

### **31: THE FLAT FREAK**

Some time ago a Sub-Tropical Dinner was given by some South African millionaire. I forget his name; and so, very likely, does he. The humour of this was so subtle and haunting that it has been imitated by another millionaire, who has given a North Pole Dinner in a grand hotel, on which he managed to spend gigantic sums of money. I do not know how he did it; perhaps they had silver for snow and great sapphires for lumps of ice. Anyhow, it seems to have cost rather more to bring the Pole to London than to take Peary to the Pole. All this, one would say, does not concern us. We do not want to go to the Pole--or to the hotel. I, for one, cannot imagine which would be the more dreary and disgusting--the real North Pole or the sham one. But as a mere matter of psychology (that merry pastime) there is a question that is not unentertaining.

Why is it that all this scheme of ice and snow leaves us cold? Why is it that you and I feel that we would (on the whole) rather spend the evening with two or three stable boys in a pot-house than take part in that pallid and Arctic joke? Why does the modern millionaire's jest--bore a man to death with the mere thought of it? That it does bore a man to death I take for granted, and shall do so until somebody writes to me in cold ink and tells me that he really thinks it funny.

Now, it is not a sufficient explanation to say that the joke is silly. All jokes are silly; that is what they are for. If you ask some sincere and elemental person, a woman, for instance, what she thinks of a good sentence from Dickens, she will say that it is "too silly." When Mr. Weller, senior, assured Mr. Weller, junior, that "circumvented" was "a more tenderer word" than "circumscribed," the remark was at least as silly as it was sublime. It is vain, then, to object to "senseless jokes." The very definition of a joke is that it need have no sense; except that one wild and supernatural sense which we call the sense of humour. Humour is meant, in a literal sense, to make game of man; that is, to dethrone him from his official dignity and hunt him like game. It is meant to remind us human beings that we have things about us as ungainly and ludicrous as the nose of the elephant or the neck of the giraffe. If laughter does not touch a sort of fundamental folly, it does not do its duty in bringing us back to an enormous and original simplicity.

Nothing has been worse than the modern notion that a clever man can make a joke without taking part in it; without sharing in the general absurdity that such a situation creates. It is unpardonable conceit not to laugh at your own jokes. Joking is undignified; that is why it is so good for one's soul. Do not fancy you can be a detached wit and avoid being a buffoon; you cannot. If you are the Court Jester you must be the Court Fool.

Whatever it is, therefore, that wearies us in these wealthy jokes (like the North Pole Dinner) it is not merely that men make fools of themselves. When Dickens described Mr. Chuckster, Dickens was, strictly speaking, making a fool of himself; for he was making a fool out of himself. And every kind of real lark, from acting a charade to making a pun, does consist in restraining one's nine hundred and ninety-nine serious selves and letting the fool loose. The dullness of the millionaire joke is much deeper. It is not silly at all; it is solely stupid. It does not consist of ingenuity limited, but merely of inanity expanded. There is considerable difference between a wit making a fool of himself and a fool making a wit of himself.

The true explanation, I fancy, may be stated thus. We can all remember it in the case of the really inspiriting parties and fooleries of our youth. The only real fun is to have limited materials and a good idea. This explains the perennial popularity of impromptu private theatricals. These fascinate because they give such a scope for invention and variety with the most domestic restriction of machinery. A tea-cosy may have to do for an Admiral's cocked hat; it all depends on whether the amateur actor can swear like an Admiral. A hearth-rug may have to do for a bear's fur; it all depends on whether the wearer is a polished and versatile man of the world and can grunt like a bear. A clergyman's hat (to my own private and certain knowledge) can be punched and thumped into the exact shape of a policeman's helmet; it all depends on the clergyman. I mean it depends on his permission; his imprimatur; his nihil obstat. Clergymen can be policemen; rugs can rage like wild animals; tea-cosies can smell of the sea; if only there is at the back of them all one bright and amusing idea. What is really funny about Christmas charades in any average home is that there is a contrast between commonplace resources and one comic idea. What is deadly dull about the millionaire-banquets is that there is a contrast between colossal resources and no idea.

That is the abyss of inanity in such feasts--it may be literally called a yawning abyss. The abyss is the vast chasm between the money power employed and the thing it is employed on. To make a big joke out of a broomstick, a barrow and an old hat--that is great. But to make a small joke out of mountains of emeralds and tons of gold--surely that is humiliating! The North Pole is not a very good joke to start with. An icicle hanging on one's nose is a simple sort of humour in any case. If a set of spontaneous mummers got the effect cleverly with cut crystals from the early Victorian chandelier there might really be something suddenly funny in it. But what should we say of hanging diamonds on a hundred human noses merely to make that precious joke about icicles?

What can be more abject than the union of elaborate and recherche arrangements with an old and obvious point? The clown with the red-hot poker

and the string of sausages is all very well in his way. But think of a string of pate de foie gras sausages at a guinea a piece! Think of a red-hot poker cut out of a single ruby! Imagine such fantasticalities of expense with such a tameness and staleness of design.

We may even admit the practical joke if it is domestic and simple. We may concede that apple-pie beds and butter-slides are sometimes useful things for the education of pompous persons living the Higher Life. But imagine a man making a butter-slide and telling everybody it was made with the most expensive butter. Picture an apple-pie bed of purple and cloth of gold. It is not hard to see that such schemes would lead simultaneously to a double boredom; weariness of the costly and complex method and of the meagre and trivial thought. This is the true analysis, I think of that chill of tedium that strikes to the soul of any intelligent man when he hears of such elephantine pranks. That is why we feel that Freak Dinners would not even be freakish. That is why we feel that expensive Arctic feasts would probably be a frost.

If it be said that such things do no harm, I hasten, in one sense, at least, to agree. Far from it; they do good. They do good in the most vital matter of modern times; for they prove and print in huge letters the truth which our society must learn or perish. They prove that wealth in society as now constituted does not tend to get into the hands of the thrifty or the capable, but actually tends to get into the hands of wastrels and imbeciles. And it proves that the wealthy class of to-day is quite as ignorant about how to enjoy itself as about how to rule other people. That it cannot make its government govern or its education educate we may take as a trifling weakness of oligarchy; but pleasure we do look to see in such a class; and it has surely come to its decrepitude when it cannot make its pleasures please.