

OBJECTIONS TO LAUGHTER

"Laughter" is a word, we are told by the philologists, that is a distant cousin of Greek words meaning "to cluck like a hen," and also "to croak." But we need go no further than our everyday speech to have it brought home to us that when we laugh we do something that puts us on a level with the lower animals. We say of a laughing human being that he "bellows" or "roars" or "cackles" or "crows" or "whinnies." We say of one man that he "laughs like a hyena" and of another that he has a "horse laugh."

Perhaps it was their realization of the essential animal nature of laughter that led so many philosophers, saints, and authorities on behavior to condemn it. Plato, for instance, declares that the guardians of the state ought not to be given to laughter, and that persons of worth must never be represented as being overcome by laugh-

ter. As for the saints, though many of them have been cheerful men, few of them have been conspicuous for their hilarity. Some of them have even thought it was a sin to laugh, believing, with Saint Basil, that laughter was the one bodily affection that the Founder of the Christian religion "does not seem to have known."

Among more wordly authorities on behavior we find the same thing. Lord Chesterfield, the greatest English gentlemen who ever left detailed instructions as to behavior, declares emphatically in one of his passages that a man who wishes to be regarded as a gentleman must avoid laughter above all things. Everyone knows the passage in which he warns his son: "Lord laughter is the mirth of the mob, who are only pleased with silly things; for true wit or good sense never excited a laugh, since the creation of the

world. A man of fashion and parts is, therefore, only seen to smile, but never heard to laugh." In a further letter, Lord Chesterfield writes:

I am neither a melancholy nor a cynical disposition; and am as willing and as apt to be pleased as any body; but I am sure that, since I have had the full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh.

But it is not only the philosophers, the saints, and the authorities on manners who have belittled laughter. That the ordinary man cares little for laughter can, I think, be easily proved.

Consider, for one thing, literature. Today three out of four of our best-sellers are writers who depend for their effect scarcely at all upon humor. I do not forget that Dickens, the permanent best-seller of English literature, was a humorist as well as a tragic sentimentalist. But, taking a general view of popular literature, we shall be safe in affirming that it is easier to become a best-seller with a book that does not contain a single laugh than with a

book that, in the language of the reviewers, contains a "laugh on every page." No novelist ever succeeded in becoming immortal through alone. And even masterpieces of comedy are most ardently appreciated, not for comic, but for serious reasons.

Laughter cannot play more than a small part in a man's life. The very essence of laughter is surprise and a break in the monotonous continuity of our thoughts or our experience. It is a physical appreciation of the surprising things of life, such as the spectacle of a man falling suddenly on ice, or sitting down on the floor instead of a chair. Such things makes us laugh, of course, only if the results are not too serious. If a man died as a result of any of these accidents, nobody but a savage would think it funny, however, suprised he might be. What makes us laugh is a mixture of the shock at an accident that looks as it might be serious and the realization that it is after all only a hundreth part as serious as it might have been.

We can see, then, why saints and Utopian philosophers are on the whole hostile or indifferent to laughter. The saint and the Utopian philosopher have a vision of a perfect world in which accidents do not happen. Laughter is a confession of the sins and silliness of the world, but it is also a kind of genial acquiescence in these sins and sillinesses. To the saint, the stumblings of man are tragic, proving that he is not yet an angel. To men and women with a sense of humor, the stumblings of man — even on his way to perfection — are largely comic, proving that he is only a human being after all. We may deplore, if we like, the saint's lack of humor, but in this I think we may be wrong. He has a vision that we have not. Our sense of humor is only a compensation for our lack of vision. We should never have possessed it if we had remained in Eden. It is the grace of our disgrace — a consolation prize given to a race excluded from Paradise.

Laughter, even when salted with derision or bitterness, is a form of play. As with play of all sorts, one

of its chief function is to saints and Utopian philosophing formulae of our daily lives. Comedy gives us, indeed, a new and surprising pattern of life — a pattern that is a lampoon on the pattern to which we are accustomed. Mrs. Malaprop breaks the pattern of the ordinary use of words, and as a result her "allegory on the banks of the Nile" still sets the theater in a roar. Lear in his nonsense verses breaks the pattern of intelligible speech, and we love his nonsense because he enables us to escape for the moment from the iron rule of sense. People do not laugh when a cock crows, but I have heard the gallery laughing uproariously when a man in the audience imitated a cock crowing — he was breaking the pattern of human behavior. The amusement many people get from talking and performing animals may be explained in the same way. The parrot that swears is not behaving according to the monotonous rules of bird life. Lord George Sanger amused thousands of people some years ago by introducing into his circus an oyster that smoked a pipe. This

would not have been amusing but for the fact that oysters do not, as a rule, smoke.

All the comic writers from Aristophanes to Shakespeare, from Swift to Lewis Carroll, have broken the pattern for us in a comparable way. They have taken us when we were tired of looking at life as though it were a series of demonstrable theories in Euclid, and have torn all those impressive triangles and circles into small pieces, and have dipped them in color and put them into a kaleidoscope.

Laughter, then, springs largely from the lawless part of our nature. Hilarity is a kind of heresy — a cheerful defiance of all the laws. At the same time a reasonable defense of laughter may be founded on the fact that men who are lawless in this way are not the greatest

lawbreakers. Murderers and thieves are, for the most part, serious men who might have remained law-abiding citizens if only they had had a greater capacity for laughing.

It would be going too far to claim that all laughers are virtuous men and all non-laughers criminals. But it is probably true that the laughing man, if he is virtuous, will as a result of his laughter be less offensively virtuous, and if he is vicious he will be less offensively vicious. Laughter gives a holiday both to the virtues and to the vices.

The worst thing that can be said against laughter is that, by putting us in a good humor, it enables us to tolerate ourselves. The best thing that can be said for it is that for the same reason it enables us to tolerate each other. — *By Robert Lynd, condensed from The Atlantic Monthly, March, 1930*

KISS

When women kiss it always reminds one of prize-fighters shaking hands. — *H. L. Mencken*