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MAKE THE WORLD LAUGH WITH YOU

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IT needs no sage to persuade us of the unique and disturbing nature of laughter. For the man who can regard his kind with detachment, the thing is self-evident. Man's other expressions of emotion are at least to some extent calculable. But laughter is, in the main, an accident. It is true that comedians and wits and other people who have dabbled in the subject can, and often do, deliberately call forth laughter from their fellows. But it is a ticklish and uncertain business in which the chances of success are more precarious than those in any other undertaking. For the most part, laughter comes upon a man unawares. It will strike him when he least expects it, sometimes on the most inappropriate occasions.

When considered as a diversion, again its unique nature becomes apparent; for it is the only diversion that cannot be indulged in at will. If a man feels like walking, he has but to step outside his door. If he wishes to read, he takes up a book. Thinking and, to some extent, even dreaming can be performed when desired. He can say, "Let us eat, let us drink, let us smoke," and so saying he can proceed to do these things. But he cannot deliberately set himself to laugh. He does not write to a friend,

"Do come around and laugh for an hour or two this evening."

It is no wonder, then, that man has always been fascinated by laughter, that he has examined it, tasted it, analyzed it in all its multitudinous demonstrations, divided it into categories and tones like a musical scale, lovingly invented for it a marvelous variety of words, each akin to laughter in nature, each striving to reproduce the particular noise made by the particular variety of laughter for which it stands. That is why there is today a whole scale of words with which to describe laughter.

The snort, the snicker, the snigger, the titter, the giggle, the chuckle, the chortle, the guffaw—what a range there is! What variety, what development from the short dry interjection of the snort, hardly more than the stirring of a dead leaf, through the growing and more musical agitation of the titter, the giggle, the chuckle, to the superb and sonorous outburst of the guffaw. And we enroll other words in the service. We speak of a burst, a roar, a peal, a shriek, a paroxysm, a yell, an explosion of laughter.

The most irresistible variety of laughter is that which springs up suddenly and most inexplicably between two peo-

ple in the course of a conversation. Something is said, something unexpected and often trivial but fraught with an exquisite aptness, and suddenly the divine spark is struck, the train fired, and laughter explodes. Only those who have suffered this divine accident can sympathize with the ecstatic paroxysms of the victims. Those who have not been ignited by the spark feel, if they are present, impatient and a little ashamed. If not present but told of it afterwards, they reply that it does not seem to them particularly funny. And in nine cases out of ten they are right—it is not.

But to the fortunate victims the thing is exquisitely titillating. They become immersed in it as in an electric bath. Their whole beings are thrilled and shaken. It has "gotten them" as nothing ever got them before. They are possessed, body and soul, by the heavenly demon, and, rocking like dervishes, they give themselves up to unrestrained delight.

And then, as physical weariness sets in, as that ache of the shaking diaphragm becomes almost unendurable, they begin to take themselves in hand, to stare sternly, in a desperate search for seriousness, at the cold external world and the glowing brand that has fired them. Self-possessed and cool, they contemplate it once more. After all, what was there in it to cause that conflagration? It appears to them now cold and ashen gray.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the humor flows back into it, the brand begins to glow again, an inescapable titillation of the senses upsets the victims once more, once more the thing has become sublimely ludicrous, and another paroxysm of

laughter breaks out. So the process may continue till final exhaustion brings it to an end.

Even then it may break out again, hours afterwards, in the middle of the night to the terror of a sleeping household, or months and even years later when the victims meet again and recall the original accident.

What release, what invigoration comes from laughter such as this! For a while the laugher has enjoyed reconciliation with himself and with the whole of creation. His whole being has resounded in one rich chord. He has known complete liberty and complete activity. The beast in him and the angel in him have laid aside for a moment their lifelong enmity and caroused together.

For a few moments, under the spell of laughter, the whole man is completely and gloriously alive. Body, mind, and soul vibrate in unison and, as three wires of a piano, produce a single resonant tone. If the condition produced in a man by laughter could be permanently maintained, this earth would become the Kingdom of Heaven.

Laughter is a wide and fruitful field for the psychologist, and the more he can tell us on the subject, the nearer we shall approach to that self-knowledge recommended by the Greek philosophers.

But all that the psychologists and philosophers can tell us will never abate by one jot the rapture and refreshment of the act of laughing, nor will it furnish us with an infallible recipe for the production of laughter. And so laughter will doubtless remain—as long as mankind retains the priceless gift of laughing—an accident.