

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

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CHAPTER XXVII

HUMOR AND THE INFINITE

Any form of inferiority excites laughter. In the lower states of intellect, in the lower conditions of social life, or in barbaric communities we find that all forms of inferiority arouse derision and laughter. We find that some of the more ferocious types positively enjoy pains inflicted on their enemies. Enemies taken captives are tortured, while their cries arouse a feeling of glee in the bystanders. The same we find in the tortures inflicted on the heretics in the Middle Ages. The crowd enjoyed the spectacle of having a heretic burned alive, the day of an *auto-da-fe* was regarded as a festival. The writhing pains of the heretic were met with hilarious, uproarious laughter. Boys of the rougher type in torturing insects and defenceless animals laugh immoderately—the agonies of the animal are a matter of intense enjoyment to the youthful tormentors. Similarly the gladiatorial games of the ancient Romans and the bull fights of the modern Spaniards, the prize fights, boxing matches,

and other games of the Anglo-Saxon races are all arranged with the view of appealing to the lower brutal instincts of man.

In the vulgar shows of our own times we find the lower instincts taking the upper hand. A man knocked down on the stage several times in succession, one poking his fingers into another man's eyes, one stepping on another man's corns, all such actions having the appearance of causing pain, of not a dangerous character and still seemingly serious to the one who is subjected to them, are greeted by some audiences with peals of laughter. The pain is regarded by the audience as slight and insignificant, although the abused person may regard the matter in a very different light. In fact, the more important the insignificant matter is considered by the person the more ridiculous the whole performance appears. In many societies pain is regarded as ludicrous, even if it is a matter of death, as in the case of the gladiatorial games of the ancient Romans. This was due not only to the brutality of the people used to such spectacles, but also to the fact that the lives of the gladiators were considered as worthless.

To laugh at the misfortunes of other people with whom we have no sympathy, or for whom we have no use and whom we treat with contempt and possibly with hatred, may be considered as one of the early roots of the comic and ludicrous. One laughs at the misfortunes of his enemies, the laughter is malicious,

diabolical, and really belongs to the inimical sneer which is the direct descendant of the snarl of the brute. We may include under it the obscene and scurrilous joke which regards the object of ridicule with a sneer. The obscene joke has the tendency to awaken sexual energy and pamper the sexual instinct. This root of malice, however, becomes gradually atrophied and dwindles away in the higher spheres of comic art. At first the malicious side is hidden and then is completely omitted in the real productions of art. The malicious comic may be still utilized for the amusement of the mob, but it is not art. Detective stories and dime novels are not regarded as literary productions, although they may keep on amusing the crowd. *Play on malice, credulity, and low instincts is kept out of art.*

If we come to analyze the comic we find that its object is the awakening of the subconscious surplus energy of man, bringing to the foreground the play of free, unimpeded activity, giving rise to pure joy, resulting in laughter. Malice and cruelty belong to the primitive means of arousing man's reserve energy, just as war was useful in bringing men into communication, as cruel despotism was requisite to cement tribes, and as slavery had its place in the training of man. Such means, however, fall into disuse with the further advance of mankind.

The comic, which is a manifestation of the play instinct, follows a similar course. The factor of cruelty

is no longer the one that arouses mirth among civilized people, or, at least, among the best classes of civilized races. In fact, we find that the element of malice must be hidden, and the element of inflicted pain must be of a character that should be slight, insignificant, and only *apparently serious*. Furthermore, the demand is that the ridicule should be directed against something which is really inferior and demands suppression in the mild way caused by laughter.

In the still higher forms of ridicule the malicious is not only eliminated, but sympathy is present with the inferior object or relations ridiculed. *This is the form known as humor*. Dickens ridicules a number of characters, but we see through his ridicule his humaneness and love for human life; we love and sympathize with the people whom we regard as ludicrous.

The same we find in the genial humor of Bret Hart, and of Mark Twain, writers who otherwise lack the artistic sense. Thus, for instance, in "Huckleberry Finn," the negro *Jim* is put in a ridiculous light with all the beliefs and superstitions which he entertains and which he tries to impress on his companion, *Finn*. At the same time we feel the common humanity we share with the poor negro. We cannot help loving and sympathizing with poor *Jim* in spite of all his failings and shortcomings. We laugh at *Jim*, but there is human feeling in the laughter as we feel intensely

our community with him.

The laughter in such ridicule acts in that way of catharsis as described by Aristotle in the case of tragedies—it purifies us and establishes our common humanity, full of defects and imperfections, revealing that divine spark which burns in every human being in spite of the ashes which cover the flames, hide the fire, and seemingly smother it. We forgive and we sympathize, for we see a living soul, the beauty of the spirit behind the ugly, dirty tatters, and the black skin. The characters may be laughed at, but we cannot help loving them.

Dickens' characters may be commonplace people, but we feel the good heart that beats under their unattractive exterior, and we come to love them. Such, for instance, are the characters *Barkis* and *Pegotty*, in "David Copperfield." We laugh away our indignation, narrowness, and prejudices. As in all art, the bonds of individuality are burst asunder and the artist, by means of his humor, brings people together. Souls are stripped of their conventionalities by ridicule and come into close contact.

Our life runs on worn-out paths laid in the ruts of social tradition; our experiences are run into ready-made moulds of pale abstract concepts; our feelings, emotions; cravings and longings are controlled by tradition and custom, handed down by former generations, as well as by habits developed in the

course of the routine education of the individual. We are apt to fall into a routine and cease to appreciate the main, central, essential aspects of life. We attend to our individual experiences, as they come along, without the realization of their general meaning and significance. In the routine of our life, and in the tangle of our experiences, we are apt to go by the practical rule of thumb, and cease to appreciate the really important; we cease to discriminate the essential from the inessential. The power of selection and the sense of appreciation of the important and unimportant, of the significant and insignificant, being feeble, undeveloped or rudimentary in the average specimen of humanity, man wanders about like a lost sheep in the wild confusion of his chaotic experiences. The best that man can do is to seize on each bit of individual experience, as it forces itself on him, but he cannot grasp the many experiences as a whole, see them in perspective, and view them in their various aspects.

The function of art is the selection by the artist of the important, essential, significant traits of life and the weaving of them into creations of universal types. The types are ideal and still they are real, inasmuch as they give meaning and significance to the confused and chaotic individual experiences of our daily life. The artist, by his creative genius, gives us the perspective of things: he makes us appreciate the various aspects of life, which he reveals to our gaze by finding their ideal meaning, their real significance in

the ceaseless flux of our life; he gives us the interpretation of the various aspects of life, as seen by the eagle eye of his artistic genius. This the artist accomplishes by presenting the typical, the ideal, the universal in concrete, individualized forms of sensuous experience.

Out of the chaos and confusion of experience the artist selects the essential; out of the fleeting and transitory he selects the permanent, the abiding, the characteristic features, creating them into living types, into immortal characters. The artist universalizes the individual and individualizes the universal; he embodies the ideal into a living type. Phidias creates his Zeus, Raphael his Madonna, Homer creates his Achilles, Hector and Ulysses, Æschylus breathes life into his Prometheus, Sophocles creates his Antigone, Euripides his Alcestis, Cervantes his Don Quixote, Shakespeare his Hamlet and Goethe his Faust.

Dramatic genius expresses itself in tragedy and comedy the function of which is the creation of types and the revelation of the real, inner, deeper nature of man. Tragedy reveals the nature of types of man through inner struggle and suffering, while comedy gives a glimpse into the depths of types of man's life by contrast of defects of the actual with the ideal through laughter and joy. Both tragedy and comedy, in the better and higher sense, confront man with his

real self.

In the higher forms of art comedy and tragedy may merge. It is hard to tell whether or no Euripides, "Alcestis," Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," Gogol's "Dead Souls" belong to tragedy or to comedy. Dante's "Inferno" is entitled "Divine Comedy."

In his "Dead Souls," Gogol complains of the unjust judgment which does not recognize the fact that creations of "elevated laughter stand on the same plane with the creations of elevated lyrical emotions." He further tells us: "I have been condemned by some strange power to go hand in hand with my heroes (types), to view life, as it sweeps pompously by, through the seeming world of laughter and tears." Tragedy and comedy, in fact, all the higher forms of art, free man from the bonds of his finite individuality, and, through laughter and tears, reveal to him by immediate intuition the infinity, the freedom of his better, deeper, larger self.

Banter and badinage are akin to humor. The person is humiliated and laughed at, but only in play. In reality it is the reverse that is meant. Affection and love are expressed in terms drawn from the inferior and humbler side of life. What is meant is the opposite, it is based on association of contrast. In the same way a big man is called an infant, or white is indicated as black, sweet as sour, good as bad, and

love is playfully regarded as hatred. This play and playful spirit often come from a deep source of love. In this respect it is akin to the kiss, the smacking and, the licking which express affection and which, by the law of association of similars, are originated in food reactions and afterward transferred to other sources to express satisfaction, gratification, and love.

In some cases the excitement may run so high as to be manifested by a sham bite and even by an actual strong bite causing pain. Banter and badinage are in the intellectual world of laughter what the kiss and the bite are in the material world. In banter and badinage there are love, faith, and devotion, but they are all covered by a thin veil of smiles, laughter, ridicule, and raillery. The superior is expressed in terms of the inferior.

In this respect we may regard it as the reverse of irony, in which the inferior is played as if it were the superior. Irony is allied to sarcasm. Both show lack of trust in the powers of the ridiculed object. Banter and badinage are more allied to satire, in which, though pessimistic and attacking faults and defects, still there faith in the deeper forms of life and the possibility of regeneration. The satirist ridicules the faults and shortcomings of persons and life, he expects improvements and hopes that a new higher type will take the place of the old degenerated forms.

We may call the reader's attention to a little-

known Christmas story, entitled "Makar's Dream," by Korolenko. The writer draws a vivid picture of *Makar's* life, of his family relations, of his beastly drunkenness. The picture is full of grim humor. *Makar*, in his besotted state, the result of heavy drinking in honor of Christmas holiday, dreams that he has departed this life and has gone to heaven before the seat of judgment. The journey presents many ludicrous incidents. Poor, ignorant, superstitious *Makar* is helpless and bewildered in the heavenly court-house. The sins and merits are weighed on scales; the sins are too heavy. As usual *Makar* attempts to lie and cheat and is caught in the act. The charges against him are too grave. As the loving glance of Christ falls on *Makar*, the fear disappears, confidence and courage rise in the poor sinner's soul. Righteous indignation arises in him against the accusations of his cheerless life. He recalls his whole life—down to the smallest detail, it was indeed a miserable and brutal life. As he goes back to his early childhood he sees himself with all the possibilities of a good human soul. He witnesses the state of degradation in which he has fallen, and a cry of intense pain rends his agonized soul.

In "The Death of Ivan Ilitch," Tolstoy, the greatest of Russian writers, depicts with spirit and humor the artificial life of the modern successful man. He ridicules the pettiness, the narrowness, the conventionality, the hypocrisy, the aimlessness of such a hollow life. From the artificial social standpoint

the life of the successful man is good and superior; in reality, it is inferior, bad and miserable. Guided by the false social standards, the successful man does not realize whither he drifts. The whole career is described by Tolstoy with all the artistic power in his possession. Tolstoy pours out the vials of his righteous ridicule in his humorous descriptions of the hypocrisy that permeates the life of the wealthy classes with their affected standards of sham goodness and counterfeit happiness. *Ivan Ilitch* falls sick. The disease becomes painful and aggravated. Physician after physician is consulted, and new treatments are undertaken. Tolstoy takes the occasion to describe in a humorous light the character of the physician, the lawyer, the judge, and of the professional man in general. He shows the hypocrisy, the vanity, the conceit of the various professions. The disease gains ground, develops, becomes fatal. *Ivan Ilitch* becomes obsessed with the fear of death. With the inimitable vigor characteristic of Tolstoy, he sketches in bold, artistic outlines this state of obsession which finds its victims among the higher classes of society. As the end draws nigh, *Ivan Ilitch* begins to realize that his life has not been a success, that it has been a rank failure; in fact, it was all an immense lie. A cry of agony arises from the inmost depths of his soul. As the sham of life vanishes the fear and pain suddenly disappear. In freeing himself from the bonds of his artificial life a great light and joy have entered into his soul. He has regained his real,

true self.

In one of his stories, "Three Deaths," Tolstoy describes, with the titanic power of his genius, the life, sickness, and death of a wealthy lady. He shows the pettiness of that life, the hypocrisy, the discontent, the irritability, the credulity, the fear of death with which the wealthy classes are smitten. In a few lines of genius he depicts the life and end of a poor driver. There is a grim humor in the picture of the simple people—the lack of self-consciousness, the rough, natural kindness, the brutal frankness, the ignorance, the superstitions, the absence of morbid fears, the almost total resignation to the course of their life. The short scenes are full of the most delicate, the most artistic touches of humor. With a few strokes of genius the artist scales the heights of the human spirit, and throws a beam of light into the inmost depths of human nature. The story is concluded by a wonderful description of a scene in the forest, a requiem by the forest over the departure of a tree, a paean by nature triumphing over death, a symphony of joy of newly rising life.

In the highest forms of humor the gentle smile and rippling laughter may end with an agonizing cry coming from the inmost depths of the human soul. The ludicrous, the humorous, is the play of mental light and shade on the foamy, restless waves, rolling and swaying above the unknown depth of the human

spirit.

We may say that the highest form of humor is akin to that upbraiding and finding of faults characteristic of the ancient prophets. The shortcomings are pointed out bluntly and with intense fervor, but behind the reproofs, condemnations, and denunciations there is seen to be flaming an intense love for man, there is present an almost superhuman faith in the capabilities of human nature. The allusions and suggestiveness of humor are absent, but there is present an intense love of truth and of the ideal as well as a profound love of man. Listen to the invective against the waywardness of his generation by the prophet Hosea:

O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee ? . . .

The iniquity of Ephraim was discovered, and the wickedness of Samaria; for they commit falsehood; and the thief cometh in, *and* the troop of robbers spoileth without. . . . Ephraim is a cake not turned. . . . Ephraim also is like a silly dove. . . . Woe unto them! for they have fled from me: destruction unto them! because they have transgressed against me: though I have redeemed them, yet they have spoken lies against me.

Israel is an empty vine. . . . O Israel, thou hast sinned from the days of Gibeah. . . . Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies. . . . Therefore shall a tumult arise

among the people, and all thy fortresses shall be spoiled. . . .

The prophet's love becomes awakened:

When Israel *was* a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. . . . I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. . . . I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love. . . . How shall I give thee up Ephraim? *How* shall I deliver thee, Israel? . . . Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled Together. . . . I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I *am* God, and not man. . . .

In this we find infinite love, sympathy, pity, and compassion.

There is an element in the higher forms of the ludicrous which broadens and deepens it to an extent to which the lower form do not aspire. While in the lower forms the inferior aspect is totally on the side of the ridiculed object, whether it be person, idea, feeling, institution, or belief, in the higher forms there is a reflections of inferiority on the person who observers the ludicrous, and there is again a reflection of superiority from the observer to the ridiculed object. Thus there is a mutual sympathy established between the contrasted personal states, as well as a communion between the contrasted personal states, as well as a communion between the

opposed relations of inferiority and superiority. The lower forms tend to bring out the inner latent energies of the observer, the higher forms tend to show the depth of human life and the greatness of soul of the very characters represented to us in a ludicrous light. The glimpse into the infinity of the human soul is given to us under the very forms of defects and shortcomings. The lower forms of ridicule lean more to the inferior, the animal, the brutal, the cruel, and the pessimistic, while the higher forms have the distinct aspect of human love, compassion, and pity.

On the one hand, the observer, far from feeling triumphant, arrogant, and superior in regard to the ridiculed object or subject, feels his affinity with the inferior responding with a deep emotion of humility that one is not better than the most humble and the lowest of human life. On the other hand, there opens before one an infinite horizon of what is really true and noble in the human soul. Under the veil of petty, ludicrous traits and incidents we witness the revelation of the depth of human life and of the splendor of the soul present in what is humble, meek, and low. The great are humbled and the low are exalted. Both, however, are surrounded by a glorious halo of what is truly great in man. All the barriers of artificiality and conventionality of social relationship are broken and the human soul shines forth in its full glory.

The highest development of ridicule, true humor,

brings one in touch with the infinite. True humor in its highest stages sees the infinite depth of the soul in the very failures, faults, defects, and imperfections.

For thence—a paradox

Which comforts while it mocks,—

Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:

What I aspired to be,

And was not, comforts me. . . .

.....

Now, who shall arbitrate?

Ten men love what I hate,

Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;

Ten, who in ears and eyes

Match me: we all surmise,

They, this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

Not on the vulgar mass

Called “work,” must sentence pass,

Things done, that took the eye and had the price;

O'er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;

All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's
amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;

All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher
shaped.