

ON LAUGHING.

And laughter holding both his sides.—MILTON.

If you were to ask a learned physician to explain to you the peculiar sensation termed laughter, it is more than likely he would astonish you with an amazing profundity of erudition, ending in the sage conclusion that he knows nothing more about the matter than that it is a very natural emotion of the senses, generally originating with a good joke, and not unfrequently terminating in a fit of indigestion. If he happened to be—as there are many—a prig-gish quack, it is not unlikely he would add, as a sequel, that it was an most unmannerly indulgence, particular favouring a determination of blood to the head, and decidedly calculated to injure the fine nerves of the facial organ. If on the contrary he should be a good, honest follower of Galen, he would not fail to pronounce it the most fearful enemy to his profession, as being altogether incompatible with physic and the blues; and, by way of illustration, he might go so far as to read a chapter of Tom Hood's best, in order to prove the strength of his position.

Laughter—good, hearty, cheerful-hearted laughter—is the echo of a happy spirit, the attribute of a cloudless mind. Life without it were without hope, for it is the exuberance of hope. It is an emotion possessed by man alone, the happy light that relieves the dark picture of life.

We laugh most when we are young. The thoughts are then free and unfettered; there is nothing to bind their force impulse, and we sport with the passions with the bold daring of ignorance. Smiles and tears, it has been observed, follow each other like gloom and sunshine; so the childish note of mirth trends on the heels of sorrow. It was but yesterday we noticed a little urchin writhing apparently in the agony of anguish; he had been punished for some trivial delinquency, and his little spirit resented it most gloriously. How the young dog roared. His little chest heaved up and down, and every blue vein on his pure forehead was apparent, bursting with passion. Anon, a conciliatory word was addressed to him by the offended *superiorite*, a smile passed over the boy's face, his little eyes sparkling through a cloud of tears, were thrown upward, a short struggle between pride and some more powerful feeling ensued, and then there burst forth such a peal of laughter, so clear, so full, so round, it would have reached the heart of a stoic.

Our natural passions and emotions become subdued or altogether changed, as we enter the world. The laugh of the schoolboy is checked by the frown of the master. He is acquiring wisdom, and wisdom—ye gods, how dearly bought!—is incompatible with laughter. But still, at times, when loosened from his shackles, the pining student will burst forth as in days gone by; but he is no longer the cue and action for passion he then had; the cares of the world have already mingled themselves in his cup, and his young spirit is drooping beneath their influence. The laugh of boyhood is a merry carol; but the first rich blush has already passed away. The boy enters the world full of the gay buoyancy of youth. He looks upon those he meets as the playmates of other hours.

But experience teaches him her lessons; the natural feelings of his heart are checked; he may laugh and as formerly, but the spell, the dreams that cast such a round his young days, are dissipated and broken.

There are fifty different classes of laughers. There is the smooth-faced, politic laugh, your laughter by these brings are generally found within the precincts of a court, at the heels of some great man, to whose dictum they shape their passions as a model. Does his ship say a *bon mot* it is caught up and grinned at in any possible manner, till the powers of grimace exhausted, his lordship is pleased to change the subject and strike a different chord. And it is not astonishing. Who would refuse to laugh for a pension of two hundred a year? When gratitude demands it,

there is then your habitual laughers, men who laugh by without rhyme or reason. They are generally the smooth-faced gentlemen, who eat hearty suppers and are free-and-easies. They will meet you with a smile on their countenance, which, before you have said

three sentences, will resolve itself into a simper, and terminate finally in a stentorian laugh. These men may be truly said to go through life laughing; but habit has blunted the finer edges of their sympathies, and their mirth is but the unmeaning effusion of a weak spirit. These personages generally go off in fits of apoplexy, brought on by excessive laughter on a full stomach.

There is then your discontented, cynical laugh, who makes a mask of mirth to conceal the venom of his mind. It is a dead fraud, that ought not to be pardoned. Speak to one of these men of happiness, virtue &c., he meets you with a sneer, or a bottle-imp kind of chuckle; talk to him of any felicitous circumstance, he checks you with a sardonic grin that freezes your best intentions. He is a type of the death's head the Egyptians placed at their feasts to check their exuberant gaiety.

There is then your fashionable simperer, your laugh, *a-la-mode*, your inward digester of small jokes and tittle-tattle. He never laughs, it is a vulgar habit; the only wonder is, that he eats. People, he will tell you, should overcome these vulgar propensities; they are abominable. A young man of this class is generally consumptive; his lungs have no play, he is always weak and narrow chested; he vegetates till fifty, and then goes off overcome with a puff of *eau de rose* or *millefleur* he has encountered accidentally from the pocket handkerchief of a cheesemonger's wife.

Last of all there is your real, good, honest laugh, the man who has a heart to feel and sympathise with the joys and sorrows of others, who has gone through life superior to its follies and has learnt to gather wisdom even from laughter. Such are the men who do honor to society, who have learnt to be temperate in prosperity, patient in adversity, and who, having gathered experience from years, are content to drink the cup of life, mingled as it is, to enjoy calmly the sweeter portion, and laugh at the bitter.

There is a strange affinity in our passions. The heart will frequently reply to the saddest intelligence by a burst of the most unruly laughter, the effigy of mirth. It seems as though the passion, like a rude torrent, were too strong to pursue its ordinary course, but, breaking forth from the narrow channel that confined it, rushed forth in one broad impetuous stream. It is the voice of anguish that has chosen a different garb, and would cheat the sympathies. But we have ourselves been demonstrating the truth of our last proposition, for we have been writing on laughter till we have grown sad. But what says the old song?

To-night we'll merry, merry be,
To-morrow we'll be sober.

But sadness, after all, is joy deferred.

WEDDING RINGS.

Inquiries into such of our popular customs as appear to owe their existence to times long gone by, have often afforded me an interesting and, I may add, in most cases a profitable amusement, during the hours of relaxation from severer studies.

The use of a ring in the nuptial ceremony is one of those established customs which lay claim to very ancient origin. We find that with the Romans it was usual to present one to their betrothed wives even before the day of marriage, as appears from the following passage in Juvenal.—

"*Digito pignus fortasse dedisti.*"

"Perhaps you have already put the ring upon her finger."

Pliny informs us that the ring used on such occasions was a plain one, unadorned with jewels, and made of iron; but Tertullian observes, that at one time it was made of gold, which being the purest metal, and continuing the longest without rust or tarnish, might perhaps indicate that permanent affection which ought to subsist between married persons: and for the same reason, no doubt, the ring was selected as a gift in preference to other ornaments, the circle being that figure which the ancients used as an emblem of eternity.

It is further remarkable, that the ring is to this day placed on the same finger of the same hand, on which it was worn by the Roman matrons. The reasons given;

why the fourth finger of the left hand is chosen for this purpose, are various; some supposing the ring to be least exposed to injury and at the same time most conspicuous when on that finger; thus Alexander ab Alex. "Former ages placed the wedding ring on the left hand, that it might not be worn in pieces;" whilst others think that it was worn there under the idea of a nerve proceeding from that finger to the heart. This latter opinion seems most favoured by those authors who have noticed the custom; particularly Aulus Gellius, who has a passage in the tenth book of his "Attic Nights," to this purport:—"Apion says, that, in dissecting bodies, previous to their being embalmed, the Egyptians have found a nerve running to the heart, from the finger we have mentioned, and from none else, wherefore it seems proper that this, being so intimately connected with the heart, should be distinguished from the rest by such an ornament." Of these two reasons, however, the former is without dispute the more probable, especially as the latter is founded on an anatomical error.

The Jews, also, had a custom of this sort in their marriages, as well as the Romans, which I believe is continued by their descendants to the present day; and what is more worthy of notice, they made use of rings bearing some short and applicable motto, generally the words, *Muzal tob*; that is, "Be it done in a good hour;" an admonition which may prove as useful in our days, as it was thought appropriate when first inscribed on the ring of a Jewish bride.

Thus it appears, that we still retain, in all its peculiarities, a custom of universal use amongst the Romans and the Jews, to the latter of whom the invention may be attributed, if not with certainty, at least with great probability; one thing we may be assured of, from the knowledge we have of that once-favoured people, that they would not be likely to adopt such a custom in imitation of those by whom they had been subjugated, whilst, on the other hand, it cannot be supposed that the Romans, fully aware of the rank which the Jews once held in the scale of nations, would think an imitation of their ceremonies derogatory to their own dignity.

What were the emblematical significations of the "wedding ring," has been shown above, but its real use was as the token of a covenant made between the parties, and binding them to each other for life; in this sense we retain it, and with this signification it was used by the primitive Christians.

The actual as well as the allegorical meanings of the "wedding ring" still continue, though their institutions are no more remembered; and notwithstanding the inscription, *Muzal tob*, no longer appears upon it, yet its import ought to remain firmly impressed upon the mind. Engagements which are to last for life should be made "in a good hour;" they should be undertaken with cautious reflection. Were this always attended to, I am enthusiast enough to believe that they who entered on the married state, would find it a real Utopia; as the beginning would be propitious, so its continuance would be happy.

CHEERFULNESS.—Cheerfulness, which is a quality peculiar to man—a brute being capable only of enjoyment—opens like Spring, all the blossoms of the inward man: a discontented God were a contradiction, and salvation is an eternity older than damnation. Try for a single day, I beseech you, to preserve yourself in an easy and cheerful frame of mind—be but for one day, instead of a fire-worshipper of passion and hell, the sunworshipper of clear self-possession—and compare the day in which you have rooted out the weed of dissatisfaction, with that on which you have allowed it to grow up—and you will find your heart open to every good motive, your life strengthened, and your breast armed with a panoply against every trick of fate—truly you will wonder at your own improvement.—*Blackwood.*

BOASTING.—Dean Swift says, "It is with narrow-hearted people as with narrow-necked bottles, the less they have in them the more noise they make in pouring it out."