

**ANECDOTA AMERICANA: FIVE
HUNDRED STORIES FOR THE
AMUSEMENT OF THE FIVE
HUNDRED NATIONS THAT
COMPRISE AMERICA**

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**ANECDOTA
AMERICANA**

ANECDOTA AMERICANA

*Five Hundred Stories
for the Amusement of the
Five Hundred Nations
That Comprise
America*



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1934

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*BY WAY OF ELUCIDATION
IN THE FORM OF
A PREFACE*

"What a laugh is, by what means it is raised, wherein it consists, in what manner it bursts out, and is so suddenly discharged . . . let Democritus explain all these particulars; they are not to my present purpose, and if they were I should not at all be ashamed to say that I do not know them; for even they who pretend to account for them know nothing of the matter."

Cicero: *De Oratore*, Book 11

WHAT IS THE ELEMENT IN MIRTH THAT PRODUCES LAUGHTER?

What does laughter mean? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a clown, a play upon words, a situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy? The greatest of thinkers from Aristotle downwards have pondered upon this problem which has baffled every effort and has escaped only to come up again as a pert challenge at philosophic speculation.

The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in this creature some human attitude of expression. You may also laugh at some inanimate object not because of its natural form but the shape that men have given it, the human caprice which has caused it to assume a definite mold. Man has sometimes been defined as (an animal which laughs). He has also been equally defined as an animal which is laughed at. For if any other animal or lifeless object produces the same effect it is usually because it bears some resemblance to man. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.

To produce the entire effect the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is really to intelligence, pure and simple. This intelligence, however, must always remain in touch with other intelligences. You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter has need of an echo. Listen to it carefully, it is not an articulate, clear, well defined sound. It is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something starting with a crash, to continue in recur-