

## *Two Fables for Physicists*

Once upon a time a man in the village invented a scroll saw. With a little blade that oscillated up and down through a hole in a table he could cut stars and circles and crescents and all sorts of wooden shapes. He could make in a jiffy ornaments that required many hours when his neighbors whittled them with jackknives, and he could make them better.

The people of the village had always liked to decorate their homes. They used many kinds of paint and trimming to make their village pleasant to live in. And with the invention of the scroll saw they quickly found that they had a new method of ornamentation.

The next-door neighbor of the man with the scroll saw came to him and said, "I am building a new house. Perhaps you will saw some curlicues to decorate the eaves. I believe it will make my new house very pretty and help to make our town a pleasant place to live." So the man with the scroll saw made curlicues for the eaves.

Soon everyone was decorating his house with curlicues. Each one wanted more curlicues on more parts of his house than the last one had had. The village became full of gingerbread architecture. Every home builder felt that he had reached a new era of good living and took great pride in how much he was contributing to the decoration of his town.

Then one day a man who was about to build a house said to his friend, "I will have to choose a new design for the curlicues of my house. Tell me what kind of curlicues Smith's new house has so that I will not imitate him."

"Now let's see," said his friend.

"What does Smith's house have for curlicues?" But he couldn't remember although he lived right next door to Smith. In fact, when the two men asked around the public house, no one could remember what Smith's curlicues were like, nor could anyone remember what sort of gingerbread adorned any of the other recently built houses of the village.

The man who was about to build his house decided that if no one was looking at the curlicues, he needn't put them on. So he built a simple house without gingerbread, and many people looked at it and admired it. The man who had built it took pleasure in their admiration and felt no regret that he had not added as many curlicues as his neighbors. Soon everyone in town was building simple houses, and gradually gingerbread architecture disappeared from the village.

Once upon a time a man in the town invented a new and cheaper way to print documents. With a little rotating cylinder he could produce handbills and articles and magazines and newspapers more quickly and cheaply than anyone else.

His neighbors were pleased because all of them liked to read, and many of them liked to write. "Now," they said, "we can always have lovely stories and stimulating articles to entertain and inform us."

The printer's neighbor came and said, "I have discovered a new way to make gooseberry jam. Perhaps you will print my recipe, and all of the other people in the town can make it too." So the printer printed the recipe.

Soon other men came with recipes and poems and stories about their

vacations. The printer printed all of them; all of the people had lots of things to read, and the writers were particularly happy. They took great pride in the numbers of recipes and poems and stories they had contributed to the pleasure of their friends.

And then one day a man who had made some very good strawberry jam said to his friend, "I think I should publish my recipe, but I am not sure that the method is new. How does Mrs Smith make her strawberry jam?" But his friend didn't know, and when they asked around, they found that no one else knew either. Everyone had been so busy writing down his own recipes and publishing them that no one had had any time to read Mrs Smith's recipe. In fact no one seemed to have very much time to read anything.

The man who was about to publish his recipe for strawberry jam decided that if no one was going to read it, he wasn't going to publish it. Instead he gathered a great many recipes together and wrote a cookbook, one chapter of which was, "All About How to Make Jams and Jellies." His neighbors read the book, and the man who had written it took just as much pleasure in their reading of it as he had formerly taken in the number of recipes he had published every year. Soon everyone in town was trying to write books that people would read. Those who used to say, "That man has published 532 recipes," began to say instead, "That man's book is read in 14 states." Gradually the town developed quite a collection of books that were read and people's houses were no longer filled with recipes, articles and poems that no one had time to read.

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr