

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT THAT?



IT is said that a sense of humour is one of those characteristics which especially distinguished *homo sapiens* from his less sapient forebears. Though the jackass and the hyena are reputed to laugh uproariously, there is little doubt that the more human and civilised man has become, the more developed and the more specialised is his sense of humour. Dr. Basil Howard, in a talk which he gave recently from 4YA, digs back far into the past to find the beginnings of humour: "The crude basis of humour, is the experiencing of savage feelings of exaltation at the discomfiture, injury, or death of a fellow man. We can imagine that the one time occupant of the Piltdown skull laughed a horrible and sardonic laughter when the sabre-toothed tiger turned and mauled the hunter who had been so cunningly stalking it. As social sense and group responsibility developed, man, I imagine, came to exclude death from the laughabilities except when the victim was a stranger or an enemy. As millenniums passed we reached a social state in which laughter at another's discomfiture was limited, in polite circles, to circumstances in which the victim suffered only momentary inconvenience."

So we get considerable specialisation of humour. One half of the world will laugh to see a quarrelling couple smash up the furniture in their flat, cover Grandpa with whipped cream, or tip Ma into the soapsuds. The other half of the world will remain unmoved. Not only does humour vary in drawing-rooms and boxing rings, but tastes in humour vary widely from country to country. And since it is not the big disagreements that make life unbearable but the small irritations, perhaps it is just these differences in humour that make it hard for

nations to see eye to eye on the big issues. An English couple visiting Berlin some years ago sat unmoved through a comedy that rocked the rest of the theatre. The Irish, even in their most friendly moods, will confide that what makes the English so impossible is that they cannot see a joke. And *Punch*, which sends most English people into quiet chortles of mirth, leaves the rest of the world without a smile.

What Is Wit?

So we turn with pleasurable anticipation to the 4YA Winter Course talks on Humour in Literature. These cover not merely English literature, but also such topics as "Satirists in the Soviet Union" by Mrs. M. Harris (September 1); "American Humour" by Dr. K. Sheen (September 15), and "Humour in New Zealand Literature" by John Harris (September 29). In the first talk of the series, Dr. Basil Howard drew the distinction between wit and humour. "Humour", he said, "is of the imagination and its subject is mankind. Wit is of the intellect and its subject is the manner of expression. You cannot think a witty thought without thinking in words; humour is often wordless and laughter springs unconsciously straight from the imagination." This distinction prepares the way for the next talk on "Modern Humorists" by Miss W. McQuilkan, which may be heard from 4YA on August 18.

LISTENINGS

(Perpetrated and illustrated by KEN ALEXANDER)

THE newspapers have given us a good story about the jackal and the wolf—otherwise, Musso and Ribbo. When it looked as though Rommel might take Alexandria, Musso is said to have put on his best marching suit, gathered up his technical yes-men, filled bags with Italian currency (worth about a bob a bag) and hastened to Libya there to await word that Alexandria had fallen. But Ribbentrop, also smelling out meat for his long teeth, flew to Tripoli with the intention of beating Musso to it; which is quite in order; for the wolf should always arrive before the jackal. Both waited and waited until the sands of the desert grew colder and colder towards them. Then Ribbo, who is a bit quicker in the uptake than Musso, said, "The quarry limps but falls not yet; and no good wolf falls on the victim until the victim has fallen." So he flew back to tell the leader of the pack that things were not as they seemed. But Musso said, "Let's tarry awhile, brother jackals; you never can't tell; a good jackal always hangs round in case of a soft snap." So Musso jumped about the sands of Libya, saluting himself with both arms and riding a white ass about the desert until, in the sand storms, it was difficult to decide which was Musso and which was the ass. But the ass wore nothing but a saddle and



bridle and that helped. In a couple of weeks Musso had practised riding triumphantly through Alexandria until he made a great show of it. All he needed was Alexandria. It was a great shame because Musso had been looking forward for a long time to riding triumphantly through something. Now it looks as though the only safe way for Musso to ride triumphantly through anything is in a long box with gold handles on it.

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