE EFFECT OF THE HOMELY SIMILE, which in Sam's language often involves animals, either farm or wild, is well illustrated by Sam's indignation at Dr. Abernethy, the fashionable doctor at the court of St. James in London. The latter had been too outspoken at the expense of the Hon. Alden Gobble, the American Secretary to the Legation in London, when the latter went to the doctor for a cure for indigestion, or bolting his "vittles". One notes the skilful, humorous build-up which shows Alden Gobble as a very wide-awake Yankee diplomat, almost sharp enough to cut himself. He could "hide his trail like an Indian". Sam angrily tells the tale:

> The Hon. Alden Gobble was dyspeptic, and he suffered great oneasiness arter eatin', so he goes to Abernethy for advice. "What's the matter with you?" said the doctor, jist that way, without even passing the time o' day with him: "What's the matter with you," said he. "Why," says Alden, "I presume I have dyspepsy." "Ah!" said he, "I see; a Yankee swallered more dollars and cents than he can digest?" "I am an American citizen," says Alden, with great dignity: "I am Secretary to our Legation at the Court of St. James". "The devil you are," said Abernethy; "then you'll soon get rid of your dyspepsy." "I don't see that 'are inference," said Alden. "It don't foller from what you predicate at all — it an't a natural consequence, I guess, that a man should cease to be ill because he is called by the voice of a free and enlightened people to fill an important office." (The truth is you could no more trap Alden than you could an Indian. He could see other folks' trail, and made none himself; he was a raal diplomatist, and I believe our diplomatists are allowed to be the best in the world.) "But I tell you it does foller," said the doctor; "for in the company you'll have to keep, you'll have to eat like a Christian."

Sam's indignation at this slight to one of his fellow, free-and-enlightened citizens is expressed in the strong farm imagery of a dog and hog:

> . . . I'd a fixed his flint for him, so that he'd think twice afore he'd fire such another shot as that 'are again. I'd a made him make tracks, I guess, as quick as a dog does a hog from a potato field. He'd a found his way of the hole in the fence a plaguy sight quicker than he came in, I reckon.

This farm imagery, even though the joke is on the Hon. Alden Gobble and Sam Slick rather than on the rude and vitriolic Dr. Abernethy, nevertheless reduces the fashionable London doctor, in Sam's bruised Yankee soul at least, and to some extent in ours, to the undignified and even grotesque image of a horrified hog scuttling squealing from a forbidden potato field with the farm dog snapping at his heels. The doctor pictured as a panicking pig trying to get back out through a hole in the farmer's fence is a strong comic image. The Hon. Alden Gobble has been made to look like a loutish lumberjack and therefore Sam, in patriotic and purely imaginary revenge, makes Dr. Abernethy look like the disappearing rearend of a pig, caught in the potatoes and conscious of error.

Sam's imagery is powerful and, though his triumph is purely imaginary, his point well made; but his anger at the insolence of Abernethy inadvertently betrays his comic character when one of the much despised but secretly somewhat respected English (with regard to superficial *savoir faire* at least — they quibbled, for instance, about spitting in the sawdust and took an hour to eat a ten-minute meal) gets in a wicked thrust and an unsporting one, at an important, dignified and highly respected "free-and-enlightened citizen" of the greatest republic the sun even shone on. Sam is surprised and angry, and when we see a man surprised and angry about a small point, then there is one of the unfailing elements of comedy. As a result all three men involved, Sam, the Hon. Gobble and Dr. Abernethy, are comically transmogrified into the small boys they once were; we see them in a new light; there is something incongruous, and they become figures of fun. We look down upon them from the godlike height of comedy as three little quarrelling human beings, with their quirks and their pride and their tempers. Sam, who almost always is the master of every situation, who always scores off everybody else and gets the last laugh, is ruffled and riled, and the reader sees him for once unable to do much but nurse his damaged national dignity and invent revenges — a schoolboy again. He then adds darkly, his mind still running on pigs, that the Hon. Alden Gobble would "a 'taken the bristles off his hide as clean as the skin of a spring shote of a pig killed at Christmas", if the doctor had not slipped out of the door as he fired such a skilful Parthian shot. However, the doctor had scored his point; unsportingly perhaps, he has, with no more than his periscope showing, torpedoed the elusive Gobble. He has told him

that he is a pig, but that he is safe now that he is free of his old associates and then he makes an agile exit — chuckling.

One comic element in this exchange is undoubtedly that of the biter being bit. The famous doctor is undeniably rude (though we see Sam frequently being rude, or offensively nationalistic, or both); he is furthermore rude to a clever man who is in a high diplomatic position and, what is worse to Sam, the smartest of smart Yankees, who could "catch a weasel asleep" any day in the week; then, to add insult to injury, the doctor, slipping away betimes from fields where glory does not stay, deprives the Hon. Alden Gobble, and therefore Sam, vicariously, of the opportunity of retaliation. There is nothing so irritating as being deprived of the last word. Both these outraged Americans are open-mouthed with surprise at this rudeness coming from so unexpected, so unfair a quarter, as a fashionable society doctor, to such an elevated, dignified and wide-awake personage as the Honourable Secretary to the American Legation at the Court of St. James.

Rudeness is often funny, probably because of the unexpectedness of it in a world where we cannot afford to be rude and also where we are trained from childhood to be polite, frequently against our real feelings. Politeness, in fact, is often a necessary hypocrisy. This is well illustrated by the great success of that rather over-rated comedy, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, where the consistent rudeness, so startling in our society, defeats itself in the end because it is so consistent that there is no surprise left. Children of course are naturally and honestly rude. "Kiss the lady, Tommy," says Mother. "No, she's prickly", replies the young citizen of the future, with a complete honesty which he will learn to hide in his next ten years. In fact in one sense a child is not rude at all, since he does not mean to be, but merely honest; however, when a full-grown man, like Sam Slick, or the Hon. Gobble, or Dr. Abernethy, acts like a child, that is funny.

Another instance of farm language used for satirical effect is seen where Sam, still smarting patriotically from the slight to the Honourable Secretary to the Legation at the Court of St. James, turns for revenge on the nearest Britishers, the lacksadaisical Bluenoses with their country ways and their contemptible horseflesh:

> . . . the nasty yo'-necked, cat-hammed, heavy-headed, flat-eared, crooked-shanked, long-legged, narrow-chested, good-for-nothing brutes; they ain't worth their keep one winter. I vow I wish one of those blue-noses, with his go-to-meetin' clothes on, coat tails pinned up behind like a leather blind of a shay, an old spur on one heel, and a pipe stuck through his hat-band, mounted on one of those limber-

timbered critters, that moves its hind legs like a hen a-scratchin' gravel, was sot down in Broadway, in New York, for a sight. Lord! I think I hear the West Point Cadets a-larfin' at him: "Who brought that 'are scarecrow out of standin' corn and stuck him here?"

The description of scrub stock in the way of horseflesh is good, cumulative invective — suggestive of Prince Hal telling Falstaff what he thinks of him or Kent giving Oswald a thumbnail sketch of himself — and, mounted contentedly on such an inferior steed, poor farmer Bluenose seems to lose caste by mere association. The man takes on the quality of the "cat-hammed", "heavy-headed" Rosinante he is riding; he after all chose it and sits contentedly on the unfortunate and dejected animal. The man appears something of a donkey. To underline this, Sam adds the reference to the coat-tails pinned up behind "like a leather blind of a shay", the old and solitary spur, the pipe in the hat-band, and the ignoble animal with the action (at least of the hind legs) of "a hen a-scratchin' gravel". This is a sufficiently graphic picture of a simple countryman in any age, at least until the nineteen-ten era of the first flivvers; but then the final rural image, of Bluenose being brought out of "standin' corn" like a scarecrow, and "sot down in Broadway", clinches it, with the additional nice contrast of Broadway and the farm, and the neat and shining West Point cadets and the shabby, happy, Bluenose farmer on his tottering Dobbin.

THE EQUINE METAPHOR is varied in the mordant description of Marm Pugwash, the bad-tempered but beautiful hostess of the inn at Amherst, who is brought to us in flesh and blood colours by means of typical Haliburton farm imagery.

Sam and the Squire reach the inn late; so late that Marm Pugwash is not at all pleased. She is irritably sweeping up the ashes and banking up the coals for the night and would just as soon not see them, or their money either. Sam, just before they get there, forewarns the Squire of the erratic service they may expect:

...Marm Pugwash is onsartin in her temper as a mornin' in April; it's all sunshine or all clouds with her, and if she's in one of her tantrums, she'll stretch out her neck and hiss like a goose with a flock of goslings. I wonder what on earth Pugwash was a-thinkin' on when he signed articles of partnership with that 'are woman; she's not a bad-lookin' piece of furniture, neither,...

This kind of Medusan shock-effect is achieved by the simultaneous double image of a beautiful woman and a hissing goose. It is vivid comic imagery. One sees Sam and the Squire jumping back in alarm at this hostility from an unexpected quarter. The goose, though comparatively harmless, has a startling approach, like a snake. It is a touch which one might find in Twain but would not find in Dickens, the latter's early experience of humanity, from which he mainly wrote, being confined mostly to urban life.

Sam carries this imagery a little further in a typical, mixed comparison of the beautiful Marm Pugwash to sour apples, and a horse, or rather, in her case, a mare. The mare metaphor, like the heifer metaphor, is exactly the kind of farm imagery in Haliburton's humour which shocked our great-grandfathers, but which seems mild enough to the average reader now. Sam continues:

> Now, Marm Pugwash is like the minister's apples, very temptin' fruit to look at, but desperate sour. If Pugwash had a watery mouth when he married, I guess it's pretty puckery by this time. However if she goes for to act ugly, I give her a dose of *soft sawder,* . . . it's a pity she's such a kickin' devil, too, for she has good points — good eye, good feet, neat pastern, fine chest, a clean set of limbs, and carries a good — But here we are; now you'll see what soft sawder will do.

The missing word is of course *weight.* Perhaps this offended too.

The appropriateness of the comparison of a beautiful but bad-tempered woman to a kicking and temperamental mare is evident from the humorous point of view, and is perhaps more amusing when one remembers Sam's advice on managing a wife in just the same way as he manages a fractious horse, which needs kindness, infinite patience and a firm hand. Both are tricky "critters", though the parallel must have been both more discernible and more forceful to our horse-conscious forbears than to ourselves.

Sam's farm imagery again clearly presents a character — this time the feminine one of Marm Pugwash discontentedly ruling the small and frustrating world of an Amherst inn in uneasy harness with Mr. Pugwash, whose weaknesses she probably came to recognize early, but after marriage. One feels, in the words of the old folk saying that the grey mare was the better horse, and that she knew it. There she stands, like Browning's Duchess, looking as though she were alive; the effect is achieved by a goose, sour apples and a skittish, temperamental mare.

Another instance of farm imagery, which is masterly in its combination of humour and pathos, occurs in Sam's account of the broken heart of a New England Paul Bunyan, one Washington Banks. This W. Banks was tall, so tall

that he could spit down on the heads of British Grenadiers, or nearly wade across the Charleston river, and he was furthermore as strong as a towboat. Sam lets us know just how tall he was: "I guess he was somewhat less than a foot longer than the moral law and catechism too." He was the observed of all observers, particularly the feminine ones, who would rush to the "winders" exclaiming "bean't he lovely!" Well, poor Banks died of a broken heart, the only poor soul Sam had ever heard of who had actually succumbed to this romantic malady. Women, of whom Haliburton took a strongly unromantic view, never did:

> The female heart, as far as my experience goes, is just like a new india-rubber shoe; you may pull and pull at it until it stretches out a yard long, and then let go, and it will fly right back to its old shape. Their hearts are made of stout leather, I tell you; there is a plaguy sight of wear in 'em.

However, men have died, and worms have eaten them too, but not for love, says Sam. Nor did W. Banks die for love; he died from lifting the heaviest anchor of the *Constitution* on a bet, of all the foolish things to do, with his prospects. Sam meets this huge, long-legged, sad-eyed hero a month or two before his death, and finds him quite, quite down, in fact "teetotally defleshed":

> "I am dreadfully sorry," says I, "to see you Banks, lookin' so peecked: Why, you look like a sick turkey hen, all legs; what on airth ails you?"

Now probably the only sick, wild bird which might convey the impression of a very tall, powerful, Bunyanesque figure in his decline would be a heron, crane or stork, but the farm image of the "sick turkey hen" is far better. It combines the pathetic and ridiculous in such a way as to surprise the reader into a rueful smile at humanity, which will lightly lift frigate anchors for no very good reason.

In another typical passage Sam Slick describes conditions in the States in the 1830's, by the use of an extraordinary cluster of seven farm or animal images. (The italics are Haliburton's.)

> *The Blacks and the Whites* in the States show their teeth and snarl, they are jist ready to fall to. The *Protestants and Catholics* begin to lay back their ears, and turn tail for kickin'. The *Abolitionists* and *Planters* are at it like two bulls in a pastur'. *Mob-law* and *Lynch-law* are workin' like yeast in a barrel and frothin' at the bunghole. *Nullification* and *Tariff* are like a charcoal pit, all covered up, but burnin' inside, and sendin' out smoke at every crack enough to stifle a horse . . . . *Surplus Revenue* is another bone of contention; like a shin of beef thrown among a pack of dogs, it will set the whole on 'em by the ears.

These terms and this imagery are so essential to Haliburton that one wonders how he would have written without them. And if this imagery succeeds with us in making his characters and incidents and anecdotes vivid, how much more effective must it have been in his day, when the farm and the country were much closer to every man and everyone was at least familiar with the ubiquitous cab-horse? With Haliburton, as this passage shows, the animal imagery comes naturally. Men are interpreted through the animals, usually to describe disorder satirically in the supposedly ordered world of men, or at least to show conduct which falls below the rational level. If there is something amiss Sam immediately thinks of a dog or a rat or a pig, or a bull, or a heifer, or a mare, or a weasel, or a lobster, or a frog, or a sick turkey hen. His animal images come pouring out as "thick as toads arter rain".

A good example of proliferating bucolic metaphors occurs in *The Letter Bag of The Great Western*, when Sam makes his satiric point to the Squire on these eloquent Britons who were "doing" the States at high speed and once-over-lightly, and does it with a nice flow of scornful animal and farm imagery which includes a monkey, hogshead of molasses, flies, cockroaches and a "Varginey goose". He concludes with:

> I shot a wild goose at River Philip last year, with the rice of Varginey fresh in his crop; he must have cracked on near about as fast as them other geese, the British travellers. Which know'd the most of the country they passed over, do you suppose?

One last instance of rural metaphor must suffice. The fine ladies of London parading up and down the Park, clad in their silks and satins, without much to do and with no visible husbands, draw Haliburton's Victorian fire, this time through the mouth of old Slick, Sam's farmer father:

> There's a great many lazy, idle, extravagant women here, that's a fact. The Park is chock full of 'em all the time, ridin' and gallavantin' about, tricked out in silks and satins, a-doin' of nothin'. Every day in the week can't be Thanksgivin' day, nor Independence day nother. . . . Who the plague looks after their helps when they are off frolickin'? Who does the presarvin' or makes the pies and apple sarce and doughnuts? Who does the spinnin' and cardin', and bleachin', or mends their husband's shirts or darns their stockin's? Tell you what, old Eve fell into mischief when she had nothin' to do; and I guess some o'them flauntin' birds, if they was follered, and well watched, would be found a-scratchin' up other folks' gardens sometimes. If I had one on 'em I'd cut her wings and keep her inside her own palin', I know. Every hen ought to be kept within hearin' of her own rooster, for fear of the foxes, that's a fact.

It would be hard to find another writer who expresses his view of life with such a debt as Haliburton to the farm, the wharf, the kitchen and Noah's ark in general (though Joyce Cary is one notable modern exception — one remembers Sara Monday as the "old crawfish", and her fierce, little husband, Mr. Wilshire, the *mus ferocissimus*, and Professor Alabaster who had a walk like the front legs of a horse). Sam talks, for instance, in farm and kitchen terms of another young lady at an inn where he was staying who was "as blooming as a rose and as chipper as a canary bird," but who was also, he quickly discovered on attempting a kiss, "as smart as a fox-trap and as wicked as a meat-axe," in fending off Yankee boarders. He finds however that it is all a feminine bluff and he gets his kiss in the end, which causes him to ruminate: ". . . if you haven't turned out as rosy a rompin', larkin', light-hearted a heifer as ever I see'd afore, it's a pity."

Shakespeare, originally a country boy, sometimes uses similar feminine imagery. One thinks, for instance, of one of the supreme comic images of literature, which gives the very subjective view of an old soldier, who was not at all impressed with her, of one of history's most interesting women. Scarus, liking Antony and blaming Cleopatra for Antony's downfall, describes her flight, from the famous sea-battle where she left her navy gazing, as being like that of a "cow in June", across the meadow, thundering hooves, tail erect — with a horse-fly after her. Antony might have preferred a kinder simile, but the anti-romantic Haliburton, like Scarus, was a heifer man at heart, with a touch of the meat-axe in his nature.