

PSYCHOLOGY

What Makes You Laugh

Despite Old Proverb, Unexpected Doesn't Always Happen, But When It Does, Results Are Often Considered Amusing

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

JOSH BILLINGS said: "There iz two things in this world for which we are never fully prepared, and them iz—twins."

If you laughed at that joke, you were amused in a superior adult way by the very same situation that produced gleeful gurgles in a baby who is tossed towards his mother's arm and then suddenly jerked away and planted on father's knee instead.

At least that is Max Eastman's theory of what puts the fun in funny and the laugh in laughter. In a good joke, he says, your mind is led on in a certain pathway. You are looking forward to a certain ending to the line of thought. Then suddenly that goal is jerked away and you are left nowhere, or, better still, landed somewhere else instead.

That is why the clown is funnier when his drollery comes from a solemn or grotesque countenance. That is why the angry old lady sends us off into a roar when her tirade is choked by the sudden slipping of her false teeth.

But you must be in the mood for fun. Otherwise the performance may seem appalling.

Not Always At a Joke

Of course, when you laugh it need not be at a joke. We laugh for many reasons—or for none at all.

At home, my little twin nieces distinguish between the "funny-ha-ha" and the "funny peculiar." So we might also distinguish between the "ha-ha-funny" and the plain "ha-ha-ha."

Cynical uncles and bored grandmothers have been known to insist that the baby's first smile is due not to pleasure but to gas on the stomach, but even parents break down and acknowledge that health is a surer stimulus to infant laughter than is humor.

Ask any father who has stood on his head or wagged his ears in an effort to still the wailing of an insomniac baby. He will readily enough admit to only partial success. A new class for expectant fathers in New York teaches the paternal pupils to put junior over the shoulder and pat the air out of him.

The laughing baby is the healthy baby and one free from discomfort. We have this on the authority of a psychologist who has made a scientific study of child laughter, Dr. Grace E. Bird, of the Rhode Island College of Education.

But she needn't have stopped with babies. It is my own opinion that the grown men and women who laugh are not the ones aching with sciatica or those trying to divert themselves with the humor magazines left optimistically in the dentist's chamber of waiting. "Laugh and grow fat" has been turned around in the telling. The original version was, "Be fat and laugh, sir."

With Activity

Children laugh, too, with physical activity, especially over new success at a physical skill. The chuckles and giggles of a baby walking or running for the first time or bringing his hand down smack in the middle of the birthday cake are like those of an adult taking his first trip down the toboggan slide or riding the silly devices at an amusement park.

Have you ever wondered why a high school girl laughs? Just let two or three of them get together and one of them may mention just a single word. It is probably some innocent little word to which not even the most imaginative can attach humorous association, like "hot" or "stupid." But its utterance will set the whole bevy off into uncontrollable giggles. And this keeps up until the male member of the household throws down his paper with an oath and sets off downtown.

The answer to what arouses this sort of mirth is not to be found in any tome on the psychology of the humorous. But the physician has a clue to the matter, for it is a nervous laugh and particularly afflicts high-strung, mentally overworked girls at adolescence.

Children who get fits of giggles are more likely to have the attacks when they are tired by the terrible exertion of sitting still. This accounts for the seizures that take place in church and at funerals. The giggle fits often terminate in tears.

Some psychologists have held the theory that laughter is a social gesture, and have linked the baby's first chuckle

with his awakening to a world outside his own ego. But this does not apply to kindergarten children, Dr. Bird tells us.

When a kindergarten child finds something funny he laughs right out and by himself. There is no need for him to tell the joke or share his mirth. He has the amusing idea that his entertainment is a personal affair.

When the kindergarteners do join in social laughter, it is of an entirely different kind from their hilarity over the amusing, Dr. Bird found. Under such circumstances, no one seems to know why he is laughing or at what. He just joins the chorus. The laughter is boisterous and noisy and might just as well be jumping or shouting, so far as its humorous import is concerned.

Very different is the polite tittering of adults over the teacups or the wine glasses, Dr. Bird says. For this is really social.

"Often, indeed, the mere fact that individual adults find themselves in one another's society is apt to create laughter, although their conversation may be commonplace to the extent of dullness, with no attempt at wit or humor," she comments. "In some cases this behavior may be a defense against inadequacy in conversation or social adjustment just as a child's laughter may be a defense against the realization of a baffling or confusing situation which presents a problem to be solved.

"In most cases, however," she admits, "this type of adult social laughter probably registers satisfaction or well-being."

At a Good Time

In other words we laugh when we are having a good time. If the adult's idea of fun is somewhat different from that of the infant, that may account for his chuckles originating over a different sort of beverage.

But when it comes to the real laugh of amusement, Dr. Bird's observations of kindergarteners confirms Max Eastman's keen summing up. Children laugh at the unexpected, the inappropriate, the temporary baffling. And if the child's jokes are puzzling to the adult, maybe it is because we have become too well immunized to the outlandish.

What is funny about a dishpan? No housewife or dutiful husband would dream of laughing at one. But when a dishpan was brought into the classroom,



DOES IT SEEM FUNNY TO YOU?

Inverted chairs are a scream to this young man.

it provoked a burst of hilarity rivalled only by Mary's little lamb.

Pulling a button off a coat heads Dr. Bird's list of typically humorous situations among the children. Maybe you think that is not funny, but I have seen sophisticated adults mirthful over the spectacle of a man sewing a button on his coat.

A little boy burst into tears during the playing of what was generally considered as cheerful music. The teachers expected mirth at such an unexpected deviation from routine. But only the teachers could see the essence of a humorous situation in that.

To the children crying in or out of school was perfectly commonplace.

Puppy As a Clown

But when they saw a puppy chase his tail for the first time, they were hilarious over the performance. And when a pet rabbit in the schoolroom kicked and tore paper during a silent period, the effect was almost hysterical.

Adults are often amused (or pretend to be) by their own errors; the child has a different slant on things. When a ball happened to roll straight into the hands of a youngster who anticipated difficulty in capturing it, he laughed heartily.

Another child who expected the pet rabbit to come and eat out of his hand laughed hilariously when it ran the other way.

Laugh at Spilled Paint

Whenever a child spilled paint for the first time, Dr. Bird noticed, he was more inclined to be amused than troubled, except in the case of a little girl who spoiled the dress she had been cautioned to take care of.

Upsetting a chair or wastebasket or dropping a cup was always funny unless it happened too often. Then it was unworthy of notice.

Out walking with the twin nieces, I noticed a mossy stone that was very slippery and warned them about it. But one of them stepped on it, nevertheless, and fell. The other child was shocked.

"Oh, you shouldn't have fallen down, you were told not to!" she cried.

But the other youngster, prone and bruised, found the situation amusing.

"I never heard!" was her explanation of why the accident was funny.

As children grow older, mentally and emotionally, they become able to take delight in more subtle forms of humor. Delicate satire, gentle sarcasm, whimsical nonsense, begin to have some appeal.

Yet even when they reach high school

age, young people are woefully lacking in ability to take delight in witty plays upon words and other more intellectual sorts of humor, it is revealed by tests conducted by Miss Winifred H. Nash of the Boston Memorial High School for Girls. Pupils with high intelligence rating show a much keener appreciation of humor than do those of low IQ, she found from her study of 503 students.

Brightest Miss Subtleties

But even the brightest are woefully lacking in enjoyment of the more subtle types of humor. Mark Twain, American laugh laureate, seemed funny to only 69 per cent. of those tested. The delicate whimsicality of Charles Lamb appealed to only 27 per cent.

The pupils, in general, appear to appreciate only the short, sharply-pointed joke that starts a roar of laughter at once, reports Miss Nash.

Humor of a gentler, more subtle type makes little appeal.

Education in humor is needed, she concludes, in order that high school students may understand the humor of satire, whimsicality, puns, delicate playing with ideas, and other forms of humor that start the slow smile, the quiet chuckle or the pleasant glow of genial humor.

A school course in laughter. That is in short the proposal of Miss Nash, seconded by *The Journal of Education*, in which her report appeared, and by *School Management*, another education journal going to superintendents and other school officials.

It is worth consideration. If the high school is to train young people for life in this twentieth century world, development of ability to recognize the ridiculous, to smile at the silly, and to gain pleasure from playfulness, should be as important as, say, a course in cooking or in algebra.

Perhaps the textbook for such a course might be Max Eastman's "Ten Commandments of the Comic Arts," which at all events should be followed reverently by all those who would be amusing. Here they are as given in his book, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, (Simon and Schuster):

1. Be interesting.
2. Be unimpassioned.
3. Be effortless.
4. Remember the difference between cracking practical jokes and conveying ludicrous impressions.
5. Be plausible.
6. Be sudden.
7. Be neat.
8. Be right with your timing.

9. Give good measure of serious satisfaction.

10. Redeem all serious disappointments.

The first law is important because the best of jokes may fall flat unless it "taps a stream from one of the eternal glee-reservoirs" (such as sex) or unless a real emotion interest is built up.

The reason for the second law is that we cannot laugh about what matters too much. Death is seldom the butt of a good joke. The audience must be in a playful mood if anything is to seem funny.

The labored joke is wearying. Hence law 3.

"By a practical joke," says Mr. Eastman of his fourth commandment, "I do not mean setting a can of water on the upper edge of a door and then calling someone in the next room—although that is a practical joke and a good one, especially if the person does not come, and you forget what you wanted him for and get up and go after him yourself."

He means a joke which comes to a point as distinguished from the humorous story which is laugh-provoking throughout. Laws 5 to 10, the importance of which are obvious, apply only to the pointed joke.

These laws bar the dragged-in joke, the chestnut, the inverted joke or riddle, and the attempt to emphasize the point by repetition.

The final commandments require that the joke have some link or pertinence in the more serious interests of life.

"During the depths of the Great Depression," says Mr. Eastman, "a story went around about a young man who had a nervous breakdown. The doctor recommended to his parents that they put him somewhere where he would not be disturbed, and so they put him in business."

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Science News Letter, February 18, 1939

Over 1,500,000 new houses have been built in Britain in about six years.

More than 100,000 miners were trained in first aid by the Bureau of Mines in the past year ending June 30.

FORESTRY

New Deadly Disease Is Destroying Elms in Ohio

A NEW-FOUND, deadly disease, caused by a filterable virus instead of a fungus, has killed many hundreds of American elms in Ohio. Plant pathologists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture fear that it will prove even more destructive than the so-called Dutch elm disease that they have been fighting for several years in the neighborhood of New York, unless its cause can be discovered and means for combating it developed.

The disease was first called to the attention of government scientists in Ironton and Dayton, Ohio. During three years it killed more than 1,000 out of about 1,800 elms in Chillicothe. It is now rampant in Columbus. It was at first thought to be a "city" disease, but it has since been found in forest trees in West Virginia, northern Kentucky and southern Indiana and Illinois.

Symptoms are: first, a slight shriveling and brittleness in the leaves; then a rotting of the roots and the inner bark

of the trunk. Within a few months the tree may be dead.

The new disease is not at all related to the Dutch elm disease of the Northeast. That is caused by a fungus which is carried about by a beetle. The Ohio valley elm disease has been proved to be due to a filterable virus—a mysterious, self-multiplying something that is too small to be seen through a microscope. How it gets from one tree to another is still unknown. The present outbreak is the first known instance of a virus disease causing a fatal epidemic among trees.

Since the disease may have gained a foothold outside the Ohio valley, government authorities wish to be informed regarding trees showing symptoms of its presence. Notices should be sent to the Division of Forest Pathology, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Because the disease is caused by a virus that cannot be isolated and identified, there is no point in sending diseased samples.

Science News Letter, February 18, 1939

GENERAL SCIENCE

Leading Scientists Are Born and Trained in East

TO THE Yankee ingenuity and curiosity of New England stock, America apparently owes the development of most of her most outstanding scientific men.

A survey of the names in *American Men of Science*, starred for their eminence, reveals that New England contributed far more, in proportion to general population than did any other section of the country. The yield of 77 per million in the wooden nutmeg country was double that of the Middle Atlantic States (37 per million) and far outdistanced that of the East North Central (30), Pacific (27), West North Central (22), Mountain (17), South Atlantic (11), and South Central (4).

The East has also contributed the training for these scientific men.

"Of those who received American bachelors degrees," writes Prof. Stephen S. Visher, of Indiana University, in re-

porting his survey to the *American Journal of Science*, "nearly 30 per cent graduated in the East North Central States, 22 per cent in New England, but less than one-eleventh in the South. For their doctorates, over one-fourth of those with American doctorates went to New England, nearly one-fourth went to Middle

● RADIO ●

Dr. Henry Field, Curator of Physical Anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History, will be guest scientist on "Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, Director, Science Service, over the coast to coast network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Thursday, Feb. 23, 7:15 p. m. EST, 6:15 p. m. CST, 5:15 p. m. MST, 4:15 p. m. PST. Listen in to your local station. Listen in each Thursday.

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