



My Financial Career: A Scathing Satire on the Absurdities of the World

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Abstract:

Stephen Leacock, a Canadian humorist has employed his creative genius to satirize the absurdities of the world where a common man like the narrator experiences fear which creates distrust in him on the occasion of opening a bank account in his much acclaimed short story 'My Financial Career'. Humour stems from the peculiar behaviour of an ordinary fellow who finds the way of this world highly incomprehensible and challenging. The present research paper aims to focus on the sad reality that how the vulnerable people feel when they have to face the bureaucrats.

Keywords: *Absurdities, Bureaucrats, Challenging, Humour, Satire*

Stephen Leacock, the student of political Economy and Political Science, earned worldwide recognition as a humorist. He occupies a very reputable place among the humorists of the world. His Writings reflect his ability to create humour even out of simple day to day affairs. They are marked by his power of sharp observation and criticisms of follies of the world. His ordinary and simple spirited characters have always amused the readers of the world. It has been rightly observed:

Leacock's literary achievement is largely in the mastery of the comic sketch...His art is basically that of the miniaturist, the literary material honed to a fine detail. His subject matter is wide-ranging, but always there is the appeal to the middle-class sensibility. The humor is often based on some form of frustration or mild victimization: the befuddlement of the little man in confronting the large, faceless corporate structure, as in 'My Financial Career'... (Stephen Leacock Essay, www.enotes.com)

'My Financial Career' is one of the earlier pieces of Leacock which is autobiographical in character and pokes fun at the social absurdities and irrational behaviour of the bureaucrats towards the simple man like the narrator of the short story. It delineates how it creates fear and distrust among the common men when they have to visit the institutes like the bank.

The title of the story is itself humorous as the title of this short story tempts the readers to believe that the writer must be talking about major ups and downs in the financial investments of the narrator in shares, acquisition of land or gold but they are disillusioned soon as it is a story of an ordinary employee, earning meagre amount every month. He is contented with what he gets and minor increment of fifty dollars leads him to the bank for the safety of his saving. His first encounter with the bank creates a kind of fearfulness. The narrator shares his real mental situation thus:

When I go into a bank I get rattled. The clerks rattle me; the wickets rattle me; the sight of the money rattles me; everything rattles me. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 60)

The situation in which the narrator is caught clearly suggests that it requires a special skill to get your work done easily; it is the common experience of the vulnerable people that the government officials are hardly co-operative or willing to extend any help needed. It is a jargon and there seems to be no way out. The writer realistically presents how the narrator of the short story pathetically suffers when he visits the bank. The narrator wants to open a bank account as he got salary hike of fifty dollars. For that he decides to meet the manager first as he has such an idea in his mind that if one has to open the bank account one has to meet the manager of the bank first.

Visiting a bank, perhaps for the first time, proved to be a very embarrassing and humiliating experience for the narrator. He had no knowledge what so ever of the proper procedure for opening an account. He entered into the bank premises with his fifty six dollars meant to be deposited. He was totally in a state of confusion. The way he behaves, feels and talks makes the readers laugh at his miserable condition. The apathy of the staff unnerves him. It was a suffocating atmosphere and poor depositor would like to run away from here at the earliest possible. He mustered courage to approach an accountant who looked as if he were frightful creature to the narrator which he calls him "a tall, cool devil". Having the idea that the manager is the head of the bank, he wishes to meet him alone. The word 'alone' twice creates misunderstanding and wonder one laughs at his utter ignorance and fear. The narrator is much tensed and his frightfulness makes him create some confusion among the bank members and the manager.

The manager at first takes him for some detective who has arrived to share some serious information as he demands to meet the manager alone. For him to open a bank account is a very serious thing and he wants to take all necessary cares to keep his money safe. The narrator says to the manager:

"Can I see the manager?" I said, and added solemnly,
"Alone." I don't know why I said "alone." (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 61)

The narrator's air of confidentiality and distrust and his way of talking force the manager to take him seriously. The narrator also learns that the manager has somewhat misunderstood him. He says:
The manager looked at me in some alarm. He felt that I had an awful secret to reveal...

"You are one of Pinkerton's men, I presume," he said.
He had gathered from my mysterious manner that I was a detective...
"No, not from Pinkerton's," I said,... "I am not a detective at all. I have come to open an account. I intend to keep all my money in this bank." (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 61)

The manager seems little relieved to learn that he is not a detective. But again misunderstands him for some business magnet eager to make huge investment in the bank. No sooner does he learn that the visitor was neither a detective nor a big businessman, he sends him out gracefully instructing the accountant to do needful to open an account. The following conversation clearly exhibits how the manager mistakes him, following the way of his talking:

The manager looked relieved but still serious; he concluded now that I was a son of Baron Rothschild or a young Gould.

"A large account, I suppose," he said.
"Fairly large," I whispered. "I propose to deposit fifty-six dollars now and fifty dollars a month regularly."
The manager got up and opened the door. He called to the accountant.
"Mr. Montgomery," he said unkindly loud, "this gentleman is opening an account; he will deposit fifty-six dollars. Good morning." (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 62)

The narrator hands over his fifty six dollars to the clerk concerned. Now being an account holder he was entitled to draw a cheque, he wishes to withdraw six dollars from his account but in hurry and confusion he mentioned the amount as fifty six. On being asked about the mode of payment, he informed to be paid in fifties and sixes. He left the bank somewhat with a sigh of relief and resolve never to visit it again. It was a nightmarish experience for him. Mark the humorous situation of the narrator:

What! are you drawing it all out again?" he asked in surprise. Then I realized that I had written fifty-six instead of six... All the clerks had stopped writing to look at me.
Reckless with misery, I made a plunge.
"Yes, the whole thing."
"You withdraw your money from the bank?"
"Every cent of it."
"Are you not going to deposit any more?" said the clerk, astonished.
"Never." (The Joy of Reading Literature, 63)

The readers go on laughing at every stage of his behaviour. He is too innocent to understand intricacies of a financial institute. Leacock gives here minute details of the painful experience of the narrator-raise in salary, conversation with the manager, his imaginary fears, mistake in writing the cheque, firm decision not to step in the bank in future-to highlight problems of those who have no idea of bank transactions. Humour stems from the peculiar behaviour of an ordinary fellow who finds the way of this world highly incomprehensible and challenging. It has been attributed:

The humor of the piece is achieved not only by the exaggerated situation but also by a skillful use of short clips of dialogue. The narrator's psychological intimidation is clearly presented by an economy of detail in which the scene richly suggests more than it relates.
(*My Financial Career Summary*, www.enotes.com)

Leacock's sympathy obviously lies with the victims of inhuman behaviour of the uncaring authorities. And that is the job of a humorist. He picks up characters and situations from the world ground. The experience of the ordinary man like the narrator at a bank or any government office does not differ much. Even a highly educated person finds it difficult to fill in a complicated form.

It is but a sad reality even after so many years of development and progress, the ordinary village dwellers find it difficult to understand how government machinery runs. They become the victims of government's red-tapism, hostility and indifferent attitude of the bureaucrats. They run from pillar to post and worship each official with an awe of god to get their works done. These fat-Skinned bureaucrats exploit these gullible people due to their sheer ignorance. The plight of the narrator should be attributed to his ignorance as well as callous attitude of the bank officials. It has been rightly noted:

Not only the man himself is responsible for this failure, the people in the bank are also factors that made him fail. Firstly, the clerks in the bank are not enthusiastic enough. They are not willing to help him initiatives. Secondly, the accountant is lacking zeal and acting coolly to him in which was making him even more nervous. Lastly, the manager of the bank was impatient and spoke to the man abruptly after realizing that the man was not a rich person, it made him feel very embarrassed.
(Sakuranbo, www.studymode.com)

The narrator here is a helpless fellow whose frightened state of mind, lack of information and wrong beliefs takes him back to his original state. His visit to a bank proves futile. He defines it as his financial Career to glorify it but defines it understand that fifty six dollars is a trivial amount to shape financial career. Such persons making tall claims without any qualification are ridiculed and made fun of by the people. It has been attributed:

‘My Financial Career,’ about a prototypical “little man” confronted by an intimidating institution as he opens a bank account. In the story, Leacock treats with characteristic sympathy the honest and decent but powerless victim of an absurd and hostile world. (*Stephen Leacock Essay*, www.enotes.com)

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