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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER.*

I think I must tell you the origin of this talk to-day. A number of nurses belonging to the Association, of which I have the honour to be the chief official, grew reminiscent one evening, and one of them quoted a remark which I had made many years before. Exasperated, perhaps, by the reluctance of someone to undertake some particular case I am reputed to have said: "I never heard the word 'can't' so often as I have since I came to London." No doubt this remark was made with the intention of putting someone on her mettle, but it is remembered against me unto this day. There was some laughter and more talk on the evening I am alluding to, and the subject of my broadcasting was referred to. I invited help in drawing up a list of subjects, from which the authorities could make their selection. "Think of something she *can't* do," came the chorus, and then I realised that I was to reap the revenge upon my ill-considered remark of years before. Nemesis was upon me, but what could I do but accept the challenge; only one stipulation I made, it was that there should be but a few moments in which to select a subject. "Laughter, let's say laughter, there's nothing much to tell about laughter, such an everyday thing as laughter," and I duly entered that in the list of subjects, prefacing it with the word psychology to bring it into line with my usual subjects. On consideration there did seem wonderfully little to be said on the subject of laughter, and, later, I nearly followed up the list, just posted, with a postcard to ask that this subject be not considered, but that did not seem like playing the game to the nurses. It came back among the selected subjects, and so here I am in the pillory, as a result of not having kept watch on my unruly member years ago; I am in honour bound not to say "I can't."

Some little time ago I was talking to a man who is a great psychologist as well as an enthusiastic observer of human nature. He was speaking of fear and, by a very clever course of reasoning, too lengthy for recapitulation, he argued that many of the ills of life have their origin in fear. He went on to speak of the crowds one meets every day in the streets of London, remarking that their faces looked machine like, that they gave one the impression of being driven, and this condition also he attributed in certain respects to fear, to the desire of people to get away from themselves altogether, right away into the surging, hurrying life around them. They were impelled then, he said, only by the tide of affairs, and little of emotion, thought, or even will power, was claimed of them.

But laughter may be said to be the antidote to fear, and, indeed, that is the light in which it has often been regarded at various periods of the world's history. It is recorded of the great Zoroaster, of the ancient Persian mythology, that he came into the world smiling and that all the world rejoiced because of this smile, while demons and forces,

antagonistic to humanity were driven away by it. The smile of Zoroaster meant freedom for mankind; and, to this day, if we give the matter consideration, laughter is, from a psychological point of view, more or less, an expression of freedom. That at least is the aspect in which I wish you to think of it during this afternoon's talk.

The psychological effects of laughter on children are often overlooked. Apart from the influences of illness or faulty training, it may be said that the more readily children alternate between laughter and tears the greater is likely to be their individuality and strength of character. This does not apply so much to children over seven, for, at that age and after, the ego—the personality—has taken possession of the child, and so he will be influenced more by the forces of reason and expediency.

But, nevertheless, one curious thing about laughter is that it is to only a very small extent connected with the intellect; indeed, any such connection may be said to be of a negative character. No joke, explained by the intellect, by logic, will give food for laughter, and probably these very facts give us the explanation why, after prolonged intellectual activity, after prolonged mental strain or worry, you often hear people say that they must go to this or that comedy "to get a laugh." They realise, without even interpreting it in thought, that laughter implies a certain freedom, an escape from the problems that have held the mind, have imprisoned it by their urgency and weight; in laughter the mind finds its way of escape from these, its chance to re-create itself, to strengthen itself for future activities. But there is another aspect, and a less laudable one, in connection with the argument that laughter is the expression of freedom. Quite frequently, when a person is pressing some argument, and when his contentions are quite forceful enough to convince any unprejudiced person of the facts he wishes to drive home, his antagonist will meet his arguments with laughter, will, as it were, get away from them, clear of them, will free himself of them by laughter. It is not that he is not convinced of the soundness of the points put forward by his opponent, rather he is so, but to push them aside, to free himself from them, he laughs. There are lots of people who laugh at things, simply because they do not wish to understand them; this is their way of freeing themselves from the claims of truth and clear thinking.

But when laughter is with you it is a different matter. Any of us who have done a little dramatic work, know the triumph one feels, the sense of having conquered, of having set oneself into a right relationship towards prejudice or criticism when, to use a stage expression, one "gets a laugh." "Don't go too quickly there you may get a laugh," "Don't cut out your laugh," "Stop for the laugh," these are among the most peremptory, the most insistent of the calls from the producer during rehearsals. He at least never minimises the importance of laughter, he has too good an estimate of the psychology of the human mind, of the psychology of the crowd mind. It is the same thing, too, when it comes to platform speaking. Once you have

* Portions of a talk broadcast from the Glasgow Station on August 27th.

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