

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Cornac and his Wife [The fourth story in Lewis's 1927 collection *The Wild Body: A Soldier of Humour and Other Stories*]

Author: Lewis, Percy Wyndham (1882-1957)

Date of first publication: 1927

Edition used as base for this ebook: New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928

Date first posted: 11 March 2011

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20110324

This ebook was produced by Barbara Watson & the Online Distributed Proofreading Canada Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This ebook was produced from images generously made available by the Internet Archive

THE CORNAC AND HIS WIFE

by Wyndham Lewis

I MET in the evening, not far from the last inn of the town, a cart containing the rough professional properties, the haggard offspring, of a strolling circus troupe from Arles, which I had already seen. The cornac and his wife tramped along beside it. Their talk ran on the people of the town they had just left. They both scowled. They recalled the inhabitants of the last town with nothing but bitterness.

Against the people to whom they played they had an implacable grudge. With the man, obsessed by ill-health, the grievance against fortune was associated with the more brutal hatred that almost choked him every time he appeared professionally.

With their children the couple were very demonstrative. Mournful caresses were showered upon them: it was a manner of conspicuously pitying themselves. As a fierce reproach to the onlooker these unhandsome gytes were publicly petted. Bitter kisses rained upon their heads. The action implied blows and ill-treatment at the hands of an anonymous adversary; in fact, the world at large. The children avoided the kisses as though they had been blows, wailing and contorting themselves. The animosity in the brutal lips thrust down upon their faces was felt by them, but the cause remained hidden for their inexperience. Terror, however, they learnt to interpret on all hands; even to particularly associate it with love towards the offspring. When the clown made a wild grimace in their blubbering faces, they would sometimes howl with alarm. This was it, perhaps! They concluded that this must be the sign and beginning of the terrible thing that had so long been covertly menacing them; their hearts nearly hopped out of their throats, although what occurred passed off in a somersault and a gush of dust as the clown hurled his white face against the earth, and got up rubbing his sides to assure the spectators that he was hurt.

Setting up their little tent in a country town this man and his wife felt their anger gnawing through their reserve, like a dog under lock and key. It was maddened by this other animal presence, the perspiring mastodon that roared at it with cheap luxurious superiority. Their long pilgrimage through this world inhabited by 'the Public' (from which they could never escape) might be interpreted by a nightmare image. This was a human family, we could say, lost in a land peopled by sodden mammoths possessed of a deeply-rooted taste for outdoor performances of a particularly depressing and disagreeable nature. These displays involved the insane contortions of an indignant man and his dirty, breathless wife, of whose ugly misery it was required that a daily mournful exhibition should be made of her shrivelled legs, in pantomime hose. She must crucify herself with a scarecrow abandon, this iron and blood automaton, and affect to represent the factor of sex in a geometrical posturing. These spells were all related in some way to physical suffering. Whenever one of these monsters was met with, which on an average was twice a day, the only means of escape for the unfortunate family was to charm it. Conduct involving that never failed to render the monster harmless and satisfied. They then would hurry on, until they met another. Then they would repeat just the same thing over again, and once more hasten away, boiling with resentment.

The first time I saw them, the proprietress stood straddling on a raised platform, in loose flesh-tights with brown wrinkled knee-caps, *espadrilles*, brandy-green feathers arching over her almost naked head; while clutched in her hands aloft she supported a rigid child of about six. Upon this child stood three others, each provided with a flag. The proprietor stood some distance away and observed this event as one of the public. I leant on the barrier near him, and wondered if he ever willed his family to fall. I was soon persuaded, on observing him for a short while, that he could never be visited by such a mild domestic sensation. He wished steadily and all the time, it was quite certain, that the earth would open with a frantic avulsion, roaring as it parted, decorated with heavy flames, across the middle of the space set aside for his performance; that everybody there would immediately be hurled into this chasm, and be crushed flat as it closed up. The Public on its side, of course, merely wished that the entire family might break their necks one after the other, the clown smash his face every time he fell, and so on.

To some extent Public and Showman understood each other. There was this amount of give and take, that they both snarled over the money that passed between them, or if they did not snarl it was all the worse. There was a unanimity of brutal hatred about that. Producer and consumer both were bestially conscious of the passage of coppers from one pocket

to another. The public lay back and enjoyed itself hardly, closely, and savagely. The showman contorted himself madly in response. His bilious eye surveyed its grinning face, his brow sweated for its money, his ill-kept body ached. He made it a painful spectacle; he knew how to make it painful. He had the art of insisting on the effort, that foolish effort. The public took it in the contrary spirit, as *he* felt, on purpose. It was on purpose, as he saw it, that it took its recreation, which was coarse. It deliberately promoted his misery and affected to consider him a droll gay bird.

So this by no means exceptional family took its lot: it dressed itself up, its members knocked each other about, tied their bodies in diabolical knots before a congregation of Hodges, who could not even express themselves in the metropolitan tongue, but gibbered in breton, day in, day out. That was the situation. Intimately, both Showman and Public understood it, and were in touch more than, from the outside, would be at once understood. Each performance always threatened to end in the explosion of this increasing volume of rage. (This especially applied to its fermentation within the walls of the acrobatic vessel known as the 'patron,' who was Monsieur Jules Montort.) Within, it flashed and rumbled all the time: but I never heard of its bursting its continent, and it even seemed of use as a stimulus to gymnastics after the manner of Beethoven with a fiery composition.

So there those daily crowds collected, squatted and watched, 'above the mêlée,' like *aristos* or gentlepeople. But they did pay for their pleasure (and such pleasure!): they were made to part with their sous, strictly for nothing, from the performers' standpoint. That would be the solitary bright spot for the outraged nomad. At least to that extent they were being got the better of. Had you suggested to the Showman that the Public paid for an idea, something it drew out of itself, that would have been a particularly repugnant thought. The Public depends upon him, that the primitive performer cannot question. And if women for instance find it hard to look on their own beauty as their admirer does (so that a great number of their actions might be traced to a contempt for men, who become so passionate about what they know themselves to be such an ordinary matter—namely themselves), so it was perhaps their contempt that enabled this fierce couple to continue as they did.

This background of experience was there to swell out my perception of what I now saw—the advancing caravan, with the familiar forms of its owners approaching one of their most hated haunts, but their heads as yet still full of the fury aroused by the last mid-day encounter. I followed them, attempting to catch what they were saying: but what with the rumbling of the carriages and the thick surge of the proprietor's voice, I could not make out much except expletives. His eye, too, rolled at me so darkly that I fell behind. I reflected that his incessant exercise in holding up his family ranged along his extended arm, though insipid to watch, must cause him to be respected on a lonely road, and his desperate nature and undying resentment would give his ferocity an impact that no feeling I then experienced could match. So I kept my eyes to myself for the time and closed down my ears, and entered the town in the dust of his wagons.

But after my evening meal I strolled over the hill bisected by the main street, and found him in his usual place on a sort of square, one side of which was formed by a stony breton brook, across which went a bridge. Drawn up under the beeches stood the brake. Near it in the open space the troupe had erected the trapeze, lighted several lamps (it was after dark already), and placed three or four benches in a narrow semicircle. When I arrived, a large crowd already pressed round them. 'Fournissons les bancs, Messieurs et M'dames! fournissons les bancs, et alors nous commençons!' the proprietor was crying.

But the seats remained unoccupied. A boy in tights, with his coat drawn round him, shivered at one corner of the ring. Into the middle of this the Showman several times advanced, exhorting the coy Public to make up its mind and commit itself to the extent of sitting down on one of his seats. Every now and then a couple would. Then he would walk back, and stand near his cart, muttering to himself. His eyebrows were hidden in a dishevelled frond of hair. The only thing he could look at without effort was the ground, and there his eyes were usually directed. When he looked up they were heavy—vacillating painfully beneath the weight of their lids. The action of speech with him resembled that of swallowing: the dreary pipe from which he drew so many distressful sounds seemed to stiffen and swell, and his head to strain forward like a rooster about to crow. His heavy under-lip went in and out in sombre activity as he articulated. The fine natural resources of his face for inspiring a feeling of gloom in his fellows, one would have judged irresistible on that particular night. The bitterest disgust disfigured it to a high degree.

But *they* watched this despondent and unpromising figure with a glee and keen anticipation. This incongruity of appearance and calling was never patent to them at all, of course. That they had no wish to understand. When the furious

man scowled they gaped delightedly; when he coaxed they became grave and sympathetic. All his movements were followed with minute attention. When he called upon them to occupy their seats, with an expressive gesture, they riveted their eyes on his hand, as though expecting a pack of cards to suddenly appear there. They made no move at all to take their places. Also, as this had already lasted a considerable time, the man who was fuming to entertain them—they just as incomprehensible to him as he was to them from that point of view—allowed the outraged expression that was the expression of his soul to appear more and more in his face.

Doubtless they had an inspired presentiment of what might shortly be expected of the morose figure before them. The chuckling exultation with which an amateur of athletics or fight-fan would examine some athlete with whose prowess he was acquainted, yet whose sickly appearance gives no hint of what is to be expected of him, it was with that sort of enlightened and hilarious knowingness that they responded to his melancholy appeals.

His cheerless voice, like the moaning bay of solitary dogs, conjured them to occupy the seats.

'Fournissons les bancs!' he exhorted them again and again. Each time he retired to the position he had selected to watch them from, far enough off for them to be able to say that he had withdrawn his influence, and had no further wish to interfere. Then, again, he stalked forward. This time the exhortation was pitched in as formal and matter-of-fact a key as his anatomy would permit, as though this were the first appeal of the evening. Now he seemed merely waiting, without discreetly withdrawing—without even troubling to glance in their direction any more, until the audience should have had time to seat themselves,—absorbed in briefly rehearsing to himself, just before beginning, the part he was to play. These tactics did not alter things in the least. Finally, he was compelled to take note of his failure. No words more issued from his mouth. He glared stupidly for some moments at the circle of people, and they, blandly alert, gazed back at him.

Then unexpectedly, from outside the periphery of the potential audience, elbowing his way familiarly through the wall of people, burst in the clown. Whether sent for to save the situation, or whether his toilet were only just completed, was not revealed.

'B-o-n-soir, M'sieurs et M'dames,' he chirruped and yodeled, waved his hand, tumbled over his employer's foot. The benches filled as if by magic. But the most surprising thing was the change in the proprietor. No sooner had the clown made his entrance, and, with his assurance of success as the people's favourite, and comic familiarity, told the hangers-back to take their seats, than a brisk dialogue sprang up between him and his melancholy master. It was punctuated with resounding slaps at each fresh impertinence of the clown. The proprietor was astonishing. I rubbed my eyes. This lugubrious personage had woken to the sudden violence of a cheerful automaton. In administering the chastisement his irrepressible friend perpetually invited, he sprang nimbly backwards and forwards as though engaged in a boxing match, while he grinned appreciatively at the clown's wit, as though in spite of himself, nearly knocking his teeth out with delighted blows. The audience howled with delight, and every one seemed really happy for the moment, except the clown. The clown every day must have received, I saw, a little of the *trop-plein* of the proprietor.

In the tradition of the circus it is a very distinct figure, the part having a psychology of its own—that of the man who invents posers for the clown, wrangles with him, and against whom the laugh is always turned. One of the conventions of the circus is, of course, that the physical superiority of this personage should be legendary and indisputable. For however numerous the clowns may be, they never attack him, despite the brutal measures he adopts to cover his confusion and meet their ridicule. He seems to be a man with a marked predilection for evening dress. As a result he is a far more absurd figure than his painted and degenerate opponent. It may be the clown's superstitious respect for rank, and this emblem of it, despite his consciousness of intellectual superiority, that causes this ruffianly dolt to remain immune.

In playing this part the pompous dignity of attitude should be preserved in the strictest integrity. The actor should seldom smile. If so, it is only as a slight concession, a bid to induce the clown to take a more serious view of the matter under discussion. He smiles to make it evident that he also is furnished with this attribute of man—a discernment of the ridiculous. Then, with renewed gusto and solemnity, he asks the clown's *serious* opinion of the question by which he seems obsessed, turning his head sideways with his ear towards his droll friend, and closing his eyes for a moment.

Or else it is the public for whom this smile is intended, and towards whom the discomfited 'swell' in evening dress turns as towards his peers, for sympathy and understanding, when 'scored off' anew, in, as the smile would affirm, this low-bred and unanswerable fashion. They are appealed to, as though it were their mind that was being represented in the

dialogue, and constantly discomfited, and he were merely their mouthpiece.

Originally, no doubt, this throaty swell stood in some sense for the Public. Out of compliment to the Public, of course, he would be provided with evening dress. It would be tacitly understood by the courteous management, that although many of those present were in billycocks, blouses and gaiters, shawls and reach-me-downs, their native attire was a ceremonial evening outfit.

The distinguished Public would doubtless still further appreciate the delicacy of touch in endowing its representative with a high-born inability to understand the jokes of his inferiors, or be a match for them in wit. In the better sort of circus, his address is highly genteel, throaty and unctuous.

In the little circuses, such as the one I am describing, this is a different and a very lonely part. There are none of those appeals to the Public—as the latter claim, not only community of mind, but of class, with the clown. It becomes something like a dialogue between mimes, representing employer and employee, although these original distinctions are not very strictly observed.

A man without a sense of humour, the man in the toff's part, finds himself with one whose mischievous spirit he is aware of, and whose ridicule he fears. Wishing to avoid being thought a bore, and racking his brains for a means of being entertaining, he suddenly brings to light a host of conundrums, for which he seems endowed with a stupefying memory. Thoroughly reassured by the finding of this powerful and traditional aid, with an amazing persistence he presses the clown, making use of every 'gentlemanly' subterfuge, to extract a grave answer. 'Why is a cabbage like a soul in purgatory?' or, 'If you had seven pockets in your waistcoat, a hip pocket, five ticket-pockets, and three other pockets, how many extra buttons would you need?' So they follow each other. Or else some anecdote (a more unmanageable tool) is remembered. The clown here has many opportunities of displaying his mocking wit.

This is the rôle of honour usually reserved for the head showman, of course. The part was not played with very great consistency in the case in question. Indeed, so irrepressible were the comedian's spirits, and so unmanageable his vitality at times, that he seemed to be turning the tables on the clown. In his cavernous baying voice, he drew out of his stomach many a caustic rejoinder to the clown's pert but stock wit. The latter's ready-made quips were often no match for his strange but genuine hilarity. During the whole evening he was rather 'hors de son assiette,' I thought. I was very glad I had come, for I had never seen this side of him, and it seemed the most unaccountable freak of personality that it was possible to imagine. Before, I had never spent more than a few minutes watching them, and certainly never seen anything resembling the present display.

This out-of-door audience was differently moved from the audiences I have seen in the little circus tents of the breton fairs. The absence of the mysterious hush of the interior seemed to release them. Also the nearness of the performers in the tent increases the mystery. The proximity of these bulging muscles, painted faces and novel garbs, evidently makes a strange impression on the village clientèle. These primitive minds do not readily dissociate reality from appearance. However well they got to know the clown, they would always think of him the wrong way up, or on all-fours. The more humble suburban theatre-goer would be twice as much affected at meeting the much-advertised star with whose private life he is more familiar than with her public display, in the wings of the theatre, as in seeing her on the stage. Indeed, it would be rather as though at some turning of an alley at the Zoo, you should meet a lion face to face—having gazed at it a few minutes before behind its bars. So the theatre, the people on the stage and the plays they play, is part of the surface of life, and is not troubling. But to get behind the scenes and see these beings out of their parts, would be not merely to be privy to the workings and 'dessous' of the theatre, but of life itself.

Crowded in the narrow and twilight pavilion of the saltimbanques at the breton Pardon, the audience will remain motionless for minutes together. Their imagination is awakened by the sight of the flags, the tent, the drums, and the bedizened people. Thenceforth it dominates them, controlling their senses. They enter the tent with a mild awe, in a suggestive trance. When a joke is made that requires a burst of merriment, or when a turn is finished, they all begin moving themselves, as though they had just woken up, changing their attitude, shaking off the magnetic sleep.

Once I had seen this particular troupe in a fair with their tent up. I had gone in for a short while, but had not paid much attention to them individually and soon left. But the clown, I remember, conducted everything—acting as interpreter of his own jokes, tumbling over and getting up and leading the laugh, and explaining with real conscientiousness and

science the proprietor's more recondite conundrums. He took up an impersonal attitude. He was a friend who had dropped in to see the 'patron'; he appreciated quite as one of the public the curiosities of the show. He would say, for instance: 'Now this is very remarkable: this little girl is only eleven, and she can put both her toes in her mouth,' etc., etc. Had it not been for his comments, I am persuaded that the performance would have passed off in a profound, though not unappreciative, silence.

Returning to the present occasion, some time after the initial bout between the clown and his master, and while some chairs were being placed in the middle of the ring, I became aware of a very grave expression on the latter's face. He now mounted upon one of the chairs. Having remained impressively silent till the last moment, from the edge of the chair, as though from the brink of a precipice, he addressed the audience in the following terms:

'Ladies and gentlemen! I have given up working for several years myself, owing to ill-health. As far as some of my most important tricks are concerned, my little girl has taken my place. But Monsieur le Commissaire de Police would not give the necessary permission for her to appear.—Then I will myself perform!'

A grievance against the police would, of course, any day of the week, drive out everything else with any showman. The Public momentarily benefited. At these words M. Montort jerked himself violently over the back of the chair, the unathletic proportions of his stomach being revealed in this movement, and touched the ground with his head. Then, having bowed to the audience, he turned again to the chairs and grasping them, with a gesture of the utmost recklessness, heaved his body up into the air. This was accompanied by a startling whirl proceeding from his corduroys, and a painful crepitation of his joints. Afterwards he accomplished a third feat, suspending himself between two chairs; and then a fourth, in which he gracefully lay on all three, and picked up a handkerchief with his face reversed. At this sensational finish, I thought it appropriate to applaud: a *feu nourri* of clapping broke from me. Unfortunately the audience was spellbound and my demonstration attracted attention. I was singled out by the performer for a look of individual hatred. He treated all of us coldly: he bowed stiffly, and walked back to the cart with the air of a man who has just received a bullet wound in a duel, and refusing the assistance of a doctor walks to his carriage.

He had accomplished the feats that I have just described with a bitter dash that revealed once more the character that from former more casual visits I recognized. He seemed courting misfortune. 'Any mortal injury sustained by me, M. le Commissaire, during the performance, will be at your door! The Public must be satisfied. I am the servant of the Public. You have decreed that it shall be me (all my intestines displaced by thirty years of contortions) that shall satisfy them. Very well! I know my duty, if you don't know yours. Good! It shall be done as you have ordered, M. le Commissaire!'

The drama this time was an *internal* one, therefore. It was not a question of baiting the public with a broken neck. We were invited to concentrate our minds upon what was going on *inside*. We had to visualize a colony of much-twisted, sorely-tried intestines, screwed this way and that, as they had never been screwed before. It was an anatomical piece.

The unfortunate part was that the public could not *see* these intestines as they could see a figure suspended in the air, and liable to crash. A mournful and respectful, a *dead* silence, would have been the ideal way, from his point of view, for the audience to have greeted his pathetic skill. Instead of that, salvos of muscular applause shook the air every time he completed one of the phases of this painful trick. Hearing the applause, he would fling himself wildly into his next posture, with a whistling sneer of hatred. The set finished, the last knot tied and untied, he went back and leant against the cart, his head in the hollow of his arm, coughing and spitting. A boy at my side said, 'Regarde—donc; il souffre!' This refusal of the magistrate to let his little girl perform was an event that especially outraged him: it wounded his french sense of the dignity of a fully-enfranchised person. His wife was far less affected, but she seconded him with a lofty scowl. Shortly afterwards, she provided a new and interesting feature of the evening's entertainment.

Various insignificant items immediately succeeded the showman's dramatic exploit, where he deputized for his daughter. A donkey appeared, whose legs could be tied into knots. The clown extracted from its middle-class comfortable primness of expression every jest of which it was susceptible. The conundrums broke out again; they only ceased after a discharge that lasted fully a quarter of an hour. There was a little trapeze. For some time already we had been aware of a restless figure in the background. A woman with an expression of great dissatisfaction on her face, stood with muffled arms knotted on her chest, holding a shawl against the cold air. Next, we became aware of a harsh and indignant voice. This woman was slowly advancing, talking all the while, until she arrived in the centre of the circle made by the seats.

She made several slow gestures, slightly raising her voice. She spoke as a person who had stood things long enough. 'Here are hundreds of people standing round, and there are hardly a dozen sous on the carpet! We give you entertainment, but it is not for nothing! We do not work for nothing! We have our living to make as well as other people! This is the third performance we have given today. We are tired and have come a long way to appear before you this evening. You want to enjoy yourselves; but you don't want to pay! If you want to see any more, loosen your purse-strings a little!'

While delivering this harangue her attitude resembled that seen in the London streets, when women are quarrelling—the neck strained forward, the face bent down, and the eyes glowering upwards at the adversary. One hand was thrust stiffly out. In these classes of action the body, besides, is generally screwed round to express the impulse of turning on the heel in disgust and walking away. But the face still confronts whoever is being apostrophized, and utters its ever-renewed maledictory post-scriptums.

Several pieces of money fell at her feet. She remained silent, the arms fiercely folded, the two hands bitterly dug into her sides. Eventually she retired, very slowly, as she had advanced, as it were indolently, her eyes still flashing and scowling resentfully round at the crowd as she went. They looked on with amiable and gaping attention. They took much more notice of her than of the man; she thoroughly interested them, and they conceded to her unconditionally their sympathy. There was no response to her attack—no gibing or discontent; only a few more sous were thrown. Her husband, it appeared, had been deeply stimulated by her speech. One or two volcanic conundrums followed closely upon her exit. The audience seemed to relish the entertainment all the more after this confirmation from the proprietress of its quality, instead of being put in a more critical frame of mind.

Her indignant outburst carried this curious reflection with it; it was plain that it did not owe its tone of conviction to the fact that she conceived a high opinion of their performance. Apparently it was an axiom of her mind that the public paid, for some obscure reason, not for its proper amusement, but for the trouble, inconvenience, fatigue, and in sum for all the ills of the showman's lot. Or rather did *not* pay, sat and watched and did not pay. Ah ça!—that was trying the patience too far. This, it is true, was only the reasoning every gesture of her husband forcibly expressed, but explicit, in black and white, or well-turned forcible words.

Peasant audiences in latin countries, and no doubt in most places, are herded to their amusements like children; the harsh experts of fun barbarously purge them for a few pence. The spectacles provided are received like the daily soup and weekly cube of tobacco of the convict. Spending wages, it seems, is as much a routine as earning them. So in their entertainment, when buying it with their own money, they support the same brow-beating and discipline as in their work. Of this the outburst of the proprietress was a perfect illustration. Such figures represent for the spectators, for the moment, authority. In consequence a reproof as to their slackness in spending is received in the same spirit as a master's abuse at alleged slackness in earning it.

I have described the nature of my own humour—how, as I said, it went over into everything, making a drama of mock-violence of every social relationship. Why should it be so *violent*—so mock-violent—you may at the time have been disposed to enquire? Everywhere it has seemed to be compelled to go into some frame that was always a simulacrum of mortal combat. Sometimes it resembled a dilution of the Wild West film, chaplinesque in its violence. Why always *violence*? However, I have often asked that myself.

For my reply here I should go to the modern Circus or to the Italian Comedy, or to Punch. Violence is of the essence of *laughter* (as distinguished of course from smiling wit): it is merely the inversion or failure of *force*. To put it in another way, it is the *grin* upon the Deathshead. It must be extremely primitive in origin, though of course its function in civilized life is to keep the primitive at bay. But it hoists the primitive with its own explosive. It is a realistic firework, reminiscent of war.

These strolling players I am describing, however, and their relation to their audience, will provide the most convincing illustration of what I mean. The difference and also the inevitable consanguinity between my ideal of humour, and that of any other man whatever, will become plain. For the primitive peasant audience the comic-sense is subject to the narrowest convention of habit. Obviously a peasant would not see anything ridiculous in, or at least never amuse himself over his pigs and chickens: his constant sentiment of their utility would be too strong to admit of another. Thus the disintegrating effect of the laughing-gas, and especially the fundamentals of the absurd, that strike too near the life-root,

is instinctively isolated. A man who succeeds in infuriating us, again, need never fear our ridicule, although he may enhance our anger by his absurdity. A countryman in urging on his beast may make some disobliging remark to it, really seizing a ludicrous point in its appearance to envenom his epithet: but it will be caustic and mirthless, an observation of his intelligence far removed from the irresponsible emotion of laughter. It will come out of his anger and impatience, not his gaiety. You see in the peasant of Brittany and other primitive districts of France a constant tendency to sarcasm. Their hysterical and monotonous voices—a variety of the 'celtic' screech—are always with the Bretons pitched in a strain of fierce raillery and abuse. But this does not affect their mirth. Their laughter is sharp and mirthless and designed usually to wound. With their grins and quips they are like armed men who never meet without clashing their weapons together. Were my circus-proprietor and his kind not so tough, this continual howl or disquieting explosion of what is scarcely mirth would shatter them.

So (to return to the conventions of these forms of pleasure) it could be said that if the clown and the manager consulted in an audible voice, before cracking each joke—in fact, concocted it in their hearing—these audiences would respond with the same alacrity. Any rudiment of *décor* or makeshift property, economy in make-up, or feeble trick of some accredited acrobat, which they themselves could do twice as well, or mirthless patter, is not enough to arouse criticism in them, who are so critically acute in other matters. To criticize the amusements that Fate has provided, is an anarchy to which they do not aspire.

The member of a peasant community is trained by Fate, and his law is to accept its manifestations—one of which is comic, one of love, one of work, and so on. There is a little flowering of tenderness for a moment in the love one. The comic is always strenuous and cruel, like the work. It never flowers. The intermediary, the showman, knows that. He knows the brutal *frisson* in contact with danger that draws the laughter up from the deepest bowel in a refreshing unearthly gush. He knows why he and the clown are always black and blue, his children performing dogs, his wife a caryatid. He knows Fate, since he serves it, better than even the peasant.

The educated man, like the true social revolutionary, does not *accept* life in this way. He is in revolt, and it is the laws of Fate that he sets out to break. We can take another characteristic fatalism of the peasant or primitive man. He can never conceive of anybody being anything else but just what he is, or having any other name than that he is known by. John the carpenter, or Old John (or Young John) the carpenter, is not a person, but, as it were, a fixed and rigid communistic convention. One of our greatest superstitions is that the plain man, being so 'near to life,' is a great 'realist.' In fact, he seldom gets close to reality at all, in the way, for instance, that a philosophic intelligence, or an imaginative artist, does. He looks at everything from the outside, reads the labels, and what he *sees* is what he has been told to see, that is to say, what he expects. What he does not expect, he, of course, does not see. For him only the well-worn and general exists.

That the peasant, or any person living under primitive conditions, does not appreciate the scenery so much as, say, John Keats, is a generally accepted truth, which no available evidence gives us any reason to question. His contact with the quickest, most vivid, reality, if he is averagely endowed, is muffled, and his touch upon it strangely insensitive; he is surrounded by signs, not things. It is for this reason that the social revolutionary, who wishes to introduce the unexpected and to awaken a faculty of criticism, finds the peasant such unsatisfactory material.

Just as the peasant, then, has little sense of the beauty of his life, so his laughter is circumscribed. The herd-bellow at the circus is always associated with mock-violent events, however, and his true laughter is always torn out of a tragic material. How this explains my sort of laughter is that both our patterns are cut or torn out of primitive stuff. The difference is that pure physical action usually provides him with his, whereas mine deal with the phantoms of action and the human character. For me *everything* is tragically primitive: whereas the peasant only feels 'primitively' at stated times. But both our comedies are comedies of action, that is what I would stress.

This particular performance wound up rather strangely. The showman's wife had occasion to approach and lash the public with her tongue again, in the final phase. As the show approached its conclusion, the donkey was led in once more, pretended to die, and the clown made believe to weep disconsolately over it. All was quiet and preparation for a moment.

Then, from an unexpected quarter, came a sort of *dénouement* to our evening. Every one's attention was immediately

attracted to it. A small boy in the front row began jeering at the proprietor. First, it was a constant muttering, that made people turn idly to that quarter of the ring. Then it grew in volume and intensity. It was a spontaneous action it appeared, and extremely sudden. The outraged showman slouched past him several times, looking at him from the tail of his eye, with his head thrust out as though he were going to crow. He rubbed his hands as he was accustomed to do before chastizing the clown. Here was a little white-faced clown, an unprofessional imp of mischief! He would slap him in a moment. He rubbed his horny hands but without conviction. This had no effect: the small voice went steadily on like a dirge. This unrehearsed number found him at a loss. He went over to the clown and complained in a whisper. This personage had just revealed himself as a serious gymnast. Baring his blacksmith's arms, and discarding his ludicrous personality, he had accomplished a series of mild feats on the trapeze. He benefited, like all athletic clowns, by his traditional foolish incompetence. The public were duly impressed. He now surveyed them with a solemn and pretentious eye. When his master came up to him, supposing that the complaint referred to some disorderly booby, he advanced threateningly in the direction indicated. But when he saw who was the offender, finding a thoughtful-looking little boy in place of an intoxicated peasant, he was as nonplussed as had been his master. He looked foolishly round, and then fell to jeering back, the clown reasserting itself. Then he returned with a shrug and grimace to his preparations for the next and final event.

It is possible that this infant may never have thought comically before. Or he may, of course, have visited travelling shows for the purpose of annoying showmen, advertising his intelligence, or even to be taken on as a clown. But he may have been the victim of the unaccountable awakening of a critical vein, grown irresponsibly active all at once. If the latter, then he was launched on a dubious career of offence. He had one of the handsome visionary breton faces. His oracular vehemence, though bitterly sarcastic, suggested the more romantic kind of motivation. The showman prowled about the enclosure, grinning and casting sidelong glances at his poet: his vanity tickled in some fashion, perhaps: who knows? the boy persevering blandly, fixing him with his eye. But suddenly his face would darken, and he would make a rush at the inexplicable juvenile figure. Would this boy have met death with the exultation of a martyr rather than give up his picture of an old and despondent mountebank—like some stubborn prophet who would not forgo the melodrama forged by his orderly hatreds—always of the gloom of famine, of cracked and gutted palaces, and the elements taking on new and extremely destructive shapes for the extermination of man?

At last that organism, 'the Public,' as there constituted, fell to pieces, at a signal: the trapeze collapsed, the benches broke the circle described for the performance, and were hurried away, the acetylene lamps were extinguished, the angry tongues of the saltimbanques began their evil retrospective clatter. There had been *two* Publics, however, this time. It had been a good show.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *The Cornac and his Wife*, by Wyndham Lewis]