

A Thousand and One LIMERICKS



Editorial Selection by
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with an Introduction by
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Collector's Library

Introduction

While the limerick is a largely Anglo-American phenomenon, it is sometimes claimed that the first limerick was composed by Italian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274):

Sit vitiorum meorum evacuatio
Concupiscentiae et libidinis exterminatio,
Caritatis et patientiae,
Humilitatis et obedientiae,
Omniumque virtutum augmentatio.

(Let my viciousness be emptied,
Desire and lust banished,
Charity and patience,
Humility and obedience,
And all the virtues increased.)

It has the standard limerick rhyme-scheme of **a a b b a**, as do a number of later poems from Tom O'Bedlam and Shakespeare to James Boswell, but it is not until the nineteenth century that the limerick develops into the form that we know today. This was established by Edward Lear in his *Book of Nonsense*, published in 1846.

It should be noted that Lear did not call his

nonsense-verse ‘limericks’. The origin of the term is, at best, a guess, and the commonest suggestion, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is that the name is ‘from a custom at convivial parties, according to which each member sang an extemporised “nonsense-verse” which was followed by a chorus containing the words “Will you come up to Limerick”.’ Other than this, there is no Irish connection. The first instance of the use of ‘limerick’ to mean nonsense-verse the *OED* cites as being in 1896, and in *Stalky & Co* by Rudyard Kipling (1899) Stalky suggests that he and his companions should ‘make up a good catchy limerick, and let the fags sing it’.

Edward Lear (1812–1888) was a remarkably fine artist, famed for his *Illustrations of the Family of the Psittacidae* (1832), but he was afflicted with ill health and gratefully accepted a post with Edward



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Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby, who was a naturalist and an expert on parrots. Lear was a popular member of the household, especially with Derby's grandchildren, and it was for them that he composed his nonsense verses. For the most part, they are just that, and lack the punch-line of later limericks. They are frequently geographical, and in most of them the last word of the first line is repeated as the last word of the last line:

There was an old man of Thermopylae,
Who never did anything properly;
But they said, 'If you choose
To boil eggs in your shoes,
You shall never remain in Thermopylae.'

Punch magazine published an unfunny limerick about Lord Brougham shortly before publication of *Nonsense Verse* but subsequently dropped the form (except for reviving it briefly in 1863 when *Nonsense Verse* was reprinted). However, the distinctive form turned up elsewhere in 1872, when a Cambridge undergraduate called A. C. Hilton contributed:

There was a young gourmand of John's
Who'd a notion of dining on swans;
To the Backs he took big nets
To capture the cygnets
But was told they were kept for the Dons.

(It should be explained that St John's College, Cambridge which spans the River Cam is one of the few bodies entitled, under Royal licence, to cull and eat swans. A later and rather bawdier version is:

There was a young student at John's
Who wanted to bugger the swans,
But a loyal Head Porter
Said, 'Sir, take my daughter,
Them swans is reserved for the Dons.'

By the late nineteenth century the form was beginning to acquire the characteristics that we know today. The rhyme scheme was established, as was the scansion, which was generally amphibrachic (short, long, short – 'Whilst Titian was mixing rose madder') or anapaestic (two shorts and a long – 'From the depths of the crypt at St Giles'), and it became accepted practice that the final line should deliver an unexpected or decisive message to round off the verse.

In the Edwardian era of the early twentieth century, the popularity of the limerick was boosted by contests in newspapers and magazines which offered increasingly lavish prizes for completing a limerick, of which the first four lines were supplied by the competition setter. Winners might receive as much as £50 which was worth roughly £2,000 in today's money. After WWI, prizes were even more

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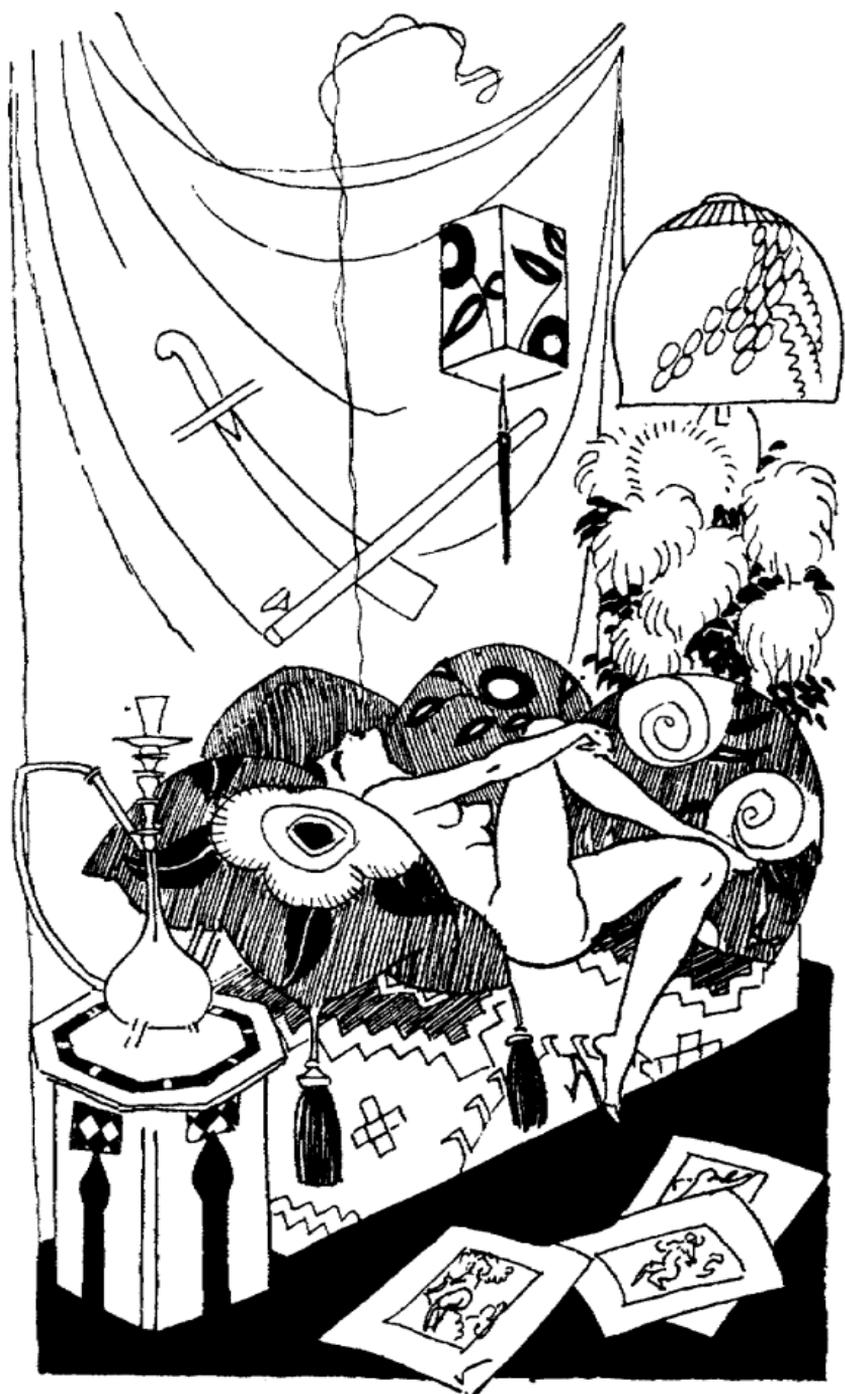
extravagant, and included a first prize of a freehold house, a horse and trap and £2 a week for life.

In the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Raymond Chapman pointed out that the limerick with its 'easy, swinging rhythm makes it particularly suitable for humorous or scurrilous verse, and for taboo subjects'. Publication in 1924 of Langford Reed's *The Complete Limerick Book*, with illustrations by H. M. Bateman, gave the form some respectability and it flourished. But the growth of ribald limericks is the chief characteristic of the period, and this aspect has given the form lasting appeal. Because of the often scurrilous content, it is assumed that most limerick authors are men – though since authorship of most limericks is anonymous it is difficult to prove – and it is fair to say that the limerick is not a preferred form for female writers. It is surprising that there seems to be no limerick attributed to Dorothy Parker, who would surely have embraced the genre gladly. Gershon Legman avers that one limerick that women seem to appreciate is:

'For the tenth time, dull Daphnis,' said Chloë,
'You have told me my bosom is snowy;
 You've made much verse on
 Each part of my person,
Now *do* something – there's a good boy.'

Musical,
Theatrical
& Acrobatical





There was a young lady of Norway
Who hung by her toes in a doorway.
She said to her beau:
‘Just look at me, Joe,
I think I’ve discovered one more way.’



Some amateur players, most brave,
A performance of *Hamlet* once gave.
Said a wag, ‘Now let’s see
If it’s Bacon or he –
I mean Shakespeare – who’s turned in his grave.’



There was an old lady of Tooting
Who wanted to learn parachuting.
Though they tried to repress her,
She jumped from the dresser,
A perfect vol-plane executing.



A tone-deaf old fellow of Tring,
When somebody asked him to sing,
Replied, ‘It is odd,
But I cannot tell “God
Save the Weasel” from “Pop goes the King”.’



A singer in Radio City
(Whose form is impressively pretty)
Is often addressed
By the name of 'Beau Chest',
Which is thought to be tasteful and witty.



There was a young man of Hong Kong
Who invented a topical song.
It wasn't the words
That bothered the birds
But the horrible double ontong.



There were three little owls in a wood
Who sang hymns whenever they could.
What the words were about
One could never make out,
But one felt it was doing them good.



There was a young lady of Ealing
Who had an irrational feeling
That she was a fly
And she felt she should try
To walk upside down on the ceiling.



There once was a corpulent carp
Who wanted to play on the harp;
But to his chagrin,
So short was his fin,
He couldn't reach up to C sharp.



Elgar's opera *At the Boar's Head*
As a title makes no one's face red –
Save Jessica Hood's
(Most prudish of prudes),
Who thinks of what Spooner'd have said!





There was a composer named Liszt
Whose music no one could resizt.
When he swept the keyboard
Nobody could be bored,
And now that he's gone he is miszt.



Of a sudden, the great prima donna
Cried: 'Gawd: my voice is a gonner.'
But a cat in the wings
Said: 'I know how she sings,'
And finished the solo with honour.



There was a young lady named Hatch
Who doted on music by Bach.
She played with her pussy
To *The Faun* by Debussy,
But to ragtime she just scratched her snatch.



A musicienne in gay Montebello
Amused herself playing the cello,
But not a solo,
For she used as a bow
The dong of a sturdy young fellow.



A baritone star of Havana
Slipped horribly on a banana;
 He was sick for a year
 Then resumed his career –
As a promising lyric soprano.



We've got a new maid called Chrysanthemum
Who said, 'I have just come from Grantham, m'm.
 I lost my last place
 In the sorest disgrace,
'Cos I snored through the National Anthem, m'm.'



'My girlfriend wants me to ski,'
Said the flabby young cellist, 'but gee!
 With Stravinsky, Stokowski,
 Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky,
That's quite enough skiing for me.'



A famous theatrical actress
Played best in the role of malefactress;
 Yet her home life was pure
 Except, to be sure,
A scandal or two just for practice.

A THOUSAND AND ONE LIMERICKS



A certain young sheik I'm not namin'
Asked an actress he thought he was tamin',
 'Have you your maidenhead?'
 'Don't be silly!' she said,
'But I still have the box that it came in.'



The last time I dined with the king
He did a quite curious thing:
 He sat on a stool,
 And took out his tool,
And said, 'If I play, will you sing?'



There was a young man from Madrid
Who discovered when only a kid
 That by lying supine
 And twisting his spine,
He could suck his own cock – so he did.



There was a young lady of Brussels
Whose pride was her vaginal muscles;
 She could easily plex them
 And so interflex them
As to whistle love songs through her bustles.



An organist playing at York
Had a prick that could hold a small fork,
And between obligatos
He'd munch at tomatoes,
And keep up his strength while at work.

