

When someone asks me what business I am in, I am seized with embarrassment: I
5 blush and stammer, I who am otherwise known as a man of poise. I envy people who
can say: I am a bricklayer. I envy barbers, bookkeepers, and writers the simplicity of
their avowal, for all these professions speak for themselves and need no lengthy
explanation, while I am constrained to reply to such questions: I am a laugher. An
admission of this kind demands another, since I have to answer the second question:
10 “Is that how you make your living?” truthfully with “Yes.” I actually do make a living
at my laughing, and a good one too, for my laughing is—commercially speaking—
much in demand. I am a good laugher, experienced, no one else laughs as well as I do,
no one else has such command of the fine points of my art. For a long time, in order
to avoid tiresome explanations, I called myself an actor, but my talents in the field of
15 mime and elocution are so meager that I felt this designation to be too far from the
truth: I love the truth, and the truth is: I am a laugher. I am neither a clown nor a
comedian. I do not make people gay, I portray gaiety: I laugh like a Roman emperor,
or like a sensitive schoolboy, I am as much at home in the laughter of the seventeenth
century as in that of the nineteenth, and when occasion demands I laugh my way
20 through the centuries, all classes of society, all categories of age: it is simply a skill
which I have acquired, like the skill of being able to repair shoes. In my breast I
harbor the laughter of America, the laughter of Africa, white, red, yellow laughter—
and for the right fee I let it peal out in accordance with the director’s requirements.

I have become indispensable; I laugh on records, I laugh on tape, and television
25 directors treat me with respect. I laugh mournfully, moderately, hysterically; I laugh
like a streetcar conductor or like an apprentice in the grocery business; laughter in
the morning, laughter in the evening, nocturnal laughter, and the laughter of
twilight. In short: wherever and however laughter is required—I do it.

It need hardly be pointed out that a profession of this kind is tiring, especially as I
30 have also—this is my specialty—mastered the art of infectious laughter; this has also
made me indispensable to third- and fourth-rate comedians, who are scared—and
with good reason—that their audiences will miss their punch lines, so I spend most
evenings in nightclubs as a kind of discreet clique, my job being to laugh infectiously
during the weaker parts of the program. It has to be carefully timed: my hearty,
35 boisterous laughter must not come too soon, but neither must it come too late, it must
come just at the right spot: at the prearranged moment I burst out laughing, the
whole audience roars with me, and the joke is saved.

But as for me, I drag myself exhausted to the checkroom, put on my overcoat, happy that I can go off duty at last. At home I usually find telegrams waiting for me: "Urgently require your laughter. Recording Tuesday," and a few hours later I am sitting in an overheated express train bemoaning my fate.

5 I need scarcely say that when I am off duty or on vacation I have little inclination to laugh: the cowhand is glad when he can forget the cow, the bricklayer when he can forget the mortar, and carpenters usually have doors at home which don't work or drawers which are hard to open. Confectioners like sour pickles, butchers like marzipan, and the baker prefers sausage to bread; bullfighters raise pigeons for a
10 hobby, boxers turn pale when their children have nosebleeds: I find all this quite natural, for I never laugh off duty. I am a very solemn person, and people consider me—perhaps rightly so—a pessimist.

During the first years of our married life, my wife would often say to me: "Do laugh!" but since then she has come to realize that I cannot grant her this wish. I am happy
15 when I am free to relax my tense face muscles, my frayed spirit, in profound solemnity. Indeed, even other people's laughter gets on my nerves, since it reminds me too much of my profession. So our marriage is a quiet, peaceful one, because my wife has also forgotten how to laugh: now and again I catch her smiling, and I smile too. We converse in low tones, for I detest the noise of the nightclubs, the noise that
20 sometimes fills the recording studios. People who do not know me think I am taciturn. Perhaps I am, because I have to open my mouth so often to laugh.

I go through life with an impassive expression, from time to time permitting myself a gentle smile, and I often wonder whether I have ever laughed. I think not. My brothers and sisters have always known me for a serious boy.

25 So I laugh in many different ways, but my own laughter I have never heard.