

# JEWISH JESTERS.

## Modern Variety Artists and Their Forerunners.

THE professional mirth-maker is a very ancient figure in human history. In Ancient Greece he was already well known, for Xenophon has preserved for us a sketch of one of these comedians, while it is recorded that Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, kept a jester at his Court. Through Roman times and during the Middle Ages, the professional fool is found pursuing his calling, so that it is not surprising to find that in the course of time his counterpart appears in Jewish life, though of course with characteristic differences.

Jewish life, with its emphasis on the intellectual and the sincere reverence which it demanded for the human form, could never tolerate the kind of buffoon, so popular in the Middle Ages, who created laughter by the exploitation of some physical deformity. The tumblers and contortionists of the Gentile world were not represented in medieval Jewry. But the wit, the entertainer who chased away present cares with apt humour, appeared as early as the Twelfth Century. These Jewish jesters or *lezin* combined the qualities of the Court fool with those of the troubadour. They seem first to have arisen from the demand for mirth-makers at family festivities, particularly weddings. On these occasions they sang cheerful songs, gave mock dissertations and generally did their best to keep everybody in high spirits. Gradually, as it was discovered how much these humorists were appreciated and how readily the guests contributed tangible expression of their appreciation in the form of money, there sprang up a professional class of *lezin* whose members travelled from wedding to wedding and made a very comfortable living out of their powers of entertainment.

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IN most cases, these Jewish jesters were men of some learning. Indeed, without the necessary knowledge they could not have included in their jokes those clever allusions which gained them the appreciation of the scholarly. A Jewish jester had to have some considerable knowledge of Rabbinical learning so as to score witticisms and draw laughter from a people who were intellectually of too high a level to find anything funny in mere buffoonery. One great advantage the Jewish jester possessed: he could travel from centre to centre in Europe, wherever the petty restrictions and bigoted anti-Jewishness of the time permitted him to travel, and his allusions to a common literature and to points in dispute by means often of correspondence between the Rabbis and scholars of the period would always be sure of appreciation.

There was a time, when the black night of Jewish persecution had settled heavily on Jewry, when religious leaders began to look askance at these professional mirth-makers at Jewish marriages. Conditions for Jews were so appalling that it seemed that any form of laughter and merriment was in bad taste, even at weddings, when the spirit

of Judaism commands the fullest of sober rejoicing. Thus the Jewish jester found opposition to his calling. Perhaps the Jewish jesters as a class had developed a style of humour a little too worldly for the tastes of the contemporary scholars. Anyhow, by the Seventeenth Century we find references in works by religious leaders decrying the practice of employing jesters by encouraging their presence at weddings. By that time, the name "*marshallik*" had come to be applied to the wedding jester. The origin of the word is interesting. It appears to have come from the old German word "*Marschalk*," meaning a sort of master of ceremonies, and is not, as was at one time thought, connected with the Hebrew word for an anecdote, *mashal*.

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RABBI JAIR BACHARACH, who lived in the Seventeenth Century, writes in very censorious terms of the practice of scholars acting as "*marshallikim*" at weddings. But human nature loves a jest, and so the opposition of the kill-joys was of little effect, the *marshallik* continuing to appear at Jewish weddings and developing, in Russia and Poland particularly, into a respected and welcome entertainer. Often these Jewish jesters were men of considerable learning and also very well-behaved and valued members of the community. By reason of his learning the "*marshallik*" was sometimes permitted to deliver an address to the bride and bridegroom; and often, realising the effectiveness of contrast, he would speak with deeply moving earnestness upon some serious aspect of life, bringing tears to the eyes of his listeners, and then leaving the solemn aspect of his subject, would turn their tears to laughter by brilliant sallies of wit and humorous allusions and anecdotes.

Just as the troubadours and jesters of this Gentile world sowed the seeds for the epic and the lyric, so the Jewish "*Marshallikim*" created a form of rhyming anecdote which gradually assumed a literary form. Many a folk-song and many a legend in Jewish literature, owe their preservation to these jester rhymsters who wrung tears and laughter from the guests assembled at Jewish weddings. As the great upsurging of the Jewish renaissance began to stir, the "*marshallikim*" were encouraged to contribute original rhymes and poetry, to set them to music, to publish them for the delight of readers, and we find a man like Eliakim Zenser, of Vilna, earning world-wide repute for his songs. Zenser was something of a Jewish Noel Coward. He could sing excellently, he could compose pleasing music, he could write charming lyrics, popular plays, and he was an actor and reciter of no mean excellence. After acquiring a distinguished popularity in Russia, he went over to America in 1839 and toured with great success. The fact that he finished up as a printer and publisher in New York is but another proof of the versatility of this distinguished Jewish jester.

BUT his journeying to the States had effects beyond the widening of his own fame. From his example, there began to spring up a class of "*marshallikim*" in America, and all the time the flow of immigration from the old countries continued there was a living to be earned by the Jewish jester who sang and waxed humorous for a consideration when families had occasions of rejoicing. Naturally as assimilation developed, the Jewish jester was less in demand for family functions, but a far wider and more lucrative field opened up for him, even though moving out into the Gentile world, learning and subtle allusion were no longer the principles upon which his profession depended. The whole field of entertainment became the realm of the Jewish jester. Variety shows were an easy conquest; were he adept at jingling rhyme, he had but to couple "blue" with "yew"—supposedly a pronoun—and royalties flowed into his pockets; had he the knack of turning a catchy tune, Tin-Pan-Alley awaited him whence he could fox-trot his way to wealth. Lastly, the invention of the cinematograph broke down still further barriers, and the Jewish jester could plunge into a trade with many branches all offering rich awards.

Unfortunately, with the disappearance of the closely-knit formation of world Jewry, with the removal of the moral power of those who fought for the dominance of the better and more spiritual over the unrestrained and ethically irresponsible, our Jewish jesters have had no guides whose voluntarily recognised authority could cry halt when the amusements provided tended to become enervating and to corrupt. But the delinquencies of the lineal descendants of the old "*marshallikim*" will probably correct themselves in time, and sheer pride will perhaps in the long run lead our Jewish jesters to desire triumphs by standards of less ephemeral quality than the coins they can count after handing round the hat.

—“The Jewish World.”

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