

The Logic of Laughter

Frank Boreham

Frank Boreham was ordained a Baptist Minister but has preached before Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational and Church of England pulpits for many years in Australia. He was the author of forty-eight books and a regular columnist for The Melbourne Age from 1936 to his death in 1959. This article is reprinted from The Melbourne Age, November 16, 1947.

Two professors of Illinois University, Drs. Raymond Cattell and Leonard Luborsky, are making an exhaustive study of the things that amuse all kinds and conditions of people, with a view to presenting us with a complete philosophy of laughter. They will probably find the problem a trifle more intricate than they had supposed for the trouble is that, when a man begins to philosophise about laughter, he discovers to his consternation that it is scarcely possible to lay down any proposition on the subject without being startled by the awkward fact that a diametrically opposite proposition is just as capable of substantiation.

It may be affirmed, for example, that there is nothing quite as good as a hearty laugh. There is something genial, something kindly, something sociable about it. In discoursing in his inimitable way on the country inns to which he and his fellow anglers restored for occasional hospitality, Izaak Walton lays down as one of the axioms of his delicate craft that the man who can beguile the tedium of a long evening or a wet day by gathering his companions round a roaring fire and keeping them in a simmer of clean and honest laughter should never be allowed, on departing from the tavern, to pay his own bill.

Yet, whilst nothing can be quite as kindly as laughter, nothing can be quite as cutting and as cruel. We all hate to be laughed at. Ridicule, an Eastern proverb avers, will pierce even the shell of the tortoise. In his *By the Fireside*, Charles Wagner tells the story of a laugh—thoughtless, lighthearted and utterly destitute of any evil intent—that rang in a man's ears from childhood to old age, embittering his life at every recollection of it. As a small boy this man, who, when Wagner met him, was very old, had committed some childish misdemeanor, and, in the presence of the family and of several friends, had been sternly reprimanded. He felt that his offense, freely acknowledged and bitterly regretted, merited the reprimand, and, in the presence of the entire company, he burst into tears. But, as he closed the door behind him, still overwhelmed by the enormity of his transgression and the blackness of his disgrace, a great roar of laughter from those inside the room assailed his ears. "Shall I ever forget that laugh?" asked the old man.

In the farthest corner of the house I hid myself from everybody and wept my little heart out: that laugh made me suffer so!

The incident demonstrates the fact that laughter, which can be the most kindly thing in the universe, can, even when destitute of any malicious intent, be the most cruel. Nor do the contradictions end here.

Thoreau affirmed that laughter is an indispensable pledge of sanity. There can be no doubt about it. And yet is the opposite equally true? Is there not a horrible laughter that we associate with the ravings of a mind diseased? Or, to look in another direction, is it not generally assumed that laugh ripples most readily from the lips when the heart is gay? But again, there is an alternative. For in *The Antiquary* Sir Walter Scott says of Sir Arthur Wardour that

. . . he laughed that bitter laugh which is the most fearful expression of human misery.

Merriment on the one hand and misery on the other: laughter is the natural index of them both. Again, we all affirm, in our easygoing way, that laughter makes a man lovable. But does it not sometimes make a man detestable? In the famous trial scene in *Picwick*, Dickens has a good deal to say about the laughter of Perker, the sergent's clerk. "It was not a noisy, boisterous laugh," Dickens says,

. . . but a silent, internal chuckle, which Mr. Pickwick disliked to hear, When a man bleeds inwardly it is a dangerous thing for himself; but when he laughs inwardly it bodes no good to other people.

The healthy and delicious ecstasy of robust and wholesome laughter is part of the music of the spheres. But the muffled and half-hearted sputterings of simperers and sniggerers and chucklers and gigglers and titterers grate upon the ear and seem pitifully out of harmony with the eternal scheme of things.

In this welter of confusion one circumstance stands out clearly. Laughter is a monopoly of humanity. We speak of a certain beast of prey as the laughing hyena, because, in its most gruesome moods, that ferocious creature really seems to be grinning! We speak of one of the most attractive denizens of the Australian bush as the laughing jackass, because, in its vocal moments, the note of that handsome bird sounds sometimes like a merry chuckle, sometimes like a loud guffaw. Yet whilst we use this picturesque phrasology, we know perfectly well that we are employing the vocabulary of imagination rather than the vocabulary of science. The laughing hyena does not really laugh: the laughing jackass does not really laugh. Nothing, indeed, laughs but man. And why does man laugh? Is it because he was fashioned in the image of his Maker? John Masfield evidently thinks so.

Laugh and be merry; remember,
in olden time,
God filled the heaven and the
earth with the strong red

wine of His mirth,
The splendid joy of the stars,
the joy of the earth.

“How,” asked Heinrich Heine, “can we think that God is destitute of humor when He made kittens?” And in his tribute to Artemus Ward, James Rhoades declared it inconceivable that so good a man and so hearty a laugher had gone to a land from which laughter is excluded. Ω

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