

# Concerning the Vulgar Habit of Laughing

By *Thomas L. Masson*

IT IS gradually beginning to dawn upon the most reluctant people in the world—I refer to the Americans—that their humor is no laughing matter. Laughter will soon be recognized as a vibratory emotion in which the death rattle is distinctly discernible. Unless all signs fail, laughter will soon be relegated to the past as one of the lowest forms of human self-expression. The man who laughs will be in the same case with the man who spends money only upon himself. Both are a form of ostentatious vulgarity, not to be tolerated where spiritual intelligence will soon hold dominion over the intellect.

This is by no means stated in disparagement of real humor which is always truth undisguised, nor even in disparagement of our present humor, much of which is not only humorous but also true. No, it is not that. It is simply that we are gradually discovering that there is a higher happiness which comes from tranquillity; that true enjoyment, the best entertainment, is something so closely allied to the permanent that it carries with it no explosive quality. The "Make me laugh" era is passing. The "smile that won't come off" era has been so commercialized that many of us have been fairly driven into an appearance of outward stolidity in order to protect our inward joy.

Hitherto, in order to conceal our dismay over the sudden display of truth as it came in humor, we have thought it best to laugh. But this is an age of exposure. The necessity for dissimulation has gone. We no longer feel ashamed at anything we do. Hence, when a good joke comes along, we may easily be inclined to shed tears over it. The tragedy of it will shock us more than before the truth of it tended to make us conceal it with an outward show of mirth. And from all this—who knows?—a national sense of humor, hitherto lacking, may arise. In a democracy all things are possible. David, one of the first unprofessional humorists, and therefore a good one, remarked that all men were liars. That established his reputation. It was true, and therefore humorous.

Of course, real humor must not only be true, but it must be put in such form as to be startling. A recent writer in the *London Spectator*, in commenting upon this fact, remarked that he could not for some time understand why it was that the undoubted humor of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas no longer interested him, until it suddenly occurred to him that the reason was he

was no longer shocked. That explains a great deal. It explains why so many humorists go up like rockets and come down like sticks. Also why the old jokes are the best, because, where nothing shocks us any more, we quite naturally turn to the durable things, in a kind of revulsion. We go back to Gilbert and Sullivan, not to get a laugh out of them so much as to realize the beauty and excellence of their lines and cadences.

It therefore becomes necessary all the time for our humorists to be more finished in their work. And they are. They write better, technically. But certainly they are hard put to it for forms. Mr. Corey Ford falls back on Rollo. Two or three years ago Mr. George S. Chappell fell back on Rollo. Similarly Mr. Christopher Ward falls back on the time-honored burlesque of fiction, which in 1867 Bret Harte used in his "Condensed Novels," and which has been used in some way or other from ye olden days. Mr. Newman Levy finds himself in the ballad form, some of his work suggesting the Bab Ballads, and Miss (Is she a Miss?) Anita Loos is much closer to the present; for Ring Lardner's influence is plainly discernible in her work, and her phrase, "If Mama did not die of hardening of the arteries," suggests that also quite possibly she has read her George Ade.

Mr. Benchley is more original in his vein. The amusing quality of his work consists of his pomposity, of the air of verisimilitude he manages to throw over everything he does. He does not exactly create new characters—as for instance among scientists—so much as he introduces himself as if he were one of them. He arrays himself in the mantle of a scientist with the air of doing the most important thing in the world. Of course, in order to get the thing right, he has to go into some detail, and it is undeniable that this makes his work frequently tiresome. The answer is, try it yourself and see how hard it is.

As for Bugs Baer, he is what may be termed an antonym hound; that is, he rejoices in similes that don't assimilate. He would assemble a flivver by putting the carbureter on the rear axle, and so on throughout. "Do you remember those Brush roadsters?" he asks. "They buttoned up the back and cranked up behind the left ear." Neither is this a new form of humor. Bill Nye used it most effectively. Everybody has used it. It has been, by English critics, declared a "pecooliar" quality of American humorous writing. The fact is, we have a kind of genius

for this sort of thing. It is the same kind of genius which caused us to name our battle-ship guns "loud speakers." Bugs Baer has it in excess, and is such an addict that you have to read him closely to get at the richness of his dialect. In his "Family Album" he has taken a very old subject and recreated it in whimsical prose of no mean merit. It is not at all necessary to be too literal, too critical about the way he does it. The only thing which concerns us is, Does it present truth in such a way as to arrest our attention and occupy our minds for the time being, to our satisfaction? It does. And the question again is, Could we do it as well? Could we do it at all?

And we come back here, after all, mainly to the question of personality. Given the right sort of personality and the man can do pretty much as he likes, he can say what he pleases, and the thing interests us. It interests us mainly, I still insist, because the man himself has dug down somewhere and discovered some section of truth, and the trick is to give it to us in such a manner as to arouse us to it.

For instance, when Montague Glass wrote "Potash and Perlmutter," it had never occurred to anybody—at least in a literary public way—that Jews were human beings. Mr. Glass disclosed the truth about them. He made us laugh and cry over the grand verities of human nature, as displayed in the domestic lives of his Jewish people. Bugs Baer, in his distorted word pictures, does not do quite this thing, because his medium is different; but all the same, certain American types, in this most distorted manner, we recognize as ourselves, as an essential part of ourselves. Let me now briefly take these books presented in order.

Mr. Corey Ford in "Three Rousing Cheers"<sup>(1)</sup> is plainly, and indeed unaffectedly and joyously, following in the recent footsteps of Donald Ogden Stewart. It is superficial enough, but amusing. The difference between Mr. Ford's work and Mr. Fairfax Downey's work in "Father's First Two Years"<sup>(2)</sup> is very marked indeed. Mr. Downey makes no pretense of shocking us. His book, with a few well-chosen medical hints taken from authorities, might be a guide. You feel at first almost ashamed of him that he should dare to think of anything funny about a baby. Yet we know that—as I have intimated—the secret of real humor is to take old truths and recreate them. There are always new people coming on who will be occupied with reflections which may seem quite trite to the old stagers. Then there is this to be said: you can introduce new figures of speech as applied to this old thing you are writing about, so as to give it being. Here is one of Mr. Downey's signs:

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The baby's mother is the interpreter. "Baby says it is about time you dropt around to look over his firm," she translated proudly. "He's been set up in business for himself for a year now without your showing the slightest interest." It is a pleasant book and—this being the author's first—shows a right kind of foundation; for after all, it is better to practise on the commonest objects, if one is to produce real humor permanently.

As to Mr. Benchley<sup>(3)</sup> a little more: he labors under the handicap of most "popular" writers for the American public; he must produce, and how difficult it is not to become tiresome when you are supposed to be continuously funny, and particularly when your story is not cumulative! It is not so much a question as to whether one can sit down at night and read this book of his through and have it "grip" you as if Harold Bell Wright had written it, as it is whether the things in it are illuminating by themselves. For it is in this illuminating quality that a book of humor stands or falls. This in my opinion is where Benchley

excels, quite possible along with Bugs Baer.<sup>(4)</sup> Both carry searchlights of individual make. That is important in a humorist.

It appears to me that the searchlight which Anita Loos has in her "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"<sup>(5)</sup> is one assembled. But, nevertheless, how well she handles it! Her character is that creature of decadent delicatessen city civilization, something akin to the flapper, with her friend, the finally disappointed Eisman. It is full of what we term "wise cracks." We recognize the girl at once, and the book undeniably—with a somewhat definite story interest—carries us along pleasantly enough, Ralph Barton's inimitable pictures adding greatly to the sensations.

Christopher Ward<sup>(6)</sup> among these diverse types of books—and in spite of the limitations of his subject—shines by an art of his own. He is a good workman, because he first thoroughly absorbs the books he burlesques. His courage in thus reading them in itself deserves a distinguished decoration. I fancy that, quite possibly, the genuine merit of his work may not be duly appreciated by the mass, because this would mean that everybody has read what Mr. Ward writes about. Even so, if you have read any of these books (there are seventeen in all, from Defoe to Peter Kyne), you will be enormously amused by the way he succeeds in hitting them off. For myself, one of the best—doubtless because I am most familiar with the original—is the take-off on Masfield's "Sard Harker." This is great burlesque.

Now, among all of these books the only one which is verse is Newman Levy's "Gay But Wistful."<sup>(7)</sup> It is a collection of ballads, jingles, book reviews and fixt forms. To my mind Levy is among the six best writers of light verse in this country. For example, take up this slender little book and read "The Ballad of Will's Bill" or "The Ballad of the Lady and the Dragon." These things are much more than nonsense. They are delicious fantasies, infused with a true sense of comedy.

As for the last two books, Mr. Cobb's "Many Laughs"<sup>(8)</sup> and "Tom Masson's Annual,"<sup>(9)</sup> they are both collections. The first is another batch of stories Mr. Cobb (our most renowned storyteller) has gathered together from his apparently inexhaustible store, and the second is a selection of the best humor, mostly very short, of the past year.

Taking this group of books as a whole—that is, as characteristic of our humorous literature during the past half-year—it must be confessed that they are disappointing. While they show good workmanship, and while there is among them a respectable portion of genuine humor, they do not reveal any marked advance over the past.

(4) THE FAMILY ALBUM. By Arthur ("Bugs") Baer. With an introduction by Gilbert Seldes. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. \$1.50.

(5) GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES. By Anita Loos. Intimately illustrated by Ralph Barton. New York: Boni & Liveright. \$1.75.

(6) FOOLISH FICTION. By Christopher Ward. New York: Henry Holt & Co. \$1.90.

(7) GAY BUT WISTFUL. By Newman Levy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

(8) MANY LAUGHS FOR MANY DAYS. By Irvin S. Cobb. New York: George H. Doran Co. \$2.50.

(9) TOM MASSON'S ANNUAL. Edited by Thomas L. Masson. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co. \$2.

(1) THREE ROUSING CHEERS FOR THE ROLLO BOYS. By Corey Ford. Illustrated by Gluyas Williams. New York: George H. Doran Co. \$2.

(2) FATHER'S FIRST TWO YEARS. By Fairfax Downey. With drawings by Margaret Freeman. New York: Minton, Balch & Co. \$1.50.

(3) PLUCK AND LUCK. By Robert Benchley. Illustrated by Gluyas Williams. New York: Henry Holt & Co. \$2.