

# HOW "APRIL FOOL" ORIGINATED AND SOME FAMOUS PRANKS

## One Authority Goes Back to Noah's Dove, but the Most Plausible Theory Has to Do with the Change in the Calendar Made in France.

It is tolerably certain that all day tomorrow the telephone number 3732 Rector will be kept merrily ringing, and that the tired official will have to answer five or six hundred times as good-naturedly as he can the apparently modest query, "Is Mr. Fish in?" It is equally certain that hundreds of similar inquiries for Mr. Lion will be sent over the wires to Telephone No. 533 Tremont.

Is it necessary to explain that the first number is that of the Aquarium, and the other that of the Zoological Garden? It is possible that the chief assistants of this brilliant sort may be working off during the twenty-four hours of April Fool's Day. But no one is likely to catch a certain examiner at the local office of the State Department of Insurance in exactly the way that he was caught this time two years ago.

He was called up to the phone by a stranger. "I don't care to give my name," so spoke a voice he did not recognize. "But you may tell Supt. Hotchkiss for me that if he calls on Coffin & Graves at 129 Broadway he can get some important information."

"Hum! ah, yes, quite so!" said the official, who is an Englishman, and with a courteous and amiable gentleman. "But is there any reason why I should not call at once upon Coffin & Graves?" "One whatever," said the voice. "Though there isn't any hurry. They'll be there whenever you are."

The Insurance Department's offices are on the twenty-eighth floor of the Singer Building. Our English friend rode down the elevator, walked out through the long foyer to the street, and turned south. He counted the numbers as he went along. "One fifty-one," said "147, 128," and so on to No. 129. That number is about the middle of Trinity churchyard.

"Hum!" said the official, "how very odd!" A moment later he struck the iron fence violently with his cane. The custom of setting aside one day in the year for playing pranks upon one's neighbors is pretty general throughout the civilized world, and, indeed, is so ancient that its origin is pretty well lost in the mists of antiquity.

One authority bids us go back to Noah and the dove, which he sent out of the ark on a fool's errand before the waters of the great deluge had subsided. Hoary tradition asserts that the day Noah chose was April 1.

Most plausible of all theories about the day ever offered is that which refers its origin to France. It was the first nation in Christendom to alter the arrangement of the calendar so that the year began with January 1, instead of March 25, as of yore. When, therefore, Jan. 1 became New Year's Day, or as the French call it le Jour d'etrennes, the day of gifts, the custom of presenting gifts on March 25 was abolished in favor of the new festival.

But a memory of the old festival, which loomed up on April 1 was still retained by the old-fashioned and the conservative. They still gave gifts and made visits on April 1.

It was in order to ridicule this moss-grown custom that the merry spirits began to make mock visits and pretended gifts on the abandoned festival. The custom was kept up long after its origin had been forgotten and its continuance will always be assured, for it appeals to the same fundamental need as the carnival, or Christmas itself, the human

in short, the whole family of innocent children made April fools. Nay, my landlady herself did not escape him." The jest of sending people on "sleeveless errands" still survives locally in England on the first of April, and flourishes apace in Scotland under the title of "Hunt the Gowk." Gowk is a cant name for a cuckoo, and also, by extension, for a fool or a simpleton. The victim is dispatched with a sealed message to some person at a considerable distance from his home. What the envelope contains is simply this familiar couplet:

This is the first of April.  
Hunt the gowk another mile.  
The person addressed reads the message, soberly informs the messenger that he is not the right person, or that he cannot perform what is asked, but adds that he knows a friend who is able and willing to comply, so he seals up the message in another envelope, which he addresses to somebody still further away. This one in turn goes through the same farce, and in this fashion the poor gowk is hunted from pillar to post until he gives up in despair or begins to suspect the trick or is put wise by some fellow-citizen kinder than the others.

It is in allusion to this custom that Poor Robin's Almanac in 1750 asked the pertinent question:  
It is a thing to be disputed—  
Which is the greatest fool reputed,  
The man, who innocent when  
Or he that him designedly sent?  
There is a curious analogy between this sport of hunting the gowk and a jest that is practiced in Hindustan on the feast of Hull, which falls on March 31, or approximately the same date as our April Fool's Day. The chief diversion of the day is to send people on ludicrous or impossible errands.

"They carry the joke so far," says one authority, "as to send letters making appointments in the names of persons it is known must be absent from their houses at the time fixed upon, and the laugh is always in proportion to the trouble given."  
We know that the feast of Hull is of immemorial antiquity, but after all, who can assure us that this particular feature of the occasion may not have been quite recently interpolated in imitation of the April day foolery among India's conquerors?

In the year 1860 a notorious and still remembered hoax was successfully played in London. Toward the latter part of March a number of invitation cards were distributed through the mails to leading citizens. Each invitation bore the stamp of an inverted sixpence to give official vraisemblance to the document.  
"Tower of London. Admit Bearer and company to view Annual Ceremony of Washing the White Lions on Sunday, April 1st, 1860. Admittance only at White Gate."  
It is particularly requested that no gratuities be given to wardens or attendants.

eggs, an ounce of motherwit in a bottle and other mythical objects. These may be capped by similar English jests. On every recurrent first of April, some one in Merry England is sure to be sent for a haporth of crocodile quills, for bottled subbeams, for the History of Eve's mother, for hen's teeth, strup oil, tulip powder or pigeon's milk. In view of the Shakespearean expression "sucking dove" the latter sounds at first hearing quite plausible.

Children of England retort upon their elders. A hundred years ago they used to say, "Sir, your shoe's unbuckled." Today, their successors cry out, "Mister, your shoe's untied!" A more elaborate piece of wagery has endured up to the present time in practically its original form.  
"Sir, there's something out of your pocket."  
"Where?"  
"There!"  
"What?"  
"Your hand, sir!"  
Or again a boy and a lady enter into this dialogue:  
"Ma'am, you have something on your face."  
"Indeed! What is it?"  
"Your nose, ma'am."

In all cases the ultimate rejoinder is accompanied with a burst of laughter and the shout of "April fool!"  
In June, 1891, there passed away in Paris a reckless humorist whose all the obituary described as "the last of the Bohemians." He called himself Sapeck, but his real name was Eugene Battelle. He came to Paris from the provinces to study law, and having studied it he very soon abandoned it and spent the rest of his life in breaking it, but only in a jovial and harmless way. The annual recurrence always brought out from him some wild practical joke which was duly recorded in the papers, for all the reporters were on the sul vive for Sapeck's latest.

One of his neatest tricks was played at the expense of a fashionable school for girls at Montrouze. For this he had to call in the assistance of two of his student followers. The trio arrayed themselves in full dress and called on the head of the school, an aristocratic old lady of the ancien régime.  
"Madame," said Sapeck gravely, "we have called to examine your pupils."  
The good lady was surprised. "But for what?" she demanded.  
"For their 'singing.' We are the inspectors."  
"But there must be some mistake," protested the lady. "The inspectors have already been here. He called only last week."  
"Yes, Madame," said Sapeck, "that I know full well. His examination, however, was a purely technical one. The Minister of Public Instruction has decided that all pupils must also be examined from an artistic point of view, and he has delegated us to perform that agreeable task."



A Famous April First Cartoon by Kenny Meadows.



THE WRONG BOY IN THE WRONG PLACE.  
Sir Pompey Bedell, J. P. (on discovering that his eggshell is an empty one turned upside down) "What—what is the meaning of this?"  
"New Page. 'Fust o' April, sir!' (Explodes, and is dismissed with a month's wages.)

spectacles, who will tell you that he is M. Sarcey. But you will pay no attention to him, for he is only my private secretary, whom I make use of to keep undesirable callers away. He is so accustomed to impersonating me that he will probably insist most vigorously that he is I. But you may simply tell him to go about his business and demand to see me."

The description, of course, was that of the real Sarcey. True to his word the stranger called that evening at the address given.  
"Yes, yes," he said on being ushered into the presence of M. Sarcey. "I know all about you. You are merely my private secretary. M. Sarcey told me all about you. But I want to see him himself."  
Monsieur Sarcey's protestations were unavailing and the visitor finally went away in a rage, vowing vengeance upon the supposed private secretary.

When Sarcey learned of the April Fool joke that had been played upon him and his strange visitor he seemed to enjoy it as much as Allais himself.  
Another French story bears an excellent moral for practical jokers. A Parisienne of good repute stole a watch from a friend's house, all in joke, for it was April 1, and still in joke, he sent the police all over the city in search of imaginary suspects. When at last the watch was located and the jester cried, "Poison d'Avril," the magistrate entered heartily into the humor of the thing by informing the lady that she would have to go to jail as a Poison d'Avril until the next first of April.

New York's pet jester, as we all know, is Brian G. Hughes. Any old day is good enough for him to celebrate with a joke. Indeed, the only failure he ever made was once when he deliberately chose the eve of April Fool's day for the date of his exploit. Saturday night, March 31, a watchman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art discovered on the steps an old overcoat, two pictures cut from their frames, a bottle of knockout drops, and a kit of burglar's tools.

Great was the excitement over the find. The entire force of watchmen commenced a thorough search throughout the building. Nothing more was found, but while the museum was still in an uproar a cabman drove into the courtyard of the Arsenal in Central Park. He had three old paintings on the top of his hansom. He explained that they had been given to him by a stranger, who had bid him wait outside while he mounted the stairs of the Metropolitan Museum. The cabman had waited, he said, but finding that his fare did not reappear he began to grow suspicious. At last, feeling sure that foul play was afoot, he had driven round to the Arsenal to acquaint the officials there of all the circumstances.

The police Captain carefully inspected the canvases. On the back of one, which purported to be a St. Jerome by Murillo, he discovered a letterhead of the South Kensington Museum, London.  
Sir Purdon Clarke had just been appointed director of the Metropolitan Museum. The captain decided to send for him and meanwhile to lock cabbie up for the night. This was more than the night hawk had bargained for. Round the corner at a restaurant he had agreed for a consideration of \$50 to help Mr. Hughes out in his joke. In the station house his nerve broke down completely and he poured forth the whole story.  
On the most elaborate and the best sustained of all practical jokes and likewise one of the crudest was that played upon nearly fifty years ago by the once famous wag, Albert Smith, upon a publisher named Langford, on the evening of March 31. It was climbing up the stairs of the Garrick Club when Albert Smith halted him with:  
"Hello, Joe, who cut your hair?"  
Now it happened that Langford was in a dignified mood and he resented the query.  
"I really don't see," he replied, "how it can interest you who cut my hair."  
Albert Smith went down stairs, met a lot of his friends, and egged them on to tease Langford by a repetition of the question. The next member of the club who was upstairs sauntered up to Langford and said: "It was all along of your hair cut, who did it?"  
Joe very sternly replied: "I can't imagine what business that is of yours." Then he ordered a glass of sherry and biters. The waiter who brought it up gave a little start of surprise and apologized.  
"Beg pardon, Sir. It was all along of your hair, Sir; it looks unusual."  
Langford went to the glass and saw nothing unusual, but as he was considering his face another member accosted him with "Where on earth did you get your hair cut, dear Joe?"

"Finally the poor man was driven out of the club by a deep-laid plot was laid by his friends. Next day at breakfast, as Langford was reading The Times, his eye was caught by this advertisement: "J. M. L.: Say, who cut it? Was it your own hand or the deed of another? Confess ere it be too late."  
He walked down the Strand that morning in a perturbed frame of mind. He hadn't gone far before he received another shock. A row of sandwich men were coming toward him, and when they arrived close enough he found that on the posters they carried there was printed in flaming letters:  
"Who Cut Langford's Hair?"  
A similar procession was met parading Cleopside. These men perambulated the streets of the City all day, and Langford, who met them again as he left his business, babbled over with wrath. He entered the club in a fume, and encountered Albert Smith, who condescended with him and said it was a mere April fool joke, and that Langford's best plan was to grin and bear it for the moment.  
But the conspirators were not yet satisfied. They kept up the joke even after the date that in a measure excused it. April Fool's Day passed, but all during the next day and for several days thereafter, Langford's annoyances were repeated. Continual surprises met him at every turn. On the day he went down to Churtyse races he saw the walls placarded with enormous posters, yellow and black, "J. M. L.: Once more, who cut it? What must you say?" A band of Ethiopian minstrels was furnished with a melody to sing outside Raymond's Buildings (where Langford lodged) to the air of "What Are the Wild Waves Saying?" then very popular. And the refrain was: "What are the wild waves saying, as dey laps de Waterloo stair?" "What are den wild waves saying? Dey say, 'Who cut Joe's hair?'"  
In despair Langford once more applied to Albert Smith for advice. Smith suggested that he should put an end to the joke by taking a trip to the Continent.  
"If you would like to visit Chamouni," intimated the jester. "I will give you a parcel for a friend of mine there and letters of introduction to the best guides and hotel keepers."  
Langford assented. On his arrival he delivered the parcel and letters. Next day he went up the Montanvert, and the first thing he saw on the face of a high rock was a gigantic poster. "Who cut Langford's hair?" And when he got back to Chamouni the poster was spread all over the place. Of course, he could not help seeing the hand of Smith and Smith's friends in this newest form of persecution. But his spirit was broken. He sat down and wrote a humble letter to Albert. "I yield," he said. "Spare me! My hair was cut in St. Martin's Court at the barber's on the left-hand side. His charge was threepence. I am quite beaten."

TOO BAD.  
Time—2 L. m.  
Dr. Cholera (down speaking-tube.) "What is it?"  
Voice from below. "The first of April!"

craving for a little nonsense now and then.  
The April fool custom was known to eighteenth century England, for Addison denounced it in The Spectator and Dean Swift actually shared in a conspiracy to play an April fool joke upon a publican. From his "Journal to Stella" it appears that he and Dr. Arbuthnot and Lady Masham spent the evening of March 31, 1713, in "contriving a lie for the morrow"—viz., through the servants they would spread a report that a notorious criminal recently executed had come to life again and might be seen in the flesh at the Black Swan in Holborn. They made merry at the thought of hundreds of curious and expectant visitors who would throng into the tavern only to be disappointed. But with the morning it would seem that calm reflection came, for Swift's next record notes that the plan fell through on account of a lack of enthusiasm in his fellow-conspirators.

Addison would not have approved what Swift planned to do. In The Spectator he shows that he had a well-founded contempt for all April fooling. A neighbor, he says, "a haberdasher by trade, and a very conceited fellow," had made his boast that for ten consecutive years he had celebrated the return of April and had made at least a hundred fools. "My landlady had a falling out with him about a fortnight ago for sending away one of her children upon a sleeveless errand, as she terms it. Her eldest son went to buy a half penny's worth of ink at a shoemaker's; the eldest daughter was dispatched half a mile to see a monster, and

Persuaded at last of the stranger's good faith, Madame summoned her pupils to pass the required examination.  
Many of the girls were very pretty (Sapeck, the rascal, was only too well aware of the fact) and the three impostors contrived to make the examination last from three to four hours. Each of the girls was required to sing, and the prettiest of them had their lungs sounded, and their throats examined. Then wine and other refreshments were served by the head of the school, and presently the three examiners went away, profuse in their praises of the school and their tributes to the artistic qualities of the pupils.

Next day the joke was exposed in the papers, and there was some talk of prosecuting Sapeck, but the matter went no further than talk.  
Alphonse Allais, who is still alive, though now sobered down into comfortable conventional old age, was a companion of Sapeck's when he was young, and he took up the role of the People's Jester when it was dropped by his mentor. He was very different, however, from Sapeck, less bohemian, less bolsherois, but in his quiet way equally effective.  
One April morning (it happened to be

the first day of that frisky month) Allais was seated at that well-known resort for actors, reporters, and men about town, The Chat Noir, when a stranger entered. He inquired for M. Francis Sarcey, the famous dramatic critic, who was well known to be a habitué of the place.  
"I am he," said Allais promptly.  
"What may I have the pleasure of doing for you?"  
The stranger entered into conversation and was evidently greatly pleased with the great man's condescension. On taking his leave he said he hoped that this would not be the last meeting.  
"But," he added, "I must add a word of caution. Doubtless when you come you will first meet a stout man with much white beard and hair and a pair of big

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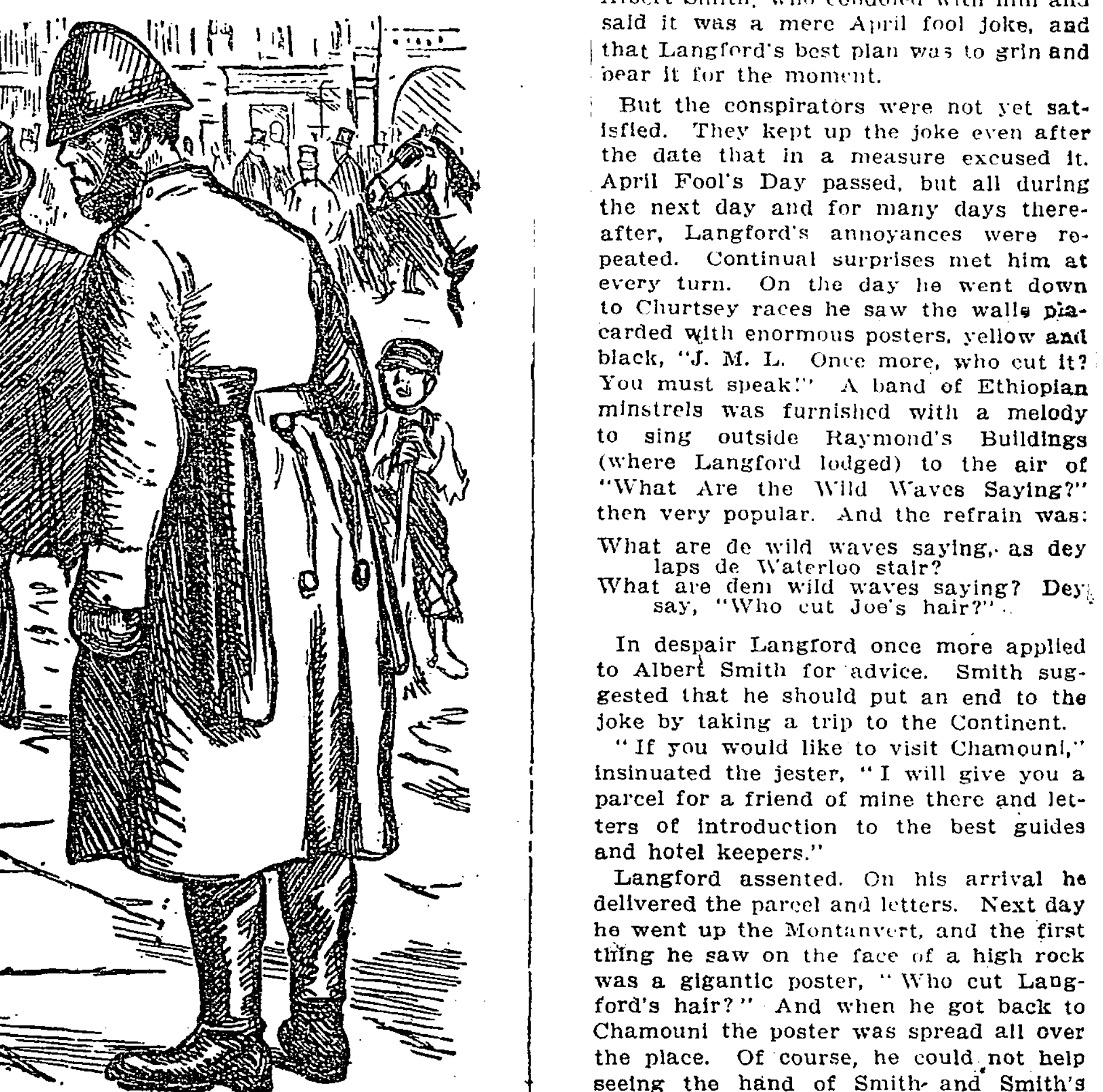
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