

CHAPTER IV

TEACHING THE FAMILY HUMOR

When the children were very young, Grandfather started what became a life-long family practice - namely, telling jokes at the dinner table. Grandfather did this partly to enable him to forget the petty annoyances of the day and partly with a definite purpose of teaching the family to appreciate humor.

Grandfather had observed that folks who were always serious minded had a sad time with themselves and that a bump of humor would help one over many a bad spot along life's highway. He could appreciate what a help it must have been to Lincoln to be able on the most trying occasions to relax enough to tell a funny story. He wished his family to acquire this art. So as soon as Charles and George could understand the point of a story, Grandfather began to tell stories and ere long, as soon as Grandfather had said grace at dinner, the children began, "Tell us a funny story, papa."

One sample will illustrate: The children having made their usual demand for a funny story, Grandfather told this one. "An Irishman was very ill with pneumonia. The doctor told his wife to put a poultice on Pat's chest. The next morning the doctor came and found his patient no better. He upbraided Mary for not having put a poultice on her husband's chest. "Sure," said Mary, "and he had no chest so I put it on his trunk." Charles saw the point and laughed heartily, but George sat in his high chair solemn as an owl. Suddenly, after we had all finished laughing, George began to laugh uproariously and to bang the tray with his spoon. "Oh, I see, I see," he cried, "her husband was an elephant."

As soon as the children were able, they were encouraged to tell

their own funny stories or amusing incidents of the day. Later Charles set up a competition between himself and Grace in dinner story telling, and the neighbors could always tell when the Parlins ate dinner by the bursts of laughter emanating from the Parlin dining room. To this day a family dinner is a very merry affair, each one contributing his droll tale or humorous incident or amusing story. These volumes are for the most part transcriptions of stories as told at the family dinner table.

The boys had become quite adept at humor before Ruth reached the age of appreciation. "If instead of laughing at me for not seeing the point of a joke," said little Ruth, "someone would tell me what a joke is so that I could recognize one, it would be a lot better."

"Oh, I can see the point," said the serious-faced Ruth a little later, "but I don't say 'Tee Hoo' every time I understand something." "Do you know, Ruth, why a bow-legged man cannot catch a rabbit?" asked her father. "Sure," says Ruth, without a smile. "Well, tell us," said her father, "why cannot a bow-legged man catch a rabbit?" "Because," said Ruth, "he cannot run fast enough."

Later someone gave Ruth a book of jokes and she and her chums, the Glover twins, sat on the floor by the hour and studied these jokes - and, presto - change - the serious, sad look vanished from Ruth's face and Ruth was soon the first to see the point and the one who laughed first and loudest at all the family jokes.

Grace, being much younger than the other children, was much loved, but sometimes "kidded" by the older children and very early developed a self-reliant complex and passed critical judgment on all information offered her. One day as she sat in her high chair, pounding with her spoon, as very young children of the earlier generation used sometimes to do, George

undertook to give her instructions in table manners. To these instructions the youthful Grace listened with absorbing attention. George, seeing that he was making a favorable impression, kept on and showed her just how she should do everything. When at last he stopped, Grace leaned back in a chair with a merry laugh and, waving her tiny hand at him, said: "Good night nurse."

Years later Charles one evening sitting with Grace on the sofa, showed her some diamonds. "What are you going to do with those?" Grace asked. "I am going to take them over to Boyds to let Miriam select one for an engagement ring. We are engaged to be married," replied Charles. "Ha, ha," says Grace, "that's a good jolly. Now tell me what you are really going to do with them." "Why, really, Grace," persisted Charles, for once losing some of his ever present poise. "Why, yes, Grace," said her mother, "it's true. Charles and Miriam are really engaged." "You can all help him if you want to," says the skeptical Grace, who not without reason was always on the lookout for some practical joke, "but you can't make me believe that."

There is an old adage - "Laugh and grow fat." Grandfather is not certain of the correctness of this bit of philosophy, but as he thinks back over a third of a century of family dinners and then looks at the various members of his family, he thinks he has some tangible evidence to offer as proof of the adage.