

# HILARIOUS LITTLE HOWLERS



*Selected by*

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# Hilarious Little Howlers

(Original title: *100 Hilarious Little Howlers*)

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# Hilarious Little Howlers

## Introduction

Everybody likes a funny story, but not everybody can tell one. Maybe that's why books of so-called serious fiction greatly outnumber books of comic writing. The relative scarcity of funny fiction and the high esteem in which we hold humorists are testaments to the unique character of comic storytelling. You know that old saying: tragedy is easy, comedy is hard.

The funny thing about funny stories is that their raw materials are not much different from those used to create their more sober counterparts. Cut through the corn, dissect the delirium, and you find many of the same themes and concerns around which dramatic writing is built: the home, the family, the workplace, the battle of the sexes, differences of opinion, clashes of values, miscommunication. The difference between the two types of stories is the perspective. Our best writers know that humor is just a way of looking at life cockeyed so that the contour of the commonplace is distorted or the absurd is made to look fairly rational. Like alchemists, they transmute the basic into the rarefied, filtering the seriousness out of a slice of life and refracting the blandly universal through the prism of their antic imaginations.

*Hilarious Little Howlers* is a book of alchemy, the product of almost two centuries of experimentation. In pursuit of that cherished philosopher's stone, a good laugh, its contributors take the profane materials of ordinary experience—romantic relationships, holiday celebrations, sports, popular entertainment—and reconstitute them as the sacred stuff of the slightly silly. Their efforts are a reference guide to the tricks of the humorist's trade. Some apply the technique of the jokester, detonating a solidly straight story with an expertly planted punch line. Others take the satirist's approach, working a giddy variation on a familiar theme or style. Many of the selections have a fantasy element, but why should that be surprising? The abnormal and the absurd have a relationship as well established as—well, Abbott and Costello's.

Plenty of chuckles are to be found here, and a few genuine surprises as well. Who would have thought a writer as dark and dour

as Edgar Allan Poe capable of lighter fare such as “Diddling”? Or what about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—creator of that paragon of reason, Sherlock Holmes—indulging eagerly in the comic irrationality of “His First Operation”? Ambrose Bierce, best known as a writer of horror and of the horrors of the U.S. Civil War, is also on hand with a masterpiece of mordant merriment with the unlikely title “Oil of Dog.” Such unexpected delights express the essence of the comic: moments of uncharacteristic whimsy that offer a pleasant break from the expected.

Whatever your preference—the discreet snicker or the boisterous belly laugh—you’ll find a generous helping of humor in *Hilarious Little Howlers*. The only thing serious here is the fun that awaits you.

—Stefan Dziemianowicz  
New York, 1999

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	ix
<b>Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir</b> by Thomas Hardy	1
<b>The Advent on Channel Twelve</b> by C. M. Kornbluth	3
<b>The Adventures of Shamrock Jolnes</b> by O. Henry	6
<b>After You, Montagu</b> by Howard Wandrei	11
<b>Agamemnon's Career</b> by Lucretia P. Hale	13
<b>All Moon-Beasts Amorphous and Mephitic</b> by Peter Cannon	20
<b>At Arms with Morpheus</b> by O. Henry	25
<b>Believing in the Twentieth Century</b> by Darrell Schweitzer	29
<b>The Belle of Vallejo</b> by W. L. Alden	38
<b>Boots</b> by Anton Chekhov	40
<b>Broker's Loan</b> by Donald Wandrei	44
<b>The Captain's Story</b> by Mark Twain	47
<b>The Case of Jack the Clipper, or A Fimbulwinter's Tale</b> by David Langford	51
<b>Chalk Talk</b> by Edward Wellen	57
<b>A Change of Lifestyle</b> by Joe and Karen Lansdale	60
<b>Chasing the Ugly Dog</b> by Tom Piccirilli	63
<b>Christmas Afternoon</b> by Robert C. Benchley	67
<b>Christmas Eve in the Blue Chamber</b> by Jerome K. Jerome	70
<b>Cinderella</b> by Ring Lardner	77
<b>The Cleft</b> by Gahan Wilson	80
<b>Deflation 2001</b> by Bob Shaw	83
<b>Dentondagon!</b> by Don Webb	86
<b>Detection Perfection</b> by Tim Lebbon	88
<b>Diddling: Considered as One of the Exact Sciences</b> by Edgar Allan Poe	96
<b>A Difficult Subject</b> by Jane Rice	105
<b>The Dog That Spoke French</b> by Vincent Starrett	109
<b>The Drawing-Room Bureau</b> by E. F. Benson	111
<b>The Egg</b> by Sherwood Anderson	119
<b>The Errors of Santa Claus</b> by Stephen Leacock	128
<b>The Final Apprentice</b> by Steve Rasnic Tem	132
<b>Forgetful Charlie</b> by Hugh B. Cave	141

<b>Gandhi at the Bat</b> by Chet Williamson	145
<b>Getting Enough</b> by Chet Williamson	149
<b>Great-Aunt Ella and the Stanley Steamer</b> by Jane Rice	153
<b>Gremlin</b> by Karl Edward Wagner	159
<b>The Grilling of Loren Ellery</b> by Jack London	164
<b>The Hand That Feeds</b> by John Maclay	169
<b>The Hapless Bachelors</b> by E. F. Benson	172
<b>Hearing Aid</b> by David Langford	183
<b>The Helping Hand</b> by Robert Sheckley	191
<b>The Hexer</b> by Howard Wandrei	192
<b>His First Day at Editing</b> by Eugene Field	204
<b>His First Operation</b> by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle	209
<b>If at First You Don't Succeed, to Hell with It!</b> by Charles E. Fritch	215
<b>An Imperfect Conflagration</b> by Ambrose Bierce	220
<b>In Mid-Atlantic</b> by W. W. Jacobs	223
<b>The Independent Fiend</b> by Gordon Linzner	229
<b>Interlude in a Laboratory</b> by Steve Rasnic Tem	236
<b>Kitty Answers</b> by William Dean Howells	237
<b>The Legend of Scotland</b> by Lewis Carroll	243
<b>The Life of Anybody</b> by Robert Sheckley	249
<b>A Little Joke</b> by Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins	251
<b>Little Red in the Hood</b> by Linda Addison	255
<b>The Lot's Wife Caper</b> by Edward D. Hoch	256
<b>Luck</b> by Mark Twain	263
<b>Lynx-Hunting</b> by Stephen Crane	267
<b>Malice Aforethought</b> by Donald A. Wollheim	272
<b>Mirror, Mirror</b> by Tina and Tony Rath	277
<b>Miss Crump's Song</b> by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet	282
<b>Miss Rennsdale Accepts</b> by Booth Tarkington	286
<b>Monologue in Baker Street</b> by Vincent Starrett	292
<b>Monster Tales: Return of the Jumbo Shrimp</b> by Les Daniels	293
<b>Moti Guj—Mutineer</b> by Rudyard Kipling	294
<b>Mrs. Joseph Porter</b> by Charles Dickens	301
<b>Not Just Another Saint Paddy's Day</b> by Ben P. Indick	310
<b>Nothing but the Best</b> by Brian McNaughton	313
<b>Novelty and Romancement: A Broken Spell</b> by Lewis Carroll	316
<b>Oil of Dog</b> by Ambrose Bierce	323
<b>The Old, Old Story of How Five Men Went Fishing</b> by Stephen Leacock	327
<b>Our New Bedstead</b> by Frederick Swartout Cozzens	333



<b>Papa's Planet</b> by William F. Nolan	337
<b>Paranoid Fantasy #1</b> by Lawrence Watt-Evans	341
<b>Patrons</b> by Jessica Amanda Salmonson	343
<b>The Perfumed Garden</b> by David H. Keller	345
<b>Personality Problem</b> by Joe R. Lansdale	352
<b>A Piece of Red Calico</b> by Frank R. Stockton	353
<b>Pig</b> by Rudyard Kipling	358
<b>Project Hush</b> by William Tenn	364
<b>Rheumatism Movement Cure</b> by Robert Jones Burdette	370
<b>The Saga of Lizzie Borden</b> by Jane Rice	373
<b>Santa's Tenth Reindeer</b> by Gordon Van Gelder	376
<b>The Second Coming of a First Husband</b> by Irvin S. Cobb	379
<b>The Social Life of the Newt</b> by Robert Benchley	387
<b>"Sorry, But We Only Offer That Course in the Fall"</b> by William Relling, Jr.	391
<b>Speak</b> by Henry Slesar	394
<b>The Stalled Ox</b> by Saki	396
<b>The Stampeding of Lady Bastable</b> by Saki	400
<b>The Stout Gentleman: A Stage Coach Romance</b> by Washington Irving	403
<b>Sweet Violence</b> by Morris Hershman	412
<b>A Tale of Wet Days</b> by Irvin S. Cobb	413
<b>Tempest in a Tub</b> by J. M. Bailey	420
<b>Truman Capote's Trilby: The Facts</b> by Garry Kilworth	422
<b>Two Dead Guys Walkin' Around Eatin' People</b> by John R. Platt	430
<b>Upon My Soul</b> by Jack Ritchie	437
<b>The Vigil</b> by W. W. Jacobs	440
<b>When a Felon Needs a Friend</b> by Morris Hershman	449
<b>With Nott in the Terrible Targa</b> by William F. Nolan	456
<b>Witch Hunt</b> by Lawrence Schimel	464
<b>The Worst Fog of the Year</b> by Ramsey Campbell	466
<b>X-ing a Paragrab</b> by Edgar Allan Poe	472
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	479

## Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir

Thomas Hardy

**I**t happened on Sunday after Christmas—the last Sunday ever they played in Longpuddle church gallery, as it turned out, though they didn't know it then. As you may know, sir, the players formed a very good band—almost as good as the Mellstock parish players that were led by the Dewys; and that's saying a great deal. There was Nicholas Puddingcome, the leader, with the first fiddle; there was Timothy Thomas, the bass-viol man; John Biles, the tenor fiddler; Dan'l Hornhead, with the serpent; Robert Dowdle, with the clarionet; and Mr Nicks, with the oboe—all sound and powerful musicians, and strong-winded men—they that blowed. For that reason they were very much in demand Christmas week for little reels and dancing parties: for they could turn a jig or a hornpipe out of hand as well as ever they could turn out a psalm, and perhaps better, not to speak irreverent. In short, one half-hour they could be playing a Christmas carol in the Squire's hall to the ladies and gentlemen, and drinking tay and coffee with 'em as modest as saints; and the next, at The Tinker's Arms, blazing away like wild horses with the "Dashing White Sergeant" to nine couple of dancers and more, and swallowing rum-and-cider hot as flame.

'Well, this Christmas they'd been out to one rattling randy after another every night, and had got next to no sleep at all. Then came the Sunday after Christmas, their fatal day. 'Twas so mortal cold that year that they could hardly sit in the gallery; for though the congregation down in the body of the church had a stove to keep off the frost, the players in the gallery had nothing at all. So Nicholas said at morning service, when 'twas freezing an inch an hour, "Please the Lord I won't stand this numbing weather no longer: this afternoon we'll have something in our insides to make us warm, if it cost a king's ransom."

'So he brought a gallon of hot brandy and beer, ready mixed, to church with him in the afternoon, and by keeping the jar well wrapped up in Timothy Thomas's bass-viol bag it kept drinkably warm till they wanted it, which was just a thimbleful in the Absolu-

tion, and another after the Creed, and the remainder at the beginning o' the sermon. When they'd had the last pull they felt quite comfortable and warm, and as the sermon went on—most unfortunately for 'em it was a long one that afternoon—they fell asleep, every man jack of 'em; and there they slept on as sound as rocks.

'Twas a very dark afternoon, and by the end of the sermon all you could see of the inside of the church were the pa'son's two candles alongside of him in the pulpit, and his spaking face behind 'em. The sermon being ended at last, the pa'son gie'd out the Evening Hymn. But no quire set about sounding up the tune, and the people began to turn their heads to learn the reason why, and then Levi Limpet, a boy who sat in the gallery, nudged Timothy and Nicholas, and said, "Begin! begin!"

"Hey? what?" says Nicholas, starting up; and the church being so dark and his head so muddled he thought he was at the party they had played at all the night before, and away he went, bow and fiddle, at "The Devil among the Tailors," the favourite jig of our neighbourhood at that time. The rest of the band, being in the same state of mind and nothing doubting, followed their leader with all their strength, according to custom. They poured out that there tune till the lower bass notes of "The Devil among the Tailors" made the cobwebs in the roof shiver like ghosts; then Nicholas, seeing nobody moved, shouted out as he scraped (in his usual commanding way at dances when the folk didn't know the figures), "Top couples cross hands! And when I make the fiddle squeak at the end, every man kiss his pardner under the mistletoe!"

The boy Levi was so frightened that he bolted down the gallery stairs and out homeward like lightning. The pa'son's hair fairly stood on end when he heard the evil tune raging through the church, and thinking the quire had gone crazy he held up his hand and said: "Stop, stop, stop! Stop, stop! What's this?" But they didn't hear'n for the noise of their own playing, and the more he called the louder they played.

"Then the folks came out of their pews, wondering down to the ground, and saying: "What do they mean by such wickedness! We shall be consumed like Sodom and Gomorrah!"

'And the Squire, too, came out of his pew lined wi' green baize, where lots of lords and ladies visiting at the house were worshipping along with him, and went and stood in front of the gallery, and shook his fist in the musicians' faces, saying, "What! In this reverent edifice! What!"

'And at last they heard'n through their playing, and stopped.

'“Never such an insulting, disgraceful thing—never!” says the Squire, who couldn't rule his passion.

'“Never!” says the pa'son, who had come down and stood beside him.

'“Not if the Angels of Heaven,” says the Squire (he was a wicked-ish man, the Squire was, though now for once he happened to be on the Lord's side)—“not if the Angels of Heaven come down,” he says, “shall one of you villainous players ever sound a note in this church again; for the insult to me, and my family, and my visitors, and the pa'son, and God Almighty, that you've a-perpetrated this afternoon!”

'Then the unfortunate church band came to their senses, and remembered where they were; and 'twas a sight to see Nicholas Puddingcome and Timothy Thomas and John Biles creep down the gallery stairs with their fiddles under their arms, and poor Dan'l Hornhead with his serpent, and Robert Dowdle with his clarionet, all looking as little as ninepins; and out they went. The pa'son might have forgi'ed 'em when he learned the truth o't, but the Squire would not. That very week he sent for a barrel-organ that would play two-and-twenty new psalm-tunes, so exact and particular that, however sinful inclined you was, you could play nothing but psalm-tunes whatsoever. He had a really respectable man to turn the winch, as I said, and the old players played no more.'

## The Advent on Channel Twelve

C. M. Kornbluth

**I**t came to pass in the third quarter of the fiscal year that the Federal Reserve Board did raise the rediscount rate and money was tight in the land. And certain bankers which sate in New York sent to Ben Graffis in Hollywood a writing which said, Money is tight in the land so let Poopy Panda up periscope and fire all bow tubes.

Whereupon Ben Graffis made to them this moan:

O ye bankers, Poopy Panda is like unto the child of my flesh and you have made of him a devouring dragon. Once was I content with my studio and my animators when we did make twelve Poopy Pandas a year; cursed be the day when I floated a New York loan. You have commanded me to make feature-length cartoon epics and I did obey, and they do open at the Paramount to sensational grosses, and we do re-release them to the nabes year on year, without end. You have commanded me to film live adventure shorts and I did obey, and in the cutting room we do devilishly splice and pull frames and flop negatives so that I and my cameras are become bearers of false witness and men look upon my live adventure shorts and say lo! these beasts and birds are like unto us in their laughter, wooing, pranks, and contention. You have commanded that I become a mountebank for that I did build Poopy Pandaland, whereinto men enter with their children, their silver, and their wits, and wherefrom they go out with their children only, sandbagged by a thousand catch-penny engines; even this did I obey. You have commanded that Poopy Panda shall every weekday night on television between five and six for the Poopy Panda Pals, and even this did I obey, though Poopy Panda is like unto the child of my flesh.

But O ye bankers, this last command will I never obey.

Whereupon the bankers which sate in New York sent to him another writing that said, Even so, let Poopy Panda up periscope and fire all bow tubes, and they said, Remember, boy, we hold thy paper.

And Ben Graffis did obey.

He called unto him his animators and directors and cameramen and writers, and his heart was sore but he dissembled and said:

In jest you call one another brainwashers, forasmuch as you adde the heads of children five hours a week that they shall buy our sponsors' wares. You have fulfilled the prophecies, for is it not written in the Book of the Space Merchants that there shall be spherical trusts? And the Poopy Panda Pals plug the Poopy Panda Magazine, and the Poopy Panda Magazine plugs Poopy Pandaland, and Poopy Pandaland plugs the Poopy Panda Pals. You have asked of the Motivational Research boys how we shall hook the little bastards and they have told ye, and ye have done it. You identify the untalented kid viewers with the talented kid performers, you provide in Otto Clodd a bumbling father image to be derided, you furnish in Jackie Whipple an idealized big brother for the boys and a sex-fantasy for

the more precocious girls. You flatter the cans off the viewers by ever saying to them that they shall rule the twenty-first century, nor mind that those who shall in good sooth come to power are doing their homework and not watching television programs. You have created a liturgy of opening hymn and closing benediction, and over all hovers the spirit of Poopy Panda urging and coaxing the viewers to buy our sponsors' wares.

And Ben Graffis breathed a great breath and looked them not in the eye and said to them, Were it not a better thing for Poopy Panda to coax and urge no more, but to command as he were a god?

And the animators and directors and cameramen and writers were sore amazed and they said one to the other, This is the bleeding end, and the bankers which sit in New York have flipped their wigs. And one which was an old animator said to Ben Graffis, trembling, O chief, never would I have stolen for thee Poopy Panda from the Winnie the Pooh illustrations back in twenty-nine had I known this was in the cards, and Ben Graffis fired him.

Whereupon another which was a director said to Ben Graffis, O chief, the thing can be done with a two-week buildup, and Ben Graffis put his hands over his face and said, Let it be so.

And it came to pass that on the Friday after the two-week buildup, in the closing quarter-hour of the Poopy Panda Pals, there was a special film combining live and animated action as they were one.

And in the special film did Poopy Panda appear enhaloed, and the talented kid performers did do him worship, and Otto Clodd did trip over his feet whilst kneeling, and Jackie Whipple did urge in manly and sincere wise that all the Poopy Panda Pals out there in televisionland do likewise, and the enhaloed Poopy Panda did say in his lovable growly voice, Poop-poop-poop.

And adoration ascended from thirty-seven million souls.

And it came to pass that Ben Graffis went into his office with his animators and cameramen and directors and writers after the show and said to them, It was definitely a TV first, and he did go to the bar.

Whereupon one which was a director looked at Who sate behind the desk that was the desk of Ben Graffis and he said to Ben Graffis, O chief, it is a great gag but how did the special effects boys manage the halo?

And Ben Graffis was sore amazed at Who sate behind his desk

and he and they all did crowd about and make as if to poke Him, whereupon He in His lovable growly voice did say, Poop-poop-poopy, and they were not.

And certain unclean ones which had gone before turned unbelieving from their monitors and said, Holy Gee, this is awful. And one which was an operator of marionettes turned to his manager and said, Pal, if Graffis gets this off the ground we're dead. Whereat a great and far-off voice was heard, saying, Poop-poop-poopy, and it was even so; and the days of Poopy Panda were long in the land.

Filtered for error,  
Jan. 18th 36 P.P.  
Synod on Filtration & Infiltration  
O. Clodd, P.P.P.  
J. Whipple, P.P.P.

## The Adventures of Shamrock Jolnes

O. Henry

**I** am so fortunate as to count Shamrock Jolnes, the great New York detective, among my muster of friends. Jolnes is what is called the "inside man" of the city detective force. He is an expert in the use of the typewriter, and it is his duty, whenever there is a "murder mystery" to be solved, to sit at a desk telephone at Headquarters and take down the message of "cranks" who 'phone in their confessions to having committed the crime.

But on certain "off" days when confessions are coming in slowly and three or four newspapers have run to earth as many different guilty persons, Jolnes will knock about the town with me, exhibiting, to my great delight and instruction, his marvellous powers of observation and deduction.

The other day I dropped in at Headquarters and found the great detective gazing thoughtfully at a string that was tied tightly around his little finger.

"Good morning, Whatsup," he said, without turning his head. "I'm glad to notice that you've had your house fitted up with electric lights at last."

"Will you please tell me," I said, in surprise, "how you knew that? I am sure that I never mentioned the fact to any one, and the wiring was a rush order not completed until this morning."

"Nothing easier," said Jolnes, genially. "As you came in I caught the odor of the cigar you are smoking. I know an expensive cigar; and I know that not more than three men in New York can afford to smoke cigars and pay gas bills too at the present time. That was an easy one. But I am working just now on a little problem of my own."

"Why have you that string on your finger?" I asked.

"That's the problem," said Jolnes. "My wife tied that on this morning to remind me of something I was to send up to the house. Sit down, Whatsup, and excuse me for a few moments."

The distinguished detective went to a wall telephone, and stood with the receiver to his ear for probably ten minutes.

"Were you listening to a confession?" I asked, when he had returned to his chair.

"Perhaps," said Jolnes, with a smile, "it might be called something of the sort. To be frank with you, Whatsup, I've cut out the dope. I've been increasing the quantity for so long that morphine doesn't have much effect on me any more. I've got to have something more powerful. That telephone I just went to is connected with a room in the Waldorf where there's an author's reading in progress. Now, to get at the solution of this string."

After five minutes of silent pondering, Jolnes looked at me, with a smile, and nodded his head.

"Wonderful man!" I exclaimed; "already?"

"It is quite simple," he said, holding up his finger. "You see that knot? That is to prevent my forgetting. It is, therefore, a forget-me-knot. A forget-me-not is a flower. It was a sack of flour that I was to send home!"

"Beautiful!" I could not help crying out in admiration.

"Suppose we go out for a ramble," suggested Jolnes.

"There is only one case of importance on hand now. Old man McCarty, one hundred and four years old, died from eating too many bananas. The evidence points so strongly to the Mafia that the police have surrounded the Second Avenue Katzenjammer Gambrinus Club No. 2, and the capture of the assassin is only the matter



of a few hours. The detective force has not yet been called on for assistance."

Jolnes and I went out and up the street toward the corner, where we were to catch a surface car.

Halfway up the block we met Rheingelder, an acquaintance of ours, who held a City Hall position.

"Good morning, Rheingelder," said Jolnes, halting.

"Nice breakfast that was you had this morning."

Always on the lookout for the detective's remarkable feats of deduction, I saw Jolnes's eyes flash for an instant upon a long yellow splash on the shirt bosom and a smaller one upon the chin of Rheingelder—both undoubtedly made by the yolk of an egg.

"Oh, dot is some of your detectiveness," said Rheingelder, shaking all over with a smile. "Vell, I bet you trinks and cigars all around dot you cannot tell vot I haf eaten for breakfast."

"Done," said Jolnes. "Sausage, pumpernickel, and coffee."

Rheingelder admitted the correctness of the surmise and paid the bet. When we had proceeded on our way I said to Jolnes:

"I thought you looked at the egg spilled on his chin and shirt front."

"I did," said Jolnes. "That is where I began my deduction. Rheingelder is a very economical, saving man. Yesterday eggs dropped in the market to twenty-eight cents per dozen. To-day they are quoted at forty-two. Rheingelder ate eggs yesterday, and to-day he went back to his usual fare. A little thing like this isn't anything, Whatsup; it belongs to the primary arithmetic class."

When we boarded the street car we found the seats all occupied—principally by ladies. Jolnes and I stood on the rear platform.

About the middle of the car there sat an elderly man with a short, gray beard, who looked to be the typical, well-dressed New Yorker. At successive corners other ladies climbed aboard, and soon three or four of them were standing over the man, clinging to straps and glaring meaningly at the man who occupied the coveted seat. But he resolutely retained his place.

"We New Yorkers," I remarked to Jolnes, "have about lost our manners, as far as the exercise of them in public goes."

"Perhaps so," said Jolnes, lightly; "but the man you evidently refer to happens to be a very chivalrous and courteous gentleman from Old Virginia. He is spending a few days in New York with his wife and two daughters, and he leaves for the South to-night."