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Mark Twain, "A Literary Nightmare" (1876)

10-13 minutes

Will the reader please to cast his eye
over the following lines, and see if he
can discover anything harmful in
them?

Conductor, when you receive a fare,
Punch in the presence of the
passenjare!

A blue trip slip for an eight-cent fare,
A buff trip slip for a six-cent fare,

A pink trip slip for a three-cent fare,
Punch in the presence of the
passenjare!

CHORUS

Punch, brothers! punch with care!
Punch in the presence of the
passenjare!

I came across these jingling rhymes
in a newspaper, a little while ago, and
read them a couple of times. They
took instant and entire possession of
me. All through breakfast they went
waltzing through my brain; and when,
at last, I rolled up my napkin, I could
not tell whether I had eaten anything
or not. I had carefully laid out my

day's work the day before—thrilling tragedy in the novel which I am writing. I went to my den to begin my deed of blood. I took up my pen, but all I could get it to say was, "Punch in the presence of the passenjare." I fought hard for an hour, but it was useless. My head kept humming, "A blue trip slip for an eight-cent fare, a buff trip slip for a six-cent fare," and so on and so on, without peace or respite. The day's work was ruined—I could see that plainly enough. I gave up and drifted down-town, and presently discovered that my feet were keeping time to that relentless jingle.

When I could stand it no longer I altered my step. But it did no good; those rhymes accommodated themselves to the new step and went on harassing me just as before. I returned home, and suffered all the afternoon; suffered all through an unconscious and unrefreshing dinner; suffered, and cried, and jingled all through the evening; went to bed and rolled, tossed, and jingled right along, the same as ever; got up at midnight frantic, and tried to read; but there was nothing visible upon the whirling page except "Punch! punch in the presence of the passenjare." By sunrise I was out of my mind, and

everybody marveled and was distressed at the idiotic burden of my ravings—"Punch! oh, punch! punch in the presence of the passenjare!"

Two days later, on Saturday morning, I arose, a tottering wreck, and went forth to fulfil an engagement with a valued friend, the Rev. Mr. — — —, to walk to the Talcott Tower, ten miles distant. He stared at me, but asked no questions. We started. Mr. — — — talked, talked, talked as is his wont. I said nothing; I heard nothing. At the end of a mile, Mr. — — — said "Mark, are you sick? I never saw a man look so haggard and worn and absent-

minded. Say something, do!"

Drearily, without enthusiasm, I said:

"Punch brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the

passenjare!"

My friend eyed me blankly, looked

perplexed, they said:

"I do not think I get your drift, Mark.

Then does not seem to be any

relevancy in what you have said,

certainly nothing sad; and yet—

maybe it was the way you said the

words—I never heard anything that

sounded so pathetic. What is—"

But I heard no more. I was already

far away with my pitiless,

heartbreaking "blue trip slip for an eight-cent fare, buff trip slip for a six-cent fare, pink trip slip for a three-cent fare; punch in the presence of the passenjare." I do not know what occurred during the other nine miles. However, all of a sudden Mr. — — — laid his hand on my shoulder and shouted:

"Oh, wake up! wake up! wake up! Don't sleep all day! Here we are at the Tower, man! I have talked myself deaf and dumb and blind, and never got a response. Just look at this magnificent autumn landscape! Look at it! look at it! Feast your eye on it!

You have traveled; you have seen
boaster landscapes elsewhere.

Come, now, deliver an honest
opinion. What do you say to this?"

I sighed wearily; and murmured:

"A buff trip slip for a six-cent fare, a
pink trip slip for a three-cent fare,
punch in the presence of the
passenjare."

Rev. Mr. — — — stood there, very
grave, full of concern, apparently, and
looked long at me; then he said:

"Mark, there is something about this
that I cannot understand. Those are
about the same words you said
before; there does not seem to be

anything in them, and yet they nearly
break my heart when you say them.

Punch in

the—how is it they go?"

I began at the beginning and repeated
all the lines.

My friend's face lighted with interest.

He said:

"Why, what a captivating jingle it is! It
is almost music. It flows along so
nicely. I have nearly caught the
rhymes myself. Say them over just
once more, and then I'll have them,
sure."

I said them over. Then Mr. — — —
said them. He made one little

mistake, which I corrected. The next time and the next he got them right. Now a great burden seemed to tumble from my shoulders. That torturing jingle departed out of my brain, and a grateful sense of rest and peace descended upon me. I was light-hearted enough to sing; and I did sing for half an hour, straight along, as we went jogging homeward. Then my freed tongue found blessed speech again, and the pent talk of many a weary hour began to gush and flow. It flowed on and on, joyously, jubilantly, until the fountain was empty and dry. As I wrung my friend's hand at parting, I said:

"Haven't we had a royal good time!
But now I remember, you haven't said
a word for two hours. Come, come,
out with something!"

The Rev. Mr. — — — turned a lack-
luster eye upon me, drew a deep
sigh, and said, without animation,
without apparent consciousness:

"Punch, brothers, punch with care!
Punch in the presence of the
passenjare!"

A pang shot through me as I said to
myself, "Poor fellow, poor fellow! he
has got it, now."

I did not see Mr. — — — for two or
three days after that. Then, on

Tuesday evening, he staggered into my presence and sank dejectedly into a seat. He was pale, worn; he was a wreck. He lifted his faded eyes to my face and said:

"Ah, Mark, it was a ruinous investment that I made in those heartless rhymes. They have ridden me like a nightmare, day and night, hour after hour, to this very moment. Since I saw you I have suffered the torments of the lost. Saturday evening I had a sudden call, by telegraph, and took the night train for Boston. The occasion was the death of a valued old friend who had

requested that I should preach his funeral sermon. I took my seat in the cars and set myself to framing the discourse. But I never got beyond the opening paragraph; for then the train started and the car-wheels began their 'clack, clack-clack-clack-clack! clack-clack! clack-clack-clack!' and right away those odious rhymes fitted themselves to that accompaniment. For an hour I sat there and set a syllable of those rhymes to every separate and distinct clack the car-wheels made. Why, I was as fagged out, then, as if I had been chopping wood all day. My skull was splitting with headache. It seemed to me that

I must go mad if I sat there any longer; so I undressed and went to bed. I stretched myself out in my berth, and—well, you know what the result was. The thing went right along, just the same. 'Clack-clack clack, a blue trip slip, clack-clack-clack, for an eight cent fare; clack-clack-clack, a buff trip slip, clack clack-clack, for a six-cent fare, and so on, and so on, and so on punch in the presence of the passenjare!' Sleep? Not a single wink! I was almost a lunatic when I got to Boston. Don't ask me about the funeral. I did the best I could, but every solemn individual sentence was meshed and tangled and woven in

and out with 'Punch, brothers, punch with care, punch in the presence of the passenjare.' And the most distressing thing was that my delivery dropped into the undulating rhythm of those pulsing rhymes, and I could actually catch absent-minded people nodding time to the swing of it with their stupid heads. And, Mark, you may believe it or not, but before I got through the entire assemblage were placidly bobbing their heads in solemn unison, mourners, undertaker, and all. The moment I had finished, I fled to the anteroom in a state bordering on frenzy. Of course it would be my luck to find a sorrowing

and aged maiden aunt of the deceased there, who had arrived from Springfield too late to get into the church. She began to sob, and said:

"Oh, oh, he is gone, he is gone, and I didn't see him before he died!"

"Yes!" I said, 'he is gone, he is gone, he is gone—oh, will this suffering never cease!'

"You loved him, then! Oh, you too loved him!"

"Loved him! Loved who?"

"Why, my poor George! my poor nephew!"

"Oh—him! Yes—oh, yes, yes."

Certainly—certainly. Punch—
punch—oh, this misery will kill me!

"Bless you! bless you, sir, for these
sweet words! I, too, suffer in this dear
loss. Were you present during his last
moments?"

"Yes. I—whose last moments?"

"His. The dear departed's."

"Yes! Oh, yes—yes—yes! I suppose
so, I think so, I don't know! Oh,
certainly—I was there I was there!"

"Oh, what a privilege! what a
precious privilege! And his last
words—oh, tell me, tell me his last
words! What did he say?"

"He said—he said—oh, my head, my head, my head! He said—he said—he never said anything but Punch, punch, punch in the presence of the passenjare! Oh, leave me, madam! In the name of all that is generous, leave me to my madness, my misery, my despair!—a buff trip slip for a six-cent fare, a pink trip slip for a three-cent fare—endu—rance can no further go!—PUNCH in the presence of the passenjare!"

My friend's hopeless eyes rested upon mine a pregnant minute, and then he said impressively:

"Mark, you do not say anything. You

do not offer me any hope. But, ah me, it is just as well—it is just as well. You could not do me any good. The time has long gone by when words could comfort me. Something tells me that my tongue is doomed to wag forever to the jigger of that remorseless jingle. There—there it is coming on me again: a blue trip slip for an eight-cent fare, a buff trip slip for a—"

Thus murmuring faint and fainter, my friend sank into a peaceful trance and forgot his sufferings in a blessed respite.

How did I finally save him from an

asylum? I took him to a neighboring university and made him discharge the burden of his persecuting rhymes into the eager ears of the poor, unthinking students. How is it with them, now? The result is too sad to tell. Why did I write this article? It was for a worthy, even a noble, purpose. It was to warn you, reader, if you should come across those merciless rhymes, to avoid them—avoid them as you would a pestilence.