

MAKERS OF LAUGHTER.

My attention was first called to this subject by a sentence I once read in the daily paper, which was to the effect that "Laughter is essentially immoral" the reason stated for it being that "Laughter should be indolent and free from care, and not given to fretting over troubles and worries of this unintelligible world!"

I cannot say that I altogether agree with this reasoning for, look at the matter as we will, regard it in what light we may, it is not in accordance with the teaching of the past writers who would have us believe that "Laughter is the reaction of an overcharged mind" and that so far from being free from care the laughter that is akin to tears is often the safety-valve of a mind surcharged with grief and pain. If we are to believe this, then we must start out with the understanding that the physical basis of laughter is the reaction of the mind on the body and that it does not always imply frivolity, want of mind, or shallowness of feeling, but that of every world it is in reality a very large factor in the ordinary and commonplace relations of everyday life.

In the olden days, the witty and humorous authors were generally the great thinkers and scholars of literature. Shakespeare and Rabelais were giant makers of laughter, Cervantes, Sterne and Goldsmith diluted their laughter with grim smiles, but they all taught us that the only way to take life seriously was to infuse into it what has been called "Wisdom of Laughter," to sweep aside the same clouds and dark shadows that creep into all our lives, and to let humour brighten up all the corners for there is a saving grace in a touch of humour—always. To cultivate the joys of sympathetic mirth is to put away much of the narrowness of our lives, for good humour will often, and priggishness seldom, keep house together. A touch of unconscious humour will often relieve the monotony of work and take us out of ourselves.

Some time ago I asked the question "What is wit?" I was somewhat dismayed at first for we have been told that "nothing is harder to give than a concise definition," so I have borrowed my answer from one of the ablest writers and the most brilliant humorist the world has ever known—Alex. Pope. He tells us:

*True wit is nature to advantage drest
Of thought before, but never so well expressed.*

and this is strictly true for a thought, an idea, may come into our minds frequently, perhaps before we suddenly find the exact words in which to express it both concisely and wittily.

A well-known writer, G. K. Chesterton, says "a wit is he who sees the consistency of things, but a humorist is he who sees the inconsistency of things."

Wit and humour, my first two makers of laughter, though generally classed together are in reality two distinctly different things: wit is the product of education and learning; to be witty one must be to some extent wise, to have at any rate a quick and ready brain and that is not given to everyone to possess: but humour is a very different thing for it is the product of nature and opportunity and I would say, if I may adapt the words of Shakespeare, "woe to the man who has not humour in his soul." To be the constant companion of such a person would be very much like incurring the fate of the tyrant Myzetus' victim whom he condemned to be tied for life to a dead body.

Of the two a keen sense of humour is preferable to all the sharpest sallies of wit: for wit is often deficient in sympathy. Its most sparkling retorts and repartees are apt to be one-sided and unfair, and there is frequently a sting in its ridicule. But humour is a very human thing, it makes the old feel young again, it makes the young feel that the sun is always shining, and anyone with a keen

sense of humour can often carry a company far before the most learned scientist because he possesses one of those touches of nature that make the whole world akin.

In these strenuous times—when the battle of life, the strife for pre-eminence, the struggle for bare existence have reached such a pitch—life would be almost unbearable if we had not something to take us out of ourselves.

*He cannot be complete in aught
Who is not humorously prone
A man without a merry thought
Would scarcely have a funny-bone.*

There are several sorts and kinds of humour, all equally enjoyable both to the giver and the receiver, and not only enjoyable but useful, for merriment is the outcome and sustainer of healthy vitality, it quickens the pulse and regulates the mind, it relieves the worry of business and the strain of intellectual work. For many who are not really humorous themselves are quick to perceive the humour in others, and penetrate beneath the surface of many amusing little episodes that are constantly occurring around us in our daily life.

Not long ago the routine and tedium of a large school-room were relieved by a small boy who, in his prayers, said "many are cold but few are frozen" and if we read the records of schoolboy life and peep into the annals of the schoolroom it is wonderful what clever pieces of humour and really brilliant wit we find there. There is the story of the boy who was asked to dry the towel and said "Mamma, is it ready when it's brown?"

Ella Wheeler Wilcox gives us some good advice in the following:—

*Smile a little, smile a little,
As you go along,
Not alone when life is pleasant
But when things go wrong,
Care delights to see you frowning,
Loves to hear you sigh;
Turn a smiling face upon her,
Quick the dame will fly.*

*Smile upon your undone labour:
Not for one who grieves:
O'er his tasks waits wealth or glory,
(He his smiles achieves)
Though you meet with loss and sorrow
In the passing years
Smile a little, smile a little,
Even through your tears.*

That the Irish have a wide reputation as makers of laughter has been undoubtedly proved long ago, although they may not be guilty of all the bulls and blunders laid to their charge. Still there is a lightness and gaiety—we might almost say an expansion—about their character which show that their wit is redolent of the whole nature of the people.

Most European nations have their own ideas of wit and humour, although before we say what makes a nation laugh it is best to know something of its past history and of its peoples' occupations and surroundings, for the wit and humour of one age and nation are no more like those of another time and race than are their ways and customs. Often by studying the humour of a past people much may be learnt of their manners and habits and of the changes in their social ways and dress.

The humour of most European nations is amusing both in conception and expression, but what we must remember is it requires a rare gift on the part of the translator not to be lost in the translating.

In Spain the reputed qualities of the people are pride, haughtiness and reserve, yet there is a vivid imagination and keen humour to be found in many of their dramatists and writers, and it is to this country that "Don Quixote" owes its origin which is *par excellence* the standard work

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)