

Women, men, fish and bicycles

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A Load of Wit
Des MacHale
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A woman without a man, says Gloria Steinem, is like a fish without a bicycle. That sounds rather strange, even bizarre, until you realise the wit in that statement. And wit is something we have been doing without, much to our surprise, for quite a while now. When was the last time you heard someone among the glamorous and the glitzy come up with a wisecrack? There is Ronald Reagan, with his 'Honey, I forgot to duck' comment to his wife moments after the assassination attempt on him in March 1981. There was John F. Kennedy, who regaled newsmen on his visit to France in 1961 with the remark, 'Gentlemen, I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris'. Rack your brains and you just might recover some of the gems of humour you may have lost over the years.

And while you do, here is a work that promises to do wonders, almost in the manner of an aphrodisiac, to the funny side in you. The love that we indulge in, the sex we think we enjoy, the marriage we fall into --- all of these have elicited light comments over the years. Think of Ann Landers' meaningful statement: 'The poor wish to be rich, the rich wish to be happy, the single wish to be married, and the married wish to be dead.' Smiling, or chuckling away? You will explode in laughter with Woody Allen's 'The only time my wife and I had a simultaneous orgasm was when the judge signed the divorce papers'. So much for happy sex, unless you would like to focus on Gypsy Rose Lee's self-deprecating comment: 'I have everything I had twenty years ago --- except that now it's all lower'. And then, of course, there is the vast field of politics from where you can pick some of the choicest of nuggets when looking for humour to throw around. It was Voltaire who once told people that 'the ideal form of

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government is democracy tempered with assassination'. Don't take that seriously, but sure, you can laugh a little. You can even belittle democracy a bit, through quoting H.L. Mencken: 'Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.' And there you have it, and more. Ralph Abernathy once induced guffaws with his barb on the Watergate president: 'Richard Nixon told us he was going to take crime off the streets. He did. He took it into the White House'.

When you think of wit and banter and repartee, there is no better instance of it than the personality of Oscar Wilde. Here is a cracking statement from him: 'The English country gentleman galloping after a fox --- the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable'. It is all about social mores and manners, in that featherweight way of speaking. Cecil Beaton could well have been speaking for many of us when he declaimed thus, with a wink at Churchill of course, on fashion: 'Never in the history of fashion has so little material been raised so high to reveal so much that needs to be covered so badly'. If that was about the revelation of so much human flesh, here is one about bodies unwilling to make their way out of bed: 'It was such a lovely day I thought it was a pity to get up.' And it is Somerset Maugham doing the talking here. Where would we be without him?

This is a compendium of laughter-inducing wisecracks. But then, some wisecracks surely do bring out the lighter aspects of our personalities. Here is what Duncan Spaeth has to say about empire and the English: 'The sun never sets on the British Empire because God wouldn't trust an Englishman in the dark.' Lest anyone feel offended, here is an attempt to balance things, albeit at the expense of the Irish and coming from none other than George Moore: 'In Ireland a girl has the choice between perpetual virginity and perpetual pregnancy.' But perhaps the most hilarious example of humour is set against the French, especially those who caused all those events in 1789. P.G. Wodehouse puts it succinctly: 'The French invented the only known cure for dandruff. It is called the guillotine.' What more could you ask for?

And literary humour? You only have to listen to G.B. Shaw. And this is what he has to say: 'I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation.'

Read the book, if you can. Or stay put. The choice is yours.