

THE SATURDAY READER.

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Continued from week to week, the NEW STORY,

"THE TWO WIVES OF THE KING."

TRANSLATED FOR THE "SATURDAY READER" FROM THE FRENCH OF PAUL FEVAL.

LAUGHTER AND ITS USES.

HE among the ancients, for whom we entertain the highest regard, is Democritus, the laughing philosopher. He was none of your super-solemn exponents of wisdom, none of those teachers whose brows wear a perpetual frown, and each of whose wrinkles might be translated into a severe moral lecture; but he was a man who adapted himself to every change of circumstance with a light-hearted readiness that betokened the true philosopher; and after laughing for a hundred years, seated himself with a smile in Charon's ferry-boat, was quietly carried across the Styx, and pleasantly landed in the meadows of Asphodel. At this remote period of time, it would be impossible to ascertain if Democritus were acquainted with the properties of that comic chemical compound, called laughing gas; but of this much we are certain, that the course he pursued embodied a deep physiological truth, and, had his example been followed by posterity, opium salts and blue pill would never have been added to the number of our plagues, and the terrific array of bottles that are seen marshalled on the shelves of our apothecaries—every large jar a one hundred pound shot, to be levelled one time or another at the stomachs of the community, and every small phial a minnie bullet at least—could never have come into existence.

To laugh and grow fat, is one of those sayings that almost rises to the dignity of a prescription by Dr. Abernethy. It is a saying that conceals, under a somewhat rough and ready form of phraseology, a vast amount of practical wisdom; and if everybody obeyed the injunction, there can be no question that a great quantity of physic would be thrown "to the dogs," though why dogs, and not those nocturnal abominations, the cats, should be selected by Macbeth as the victims of pills and potions, is a matter we could never thoroughly understand. Some time ago the obese portion of the population of England were awakened to a sense of their ponderous condition by a pamphlet written by a Mr. Banting, who, after illustrating the evils of corpulence, as experienced by himself, gave certain rules for reducing the most Falstaffian proportions to the slender symmetry of a bamboo. Now, there is a great difference between the man who is sleek, plump and well-rounded, the man who gives his tailor no difficulty, when fitting him with a coat—there is a great difference we say between such a one, and the man who feeds as ravenously as an alligator, waddles and flounders under a mass of useless and burdensome flesh, and who, even if his life, or rather his dinner, were depending on the feat, could not stoop down and tie his shoe-strings. As to this Mr. Banting, we regard him as an arrant humbug, if not something worse;

we look upon him as an ogre in human shape, and possessed of more than ogre's cunning; and our readers will doubtless bear us out in our opinion, when we inform him that he is—an undertaker! It will be seen at a glance that it is for the interest of his profession that every rubicund, genial, good-natured man, should be transformed into a sallow, fretful and melancholy skeleton; and we wonder that some of the philanthropic butchers of London, actuated by motives of humanity, did not, before this time, execute summary vengeance on Mr. Banting—and thus remove at least one agent who has been labouring for the deterioration of the species, by endeavouring to wean them from beef-steaks and mutton-chops.

We are not learned in the abstruse mysteries of anatomy, and therefore cannot tell how it is that a good, hearty laugh propels through certain nerves and muscles a current of leaping vitality, before which, as at the touch of Ithuriel's spear, the blue devils take wing and vanish, and the spleen-born vapours that overshadow the mind are swept away as rapidly as the mists of the morning before the beams of the rising sun, and the breath of the freshly-blowing breeze. We do not profess to be able to explain how this beneficent result is accomplished, but we are aware that it is, in the great majority of cases, a physiological fact. A number of interesting cases might be cited to show that a vigorous laugh has often effected cures, in cases of internal disorders, when all the medicines of the pharmacopœa failed of success. The latest instance of this kind is narrated by Dr. John Brown, the author of that pathetic story—"Rab and his Friends;" the case is mentioned in a useful and entertaining little book, written for the working classes, and entitled "*Lay Sermons*," and came under the notice of Dr. Brown himself. The facts are as follow: An excellent young wife lay at the point of death; her husband and friends were standing, sorrow-stricken, by the bedside, when some one present made an observation at which the dying woman suddenly burst forth into a loud laugh, and the result was, that an internal tumour was ruptured, and from that moment she entered upon a speedy recovery. The learned Erasmus, one of the brightest intellectual lights of the sixteenth century, was cured of a disease in a manner somewhat similar. He was reading the barbarous Latin of "*Huitten's Letters of Obscure Men*," and fell into such violent fits of laughter, that he broke an internal abscess that had caused him prolonged suffering. The French physician, Tissot, a man celebrated in his day, professed to cure consumptions and liver complaints by causing his patients to laugh; and Sydenham, one of the first names in English medical science, asserted that the arrival of a clown in a village was as beneficial as the entrance of twenty donkeys laden with drugs. Sterne wished laughter enumerated in the *Materia Medica*, and tells us that "When a man smiles, and much more when he laughs, it adds something to his fragment of life."

There are some men fancy that it is a sign of greatness always to wear a face as solemn as a tomb-stone; and thus try to earn the reputation of deep intellect and of being continually wrapt up in thought. It is Coleridge, we think, who tells the story of an old gentleman at a dinner party, who forbore to join in the conversation, and who, wearing a look of great profundity, was regarded by the other guests as a man who, when he opened his mouth, would edify all present by the utterance of something original and striking. But the company were disagreeably surprised, when, on dumplings being brought in, the old gentleman opened his mouth for the first time, and uttered the request—"Give me one of them jockies."

Of the same mental calibre of this old gentleman, are those bilious bipeds, whom we meet in every walk in life, and who regard laughter as one of the greatest sins of which they could be guilty; such persons as these are the icebergs of society; and woe be to the barque of innocent amusement that cannot leave their path. We have it, however, in history, that there have been men who made some noise in the world, and who thought it a point of excellence never to laugh. We are told that, among the ancients, Phocion, Anaxagoras, and Cato abjured laughter; and Philip IV., of Spain is said to have laughed outright only once in his life; and this was the occasion. His bride, Anne of Austria, while journeying toward Spain was met by some German nuns who desired to present her with some stockings of their own knitting. But a Spanish grandee of her suit put in the objection, that it would be against etiquette to accept the gift, as the Queens of his country were not supposed to have any use for stockings; she then burst out weeping, fearing that, on her arrival at Madrid, her feet would be cut off; and this incident furnished her husband with the only hearty laugh he ever enjoyed. We have seen it stated that the late Emperor Nicholas, of Russia, never laughed; we do not wonder at it, for the load of guilt that weighed upon his soul was not only likely to extinguish the embers of mirth, but, if he possessed a conscience at all, was sufficient to drive him mad. Such a man deserved no more sympathy than was expressed, in a poem that appeared in *Punch*, shortly after the news of his decease reached England. We quote, from memory, the first stanza:

"Smitten, as by lightning smitten,
Down amid his armed array,
With the fiery scroll half written
Bidding myriads to the fray;
Knee to earth and eye to heaven,
God hath won the day."

We have it on record that, in one instance, laughter had the effect of winning a victory. It is stated that, during Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt, the Mamelukes made a furious attack upon the French, but immediately retired and fled on hearing the peal of laughter which arose from the French ranks on hearing the word of command, "*un quarré, les ânes et les savants au milieu*." (Form square—the asses and men of science, in the centre). The Prussian General Bulow proposed that troops, when commencing battle, should advance with their arms at a shoulder, and salute the enemy with loud bursts of laughter. "Be sure," said old Bulow, "that your opponents, surprised and dismayed at this astonishing salute, would turn about and run off." Man is the only animal that laughs, and a cynical Frenchman accounts for this fact by saying that animals were not made capable of laughter, because they were created before man, and therefore had nothing at which to laugh. We had intended, in the course of this article, to devote some attention to a subject closely connected with laughter, namely humour; but we find we have already transgressed the limits within which we must confine our observations. We may, however, in another number of the *Saturday Reader*, take occasion to jot down a few observations on wit, humour and the humourists, not forgetting a glance at certain subjects which come within the range of the ludicrous. In this money-grubbing, selfish and materialistic age, a good, rollicking, body-shaking roar of laughter, is almost as great a phenomenon as the occurrence of an earthquake; and the dyspeptic shadows that flit along our streets bear ample evidence of the assertion. Further, that species of literature which, by a misapplication of language, is dignified by the name of