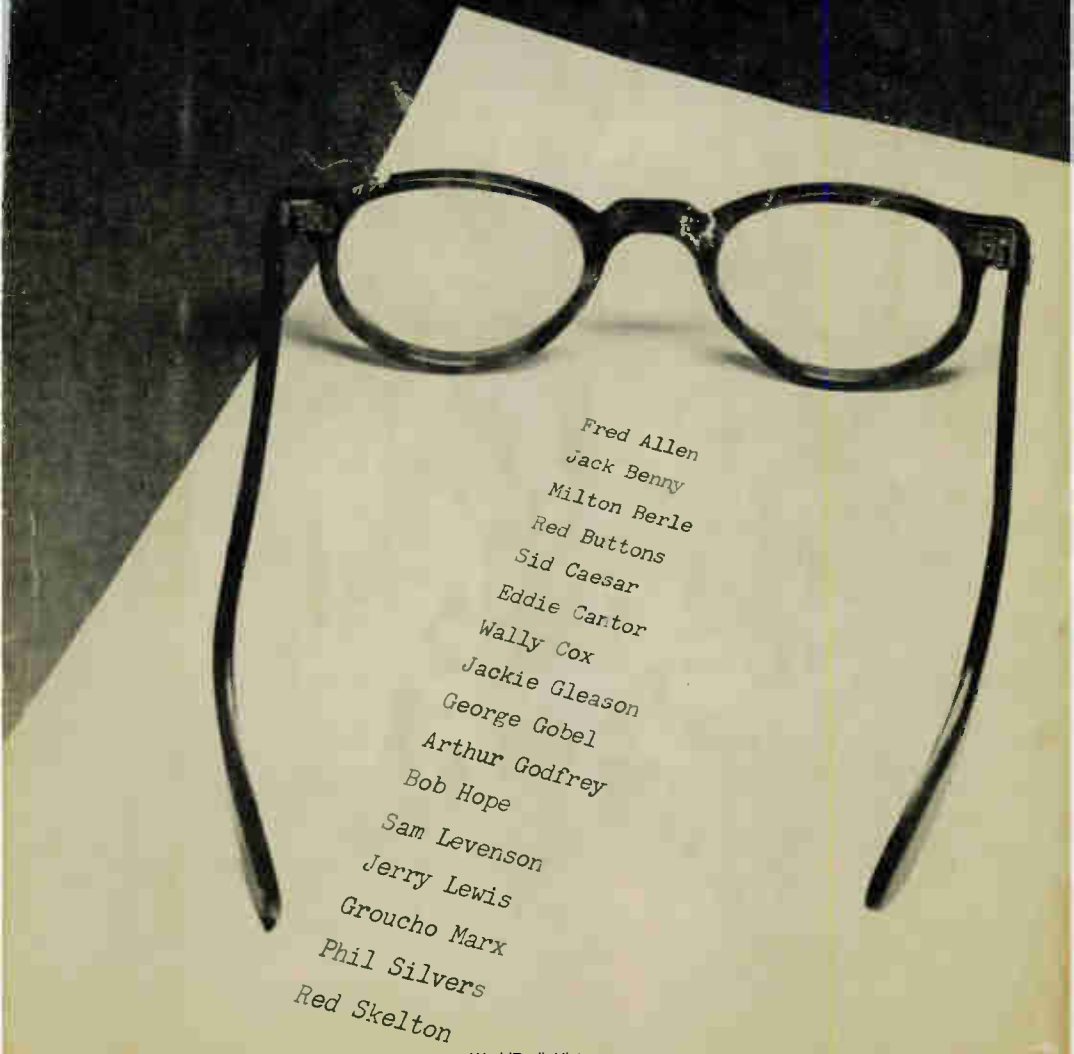
The Funny Men

by Steve Allen



FROM *The Funny Men*

Fred Allen Whatever form our afterlife may take, it is comforting somehow to think that now Fred is with the men among whose company he must surely be ranked: Artemus Ward, Bill Nye, Mark Twain, Josh Billings, Abe Martin and Will Rogers.

Jack Benny It is therefore with the full knowledge that the judgment is nothing more than personal that I submit that basically Jack Benny is an *actor* of sheer comic genius rather than a true essential comedian.

Milton Berle Milton *is* a ham. He does use other people's jokes. He *will* do anything for a laugh. But the important thing, to my mind, is that he gets the laugh.

Red Buttons It is probable that only in the field of sports could a man repeat the yesterday's-hero-today's-scapegoat story that Red has lived out in the past three years.

Sid Caesar Of all the important comedians performing on television at the present time I find Sid Caesar the most consistently funny.

Eddie Cantor Cantor, then, like Sophie Tucker and a number of other performers, sells *yesterday*. The good old days always seem better than they were and they acquire a certain added goodness, no less appreciable because it is illusory, simply because they are old.

Wally Cox Almost every professional buffoon will, if he is honest, admit that during his formative years he learned a trick or two from someone else in the field. Wally Cox seems to have been influenced by a rainy afternoon.

Jackie Gleason Alternating between excesses of the flesh and torments of the soul, Gleason is a driven figure who laughs, like some of his colleagues, in spite of himself.

George Gobel Another reason you are amused by Gobel is such an obvious thing that you'll laugh when I tell you: his jokes are good.

Arthur Godfrey He not only makes money for CBS. He also receives the passionate love of millions.

Bob Hope Hope is funny by nature, but he also understands his nature. He is without question the champ as all-around comedian.

Sam Levenson Our laughter at Sam's rambling accounts of incidents from his childhood is of a very special sort. It is the laughter of *recognition*.

Jerry Lewis Although their styles are in no way similar, I believe Jerry Lewis is the foremost visual comedian since Charlie Chaplin.

Groucho Marx There's something about Groucho that makes him funny just standing there, some mysterious long-time conditioning that has grown up around the man and his relationship with the American people that makes all of us love this Peck's Bad Boy of humor.

Phil Silvers Like Bob Hope and Jack Benny, he is an artist in the matter of comedy timing. For all his easygoing spirit Phil is a powerhouse on stage. More vigorous than Hope, he even approaches the physical dynamism of Berle. More than one Broadway musical has coasted to box-office success on the strength of his electric vitality.

Red Skelton One of the great clowns of our time.

June 14

IT HAS somewhere been pointed out that the number of people in the United States who have a sense of humor is roughly the same as the number who play the piano. Now, no one who can't play the piano ever steps up to one at a party and tries to ripple off a sonata. But people utterly without a sense of humor seem to have no hesitation about trying to be funny. Which is a rather roundabout way of saying that most books about humor have been written by people who don't have it.

This one is a noble exception. It is a comedian's-eye view of comedy. We have had critics, philosophers, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers airing their ideas about television comedy. Here for the first time is a survey of the field from someone who is up to his larynx in it.

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There are probably sixty million people who will testify that Steve Allen has a pretty good idea of what is funny and what isn't. (Leo Guild, TV-radio critic for *The Hollywood Reporter,* calls Mr. Allen "the funniest man in TV for 1955.") That he happens as well to be something of a philosopher of humor may not come as too much of a surprise to that portion of his audience interested in such technical points as 1) What is the relation of a particular comedian to his audience? 2) What is he best at? 3) Where does he fall flat on his face? 4) Why do people laugh at him? Mr. Allen, a connoisseur of laughter, answers these questions and a lot more about the sixteen famous comedians he analyzes in *The Funny Men.*

Jacket design by Peter Hollander

The Funny Men

BY

STEVE ALLEN

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To Jaynie-bird

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A Few Thoughts on TV Humor

COMEDY is not a science. It is an art. I do not believe there are any absolute truths in the arts. Consequently you may feel perfectly free to disagree with anything I say in this book. I shall present a great many things as facts or firm beliefs, of course; it's just that you are not obliged to agree with me. When I first began working as a practicing humorist a dozen or so years ago I believed differently. I thought, for example, that a joke had a value all its own and that Fred Allen was the funniest comedian in the business. I know now that Joe Miller's book is not the Bible and that I am not entitled on any logical grounds to silence the man who says that Fred Allen was not nearly so funny as Pinky Lee.

Last year I decided to prove to everybody else what I had learned, so I took a poll. It was not a very scientific poll since I questioned only about two hundred people, but I am certain the results would not change much if I polled two hundred thousand. The mimeographed sheet of paper I passed out to people in various parts of the country was extremely simple. On the left side of the page was an alphabetical list of the names of forty-five television comedians. (My own name was, naturally, omitted.) On the right side was an equal number of blank lines. One simply had to write the names in the blank spaces in the order of preference.

It is important to note here that I was not conducting a popularity contest. I asked that the sole basis of judgment be in the area of humor. To make the point entirely explicit I wrote, "Do not vote for a man just because you *like* him. You may, for example, be fonder of Garry Moore than you are of Groucho Marx. But if you think Groucho is funnier than Garry, then you must put his name higher on the list."

Prepared as I was by my opinion that tastes in comedy are apt to be extremely personal and mysterious, I was nevertheless flabbergasted by the results—and it's a long time since my flabber has been gasted, I assure you. I had expected that names like Bob Hope, Fred Allen, Groucho Marx, and Jack Benny would be at or near the top of most lists and that certain other names might often be found toward the bottom. As for the negative side of the picture, my predictions were relatively accurate, although I shall not mention here the names of the men who were popularly voted as unamusing since to do so could cause them great professional and personal hardship. But for the rest of it I found little rhyme or reason. Jackie Gleason would be top man on one list and number twenty-seven on the next. George Gobel might be number two on one list and bottom-rung on another.

The so-called *top* comedians owe their eventual popularity, I am now convinced, to some quality that makes them likable or exciting to watch, for, judged solely on the basis of their ability to amuse, many of them would not for long be considered as important as they are. Some of them, too, seem to owe their present popularity to their past accomplishments in much the way that a prize fighter retired from active competition might still be revered even though he fought only exhibition bouts.

Further demonstration of the one-man's-meat-another-

man's-poison aspect of the situation was forthcoming when some of my acquaintances began to inspect one another's returns.

"What!" a woman would shriek. "You think Sid Caesar is funnier than Jack Benny?"

"But of course" would be the answer. "You don't mean to tell me you still find Benny amusing?"

And so it went. I discovered that great waves of mutual contempt could be engendered at a cocktail party by bringing up the subject of my questionnaire. Men would almost come to blows over the relative merits of Wally Cox and Herb Shriner.

Doing research, I came into contact with innumerable examples of this sort of thing. In her column of April 3, 1955, Dorothy Kilgallen wrote:

> Ever since I was a girl of ten or eleven I have been nagged by a recurring worry about my taste, because I was unable to appreciate W. C. Fields. He was billed . . . as a comedian, everybody accepted him as a funnyman, but he never made me laugh and after I had seen two or three of his films I was content to skip the rest. This bothered me as I grew up. I would come upon glossy magazine articles written by glossy intellectuals, and they made it clear that not only was Mr. Fields' humor side-splitting but it was also profound and susceptible of endless analysis. Eventually I accepted the theory that anyone who did not think the man with the bulbous nose was . . . amusing . . . was . . . insensitive to art.

Had she stopped at this point, Miss Kilgallen would have been perfectly within her rights, for no laws govern the arts. If I do not feel pleased by a Beethoven symphony there is no rule or judgment of man or Heaven that obliges me to change my mind. I err, however, when I assert that *my* viewpoint is

the correct one and that all who oppose it are dunderheads.

Dorothy went on to say:

> I caught one of W. C.'s old movies on television the other night. He did a golfing bit and the famous dentist routine which I believe his followers consider a classic. The golfing bit was an utter drag and the dentist routine was embarrassing. I was right the first time. W. C. Fields wasn't funny.

Let the reader who is without sin cast the first stone at Miss Kilgallen. All of us seem willing to disparage the majority vote if it differs from our own. Has man ever waited for democratic justification for artistic or philosophical judgments privately arrived at? Her statement may be illogical but it is precisely the kind of statement people always seem to make when they discuss comedy. Perhaps after you have finished reading this book you will be willing to say of a comedian who seems to make only *others* laugh, "He is not funny *to me*."

I find it fascinating that humor, which ought to give rise to only the most lighthearted and gay of feelings, can stir up such vehemence and animosity. Evidently it is dearer to us than we realize. Men will take almost any kind of criticism except the observation that they have no sense of humor. A man will admit to being a coward or a liar or a thief or an adulterer or a poor mechanic or a bad swimmer, but tell him he has a dreadful sense of humor and you might as well have slandered his mother. Even if he is civilized enough to pretend to make light of your statement, he will still secretly believe that he has not only a good sense of humor but one superior to most. He has, in other words, a completely blind spot on the subject. This is all the more surprising when you consider that not one man in ten million can give you any kind of intelligent answer as to what humor is or why he laughs.

One day when I was about twelve years old it occurred to

me to wonder about the phenomenon of laughter. At first I thought: It is easy enough to see *what* I laugh at and *why* I am amused, but why, at such times, do I open my mouth and exhale in jerking gasps and wrinkle up my eyes and throw back my head and halloo like an animal? Why do I not instead rap four times on the top of my head or whistle or whirl about?

That was over twenty years ago and I am still wondering, except that I now no longer even take my first assumption for granted; I no longer clearly understand why I laugh at what amuses me nor why things are amusing. I have illustrious company in my confusion, of course. Many of the great minds of history have brought their powers of concentration to bear on the mystery of humor and to date their conclusions are so contradictory and ephemeral that they cannot possibly be classified as scientific.

Many definitions of the comic are incomplete and many are simply rewordings of things we "already know." Aristotle, for example, defined the ridiculous as that which is incongruous but represents neither danger nor pain. But that seems to me to be a most inadequate sort of observation, for if at this minute I insert here the word *rutabagas* I have introduced something incongruous, something not painful or dangerous, and also something not funny. Of course it must be admitted that Aristotle did not claim that *every* painless incongruity is ridiculous, but as soon as we have gone as far as this admission we begin to see that we have come to grips with a ghost. When we think we have it pinned it suddenly appears behind us, mocking us.

An all-embracing definition of humor has been attempted by many philosophers, but no definition, no formula has ever been devised that is entirely satisfactory. Aristotle's definition has come to be known loosely as the Disappointment Theory,

or the Frustrated Expectation, but he also discussed another theory, borrowed in part from Plato, which states that the pleasure we derive in laughing is an enjoyment of the misfortune of others, due to a momentary feeling of superiority or gratified vanity that we ourselves are not in the predicament observed.

Most of the later theories of humor fall under one of these two headings. If a man slips on a banana peeling and falls, we laugh, and in laughing we justify the Derision theory. If a man says, "Here's a list of people who won't watch Arthur Godfrey any more," and then hands you an obituary column, your laughter arises from a Frustrated Expectation. But, alas, already our definitions have begun to turn to rubber, for it is obvious that you could also be laughing at the man-with-banana-peel because you expected him to continue to a particular point and the sudden Disappointment or Frustration of your Expectation was what aroused your risibilities. Likewise, a joke that derails your train of thought could also be amusing partly because of your contempt for the ignorance of the speaker.

There is another theory, undoubtedly of some value, which claims that all laughter originated in the gleeful shout of triumph to which early man gave vent at the moment of victory over an adversary. I believe this was probably the starting point of much of our present laughter, but it doesn't explain to me why babies smile and laugh. Cicero said that the ridiculous rested on a certain meanness and deformity and that a joke, to be really amusing, had to be at someone's expense. However, he admitted also that the very funniest jokes are simply those in which we expect to hear one thing and then hear another. Here again we have only to realize that many a comment at someone's expense is not a joke at all, and that

every Frustrated Expectation is not automatically amusing, to be made aware that the pursuit of laughter takes place in an intellectual maze. Perhaps laughter is a simple gift of the gods, a potentiality of the mind that, because it varies from individual to individual, will never be completely understood.

Hazlitt has scanned the area and observed:

> We laugh at absurdity; we laugh at deformity. We laugh at a bottle-nose in a caricature; at a stuffed figure of an alderman in a pantomime, and at the tale of Slaukenbergius. A dwarf standing by a giant makes a contemptible figure enough. Rosinante and Dapple are laughable from contrast, as their masters from the same principle make two for a pair. We laugh at the dress of foreigners, and they at ours. Three chimney-sweepers meeting three Chinese in Lincoln's Inn Fields, they laughed at one another until they were ready to drop down. Country people laugh at a person because they never saw him before. Any one dressed in the height of the fashion, or quite out of it, is equally an object of ridicule. One rich source of the ludicrous is distress with which we cannot sympathize from its absurdity or insignificance. It is hard to hinder children from laughing at a stammerer, at a Negro, or at a drunken man, or even at a madman. We laugh at mischief. We laugh at what we do not believe. We say that an argument or an assertion that is very absurd is quite ludicrous. We laugh to show our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us, or to conceal our envy or our ignorance. We laugh at fools, and at those who pretend to be wise—at extreme simplicity, awkwardness, hypocrisy and affectation.

Shakespeare, the great font of wisdom to whom men seem to turn in much the same way as they turn to the Bible when they seek to justify their private judgments, said in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him who hears it. Never in the
tongue of him who makes it.

Humor is then seen to be as indefinable as beauty. My favorite color is blue, yours is green, another's is red. I like Bach, you like Beethoven, another Guy Lombardo. I like the exact scenic translations of Da Vinci, you prefer the poetic distortions of Matisse, another chooses Picasso. I laugh at Groucho Marx, you prefer Jackie Gleason, another tunes in to Eddie Cantor. We cannot be dictated to in our artistic judgments. Perhaps a joke has no objective meaning whatever; perhaps its existence *as a joke* is altogether subjective and different in the case of each observer.

I believe one important natural function of laughter is to help us control our emotions. The person who purposely looks for the element of humor in an uncomfortable situation is making use of an important procedure in emotional control. The ability to laugh off an awkward incident has saved many an unpleasant moment in social life. Laughter is superb relaxation.

There is something about laughter which can sweep away annoyance, jealousy, and even disgust. It can turn aside anger because it is commonly mutually stimulating. The old observation about the yawn is true of the laugh, too. Your laughter will make another person laugh, and he in turn will make your own laughter more hearty.

And yet laughter itself is not the prime mover in such situations. It is but the outward visible manifestation of a sudden inner state of mind.

Babies, when they first begin to smile and chuckle, which is often at the age of six or seven weeks, seem to do so without rhyme or reason. Later their laughter becomes conditioned

and they learn to use it at appropriate moments. The mystery of it all arises thus: For every "rule" explaining the psychology of laughter there are a thousand exceptions. Some theories say suddenness and surprise are necessary to humor, but one minute's thought will serve to produce a wealth of evidence that familiar things which the mind can slowly savor are also often vastly amusing.

My dozen years in catering to public tastes have convinced me that what people will laugh at is almost entirely determined by their social conditioning. This has been proved many times by scientific method. Wolff, Smith and Murray performed an experiment involving the following joke which was told to Jewish subjects:

> PAT: Will you help me by cashing this check?
> IKEY: I wouldn't cash a check even for my own brother.
> PAT: Well, you know your family better than I do.

Naturally very few of the subjects thought the joke amusing. Another group, also Jewish, were told the same joke except that the name Ikey was changed to MacTavish. The second group enjoyed the story immensely. There are thousands of examples that substantiate this point. Josh Logan tells of a bit of business that Ezio Pinza does in his nightly performance in *Fanny,* a joke that pertains to a heart attack. Night after night the joke gets a tremendous laugh, but for several days after President Eisenhower's attack in the fall of 1955 it was met with complete silence. Any TV comedian's secretary can show you the letters that pour in daily protesting against jokes about mothers-in-law, fat people, dogs, criminals, traveling salesmen, policemen, politicians, cowboys, Indians, and what have you. These jokes are hilariously received by millions of people, but a few individuals, because of their

personal conditioning, undertake to write letters to Jack Benny or Bob Hope telling them that the jokes are simply not funny. I guess it's not too surprising that people don't really know what's *not* funny because, as I say, we all have a lot of trouble telling for sure what *is* funny and why.

One interesting thing to me is that people who get around to formulating theories that purport to explain humor always seem to state them with vigorous certainty. If I were to state a theory of humor (and I am not going to) I'd start it out with a phrase like "Most humorous ideas seem to be . . . " or "Much of what man regards as amusing. . . ." But no. Plato just came right out and said, "The pleasure of the ludicrous originates in the sight of another's misfortune." I wonder what Plato would say about this poem:

Roses are red
Violets are blue
You think this will rhyme
But it won't.

That's funny for only one reason. You expected one thing and got another. So we're back to Aristotle's Disappointment theory. But I wonder what Aristotle would say about this line: I've been turned down so many times I feel like an old bedspread.

The humor there involves neither a frustrated expectation nor a feeling of superiority. If anything, jokes of that type make the hearer feel inferior to the speaker. A *bon mot* of this sort involves what we might call the Double Meaning Theory. In this instance we are suddenly reminded that the phrase "to turn down" has more than one meaning. So with this new theory we're back in our maze again, as confused as ever about the mystery of laughter.

The Double Meaning Theory, incidentally, can be employed to analyze both the highest and the lowest forms of wit. Some of the cleverest witticisms are simply *double-entendres,* and some of the "corniest" puns are of the same family. I have long maintained that what people call a "bad pun" is often actually neither good nor bad in itself but simply a pun handled badly, which means delivered by a person with an undistinguished sense of humor or by a person who does not know how to present properly the humorous idea he has conceived.

Some puns, of course, are patently superior. "One man's Mede is another man's Persian," for instance. And if I may get personal, I have always taken considerable pride in a triple pun I once perpetrated in telling the story of how the world came to be divided into the various time bands, or zones. The man who set up this plan was a nineteenth-century Norwegian scientist named Andersrag. Alex Andersrag. To this day you will hear people talk about the Alex Andersrag Time Band.

Down through the ages man has always punned. Cicero, Shakespeare, John Milton, Sydney Smith, and you, dear reader, share the habit. Indeed, Jesus Christ founded his church with a pun, albeit his intention was solemn. "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church" is not a pun in English, but Christ did not speak English. His language was Aramaic and in it the word for *Peter* and the word for *rock* are one and the same. We can see the connection in such English words as *petrify* and *petroleum.*

In the light of all this confusion about humor it will be seen as astounding that people will often assume that their personal judgments of it are to be accorded unequivocal respect.

A Few More Thoughts on TV Humor

RADIO was a tragedy for the deaf. Television is a tragedy for the blind. It is also, on occasion, a tragedy for the sensitive viewer to whom the contemplation of mediocrity is a painful experience. But for all its faults television has done something that radio failed to do. It has given the world of comedy a transfusion of new blood.

Six or seven years ago something was happening to radio comedy. The industry, at the time, was going through one of its fairly regular periods of upheaval and was in the midst of a frantic "giveaway" craze. Trips to Bermuda, mink coats, refrigerators, gold-plated lawnmowers and baby elephants were being dispensed to a greedy public with such prodigality that economists were beginning to make light of the threat of communism. They claimed that there was no need for the government to bother about distributing the wealth when radio had taken over the job.

A year later there was another flip-flop. The hero of the moment was no longer the openhanded quizmaster but the lowly disk jockey.

A Few More Thoughts on TV Humor

Radio had passed through fads and phases before, but comedy had always held its own. The programs with the highest ratings were invariably the big laugh shows, and the nation's dialers wavered not in their loyalty to Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Red Skelton, and the other top-line funnymen. But at long last rumblings began to be heard underground. Ratings on comedy shows started to fluctuate unpredictably. The public began muttering against its gods of comedy. What was causing the tremors? Was it television? Sunspots? Inflation? International jitters?

Broadcasting executives weren't quite sure. All they knew was that news commentators like Walter Winchell, emcees like Ralph Edwards, personalities like Arthur Godfrey, were poking their noses up into the stratospheric heights which from time immemorial had been the almost exclusive domain of the comedians.

Dramatic programs like "Lux Radio Theater" and the "Screen Guild Players" were getting heftier ratings than a barrel of comedy shows. What was going on? Nobody knew.

When Ralph Edwards introduced his now almost forgotten Miss Hush gimmick his listeners increased by the millions. "Stop the Music," a gigantic giveaway session competing with Fred Allen for Sunday-evening listeners, won the fight hands down. Every intelligent listener, if asked which of the two programs he would prefer to spend his time listening to if cast on a desert island, would choose Allen's half hour, but for some strange reason the people were going for something new.

On the street and in bars people were becoming noticeably more critical of radio comedy in general. "I don't listen to Bob Hope any more. Sounds to me like he does the same show

every week," they were saying. "Is Benny kidding with those toupée jokes?" "Burns and Allen? Are they still on the air?"

Radio was soon made painfully aware that comments such as these were common from coast to coast. Some blamed the situation on the wild giveaways and the disk-jockey craze, but thoughtful executives realized the trouble had deeper roots.

Something was happening to radio comedy. People were listening to the old programs out of habit more than anything else. Many were no longer listening at all.

Both viewers-with-alarm and pointers-with-pride had come to the realization that the blame for the situation lay largely within the radio industry itself, but one couldn't escape the conclusion that the public was to some extent responsible, too. The saturation point, it seemed, had almost been reached in the public's acceptance of certain familiar devices such as Hope's nose, Benny's penny-pinching, Allen's rigid interview format, Fibber's hall closet, and Skelton's "I dood it," but the listeners, screaming on one hand for something new, failed to give the newcomers a chance when they did come along.

Henry Morgan, launched in a cloud of fire and smoke, settled back down to earth in a series of embarrassing sideslips. Jack Paar was loudly hailed in a summer replacement for Jack Benny, and then overlooked in the autumn rush. Bob Sweeney and Hal March, young CBS duo, were given a lengthy sustaining ride by the network, but as far as the advertising agencies were concerned, the boys weren't on earth. Abe Burrows, admitted by one and all to be an extremely funny man, was slotted here and there and finally left off the regular radio schedule altogether. Danny Thomas, darling of the night clubs, stumbled around the kilocycles and hastily decided to give up. Dave Garroway and Robert Q. Lewis were just begin-

ning to be heard from, but though they had their quota of followers, they were still unknown quantities to the listening public at large. Jim Hawthorne, West Coast zany, suffered similarly.

Listeners avoided us one and all so markedly that we began using the "My Hooper is so low" joke as a stock in trade. Radio critics, during this trying period, were very kind. Scarcely a day passed that there didn't appear a newspaper or magazine article singing the praises of one or another of our fledgling group. But the people at home just wouldn't get on the bandwagon.

What happened next? Radio executives looked at the ratings. "What's this?" they said. "Nobody listening to our new boy? Guess we'll have to drop him!"

It had taken from five to twenty years to put the comedy giants on top, but radio had grown suddenly impatient with its crop of newcomers, and sponsors, notoriously if understandably shortsighted when it came to gambling on an unknown quantity, were still climbing over one another to see who could sign up Bing Crosby.

Let me make one thing clear: The top comics are at the top only because they deserve to be there, and, to do them justice, they seemed to be aware of what was going on. Bob Hope did a greatly revised show that fall of 1948, and other comedians shuffled and strengthened their writing staffs, tried out new supporting characters, new approaches to humor. Networks shifted broadcast times by way of stirring up listener interest.

And that's the way it stood. Radio needed new faces, but it didn't know what to do with them. Then along came television and, as the saying goes, they all lived happily ever after.

Because the front-line humorists refused to jump into the new medium and run the risk of flopping, the eager replacements were at last allowed to get into the game for fair. Alan Young, a question mark in radio, quickly established himself as one of the most talented clowns in video, although after three years he was to run into material trouble. Sid Caesar, a complete stranger to all but a small coterie of fans, took the new medium by storm. Jack Paar, Dave Garroway, Robert Q. Lewis, Paul Winchell, Henry Morgan, Jackie Gleason, Jerry Lester, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Sam Levenson, Jack Carter, Wally Cox, Red Buttons, George Gobel—all of us were at last given an opportunity to show what we could do.

Some of us, of course, have fallen by the wayside, relatively speaking, as did some of the old guard. But the important thing is that we were given our chance and the old-timers (Burns and Allen, Benny, Hope) were given a new lease on life. We have mingled with the oldsters, and the aristocracy has been reshuffled so that today a person under twenty years of age sees Jerry Lewis, Jackie Gleason and Sid Caesar standing on the same plateau with Groucho Marx, Bob Hope and Jack Benny.

And now, curiously enough, rumblings are being heard again. Twenty years of radio history seem to have been condensed into five years of television. The TV humorists are fallen upon evil times. They have learned a depressing fact: People get tired of you a lot quicker on TV than they do on the radio. They pick you up faster, but they drop you faster, too. On the radio it took a long time to become a star, and if you made it you could stick around for maybe ten or fifteen years right at the top.

A Few More Thoughts on TV Humor

On television the first favorable reviews are hardly dry before critics, cab drivers and relatives are telling you what's the matter with your program. Maybe it's just that familiarity breeds contempt, and people can get a lot more familiar with you if your face pops right into their living rooms week after week. Television, of course, is a much more personal medium than radio.

The comedian is not just a buzz in the ear; he's a personality present almost in the flesh. You get to feel that you know him. When you feel you know people you feel you're qualified to offer them criticism.

It's a little like falling in love. You meet an attractive person and all you want to say to her is "You're lovely." Six months later you're saying, "You're lovely, but do you *have* to do your fingernails in public?" In another year, if you've married the girl, you're saying, "Of course I love you, but don't you think you ought to take off a little weight?"

The relationship between a TV fan and his favorite comedian is much like that.

On this subject Harold B. Clemenko, writing in *TV Guide*, says:

> Pity the poor TV comedian. Granted that his salary is an astronomical figure. Granted that laughter seems a delightful lifework. Granted that his name is on every kiddy's tongue and his fame equals that of the President.
>
> But consider the straws in the wind:
>
> The never-ending streams of condemnatory newspaper reviews of comedy performances on TV. . . . The new American luncheon cliché: "I saw Joe Doaks' show last night. Boy, was he lousy!" . . . The eternal cry for new jokes—of which there are none. * . . . The frantic search for new ap-

* Of which, more later.

proaches—of which our best minds seem to find pitifully few.

You can sense it in the studio audiences which don't laugh quite as hard as before. And in the comics themselves, fighting desperately to amuse an audience that is sitting on its hands. Cruel, ultra-faithful television lets us live these moments with our comics.

Sitting in our living rooms, we can see the pallid-green disappointment written on faces trying hard to keep up the pretense of gaiety.

There's something telepathic about a show. It either clicks or it doesn't—and everybody seems to know it at once. The studio audience, the home viewers, the technicians, the cast. More and more these days, the show decidedly does not click.

We cannot find it in our hearts to blame the performers for this. Or the script writers. They are fighting a losing battle. The battle of satiety. For when you've had it, you've had it. Period.

Perhaps we are demanding too much of the gift of laughter. After you've smelled a rose a few moments, it seems to cease giving off its beautiful scent. Science tells us this is due to the tiring of our own sense of smell. Aren't we in the same way, perhaps, tiring of the steady flow of laughter? Man, of course, will always want to laugh—in moderation. But history knows no era when laughter was fed to whole populations for hours at a time, steadily, night after night, month after month.

I don't know what the solution is. All I know is that people are getting tired of too much comedy. Our supply and demand system being what it is, and Hooper ratings being what they are, the chances are the masters of television will respond to this by giving us less comedy—or just as many comedians with shorter shows. Bob Hope touched on this when he pointed out that he had started in TV with an hour-and-a-half show, had reduced to an hour, and was now

doing a half-hour. Said Bob: "I think they're grooming me for spot announcements."

Even if they do, Bob—or Jerry, or Fred, or Sid or Milton—even as you deliver the gag allowed by your brief eight seconds, half your living-room audience will sadly shake their heads and say, "I've heard that one before."

And say it they do.

The other day a cab driver said to me, "You know, I don't watch Sid Caesar as much as I used to."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "He uses them old jokes and everything."

The cabbie was wrong. Sid Caesar does not use old jokes. The scripts for his sketches are, as a matter of fact, about the freshest thing in TV comedy. But the man behind the wheel, like most other folks I meet, seemed to feel that he was qualified to tell which jokes are old. His self-confidence was misplaced. The average man has a sieve for a memory, as far as jokes are concerned. Some comedians utilize a fairly high percentage of old material and the public never seems to be aware of the fact; others use nothing but newly minted jokes and are accused of dipping into Joe Miller. Think *you* know an old joke when you see one? Below are ten gags. Mark with an X the ones that you personally know are more than a few months old.

1. A TV executive's wife being ill, a doctor was called. Shaking his head sadly, the doctor said, "I do not like her looks." "That's all right, Doc," said the husband. "I haven't liked her looks for a long time myself."

2. "If you buy this new Jaguar," said the car dealer, "you

could leave New York right now and be in Pittsburgh by four-thirty in the morning!" "Don't be silly," said his customer. "What would I do in Pittsburgh at four-thirty in the morning?"

3. "You told me your father was no longer living," cried the new bride. "Now I find out he's still living, and in Alcatraz at that!" "Listen," said her husband, "do you call that living?"

4. "Some people say my sister dyes her hair blond," says comedienne Jane Kean, "but that's not true. It was blond when she bought it."

5. A young surgeon from Columbia University, operating for the first time before an audience of colleagues, performed so brilliantly that they applauded. Touched, the surgeon for an encore removed his patient's appendix.

6. An old gentleman from the Bronx said to his grandchild, "My boy, life is very much like an atomic engine." "How, Grandfather?" said the boy. "How should I know?" the man answered.

7. At Lindy's a man dipped his hands into the mayonnaise bowl and ran them through his hair. When the waiter looked surprised, the man said, "Oh, pardon me. I thought it was spinach."

8. Toots Shor listened attentively to the pathetic tale told by a panhandler who walked into his restaurant. After a few minutes tears welled up in Shor's eyes. "Throw this bum out," he said sadly. "He's breaking my heart!"

9. "I want a girl who's beautiful, who's intelligent, and who's rich," said Milton Berle. "Don't be silly," snapped Phil Silvers. "What do you want with three girls?"

10. "George," said Gracie, "isn't nature wonderful? Just

imagine: there are two holes cut in the skin of a rabbit, just where the eyes are located."

Well, I suppose you want to check your score. Unless you marked all the jokes as old you missed the mark. Not only are these jokes ancient, but you can find them all (with different names involved, of course) in Sigmund Freud's famous work *Wit and the Unconscious.* Many of the jests were venerable in the last century. Now back to your TV set and not another word out of you.

Even if you failed this test, I suppose you will derive some satisfaction from your belief that it at least confirms your long-standing opinion that there is no such thing as a new joke. You are already supported in this opinion by not a few professional critics. Most of them don't know enough about jokes to criticize them on any logical basis, so they simply classify all jokes they don't like as "old" jokes and hope that the matter will be left there.

Well, it won't, and I hope I don't sound too much as if I were rolling up my sleeves. I don't know where the idea ever came from that there could be no such thing as a new joke, but, like most false ideas, it has caught on rather well.

People hate to think, I suppose. It's much easier to pick up ideas from one or another of the intellectual Automats that life makes available to us. That's why many people's minds are nothing but collections of axioms, proverbs, old-wives' tales, slogans, and schoolday maxims. *There's nothing new under the sun. Opposites attract. The murderer always returns to the scene of the crime. President Truman got us into the Korean War. It always rains on Good Friday. As Maine goes so goes the nation.* These are the sort of catch phrases that

substitute for thought. Most of us believe libraries-ful of such nonsense.

As for humor, I assure you there are at this moment new witticisms being born all over the world. After all, there are new paintings, new songs, new advances in science, new inventions, new ideas of all kinds. Why not new jokes?

Since there are constantly coming into our consciousness new things to discuss, new experiences to live through, it follows that any jokes about these things will be *new* jokes. Italian haircuts, the Army–McCarthy hearings, 3-D motion pictures, stereophonic sound, flying saucers, bop music—none of these matters existed for us during all the millions of years of our climb to our present position on the scale of civilization. It would be impossible, therefore, to make an *old* joke on these subjects, except in the obvious sense that one might take a particular old joke and convert it to modern terms.

Here is a joke that never existed before three-dimensional motion pictures came along: A man went to see *Cinerama* but had a bit of trouble because of a rather tall gentleman directly in front of him. Finally he leaned forward and said, "Say, I wonder if you'd mind slouching down a bit so I could see better."

"Don't be ridiculous," said the stranger. "I'm in the picture!"

Another example:

The opening scene of *Cinerama* takes the audience on a thrilling roller-coaster ride.

Two men went to see the picture, and as soon as the ride started one turned slightly green.

"I'm sorry," he said to his companion. "I've got to get out of here. I'm getting sick."

"Will you sit down and stop acting like a child!" the other demanded. "It's only a movie."

A minute later the roller coaster roared down a steep incline and the first man spoke again.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I'm sick as a dog. I've got to get some fresh air."

"Sit down," whispered his friend. "You're embarrassing me. Just sit down and stop acting like a jerk. This is only a picture."

After a few seconds the pale one rose again. "Forgive me," he said, "but I can't take this any more."

"Listen," roared his pal, "will you sit down before we both fall out of this thing and get killed!"

There are certain people who like to make lists. No matter what they're talking about they say things like "There are only three kinds of women," "All popular songs can be divided into thirteen basic types," "There are just seven basic story plots," and so on. Nonsense, it seems, is made more palatable by virtue of its being neatly packaged.

Surprisingly enough even some professional humorists have made the mistake of listing the "basic types" of jokes. It is important to note that each of them has his own idea as to what these types are and that no two seem to agree as to the number of types.

To give one example, the late David Freedman, who for many years wrote most of Eddie Cantor's material, including books and magazine articles as well as radio scripts, said:

> There is much talk of basic jokes. They are closely related and interwoven, but essentially they form the basic pattern of humor. These are the seven:

1. Literal English (puns)
2. Insult
3. Sex
4. Domestic
5. Underdog (the worm turning)
6. Incongruity
7. Topical

Two years after making out this particular list for interviewer Benn Hall, Freedman had this to say to Max Eastman:

> There are *six* kinds of jokes that, if they are any good at all, will draw the belly laugh. . . .
>
> 1. Insults
> 2. Anatomical reference (rear-end joke)
> 3. Kissing
> 4. Matrimony
> 5. The *dumb* joke
> 6. Children's mistakes

Evidently at this point Freedman decided to lengthen his list to the traditional seven, for he added: "7. Truth . . . any true portrayal of what happens to you in your life."

Perhaps to belabor the point, I will here include another list, this one provided by Sidney Reznick, one of radio–TV's busiest jokesmiths, in his book *How to Write Jokes*. He enumerates:

1. Marriage
2. The Excuse
3. Old Maids
4. Liquor (drinking)
5. Whiskers
6. Seasickness
7. Death

8. The Boardinghouse
9. Thrift
10. The Fat Man
11. Cute Kiddy Sayings
12. Turnabout (the underdog triumphs)
13. Mother-in-law
14. The Bride
15. Talkativeness

The reader may, of course, lengthen this list to his heart's content. One could add such subjects as

16. Religion
17. Smoking
18. Driving
19. Swimming
20. Cowardice
21. Television
22. Dentists, and
23. Baseball

The point is obvious. There is no such thing as a list of seven or seven hundred basic jokes.

Another thing, so obvious that it is frequently overlooked, is that these basic "jokes" are not jokes at all but only classifications of subject matter. It is not correct, therefore, to say that a mother-in-law joke is one of the basic jokes, for the reason that it is possible to make a million individual jokes about one's mother-in-law.

A: "Here is the final score of the big football game between Harvard and William and Mary: Harvard 14, William 12, Mary 6."

B: "When I played football I was in charge of all the aerial work for the team: I blew up the footballs."

These jokes are both about football, but it is apparent that they are two separate jokes. The number of types of jokes is limited only by the number of things there are in the world for man to discuss.

Then, too, it is an extremely difficult matter to catalogue jokes. Suppose there's an anecdote that starts out "Pat O'Malley was walking home one day, in a rather intoxicated condition, and he happened to meet Father Flannagan . . . " This sort of story is usually found in jokebooks under the heading "Irish Jokes," although it might just as logically be classified under "Drinking," "Religion" or "Walking." Pat might discuss with Father Flannagan the fact that his mother-in-law talks too much and that the other people at the boardinghouse are—— Ah, but already we see that our joke might now be classified under "Boardinghouse," "Mother-in-law," "Marriage" or "Talkativeness."

Most comedy writers are aware that the classification of jokes according to subject matter is useful only when one is trying to locate a particular gag in a bulky file. Far more useful in the *creation* of humor, however, is the realization that there are various *formulas* according to which jokes may be constructed in an almost mechanical sense. For example:

1. *The Literalization Formula.* This formula may represent either a very basic sort of humor or a sophisticated approach to the subject. It involves simply the *literal interpretation* of an idiomatic expression. As children, all of us have made these interpretations. Who has not giggled at expressions such as "She's crying her eyes out" or "I laughed till my sides split"?

One of the nation's leading cartoonists, Virgil Partch, em-

ploys scarcely any other formula for the creation of his cartoons. Sample: A surgeon is huddled over an operating table, scalpel in hand. On the table, however, is not a human being but a short, thin ribbon of cloth. An intern provides the caption: "Dr. Benton is operating on a shoestring."

To make a joke out of figures of speech such as the above, one simply interprets literally and then provides a response based on the interpretation.

BOB HOPE: I laughed till my sides split.

JERRY COLONNA: Well, a little Band-Aid will take care of that.

2. *The Reverse Formula.* This simply involves saying the exact opposite of what is expected. It is another extremely elementary form of humor. The natives of India, for example, have a simple joke that may not amuse you, but it contains the proper mechanical elements: "The tiger and the rabbit had a fight. The rabbit won."

Other examples: "My fingernails may be dirty and my clothes ragged, but there's one thing you've got to admit: I'm a slob."

"My wife is so ugly, when she sees a mouse the *mouse* jumps on the chair."

"I won't say I look down-and-out, but last night a hold-up man gave *me* money."

3. *The Exaggeration Formula.* This formula calls for more ingenuity on the part of the writer than, for instance, the two types mentioned above—for the obvious reason that every exaggeration is not automatically a joke. It is not amusing to say, "My health is so bad I'm the sickest man in the world." It *is* amusing to say, "My health is so bad my doctor just advised me not to start reading any serials." Or: "This school is

so tough they print the report cards on sandpaper." Or: "He's so tall he gets the bends when he sits down." Now, since all this, like a magician's trick, on exposure is seen to be a simple matter, the question naturally arises as to how the opinion that there are no new jokes became widespread in the first place.

I believe there are two reasons for this. The first, I think, lies in that natural suspicion with which the layman regards the creative artist. He recognizes that the artist is superior to him in that the artist can do something he cannot. (In this case the writer can create jokes or, if you will, the comedian can deliver them.) The layman feels a compulsion to criticize.

The second, and more important, reason for the no-new-humor theory has to do with the fact that at any given moment the supply of old jokes in the world is larger than the supply of new jokes by exactly the number of jokes that have ever been written. A joke, in other words, is hardly in existence for half a day before it is being classified as "old." Most of the gags one hears, therefore, *are* old. Most, but not all.

Jokes are being fed into the hopper of public demand at a tremendously accelerated rate, as compared with former times.

When vaudeville was in its heyday a comedian could make a single monologue or sketch last for ten years. Today the same entertainer often exhausts more material in one broadcast than he formerly may have used in a decade of performing in theaters. Too, there are many more comedians working today than there were twenty years ago. Good or bad, they are appearing before microphones and cameras, burning up comedy material at a fantastic rate.

Then there are the popular magazines, almost all of which now use cartoons. There are the thousands of newspapers that

provide humor as a necessary ingredient of a balanced diet for their readers. Is it any wonder that the comedy writers of the nation, faced with this fearsome daily deadline, resort to a condoned sort of plagiarism? Almost all of them must maintain a voluminous file of gags, ideas and notes. A certain small portion of each file represents original material. The rest is culled from magazines, newspapers, and other radio and television programs. The writer soothes his conscience by resorting to what is known in the trade as "switching." This is merely a matter of taking an ancient wheeze and restating it in up-to-the-minute terms.

Frequently, too, writers do not even bother to "switch." They simply appropriate as is. The reader may profess to be shocked by this information, but let him who is innocent speak up. Haven't you ever tried out at the office a quip you heard on the Bob Hope show? Have you ever created a single one of the stories you have been telling all your life? Every other form of art, it seems, can be protected as the property of its creator. A painting, a song, a poem, a novel, a piece of sculpture are all secure from appropriation. A joke, however, somehow is considered in the public domain.

For this largess we owe, I think, a tremendous debt to our humorists, the vast majority of whom labor in complete anonymity. When your favorite comedian says good night, do you ever pay any attention to the names of the writers as they are whisked deftly on and off your TV screen? Very probably not. Indeed, the only reason the industry bothers to include these credits at all is as a sop to the ego of the men involved. The writers are aware that their friends and the members of their families may notice the credits and that is reward enough for them.

The late Russell Maloney, writing in *The Saturday Review*, said:

> I seriously believe that if the jokesmiths—the writers of farces, motion-picture comedies, cartoon captions, funny magazine articles, and radio scripts—were to go on strike for a week, the consequences would be as damaging to the national economy as a coal strike. Newspapers and magazines would shrink to almost nothing, no cameras would turn in Hollywood, and the radio would stutter and fall silent. A wave of alarm would sweep the country.
>
> Humor, the manufactured joke, has become the lubricant of modern life. In cities so crowded that it is impossible to walk the streets without actually bumping into other people, millions of people live uncomfortably, the vast majority of them working at jobs that are fantastically degrading to the human spirit. To realize for yourself how necessary a ready joke is under these conditions, just try to get through a short period of time, even twenty-four hours, without once making a joke. Jokes are the small coinage of life today, as necessary as the dime in the subway turnstile.

Another reason for the value of humor is its fragility. It does not travel well from one part of the world to another and it does not keep well in any one climate for a very long time. I have a large collection of books by the classic humorists and also a plentiful number of books containing collections of humor of particular periods in our national history. I regret to say that most of these books aren't very funny today. Even when you're spading up such rich earth as one of the old Abe Martin Almanacs you'll consider yourself lucky if you find ten jokes worth repeating. I am particularly fond of Artemus Ward, but even the old redhead has to be gone over with a magnifying glass before you can come up with a

flash of wit that seems truly timeless. Will Rogers was a great humorist, but if you read one of his newspaper columns or listen to one of his radio monologues at this late date it's a somewhat disillusioning experience.

The transition from radio to television, I believe, gave even greater impetus to the inexorable wheel that turns the public's tastes in humor. A great deal of the material that was so successful on radio turned out to be unsuitable for television because some magical use of the imagination was taken away by the new medium. Fred Allen's delightful Allen's Alley characters just weren't believable when you looked at them. Radio humor, especially of the higher (Fred Allen) type, had a certain poetry to it that the merciless eye of the TV camera seems to have pierced. Television humor, in a general way, is more blunt, more forceful. People take things more literally and no longer experience the enchantment once lent by distance. With television you are indeed *there*.

To give one example of the sort of thing that used to convulse radio listeners but is now unacceptable, consider the case of Digger O'Dell, the friendly undertaker, who used to be such a popular feature of the old William Bendix "Life of Riley" radio show. Today on TV, Riley is a much more realistic character and the things that happen to him are relatively plausible as compared to the Riley of radio. The program, in my opinion, was funnier on radio, and one of the reasons was Digger. You may recall his outrageous puns and jokes on anything to do with death. His favorite radio program was "Young Widow Brown"; his favorite orchestra leader was Spade Cooley. He even successfully used the ancient joke that says that although you may not like flowers at first, eventually they'll grow on you. If he came upon Riley napping in a ham-

mock, he'd chuckle lovingly, "Riley, you look wonderful laid out like that." One of his favorite proverbs was "The grass is always greener on the other fellow."

This was all amusing and acceptable enough in the old days when there was a sort of make-believe, just-for-fun air about it all, but television is frightfully realistic. The jokes were just too powerful for TV. Digger O'Dell went the way of Mrs. Nussbaum and Titus Moody and Fibber McGee and Molly and Jerry Colonna and a good many other wonderful radio characters.

The great brahmin of comedy, Jack Benny, is well aware of the orchidlike quality of humor. "Now and then," he told me, "we'll get out an old script or bit and repeat it, and you know something? We *always* have to rewrite it, bring it up to date. Some lines that are funny today just won't be funny five years from now."

Sooo-oo-ooo (as Ed Wynn used to say), having got these introductory remarks off my chest, I suppose I had better get down to the business of presenting the body of the book. I should point out in advance, however, that this is not a funny book. Books on humor never are, really, except in regard to the material they quote. They are like books on magic or poetry, which always seem to make disappear the very thing they are trying to capture and examine.

Nor will this book be a gold mine of biographical information. If you want to know what Jack Benny's real name is or why What's His Name had trouble with his second wife, this is not the book for you. I concern myself on the following pages only with an examination and a somewhat relaxed analysis of television humor. My method has been simply to write a chapter on each of sixteen of America's favorite funnymen. There

are certain books that are written to entertain and divert, others that are written with the intention of changing the reader's mind. I confess that this book falls in the latter classification. I hope that, after you read it, you will have a better understanding of the comedians you watch on TV. If you drive a truck or sell insurance, I think this book will make you more tolerant. If you are a professional critic, I hope this book will make you more humble.

Fred Allen

ST. PATRICK'S DAY 1956 was one I shall not soon forget. The day before—Friday, March 16—New York was hit by an unseasonal blizzard and on Saturday the city's Irish paraded through snow and bitter cold. One elderly Irishman that night took a stroll from which he never returned. About the time he was putting on his overcoat to go out I was sitting in a room on the twelfth floor of the Waldorf-Astoria with Sid Caesar and several members of his staff. We had just come upstairs after attending the annual award ceremonies of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and were enjoying a social drink while discussing that favorite conversational topic of all comedians: comedy.

Sid told a few funny stories about his experiences in Europe, and then somehow the conversation got around to Fred Allen, as it often does when professional humorists get together. Sid recalled how impressed he was one day several years before when Fred had dropped into his theater at rehearsal time. "It was really something," he said. "Here was this guy I had listened to on the old Majestic all through my childhood years, this guy who seemed like God or somebody, and all of a sudden there he was hanging around my theater."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Oh, just talked for a while. It was the day Truman was going through town in some big parade or something. I remember we went outside to watch him go by, and after he'd passed I said, 'Harry looks a little like he's sick,' and Fred said, 'Doesn't surprise me. He probably caught it from the country.' "

When Jayne and I left the Waldorf we drove Carl Reiner and his wife to their garage, and as we stopped for a red light at the corner of 57th Street and Seventh Avenue we saw Sylvia and Leonard Lyons. Since cabs were at a premium, we offered them a lift, and as they climbed into the car Jayne noticed that Sylvia seemed shaken. It was then that Leonard told us that Fred Allen had just died. Leonard had identified the body, and to him had fallen the grim task of telling Portland the sad news.

The following day "What's My Line?" called me and asked me to fill in for Fred. Portland had vetoed replacement of the regular format with a special tribute and had suggested instead that the program, in show-business tradition, go on as usual. At the conclusion of the show that evening I said something that still expresses better than any other words I might now create what I felt at Fred's passing: "A few months ago Fred read a postcard here on the show, a card asking, 'Is Fred Allen Steve Allen's father?' Fred laughed and explained that the answer was no. But last night when I heard of his death I couldn't have been more deeply affected if the answer had been yes."

The next day, Monday, Bennett Cerf, Howard Deitz, Bob Hope, Kenny Delmar, Peter Donald, John Crosby, Herman Wouk and Jack Benny gathered on my late-night program to

All right. We've established there are really too many talented song writers. At the opposite end of the chart explaining supply-and-demand relationships you'll find the word *comedians.* There are really not enough of these, believe it or not. If every big singer in the country retired tomorrow you'd have a new crop of kids ready to fill their shoes within two years. But if all the top-bracket funnymen in the business were taken away from us, it would be a long time before the pain of their loss would be eased.

Hollywood can find plenty of collar-ad faces to throw upon its screens, the record industry will always come up with at least acceptable voices, casting directors can thumb through card indexes for various sorts of talents, but only the comedian is in such demand that he can almost name his own price in the hectic entertainment market. There are thousands of singers, dancers, magicians and actors swarming in and out of theaters and broadcasting studios, but almost the entire job of making America laugh is handled by a small group of some thirty men.

Thus it is particularly puzzling that one of this select group, and the one, indeed, that was considered by many authorities to be the group's leading wit, was, so far as television is concerned, more or less out of work, partly retired to the status of great-white-father-grand-old-man of contemporary comedy.

You almost get angry at the whole medium, wondering why it couldn't seem to accommodate a man who could say of California, "It's a great place to live, if you're an orange."

Television needed a man who could say of Georgie Jessel, "Georgie loves after-dinner speaking so much he starts a speech at the mere sight of bread crumbs."

When the price of milk in New York City rose to twenty-

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pay tribute to Fred, to tell of their love and respect for him and, oddly enough at such a sad time, to laugh heartily at his remembered jokes. I remembered thinking during that program what a peculiar thing it was that such a vast talent as Fred's had gone largely unhonored by television. Consider, for a moment, the background.

The opinion seems to be popular that the entertainment field is at all times vastly overstocked with talented people and that, therefore, only a select few can get to the top, while the rest must inevitably wend their broken way into obscurity.

Like a great many popular opinions, this one is composed of one part truth and nine parts nonsense. There is only one branch of show business that honestly appears to have more talent than can ever possibly be accommodated: the song-writing field. There are millions of people around who can write a pretty fair song in whole or in part, but the market for popular music in this country is so restricted that a stable of five or six competent tunesmiths could easily satisfy the entire normal demand.

The illusion that there are too many talented performers in the other areas of the entertainment world is created by the great deal of hustle and bustle in agency offices, endless union membership lists and cutthroat competition for available work. True, indeed, there are too many people looking for work as clarinet players, tap dancers, acrobats and singers, but the brutal fact of the matter is that a strikingly small minority of these ambitious entertainers have anything more than run-of-the-mill ability.

In fact, it is the very paucity of genius that explains why a good many artistically impoverished individuals achieve suc-

cess anyway. There are simply so many motion pictures to be made, so many plays to be produced, so many orchestras to put together, so many broadcasts to be aired, and if there is not enough real talent to go around, why then it is the most natural thing in the world that the fates should say to a few fortunate folk, "You have not really enough ability to be a star, but we are casting around for a star today, so you'll do until the real thing comes along."

Which makes me remember the story of an actor who went to his psychiatrist. "Doctor," he said, "you've got to help me. I have no talent, I can't sing on key, I can't dance, I don't tell funny stories and I'm not handsome. What would you suggest?"

"Why, the solution is simplicity itself," said the doctor. "You've got to get out of show business."

"But I can't," the actor said. "I'm a star!"

Granted, then, that success is not always predicated upon ability, is it nevertheless true that a great many unrecognized talents are doomed to mill forever with the unheralded throng simply because of the strangling competition? As they used to say in the Army, that's a good question. The answer to it is "No!"

There is a period through which every successful entertainer suffers and during which his innate or acquired talent is nurtured and developed until it matures to the point where it demands recognition. But the idea that the woods are full of people who could sing just as well as Bing Crosby if someone would only give them the chance, or people who could act rings around Marlon Brando if some producer would only audition them, is extremely unrealistic.

The Funny Men

All right. We've established there are really too many talented song writers. At the opposite end of the chart explaining supply-and-demand relationships you'll find the word *comedians.* There are really not enough of these, believe it or not. If every big singer in the country retired tomorrow you'd have a new crop of kids ready to fill their shoes within two years. But if all the top-bracket funnymen in the business were taken away from us, it would be a long time before the pain of their loss would be eased.

Hollywood can find plenty of collar-ad faces to throw upon its screens, the record industry will always come up with at least acceptable voices, casting directors can thumb through card indexes for various sorts of talents, but only the comedian is in such demand that he can almost name his own price in the hectic entertainment market. There are thousands of singers, dancers, magicians and actors swarming in and out of theaters and broadcasting studios, but almost the entire job of making America laugh is handled by a small group of some thirty men.

Thus it is particularly puzzling that one of this select group, and the one, indeed, that was considered by many authorities to be the group's leading wit, was, so far as television is concerned, more or less out of work, partly retired to the status of great-white-father-grand-old-man of contemporary comedy.

You almost get angry at the whole medium, wondering why it couldn't seem to accommodate a man who could say of California, "It's a great place to live, if you're an orange."

Television needed a man who could say of Georgie Jessel, "Georgie loves after-dinner speaking so much he starts a speech at the mere sight of bread crumbs."

When the price of milk in New York City rose to twenty-

two cents a quart it was Fred who said, "Milk hasn't been so high since the cow jumped over the moon."

In Lindy's one night Leonard Lyons heard Oscar Levant ask, "Fred, are you an egomaniac?" "No, Oscar," Fred replied. "I've heard that the meek shall inherit the earth and I'm standing by to collect."

Although he may have just been going for a joke in response to Oscar's question, Fred spoke the truth about himself. He was the meekest, the least phony of all the famous performers I've met. He never publicly associated himself with any charity, but he was the most charitable man I've known. But a lot of wealthy men give money; Fred gave *himself* in addition—his time and his talent. He came through for a lot of us. Dave Garroway and Henry Morgan found Fred in their corners during the early days of their struggle for recognition. Herb Shriner was suggested by Fred to replace him when his first heart attack forced him to withdraw from "Two for the Money." Red Skelton says it was Fred who wrote Red's famous Guzzler's Gin routine. I will always be grateful to Fred for appearing on a special "Tonight" broadcast celebrating the opening of *The Benny Goodman Story*. We were stuck for a big-name star to open the show. When we told Fred our problem he agreed on the spot to step in. And he was in great form that night. It was to be his last big monologue.

So what about Fred and television? Where did the trouble lie? I think the fault was neither Fred's nor TV's. It was just one of those things. Fred's greatest work was behind him, after all, and though he was brilliantly witty to his last day, he was ill at ease before the camera. "What's My Line?" gave him at best openings for only two or three jokes per broad-

cast. None of his classically witty prepared material could be brought to the panel table since the show is unrehearsed and ad-libbed, and although he was a master of the off-the-cuff chatter, he was always somewhat distracted by the mechanics of the game itself. Now and then, of course, he would score strongly. One night, speaking to a shoemaker who mentioned the name of Gino Prato, Fred said, "I wish you'd tell Gino to hurry back from Europe. He's got a pair of my shoes locked in his store." But most of the laughs on "What's My Line?" came from the confusion of the panelists and the double-meanings that often stem from their ignorance of the professions they are trying to identify. The Fred Allen of "What's My Line?" was not the *real* Fred Allen. It was true that, as Madison Avenue parlance has it, he hadn't "found himself" in television.

This search for one's self in the TV jungles can be a pretty frightening thing, too. When CBS first brought me from Hollywood to New York there were regular executive sessions devoted to "finding the real Steve Allen." I had been conducting a well-received radio show five nights a week on station KNX, and it was presumably the success of this program that induced the network to transfer me to its eastern headquarters. But as soon as I arrived in town there began a search for the "real" me. I became so wary of the mechanics of this probe that I eventually began to fancy that I was being followed through the halls of 485 Madison Avenue by vice-presidents with pith helmets and butterfly nets.

Poor Fred had gone through the same sort of thing for about four years. But he was philosophical about it. Lunching with John Crosby one day at the Plaza, he smiled amiably to a lady who had nodded a greeting from across the room.

"I have to be very careful," he said. "My public has shrunk to such an extent that I have to be polite to all of them. I even say hello to people in sewers. You know, I went off the air once before, back in 1944. We got three letters deploring it. This time we're way ahead of that: I think we got fifteen."

From the beginning, oddly enough, even way back before he had to work in the medium, Fred had cast a suspicious eye at television. "When you see Kukla, Fran, and Ollie come alive on that little screen, you realize you don't need great big things as we had in radio. They ought to get one of those African fellows over here to shrink all the actors. We're all too big for this medium.

"TV," he said, "gets tiresome. Take 'The Goldbergs,' which has been so well received. It's a good show, but it gets so after you see it four or five times you know what the uncle is going to do and you know what the kids are going to do. The trouble with television is it's *too* graphic. In radio, a moron could visualize things his way; an intelligent man, his way.

"Everything is for the eye these days—TV, *Life*, *Look*, the movies. Nothing is for just the mind. The next generation will have eyeballs as big as cantaloupes and no brain at all."

Of all the prominent comedians, Allen most closely approached the status of a philosopher. Since a philosopher must, by the very nature of his mission, be a critic it follows that Fred's was comedy with a heavy critical content. For some as yet unidentified reason television is the first medium in history not only to put a low price on critical humor but practically to exclude it altogether.

The theater, the press, the lecture platform, radio—all accommodated pungent satire, all were successfully used as bases from which to fire the barbed comic shaft. Television, possibly

because of its complete sensual intimacy, possibly because it is a medium wherein a picture may detract from, rather than add to, an idea, has placed the sardonic humorist in an awkward position.

Some thought had been given, therefore, to "softening up" Allen's comedic style. There had been attempts to make him what the trade refers to as "gracious and warm." Such efforts were, naturally, doomed to failure, if only on an old-dog-new-tricks basis. Fred was, after all, the king of radio comedy, and kings are notoriously opposed to change, particularly of a personal nature. Besides, one cannot help feeling that Fred really shouldn't have been asked to modify his professional personality. He had never had to sell "himself" before; he had simply presented amusing ideas. It is audiences, perhaps, who should be asked to change. How dare they, one is tempted to demand, not enjoy the work of a man who brought them so much pleasure on the radio?

Fred's bitterness was a pose and a disguise anyway. Its existence was real enough, but it was a camouflage for his true personality, which *was* gracious and warm. Unlike some performers who are angels to the public and devils to their associates, he exposed his Mephistophelean side to his public and worked his good deeds in the anonymity of his daily routine. While he was an outspoken individualist and a man of many dislikes, he was an eminently enjoyable companion and a top-notch conversationalist. Modest, soft-spoken, without a trace of phoniness, he was also privately known as a push-over for anybody in need of a handout. Friends say he had one of the longest "pension" lists in show business. Almost every successful performer has a small and usually vocal circle of people who choose to be identified as enemies; I

have never heard anyone say a word against Fred Allen.

Mark Goodson, who with his partner Bill Todman produces such shows as "What's My Line?," "I've Got a Secret," "Two for the Money" (which was originally created for Fred), and Fred's "Judge for Yourself," had this to say about Allen's personality: "Fred is a complete paradox. On the air he can't function unless he's holding something of life up by a tweezers and frowning at it. If we had a contestant on the show who had just lost a leg, saved somebody's life, beat out a fire with his bare hands and joined the Marines, Fred would simply be constitutionally unable to say to the guy, 'Gosh, we certainly are proud and happy to have you with us tonight.' And yet, after the show, when some glad-handing emcee might be brushing the hero off, Fred would probably hand him a personal check for two hundred dollars and walk away fast."

Sam Levenson has several theories about Allen's difficulties before the camera. "We all love the real Fred Allen," he says, "but I think what is basically wrong is that he doesn't look well on TV. By that I mean he doesn't screen well. Also, on radio the listeners used their imaginations. It helped. Another point is that Fred has worked with a script in his hands for twenty years and it's very difficult for him to get used to this new medium."

Fred himself admitted the problem is a big one. "We all have a great problem—Hope, Benny, all of us. We don't know how to duplicate our success in radio. We found out how to cope with radio, and after seventeen years you know pretty well what effect you're achieving. But the same things won't work in television. Jack Benny's sound effects, Fibber McGee's closet—they just won't be funny in television. We don't know what will be funny or even whether our looks are acceptable."

It is my opinion that the frequently heard reference to Fred's doleful physiognomy does not represent a true reason for his television contretemps. If he had done the proper sort of program for him I believe it would not have mattered what he looked like. When has there ever been a handsome comedian anyway? Fred in person made studio and theater audiences laugh for years and they saw his face. And in 3-D and color at that.

Fred, by the way, directed a considerable amount of criticism at people who go to see television comedy programs and sit in their seats and laugh.

He started it six years ago. He said, "The worst thing that ever happened to radio was the studio audience. Somebody like Eddie Cantor brought these hordes of cackling geese in because he couldn't work without a bunch of imbeciles laughing at his jokes."

Every comedian, of course, is just a little bit afraid of an audience. It isn't stage fright; that's no problem. What you're afraid of is that the people won't laugh. But Fred had never let up on the pew-holders. "Would anybody with a brain be caught dead in a studio audience?" he has demanded. "Would anybody with a sense of taste stand in line to watch half a dozen people in business suits standing around reading into microphones?"

Allen and a lot of other people who are of the same mind liked to hark back to the days of Stoopnagle and Bud, Amos and Andy, and Easy Aces. "There," they say, "were comedy shows without a live audience. We should never have made a change."

On this point alone I confess that I always disagreed with Fred.

The old quarter-hour shows were funny all right, but personally I laughed louder at Fred Allen's radio program, the one with the studio audience. And I laughed louder at it than I would have if Fred had broadcast the exact same scripts from an empty room.

Basically, it's a matter of mass psychology. The appreciation of humor is at its heart an emotional matter. You won't laugh at the most amusing joke in the world if you're not "in the mood." And when are you more in the mood for laughter —when you're sitting in a room by yourself or when you're with a large group of friends?

I always have thought that Danny Kaye was about as funny as anybody ever gets in the movies. His pictures usually make me laugh so loud I embarrass my companions. But one time I saw one of his pictures at a drive-in theater. I didn't laugh aloud once. I didn't hear anybody else laughing.

Fred knew that a joke with which he could make a friend chuckle on the street would make an audience of fifty laugh deeply, and could make an audience of five hundred roar for perhaps half a minute.

But sometimes people say, "Why don't they just *try* a comedy show without an audience?"

They have. Henry Morgan did once. Just once. The script was marvelous and Henry was in top form. But at home I didn't crack a smile. Next week Henry performed before his usual crowd and I laughed aloud.

"But," a last-ditcher may protest, "what you say only applies to out-and-out joke programs. What about situation-comedy shows? Wouldn't they be better if the viewer at home could make up his own mind about when to laugh?"

Of course not. Ever see a rehearsal of a comedy in an empty

theater? 'Tain't funny, McGee. "Mr. Peepers," "I Love Lucy" —all the good situation-comedy shows are helped by the sound of laughter. There *is* one culprit we can do without, though. That's the guy who does a bad job of dubbing in tape-recorded laughter on filmed programs. A laugh has a certain mathematical logicality in relation to the joke that precedes it. Some of these recording engineers can't add two and two.

To get back to Fred, one valid explanation of his difficulty with the visual medium lies in the obvious fact that he was a humorist; he worked with the word. His material usually looked as funny in print as it sounded coming out of his mouth. You cannot say the same for material offered by a Jackie Gleason or a Milton Berle.

Allen was the king of wits in radio, where the spoken word was all. He was not helped by the camera. It was a hindrance and a distraction to the true appreciation of his humor.

Fred realized this himself. Speaking of his ill-fated "Judge for Yourself" program, he had said, "There are so many things to keep in mind and cues to look out for. No sooner do I get going smoothly on an interview than I get a hand signal to break it up. A television performer is surrounded by bloody commotion."

Never were truer words spoken. In radio the only thing moving on the stage at any given moment was the comedian's mouth. Supporting players have been fired for crossing their legs or in any other way distracting the attention of the studio audience during a broadcast, and with some justification. A comedian is hired to make people laugh. If there is extraneous movement in the studio, it competes for the attention of the audience. If an audience's attention is divided, it does not laugh.

I shall never forget my first experience on television. Used to the rigid silence of radio studios, the rapt attention of the people in the seats, I was horrified to learn that instead of being separated from the audience by one thin microphone, I was now required to reach them through a jungle of cameras, lights, props, microphone dollies and scenery inhabited by three cameramen, two men working microphones, numerous stagehands creeping around in the darkness, assorted production assistants, who strode around with headphones muttering audibly while receiving communications from the control booth, and a generous collection of announcers, musicians, actors and dancers. Trying to make an audience laugh under these circumstances is a little like working at the Palace while between you and the footlights the Harlem Globe-Trotters map out a few fast-moving plays.

TV studio audiences are usually so fascinated at being behind the scenes that they can scarcely take their eyes off the cameras to look at the actors. Frequently, I have sat in the living room with friends watching one or another comedian suddenly garner four or five seconds of silence for a joke that was obviously of high caliber. The reason may well have been something like a stagehand walking in front of the audience with a ladder. You don't see him at home. All you see at home is the comic with egg on his face.

This sort of situation is particularly troublesome to a performer like Allen who brought no definite physical plus to a delivery of his lines. Unless an audience was paying strict attention to what he said, his gems sometimes were not picked up. The timing of a joke is a delicate thing; with a comic like Allen it didn't require much to throw that timing off.

Not many people know, incidentally, that no matter who

you are you don't get as big laughs in a TV studio as you do in a radio studio. Besides the matter of physical distraction, there is the issue of microphone pickup and studio sound amplification. In radio a comedian's mouth was usually four or five inches away from the mike. That meant the engineers could get a full, close, rich pickup of his voice, and the public-address system could throw it clearly into all corners of the studio. In TV theaters, mikes are usually kept invisible. That means they are floating around out of the picture two or three feet over the performers' heads. In order to send out sound of the same volume as was maintained in radio the engineers must crank up the gain very high. That opens the delicate mikes and means the public-address system in the studio tends to play the sound so loud that it floats back into the open microphones, producing that loud, screeching howl you sometimes hear. It's called "feedback." Now no self-respecting engineer likes to hear feedback, so he solves the problem simply by turning down the volume of the public-address system. That prevents feedback all right, but it also makes it relatively difficult for the people in the theater to hear the comedian. When they have trouble hearing they laugh less. You at home just get the impression the comic isn't very funny. Often he's doing jokes he's been doing successfully for twenty years. He may not be getting laughs on a particular night because of technical reasons.

This is a thing every comedian knows the way he knows the Ten Commandments (which may, now that I think of it, be a fairly ill-advised figure of speech). But no one else ever believes him.

I did a program once on CBS television called "Songs for Sale." It was a popular show and had a respectable rating. But

the first night I went on the air I didn't get as many laughs as I felt I deserved. The next morning there was a meeting of executive and production minds.

"We didn't think much of the jokes last night, Steve," a program head told me amiably. "How would you like a new group of writers?"

"To tell you the truth," I said, "the audience couldn't hear very well in that studio. The jokes were funny enough; the people just didn't get a chance to show what they thought of them."

"I understand Hal Collins may be available soon," somebody said. "I think he's leaving Berle."

"Is Collins an engineer?" I asked.

Everyone smiled at what they thought was a quip. It developed Collins was a gag writer.

Believe it or not, every single Monday morning for six weeks we had that same damned production meeting, and finally the writers working on the show were actually dismissed. I was still holding out for a new public-address system. Fortunately, one night the hand of God fell upon the situation. Frank Stanton, CBS top man, happened to step into the theater while the program was in progress. After a few moments he walked into the control room. "I can't hear very well standing in the back of the studio," he said.

The following morning there was no meeting to discuss the program's faults. Instead, a gang of engineers was sent into the studio with instructions to rip out the old PA system and install new equipment. The next Saturday night I got my full quota of laughs. The studio has been a good one for comedy shows ever since, and I was happy to observe a few months ago, when I dropped into it to watch the Jackie Glea-

son show, that the sound setup had been even further improved by the addition of two new extra-loud speakers down in the first row. Evidently Jackie had demanded it. Bless his heart.

A comedian of Fred's type is considerably handicapped by the technical exigencies of TV, and he seemed to appreciate the point fully.

"The television set," he said in explanation, "just isn't an instrument of wit. The comedy you see on TV is physical rather than mental and is based largely on old burlesque routines. Take Sid Caesar. He's one of the finest comedians on the air, but if you analyze his comedy you'll find it's the physical type."

True enough. Much TV humor *is* physical and such of it as is not is usually worked into a sketch. Even comics such as Bob Hope and Milton Berle, who made their reputations standing up and firing one big joke after another at point-blank range, have come to realize that TV audiences want to get interested in some sort of story line. The question is: Where did this leave Fred Allen?

I'll be darned if I know. All I know is I loved his humor.

Fred was classic with descriptions and comparisons and exaggerations. That's why he's the most quoted comedian of our time. I will always think that one of the funniest jokes ever written was Fred's crack about the scarecrow that "scared the crows so badly they brought back the corn they had stolen two years before."

James Thurber says one of his favorite lines was Fred's remark to a bass player whose instrument made such strange sounds that Fred peered down into the pit and said to him, "How much would you charge to haunt a house?"

Another line that broke me up was Fred's answer to a friend who inquired about his destination one time when he was making a trip out of New York. "I'm going to Boston to see my doctor," said Fred. "He's a very sick man." It was Fred who said, in discussing a geometry problem, "Let X equal the signature of my father."

But these are all what the trade calls stand-up jokes, jokes to be flung in an audience's teeth. And therein lies one clue to Fred's TV difficulties. He could function only as an observer, a commentator, a humorist, not as an actor. Fred was patently an inadequate sketch comic. He had no ability to "lose himself" in a character. He could put on a costume and say a line out loud, all right, but you never believed he was the character he was portraying in the way you believe that Sid Caesar or Jackie Gleason or Milton Berle have adopted a mystically different personality.

All other comedians can sell you a bad line by giving it a physical push. Jerry Lewis can convulse an audience with a weak gag by mugging as he delivers it. Sid Caesar can do a dialect or emote or make a face and thus make almost any line seem funny. Jackie Gleason can punch a line out with such gusto that you laugh before you know what you're laughing at. But Fred Allen had to have a good solid joke for you or you didn't laugh. The point is not made for the sake of criticism. It is made to explain why Fred—who had only dazzling wit to sell—was ill at ease in the medium of television.

Allen's dilemma might have seemed solved when we remember that there are other comedians functioning successfully in TV who do not do sketches. Groucho Marx doesn't. Herb Shriner doesn't.

The solution, then, seems simple. Make him a quizmaster.

Only thing wrong is that this particular solution had been tried and found wanting. Fred's "Judge for Yourself" was called by one critic "a pointless hodgepodge," although it was produced by the same organization that put together Herb Shriner's successful "Two for the Money" and was loosely similar to Groucho's "You Bet Your Life." The quiz-game format seemed a natural for Allen because he was one of that small minority of comedians able to ad-lib. Like Groucho and Shriner, he was given the additional benefit of interviews that were more or less written out in advance. But Fred lacked a quality that Groucho and Shriner have. His mind was rapier-quick, but he was not used to making small talk with relative nonentities. He was not entirely at ease with bus drivers and dentists and housewives from Des Moines. He was too honest not to be distracted by the technical froth of "the game," and the result was that he did not develop the ability to relax entirely with his guests. If he *could* have relaxed, he could probably have done a better job than either Groucho or Shriner on a nothing-set-up-no-holds-barred interview, but he did not seem to be psychologically constituted to handle this particular sort of assignment so late in the game. He was impatient and confined and conscious of the pressure on him.

The solution, I think, would have been to give him the sort of program that Arthur Godfrey or Garry Moore or I do. Give him a table and a microphone and a couple of singers to fill in the holes and then just throw him a newspaper headline or a human-interest subject and I'll bet he'd have been off to the races.

These programs have writers, too, of course. Fred could have had all the help he needed and he'd have had time to prepare any jokes or stories he wanted. But he'd also have had

unlimited freedom. He'd have been under no mechanical restrictions. If he got something going that was funny he could have let it roll as long as it felt good. If something went wrong on the program he could have stopped everything and talked about what had gone wrong. If his interest in a subject lagged he could have called on the orchestra or one of the singers or a guest star. He could at last have been as funny on TV as he was when you talked to him on the sidewalk. Ask any comedian in the business. He'll tell you that Fred Allen was king of the performing humorists.

I ran into Henry Morgan one night last summer on Fifty-second Street and he was chuckling.

"What's funny?" I asked.

"I was just talking to Fred Allen," he said. "Met him coming out of the Waldorf. I asked him what he'd been doing and he said he'd just left a dinner sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. And then he said, 'You know, Henry, I was just wondering . . . do *we* really deserve top billing?' "

One thing that long fascinated me about Fred's comedy was that it was probably more secure from plagiarism than that of any other performing humorist. Most of Fred's jokes had to be heard coming out of *his* mouth to sound as funny as they were. If one did not hear them, one had to draw up a mental picture of Allen, one had to imagine that one heard his nasal, twanging voice or much of the enjoyment of the humor was lost.

I'll try to demonstrate.

One night when Milton Berle was doing a warm-up for his radio show somebody turned on a light in the sponsor's booth, revealing to the studio audience that there was no sponsor, no sign of life whatever, in the booth. "Ladies and gentlemen,"

Milton said, "that booth is a device to belittle the comedian by showing him that the sponsor doesn't care enough for his program to attend it."

At that point a page boy hurried in and switched off the light, which caused Milton to say, "Ah, a boy who has the guts to turn off the lights without a memo from a vice-president will go right to the top of the organization."

Now regardless of what your reaction was to the above story, I feel quite certain that one thing will be generally admitted: you were not really very amused by it. Milton's comments seem more sarcastic than funny, and they are certainly not jokes. At best, they might get from the average audience a sort of sympathetic chuckle.

The point of my example is this: Milton Berle never had any such experience. *The thing happened to Fred Allen* and when he responded as indicated above the audience fell into paroxysms of laughter. Believe it or not, if you go back and read the details of the incident over again (this time picturing Fred Allen at the microphone instead of Milton Berle) *you* will laugh too.

Debating some point or other with Fred one evening on my late-night TV show I happened to say, "Well, of course there are two sides to this thing." "There are two sides to a Decca record, too," said Fred, and the audience laughed. I laughed, too, for I was genuinely amused. But I do not believe I would have laughed if the remark had been made by Red Buttons.

Who would laugh to hear Herb Shriner say, "A vice-president is a bit of executive fungus that forms on a desk that has been exposed to conference"?

No, I believe much of Fred's material was so uniquely

adapted to his delivery that he needed have little fear that it would be stolen by hard-pressed rivals. Of course a great number of Allen's quips *have* been lifted, but they probably constitute a very small percentage of his total output. The old line about starting a fire by rubbing two Boy Scouts together is Fred's. So is the one about the fellow who accidentally swallowed a bottle of liquid stocking and came out of the mishap rather well except for the fact that he had to wear a garter to hold up his stomach.

Fred's old radio warm-ups were wonderful shows in themselves. He used to speak to his studio audience for about ten minutes, saying a lot of things he wouldn't have been allowed to say on the air. "If by any chance," he'd say, "any of you folks are in the wrong place you still have ten minutes to get the heck out of here. Heck, incidentally, is a place invented by the National Broadcasting Company. NBC does not recognize hell or the Columbia Broadcasting System. When a bad person working for NBC dies, he goes to Heck, and when a good person dies, he goes to the Rainbow Room."

There are several things that earmarked Fred's humor as distinctive. One was his sheer playful love of words. He had a poet's regard for peculiarities of sound and expression and he seemed never so happy as when he could roll off his tongue some glittering allegory, metaphor or simile. He was actually much more intrigued by this sort of thing than he was by the plain and simple joke.

Once, in complaining about the fact that he got no help in advance from executives, he said, "While the show was nonexistent . . . the agency men . . . were as quiet as a small boy banging two pussy willows together in a vacuum."

Putting words into the mouth of Senator Claghorn, Allen,

to describe how big a dinner was, wrote, "Son, when all the food's on, the four legs of the table is kneelin' down." About a contentious chap, Allen said, "Brother Doe always had a chip on his shoulder that he was ready to use to kindle an argument."

To express as forcefully as possible that the late Mayor La Guardia was a long way from being tall, Allen said, "He's the only man I know that can milk a cow standing up."

This line brings us precisely to another distinctive point of Fred's humor: he loved to conceive what we might call "funny pictures." By way of illustration, consider this exchange from an Allen's Alley interview between Fred and Ajax Cassidy:

ALLEN: What is that ladder you have there?
AJAX: I'm going over to Sweeny's house for dinner.
ALLEN: And you have to carry a ladder?
AJAX: The dinin'-room table is too high. You can't sit on chairs. Everybody eats on a ladder.
ALLEN: Why is the dining-room table so high?
AJAX: Sweeny is a mounted cop. He always rides in to dinner on his horse.
ALLEN: Oh.
AJAX: Sweeny never uses a napkin. He wipes his hands on the back of his horse so much, he has mice under his saddle.

This is a peculiar, individual type of humor. It is related, and not too distantly, to the humor of the modern, fey, sophisticated cartoon. It makes one think of George Price. Certainly it is a far cry from the general level of radio comedy with which it was contemporaneous.

Another earmark of Fred's humor is recognized in its occasional close resemblance to poetry. On the subject of true love he has written: "To me, Sonia was prettier than a peacock

backin' into a sunset. I used to dig up the ground she walked on and take it home."

To describe the result of being forced to trim excess wordage out of his scripts when his show was cut from sixty minutes to half an hour, Fred said, "The lines looked as though they had been written with a riveting machine dipped in ink."

He has also written of the chinchilla-winged siskin, a tropical bird that bites people to death and feeds on their screams. The siskin is evidently closely related to another of his creatures of phantasy, the four-toed gecko, a jungle swine that chases people out into the sun and eats their shadows. These ideas are entirely poetical in concept and are humorous only in a most incidental way.

Fred's habit of using actual names of people and places (when such names are *not* essential to the meaning of the joke) is another thing that identifies his style. Offering to make Orson Welles at home in the field of variety radio, Fred said, "Well, if I could give you some hints or introduce you to Ma Perkins, I'd be . . . "

Introducing Arlene Francis on "What's My Line," he said, "And here she is, the only woman who knows whatever happened to Wendy Barrie . . . "

Asked if he could speak French, he said, "Just enough to get out of Rumpelmayer's."

To indicate what life would be like in this country if people became extinct, Fred said, "It will be like Philadelphia on a Sunday."

Another example of Fred's closeness to the Abe Martin–Bill Nye–Josh Billings school lay in his practice of *naming things* poetically. Artemus Ward, for example, called the American eagle "patriotic poultry."

Now consider the famous radio interview between Fred and a certain Captain Knight, who owned an eagle. In the course of this chat Fred referred to the eagle in the following ways: "The gentleman buzzard"; "This bloated sparrow"; "The one we see on the half dollar: the Mint Macaw"; "A bald eagle wearing a toupee"; "These Tenth Avenue canaries"; "He looks like Joe Penner with feathers on"; "The King-Kong Robin."

The poetic style of Fred's humor puts him, I believe, closer to the classic American humorists than any of his contemporaries.

"The Shanghai rooster is built on piles like a sandy-hill crane. . . . They often go to sleep standing and sometimes pitch over, and when they do they enter the ground like a pickax."

That's a line from Josh Billings, and it's greatly similar in style to Allen's work.

"Sending men to that Army," said Abraham Lincoln, no mean humorist himself, "is like shoveling fleas across a barnyard—they don't get there."

That is not a joke; it's a funny picture and it could have come straight from the lips of Allen's Titus Moody.

Whatever form our afterlife may take, it is comforting somehow to think that now Fred is with the men among whose company he must surely be ranked: Artemus Ward, Bill Nye, Mark Twain, Josh Billings, Abe Martin and Will Rogers. It brings a smile to the lips to think of the Olympian dialogues of these lamented wits. Perhaps the spring lightning that crackles over the city is the laughter of the gods at the round-table conversation of our departed friends.

Fred Allen has made some interesting predictions about television. He has always decried the Milton Berle approach

to the medium. Milton and the score of funnymen who work like him did not seem, to Fred, to be ideally suited to TV. "All they're doing," he said, "is photographing vaudeville shows."

He once predicted that the eventual big comedy star of television would be a fellow who would just sit in an easy chair and talk to people in a quiet way as if he were talking to them in person in their living rooms. I think Fred Allen could have learned to function in just that way, and, ah, then what a program we would have seen! He didn't really need television, of course. His reputation is secure, and nothing can diminish his stature. But television surely needs people like Fred.

Jack Benny

In 1926, reviewing a Broadway musical called *Great Temptations,* the New York *World* said, "There are probably more chorus girls, more pink feathers, more high notes on the cornet and more sets of steps than in any two shows ever given." Little was said in the *World*'s review about a comedian new to Broadway, although the *Herald Tribune* did note his presence, calling him "a pleasant imitation of Phil Baker." The newcomer's name: Jack Benny.

In those days, although he had come to use the violin only as a prop, an excuse to lead into jokes, Jack still needed it to give him a reason to walk onstage.

"Jack," said Fred Allen, "was one of the last of the funny musicians to come out of vaudeville. Phil Baker, Benny Bernie, Jack—all started out with music and ended up in comedy." It is interesting to note how very many comedians needed an excuse to step to the footlights, by the way. The humorists who started out in show business doing comedy and nothing but comedy from the very first are in the distinct minority. Will Rogers did rope tricks, Fred Allen and W. C. Fields juggled, Eddie Cantor sang, Jerry Lewis did a record pantomime, Milton Berle was a child actor, Herb Shriner played the har-

monica, George Gobel was a hillbilly singer, Sid Caesar played the saxophone in dance bands, Garry Moore was an announcer, Arthur Godfrey was a disk jockey and Jack Benny, as advertised, had his violin.

Just when did he stop being a funny musician and become a comedian? Well, here we go again with that touchy problem of defining the word. By now the reader will not be surprised at the difficulty involved in trying to determine whether Jack is a true natural comedian or the best comedy actor of his time. The word *comedian* can be used in many ways. In its broadest sense it can be used to describe any performer who makes audiences laugh; hence it would cover a host of entertainers who would possibly be surprised to find themselves so defined. Jimmy Stewart, Robert Cummings, Fred MacMurray, Ray Milland, Robert Young and William Powell, for example, during the thirties and early forties frequently played comedy roles in motion pictures. Are they comedians? We must be wary of making dogmatic pronouncements in any field of the arts, of course; in the area of humor only a fool makes rules. If I consider Debussy's *"Clair de Lune"* a beautiful piece of music and the critic for *The New York Times* considers it saccharin and spineless, we are, in a sense, both right.

It is therefore with the full knowledge that the judgment is nothing more than personal that I submit that basically Jack Benny is an *actor* of sheer comic genius rather than a true essential comedian. I have been opposed in this viewpoint, you may be interested to learn, by no less an authority than Fred Allen, who had been quoted as stating that Benny was his *favorite comedian.*

It is significant, I think, that Fred had so chosen to regard

a performer who cannot do what Fred could do, but who *can* do what Fred could not, which is another way of saying that Fred and Jack were artistic opposites. Jack can act and Fred could not. Jack can involve the emotions of his audience in a way that Fred was not able to. But Fred could create humor and Jack cannot.

In a way, too, both Fred and I can be right. Using the word *comedian* in its broadest sense—a performer who specializes in comedy roles—Jack *is* the best. He's the smoothest of them all, he appeals to high and low brows, he is able to rise above his material, and (one is tempted to ask if anything else matters) he always makes audiences laugh. He is the one comedian who never seems to turn in a bad personal performance.

But the semantic problem still faces us.

Although the public rarely differentiates between the creative humorist and the polished comedy technician, authorities tend to make a vague sort of distinction, to the advantage of the former.

"To me," says Max Liebman, "the true comedians are the people like Groucho, Fred Allen, W. C. Fields, Benchley—those who are funny on stage or off. The others, mind you, can be just as funny, but only when *in character*. Basically, they don't seem to be comedians. . . . Perhaps there ought to be some other word. They are actors, entertainers or mimics."

One reason it will always be impossible, of course, to draw a hard and fast line dividing the popular funnymen into two (or for that matter twenty-two) definite categories is that there are so many separate ways to be funny. By way of illustration an analogy with music might be drawn.

We have all heard people say of a student, "He certainly has great *musical ability*." The phrase is capable of countless

interpretations, for the genes responsible for musical talent play particularly puzzling tricks. The man to whom music is foreign might suppose that the problem is of exceedingly slight proportions—either one has musical ability or one has not.

"Musical ability," however, is a term that covers a wide area. Some people exhibit it in creative form. Others possess ability represented by mechanical mastery of an instrument. Still others may be gifted with a fantastic sort of auditory perception that enables them to listen to a symphony orchestra composed of sixty-five pieces and concentrate at will on one after another of the instruments.

Another fascinating fact about the phenomenon of musical ability is that rarely does an individual manifest it excellently in more than one way. Thus the great conductor is usually not the great composer. The composer is usually not the great instrumentalist.

What is usually thought of as "musical ability" (the ability to play an instrument well, or to understand the mechanics of music) is not necessary at all to the composer. Irving Berlin's piano technique is artistically atrocious, but he has been for many years our most prolific composer.

Similarly, the business of "being funny" is not the simple thing it might have seemed at first inspection. Some men are the "composers" of humor; these are the writers who create the material for other men to recite. The latter are like the musicians who play instruments, reading the notes from paper. Just as is the case with music, in the field of humor the men who commit it to paper rarely are able to "perform" it. Now and then, however, one finds that certain individuals are amusing both at the typewriter and on the stage, and the anal-

ogy can be carried still further in likening the humorists who can create spontaneously to the jazz instrumentalists who can do the same.

Jack Benny, then, in my opinion, is to humor what Artur Rubinstein is to music: a performer of genius.

Other commentators have remarked on the fact that Jack is not creatively humorous. TV–radio critic Ben Gross, of the New York *Daily News*, says, "On no occasion that I have been with Jack Benny socially have I heard him say anything that was truly funny."

(I must digress here to point out that one vote of this type does not completely substantiate a point. Someone or other has said about every comedian in the world, "I spent a whole afternoon with him and he didn't say anything funny at all." It should be understood that comedians don't pretend to amuse twenty-four hours a day. They usually relate their output at any given moment directly to the receptivity of their audiences. With groups of friends I am inclined to give free rein to my sense of humor, such as it is, and I find it easy to make people laugh if they are people I know well. I had lunch with Ben Gross one day and I don't believe he found me very amusing either. The reason is that Ben is a quiet, withdrawn, serious little man. He is pleasant company but he has rather an ascetic mien. So when I spoke to him I addressed him in what seemed to be a suitable manner. I made no attempt to be amusing. On the basis of our conversation I am sure he would say the same thing about me that he said about Jack Benny.)

Of himself, Benny has said, "I may not be the world's greatest comedian, but I am one of its most successful performers. And I have an explanation for this success. In the first place,

I work closely with my writers, who are good ones. But the one factor which has been . . . important is that I'm a damned good editor. Most people don't realize that the star of a weekly comedy series is like the editor of a newspaper or magazine. He has to assign writers to produce certain material. . . ."

Unlike comedians of the Milton Berle type who are rarely able to stop entertaining and are consequently honestly amusing in a barbershop, living room or subway, Jack is reserved, almost shy, and a chronic worrier. Twenty years at the very top of the heap have not given him a great deal of emotional security.

Comedians of the Fred Allen genre cannot help speaking in a witty way even when making small talk, but Jack is a sort of straight man for the whole world; he rarely amuses actively, only *passively*. His is the true "sense" of humor. He understands what is funny and reacts perfectly to it. Indeed, one will search through many pages of his scripts before finding Jack taking the punch line of a joke himself. Jack, except in rare instances, does not tell jokes on his programs, nor does he do many of the funny things for which his program is famous. The jokes are "on" him and the funny things are done *to* him.

Why, then, do we all love to laugh at Jack Benny? We laugh at him for perfectly valid reasons, but they are not the same reasons that we laugh at Milton Berle or Phil Silvers or George Gobel.

The first reason we laugh at Jack today, of course, is that we have been *conditioned* for over twenty years to do so. The first time this possibility was brought forcefully home to me was one evening in, I believe, 1946, when I went to see a broadcast of the Armed Forces radio service program, "Command Per-

formance," that was so popular during the war. The star of the show that particular evening was Bob Hope, and when Wendell Niles introduced him and he walked on stage I was surprised at the nature of the ovation the audience gave him. As might have been expected, it began with simple applause, but this was soon drowned out by the sound of laughter which continued for at least a minute and a half while Hope simply stood at the center of the stage bowing and smiling. He had neither done nor said anything funny, but we were laughing. Our reaction could only be explained on the basis of conditioning. The truth involved in this example is not obscure. On the contrary, it is so obvious that it is often overlooked. A thousand and one examples of this sort of emotional conditioning come readily to mind. If a motion-picture director wants to terrify us, he need only present Boris Karloff. A composer need only change a major chord to minor to change our mood from pleasant to sad. Jack reaps tremendous rewards from this simple truth.

Jack's present bag of tricks had not been filled when he made his radio debut in 1932 on the old Ed Sullivan show, but two years later when he landed his own series for Jello he began almost at once to establish the character that his millions of fans now know so well.

From the very first his scripts were of high caliber, and in the thirties, the first golden age of radio comedy, one can see early traces of the personality traits (stinginess, conceit, impatience) that are better known today than the emotional characteristics of Abraham Lincoln. In Sam Perrin, Milt Josefsberg, George Balzer and John Tackaberry Jack has a quartet of the best situation-comedy writers in the world. For that was Benny's great discovery: he realized that although

he had done jokes in vaudeville the comedian who depended on big jokes in radio would suffer when his supply ran low. Ed Wynn, Eddie Cantor, Joe Penner, all were jokesmiths; Jack decided to go it by another route, the one blazed by the first giants of radio comedy: Amos and Andy. Amos and Andy utilized a story line. You *wanted* to tune in to their next program partly to be amused and partly to find out what was going to happen. While Jack's shows were always complete within themselves (Amos and Andy continued stories from day to day) he nevertheless moved himself and his supporting players around and motivated them like normal people. He kept his approach to activity realistic, as distinguished from the Bob Hope well-here-we-are-on-the-moon technique. His announcer, Don Wilson, played the part of Don Wilson, the announcer. Kenny Baker and later Dennis Day played the role of the singer on the program. Phil Harris was a band leader. Rochester and Mary Livingstone alone did not, strictly speaking, play themselves, but they played real-life characters, and there are probably millions of intelligent Americans today who would swear that Eddie Anderson is actually Jack Benny's valet.

Now, any group of talented writers could have created a situation show for almost any comedian, but I believe only Jack Benny of all the performers in the business could have done as well with the format. His leisurely, unhurried vaudeville style had been developed to the point where he took perfectly to the new assignment. Radio proved even easier and better for him than vaudeville. His voice was pleasant, personal, a perfect vehicle for the emotions Benny seems innately and superbly capable of portraying. I think he is without question the best comedy actor of our time. Jackie

Gleason, also a comedy actor of lavish talent, is limited to doing "characters"; Benny plays himself.

When I say he plays himself I of course do not mean that Jack in reality is the nincompoop the public knows as "Jack Benny." On the air Benny plays a half-cynical, half-naïve braggart, parsimonious to a pathological degree, constantly frustrated in the face of insults, and physically conceited in such a defensive way that he will lie about his age, his social position, anything that threatens his dignity. In reality Jack is a highly intelligent man, generous, well liked, soft-spoken and admittedly in his sixties.

Born in Chicago in 1894, Benny Kubelsky (whose mother had moved down from Waukegan for the event) showed an early interest in the violin. It is probably common knowledge that Jack does not play that instrument as badly as he professes to. By the time he had reached his teens he was proficient enough to get a job in the pit band of a Waukegan theater. After high school he teamed up with a piano player and began playing small-time houses, but this time on the other side of the footlights. World War I and Jack's enlistment in the Navy gave him the opportunity to acquire valuable experience entertaining fellow servicemen. When the war was over it was a more suave, polished performer who returned to vaudeville, although Jack had worked as a violinist for six years before he began doing comedy.

By 1926 he had done well enough to be called to Broadway and the above-mentioned *Great Temptations*. In 1927, not long after his marriage to Mary Livingstone, Jack began what has been a largely unsuccessful attempt to carve out a film career for himself. Fortunately, during the thirties he became so big that he no longer needed Hollywood to become

a star; radio had done the job. He did appear in several pictures, starting with *The Hollywood Revue* in 1927 and reaching a climax of sorts with his much-kidded *The Horn Blows at Midnight.* Jack, ever mindful of the value of playing the fall guy, has adapted his movie career to good advantage; it's one of the stock subjects on which he can always count for a laugh.

With the possible exception of Bob Hope (and at that it's a matter of personal choice) Jack Benny is comedy's absolute master of timing. You might think a joke in the hands of any proficient professional comedian would stand or fall largely on its own merits, but such is not the case. A split-second delay here, a rushed word there, can make a joke misfire. Benny never misses. Sure-footed as a cat, he walks his confident way through a monologue or a sketch, feeling with the delicate sensibility of the true craftsman just what is the best possible moment to speak, what is the most advantageous time to remain silent, regarding the audience with a large, baleful eye.

As mentioned above, Jack's comedy involves chiefly the humor of reaction. An especially gifted entertainer can get just as big a laugh from his response to a joke or action as the average comic can get with the joke or action itself. The reaction comic is really a superb straight man in that he is able to multiply the value of a laugh. The common definition of a straight man, I suppose, is that he's the fellow who asks the comedian leading questions and who reads lines *straight.* That's a pretty good definition as far as it goes. The thing is it only goes halfway. The other half of the straight man's job is equally important. He must *receive* the joke, *react* to it and then *transmit* his reaction to the audience.

Various comedians have their personal methods of perform-

ing these separate functions. George Burns *receives* Gracie's bits of nonsense almost unnoticeably, *reacts* with compassion and weary wisdom, and then *transmits* dryly, with no evident surprise. Edgar Kennedy, of the old Hal Roach comedy shorts, used to receive with fearful misgivings, react with a gradual "slow burn" of anger, and transmit with the twiddling of fingers or by grasping his forehead with an open palm. Milton Berle's technique is to pretend that he has been interrupted in mid-sentence, then to express shock, then resentment. Jack's usual method is to build to a joke by setting up a straight line, taking it between the eyes with almost effeminate petulance, and then to regard either his adversary or his audience with that distinctive and solemn appraisal that says so much. Technically, he may vary the looking bit by saying, "Well!" or "Hmmmm!" but the dramatic effect is the same. (Arthur Marx, writing about Jack in *The New York Times* Sunday magazine, claims that Jack also uses the staring-at-the-audience business as a means of making certain that no supporting player will come in too soon and step on the laugh. When Jack has decided he's milked the reaction to the proper extent, Marx says Don Wilson told him, "he turns away from the audience and faces the person who has the next line. Until then that person isn't allowed to speak.")

Jack has an alternative reaction too, which might be described as the openly angry or "Oh, cut that out!" take. And that's about the size of it. That he can go on year after year laying people in the aisles with these two readings is a great tribute to his sense of timing and his sense of script judgment. He knows just when to throw the proper punch.

Another fascinating thing about Jack's humor (and it brings up another reason you laugh at him) is that he makes

himself consistently inferior (hence you superior) and in a limited and familiar number of ways. There is rarely any drastic experimentation on the Benny show. His writers have the formula and they stick to it, changing only incidental characters and story lines. Here is the formula: Jack Benny is ridiculous because he is a *liar*, a *penny pincher* and a *conceited ham*. He is a liar because he claims to be only thirty-nine years old, when we know he is in his sixties. He also lies about his toupee, or did.

Jokes on his "stinginess" fill every script. Jack's appropriation of the humor involved in all the ancient Scottish jokes has been, in my opinion, the most consistently successful single comedy prop in the history of humor. For over twenty years you've been laughing at the same sort of jokes. Finally a situation has come about where it doesn't even have to *be* a joke; any passing reference to Jack's close-fistedness will make you laugh. The conditioning has been perfect. And the personal identification is ironclad.

Consider, by way of proof, this example: Bob Hope, in one of his movies, is walking down a dark street. Suddenly a holdup man appears from out of the darkness and shoves a gun in his ribs, saying, "Your money or your life."

Bob pauses momentarily and then says, "I'm thinking it over."

Good joke? Yes, fair enough, although not up to Hope's usual standard.

But the incident, if you are not a million miles ahead of me, is *not* from a Bob Hope movie. Bob never heard of the gag. It's from a Benny radio script. Go over the scene again now and notice the difference in your reaction.

On the air the laughter started, not, as it would have in

Hope's imaginary movie, after the punch line, but after the *straight* line! The very *idea* of Jack Benny's being held up was amusing. Jack let the audience relish the simple prospect for at least half a minute. Then at just the proper split second, when the audience had squeezed every last drop of enjoyment out of the situation, he read the "I'm thinking it over" line in his spoiled-child sort of way; the resultant laugh set some sort of record for length and volume.

Some observers (Arthur Marx, for example) credit Jack's sense of timing alone for the fantastic response he gleans in such instances. I think it's 50 per cent timing and 50 per cent the audience's familiarity with the subject matter; or, if you will, Jack's wisdom in seeing that his writers hew consistently to the line.

I believe Jack has a better, clearer understanding of himself in his professional capacity than you will find in any other comedian. He is at all times aware of what is best for his character; he has an uncanny knack for predicting in advance what will be funny. When I functioned as master of ceremonies for the Television "Emmy" Awards in 1955, it accidentally happened that Jack and I were on the same plane going out to Hollywood for the show. Sitting in the lounge talking before we retired, I asked him if he had seen his part of the script. He told me he had not. Next day he telephoned me and said, "Steve, I've just seen the script. These jokes are no good in a spot like this. They're just the usual penny-pinching, tightwad stuff that everybody always tries to write for me. I think I'll kick something else around and bring it into rehearsal."

What Jack brought in the next day was just a page and a half of dialogue, but it was right. It was suitable for the oc-

casion. It was simply relaxed conversation that built to one big laugh, then picked up the pieces and headed slowly but surely for another.

After I introduced him Jack said:

JACK: Thank you, Steve. . . . It's nice to see you again, and I want to congratulate you on all the fine shows you are doing from New York.

STEVE: Thank *you,* Jack. . . . You've been doing a swell job too. By the way, are you one of the nominees for an award tonight?

JACK: Yes, Steve. I'm in the category of the Variety Musical Shows.

STEVE: Well . . . do you think you'll *win*?

JACK: Well, Steve, you know me. . . . You know I'm a pretty modest fellow.

STEVE: That's right, Jack. Modesty has always been your nature.

JACK: You've never heard me brag in my life.

STEVE: No, that's *right,* Jack. . . . I *never* have.

JACK: You've never heard me talk about my shows or how good I am, have you?

STEVE: No, I must admit, I haven't. That's why I ask you—do you think you'll win an Emmy tonight?

JACK: Well, Steve, let me put it this way, I can't see *how* I can possibly lose.

STEVE: I wish I were Arthur Godfrey so I could appreciate your humility.

JACK: What was that?

STEVE: Nothing . . . nothing. But, Jack, what about the other shows in your category—"Disneyland," George Gobel, Jackie Gleason, Ed Sullivan, "Hit Parade"? They're all good television shows too.

JACK: What?

STEVE: They're all good *television* shows too.

JACK: Oh, television! . . . I thought this was for *radio.* Well, let's see . . . "Disneyland," George Gobel, Jackie Gleason, Ed

Sullivan and "Hit Parade." There's five votes against me right there. Gobel's so young too. . . . Oh, well.

STEVE: Well, anyway, best of luck, Jack. [*Steve walks off.*]

JACK: It's hard to believe he's Fred Allen's son.

The long, slow build-up to a laugh, by the way, is another distinctive thing about Jack's style. Most other comedians cram a volume of jokes down the throats of the audience; Jack gets a more realistic feeling by using great stretches of what seems to be true-to-life dialogue and then scores strongly with an isolated powerful line.

At the rehearsal for the "Emmy" show, Jack said to the director, "Now, when I get to the line where I say I don't see how I can possibly lose, give me a good close-up and I'll look right into the camera. I mean, that's such a *terrible* thing to say that I'll just have to stand there alone and let the audience hate me. You know what I mean?"

A few minutes later, when we were going over the lines, Jack said, "Steve, I hope you don't mind playing straight to me here. After all, *I've* been a straight man for twenty-five years." Here is seen again Jack's complete understanding of his comedy character. While in this particular situation it made more sense for him to deliver the punch lines it is a commonplace in most of his scripts for Jack to set up laughs for those who work with him. As long as the laughs are *on* Jack, it doesn't make any difference. He still comes out on top.

Benny's personal character, incidentally, is as warm and generous as his make-believe character is despicable. Lunching at the Brown Derby the afternoon of the show, I asked his advice as to what sort of material would be suitable for an address I had to make the following week at a testimonial dinner for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Jack talked for fif-

teen minutes, telling me what I wanted to know, advising me wisely and well. Our luncheon finally broke up because he had to go to Cedars of Lebanon Hospital to visit his director Ralph Levy. If he hadn't felt obligated to visit Ralph, Jack could have spent the afternoon at the golf course. Many another actor would have gone to the country club and *called* Levy.

Jack Benny has been on top for a long time by playing "himself"; maybe the fact that he himself is exactly opposite to his public character has a lot to do with his limitless success.

Milton Berle

THERE is an old saying in show business that "Nobody likes Milton Berle except his mother and the public." Well, Milton's mother is no longer around to cheer him on from the side lines, but there remain critics aplenty who profess to see little reason for the high regard which the public evidently still has for Berle.

Some of these critics are Milton's fellow comedians. He has not so much talent, they say, as energy. He has carefully memorized, according to their theory, almost every joke ever written; he is a scene-stealer and a ham; and he lacks taste and subtlety.

At the risk of seeming controversial I should like to state that I think Milton Berle is a very funny man. That is not to deny that many of the things his detractors say about him are true. Milton *is* a ham. He does use other people's jokes. He *will* do anything for a laugh. But the important thing, to my mind, is that he gets the laugh.

It is *not* correct to say that he has more energy than talent. Part of his talent *is* his energy. Another part of his talent is his consummate technical mastery of his craft. His comedy timing is superb. He is, mechanically speaking, almost the perfect

clown. Berle is a top-notch buffoon, and buffoonery, despite its apparent slapdashery, is a delicate art. It isn't enough to walk on a stage and simply make faces and repeat jokes, as any bank clerk who has ever tried to entertain can attest. You must know at precisely which fraction of a second a grimace will add to the power of a joke and not weaken it. You must know exactly what to do with your hands, how to stand, how loudly to speak, how to spar with an audience. You must know how to recover from the shock of getting no laugh where one was expected, and how to turn the momentary defeat into a greater triumph. If these things were talents in the public domain then you and your Aunt Fanny would be under a million-dollar contract to the National Broadcasting Company and Milton Berle would be running a meat market.

Berle is an excellent mimic and a smooth dialectician. His face is a rubber mask that in the twinkling of an eye can mirror whatever emotion he believes will augment his delivery of a line.

Any critic who feels that Milton is nothing more than a walking gag file underestimates the dimensions of even that capacity. I don't see why a man should be criticized for memorizing ten thousand jokes. To me, it seems a tremendous feat and one worthy of praise. I wish I could do it.

A few years ago when Berle was Mr. Television in fact as well as in name, his critics offered a peculiar reason to explain his success. "It's not surprising," they said, "that Milton is number one man in TV right now, because so far it's a field day for amateurs. What competition has Milton got?"

There *was* something to that argument, but not much. When the big-name entertainers did deign to take the TV

plunge nothing serious happened to Milton's popularity. Admittedly he's no longer king of the hill, but the patterns of TV popularity indicate his ratings would have slipped a bit by now anyway, competition or no. The American public, it seems, can never sustain hysterical enthusiasm for any performer for more than a few years. The cry for new faces is forever loud. The fan magazines prove my point.

Bob Hope, for example, is patently a more important entertainer than, say, George Gobel. Yet you will find (at least as of the moment I write this paragraph: spring, 1955) ten times as much publicity and general excitement about George as about Bob.

A thousand examples of this sort, in every field of entertainment, could be supplied. Bing Crosby is not only a big name, he is practically an American institution; it is probable that no other singer will ever match his over-all long-time popularity. Yet try to find one story about Bing in the fan magazines. It's all Eddie Fisher and Julius La Rosa. In motion pictures Clark Gable is to Tab Hunter as, in baseball, Babe Ruth would be to the bat boy on a Moline, Illinois, softball team. But you'd never know it reading the movie mags. The fans want to read about Tab and he's a fine young man and I wish him the best of luck. But the mood of the people is ever-changing. If Berle has slipped it has very little to do, I think, with the matter of competition. Indeed, bigger names than Berle have been tried by TV and found wanting. Success in one medium has never guaranteed success in others. Fred Allen and Jack Benny were kings of radio but meant little in motion pictures. Bob Hope was big in radio and pictures but nobody would buy his records. W. C. Fields was a genius on the stage and screen but could not make a strong

impression in his few brief radio appearances. Charlie Chaplin could never repeat his phenomenal silent-picture success once talkies came along. And so it has been with television. Berle and Jackie Gleason, neither of whom had been able to make the grade in radio or pictures, took to the new medium like Esther Williams to water. Some of the radio giants have been hard put to string together two consecutive good TV broadcasts.

Berle's success as a night-club entertainer has stood him in good stead on TV stages. His monologue technique, and it is one that has been imitated by many of his competitors, is to engage in a sort of running battle with his audience. Stock lines like "What is this, an audience or a jury?" are his specialty. He doesn't just tell jokes *for* his audience, in the way that Bob Hope does; he tells jokes *at* his audience.

"Say, mister," he says to a bald-headed man at a ringside table, "would you mind moving? Your head is shining right into my eyes." After the laugh he sneaks in with "For a minute I thought you were sitting upside down." That's a peculiarity of Berle's style, too. Hit 'em with a laugh when they think they're through laughing. Berle does jokes about jokes, about the audience. "I just got wonderful news from my real-estate broker down in Florida," he will say, chuckling. "They found land on my property down there." Then, before the laughter dies: "You think I'm a fool, eh? Don't forget, *you paid*!"

Most of Berle's traditional monologues sound old-hat when you read them in cold print. The reason for that, paradoxically enough, is that an army of second-rate comics has been doing the same jokes for years, many of them picking up the lines from Milton. The gags have been overworked in every

night club in the country. But Berle can still make you laugh with the lines, even if you've heard them before.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. (But why should I call you ladies and gentlemen? You know what you are.) But, folks, on behalf of the Copacabana (and believe me, I'd *like* to be half of the Copacabana) I just want to [*slight belch*]—I don't remember eating that. But mind you . . . mind you . . . (Adolph Mindyou) I just got back into town from Florida. I flew up. My arms are very tired. They surely do gamble down there, though. You know that white flag above the Hialeah race track? That's my shirt. I had a wonderful compartment on the train on the way down. But the conductor kept locking me in at every station. And now, folks, I'd like to bring out a wonderful little dancer. You've all heard masters of ceremonies say, 'I now bring you a boy who needs no introduction.' Well, folks, this kid needs *plenty* of introduction. But first, ladies and germs—I mean gentlemen—don't mind me, folks. It's all in fun. I'm just kidding. It all goes in one head and out the other. But I feel good tonight. I just came over from Lindy's. I always go over there for a cup of coffee and an overcoat. (I'll dig 'em up if you'll remember 'em.) But as I was saying—this next boy needs no introduction. He just needs an act. No, I'm only kidding. I want to bring him out here right now. Our worst act—I'm sorry, I mean our *first* act. [*Woman laughs.*] Say, are you laughing longer or am I telling 'em better? Say, lady, are you sitting on a feather. [*More laughter.*] Look, madam, if you want to lay an egg don't do it here! I just want you to know that I'm going to play the piano with this first act, and I want you to notice that at no time while I'm playing do any of my fingers leave my hands. [*Frowns at audience.*] All right, these are the jokes! What is

this, an audience or an oil painting? Looks like a staring contest out there. I don't have to do this for a living, you know. . . ." (Following this straight line Berle usually throws in some timely popular-reference joke, such as, "I can always sell rice to Tommy Manville," "I can always dry tea bags for Arthur Godfrey," "I can always sell Kleenex to Johnny Ray," "I can always sell sneakers to Howard Hughes.") ". . . now, folks, I'd like to prevent, I mean *present* our first act. . . ."

The above gives a good idea of the style of the old Berle, the pre-Goodman-Ace Berle. Machine-gun gagging of this sort kept Milton on top for several years, but when at last TV audiences began to tire of the sameness he was wise enough to restyle his program. No longer did he simply emcee a vaudeville show. He became aware that a story line was important.

Ace and Milton worked out an arrangement whereby the "new" Berle would become more sympathetic by playing straight, by being the *target* of jokes rather than firing them. Jokes about Milton's actual (or popularly supposed to be actual) faults were heavily interlarded into his scripts. His gag thievery, his hamminess, his desire to run the whole show, became the basis for countless barbs.

Consider the following portion of the script from the broadcast on which Ezzard Charles, Janet Blair and I were Milton's guests.

MILTON: Hello, Janet. Long time no see.

JANET: Well, Milton, I've been on the road for three years in *South Pacific.*

MILTON: Oh, long time *plenty* of sea, huh. I got that joke from Maria *Riva.* Clever joke?

JANET [*Coldly*]: You ought to wash that joke right out of your files.

MILTON: Say, Janet, you look wonderful. How about being a guest on the Buick show?

JANET: Wonderful. Do you know anybody connected with the show?

MILTON: Are you kidding? Do you know who the *star* of the show is?

JANET: Yes, but I can never get in to *see* Jack Lescoulie.

MILTON: Listen, you'd be pretty lucky to come on my show. After all, forty million people will catch you.

JANET: Yeah? How come they haven't caught *you?*

Or, for another example, consider the part of the script where, while wandering through the audience interviewing people (supposedly on my own program), I come across Milton. I have just found a man who didn't respond at all to my questions and after lifting one of his closed eyelids I have reported, "Usher, this man is dead!"

MILTON [*Smiles goofily as Steve turns to him*]

STEVE: Usher, here's another one!

MILTON: What program is this: "This *Was* My Life"? What is this, a ghost-to-ghost network? So you're the M.C., Master of Cemeteries, huh?

STEVE: Folks, the views expressed by this gentleman are not necessary.

MILTON: Oh, that's good. I wish I'd said that.

STEVE: You will. But Milton, I'm glad you came over to my show. I must say I think you're one of the great stars of television.

MILTON: Thank you.

STEVE: I must say it because you said you wouldn't come on the program unless I did.

The story-line approach and the appeal to sympathy were probably a necessary concession to public taste, but I will always feel that Milton is still funniest alone, off the cuff,

battling an audience, or reacting to a real-life situation. Countless times I have seen him on night-club floors, at banquets, at telethons, on bare stages, creating humor spontaneously, striking fire by combining his two great assets: a prodigious memory and a lightning-quick sense of the ridiculous. There is nothing dignified about Milton's work. He is not the stately humorist dropping pearls. He is the bad-boy extrovert, the wise-cracking, punning, iconoclastic clown who, in my opinion, can make *any* audience laugh, whether they want to or not. Now and then people who do not clearly appreciate the power of a talent like Milton's have said to me, "Boy, I'd like to see a *real* ad libber like Groucho Marx or Fred Allen up against Berle sometime." Well, do you know what would happen if Groucho, or Fred, or Henry Morgan, or I actually attempted to *compete* with Milton? Bluntly, we'd be slaughtered. Here's exactly how it would happen. While we were creating and delivering *one* good joke, Milton would be doing five older ones. It is important to realize, however, that Berle is not simply a memory machine. He is fast on his feet but he is also more creative than his critics realize. Perhaps the next day if you had a transcript of everything Milton and his adversary said in the exchange you might conceivably find that the humorist's two or three jokes were, judged individually, more amusing than Berle's two or three dozen, but that's not the way the game is played. You don't play it on paper; your instrument is the audience. And Milton would have the audience so distracted and so amused that, at the time, they'd scarcely be noticing what the other guy was saying. Believe it or not, this scene is not entirely imaginary. It actually happened to Henry Morgan one night, and when Henry was at the height of his popularity at that. Berle had just finished

speaking at a dinner at the Waldorf and as he was leaving the room Morgan, at the microphone, threw a barb about his ad-libbing ability. Hearing the laugh, Milton turned and walked back to Henry. "So you want to ad lib, eh?" he said. What followed was painful to watch, but the audience watched and laughed. With insults, old jokes, new jokes, mugging, voice volume, arm waving, interrupting, and every trick in the trade, Milton succeeded in making Henry look like an inept newcomer. He accomplished it not precisely by being funnier than Henry but just by overpowering him. Interestingly enough, there are even comics in the business who can make Milton look bad by use of the same methods. I have seen Jack E. Leonard, Morey Amsterdam and Henny Youngman "top" Milton, as the phrase goes, by simply outshouting and outinsulting him. Pure distilled humor has little to do with it.

Oddly enough, Milton has succeeded in television where most comedians of the steam-roller type are too unsympathetic to secure regular employment on the TV networks. One reason is that for all his rough-and-tumble exterior, for all his super-confidence, there is something genuinely warm and likable at the heart of him. Milton personally is friendly, outgoing and generous. He is a tireless worker for charitable causes and always willing to give a friend or an acquaintance a helping hand. My mother, a vaudeville comedienne, known professionally as Belle Montrose, is probably the most outspoken woman since speaking began. Possessed of a sort of a sixth sense that enables her to detect phoniness a mile away, she has always been ready, willing and able to identify for me the no-goods of show business. Milton she has always liked. When he was a teen-ager they often worked on the same

bill and she was always impressed by his eager desire to please and his great affection for his mother. I am happy to say that my opinion of Milton is as high as hers. In some ways he may be, as his critics claim, emotionally adolescent, but none of us is perfect and I know that Milton is personally more warmhearted and charitable than some other performers for whom the public has an evidently higher regard. Speaking of his character, columnist Bob Sylvester says, "As brash and confident as he is while working Berle is paradoxically a sensitive man, and he can be almost overwhelmingly kind. He rarely brushes off a down-and-outer. He has time to stop and converse with anybody in the world who will stop him for advice. He is openhanded with everyone who comes within his orbit, with one exception—Milton Berle. He spends very little money on himself and dresses no better than many an out-of-work imitator."

Sylvester also tells the story of a girl named Jean Kurowsky, who was president of one of Milton's fan clubs. Somewhat shy because she had an oversized nose, Jean was thrilled one Christmas when Milton gave her a present that he knew she'd especially appreciate: a nose operation.

The Berle story began on the twelfth day of July, 1908, in the home of Moe and Sarah Berlinger on New York's West 118th Street. When Milton was seven years old he polished up an imitation of Charlie Chaplin, his mother entered him in an amateur contest, he won, and he was off to the races. Naturally the races were not big-time to start with. Milton's father was ill, his mother had to work as a department store detective, his three older brothers were not yet old enough to win the bread, and for several years Milton knocked around the semi-amateur circuit. Then one day E. W. Wolf, a Phil-

adelphia agent who booked kid shows for small vaudeville circuits, offered Mom Berle forty-five dollars a week for Milton's services. Since this was fifteen dollars more than she was making catching shoplifters, she quit her job and became a full-time stage mother, thereby setting up a professional relationship that became one of the most legendary in show-business history.

Not long after that Milton and the other Berle kids got into motion pictures on the real ground floor: at the Fort Lee, New Jersey, studios across the Hudson River. Mom Berle had learned that children were paid a dollar-fifty an hour as walk-ons, and since she had a brood of five it wasn't long before the pioneer moguls had accepted Mrs. Berle as a sort of unofficial casting agency for youngsters. Soon Milton was earning seven-fifty a day doing bits with Pearl White, Lloyd Hamilton, Milton Sills, Marion Davies and other stars of the early silent days. During all this period, of course, there was the matter of education to attend to, and Milton was enrolled in the Professional Children's School, from which he was eventually graduated with high honors.

When Milton was eleven years old a boy named Ben Grauer, familiar to radio and television audiences today, had left the act of a young entertainer named Elizabeth Kennedy on the big-time Keith-Albee circuit. Milton replaced Grauer, and the team of Berle and Kennedy was an immediate hit, at last playing at the Palace Theater, the mecca of all vaudevillians.

After several years Elizabeth Kennedy left show business to get married, and Milton found himself working alone. It was during this period that he got the reputation as a ma-

terial thief. Milton makes no bones about the matter, however, and insists that he is the only comedion honest enough to admit that he has borrowed other people's jokes, whereas most of the others do it under the table. He feels that all jokes are in the public domain and in this belief he seems to be supported by public opinion and custom. I've never heard any insurance salesman, lodge brother or smoking-room acquaintance credit the source of a funny story, so I guess Milton's attitude on this particular question is the popular one. Another point which should be made, of course, is that the matter of Milton's joke pilferage has been greatly exaggerated. He contends today that his reputation as the Thief of Bad-gags was largely the result of a planned feud between himself and a monologist named Richy Craig. "It's like Benny's tightness or Hope's nose," he says. "I go along with the gag now because the public expects it. But the man on the street wouldn't be able to tell you one joke I ever stole."

Ironically enough, Milton has had such a profound effect on the style of young comedians who followed him that he is probably in the last analysis more sinned against than sinning. A generation of younger comedians has lifted jokes from his act and copied many of his mannerisms. As Richy Craig said, before his death fifteen years ago, "I'm still not sure whether Milton Berle sounds like all comedians or all comedians sound like Milton Berle."

Few people realize, incidentally, that because of Milton's wide variety of experience in the many phases of show business he is equally at home, when it comes to throwing gags around, whether he is pitching or catching. Arnold Stang says, "In twelve years I haven't seen anyone to compare with Mil-

ton Berle as the finest straight man in the business. Watch him when he works with me, or with Ruthie Gilbert. He makes us seem lots funnier than we are."

This ability to make supporting performers seem vastly amusing, whether they are or not, is a very specialized one, and not all big-time comedians number it among their assets. There is more to it than just allowing one's writers to give stooges the punch lines of jokes. It is a matter of taking the place of the audience, of asking questions in a way that implies vast interest in the answers, and then of reacting in a seemingly genuine way when the point of a joke is revealed. Another master of the technique is Jack Benny, who achieved his great radio success partly by being able to create the impression in the minds of his listeners that people like Mary Livingstone, Don Wilson, Dennis Day, Phil Harris and Ronald Coleman were tremendously amusing personalities.

For all his night-club, theater and television success, Milton never really achieved stardom in radio or motion pictures. The reasons are not obscure. On a movie lot Milton was not working in front of an audience and although he could still be amusing he was not really the complete Berle, the catch-as-catch-can madman who plays on an audience as if it were a musical instrument and will adapt his material to suit the exigencies of a given situation. In radio he was an invisible voice; his unsympathetic characterization and flagrant mugging combined to make him essentially as unsuited to the medium as were Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis at a later time. In television, of course, he has been in his element because it is the medium that has allowed him the closest approach to his night-club technique. But, oddly enough, TV, with its technical frustrations, has proved to be more of a nervous

strain on Milton than any of the other media. To a comedian who works intimately with his theater audience, television is a mechanically monstrous thing. You want the audience to watch you, to listen carefully to what you are saying, but between you and your studio audience are three cameras, a dozen technicians, an orchestra, and a hundred and one lights, microphones, ladders, props and wires. Then, too, there's the problem of the public-address system, which is never as good in a television studio as it was in a radio studio, where sound was all-important.

Add to that the fact that you only have a week to get a program ready for broadcast, that you cannot hold the script in your hand, and that you are no longer allowed just to stand motionless in front of a microphone, and it will be seen that doing television comedy puts a considerable emotional strain on a performer. Berle's reaction to this strain is simple and straightforward: he just spends most of his rehearsal week growling at his director, his conductor, his writers and his technicians. As air time approaches he gets more touchy, more tense. His rehearsals are interrupted every few seconds by emotional pleas for quiet in the studio, for more volume from the public-address system, for changes in camera moves, or for faster entrances on the part of supporting players. He perspires freely and carries a towel wrapped, scarflike, around his neck. He used to carry a police whistle around his neck, too, but of late has not used it. Even when the show is on the air he is still worrying, sweating. I have stood waiting for an entrance cue and seen him come charging off stage for split-second costume changes, making demands in angry whispers in the wings, cursing a blue streak at what, if anything, had gone wrong on stage. It is small wonder that he cannot go home to

bed immediately after a show but must spend hours on the town or visiting with friends to relieve his tension. "It's like a race horse after a mile-and-an-eighth race," he explains. "You have to cool off and get unwound."

In the process of getting unwound Milton becomes once again the considerate, if occasionally rambunctious, man that his friends know. He makes pleasant small talk at the table, he is a check-grabber, he delights in reminiscing and telling old show-business stories. And, significantly, I think, he seems eternally young. Comedians in general seem to retain their youth better than, say, bankers or clergymen or truck drivers. Milton particularly will seem for many years a young man. His hair is not touched with gray, he has the energy of a child, and a child's desire to please, to be laughed at, to be accepted. The bulk of the people will continue to accept him, regardless of the lofty atitude of some of the critics. A comedian has, after all, only one function: to make you laugh. Milton does.

Red Buttons

Comedy is televison's most valuable single commodity. That is why the industry is prepared to pay the highest prices to its most able practitioners. And yet television still doesn't completely understand how to handle comedy. Worse yet, the comedians themselves haven't decided, with any degree of finality, how to handle television.

Just when we think we've got a theory worked out to the point where we might safely begin referring to it as a *rule,* an exception bobs up that confounds us. How do you explain a business where people like Bing Crosby, Sam Levenson, Henry Morgan, Imogene Coca, Wally Cox and Victor Borge can't seem completely to find themselves when at the same time third-rate comedians are regularly employed by the networks?

More puzzling still, how do you explain a situation like that confronting Red Buttons? It is probable that only in the field of sports could a man repeat the yesterday's-hero-today's-scapegoat story that Red has lived out the past three years. It is certain that no new (to television) comedian of recent times has opened to better reviews than those that greeted Red after his first show in October of 1953.

Bernard Kalb, writing in *The New York Times,* said Red did "a half hour of relaxed comedy that had the critics in his pocket thirty minutes later."

The usually reserved Philip Minoff reported in *Cue* magazine: "On his opening show he scored the loudest and most instantaneous success of any video comic within memory."

TV columnists the country over hauled out all the kindly adjectives in the dictionary: refreshing, hilarious, likable, funny, original, sensational. So far as I have been able to determine (and this is the most surprising part of all), the critics were unanimous in their praise. TV critics, even more than their more dignified elder brothers, drama critics, are notorious in that every man is a law unto himself and is wont to register a haughty disregard for what his colleagues think. But to return to the point—in this instance everyone agreed: Red Buttons was the best new comedian to hit television in a long time.

Red himself sensed that he had not only made the grade on his first show but made it *big.* Stepping through the curtain after his last sketch he looked straight into the camera and said, "I want you people to know that the past thirty minutes have given me the biggest thrill of my life."

It is very likely that Red's effusiveness was much more than the "you've been a swell audience" sort of thing that comedians are prone to throw across the footlights by way of a thank-you gesture. For Red had waited a long time for this night. He had knocked around in practically every corner of show business and many times before, just when it seemed the big opportunity was about to knock, it had turned away from his door.

Red Buttons

Red got into burlesque when he was eighteen and within four years had made a respectable professional reputation for himself. Then, just as he was ready for the good money of burlesque's "big time," New York suddenly decided to close down burlesque.

In 1941, thanks to José Ferrer, Red stepped up to the plate to try for the grand-slam homer again. Ferrer, he recalls, was one of his Gaiety's fans, and one afternoon he offered Red a good part in *The Admiral Had a Wife.* "It meant a big drop in salary," Red says, "but I had to take it. Getting on Broadway out of burlesque meant you'd arrived. The play got fine reviews out of town. It was a farce about life in Pearl Harbor. We were all set to open in New York on December eighth. You know what happened on December seventh!"

Not too long after that letdown Red was screen-tested by Paramount. While waiting to hear what the movie moguls thought of him, he was drafted.

Even in the beginning life hadn't been a snap for Red. Son of an immigrant hat blocker, Aaron Chwatt (Red's actual name) was born some time before 1920 in the tenements of New York's lower East Side. His boyhood experiences in this human jungle have left a mark on Red and also provided him with good joke fodder. "I lived in a pretty tough neighborhood," he says. "You either grew up to be a judge or you went to the chair."

When he wasn't fighting in the streets, Red recalls, he was in some sort of trouble at school, which was P.S. 105, on East Fourth Street. "My mom and pop," he remembers, "went to school as often as I did. They should have graduated with me."

Buttons' first step toward becoming an entertainer was taken when he was twelve. Dressed in a sailor suit, he won an amateur contest at the Fox Crotona Theater singing "Sweet Jenny Lee."

After high school his father got him a job in the Catskill mountains, proving grounds for many of the nation's comedy favorites. Pay was $1.50 a week plus room and board. Starting as a singer, he gradually switched to comedy for two reasons: "You had to do everything and my voice was changing."

From the mountains Red graduated into the "club-date" league. A club date is an engagement to entertain at some public or private event such as a picnic, convention, wedding, banquet, *bar mizvah,* or turkey raffle. Since none of these engagements in the ordinary course of events pays top wages, a comedian usually makes his way by booking two or three of them in one night. In the late thirties Red would sometimes do as many as four club dates in one evening. On such occasions, he says, "I'd make as much as sixty dollars, minus cabs and oxygen."

One of Minsky's talent scouts caught his act in 1938 and that's how he got into burlesque.

The first time I saw him work was in 1951 at a benefit at Madison Square Garden. I was on early myself and being a newcomer to New York at that time I didn't go home after my stint but sneaked around into the audience and sat down to enjoy the rest of the show. There were a lot of capable comics on the bill that night, but I think I enjoyed Red's act the most. His boyish, smiling face made immediate contact with the crowd. Also I quickly came to realize he was something of a local favorite.

Although he was largely unknown to the rest of the nation he was already a "name" in New York, and people in the crowd began to call out to him, requesting that he do particular routines they had seen before.

During the forties he had appeared successfully in *Winged Victory* and had gradually climbed out of the strictly club-date class into the more rarefied atmosphere of the night-club or *big*-club date grouping. He was certainly a polished entertainer that night at the Garden. It didn't surprise me that a couple of years later CBS was ready to give him a TV build-up. He had attracted nation-wide attention in the role of Joe E. Lewis when "Suspense" dramatized an incident from Joe E.'s career.

For some time Red's professional friends had been advising him to try TV. In July of 1953 the network closeted him with a group of writers and made a sample film of thirty minutes of the Buttons brand of comedy. The brass liked it, and when a time spot opened up in October they suddenly rushed Red to the front. The rest, as they say, is history.

Psychologists might feel there is a clue to Red's eventual difficulties in the story of what happened the night of October twenty-first, one week after his opening triumph. After rehearsing all day in a fever of tension and excitement, and still being in something of a daze at the shock of his new good fortune, Red fainted. He was revived, the program was canceled, and a film was substituted at the last minute.

The following week he was in better physical condition, and for several weeks thereafter his program climbed in popularity till at last it had become one of the ten most watched shows on the air. Like the critics, TV fans took at once to the

five basic Buttons characters: Red as himself, Rocky Buttons, The Kupke Kid, Muggsy Buttons, and the German, Keeglefarven.

I believe they were favorably impressed primarily by Red "in one," Red as himself, out in front of the curtain. His little-boy grin opened the lock; all Red had to do was walk right in and tell some stories. Like most night-club comedians, he had plenty of good jokes to open with, jokes tested and retested by a decade of experimentation.

He hit them first with his best stuff and the results were socko. His peculiar habit of slipping from jokes to snatches of song, built on a framework of an old Jewish chord progression and given an added fillip by his funny little hand-to-ear dance step delighted audiences. There were some New York fans of Red's, Jewish themselves, who had guessed that he might be what they called "too Jewish" for TV. In clubs he had been in the habit of using Yiddish expressions and doing material that smacked of "the mountains," and some of his advisers thought this would represent a handicap, but it was never a real problem. On TV Red simply skipped the Jewish jokes. Gentile audiences took him to their hearts at once.

So Red had the smile, he had "humility" and he had an impish cuteness. That's enough to start with if you play your cards right.

His most popular comedy character, oddly enough, was his least original: Rocky, the punch-drunk fighter. The question as to just who did originate this characterization will always be a matter of some debate, but there seems to be no doubt that it was not Red. Red Skelton's Cauliflower McPugg had for several years been a contender, and before Skelton essayed the role Peter Lind Hayes was employing it as a mainstay of

his night-club act. Tom DéAndrea, familiar to TV fans for his work on "The Life of Riley" and for his "Two Soldiers" sketches with Hal March, is credited by some authorities with being the man from whom Hayes got the idea. Then, of course, there was always Maxie Rosenbloom.

Be that as it may, Buttons did a topnotch job with the role and it soon became one of his strong suits.

Muggsy Buttons, the irrepressible juvenile delinquent, is sort of a cross between Red's own recollections of his lower East Side boyhood and the familiar Dead End Kids portrayals. To make Muggsy palatable, Red's writers always had to take great pains to make it clear that under his brash, irreverent exterior there was a heart of gold.

The Kupke Kid is fairly close to Muggsy Buttons, but more sympathetic. (Kupke is a Yiddish word meaning stocking cap.) The Kid really gets knocked around. He walks into danger all unseeing and in general he's much more of a dope than is Muggsy.

Keeglefarven, the German, is basically the stock German comedy type with the switch being that as presented by Red he's sometimes in the German army.

(Some say that it is the relative unoriginality of Red's characters that occasioned his sophomore-year fidgets in TV. Nothing, in my opinion, could be farther from the truth. Almost all popular comedy characters are to some extent derivative. They're all either dopes or drunks or nationality dialect types or penny-pinchers or hayseeds or—well, you get the idea. If you can think of a fairly fresh "switch" and do a good job with a character the public will never know the difference.)

So Red had weeks and weeks on the crest of the wave.

Then suddenly there came rumors of trouble in Paradise.

Red's first producer was relieved of his command and his writing staff was shaken up. Thereupon began the greatest to-do about writers in the history of comedy. Some of the boys lasted days. Others weeks. A few held on for months. It finally became a joke in the business, and Red himself began to see the amusing side of the situation. Unfortunately, its serious side was demanding most of his attention. The critics, who had been Red's first champions, began to take pot shots at him in their columns. But all in all he survived the first year without too serious mishap.

The second year was rougher. After a generally up-and-down broadcast season Red's sponsors decided they would not renew his contract. Worse, CBS finally threw in the towel and told Red he was a free agent.

What were the reasons for the full-circle swing of Red's fortunes? He points his finger at bad writing. "I just didn't have good enough scripts," he says. "A comedian who's already a big man in radio or pictures can come into TV and get away with doing a bad show now and then. But I had no such reputation to fall back on. My material had to be terrific every time—and it wasn't."

In his frantic flailings to reverse his losing streak Red had changed his program format a number of times during the year, but to no avail. Critic Harriet Van Horne, voicing the opinion of the majority of her colleagues, wrote in her column of Tuesday, March 9, 1954:

> No change in format ever stirred more fuss and pother than the recent one in the Red Buttons show. Curious to see what CBS had wrought, I tuned in young Mr. Buttons last night and found him substantially unchanged. He's still the brash kid in the stocking cap, having the last laugh on the

Proper Folk. As always, the staid souls pitted against him can only end up with pie on their face. Such was the format when Buttons began; so it remains after all the tuning up and honing down and realignment of stooges. The only discernible change in the Buttons show is that the three widely different comedy sketches have given way to three sketches on a single theme. This doesn't strike me as a step forward.

Last night, for example, we had Buttons cast in the role of a GI spy, parachuting into Austria. With the aid of a beautiful baroness (Eva Gabor) he attempted to outwit a Nazi storm trooper. One short sketch on this theme would have been hilarious. Three sketches were merely tedious.

Instead of a show with a change of pace, with varying inventions, we have one comedy idea stretched thinly over the thirty-minute span to look like three. Buttons is a highly versatile performer. But his new format keeps him twanging one string.

One time, trying to solve the mystery, Red isolated himself in his apartment and spent a week running off kinescopes of every one of his TV shows. "I discovered one mistake that way," he admits. "One of my regular characters—the Kupke Kid—just wasn't panning out. He was too dumb. He was ridiculous. I realize I made a mistake about him. I thought he'd go over, but I see now he couldn't. He was too much of a stupe. There was nothing about him to like."

According to insiders, Red's willingness to admit his mistakes was rarely communicated to the members of his writing staff.

"Time and time again," says one of his ex-scripters, "Red would put himself in the hands of a good producer or a bunch of writers. Then he'd finally be unable to resist redoing the script *his* way, ordering cuts and changes. It was rough."

The basic question naturally presents itself: What went

wrong? Forgetting for the moment matters of temperament and general errors of production judgment, what is the explanation of Red's problem?

In my opinion, it isn't Red's fault that he had trouble with his writers, and it isn't the writers' fault either. He could probably have done almost any of his second-year scripts during his first year on the air and they would have been better received. The fact is that Red is difficult to write for because over a long period of time audiences seem to feel something less than the required minimum of emotional interest in his characters.

I write jokes and frankly I would not relish the prospect of having to create for Red. His monologues would be no trouble; he does them wonderfully well. But Red, at least in my opinion, is not a funnyman per se. He does not ordinarily amuse "just standing there" as do, say, Milton Berle, Groucho Marx or Sid Caesar. Red must be doing or saying something exceptionally funny every minute. During the particular few seconds when he is *not* amusing you, subconsciously you become aware that he is pleasant in a flashy way, that there is not a great deal of *depth* to him. His many years in burlesque and clubs have given him a high professional polish. He knows all the bits, all the moves, all the expressions, all the gestures, but through no particular fault of his own, Red's emotional wellsprings do not run deep. You can watch Jackie Gleason or Jack Benny or Red Skelton over a period of years and feel a continuing interest in "what happens" to the characters they portray. They have a certain intensity of personality, a certain hard-to-define vibrancy about them that Red does not seem to be able to bring forth. Red Buttons' charm is the obvious kind. It is real enough, but in the first

five minutes you've understood all there is to know about it. It may continue to please you, but it is all on the surface. Gleason, on the other hand, has a many-faceted personality. Benny has a sly, subtle intimacy about him that never wears thin. Skelton has a tragic-clown goofiness that gets to you. But Red Buttons, in my opinion, is largely sparkle and bustle and I-hope-you-like-my-smile-'cause-that's-about-the-size-of-it.

He is perhaps to comedy what the average Rheingold model sort of girl is to beauty and charm. You see one of those girls walk into a room and you think, Wow, what a face. What a beauty. Anywhere from ten minutes to two years later, depending on the degree of your own maturity, the face loses its ability to touch you and then there is the basic lack of personality, the little-girl dullness standing bare for you to see. The comparison, like most comparisons, is not meant to be an exact measuring stick, but I think it has its value.

Red comes closest to strongly enlisting the sympathy of his viewers in the role of Rocky. At the close of his sketches portraying the punch-drunk pug we are made to feel the underlying tragedy of the character. Unfortunately, it is difficult for Red's writers to pluck the same emotional string week after week for the reason that Rocky is a fighter and only a fighter. Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden, though professionally a bus driver, can live a twenty-four-hour sort of existence. Rocky is peculiarly limited to the ring, the gym and the locker room. After three years it's tough to find new boxing jokes.

Red still seems to retain his appeal for the young and the young in heart. But the more mature viewers (as exemplified by the critics who were the loudest in their early praise of his work) seem to have been somewhat disillusioned. I do not mean these comments to be simply destructive criticism. I like

Red. In person he has always struck me as friendly and cheerful. But I feel that asking him to take a place beside, say, Bob Hope as one of the all-time comedy giants may simply be as unfair as asking Citation to pull a bulky brewery truck. Red has speed rather than strength.

Another peculiar point about Red's ability is this: I believe two of his strong points combine in a mysterious way to add up to something of a handicap. The first is represented by his stature, his voice and his "cuteness." Red plays "the little fella." So do Wally Cox, George Gobel and Alan Young. But, unlike the other three, Red also plays a fast-talking, excitable, noisy guy. Now, the nervous flibbertigibbet is not new to comedy. It's a characterization that almost unfailingly amuses. When combined with the "little guy" approach, however, the latter detracts from the sympathy engendered by the former. You start out with a warm feeling toward the underdog, but his intensity of pitch ultimately distracts you and short-circuits your normal psychological reaction.

Well, then, is all lost for Red? I think not.

For one thing, his television career placed him in the big time so that now when he plays a night club he may receive ten times as much money as he used to for doing the same routines. In September of 1954 he played The Sands in Las Vegas for $15,000 a week.

More important, NBC, deciding Red was much too talented and too young to be a has-been, picked him up, dusted him off, and put him back on the air in the autumn of 1954.

His third season, happily, was better than his second, although the ruckus with writers and producers continued. Red also was given the pleasure of being slotted opposite his old sponsor, Maxwell House, who after dropping him had picked

up "Mama." To Red's extreme gratification he eventually surpassed "Mama's" ratings.

The critics, however, continued to withhold their blessings. Many of them were kind enough to join Red in blaming the writers. Jack O'Brian, writing in the New York *Journal-American,* said, "Red's new . . . show last night found Red again abandoned by the script. His funny mannerisms and big smile . . . were almost all he could contribute to the occasion."

So again the year ended unhappily and as of this writing Red is not employed in television. He probably sits home and watches comics with less talent cavorting on his TV screen. It is something like the way things go in the fight racket. When you're on your way up, if you're a promising contender, the whole world is on your team. You can rank fourteenth on the list but still your *outlook* is bright and you can do no wrong. Finally you get your crack at the champ. If you lose, something happens to your glamour that can never completely be repaired. You may still be a top-ranking fighter, but there's some essential excitement missing. The public is looking at newer kids you could belt out in one round. It's unfair, but that's the way it is.

There is a happier side to the story, however, that would seem to provide a way back into the charmed circle for Red. Since experience has shown that he is not ideally designed for series exposure on TV, he can with no loss of grace take his place in that considerable body of talent that functions best on a now-and-then approach to the medium. Victor Borge, Jack Carson, Sam Levenson, Dick Shawn, Buddy Hackett, Imogene Coca, Cass Daley, Betty Hutton and scores of other top-name attractions are welcome any time they show up on the tube. They are perhaps no less talented than en-

tertainers who may perform every week. I am anxious to see Red again on the Ed Sullivan show or a Max Liebman spectacular. I'll bet you are too, and if network officials don't know it the more fools they.

Sid Caesar

OF ALL the important comedians performing on television at the present time I find Sid Caesar the most consistently funny. Other clowns are frequently at the mercy of their material. Caesar seems to affect a supreme indifference to material. He is amusing no matter what he is doing or saying.

A gifted dialectician, a truly artistic pantomimist and a master of timing, the young (thirty-four) buffoon of "Caesar's Hour" is a technically consummate artist. His ability to create spatial and temporal illusions by word and gesture almost reaches the point of mass hypnosis. When he says, "Here is a man getting up in the morning," and then sits down in a chair on a bare stage and begins suggesting objects and events with a combination of pantomime and muttered monologue, you actually live in the make-believe world he creates.

Equipped with expressive hands, a rubbery face and a voice that answers every dictate of his creative consciousness, Caesar exhibits a polish reminiscent of the work of two other great clowns: Charlie Chaplin and Danny Kaye. It would not be correct to say that he is *like* either of them, for they are certainly very little like each other; it is simply that his work

bears a resemblance to certain facets of Kaye and Chaplin at their best. He does not evoke the sympathy that Charlie did, to be sure, but he shares the little tramp's ability to convey ideas physically, to be funny just standing there saying nothing. And he does not work so much with music as does Kaye, but he has something of Danny's knack of vocal gymnastics, of his trick of saying commonplace things in an amusing way, and of his way of exaggerating an emotion by means of facial contortions.

If there is one word, in fact, that epitomizes Caesar's approach it is *exaggeration*. His humor is frequently based on the extension to absurd limits of a very ordinary action. Consider his famous pantomime impersonation of a woman making her morning toilet. It is not funny when a woman rubs make-up pencil on her eyebrows, but when Sid notices that he has drawn one brow a bit longer than the other and then begins trying to even them up, you are hooked. He lengthens first one brow, then the other, until at last he is drawing an imaginary line down each side of his face, practically to the lower jaw. Likewise there is nothing at all rib-tickling about a woman pulling up the zipper at the left side of her dress. Nor is it funny when Sid reaches around to the right side and pulls up another imaginary zipper. But when he *continues* to pull up make-believe zippers, first in front, then in back, then on the bias, then sideways, and follows this all up by fastening imaginary buttons up the front of the dress, the effect produced is devastatingly absurd and hence supremely funny.

Time and again it will be seen that Sid's most successful routines involve this simple process of *exaggeration by repetition*.

As the eccentric German professor he prepares to examine

a patient. Naturally this involves tapping the man's chest. With Sid, however, it also involves tapping the man's shoulder, then his upper arm, his forearm, his wrist and at last his hand, which is hanging over the side of the bed, near the floor. Without a break in his movements Sid is suddenly tapping the floor with a careful finger, listening intently the while. At last he straightens up with a knowing smile. "I can tell you your trouble in a minute," he says. "Termites!"

Another device Caesar frequently employs happens to be, for purely personal if mysterious reasons, a delight to me. It is the matter of making the sudden revelation to the audience that there is more than one meaning to an item of physical property. Since the essence of most jokes lies in their double-meaningness it will be seen that here is involved a physical switch on a word joke. I'll include an example so you won't have to go back and read this paragraph over again.

Sid, again as the German professor, is being interviewed. As the reporter launches into a particularly wordy question, the professor stares steadfastly at his right thumb, in the exact way that any of us might if we were giving close attention to the spoken words of another. In reality we rarely look straight into the eyes of those who speak to us. Frequently we examine the ceiling or the floor or our fingernails at such times without really knowing we are doing these things. Well, here is the reporter gabbing away and here is the professor looking at his right thumb. Finally the reporter says, ". . . and because of the influence of the vernal equinox, Professor, don't you agree that the issue is significant?"

"Tell me," says Sid, holding up his thumb, "you think I got a hangnail here?"

For some reason I used to do things like that when I was a

child and for years most of the people around me didn't seem to think that that sort of nonsense was funny. Then suddenly I find a comedy show where they're writing bits like that into the script. Naturally it became my favorite program immediately.

Another example:

Sid is doing one of his brilliant movie satires. It's a take-off on pictures with a prison locale and it involves all the clichés: the monotonous prison routine, the "lousy grub," the planning of the break, the break itself, the recapture of the escaped convicts and so on.

In the middle of the break Sid is caught going over the wall and is outlined against the night by the merciless glare of a spotlight. He blinks at the light for a moment, then puts one hand to his breast, extends the other to an unseen audience, and starts to sing, like Georgie Jessel, "My Mother's Eyes."

Later in the sketch he has taken refuge in an apartment and the police have surrounded the building. A new cliché is introduced: the one where the warden talks to the escaped cons by means of a public-address system. Sid is poised near a window listening to the warden's microphoned plea. Not to be outdone, he removes a large cone-shaped lampshade from a lamp on a table, puts the small end to his mouth, and shouts out the window, "Come and get me, you dirty coppers," or words to that effect.

Naturally the words didn't matter at all. What was funny was the sudden conversion of the lampshade, and in the other cases the sudden switch in the roles played by the thumb and the spotlight. No funny words or ideas were involved. You laughed because you suddenly became aware that a particular object could have more than one meaning.

This penchant for playing with *things* as well as emotions was part of Sid's character even as a child. "As a kid," he says, "a lot of people thought I was dumb, I used to do such crazy things. But I think I was just inarticulate." As is the case with many humorists, Sid's childhood mood was often shy and morose. In fact, away from the camera he still gives the impression of being shy and pensive, usually speaking in a somewhat withdrawn monotone unless he can be induced to tell a funny story or re-enact an experience. Born in Yonkers, New York, where his father ran the St. Clair Lunch Box, Sid's interest in what eventually became his first professional pursuit, music, started when he was nine. He took lessons, at fifty cents a throw, on the clarinet and saxophone and by the time he was in his late teens played well enough to work with such prominent orchestras as those of Shep Fields and Claude Thornhill. By this time, although he had never considered the possibility that comedy might be his future, he was already adept at imitating various dialects, doing his imitations in a magical sort of double-talk that to this day fools people who have even more than a little knowledge of foreign languages. The only language he speaks is English, but his uncanny musical ear can reproduce the sounds of foreign tongues with a glibness that only Danny Kaye can approach. Sid thinks he began to develop this ability when, as a youngster, he and his brother would listen to Polish, Italian and Russian laborers digging ditches and sewers around Yonkers.

As is often the case, however, no one in Sid's family recognized that a comedian was being developed, least of all Sid himself. "My becoming a comedian," he explains, "was largely an accident, just one of those freak occurrences. It happened when I was nineteen years old and in the Coast Guard. One

day when I was at the canteen in Brooklyn I got talking to Vernon Duke, the composer, and we decided to form an orchestra for dances at the base. We got the thing going and between numbers I used to kid around a little, doing imitations and double-talk routines. I enjoyed it and the audiences seemed to like it. Well, when Vernon was commissioned by the Coast Guard to write a show he recommended me to the fellow who was going to direct the production. That was Max Liebman."

Liebman was astute enough to recognize Sid's innate talent and begin cultivating it. The show, called *Tars and Spars*, toured the country for a year, and it was a happy year for Sid. He had met and married an attractive young governess named Florence Levy (with whom he has since had two children) and found the year ample time to convince himself that his future lay in comedy rather than music.

When Hollywood decided to make a picture of *Tars and Spars* Sid went West and received encouraging reviews for the job he did in the film. His Hollywood experience in general, however, was not a happy one. In two years he made only one additional picture, *The Guilt of Janet Ames*, and when he had a chance to head back East he took it. His first job on his return to New York was at the Copacabana, and Max Liebman helped him to build an act for the engagement. A few months in night clubs, however, proved to Sid that he was not cut out to be just a club entertainer.

The experience so depressed him, in fact, that he even toyed with the idea of getting out of the business. Again Mr. Liebman came to the rescue with the suggestion that he take the comedy lead in *Make Mine Manhattan*. The show ran on

Broadway for a full year. From there both Max and Sid stepped into television, with historic results.

Unlike the majority of TV comics (Gleason, Berle, Hope, Skelton, Buttons), who contribute only their formidable personalities to the presentation of their programs and have little participation in the preparation of the script, Sid is a contributor of ample material and an astute editor.

Somehow the opinion has got around that Sid's dependence on his writers' scripts is complete to an almost desperate degree. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The frequently inaccurate Jack O'Brian, critic for the New York *Journal-American*, has stated that Caesar is unable to ad-lib. The fact is that Sid spontaneously creates more material than any other comic in the business doing a scripted show. He *is* relatively inarticulate as himself, but in character his true comic genius is demonstrated by his almost unbelievable creativity under fire. Last fall when he made a guest appearance on my "Tonight" show the two of us did a sketch that ran about sixteen minutes. It consisted of a series of vignettes showing the different types of pest one meets in restaurants. The premise for each section of the sketch was, of course, determined in advance, but not one word of the dialogue was written. Sid and I ad-libbed one set of lines during rehearsal and when we went on the air we ad-libbed a completely new script, so to speak. Since I was largely playing straight for Sid I do not wish to draw attention to my own contribution; it was Sid who, in rehearsal and on the air, ad-libbed about half an hour of the most hilarious material, lines and pieces of business that I have ever seen.

Nanette Fabray says his ability to create lines above and

beyond those on paper struck her as soon as she began working opposite him.

"One day," she says, "he ad-libbed what I thought was the funniest line in a sketch we were doing. I, as the wife, had hired a maid. Sid, as the husband, disapproved. 'Do you mean to say,' he roared, 'that you went over my entire head and hired an entire maid?' "

Sid's biggest laugh lines are often not *jokes* in the usual sense of the word, but are rather phrases that employ words in somewhat the way an impressionist painter might employ lines and colors. In his mouth words become rubbery, warped and hilarious things. Consider, for example, the following portion of a sketch in which Sid, as the Commuter, is in trouble with his wife because she has intercepted a perfumed letter innocently sent to him by a woman business associate. A terrific argument ensues which leads to this exchange:

SID: In the first place, you're not supposed to read my letters and, in the second place, you're not supposed to *smell* my letters. That smell was addressed to me—and that's it—so now let's have dinner because you've got me in the right mood for a nice meal. My stomach is like a knot.

NAN: We're not eating. . . . We're not doing anything until I know what's in that letter! Are you *afraid* to show me what's in the letter?

SID: You have a nerve! You have the barbaric audacity . . . the surreptitious effrontery to demand to see this letter? Well, let me tell you something. The person who wrote me this letter wanted it to reach me. . . . That's why the letter was addressed to *me* . . . not *you* . . . but *me* . . . and to make sure nobody but me read the letter, it was sealed, and then a three-cent stamp was put on it. . . . On that stamp is a picture of Thomas Jefferson . . . looking sideways [*turns head to side*] so that even he can't see what's inside the letter. . . .

The stamp on that letter guarantees it will get to me unopened by anyone else. And that guarantee is backed by a government of a hundred and sixty million people, the United States Post Office, the Army, the Navy and the Supreme Court. And you want to defy all that. . . . It's just a matter of principalities and I'm surprised after all the years we've been married that you show this little trust in me. . . . Just because I got one perfumed letter. Look, Nan . . . this is ridiculous, honey. We're married. I trust you and I hope you trust me and we just have to believe in each other. That's why I just can't show you what's in this letter. Because I have to keep faith in our marriage.

This is material that would be much less amusing in the mouth of any other comedian, but Sid personalizes the scripted lines even more by ad-libbing his way around them and, in the process, making them even funnier. Here is a verbatim transcript of the above speech as broadcast:

SID: You want to know what's in my mail? You have the syncopated audacity to ask me what's in my personal mail? You have the barbaric foresight to ask me if you are equal to astronomical figures that know what is in my mail?

This is a bubonic plague above all that I have ever seen. You have snatched away the highest of the consequences that I have seen a person of your caliber sink below the sea.

Do you realize the United States Army, United States Navy, United States Marines and Coast Guards, and not to mention the Secret Service, which is a branch of the United States Coast Guard, is backing me to the limit? My privacy here is installed by the government. No one can get it back. It has a stamp on it, and on this is a picture of Thomas Jefferson and *he* is facing the other way! Even this exalted person cannot look into my mail. . . . My dear, I cannot show you what is in this letter because it is of principality now. We must have faith and trust because our marriage is based

on these points and I am not going against that; therefore, I cannot show you what is in this letter, for our marriage's sake.

I think a great many amateur parlor wits secretly believe that with good luck they might have been able to do what Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason or George Gobel do for a living, and, for all I know, some of them may be right. But I don't believe there's another man in the whole world who could do precisely what Sid does. Telling a funny story or acting in a sketch are, after all, relatively commonplace achievements. But the ability to make an audience believe that you are a turtle, a six-month-old baby, an ant, or Napoleon is a very rare gift.

Caesar's talent for throwing himself, Brando-like, into a role is no mere matter of actor's-studio technique. First of all, it's a talent Sid had before he was a professional entertainer. Secondly, he not only convinces, as any exceptional actor might; he also *amuses*. His method usually involves an illustration of Henri Bergson's theory that *things* are in and of themselves never funny *except when they remind us of people*.

Sid as an ant, for example, amuses not by really acting like an ant, but by acting like an ant with human motivations. He got the idea for this particular monologue one day by watching a few ants crawling along Fifth Avenue near the spot where Central Park meets the Plaza.

"Here they were," he says, "right near Tiffany's, Bergdorf's, everything. You'd think they'd be happy. But no, one instigator—there's always one in every crowd—he thinks they should move to the country so the kids will have fresh air and a green leaf to call their own."

The structure never varies: a *thing* acting like a *human*

being. And it's always the *same* human being. It's always a world-weary, somewhat sarcastic individual who knows he's a victim of circumstances and is not surprised when things go against him. Sid's humor in these instances is precisely that involved in the old joke about the two cows who stood sleepily in a chilly dawn regarding the farmer as he approached them with milking stool and pail.

"Don't look now," said one to the other, "but here comes old icy fingers again."

There is in Sid's monologues something of this idea of inevitability and resignment.

It is possible, however, that Sid rises to his greatest heights in the area of pure pantomime, although he depends on it only rarely. The art of mime itself is very rarely practiced in our time.

As Marcel Marceau, its leading genius, defines it, "Pantomime is the art of expressing feelings by attitudes and not a means of expressing words through gestures." This, of course, is the very essence of the universal theater. This explains in part the catholic appeal of Charlie Chaplin, who was probably the only universally popular comedian because he spoke the language that man could speak before he could speak a language.

Sid seems simply to have been born with a peculiar gift that might be described as the ability to write physical poetry. By that I mean he is able bodily to distill the essence of a story of emotion, to project to an audience the quality of an object or the feeling of an action. For this reason he will be less harmed by the simple passage of time than many other television comedians. Where they are limited to being punch-drunk fighters or bus drivers or mousy Milquetoasts, Sid can

be a white-wall tire, a pin-ball machine, a turtle or an insomniac.

One of his classics of pantomime (in the performance of which he was ably assisted by the vastly talented Imogene Coca) was his representation of a drummer in a symphony orchestra. He and Imogene (the tympanist) play cards, doze off, do any number of ridiculous things during the long pauses between the times when their services are actively required. At the last moment they spring to and pantomime, while an orchestra plays off-camera, the thunderous crashes and bongs written into their parts. Finally, while the number builds to a deafening climax, Sid is not content simply to pretend to be playing drums. To really exaggerate (there's that key word again) the idea of a drum boom he is ripping imaginary hand grenades off his belt, pulling the cords to send make-believe cannon shells out into the audience, and in general bringing the world down around his head.

Most often, of course, Sid does not employ pantomime alone. He usually combines it, Ruth Draper-like, with the spoken word, but working on a bare stage without props or scenery. One of his most popular routines of this sort is his imitation of a fly. He got the idea one day at a Greek restaurant while watching one circle around a counter full of food.

The bit opens with Sid yawning and rubbing his wrists together, and from that opening bit of magic he seems to look exactly like a fly. The fly wakes up, cleans his forelegs and his wings and mumbles ecstatically, "Ah, it's morning. Look at the sun coming in through the window. What a house I live in! I was so lucky to find this house. Always something to eat. Crumbs on the table. Banana peelings on the floor. Lettuce leaves in the sink. What a nice sloppy house! Well,

Eddie Cantor

ALL the other chapters in this book include some sort of analysis of the humor of the men discussed. This chapter will be an exception in that regard for the reason that Eddie Cantor's humor bore no distinctive earmarks. It was simply the humor of the day. It was on Broadway and in pictures the comedy of traditional sketches, and then in radio the grinding out of jokes, jokes, jokes.

In a way, therefore, Cantor has had it easy as a comic. He could turn any sketch, any joke to his advantage, whereas comedians like Fred Allen or Bobby Clark or Bert Lahr were limited to a certain type of material.

Though the newer generation may consider his style dated or old-fashioned, Eddie has, in the tradition of men like Al Jolson and George M. Cohan, carved out a career that spans a sizable hunk of modern American history and covers practically every facet of show business. His material is not important but Cantor himself is.

In 1910 Eddie was an unknown supporting player working for a team named Bedini and Arthur. About that time he worked, along with many other youngsters destined for fame, in one of Gus Edwards' popular "school act" companies after

having knocked around Coney Island cabarets when the songs-and-sandwiches vogue was on. In 1913 he had a partner, Sammy Kessler, and in 1914, after he and Kessler split up in London, he signed with a revue playing in England at the time. The same year he joined Al Lee in an act called "The Master and the Man." Singing in blackface with what *Variety* called "effeminate mannerisms," he scored an immediate success and, before World War I was over, was an established revue name.

By 1916 Eddie had appeared in his first show, *Canary Cottage*, and was immediately thereafter signed by Florenz Ziegfeld for the Frolics. In '17 and '18 he graduated to the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Ten years later he had passed from Broadway to Hollywood and was already rising to film fame with pictures like *Kid Boots* to his credit.

In the twenties only one Broadway entertainer was drawing bigger money than Cantor: Al Jolson. Eddie had left Ziegfeld and in 1920 signed with the Shuberts at $1,400 a week. Near the end of the decade he was considered such a favorite that Old Gold cigarettes, which had paid Jolson $2,500 for an endorsement, saw fit to pay Eddie $7,500 for the same deal. Already songs like "Dinah" and "If You Knew Susie" had become national favorites at his hands. Brunswick Records had long since signed him to a five-year contract at the astronomical (for that time) figure of $220,000, putting him on a par financially with Caruso and John McCormack.

In 1928, when *Variety* ran a list of wealthy actors with estimates of their fortunes, David Warfield's name was first. He was worth over ten million. Cantor was second with holdings estimated at well over five million. Like almost everyone else,

he was badly hurt by the stock-market crash of 1929, but his big earnings continued.

By 1931 Eddie was playing the Palace Theater for $8,000 per week. This was the year he began to score strongly on radio. It had been a long pull for the poverty-stricken orphan boy from the lower East Side, and for a while Eddie was taken aback to discover that his tremendous accomplishments in the theater did not automatically guarantee his success on the air. He succeeded, surely enough, but from the first he was engaged in what one TV-radio columnist describes as "a never-ending feud with critics who dared pan his shows." In one case Ben Gross and Abe Greenberg, who covered radio for the New York *Daily News*, sued Eddie for $100,000 as a result of a crack he had made in print that every New York radio critic "except one" was either a chiseler or a log-roller. The case was eventually settled out of court, with Eddie making a modest payoff.

A great deal of the credit for Eddie's success in radio goes to David Freedman, who in 1931 signed to write his programs. Freedman is usually credited with being the first of the big-money gag writers. He found it relatively easy to write Cantor's first three shows, but had trouble in grinding out the fourth. His wife came to the rescue with a suggestion that must have occurred to countless comedy writers before and since. "Your father has an old book called *Wit and Wisdom*," she said. "You might find something in it you can use."

The first joke Freedman read in this ancient tome was this:

WILLIE: Mother, I was almost given a pony this morning. I asked the Reverend Davis for one and he refused.

MOTHER: Then why do you say you almost received one?

WILLIE: Well, if he had said yes, Mother, I should have had the pony.

As rewritten for Cantor's program, the joke came out like this:

EDDIE: I almost got married to Jean Harlow last week.
ANNOUNCER: How's that?
EDDIE: I asked her to marry me and she said no.
ANNOUNCER: Well?
EDDIE: If she'd said yes, I'd have married her.

Freedman had come up with something simple, and Cantor's next few scripts were heavily larded with revised jokes from *Wit and Wisdom*. Recognizing a good thing, Freedman dispatched his wife and father to the public library, where they spent long hours copying jokes out of old books and magazines. They also brought home armloads of periodicals from secondhand bookstores. The best of the jokes were skimmed off, typed on file cards, and tucked away alphabetically. The project finally became too big for the family to handle, and Freedman hired three assistants. One of them was novelist Herman Wouk. For years Freedman collected jokes from all over the world and amassed a fabulous file. The practice continues widespread to this day, although it must be pointed out that it takes a lot more to become a successful gag writer than scissors, paste and file cabinets. Only a man who has the ability to write a joke in the first place knows how to rewrite one and bring it up to date. Freedman wrote Cantor's scripts, magazine stories and books for several years. He died in 1936.

In 1936 Eddie was able to capitalize on his radio and motion-picture fame to the extent of charging the RKO Bos-

ton Theater $25,000 for a six-day appearance. This set a new record and was even more remarkable in that it took place in the heart of an economic recession.

By the early 1940s Eddie's radio star had dimmed slightly and, though he was still a big name, his popularity was surpassed by that of up-and-coming younger comedians and singers. Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Fibber McGee and Molly, Fred Allen, Edgar Bergen, old reliable Jack Benny and others were satisfying the public's ever-constant demand for change. Hollywood had also lost interest in Eddie, although his life story was eventually to be brought to the screen.

Among the younger humorists today it is more or less a commonplace to observe that Cantor's great popularity is something of a mystery for the reason that he seems markedly less funny than men like Will Rogers, W. C. Fields, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, George Jessel and a handful of others.

There are two avenues of thought open to those who would solve the mystery, if mystery it is. The first is that Cantor is essentially a singer, sort of an amusing Jolson. There is something to this line of reasoning and we shall pursue it later. The other theory—and it is one that can be supported by much evidence—is that Cantor was funny *for his time*. He was always a good sketch comic and he had a shrewd showman's instinct for working himself into the proper spots to show off his talents. Cantor always marshaled his abilities with great wisdom. He was amusing at certain times, in certain acts, in certain revues because he correctly interpreted the audience's interests and catered to them. Also, he always worked with great vitality and emotion. A writer I know believes that Cantor was a great comedy actor as well as a great singing person-

ality—and here we are back at the ever-present difficulty of defining the word *comedian.*

When I say that to me Cantor does not seem to have produced a humor that has retained its vigor, as has the humor of Fields or Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy or Groucho Marx, I certainly do not intend the comment to be the negative criticism it might seem. It is something like saying that Rocky Marciano is not much of a *boxer.* Marciano was never an especially adept defensive performer. He does not have to be. He is simply the best *puncher* of his time. So it is with Cantor. He may not be considered exceptionally amusing when compared with men like Fields, Hope, or Groucho, but he has not had to be any more amusing than he is for the reason that he is basically a song-and-dance man and a great one.

When you think of Cantor you think first of the little man with the slicked-down black hair and the big eyes singing "If you knew Susie like I know Susie." Unless you are over fifty you do not associate him primarily with jokes or sketches; you associate him with songs. "Ida," "Now's the Time to Fall in Love," "Making Whoopee"—these are the tools with which Eddie Cantor has carved for himself a secure reputation. Perhaps the most successful song-and-dance man of them all, he finally attained a position where his vivacity and lightheartedness combined to create the illusion that he was a great comedian. He was always employed, after all, in telling jokes and performing as a comic in revues, motion pictures and radio programs.

But there are a great many performers who can "do comedy" and yet are not at heart actually comedians. Millions who never had the oportunity to see Cantor on Broadway or who have forgotten his early motion pictures will perhaps under-

stand the point if we talk for a minute about Bing Crosby. Bing is not a comic; he sings for a living. But his casual air and the camouflaged dynamics of his personality have turned him into an entertainer who can deliver a humorous line with the best of them. Through his long association with Bob Hope, his early days making short comedies for Mack Sennett, and his many years of serving as a mouthpiece for the material of such wits as Bill Morrow and Carroll Carroll, Bing has gradually become so associated with laughter that it does not seem unusual now that his radio and TV programs are comedy shows first and musical entertainment second.

So it is with Cantor. Exuding pep, warmth and confidence, he was always a valuable player in a comedy sketch. His small stature and frightened-rabbit expression helped him arouse the sympathy of audiences conditioned to laugh at the little-guy-getting-it-in-the-neck routine. At long last, by this process of the conditioned reflex, he convinced audiences that he was a clown at heart; the public was, in a sense, talked into believing that Cantor was a comedian of Olympian stature.

He has now, of course, several things "going for him," as they say in the trade. For one thing, he has been around for a long time. If you can manage to stay in show business for thirty or forty years, the public eventually and inevitably builds up around your talent such a rosy glow of nostalgia, such a romantic haze of remembered laughter and song, that it finally can't judge your artistic merit impartially.

Old-time performers fully realize the value of the nostalgic approach and apply it with a sometimes cold and methodical effectiveness. Many people under twenty-eight, witnessing a TV or night-club performance by Sophie Tucker for the first time, are puzzled by its popularity. "What's all the fuss

about?" they ask. "She seems like a great old gal, but she can't sing and she isn't funny. Frankly, she's corny, and when she goes into the hearts-and-flowers routine I get a little embarrassed."

'Twas ever thus, of course, with youth. The young always regard what has gone before as corny and outmoded. Sophie really can't sing, true enough. But then she never professed to have a voice.

True enough she isn't funny, but she never tried to palm herself off as a comedienne either. What she sells is warmth, excitement, showmanship, "heart" and now, most of all, nostalgia. "Look at me," she says in effect. "I'm seven million years old but, by God, I'm still doin' business at the same old stand. I'm the last of the red-hot mamas, so you'd better take a look at me now because I won't be around forever."

The young may legitimately suffer embarrassment when Sophie turns on the alligator tears, but that is because they felt no original interest in Sophie or her era. Some day a quarter of a century from now, when Eddie Fisher or Patti Page steps in front of a 3-D color television camera and says, "Will you ever forget the year we all sang 'Tennessee Waltz'?" a new generation of oldsters will rise to their feet, wipe away a tear and shout, "Yessirree, and those were the days!"

Cantor, then, like Sophie Tucker and a number of other performers, sells *yesterday*. The good old days always seem better than they were and they acquire a certain added goodness, no less appreciable because it is illusory, simply because they are old.

Another factor tremendously in Cantor's favor is his association with songs. It is a phenomenon of our particular artistic culture that the popular song is so much a part of it.

The American people's ears are invaded almost twenty-four hours a day by contemporary music. Radios, television sets and recording machines are standard artifacts in our homes. We hear music in our automobiles, in restaurants, theaters, on the street, and, if it is not provided for us mechanically, we hum or whistle it ourselves while in the shower or at the office. Songs become associated in our minds with emotions and dramatic events. We dance with a girl while the orchestra is playing "Tenderly," and forever after we think of the girl when we hear the song. We go to see a Broadway musical, and for the rest of our lives the music of the show's score brings back to us a fleeting recollection of that magic evening we spent in the theater.

That is why TV audiences applaud when Eddie Cantor starts to sing "Tomatoes are cheaper, potatoes are cheaper." When you hear an old song, ancient enthusiasms are evoked and for the moment you almost feel that not only is Eddie Cantor singing that song but that he wrote the song—that he *is* the song.

Eddie's third high card is his deft employment of the stock-reference joke. Bob Hope has his nose, Jack Benny has his age, Crosby has his money, and Eddie Cantor has his five daughters. Audiences now have come subconsciously to understand that they are to laugh at any sort of reference to Eddie's five girls. Audiences offer no resistance. They differentiate not at all between a good joke about Eddie's daughters and a bad one; they simply have conditioned-reflexed themselves into being push-overs for this particular reference.

Cantor's daughter-laugh is uniquely valuable. For one thing, it is American to have a large family, at least on paper. Most of us want large families for the other fellow, but at

least we all agree they are a fine thing. Then, too, it is a fine thing for a man to stay married to his first wife, especially in show business. So Eddie is a family man with a raft of kids. That makes him just-folks with millions of Americans. They like the whole idea.

References to his daughters, however, are sometimes tinged with the merest overtones of sexual connotation. We are all opposed to the idea of jokes that pertain to sex, but we all laugh at them. Most of us have heard it said, "I don't go for dirty jokes personally, but I heard one the other day that's just . . . well, you know, it's just cute." Cantor's jokes about his daughters are not, of course, off-color. But they do often touch on that fine limited area in which procreation may be discussed with humor and good taste. So it is that Cantor is perhaps the one comedian granted the privilege of referring from time to time to his sexual prowess.

The fourth factor explaining Cantor's success is simply that he is easy to identify physically. He looks like no one else and he looks a little odd. He is not ugly or unattractive, just unusual. He is a type. This is of greater importance than the reader may imagine. The public finds it difficult to keep its file on prominent figures in neat order. Cantor labors under no handicap. You'd know him anywhere.

His fifth strong point is his espousal of popular causes. There are certain hard-bitten show-business observers who look with a jaundiced eye on Cantor's drum-beating for the March of Dimes and various other charities.

"How can you hate a guy," they ask, "who asks you for money to help crippled kids walk again or who asks you to send books to soldiers overseas?"

That this viewpoint is probably an unfair one is pointed

out by one of Cantor's friends. "What do they want the guy to do? *Not* support the March of Dimes? Would that make him a better man? He does a lot of good making pitches to his listeners!"

Whether Cantor's motivations are one hundred per cent unselfish is not entirely pertinent to an analysis of his talents, but it is a fact that he not only successfully solicits large sums of money for various charitable causes but that his work in these areas wins him the good will of millions of his viewers.

Sixth factor explaining Eddie's long hold on the public's affections is his vast confidence in his ability. Only an ego of monumental proportions could stand by all unshy in the performance of a scripted sketch with his daughter Marilyn which involved her saying substantially, "Well, Daddy, I hope I turn out to be one tenth the performer and one twentieth the human being that you've always been."

That this loving sentiment might spring from Marilyn's heart at any time is not in question, but television programs are not usually ad-libbed. They are written down and rehearsed, and the script for Cantor's show is at all times under his supervision. He was, therefore, in effect authorizing such lavish compliments and their public expression. Certain critics called him slightly to task the day following the broadcast on which this particular exchange occurred, and one TV observer rapped his knuckles for another incident which provided, to quote, "an insight into the psychology of the ham." Cantor and Groucho Marx were singing a song with Ricky Vera, the Mexican child actor discovered by Hoagy Carmichael. Toward the end of the number Ricky made a simple gesture with his arms to emphasize a part of the lyric. Cantor, possibly forgetting for a split second that the merciless eye of

the camera was trained on him, glanced down, observed with displeasure that the youngster was to some extent stealing the scene, and actually pushed the boy's arms down, as if to say, "Watch it, sonny. Don't try to steal the spotlight on *my* show."

Barring an occasional slip, however, where such supreme self-confidence comes into conflict with the viewer's interests, it is actually a great aid to a performer. Some people say an entertainer never becomes a star without it. People like Will Rogers, they say, are the exceptions that prove the rule. Certainly Eddie Cantor's evaluation of himself is one which he is consistently able to sell to the public.

And yet it is important to observe that Cantor is not just all showmanship and shrewd front. His emotion on stage is genuine, not feigned. He is a warmhearted, excitable person and his charitable impulses are legitimate.

There are some performers who achieve a freak and short-lived popularity without having the talent to justify their fortune. But to remain a star as long as Eddie has you've got to have *something*; you've got to, as the song says, have *heart*.

Wally Cox

A LINE of speculation that has long intrigued philosophers is that concerned with men born out of their time. Shakespeare, they say, was an author of monumental genius, but if he had been born in this century might he not have been lost in the literary shuffle, partly snowed under in an age that seems to uncover exceptional creative talent with a frequency that might almost be described as monotonous?

Thomas Edison was unquestionably one of the great inventive thinkers of his era, but since most of his discoveries were made in the field of electricity, is it not entirely possible that had he been born in Shakespeare's time he might have been an eternally anonymous craftsman?

While the debate on this issue could rage forever when applied to such historic figures as Shakespeare, Edison, Julius Caesar or John L. Sullivan, there is one young man currently occupied in the entertainment field who, in my opinion, could not have been successfully destined for any other time than the present. His name: Wally Cox.

The diminutive, introspective Cox, with his vague, wistful face and his deceptively colorless personality, could have been

the tremendous success he is only at this particular stage of the world's development and only in the medium of television.

Picture Cox in the legitimate theater of a generation ago. Imagine him on the radio in the Bob Hope–Jack Benny–Fred Allen era. Conceive of him, if you can, as a motion-picture star in the time of Rudolph Valentino. Or, more dramatically, try to imagine his fate in other ages and other spheres: in the gold rush of forty-nine, in the Boxer Rebellion, the French Revolution, in Sherman's march to the sea.

Here, it is evident, is a man happily situated in time and space and here, too, in the person of "Mr. Peepers," the small-town schoolteacher, is an entertainment prize that lovers of humor the world over might happily clutch to their bosoms. That it has been taken from us is one of TV's more frustrating tragedies.

The frail, thirty-one-year-old bachelor, who in the short space of six months became a coast-to-coast favorite, is possibly a unique comedian in his generation; he unquestionably represents the greatest paradox.

A comedian is supposed to be possessed of a certain amount of dynamic vigor; Cox has none. If he is not rakishly presentable like Bob Hope, Milton Berle or Jackie Gleason, then he is supposed to look broadly funny like Jimmy Durante, Ed Wynn or Jerry Lewis; Cox is only mousy and almost unnoticeable. If a comic is not particularly visual in his approach to his audience it is presumed that what he says will be either fast and funny or designed for cerebral appeal: Cox just stands there and mumbles at you. If he does not deal in jokes in quantity it is expected that a comedian will wear a funny hat or make an absurd face; Cox is physically about as interesting

as an orange crate. That he is wonderfully amusing cannot be denied; why he is so amusing is more difficult to determine.

It is certain that he is a stylist unto himself. Never was a comedian less indebted to his predecessors and colleagues for his manner and method. Most other clowns, no matter how individual, exhibit influences of those who have gone before them. Henry Morgan was influenced by Colonel Stoopnagle and Fred Allen and Robert Benchley; Bob Elliot and Ray Goulding were influenced by Henry Morgan; Herb Shriner was influenced by Will Rogers; Will Rogers was influenced by Mark Twain. Jerry Lewis was influenced by Harry Ritz; Jackie Gleason was influenced by Jack Oakie and Harry Langdon; Frank Fontaine was influenced by Steve Evans; almost every professional buffoon will, if he is honest, admit that during his formative years he learned a trick or two from someone else in the field.

Wally Cox seems to have been influenced by a rainy afternoon.

It does not seem that he could have *learned* to act the way he does, and the ventured assumption is correct: he simply plays himself.

While the real Wally Cox is more intelligent and capable than the Wally Cox projected on your television screen, the two are identical in almost all other particulars. In a room full of people the pint-sized star takes advantage of a sort of social protective coloration to remain unnoticed as long as it suits his purpose. Unlike many of his competitors, he is never the life of a party.

But somehow when the elusive whimsy of Cox is presented in the proper framework, one's heart goes out to him and one

can laugh at him heartily and for good cause. Perhaps the reason for his appeal is that this is a world of unclear lines of demarcation between one thing and another. There is little white and little black but a great deal of gray. We are not divided into men and mice. There is something of the man and something of the mouse in all of us. Cox is the mouse in us all, and we, therefore, feel tender toward him and are amused by him.

In *Prejudices: Third Series*, H. L. Mencken, writing on the average man, says:

> It is often urged against the so-called scientific socialists, with their materialistic conception of history, that they overlook certain spiritual qualities that are independent of wage scales and metabolism. These qualities, it is argued, color the aspirations and activities of civilized man quite as much as they are colored by his material condition, and so make it impossible to consider him simply as an economic machine. As examples, the anti-Marxians cite patriotism, the aesthetic sense, and the yearning to know God. Unluckily, the examples are ill-chosen. Millions of men are quite devoid of patriotism, pity and the aesthetic sense, and have no very active desire to know God. Why don't the anti-Marxians cite a spiritual quality that is genuinely universal? There is one readily to hand. I allude to cowardice. It is, in one form or other, visible in every human being; it almost serves to mark off the human race from all the other higher animals. Cowardice, I believe, is at the bottom of the whole caste system, the foundation of every organized society, including the most democratic.

The simple fact is that there is something of the coward in us all. Fear, of course, has a vital social purpose. It is a necessary part of man's make-up, like pain. Our social conditioning, nevertheless, makes us ashamed of our natural timidity.

When it is exposed we laugh with embarrassment, provided the embarrassment is not too great.

Humorists in all ages have recognized the comic value of timorousness. There has never, in fact, been a comedian who has not at one time or another numbered a display of cowardice among his tricks. During the war a popular joke was "The draft board rated me 4-F for physical reasons: no guts." One of Artemus Ward's most amusing lines comes from a paragraph in which he purports to boast of his bravery under fire. "Bullets and cannon balls were passing all around me," he says, "in wagons, on their way to the battlefield."

Timidity carried to the extreme is the number-one comic weapon employed by Wally Cox in his Mr. Peepers characterization.

"Being a single bachelor," he says, "I usually eat my breakfast in the drugstore. I have the same thing every morning: prune juice and two scrambled eggs. . . . For lunch they have specials, like this one here, for instance. It's called the businessman's lunch—appetizer, coffee and dessert, for only forty cents. Sometimes I order that at noon. Of course," he adds, looking about furtively to make sure that no one overhears, "they don't know I'm not a businessman!"

Wally's rabbityness is not, of course, exposed in the physically extreme manner common to his colleagues. He would not, by way of example, do jokes of the following sort:

MAN: Don't worry about that guy, Red. Remember, the bigger they are, the harder they fall!
BUTTONS: Yeah, but suppose he falls on me!

TUGWELL: Why didn't you hit him, Uncle Jack? What happened to your get up and go?
CARSON: It got up and went.

COSTELLO: Listen, that's two times you've hit me!
TOUGH: Yeah? Well, what if I hit you again?
COSTELLO: That'll be three times!

Cox's timidity is more subtly expressed, hence more realistic. He is never put in a situation involving physical combat. His is, rather, the eager desire to conform, the fear of offending. He can be intimidated and dominated by anyone with whom he comes into contact. His anxiety to "go along" is often what makes him say awkward (and thus amusing) things.

LADY MARGARET [*Lifting a Martini*]: Well, cheers!
PEEPERS: What?
LADY MARGARET: I said, "Cheers!"
PEEPERS: All right—hooray!

Oddly enough, the timid approach is something peculiar to Peepers, rather than to Wally in his broader capacity as a humorist. Many TV fans have either forgotten or never knew that before Cox began playing the role of the small-town schoolteacher he was a popular night-club monologist. I first saw him doing a guest shot on "Broadway Open House" in, I believe, 1952. He delivered what was then his most successful reading, a rambling story about a misfit teen-ager named "Dufo." The narrator is cruel, unfeeling and, sadly enough, all too recognizable in a certain element of our juvenile population. The piece amuses because of the blatantly sadistic attitude of the Brando-ish speaker and his failure to recognize his relative abnormality. His attitude is incongruous, hence funny. The influence of Marlon Brando on Cox or Cox on Brando, by the way, is perfectly understandable: they are close friends and at one time roomed together.

Here is Cox, standing with a wide smile, wearing a peculiar cap, telling of his mate, Dufo.

My friend, Dufo—what a crazy guy. Always makes us laugh. You know when you're a kid you do anything for a dare? You hang over the edge of the roof on a board for a dare? Well, we seen these guys, they was trying to get Dufo to hang over the edge of the roof on a board, and we seen the board, it was a little thin board, and we told him it wouldn't hold you, you know. So he's going to do it anyway. What a crazy guy.

We use to play "Roof Tag"; everybody has to run over the roofs, and everybody has to run under the wire for, uh, radio or sumptin . . . I dunno, so everybody runs under the wire except Dufo. Gets him right here! What a crazy guy.

You know when a guy can't swim, you throw him in the water and he gets real scared? Well, we seen this guy, he couldn't swim, we was throwing him in the water and he was getting real scared. So I was telling Dufo, "Hey, pull him out. He's turning' blue, he's drownin'!" So he keeps pushing him in again. What a crazy guy!

We use to play "Back Yard Race"; everybody has to run across the back yard and climb over the fence and run across the back yard and climb over the fence and run across the back yard and climb over the fence, and like that. So this one back yard, every time we climb over the fence the lady throws things at us, you know? Water, pans, everything. So her husband gets real mad, he puts up a board with nails in it. So every time we climb over the fence we have to jump over the nails. So one time we was all climbing over the fence, and everybody jumps over the nails but Dufo. Sixteen stitches. What a crazy guy.

We use to take cars and drive 'em around. We didn't keep 'em or anything. Some guys sell 'em; we didn't sell 'em. We use to park 'em in front of the police station when we was through with them. Well, one time we seen this car, it was a thirty-nine Packard, and the keys was in it, so we was driving around, so I said let's go over to Dufo's house, so we went over there and left it out in front and went inside and said,

"Hey, Dufo, there's my car out there, how do you like it?" So he says, "That ain't your car." You know, he's real dumb. So I said, "Sure, here's the keys; go ahead take your girl for a ride." So he gets in it, and gets around the corner and the cops pick him up. He's on two-year probation. What a crazy guy. And you know, that's the only thing he ever done wrong.

Well, I'll see you around, huh?

Wally is a good advertisement for psychoanalysis. It has brought him, in just a few years, from a genuinely Peepersish timidity to a more self-confident awareness that he is the television star his agents keep telling him he is.

"I used to consider myself so insignificant and anonymous-looking," he admits, "that I'd invent little tricks to make people notice I was on earth. For example, I used to wear my wristwatch upside down when I was in high school so that whenever anybody asked me the time I'd simply raise my arm to my chest and let them see for themselves. It made for something to talk about."

In the little town of Omena, Michigan, where he was born, Wally would never have been recognized as a potential entertainer. Although his grandmother and mother had been writers and his father had worked in the advertising business, Cox never had any high-flown ambitions for himself. "I was always interested," he says, "in botany and hand crafts and things like that."

When he got out of the Army he took an aptitude test which indicated he should work with his hands and he enrolled in an industrial arts course in New York. By 1946 he was making cuff links, tie clasps and oddities good enough to sell in Manhattan shops. "Unfortunately," Wally says, "I wasn't

much of a businessman. Dealers found it easy to take advantage of me."

About this time he found that his high-school friendship with Marlon Brando and his Greenwich Village residence had brought him into contact with a number of young actors given to the habit of throwing parties. At these gatherings everyone was expected to entertain in one way or another, and since Wally couldn't imagine his friends enthralled by his prowess at hand craft, he began to formulate little monologues based on real-life characters he had observed: a harassed candy-store proprietor ("Get outta here, you kids"), a confused soda jerk, a cliché-spouting Army sergeant or the aforementioned teen-ager with the friend named Dufo. Word soon got around about Cox's living-room narrations and he was induced by Max Gordon to take a flier at night-club entertaining at Gordon's New York clubs, the Village Vanguard and the Blue Angel. At the Vanguard he was an immediate success and by 1950 had appeared, to good personal notices, in the flop revue *Dance Me a Song.* There followed a couple of years of doing television guest shots and then the fateful break: a call to handle a dramatic assignment on the "Philco Playhouse." The play in question was *The Copper,* written by David Swift. I had just come to New York myself not long before and had taken over Swift's one-room apartment on East Fifty-fifth Street. He was selling a great number of TV scripts at the time and one of them was a fey comedy about a mousy little policeman. Fred Coe, the producer, liked Cox's performance in the role so much that he was reluctant to drop the character after just one appearance. Recently I wrote to Dave to determine the order of events immediately after the broadcast, and he wrote me the following letter:

Wally did an hour "Philco Playhouse" thing I wrote called *The Copper* with some success and NBC wanted me to make a series of it. I argued them out of it because the character he protrayed in *The Copper* (that of a rookie cop) was believable in a one shot but not for any period of time. Wally just didn't have the physical attributes to make him acceptable as a policeman. We were building a series around a performer, not an actor, so Fred Coe and I evaluated what areas Wally could work in week after week and chose that of a science teacher in a small town.

Don't ask me how I came up with the name. All I know is that Wally's mother made a very big mistake in name selection: how could she call him Wally Cox when he looks so much like Robinson Peepers?

Now, of course (*now* being the winter of 1955), Mr. Peepers has gone to television's limbo, perhaps to languish there for all eternity, perhaps to be restored to grace by some moment of wisdom on the part of a network or sponsor. The program went off the air not because it was not a good program but simply because its rating began to slip when Jack Benny moved into the opposition spot on CBS. That, incidentally, is the reason a great many programs disappear. Something like "The $64,000 Question" comes along and it doesn't matter how good a program you are doing; if you happen to find yourself in competition with the new phenomenon you just resign yourself to defeat. We can't blame the sponsors. They are interested in only one thing: the value of a given program as a means of advertising a product. If the program ceases to have such a value they are no longer interested in it, and neither would you be if you were in their shoes.

Nineteen fifty-five proved a rather difficult time for Wally Cox all around. After Mr. Peepers retired Wally returned

to the night-club circuit, lured by the golden generosity of Las Vegas. His first night was an embarrassing experience, for the cash customers refused to become interested in his delicate humor. They talked, rattled dishware, heckled, consumed large quantities of alcohol, and in general presented Wally with one of those nightmares that all performers dread.

After a few days of argument in the public print between Cox and the proprietors of the establishment in which he was being nightly inconvenienced, Wally bowed out of his contract and momentarily retired to lick his wounds. The experience, bitter as it was, could not have come as a complete shock to him, however. As early as 1952 he had said to an interviewer, "I was never too happy working night clubs. I'm a quiet kind of entertainer, and most club audiences just don't have the patience to listen to anyone who doesn't hit them over the head with jokes. The hecklers are the most reprehensible of all. I never yet heard a good joke from a drunk. And if you do squelch one of them with a very funny line, your regular routine suffers because it doesn't contain anything that will top the ad lib. It's an uncomfortable situation. Also, the physical limitations of clubs are a problem. Television, the theater, the movies—they're all fine. But even without the smoke, visibility in a club or supper room is terrible. Why, I've worked in spots where the audience couldn't even see my face. They got a splendid view of my posterior, but that's not where I do my best acting. At least that's *my* opinion."

An entertainer can be as good only as a given audience will allow him to be. I have appeared during the past fifteen years before just about every type of audience there is: theater, radio, TV, luncheon, banquet, turkey raffle and night

club. There is no question in my mind that club audiences are the worst, although for certain types of entertainers they are rather well suited. For one thing they have usually been drinking. There are statistics, I suppose, that would prove that about five per cent of the earth's population is comprised of people whom, for want of a more scientific term, we might adequately describe as jerks. These people, who might be wise enough to allow their inhibitions to control them in a theater or TV studio, will, under the mellowing influence of whisky and the noisy atmosphere that prevails in most night clubs, suddenly blossom forth in all their hideous fullness. They will feel quite justified in getting into the act or, failing that, in hurling insults at the ten-thousand-dollar-a-week target who is standing at the microphone. Now, it is not too difficult to "top" a boor at such times, but if you grind him up too badly you are apt to lose the sympathy of your audience. Strong emotion is the enemy of humor, and if you stir up your audience too vigorously you are going to start losing laughs. A performer like Wally, who must depend to a great extent upon the sympathy and consideration of his audience, is really in an awkward spot when a man who has always considered himself the funniest fellow at the Shriners' lodge or what-have-you decides on the spot to become a professional.

Night clubs are noisy, distracting places anyway to the delicate humorist. I have always thought that Robert Benchley was about the funniest man who ever lived, but I believe he would have gotten very few laughs if he had ever played the Copacabana.

I remember appearing, during the war, at a Hollywood night spot called the Casbah, on Vine Street. I was working at the time with a partner, Wendell Noble, and I will never

forget one night when a lady at the bar (if there is a bar in the main room you are in *double* trouble) began to heckle us. Heckle is rather a kind word. She was really insulting us. "What makes you think you're funny?" was one of her subtler remarks. Now, it happened that the girl who was employed by the club to wander among the tables taking pictures of the customers was quite a fan of Wendell's and mine. She used to listen to our radio program and she was very kind to us when we opened at the Casbah, seeming to sense that we were a couple of inexperienced babes being thrown to the lions. This particular night I noticed out of the corner of my eye that she was walking slowly along the aisle that led to the stool whereon our vociferous critic was enthroned. I think Wendell and I were just about to go into a song when Miss Loudmouth said, "You stink." Whereupon our friend shouted, "So do you," and punched the offender right in the mouth. Well, sir, the fur really flew for the next few minutes. A lot of things happened, but one thing that did not happen was laughter. We closed about three nights later and I have never since accepted an offer for a night-club engagement. A night-club comic must be prepared to be as rude to his audience as they are to him. Consequently a "gentleman" comic like Wally figures to be in danger any time he steps onto a smoky floor.

One swallow does not a summer make and, of course, one defeat does not end a career. Wally Cox is still funny. He is still being seen from time to time on television and I believe he will remain with us, in popular favor, for a long time. My remarks about George Gobel in a later chapter might easily apply here as well, by the way. You practically never hear anyone really bitterly criticize Wally Cox or his programs. People either love him or else they just don't seem to care.

The higher-powered funnymen like Berle, Hope, Gleason and Caesar, on the other hand, are regularly batted around in the press and by the man on the street. People either love them or they can't stand them. They continue to have high ratings because of some basic excitement their personalities stir up, for better or for worse. So it is that I believe that Wally will probably not develop as wide and fanatic a following as some of the others and will not therefore become as "important" as they are. But it would be a shame if we lost our capacity to appreciate the very sizable contribution he has made to our national humor.

Jackie Gleason

I HAVE never known a successful comedian who was not somewhat neurotic. The unsuccessful ones must be in even worse condition.

The humorist is basically a complainer, but his complaint is the only universally acceptable sort. A difficult early life seems to be an essential requirement for admission to the ranks of the eminent clowns, and the ability to surmount obstacles by hook or crook, to laugh off troubles if they cannot be denied, is one of the things that in the last analysis makes a man funny.

One of the most neurotic of the top-flight comedians, at least in my opinion, is Jackie Gleason. Alternating between excesses of the flesh and torments of the soul, Gleason is a driven figure who laughs, like some of his colleagues, in spite of himself. A compulsive eater, he is frank to admit that his prodigious appetite is basically a psychological problem. Television makes him worry. When he worries, he eats. Putting away a big meal gives him a sense of security in an insecure profession. When a man exposes himself professionally to an audience of millions once a week and regularly feels the slings of criticism it is not always enough to receive lavish public

praise as an antidote. One must constantly build up one's ego in small, personal ways. So Gleason eats. He eats himself literally into the hospital, for several times a year, after one last fit of gastronomic excess, he retires to Doctors Hospital in New York City, where the staff enforces a strict weight-reducing diet. Regularly after these in-town vacations he returns to the wars, his system purged, his mind clear and wary, his will full of eager and erratic resolutions.

Gleason is rich now, and when you have gone hungry all your life it is difficult not to indulge yourself when indulgence finally falls within your financial grasp. Jack was born in Brooklyn, about forty years ago, on Herkimer Street and Rockaway Avenue, and while not destitute he was never economically secure. When he was three years old his big brother, a boy of fourteen, died. When he was eight his father, Herbert Gleason, an insurance-company worker, disappeared under mysterious circumstances on his way home from work one evening and was never seen or heard from again. A few years later Gleason's mother died. Life knocked the pins out from under Jack early and often.

Many observers of the TV scene profess to be surprised by Jackie's astounding new ambition, his desire to run the whole show, his prodigious energy, and his willingness to leap open-eyed into fields where he would seem to be ill-equipped to succeed. I think that this flowering of the Gleason ego is not a late development but something that can be traced back to Jack's childhood.

"In school," he says, "I was irritating. Why, I don't know. I know what I did but I'm puzzled as to why I did it. I would sit back until Miss Pappen or Miss Caulfield or Miss Miller would make a point to the class, then I would get on my feet

and argue with them. I would tell them that, by coincidence, I had just been reading up on that subject and that the authorities did not agree with them. They would try to shut me up and I would tell them that they were losing their tempers because they were wrong."

Jack's good friend and most charitable critic Toots Shor agrees that success has not changed Gleason. "He was always crazy," says Toots. "The only difference is he can afford it now. He used to come to my place yelling and screaming and dead broke. . . . One New Year's Eve when he hardly knew where he was going to sleep that night, he came in here and ordered champagne for everybody in the joint. What the heck, it was New Year's Eve. I was going to give everybody champagne anyway, so what's the difference whether I did it or Gleason did it. I kind of admired his nerve."

It is probable that Jack's Diamond-Jim activities of the moment are the result of his tragic childhood and his many years of professional struggle, during which time he failed to make a dent in the public consciousness while having a rough go of it as a carnival barker, night-club emcee, actor, Broadway-revue comic and motion-picture bit player. Almost twenty years of relative failure would certainly collapse the ego of the average entertainer, but the years of poverty and rebuff only cemented Jack's determination to come out on top, to justify before the world his own almost fanatic insistence on his professional self as "the greatest."

It is my belief that the wide popular acceptance today of Gleason's comedy talent is based mostly on this driving determination and his genius for showmanship.

In the sense that Robert Benchley was a funnyman, in the sense that Groucho Marx is a funnyman, in the sense that

Jerry Lewis is a funnyman, I do not believe it would be correct to refer to Jackie Gleason as a funnyman at all, despite the ease with which he can make an audience laugh. For Jackie, to be amusing, must be involved in a sketch, whereas the others can amuse alone on a stage by striking some magic creative fire within themselves.

Gleason's ability to amuse is based on two factors: his dramatic talent and his warm, likable personality. He is not, at heart, I think, a true creative comedian. He is rather an exceptionally talented extrovert, an actor who, in a comedy sketch, can deliver funny lines with polish and vigor. Many critics consider that Jackie has no peer as a sketch comic. His initial experience in television was in the title role in "The Life of Riley," the show originally on radio (and currently on television) headed by William Bendix. His performance in the Riley series was very similar to his Ralph Kramden portrayal in "The Honeymooners," the husband-and-wife blackout which he presents each week, playing opposite Audrey Meadows.

The matter of hanging precise labels on anything in the domain of humor is, of course, a tricky business. There are no absolutes in comedy; everything is relative, and there are exceptions to every rule. When I say, therefore, that to me Jackie is not funny unless he is acting, perhaps I should underline the words "to me."

There are, after all, so many different ways to be funny. It might be apropos here to quote Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Laughter* (Simon and Schuster) on Charlie Chaplin:

> Charlie Chaplin is not an intrinsically comic character. He conveys, on the contrary, when you meet him, the impression of a being that, although slight and almost minia-

ture, possesses a kind of perfection—a grace, poise and agility both of body and speech that you are not moved to improve upon. . . .

Moreover, Chaplin is an extremely serious person, so serious that he will talk your very head off—he will lecture you into a sound sleep—if you get him on one of his favorite topics, like Social Credits or the fluctuations of the gold standards. Instead of a funnyman, he is a man of humorous imagination, the most original, perhaps, since Mark Twain, and also a consummate actor. He can imagine and act like a funnyman—like almost any funnyman, for the little tramp that has become identified with his person in the public mind is but one of an endless repertory of such roles that he has at his command, if he were bold enough to show them. But in his own person he is impressive rather than funny. And it is this fact that sets him apart, and makes the word comedian seem a little inadequate to describe him.

Fortunately, Gleason and his advisers have the good sense to realize what his strong points are; his shows therefore are composed almost exclusively of sketches based on make-believe characters. Gleason is not at his best when he is playing himself, alone on the stage in front of a curtain. But let him step back into a set, put on a funny costume and assume the personality of Ralph Kramden or the Poor Soul and he can guarantee that every laugh line written into his script will get its full measure of audience reaction.

Television is the perfect medium for Jack's talents. He was never professionally happy in night clubs or vaudeville theaters; his work in Broadway reviews was not exceptional, and he was unable to win popular favor in his few brief radio appearances. But with an hour of television time at his command each week for three years he had ample opportunity to introduce and popularize characters like Joe the Bartender

and Reginald Van Gleason, the Third. With the aid of the TV cameras he has at last had a chance to turn to advantage his practiced physical timing, his dramatic prowess and his big, good-natured Irish face.

Jackie's face is a tremendous asset to him at the present stage of his career. It is an open, honest, happy face, although it can express great sadness if pathos is called for. It is the kind of a face you cannot help liking and in television it is by now obvious that a likable face is more valuable than money in the bank. Indeed, the opinion has been expressed in more than one quarter that the dour expression of Fred Allen might have explained in some small part the reason for his inability to master the new medium with the ease with which he controlled the old.

Even those who don't think Gleason is particularly amusing the first time they see him on their screens find that they still like him personally, and in short order a capable entertainer can turn this ability to be liked into a sort of magic key that opens the door to acceptance of his artistic output.

Gleason has, of course, other qualities which make him a star. He has tremendous vitality on stage, a crashing physical warmth that almost completely covers up his inadequacies as a clown. He has only to come bouncing out in front of the cameras, flashing his magnetic smile, exuding confidence and shouting, "Saaaay, you're a dan-dan-dandy bunch tonight!" to win over an audience completely.

His ability to convulse a thousand people simply by smiling at them and saying, "Mmmm—boy!" is something of a puzzle to other comedians, who say, "I don't get that big a laugh with my best jokes." Jack's competitors do not realize that the people in the audience are not laughing because they are

amused by what Gleason is saying; they laugh because of the way he says it: because he seems to be having such a good time.

If Gleason were not an exceptional sketch comic he would still be an excellent master of ceremonies. He knows how to get people excited, how to put them in a receptive frame of mind for what is to follow. That, in fact, is how he hits his followers with a one-two punch. First he warms them up without really amusing them, then when they're ready he steps back, goes into a sketch and the battle is over.

Even in a sketch what he lacks in sheer comic ability he more than makes up for in warmth and naturalness. It is this ability to seem like a real flesh-and-blood human being that makes it possible for Jackie to make a quick switch from humor to pathos. Not many viewers can watch the finish of one of his "Honeymooners" scenes without feeling an unexpected lump in the throat and a tug at the heart strings. At its best a husband-and-wife playlet between Sid Caesar and Nanette Fabray is funnier, but the same sort of scene enacted by Gleason and Audrey Meadows has more emotional impact. Indeed, it is Jackie's ability to engender *sympathy* that is one of his most powerful assets. At the finish of each "Honeymooners" sketch, by the way, an interesting thing occurs. Jackie ceases to be Ralph Kramden and becomes instead the Poor Soul. He drops the mask of anger and is no longer an aggressive adult. He is suddenly revealed as a defenseless, baby-faced incompetent—which reminds me of a story.

My youngest son, David, when he was four, got into some mischief one day and in reprimanding him I said, "What do you think you are anyway, a little baby?" "No," he shouted, eyes blazing defiance, "I'm *not* a little baby. I'm a *big* baby."

There is a peculiar appeal to a big baby, and in his pathetic moments Gleason expresses it. He is not, at such times, a *little* baby, like Jerry Lewis, whose weapon is the ridiculous; he is the big, blustering man suddenly exposed. Your heart goes out to him.

Many people profess to be surprised when Jack appears from time to time in a straight dramatic role on the "Philco Playhouse" or "Studio One." These appearances are noteworthy, in my opinion, not for their novelty, but for the excellence of the job that Jack turns in at such times, proving that he is a brilliant actor, equally at home in comedy or tragedy.

On the set the real Gleason is, like Milton Berle, an autocrat. Usually unwilling to rehearse at all until the day of the broadcast, he is a fiery dictator once rehearsal is under way. He supervises the music, suggests numbers, orders tempo changes. He has been known to take chorus dancers through a step ten times. His views on dancing, music or the technicalities of TV production are like those of the amateur art enthusiast. "I don't know what to call it," he says, "but I know what I like."

His writers fear him, particularly on the day of the show, for they know that, with his mind on a thousand and one details, he may not be in the proper mood to see the amusing side of the material they present to him. Gleason's writing staff changes more than any other in the field of television comedy with the exception of Red Buttons', and because of their own professional insecurity his writers never feel completely at home with him.

"I can't figure the guy out," one wit said, screwing up his face. "I worked for him for several months and he hardly

ever spoke to me. When he had to talk to us he'd come to the room we all worked in and knock on the door. He'd ask one or another of us to step out in the hall; he didn't want to come in and sit down and mingle with us."

"That's right," added another former member of Gleason's staff. "The guy's great, don't get me wrong, but he's not the judge of material some people think he is. Time and time again I've seen him cut some sharp, new line out of a script and replace it at the last minute with some tired gag that even Berle wouldn't use this late in the game."

"I'll say this," said the first scribe. "He's a better judge of sketch material than he is of stand-up jokes." This viewpoint —that Gleason is strongest in a sketch, weakest as "himself"— seems to parallel Jack's own evaluation of his work.

Oddly enough, Gleason is one of the few comedians ever to reach the top without establishing a basic character. When you tune in to a Jack Benny program you know what to expect. Groucho is characteristically consistent. Ed Wynn is Ed Wynn. Jimmy Durante has one personality to sell. But of himself as an entertainer Gleason says, "I'd really like to do 'me' on the show, but me, I could never sustain an hour-long program. So I play a dozen other guys. I really do several programs in one." This falls in line with the critical judgment of Gleason as, at the very core, a comedy actor rather than a creative comedian. He does not create his own material, but no one can beat him at interpreting material. Sid Caesar undoubtedly is Gleason's superior when it comes to eliciting from an audience sheer volume of intellectual laughter. Gleason's performance is the one that will more certainly involve the sympathy of the audience for the reason that it is more realistic than exaggerated.

"In spite of all this," one comedy writer has pointed out, "the guy is a natural-born *star*. It's a separate thing in itself. It almost has nothing to do with talent. It's a flair, maybe it's a touch of the ham if you will, but without it you rarely become big. You want to know something? I think that Art Carney is funnier than Jackie Gleason. I laugh at *most* of Gleason's lines, but I laugh at every single one of Art's, particularly in his Ed Norton role. The guy breaks me up. He's a real master. But he'll never be a star. He's replaced Jackie several times; he's had all sorts of breaks, but when the chips are down he's not *powerful* enough. Gleason is a big ham bone but, by God, it's that supreme confidence that he exudes when he walks on a stage that wins an audience over. It's like the difference between, oh, John Barrymore and Maurice Evans. Evans is probably a better technician at doing Shakespeare, let's say, than Barrymore was, but Barrymore had that magic something, that excess of confidence, that makes a star of the first magnitude. Whatever it is, Gleason's got it, too."

Gleason's power makes it easy for him to employ successfully such devices as the running gag or stock-reference line, and to a comedian there can be few things more valuable, especially early in his career, than a line that catches the public fancy. In addition to "Away we go" and the "dan-dan-dandy" thing, Jackie has gotten a great deal of mileage out of "One of these days, Alice. . . . One of these days, POW! Right in the kisser," which he delivers to his wife in the "Honeymooners" sketch.

Although a stock catch phrase may eventually become tiresome, there is no denying that while it is popular it works tremendously to the advantage of the wit fortunate enough to stumble across it. The history of radio and television com-

edy is full of famous stock phrases. Jerry Colonna's "Who's Yehudi?" was on everyone's lips during the early days of the old Bob Hope radio show; Jerry Lester's "George" enjoyed national popularity when he was featured on "Broadway Open House"; and Baron Munchausen's "Vas You Dere, Charlie?" will never be forgotten by fans of Jack Pearl and Graham MacNamee. It is likewise undeniable that Red Skelton owed a certain small but significant measure of his early radio popularity to the innocuous phrase, "I dood it," which in his role as the Mean Wittle Kid he used to deliver with such a vengeance each Tuesday night on NBC. Even such old-timers as Ed Wynn, with his "Sooo-ooo-oooo!" and Bert Lahr with his "Ngah-nngah-nnngah-nnngah!" illustrate the value of latching onto a word or phrase which the public may use as a means of identification.

Of all the comedians who ever employed the stock catch-phrase device, undoubtedly the most persevering in the practice was the late Joe Penner. Within the past few years I have examined some scripts of Penner broadcasts of the early thirties, when Joe was at the height of his popularity. Unbelievable as it sounds today, Penner was able to do an entire thirty-minute broadcast almost entirely without isolated jokes in the usual sense of the word because of his extreme dependence on stock lines and his great good fortune in accumulating a large number of them. Which of us over the age of thirty will ever forget the fantastic popularity of such Pennerisms as "Ya wanna buy a duck?"; "Don't ever *dew* that!"; "You nahsty man!"; and "Yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk!" So completely had these expressions captured the public fancy in the depression years that Penner was able to convulse audiences simply by engaging in long, devious lines of dialogue which

served only and insistently to build up to the logical inclusion of one or another of these verbal gold mines.

Just in case we feel a twinge of superiority over the naïve radio fans of the thirties who doubled up with laughter week after week at the simple question "Ya wanna buy a duck?" let's not forget that in our own day studio audiences are heard to howl at the words "Mmmmm-boy!"; "Well, I'll be a dirty bird"; and "You can't hardly get them no more."

Is there an explanation of the audience reaction to these catch phrases that does not necessarily bespeak idiocy on the part of television fans? There is. People who laugh when Red Buttons says, "Straaaange things are happening!" or Red Skelton shouts, "We're gonna miss that boy around here!" are not necessarily sub-par in the mental department. They are victims of what psychologists refer to as a conditioned reflex. Initially an audience is taught to laugh at a particular line because for one reason or another it is genuinely amusing in context. The line is repeated in partial context until a habitual response is built up. From that point on the comedian has only to stop everything, look the audience in the eye and plunge the needle into his helpless subjects; their response is immediate.

As for influences on his comedy style, Gleason owes a debt to several of his predecessors. He is most himself when he is "in one" or when he is doing the "Honeymooners" sketch with Audrey Meadows. When he does the Poor Soul he exhibits many of the mannerisms of Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon, two clowns who did similar sad-faced pantomimes. The soulful expression, the childish clasping and unclasping of hands, the bumbling inability to cope with mechanical props, the approach to comedy through pathos, are not orig-

inal with Gleason, but he employs these devices more adroitly than any of his contemporaries. Jack's Reggie Van Gleason characterization is more original, although here too there is some evidence that the role is generic. His right-hand man, Art Carney, in the performance of his Newton, the mustachioed doorman and/or waiter, may have contributed more than a faintly discernible influence to the Van Gleason portrayals, and the ghosts of a host of burlesque clowns literally too numerous to mention may be seen hovering about the stage when Gleason waves his arms and slithers about the stage in his familiar baggy-pants way.

Red Buttons, after carefully explaining to me that he is an admirer of Gleason's, made the observation that Jackie owes more than a small debt to a comedian Buttons refers to as "the original Jackie Gleason," Jack Oakie. "Jackie works a lot like Oakie," says Red. "He looks like him, he does a lot of the same takes, he has the same wise-guy loudmouth approach, and he does Oakie's bit with the elbows that the public thinks Gleason invented."

Jack E. Leonard, the rotund comic known to TV audiences chiefly for his many appearances on "This Is Show Business," and a close friend of Gleason's, agrees with Red. "It's simple," he says. "Jackie was always a good mimic and Oakie was one of his idols. Gleason thinks Oakie was one of the great comedy talents of all time. And another thing. The other day I saw an old Mack Sennett movie with the Keystone Cops and Ben Turpin. What do I see Turpin doing all of a sudden but Gleason's 'Away-we-go' business with the elbows. So I call him up and say, 'Hey Jackie, Ben Turpin is stealing your bit!' "

The origin of the "Away-we-go" walk, peculiarly enough, seems to be lost in the antiquity of early burlesque. Dozens of

comedians have employed the device, but no one seems to be able to identify its creator. All anyone can be sure of is that it is very old.

Is Gleason's hold on the top rung of the TV ladder secure? I think so. His popularity is a little like Godfrey's, not at all like Fred Allen's. Fred was always the critics' darling and the favorite of the intellectuals. All a rival network had to do to knock him off was put on the air a sub-standard giveaway show that drove intelligent listeners to distraction but openly pandered to the tastes of the mob. Gleason is secure, I believe, because his appeal is to the mob.

Leo Rosten, writing in *Look* magazine, says:

> Gleason brings shudders to the shoulders of the carriage trade, which he finds just peachy. He is aiming for the bleachers. He is the Brooklyn Bum of comedy and inspires the same kind of loony affection. . . . His approach to the risible makes Sid Caesar look like Noel Coward.

The chubby-faced clown has a certain gift for broad buffoonery that will always appeal to the man on the street. He will throw food, spill milk, take a pie in the face, kick women in the seat of the pants and fall on his own backside for a laugh. He will employ anything from classic pantomime to rough physical comedy. He is currently the most popular exponent of the pistol-shooting, wowee school of comedy that hasn't been seen in these parts since silent movies.

Although they are almost entirely absent (thank goodness) from television, Gleason can handle hecklers. He simply browbeats them; *he* outheckles *them*.

Peculiarly enough for such a hurly-burly comic, Jackie likes to go into lengthy "psychological" explanations of the various characters he does. "I insist on doing characters," he

says, "because frankly I don't think there's any personality who can sustain himself on television just by being himself week in and week out. There's just no one that brilliant or precious."

(In this statement Gleason reveals a habit common among comedians—that of projecting on the entire industry their own personal problems. Eddie Cantor, for another example, said about three years ago, "I predict anyone appearing once a week on television today will not be around three years from now.")

"All the characters I do on television," continues Jackie, "are psychologically constructed. I insist that they be always consistent, that each have a touch of sympathy and that they be to some extent actual. That way the people in the audience see themselves in the characters, and this takes the heat and embarrassment off them."

While all this is logical enough, most comedy writers think that Jackie is being fancy and rationalizing after the fact. "Jack was probably doing these characters for several months," one writer suggested, "before all this psychological justification occurred to him. He's a great reader, you know."

And indeed, Gleason is. He owns a bulky library covering religious subjects, hypnotism, psychic phenomena and psychology. His insomnia, he explains, gives him ample time to read.

"Gleason's characters *are* consistent," admits another gagman, "but that goes without saying. Any writer knows enough to keep characters consistent. If there's any character on television that's *not* consistent I can't think of it."

It is probable, too, that almost all characters have some touch of sympathy, although the critical observer might won-

der as to the extent of sympathy in such an obstreperous gent as the Loudmouth or Reggie Van Gleason, the ne'er-do-well playboy.

"Reggie," protests Gleason, however, "is basically lonesome. He's suspicious of everyone. He thinks everyone is waiting to do to him what he does to them. He fights back at life, loudly and unfairly. He treats others the way life has treated him."

I believe Gleason is really often talking, when he analyzes his make-believe characters, about himself. For it is undeniable that, more than any other entertainer, his characterizations are drawn from one facet of his personality or another. There is nothing of the German double-talking professor, for instance, in Sid Caesar; nothing of the brash cowboy in Larry Storch; but there is a lot of the Reggie Van Gleason in Jackie Gleason. It is not difficult, either, to find the Poor Soul, Ralph Kramden or Charlie "Loudmouth" Bratton tucked away in the ample Gleason character.

Gleason, perhaps more than any other successful clown, seems to be engaged in a great race to get out of himself. His energy is prodigious and he lives hard. He is the most ambitious of men. He plans to build a TV city in the Arizona desert; he directs and produces his own show (a chore that no other top-flight comic but Milton Berle finds necessary); he owns a bright-red Cadillac convertible; he buys expensive suits the way an average man buys handkerchiefs; he conducts orchestras when the whim is upon him; and, although he has no technical knowledge of music, he huddles with arranger-composer Dudley "Pete" King and composes melodies. He cannot make up his mind whether he is shy or blustering. He is, in an almost professional sense, a saint and a sinner.

Jackie Gleason

This season (1955) Jackie has seen fit to scrap all of his show except the "Honeymooners" sketch and to present his program as a filmed rather than live feature. Although initial reaction to the filming of the show was largely negative I think this is due to the public's natural aversion to change and to the loss of excitement that results when the present tenseness of live TV is taken away. In a few weeks I believe people will have forgotten about this inconsequential matter and gotten back to concentrating on the fact that "The Honeymooners" is as wonderfully funny as ever—in fact, even more so, since Gleason films a few more moments of entertainment than he needs and can therefore always edit the portions that do not come up to expectations.

"The Honeymooners" figures anyway to be the part of Gleason's bag of tricks most destined to succeed over the long pull. It is good, old-fashioned, family-situation comedy with three extremely adept performers playing the principal roles.

The humor of the Kramden sketches is of a sure-fire type described by Henri Bergson as "derisive." There isn't a quotably noteworthy joke in a bushel of "Honeymooners" scripts; the punch lines are almost all pure ego-deflaters with which the audience can easily associate emotionally: "You . . . are a mental case!"; "One of these days, Alice—POW! Right in the kisser!"; "Aw, shaddap!" (Fred Allen has described as the lowest man in town the guy who will quote Jackie Gleason.)

Some observers have claimed that Gleason's "The Honeymooners" is based directly on "The Bickersons," the delightful husband-and-wife series created by Phil Rapp and portrayed so gustily on radio by Don Ameche and Frances Langford. Although there are obvious similarities between the two I believe the differences are fundamental. The Bick-

ersons were highly quotable. Rapp created real gems and put them into the mouths of his shrewish wife and her long-suffering and epigram-spouting husband. The lines were so individually funny, in fact, that they were rarely realistic. The jokes were like Bob Hope jokes: flashy, witty, rapier-sharp. Gleason's lines are scarcely jokes at all; they derive too logically out of the story line to be amusing out of context. But audiences are even *more amused* by "The Honeymooners" because of the psychological truism that what involves your emotions is more effective than that which involves only your intellect.

Each "Honeymooners" sketch is constructed according to an unvarying pattern. Ralph Kramden concocts a scheme or becomes the victim of a delusion. He is aided by his weak-witted friend, Ed Norton. Ralph's wife, Alice, sees through to the accurate heart of the difficulty and attempts to deflate Ralph's daydream bubble. Ralph bridles and blusters. He persists in his scheme, only to find that Alice was right all the time. Ralph is finally revealed for what he is—a blundering braggart whose bull-voiced confidence scarcely obscures his basic feelings of inferiority. At the denouement, with the help of muted violins, the Kramdens are reconciled and Ralph is the object of the viewers' sympathy. It is all wonderfully familiar and predictable, like a well-loved comic strip. On radio its life expectancy could be fifteen years. The TV mortality rate to date leads me to believe that audiences will continue to be fascinated by "The Honeymooners" for about three more years, or till about 1958.

There is evidence that Jackie will not be surprised by the handwriting on the wall, incidentally, if and when it appears. "A guy like me can't afford to take it easy," he has admitted.

"I've got to do a million and one things. . . . The movie business proved that a star's life in pictures is five years, and a film actor only makes about two movies a year. On television a performer is seen forty times a year, so how long can he last? The time will come when TV audiences will tire of me and I know it."

That time may come, but if it does I do not believe Jackie will face professional oblivion. As Bob Hope has remarked of "I Love Lucy," people who once raved about the show now watch it matter-of-factly and are not unduly concerned if they miss seeing it altogether for weeks at a time. Such will probably be the eventual fate of "The Honeymooners," but I do not think it will ever be the fate of Jackie himself. He still has Reggie and the Poor Soul and Charlie Bratton in mothballs. He is determined to get back into pictures and show Hollywood what a mistake it made in not recognizing his talent the first time around. I think he'll do it, too. Gleason is excitement. The entertainment world needs excitement. Therefore we all need Jackie Gleason. We will not, I think, ever let him go.

George Gobel

I REMEMBER when I was about eight years old and lived in Chicago my family used to listen to the old "National Barn Dance" program over station WLS. I can't imagine now *why* we listened to the program; my people were typical big-city, middle-class Irish and, as such, were inclined to look somewhat askance at practically every other type of people in the world, particularly such obvious "oddities" as hillbillies.

It seems to me other groups than their own were always described by my family with some adjective that carried a rather derisive message. "Those dumb Swedes"; the "bullheaded Germans"; "the crazy Italians": such were the familiar phrases used to delineate the national, and for that matter, religious, political or regional groups that populated Chicago.

Hillbillies were regarded, however, as rather lovable freaks. They seemed to be all over the air waves in those days, and the best of them worked on WLS. One particular favorite was a blue-eyed, imp-faced nine-year-old boy known as "Little Georgie Gobel." He used to sing in a clear, nasal soprano and how he contrived to get such a back-country twang into his voice I do not know, because his parents ran a modest Chicago

grocery store and Georgie had been born in the Windy City on May 20, 1920. Anyway, he sounded as much like a mountain boy as the rest of them and he dressed up in a sort of cowboy outfit and twanged away on a guitar and was good enough to make an impression that has lasted longer than that made by almost anybody else who was on the "Barn Dance" show at the time. In fact, the only other names from the old cast that I can recall at the moment of this writing are Lulubelle and Scotty.

Eventually the winds of time blew all of us all over the map and I lost track of little Georgie Gobel. In fact, I never gave him another thought during the quarter of a century that followed, until one night in 1953 when I happened to be watching Hoagy Carmichael's summertime variety show on NBC.

Hoagy had been on for several weeks, I believe, and the best part of the show, in my opinion, was that which involved a visit by a clever and natural little Mexican boy named Ricky Vera, who played the part of a neighbor of Hoagy's. Ricky amused me greatly and I enjoyed his singing too, and up until the time George showed up I thought Ricky was the best thing about Hoagy's show. There had been other comedians on the show, and some of them were good. But they were not very original. Most of them seemed to be out of Milton Berle by Jerry Lewis, which is not necessarily an evil in itself; it's just that if you're too influenced by an already prominent comedian people have trouble picking you out of the crowd.

So along came old George and he was funny. Best of all, he wasn't funny like anybody else. Oh, I suppose it has become the thing now to compare him to Robert Benchley or Herb Shriner or Will Rogers or Charles Butterworth, but those comparisons only help to locate him artistically; they cer-

tainly don't define him. He has a little of Benchley's good-natured befuddlement, of his reserve and un-actorish friendliness, and he has a touch of the farm boy about him, which probably is what leads people to bring up names like Rogers and Shriner. But in the main he's a new coin, not a reissue.

George had been a long time building up to his national exposure on Hoagy's program. He stayed around Chicago for quite a few years, doing the hillbilly bit and also working as an actor on the old Tom Mix radio serial. When he was twenty-three (in 1943) he joined the Air Force and was stationed at Frederick, Oklahoma, with a B-26 group. When it became known that he was an entertainer he was requested to haul out his guitar and put on a few shows now and then for his buddies. The servicemen enjoyed his singing and playing, but, more importantly, they got a kick out of George *himself*. Something about his dead-pan, Prairie Farmer delivery convulsed his audiences, and at that point Gobel began to realize he might be able to do a little less singing and a little more talking.

Three years later, his work as flight instructor with the Air Force completed, George went back to Chicago and decided to try his hand as a civilian comedian. The going at first, traditionally enough, was slow. For a long time he was able to work only conventions and small night clubs, but little by little as his technique improved and he supplied himself with better material he began to make progress.

From the time NBC gave him his first guest shot they figured they had something, although they weren't quite sure just what. Gobel had earlier found a fan in Garry Moore, who hired him for a number of appearances on his afternoon TV show, partly because he admired his talent and partly

because Garry, too, was a member of the old Chicago radio gang. The number of appearances, by the way, was twenty-seven. CBS programmers are still red-faced at not having signed George to a contract. In 1954 NBC decided George was finally ready and they assigned Hal Kanter, one of Hollywood's top comedy minds, to the job of constructing a suitable vehicle for the new humorist. It worked out fine.

So much for history. Now, why do you laugh at George? Well, the first reason, although it might not have occurred to you, is his face. It's one any comedian might envy. To put it in the simplest terms, George has a *funny* face. It is not an unattractive face, but it is certainly not the kind you would expect to find on a high-powered comedian or a movie star or the President of the United States.

A great many comedians get no help from their faces. Herb Shriner is not amusing until he speaks. Fred Allen's face was probably something of a handicap, judged strictly as the face of a performing humorist. Sam Levenson's face is just a face. My face, I have been told, just doesn't look like the face of a humorist. But George's face sort of makes you smile just to look at it. It looks like the kind of face some sophisticated cartoonists draw. It looks a little sleepy, and a little boyish, and a little guilty, and a little confused. It is an absent-minded face, and the things Gobel says match it perfectly. He forgets ideas in mid-sentence, winces and makes a new start. He is the exact opposite of city-slicker comedians like Bob Hope and Milton Berle, and you can tell it, by his face, before he opens his mouth. There is still a lot of the old "Barn Dance" in Gobel's face, a lot of the nine-year-old impish country boy. I suppose it is paradoxical to say that George's is a perfect face for a comedian because it doesn't look like a comedian's

face. By that I mean he doesn't look like an actor; he looks like somebody who came to deliver the groceries. And that's good. That means you readily accept him as a human being. You find it easier to like him, to believe him, to know him. Some big-league wits dazzle you and intimidate you. Gobel sneaks up to you like somebody you know and speaks softly and in a very unprofessional way. His language is not the language of Broadway or Hollywood. It is the language of your butcher and your kid brother and the boy who works at the gas station on the corner. Expressions like "Well, I'll be a dirty bird" or "You can't hardly get them no more" are not what you would expect from an entertainer. George did not even originate them. He just picked them out of the vernacular.

To sum up, you like George when he shows up on your TV screen, before he even opens up his mouth.

The second important reason Gobel is amusing is that he readily inspires sympathy. Short of stature, unsophisticated, slightly country-bumpkinish, he makes you feel, as you watch him, that you want him to succeed. Certain performers, such as Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason or Bob Hope, attack an audience frontally and force it to laugh. They succeed, to be sure, but they have to work hard. Comedians of the Gobel genre actually have an easier time of it. Any comedian who can easily inspire sympathy has won half the battle. Even those of the Berle-Gleason-Hope school are aware of this and contrive to have prepared for their use scripts whose story lines force the audience to be sympathetic to them.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance to a performer like Gobel of the ability to arouse tender concern. The more self-confident clowns will always alienate a certain small but

vociferous segment of their audiences. I have sometimes heard people (usually women, oddly enough) say, "Oh, that Arthur Godfrey, he has such a great opinion of himself," or "I think Jackie Gleason is too loud and brash," or "Bob Hope seems to me like a smart aleck," but it is literally not possible, I believe, to feel that way about a comedian like Gobel. At the very least all you can do is say, "Frankly, I'm not interested in him," but you can't actively dislike him. He's just too defenseless, too friendly, too small, too disarming to annoy you.

Another reason you are amused by Gobel is such an obvious thing that you'll laugh when I tell you: his jokes are good. His scripts are fresh. In producer Hal Kanter, Gobel has one of the ablest comedy minds in the industry. It was Kanter who wrote much of the early-TV Alan Young material that critics greeted so enthusiastically. And Kanter's three scripting assistants, Jack Douglas, James Allardice, and Harry Winkler, are top-notch jokesmiths. Douglas wrote a great deal of the material that first rocketed Jack Paar to radio success when he replaced Jack Benny during the summer of 1948. He and Kanter both like to write wild, fey, offbeat jokes. They rarely could find an outlet for their whimsical material when writing for people like Bob Hope or Bing Crosby, but with comedians like Paar or Gobel, the sky's the limit. Since the public obviously has no preconceived ideas about a new comedian, since it has become accustomed to no stylistic patterns, those who write for the fledgling have a great freedom that often calls forth their best efforts.

Personally, I'm a sucker for the Literal Interpretation type of joke (referred to on pages 26-27), and the boys are throwing a lot of them into George's scripts.

For example:

WIFE: George, your son is a wild Indian.
GEORGE: Don't blame me. The Apache blood is on *your* side of the family.

WIFE: George, you've got to go to work. You've got to win the bread.
GEORGE: Honey, I've been going down to that bakery all week and my number hasn't come up once.

This particular gag, by the way, was followed by another stroke peculiar to Gobel's style: the seeming afterthought that repeats the point, restating it in a slightly different way and allowing the audience to relish the joke all over again. For example, after saying, "My number hasn't come up once," George added, "I'm beginning to think Schultz is running a crooked game down there."

To those who didn't get the joke in the first place the afterthought makes it unavoidably clear. Those who interpreted the line correctly in the first instance can still roll it around in their minds, savoring it in combination with the additional material.

If I may digress (and who's to stop me?), the Literal Interpretation Joke is one, I feel, that disproves the theory that all humor is basically derisive in origin. Much humor is cruel, of course, but not *all* of it, in my opinion. The reason you laugh at jokes that reveal two meanings to one phrase is that you thought you were thinking of one thing and you suddenly were forced to think of something else. You were pleasantly shocked. A pleasant shock makes you laugh. That's all there is to it.

Another good thing about Gobel's jokes is that they are not

only new in the simple mechanical sense, but many of them are *about new things.* They are not about hotel rooms that are small, or about toupees or noses or stomachs or bald heads or drinking or Liberace. They are apt to start out by sounding like things that are not going to be jokes at all, and, as any humorist can tell you, the joke that people really don't see coming is the most powerful, in much the same way that the punch a boxer doesn't see coming is the one that hits him hardest.

Example: "Before we start the show tonight I have a special announcement. This program is being sent to our Armed Forces." (Naturally, at this point you are certain that George is going to say the word "overseas.") But he says instead, "This program is being sent to our Armed Forces at Helsing's Bar and Grill." Then, the follow-up. "But I have a message for our fighting men there: Men! Stop fighting."

The first joke is the switch-ending formula. (It is a construction I frequently employ myself. Example: "Madam, you have just won a wonderful prize: a thrilling, all-expense, two-week vacation in the lobby of the Paramount Theater!")

The second joke is simply another that points out the unexpected interpretation of a common phrase, in this case "fighting men."

Naturally, not all of George's jokes are of this sort. He also does family banter and complains about furniture, brothers-in-law who won't work and high prices. He retains the common touch, but not in a common way.

Gobel admits to the influence of Benchley and Thurber, both of whom he has devoured in their entirety, and his work exhibits faint but wonderful imprints of their styles. Benchley and Thurber frequently amuse by assuming the

role of the sensible individual helpless in a senseless world, and that's old George for sure. He doesn't play the dope like Berle, Gleason or Buttons. He tries his hardest to be logical about things, but the people around him—well, they make it very difficult. Consider the piece of material that some of his fans consider George's classic: Harry Winkler's Bowling Ball story.

It's the frustrating tale of a man who owns a burnt-orange bowling ball and wears salmon-colored bowling shoes with caramel-beige laces. George stands facing the audience solemnly, holding his guitar, and says, "In case you're wondering why I'm not feeling well, it's because I lost my bowling ball." (The snickers usually start here.) "You can understand," he continues, "how that would affect a fellow . . . especially if he's attached to it." At this spot George can count on a big laugh. Frequently, therefore, he opens with this particular story. He goes on to detail how he lost the ball. He was on his way home from Texas, it seems, and simply left the ball on the train when he got off. A man at the Lost and Found department asks him to describe it. This question in itself is wonderfully Thurberish, and George sees through to the heart of its inanity. "Well," he says, "it's round and it has three holes."

Unperturbed, the clerk inquires, "Which side are the holes on, Mr. Gobel?"

"Well," says George, "I believe on the outside, but I can't be sure."

After gathering all necessary statistics and filling out all necessary forms the Lost and Found department instructs George to "go home and sit tight for three or four days" while they look for the ball.

"And I did," admits George. "You ever try that? It's okay, more or less, but you feel kind of *lousy* on the fifth day."

This particular line, incidentally, has a subtly hazy feel of "blue" about it, although there is no hard and fast rule of interpretation, and George *is* one of the cleanest comics in the business. Well, eventually, believe it or not, the Lost and Found people do find the bowling ball. But before they can deliver it to George they lose it again. Gobel concludes sadly, "If you ever run into some bebop musicians and they say they're having a ball, it's probably mine."

Although George can create material himself, like most of the comics in the business he started out selling largely hackneyed jokes. It was only after he began to enjoy club-date success that he was able to provide himself with fresh, original material.

I have long maintained that the hue and cry about new jokes is a personal concern of the critics and is a matter of no interest whatever to the public, who have the capacity of a sieve for remembering funny stories. Witness the joke which David O'Malley, George's manager, recalls indicated to him for the first time that Gobel was funny. O'Malley had booked a show for a service audience in a large auditorium in Chicago, and when he arrived he found panic reigning supreme backstage. The theater was packed with four thousand restless soldiers, who were beginning to stamp their feet because the show was late. Worse, O'Malley discovered that the club manager had made a mistake and would be unable to send over a promised line of beautiful chorus girls. Half an hour later George Gobel was somehow shoved into the breech. "Listen, kid," O'Malley pleaded, "can you do just five minutes out there till somebody shows up?"

Well, George went out and did a few stock Army jokes. His biggest laugh came from the story about his meeting an officer who demanded, "Young man, I'll have you know I'm the commanding officer of this post."

"Well," George replied, "you've got a good job here, so don't get drunk and louse it up."

From that point on, O'Malley recalls, George had them eating out of his hand. He was on a full hour. "'Nobody could top him after that," O'Malley says. "Son of a gun ruined my show!"

The joke that was the clincher *is* a good one, and has been for perhaps something over two hundred years. I have in my library an ancient volume of jokes published in England in 1849. The joke is included and referred to as being popular in the preceding century.

This is not meant to be a criticism of George, of course. As I say, every comedian starts out using old material; what else *can* he do? Success brings money. With money you can buy new stuff. Success and experience also frequently bring a familiarity with the mechanics of joke structure, and many comics finally get to the point where they are able to turn out a pretty fair *mot* if it's really necessary.

Talking about the problem, George says, "Even with those captive soldier audiences I kinda ran out of material. So I began to stall and to tell yarns to kill time—things I had heard comedians do on WLS shows. I didn't know just how to do it, though, so I stumbled and forgot what to say."

In the ill-wind department, George's real fumbling led him to the discovery that audiences laughed harder if he seemed confused. So he kept on stumbling. The halting pauses became part of his character. But the material problem was a

constant stumbling block to him, even in later stages of his professional development.

Garry Moore, who has followed George's success with close personal attention, says that in 1951 and '52, when Gobel worked on Garry's afternoon show, "he was just as amusing and likable as he is today. But after exhausting his night-club material he was in a tough spot."

George's hub-cap routine, by the way, is something he wrote for himself. As O'Malley says, "Actually, George could be a very fine writer of comedy material, if it were not for the fact that he is very lazy about putting things on paper. However, he does work over all of the material which his writers give him and he brings it to life with many of his own Gobelisms."

The hub-cap monologue is still the most typical and meaningful of George's specialties. It usually goes something like this:

> I may not do very well this evening, as I haven't been feeling too well . . . lately. It seems like I'm always an hour late or a dollar short. I'm the kind of a guy who will have nothing all my life and then they'll discover oil while they're digging my grave. Recently, I lost the hub caps on my automobile. . . .
>
> I called the insurance company and I finally got hold of the fellow to tell him about my hub cap. When I got him, I said, "Look, the other day I drove my car down . . ." and he said, "What is your name, sir?" I said, "Gobel is my name . . . George Gobel. . . ." I said, "The reason I called . . . I lost my hub cap. . . ." He said, "Are you married, Mr. Gobel?" I said, "Yes, I am married and my wife is married too . . . if it's any of your business . . . but I would like to tell you about my . . ."
>
> "Do you have any children, Mr. Gobel?" I said, "Yes, I

have one children. He's a boy . . . he's a cute li'l fellow. He stands about so high . . . but what I really wanted to talk about was my hub cap. . . . I lost 'em the other day . . . it's as simple as that," I said. "I drove my car downtown, parked it the same place I always park it and when I . . ."

"Was the car *locked* at the time, Mr. Gobel?" I said, "Yes, but this particular time I very carelessly neglected to take the hub caps off and put 'em in the car before I locked it. . . . It's all my fault. It's just one of them silly, stupid, unfortunate incidents that's bound to . . ." And he said, "Now, let's don't be *bitter* about the thing, Mr. Gobel." I said,

"Like I say, I drove my car down . . ." and he said, "Do you have a policy with our concern, Mr. Gobel?" I said, "No, I happen to be a grape-crusher in a winery and I just called to see if you could recommend a good place to get my feet bleached!" He said, "Now, let's don't get hostile, Mr. Gobel. Now we're only trying . . ."

"Yes, I know you are trying to do the right thing, but," I said, "I just wanted to tell you," and he said, "Now, Mr. Gobel, the trouble with you is you don't seem to realize how difficult . . . especially over a telephone to . . . if we could just get together man to man and talk this thing . . . like if we could have lunch together someday," he said finally. To make a long story short, a week ago yesterday was the day I had lunch with this clown and I not only pay for my own hub caps, I buy his lunch, drive him home and wind up with five thousand dollars' worth of hurricane insurance on my cemetery lot!

So, if I don't look too happy tonight, it's not because I'm mad at anybody . . . because he said this, now . . . He said, "You can't hardly get them kind of policies no more." I say they're pretty good to have too, because you never know when one of them tombstones is going to blow away.

The Benchley-Thurber influence is clearly discernible here, but this type of monologue must still be classified as

distinctive and original, particularly when judged against run-of-the-mill television humor. In my opinion, one of the funniest lines ever written is "Was the car locked at the time, Mr. Gobel?" I believe George, in a sketch, will always be most successful when he sticks very close to the magnificent formula of the hub-cap story. This story, in fact, would be just as funny done in dialogue form. George makes a wonderful victim.

George himself is the first to admit that theories as to why he is funny usually leave something to be desired. "Look," he will say, "please don't ask me to tell you why I'm funny because I really don't know."

His humor is, like Sam Levenson's, largely concerned with the pleasure of recognition. He is not apt, like Herb Shriner, to do jokes about rocket ships or peculiar inventors or politics. Like Sam, he amuses by reference to the commonplace. His familiar wind-up lines ("You can't hardly get them no more"; "Sure they do"; "Criminentlies") are plucked from common speech. But this does not explain exactly *why* he is funny. I know a lot of people who concern themselves with comments on the ordinary but do not amuse.

Comparisons, of course, are not definitions, but the similarity of Gobel's material to Levenson's is enough to indicate that both men are more in the *humorist* than the *comedian* category. The chief difference between their material is that Sam's stories often include a social commentary and cover the broad view. Except for recalling personal experiences of his childhood, Sam rarely does jokes about himself. George, on the other hand, personalizes most of his humor. Most of the stories he tells happened to *him*. Sam is more of the observer. George is frequently the victim.

"My wife and I were sittin' around and talkin'—the way you do when the TV set's busted."

A high percentage of George's material is the equal of the sample quoted here. One reason for its consistent high quality is that Kanter, Winkler, Douglas and Allardice are not only good craftsmen, but their abilities are particularly well suited to Gobel's style. This is not just a routine assignment for them. They know their man and they know him well.

They know him so well, in fact, that I thought in the preparation of this chapter that I would include some additional personal material about these gentlemen by way of giving you a peek into the heart of a sample comedy show.

Hal Kanter has written for most of the top comedians on the West Coast and also boasts an impressive list of motion-picture credits. He is young and, despite his wide experience, still retains a fresh, unhackneyed approach to humor. Of his present employer he says:

> George has the rare ability to perceive that which is comical and to translate his amusement into an idiom universal enough to reveal his observations to the mass audience. His perception is appreciated by the professional student of humor; his translation appeals to the lay majority. Gobel is the catalytic agent between writers' observations and audiences' recognition. Unlike many professional comedians, he can take any genuinely humorous notion (frequently obscure or esoteric) and transform it into a recognizable human statement shimmering with the excitement of honesty. And *honesty*, I think, is the essential ingredient for genuine humor—the humor that lives long after its authors are forgotten.

James Allardice, young ex-newspaperman, originally had set his sights on a playwright's career and studied under Marc

Connelly at the Yale Drama School. He achieved his ambitions with the comedy *At War with the Army*, which was produced on Broadway in 1949 and was later made into a movie. This success led him to Hollywood, where he worked on several Martin and Lewis pictures as well as *Francis Joins the Wacs*, one of the popular Donald O'Connor series.

Prior to joining Gobel's staff, Allardice's TV experience had all been in the situation-comedy field. He is a good man on story line, the framework of the sketches on which the jokes are strung. Currently Jim has left Gobel's staff and is writing the highly amusing TV chatter of Alfred Hitchcock. Of George's humor he says:

> Of course the basic factors which make George funny (surprise, exaggeration, etc.) are no different than those that have served any number of comics. To these, however, George brings a fresh approach, a unique delivery and a devastating sense of timing. He does with delivery what many comedians do physically. He may suddenly pull the rug from under his listeners or he may leave a sentence unfinished, thus giving his audience the fun of filling in the gap.
>
> The factor I appreciate most as a writer and as part of his audience is that George is really playing a part. The character which he has created is a little man in whom we can recognize ourselves, but who is at the same time a unique individual. He is never a professional comedian trying to be funny or saying a prepared ad lib after a rehearsal fluff or making some remark that is obscure to those outside of show business.
>
> I have no idea how he built up this character. It is naturally about 80 per cent George himself, but, although he has added expressions that seem primarily hillbilly or rural, he seems able to use more sophisticated phrases as a switch.
>
> Personally, I enjoyed writing for George because here, at

last, is a comic who makes language important. A writer has a chance to play around with words. Also, each joke need not be a block-buster. There are many humorous and satiric observations that are worth noting, yet cannot be confined to the limits of a two-line joke.

Harry Winkler, George's first top-notch amanuensis, was born in Chicago in 1915 and was graduated from high school in the heart of the depression. In 1935, at the University of Chicago, he became interested in political science, for what reason he cannot now recall, and after graduation worked as a newspaperman, office clerk, factory hand and what-have-you. In 1948, after having been mustered out of service and having gone back to school on the GI Bill, he visited Helsing's Bar and Grill in Chicago at the suggestion of his brother-in-law, who somehow had the idea that Winkler's style of writing and sense of humor might be right for Gobel, who was working small clubs around Chicago at the time.

Encouraged by George to submit some material, Winkler divided his energies for a while between his political studies and his fledgling comedy efforts.

"My knowledge of this kind of writing was less than elementary," he says, "and my first efforts showed as much, but after a few months I finally turned out a story George liked. He encouraged me to travel with him whenever he had club dates in Chicago, and after a while I got to learn his routines and, more important, his approach to humor.

"In July, 1954, David P. O'Malley, George's personal manager, invited me to move to Los Angeles from Berkeley to work on material for the forthcoming Gobel television show. I have been here since."

As to George's humor Winkler says:

> What makes George funny? I think the *world* makes George Gobel funny. Not that the world *means* to be funny just to please George; it's simply that the world can't help the incongruities that lie within it, just as George can't help seeing them.
>
> Of course, many people are aware of the world's ironies. But not many are able to report on these ironies so as to make them delightful experiences. The delight comes with George's masterful blending of the ridiculous with the sublime truth. A man who loses his hub caps, for example, is, on the face of it, a ridiculous person. But when he comes into conflict with the Insurance Company, a mysterious symbol of vastness and power, he becomes transformed. He is now David versus Goliath, Don Quixote fighting the windmill.
>
> I always think of George as the little boy in the fable, "The Emperor's Clothes." The people gather in the streets to see their ruler in his new clothes. They know, deep in their hearts, that he is naked. But fear and conformity silence them. If George were in that street he'd take one look at the carriage and then cry out, "Well, I'll be a dirty bird! That dude ain't wearin' a thing!" And the people in the street would burst into laughter, and the emperor himself would laugh the loudest.

If there is any negative observation that can be made about comedians of the Gobel-Shriner-Cox school it involves the somewhat meaningless point that they will probably not, in the ordinary course of events, become stars of the first magnitude. A tremendously intriguing paradox is herein contained, and it is this: that though Gobel, Benchley, Shriner, Paar, Fred Allen, *et al.* may be at their heart more truly humorous, more innately amusing, than comedians of the Berle-Gleason-

Hope group, the masses will nevertheless unfailingly consider the bombastic clowns more *important* than those of the hands-in-the-pockets persuasion.

There is a certain dynamic appeal, a certain electric gusto to the work of the big funnymen that seems to satisfy an emotional demand on the part of the average person, and it is a type of excitement that the low-key performer seemingly cannot, with certain rare exceptions, provide. Perhaps the people unknowingly long for the heroes of antiquity. Perhaps their blood in a mysterious manner remembers the subtle thrill of looking, from a lowly place, at a king. Man will always worship power, all his critical proverbs and his democratic restrictions on its abuse to the contrary, and there is something in the sheer massive ego of the olympian clowns, something of their unconscious ruthless *will,* that makes a deep impression on a plastic people.

To make the point specific by application, Bob Hope, for example, can bluster his way through a badly written scene, or a whole bad script or, seemingly, an entire season of bad scripts, and still somehow emerge triumphant, with little of his glory dimmed. George Gobel will not enjoy the same advantage. He will have to be funnier than Hope, and if he is saddled with weak material he will suffer accordingly.

There is already some evidence that it is more of a problem to create good sketch material for George than good monologues. Leo Guild, critic for *The Hollywood Reporter,* speaks for a considerable number of observers when he says, "Every time we see the Gobel show we realize the man is funnier when he is on stage alone than when he is in a skit. The skits are dependent on the humor of the situation, which [some-

times] misses . . . but Gobel's [personal] average is a lot higher."

The only other danger facing Gobel is that of becoming too "cute." The important word here, oddly enough, is "too," not "cute." For cuteness, impishness, boyishness, are important ingredients of George's charm. He is the wide-eyed innocent looking with a child's naïve and unblinking eye at a frustrating world. His seven-year-old gestures, facial expressions and reactions *must* be kept "in the act." But the fine line must be eyed continually and carefully. George is a realistic actor, so he is not entitled to indulge in the completely unbridled regression to infancy that is allowed Jerry Lewis. Lewis is permitted to revert almost to literal idiocy because his approach is unrealistic. He is a puppet, a make-believe clown. He can get away with anything short of wetting his pants. George's latitude in the little-boy area is not nearly so wide.

Another hurdle for George will probably be the second-year psychological jinx, although I am certain he will pass it with ease. His welcome to the medium was more enthusiastic than any since that which greeted Red Buttons three years before, and it eventually swelled to far greater proportions than had Red's. He is less apt to wear out his welcome than did Buttons, I think, for he is quiet and unassuming, not electric and brash. He has done a picture and is consolidating his early gains in television. He will be with us, I believe, for a long time. Personally, I can hardly wait till Saturday night.

Arthur Godfrey

For the past two years a specter has been hanging over the executive offices of the Columbia Broadcasting System's headquarters at 485 Madison Avenue in New York. Special meetings have been called lasting far into the night, top-secret memoranda have circulated through the building, and in general an air of contained panic has gripped the network's top brass.

The reason: the fear that Arthur Godfrey, the most fabulous investment in entertainment history, may be on the way down. If he is, so goes the fearful thinking, CBS earnings, currently at an all-time high, may take the plunge with him.

The incident that precipitated the current period of unrest is by now as familiar a piece of contemporary Americana as the signing of the Korean truce. If there is any man, woman or child in the nation who does not know that in October of 1953 Arthur Godfrey fired his young singing discovery, Julius La Rosa, it is not the fault of the American press.

The story, reduced to its essentials, is that La Rosa, who up until several days before his dismissal had never been represented by a professional agent, signed a contract with a Mr. Tom Rockwell of General Artists Corporation and began

making plans to appear publicly at entertainments other than those under Godfrey's personal control.

Arthur, away on vacation, was uninformed of Julius's move until shortly before airtime one Monday morning. He received the information stonily, went on the air and, in commenting on a vocal of La Rosa's, dryly announced that it had been his last and that he had "decided" to go out on his own.

That this announcement came as a surprise to the young singer cannot be denied. When the smoke had cleared away it was learned that Archie Bleyer, for many years Godfrey's musical conductor, had also checked off the lot. He, it seems, was fired for having had the temerity to make a commercial recording for Don McNeill, whom Godfrey chose to regard as a rival.

The network's embarrassed efforts to cover up with a story that La Rosa had voluntarily quit the show was brushed off by the press with the comment, "You don't quit a job on Monday morning."

Next day it was admitted that the "quitting" was actually a "firing" and that the incident was something in the nature of a straw-that-broke-the-camel's-back. There had been subterranean rumblings within the Godfrey organization for quite some time, it appeared, and only now was the public being allowed to become acquainted with the facts.

The affair, in itself, was not too important. It is certain that Godfrey needs the help of no particular vocalist to remain successful, and it is equally clear that leaving the Godfrey fold is the best thing that could ever have happened to young Julius. As Walter Winchell has pointed out on the subject of the youth's new manager, "All he has to know how to do is count."

The really surprising thing is that the story became so important to the American people. Many observers professed astonishment that the incident caused as much stir as it did. In trying to understand the reasons for the scope of national interest in the drama most were guilty, I feel, of an important, if slight, misplacement of judgment. Max Lerner of the New York *Post,* for example, said, "It is clear that TV and its gods and heroes have become big news. The Kefauver hearings were a marker in TV's history, showing what the medium could do if it dealt honestly with rich and natural material. On a different level . . . the Godfrey incident . . . shows how quickly . . . the new medium has tunneled its way into the American consciousness, so that a TV 'family affair' becomes everybody's affair."

While the tremendous if perhaps somewhat lamentable importance of television to the average American's way of life is all too obvious, it is nevertheless not precisely the power of television which is responsible for the proportions of the La Rosa story; it is the power of Godfrey.

We admire entertainers or are astonished at their skill and artistry. We thrill at the voice of a Pinza or a Frank Sinatra, howl at the antics of a Jerry Lewis, are transported by the dramatic performance of an Orson Welles, but the appeal of Godfrey lies in the fact that he does not in the artistic sense *entertain* his viewers; he simply allows us to watch him *live* for thirty minutes at a time.

He functions in our sight. He swims or walks with a cane or bumbles his way through a song or toys with a sponsor's product or tries to ice skate. This is not what we have been conditioned to accept as entertainment. It is the sort of thing we can do ourselves and we are therefore completely taken in

by a man who is one of us (or seems to be), a man who doesn't really do anything very well and consequently charms us with his resemblance to ourselves.

Finally we feel toward this man as a friend. We write him fan letters of a type that we would never write to a Clark Gable or a President Eisenhower. We think of him as "Arthur," not as "Mr. Godfrey," and we are thrilled to see that, in an industry that teems with phonies, egocentrics and noisome scatterbrains, a plain, down-to-earth citizen has achieved success.

The dangerous thing is that we will not stop there. We must take the next step: we must make Godfrey a god. And even that isn't, in itself, an evil thing. We need heroes, or so it would seem, for since the beginning of his time man has manufactured heroes out of the best men available, and if there were not enough of the best to go around, why, then the tallest or the handsomest or the loudest-mouthed or the most ambitious would do.

So Godfrey became in a very literal sense an idol. The people offered sacrifices to him and would believe no wrong of him. They laughed at quips from his mouth that were not really amusing, or that were amusing only because he said them. They devoured eagerly every printed item about his personal and professional activity. When he was hospitalized for an operation they wept actual tears and flooded heaven with prayers on his behalf.

Then came the La Rosa incident and it was a sharp, cruel shock to the people, not because an employer had dismissed an employee (it happens every day), nor because the dismissed youth was a public favorite (he was a relative unknown), but simply because their idol had been shown to have feet of clay.

Godfrey's fit of pique, his public humiliation of a youngster who had displeased him, was of itself a commonplace thing. But a god is not allowed the luxury of public sin, at least not without creating serious doubts as to his divinity.

What, then, of the fears of network and advertising executives that Godfrey might have fallen too far in public esteem to recover completely?

Has he slipped badly, or can his fantastic magnetism achieve a victory in defeat?

What is the mysterious appeal of the man anyway? What has he got?

I think I know.

When I replaced Arthur Godfrey on various of his broadcasts during recent years I was often met with the comment, "You ought to be doing that show instead of Godfrey; you're funnier than he is."

Those who expressed the opinion, flattering as it is, appear to miss entirely the point of Arthur's popularity.

It is not difficult to be funnier than Godfrey, as he is not essentially a comedian. Almost any established comic sitting in Godfrey's chair on his "Talent Scouts" or "Arthur Godfrey and His Friends" programs would make him look bad by comparison if the only important aspect of his work was the humorous.

Such is, of course, not the case. People laugh at what Godfrey says because they like him, not chiefly because what he says is amusing. His material is often, as a matter of fact, lamentably weak, if not in poor taste, but it is an indication of the tremendous power of his personality that he triumphs over the material. Godfrey is more important than anything

he says. He therefore lends to anything he says a great deal of importance.

Think of the person you dislike most in all the world. Would you laugh at a joke if he told it to you? Of course not, even if it were the funniest joke ever heard.

The truth contained in that illustration is the reverse side of Arthur's magic coin. He has such vital personal magnetism that it is difficult not to be pleased by any halfway acceptable idea he presents. Somehow when Godfrey says, "Well, the weather is certainly nice today," one feels that the weather is *unusually* pleasant. When Godfrey tells an ancient saw, one is inclined to be vastly amused, and when he extols the virtues of a brand of cake flour, one receives such a strong psychological impression that it is difficult to avoid acting on it when shopping the following day.

Arthur's strong points are several and they bear detailed examination. His greatest asset is, in my opinion, his voice, which helped establish him as a national radio favorite before a great many people had any idea what he looked like.

The dissenting opinion might immediately be expressed that, if voice were the most important consideration, then men like John Daly, Claude Rains or Dave Garroway might also expect one day to become stars of Arthur's magnitude, for they all, by certain standards, have speaking voices and habits of diction that are superior to Mr. Godfrey's.

The objection is invalid. The secret of Godfrey's voice is not in the precision of his diction, the wealth of his vocabulary or the grace of his style. The most important thing about Arthur's voice is its timbre. It rumbles and rasps and chortles and hems and haws and it does not sound anything like the

voice of a professional entertainer at all. It has neither the precision of Daly's, the rich, classic drama of Rains's nor the collegiate relaxation of Garroway's voice.

Therein lies the secret of its appeal. It just sounds so damned natural. Godfrey doesn't sound like a master of ceremonies or a comedian. He sounds like your grandfather, like Scattergood Baines, like Wallace Beery, like Santa Claus, like the family doctor, like every good-natured, lovable old man in the world. He is not old in years (51), nor has he a wrinkle or a gray hair, but he *seems* old. He is the father-image personified. He has that rare magnetic warmth that can make a man a leader when he has very little else to recommend him. It is the quality that has made successful preachers, medicine men or politicians down through the ages. Godfrey on the air is what every employee wishes his boss to be. He's the kind of person one should like to approach to ask for a raise.

This paternal quality, which is the one thing that has set Godfrey apart from his competitors, is manifested almost exclusively in his voice. Consider for a moment your reaction if he spoke in high, thin tenor tones like Frank Parker, if he spoke in a rapid-fire New Yorkese like Jan Murray or Morey Amsterdam.

Another reason that Arthur's voice is pleasant is that it is not noticeably provincially accented. If it were a Southern drawl, it would unconsciously annoy a great many people of the North. If it were a Texas dialect, it would be relatively unpleasant to Easterners used to big-city tempos of speech. If it were Brooklynese, it would be offensive to the man on the street. Godfrey just talks plain American. He is not *different* from the common man; he is all the common men in the world rolled into one. There is involved in his personality

a certain mediocrity which is a tremendously important factor in his popularity, and this middle-of-the-road lack of distinction is nowhere as evident as in his voice.

He knows how to use it, too. "When I face a mike," he says, "I have a mental image of only one person listening to or looking at me, and I talk to that one person. Most of the people I've heard on the air were pretty good speakers but they were not *talking* . . . they were *reading* and, therefore, convincing nobody."

If Godfrey were markedly superior in any of his various departments he could not be as successful as he is. A handsome man could never be so well liked as Godfrey, for though romantically inclined women might idolize him, men would feel an unconscious envy and suspicion of him.

If Arthur sang like Caruso he would never have attained his present position, for then he would have been known as a singer who talked too much. As it is, he is a guy who sings even though he knows his voice isn't worth a darn. He jokes about his voice and to keep the people satisfied he stocks his programs with others better suited to the job. Result? You love him.

Lastly, if Godfrey's intelligence were noticeably above the average he would be operating under an almost insurmountable handicap. Americans would rather like your face than respect your brain. They proved that when they selected Truman over Dewey and Eisenhower over Stevenson. The rulers of the world are rarely, as has been pointed out before, its philosophers.

There have been other entertainers who have tapped the rich vein of the nation's love for the average-type man: Gary Cooper, Bing Crosby, Will Rogers—all exhibited the relaxa-

tion and natural poise which are a significant part of Godfrey's make-up.

Is the fabulous Everyman making any important contribution to the world of humor? Except in the sense that he brings a daily smile to millions of faces (a not insignificant service in what are usually referred to as "these troubled times"), one is forced to answer no. Arthur is not in any sense a significantly creative humorist although a great many people have the idea that because he ad-libs his nimble way around prewritten commercial copy he likewise spontaneously conceives the humorous comments that are part of his broadcast. A sizable staff of gag writers always supplied him with his odds and ends of humorous trivia, although last year he dismissed most of his writing staff. (Other scripters in the trade consider that Godfrey's writers should be eternally grateful to their boss, since he can turn any small joke into a big laugh.)

When Arthur does ad-lib a story it is frequently in poor taste. Scarcely a week goes by that CBS does not receive a few pieces of mail complaining about one or another of his remarks, usually on grounds of vulgarity.

It was the redhead's penchant for barnyard humor that made Bob Hope say, "Folks can now watch Arthur Godfrey on television, then tune in on Bishop Sheen for absolution."

In the opinion of many of his devoted fans Arthur more than makes up for his occasional lapses into the realm of questionable taste by his frequent and frank references to God and religion. While never imposing his personal religious views on his listeners he nevertheless now and then puts in as vigorous a plug for the Almighty as he does for Lipton's tea or Chesterfield cigarettes. Too, he rarely closes his daily broad-

cast without a reminder that he'll be back on the following day "be the good Lord willin'."

It wouldn't surprise me too much, in view of Godfrey's seeming moral ambivalence, if he might someday be heard to say, "And now, be the good Lord willin', I'd like to tell you a few off-color stories."

Individual radio station owners have frequently expressed their disapproval of Godfrey's material on grounds of taste and those of them fortunate enough to broadcast a Godfrey program by delayed transcription have been known to audit the show and snip out offensive material before putting the transcription on the air. There have even been instances when station owners have completely canceled particular broadcasts in a fit of pique at Arthur's "So, sue me!" attitude over accusations of *double-entendre.*

Is there any use in sending CBS an angry letter when one hears an off-color comment on one of Godfrey's broadcasts? Practically speaking, none at all. Arthur today is still perhaps the biggest investment in entertainment history. Without the profits from his programs the Columbia Broadcasting System would be hard put to break even.

It was possible for George S. Kaufman to be dismissed from a television job for offending a few listeners, but Godfrey would have to run in front of a television camera naked, making obscene gestures, before any responsible network official would even consider firing him. After all, millions of dollars are millions of dollars. It's easier to reprimand Arthur and ask him not to do it again.

In all fairness to Godfrey it should be pointed out that he does not deliberately offend anyone. He is usually sur-

prised to learn that a coarse reference to a bull's activities on his Maryland farm or a chance remark about a woman's girdle has shocked a number of his listeners. The sensitivities of an old sailor, after all, are not expected to be identical with those of a spinster sipping tea in her chaste parlor in Philadelphia.

But even if his sponsors could blue-pencil his every off-color remark they would still feel they had a tiger by the tail. Godfrey's freakish popularity is evidenced by both the unique impact his personality has upon the emotions of the viewers and his penchant for getting them stirred up, for better or for worse, over a long series of tempests in his Lipton's teapot. The La Rosa matter is only one such.

Scarcely a month goes by that he is not involved in some "incident." His dramatic one-man last-minute decision to cancel a particular broadcast of his "Talent Scouts" show in the summer of 1953 is a case in point. After a rehearsal of the production one evening Godfrey simply decided he didn't like the talent, dismissed them, and substituted a makeshift version of his Wednesday-night variety program.

Reactions were, of course, immediately forthcoming. One of the tyros booted so unceremoniously by Godfrey threatened to sue him and the network for breach of contract; Lipton Tea, the "Talent Scouts" sponsor, served notice that it would not pay for a program it had not ordered; and the public rushed to telephones and writing desks to besiege the network with opinions favorable and otherwise.

Godfrey's own reactions were of the sort that uneasy CBS officials have come to refer to as "typical." Informed of Lipton's reaction, he reportedly said, "Okay, if that's the way they feel about it let's not do a 'Talent Scouts' show next week

either." Needless to say the victory in the exchange was his, hands down. Neither the network nor the sponsor had lost sight of the fact that Godfrey singlehandedly had introduced the tea product to an era of undreamed-of prosperity. Godfrey is well aware, too, that he deserves the entire credit for the fact that Lipton Tea and its parent organization, Unilever, were able to pick up an almost-defunct soup company for less than eight thousand dollars and turn it into a multi-million-dollar bonanza.

Parity, it would seem, covers a multitude of sins.

Other Godfrey "incidents" have involved arguments with the Civil Aeronautics Authority, a blast at the U.S. press in general, a swipe at the NBC opposition, and a comment on a Washington, D.C., doctor's letter that included remarks thought by several medical men to be cause for legal retaliation.

Any lesser entertainer would have been dismissed from the airways at the first of such imbroglios, but it is not entirely fair to say that only Godfrey's financial importance to CBS is responsible for the network's turn-the-other-cheek attitude.

He not only makes money for CBS. He also receives the passionate love of millions. A sizable staff of people is employed by Godfrey to do nothing more than handle the gifts that are sent to him by the scores daily. Old ladies knit socks for him, housewives bake him cakes, lonely spinsters propose marriage or something less, fishermen send him the best of their catch, the devout offer him their prayers, and amateur medical advisers deluge him with advice about one or another of his physical infirmities. He has a great power to move a great number of people personally.

If, as many close to him profess to believe, Godfrey is all

too conscious of the power he wields, it may be predicated in part on the fact that his "private pipe line" into the White House is without precedent for an entertainer. A good friend of Charles E. Wilson's, Godfrey was interested in a very personal way in the negotiations that resulted in President Eisenhower's naming of Wilson to the post of Secretary of Defense. A couple of years ago, according to the trade paper *Variety,* an Eisenhower-to-Wilson-to-Godfrey combination play resulted in Godfrey's requesting a national magazine to kill a story Ike thought would hurt the administration. The request was granted. It is common knowledge that at one time Godfrey might have become the Undersecretary of Defense by making no greater effort than asking for the job, and at one point it appeared that he might accept the assignment. His farm in Virginia has become a frequent meeting place for Cabinet officers and others important on the Washington scene. When the American Legion bestowed its highest civilian award upon Godfrey more Pentagon brass appeared than was seen at any one similar Capitol event of the year.

Paradoxically enough, in the light of these connections in high places, it is generally conceded that Godfrey's appeal is primarily to the so-called "lower classes." He is not a high brow and does not profess to be. It does not follow, oddly enough, that the more intellectually finicky TV viewer will find an examination of his program completely unrewarding, for he can at least enjoy Godfrey's naturalness, his disdain for the affected, his determined unconcern for the pompous.

Godfrey can be listened to painlessly, and that is something that cannot be said for a great many television personalities. If you could listen to only a single comedy program per week you would probably prefer to be entertained by a Skelton or

a Caesar, but for steady, day-after-day fare Arthur probably wears as lightly on the sensitivities as anyone in television.

There is, after all, something to the remark (I believe it originally was printed in Walter Winchell's column) that all Godfrey has to do for a living is show up at the studio. His ability to achieve popularity on little more than his nearly soporific approach is looked at askance by a certain school of observers, the chief spokesman for whom was probably Fred Allen. "Look at Arthur," said Fred. "He's the biggest corn-ball on the air. With all his many shows he's heard more than anybody else in a week's time, but at the end of the week I defy you to find a person who can quote a single thing he's said."

Fred had probably unknowingly put his finger on another of Godfrey's great secrets: Godfrey doesn't make you think; he *relieves* you of the responsibility. He is a cup of hot milk, a sedative, a comfort in a noisy world. As long as he is that much he does not have to be a god. The people have probably lost their idol but they may have found a man more human because of his imperfections. He may be petty and power-conscious, but aren't we all? We have already idolized him because he is so much like us. Is it such a surprise to learn that he has our faults? I do not think that Arthur will ever be able to regain the fantastic popularity that was his two or three years ago, but after all the present bickering is over and done with I think he can continue to go along in the public's good graces for as long as he wants. Who says either Arthur or the public is entitled to more?

Bob Hope

IN HER syndicated column of February 21, 1955, Faye Emerson said something I have been hearing for quite some time and from many quarters. Under the headline STAND-UP COMEDIAN IS A COOKED GOOSE Miss Emerson wrote:

> I'm going to make a flat statement. Frankly, it's not my own. It's a steal from a television critic. He said: "Two years from now there won't be a single big stand-up comedian in television." I thoroughly agree.
>
> You must admit that sounds startling when you consider that television was practically founded by Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Sid Caesar, Jack Benny and others of the "a-funny-thing-happened-to-me-on-the-way-to-the-studio" school.
>
> When you think of it, however, there are just so many amusing things that can happen to any comedian, and it soon developed that the jokes were wearing pretty thin. . . . The situation comedy became the accepted pattern.

By the time she had reached the bottom of her column, Faye had had time to consider an alternative:

> When you make a flat statement, of course, there's always somebody around to prove you're wrong. In this case, it could be Bob Hope. For a good many years, he's been standing in front of audiences delivering jokes, and it's just pos-

sible he may be the only comedian still doing it two years from now.

Like many generalities, this one was largely important because of the exceptions it implied. It was significant that in putting it forth Faye paid tribute to the best stand-up comedian of them all.

As far as television is concerned, it is Bob Hope's great misfortune to have been a radio and motion-picture success for twenty years. He has been at the top for such a very long time that the TV public, ever eager for novelty, never long content with mere excellence, seems to find no particular excitement in the fact that Hope is available on its screens.

There is no doubt in my mind that if he had been discovered last year Bob would now be known as Comedian of the Year, Mr. Television, Mr. Thursday Night, or what have you in the way of press-agent-inspired titles.

If there is one word of praise that his work most readily calls forth it is *class*. Watching him function in front of a camera, one never feels the mixture of sympathy and concern that often wells up in one's heart at the spectacle of other and newer TV comics plying their wares. Even when he has a bad show Hope is still in command. You're never really worried for him. He's still moving at high speed, tossing off his lines with a facility and delicacy of timing never equaled by any other comedian of our time.

The ability to stand up close against the footlights and face an audience is a specialty of Hope's, and no one can touch him at it. This seemingly run-of-the-mill assignment, incidentally, is one of the most difficult for the average comic. Jackie Gleason is never truly at ease till he has stepped back into the protective arms of some scenery and has gone into a

sketch. Sid Caesar is simply unable to address an audience and amuse them in his capacity as himself. Milton Berle is the only other big-time comedian who is a close match for Hope when it comes to firing jokes at point-blank range, but Milton at such times will often battle with an audience for laughs. He gets them, but not with quite the ease that Hope does.

One reason for Bob's success at handling audiences is explained by his great personal confidence. Many comedians are either shy when off stage or else their "I'm a big man" blustering is a psychological cover-up for feelings of inferiority. Hope seems honestly to be aware of his ability. He is superior and he knows it. As any salesman can tell you, that's half the battle.

Reason number two for Hope's classiness when it comes to throwing lines is his experience. Always a flip guy, he delayed little in making his destiny manifest. In high school in Cleveland, Ohio (where his family had landed after leaving England in 1907), he was already learning how to tap dance. A naturally husky physical specimen, he quit college after one year of studying dentistry to enter, believe it or not, the prize ring. Under the name of Packy East he fought for a time with consistent lack of success, reaching the height of his fistic career one night in an Ohio ring when he was quick-frozen by Johnny Risko.

Hanging up his gloves, Hope picked up the saxophone. Then came another fling at dancing, and that led to vaudeville, with a young partner named George Byrne. A turning point in Bob's career occurred one day in New Castle, Indiana, when a theater manager asked him to go back out on

the stage and announce to the audience the details of the following week's show.

"The show is called the 'Whiz-Bang Revue,' " the manager said. "It features a Scotchman named Marshall Walker. That's all I know about it."

The meager bit of information was more than enough for Hope, who had been collecting Scotch jokes in his spare time. He swaggered on stage and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, next week's show features a Scotchman named Marshall Walker. He must be a Scotchman; he got married in his own back yard 'cause he wanted the chickens to get the rice."

And so on.

Not long after that Hope left Byrne to have a go as a single, with Chicago as his scene of operations. After a long siege of tough luck he finally landed a one-week engagement as master of ceremonies at the Stratford theater, on Sixty-third Street in the wilds of Chicago's South Side.

The neighborhood crowd immediately went for Hope's breezy patter and his pre-Pepsodent smile in a big way. He was held over once, then again, finally racking up a stay of six months at the Stratford. Bookers suddenly became aware of his talent and he headed for New York, where work in musical comedies added to his polish. In *Smiles* (with Fred Astaire), *Sidewalks of New York*, *Ballyhoo of 1932*, and *Red, Hot, and Blue* (with Jimmy Durante and Ethel Merman) he began to stand out. From the night he opened in *Roberta* he was a Broadway star.

Being a big man in New York, of course, can still leave you a complete unknown to the country at large, and so it was up to radio to expose Hope's talent to the nation.

Hope's comedy style then was basically just what it is now, but then it had the added impact of being fresh and different. Before long he was a sensation. There had been funnymen on the radio before but nobody had ever made audiences laugh so often in a given few minutes of time.

A few guest appearances and he was signed for his own program. His rapid patter took the country by storm. Even as today, his jokes were full of fantastic comparisons, exaggerations, snappy, timely references. Instead of saying, "This girl was so fat that . . ." Hope switched it to, "I won't say this girl was fat, but . . ." and somehow the negative approach made the gag funnier. His jokes were up-to-the-minute, brazen and, above all, good. From the first, Bob has had the good sense to spend whatever was necessary to hire the top comedy writers. Not a humorist, he creates little of his own material, but his judgment is unerring and he knows what he likes. A list of the graduates of Hope's writing stable, incidentally, reads like a Who's Who in the field of mass-produced humor.

Some of the writers who got their start with Bob are: Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, currently writing, producing and directing motion pictures. Part of a corporate setup with Danny Kaye, their most recent joint release is *Knock on Wood*; Mel Shavelson and Jack Rose, another writing, producing and directing team whose most recent effort was Bob Hope's latest picture *The Seven Little Foys*; Milt Josefsberg, currently one of Jack Benny's top writers; Jack Douglas, now writing for George Gobel; Al Schwartz, who has been writing for some of the NBC Spectaculars; Sherwood Schwartz, currently writing for Red Skelton; Norman Sullivan and Mort

Lachman, still with Bob Hope after many years; and Roger Price, the popular night-club and TV humorist.

One secret of the success of Hope's comedy style lies, I think, in the fact that his personality is peculiarly American, peculiarly representative of the civilization in which he functions. He is the perennial wise guy whose braggadocio is made palatable by the fact that in the last analysis *he* gets it in the neck. He seems to know all the answers, yet he comes off no better in a given situation than the average man. He exhibits all the customary traits, all the faults that are common to the rest of us: cowardice, an exaggerated idea of his sexual prowess, a talent for getting into trouble without trying, and a penchant for trying to *talk* his way out of a tight spot. The average middle-class American probably would never envision himself as a Milquetoast Wally Cox, a boyish Red Buttons, a dour Henry Morgan or a leering Groucho Marx; he would probably picture himself as something very like Bob Hope.

A joke that, in this connection, I think, reveals the true Hope is a gag from one of his "Road" pictures with Bing Crosby. The boys had gone into a saloon and had been warned to act tough, as the place was a den of thieves and murderers. But when the bartender said, "What'll you have?" Bob's absent-minded answer was "Lemonade." "What!" screamed Bing, nudging him. "Oh," said Bob, "in a dirty glass."

Hope is one comic who always "plays himself," regardless of costume or locale. He does no dialects or regular characterizations, preferring to play always the breezy, overconfident guy who somehow manages to get loused up for all his flip assurance. In a well-written sketch, he can deliver strongly without overplaying, which is one reason the public has never

tired of him during almost two decades. The following scene with Rosemary Clooney from one of his TV shows is typical:

HOPE: I'd like to tell you a little about my grandfather, Robert Casanova Hope. . . . He was a sort of a Casanova of the Gay Nineties—he had a notch in his cane for every woman whose heart he had broken. . . . That's what killed him—one day he leaned on his cane.

He was a gay old dog, and the men of his day copied his style of dress. As a matter of fact, he invented spats. . . . Well, he didn't exactly invent them—he just used to let his long underwear hang out over his shoes. All the women chased him, but none of them ever caught him—he was known as Robert the Eel. . . .

This is the home of one of the young ladies grandpa was courting back in the days of the mustache cup, the horseless carriage, celluloid collars and the overstuffed bustle. Dig those crazy outfits. . . . No wonder they called it the *Gay* Nineties—people just looked at each other and got hysterical. All right, you folks—action!

MOTHER: Rosemary, I'm going to forbid you to see that young scoundrel Robert Casanova Hope unless he states his intentions. After all, he's been courting you for seven years now.

CLOONEY: But, Mother, I've tried everything to get him to propose. You have no idea how he wriggles out of it.

FATHER: I won't have my daughter resorting to trickery.

MOTHER: Oh, hush, Clarence. You're simply not trying hard enough, Daughter.

CLOONEY: How can you say that, Mother. . . . Just yesterday I pretended to faint in front of the marriage-license bureau.

MOTHER: Good thinking, girl, good thinking!

CLOONEY: When he took me inside to revive me I said, "As long as we're here, Robert, isn't there something you'd like to get?"

MOTHER: Yes. . . What did he say?

CLOONEY: He said, "I'm not ready for marriage yet. Why don't we take out a learner's permit?"

[*Doorbell sounds.*]

CLOONEY: Oh, good heavens! That's Robert now.

MOTHER: Keep plugging, girl. [*Mother hikes daughter's dress.*] There. If a man doesn't see what's in the back of the store, he won't ask for it!

FATHER: Here now, none of that. That's trickery.

MOTHER: Oh, quiet, Clarence. How do you think I hooked you? Just get him to propose, and your father and I will see to it that he doesn't get away today.

FATHER: Trickery. That's what it is—trickery! (As they exit.)

[*Doorbell rings again.*]

CLOONEY: Come in.

[*Hope enters.*]

HOPE: Sorry I'm late. I was busy pollinating my avocados—it's the mating season, you know. Flowers for my lady.

CLOONEY: How lovely!

HOPE: Oh, and one thing more. I stopped off at Tiffany's and picked up a little trinket for you.

CLOONEY: For me—a trinket—from Tiffany's?

HOPE [*Handing her candy*]: You didn't know they had a licorice counter, did you? I better sit over here. [*Hope sits. Reacts uncomfortably. His jacket is made of same material as couch.*]

CLOONEY: What's wrong? Don't you feel at home here?

HOPE: Oh, sure—and I go so well with the furniture! What's your upholsterer's name?

CLOONEY: Jim Clinton.

HOPE: I thought so. He's my tailor! (Must have a talk with that boy—this sofa has better shoulders than I do!)

CLOONEY [*Dropping hanky*]: Oops, I dropped my hanky.

[*Hope tries to scoop it. Stares at cane.*]

HOPE: I knew I'd never make it with a wood. It's a four-iron shot.

This is a fine example of a device that Hope has always put to good use: the seeming ad lib, the slightly out-of-character

aside to the audience that seems to come from Hope himself rather than from the character he is playing. Both the reference to the wood shot and the "This sofa has better shoulders than I do" line above were received with the special reaction an audience reserves for an ad lib.

[*Hope gets to his knee.*]

CLOONEY: While you're down there, isn't there something you'd like to do?

HOPE: Sure, but I didn't bring my dice with me.

CLOONEY: I'm talking about something else. When Father proposed to Mother he was kneeling on that very spot.

HOPE: Well, don't worry—a little Carbona will take that out!

This is another typical Hope-ism: the timely, local reference. The word *Carbona* is such a down-to-earth thing, such a householdish sort of word, that it greatly multiplies the laugh the joke receives for the reason that the audience does not expect to hear a performer refer to the particular things and places that are associated with the common people. The joke would be funny with the words "cleaning fluid," but it's funnier with Carbona. (Also note "Jim Clinton" above.)

CLOONEY: Oh, Robert, don't you realize we're the only ones in our set that haven't been married?

HOPE: Yeah, I was thinking about that.

CLOONEY: What do you think we should do about it?

HOPE: Join a new set?

CLOONEY: Can't you see what I'm hinting at? We have so much in common, haven't we?

HOPE: Well, it's true that we have one important thing in common —we both like me.

CLOONEY: We could be so happy together. The two of us could be one.

HOPE: Won't there be some parts left over?

CLOONEY: Oh, Robert, what have you got against marriage?

HOPE: Nothing! Nothing at all! I think marriage teaches a man patience, consideration, kindness, thrift, and a lot of other things he wouldn't need if he'd stayed single!

CLOONEY: Oh, Robert!

HOPE: Besides, I'm not your type. You're a sweet girl, a charming girl, a lovely girl, and I'm none of those things—I'm a boy!

CLOONEY: I don't care, I like you as you are! You're the only man in the world for me. Say you'll marry me.

HOPE: But think of your parents. Your father would never consent to our marriage.

[*Father pops up from behind sofa.*]

FATHER: Congratulations, my boy. You have my blessing!

HOPE: Where'd he come from?

FATHER: Now, then, let's get on with the wedding. [*He hands Clooney bridal veil and bouquet.*]

HOPE: Well, I'll see you later! [*Starts for door.*]

CLOONEY: Robert, where are you going?

HOPE: You can't rush into weddings. It takes weeks of preparation. You've gotta hire a parson and . . .

[*He opens the door. Parson enters.*]

PARSON: Dearly beloved, we are gathered here . . .

HOPE [*Walking to other door*]: Wait a minute—let's talk it over first. I want a wedding with a best man and bridesmaids . . .

[*Bridesmaids enter. One sings.*]

HOPE: This is ridiculous. When I go I'm goin' first-class. I want a big wedding with organ music and everything.

[*He has reached opposite door. Mother pushes organ on. Organist plays. Best man and Father carry Hope. Place him next to Clooney.*]

PARSON: Do you, Rosemary, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband?

CLOONEY: I do.

PARSON: Do you, Robert, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?

FATHER: Remember, son. I laid out the money for this wedding. You owe me five hundred dollars.

HOPE: I do?

PARSON: I now pronounce you man and wife!

HOPE: Trickery. That's what it is—trickery!

Hope did not invent the idea of topical humor, but he has carried it to its greatest lengths. In his autobiography, *Have Tux, Will Travel* (Simon and Schuster), he says, "For my money, the No. 1 joke of them all is the topical joke, a quip based on today's newspaper headlines. When you use one everybody is with you as soon as you tee off." Hope's insistence on topicality, of course, gives his humor a transient appeal. You can read a ten-year-old Jack Benny or Fred Allen script and still find it amusing, but a Hope script does not age well since so many of his jokes refer to popular interests of the moment.

Bob has instructed his writers to devote their greatest creative energies to his opening monologues, for he likes these monologues to tap the enthusiasms of the people. With five minutes of good topical jokes to depend on, Bob is off to the races and feels more confident about the rest of the show. His dependence on the humor of the moment is greater than that of any funnyman since Will Rogers. Will, of course, was the humorist-philosopher, always able to put his finger on just what the public wanted to hear about, and always able to say something pithy and discerning about the issue. Hope's approach is more on the surface. The jokes do not have to have any philosophical or satirical content; they just have to be snappy. If there is anything peculiar on the front pages tonight, you may be certain that next week's Bob Hope show will include references to it. At the moment of this writing the man

on the street is talking about "The $64,000 Question," Prince Rainier, Marilyn Monroe, "Medic," the Brooklyn Dodgers, Liberace, the elections, and income taxes. That's what Bob Hope is talking about, too.

Pick up a Hope script from the war years and you'll find jokes about blackouts, foxholes, the sugar shortage, draft boards, the Germans, Japs, gas ration coupons and jeeps. One reason the men in the armed forces loved Bob (besides the obvious fact that he spent a tremendous amount of time doing shows for them overseas and in hospitals) is that his jokes concerned the men themselves:

"You know what an officers' candidate school is. That's a concentration camp on our side."

"I stopped off in Paris on my way here. They had quite a few artists there, sketching the girls in a show I saw. I thought I'd try it but they threw me out—they said no fair tracing."

"Last night I slept in the barracks. You know what the barracks are—a crap game with a roof. What a place to meet professional gamblers! I won't say they were loaded, but it's the first time I ever saw dice leave skid marks."

"A discharge: that's a little piece of paper that changes a lieutenant's name from 'Sir' to 'Stinky.' "

"Soldiers are real strong. I walked in with a blonde on one arm and a brunette on the other. Two minutes later, no blonde, no brunette, no arms."

Bob has always evidenced a clear understanding of the dimensions of his ability. "In all honesty," he says, "I think I have pretty good timing." (His timing is as close to perfect as you can get.) "At times I have good material; at other times

I have great material. But I know how to cover up the merely good and make it sound better by timing. In fact, timing is my greatest asset, especially on radio or television."

Audiences are so conditioned to Hope's timing that he can get away with jokes no other comedian could get a titter with. Milton Berle once argued with a friend about the value of timing. "It's almost more important than material," he said, and proceeded to prove his point by telling an audience a joke and then substituting for the punch line the meaningless words "last Thursday." The audience roared, sucked in by Milton's adept handling of the words. He had given them the phrase "last Thursday" in such a way, with such confidence and finesse, that they laughed before they realized they had laughed at nothing.

"I know how to snap a line," says Hope, "then cover it, then speed on to the next." This is perhaps the most typical mechanical trick of Bob's monologue style. He doesn't stop and wait when he gets to the last word in a punch line. He races ahead and pretends almost not to be aware that he has said anything worth waiting for. At the 1955 Academy Awards he said, "We have a special prize for the losers—a do-it-yourself suicide kit. And I want to tell you——" And that's where the laugh comes in. "You have to get over to the audience that there's a game of wits going on and that if they don't stay awake they'll miss something—like missing a baseball someone has lobbed them. What I'm really doing is asking, 'Let's see if you can hit this one.' That's my whole comedy technique. I know how to telegraph to the audience the fact that this *is* a joke and that if they don't laugh right now they're not playing the game and nobody has any fun. At least that's my comedy technique for personal appearances. I have other

comedy styles. In pictures I work with broader material and use my face a lot. . . . I also have a sneak attack, where I make a line seem nothing. This is called a throwing-it-away technique, which is the opposite of hitting a joke too hard. Anybody can learn a lot about this technique by studying the work of such artists as Helen Broderick . . . and Bea Lillie, who tries to hide funny lines from you instead of ramming them down your throat."

Hope is funny by nature, but he also understands his nature. He is without question the champ as an all-around comedian. Others are big in one field or two. Only Hope is equally at home in vaudeville, on Broadway, in motion pictures, radio, television and the drawing room. He is not confined, as are most other buffoons, to playing the comedy second-lead in a picture. He is that rarity among comedians, the clown who can also be the leading man. Indeed, he first won the hearts of America's movie public when he sang with great tenderness "Thanks for the Memory" to Shirley Ross in *The Big Broadcast of 1938*. Since then he's given us all a lot of happy memories to be thankful for.

Sam Levenson

Most comedians are Jewish. Some members of my mother's family—warmhearted and charitable but suspicious Irish—would have thought that this fact was traceable to a conspiracy which gave all the opportunities to Semitic entertainers and left Gentile performers out in the cold.

The real reason why most comedians are Jewish is quite a simple one: the Jews are funnier, as a people, than any other group. Why are they funnier? Because they have had more trouble. And trouble often is the heart of humor. "I laugh," said Abraham Lincoln, paraphrasing Byron, "because I must not cry." "Everything human is pathetic," adds Mark Twain. "The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."

Indeed, who has ever laughed at perfection? It is when something falls short of perfection that we are amused. Humor is chiefly concerned with that part of life which is negative. Part of its purpose is to direct attention to the negative, implying a criticism. Let us improve something, says the humorist, or laugh it off. This attitude is particularly representative of Jewish humor, much of which has an intellectual character.

Other peoples (and frequently the modern American Jews)

are apt to indulge in humor for its own sake. They make much of whimsy, puns, witty repartee, nonsense and clowning. But the "traditional" Jewish humor often converts a joke into a form of social comment. It must not be supposed, however, that the humor of the Jews is only a weapon with which they subtly strike back at a bullying world. A great deal of their laughter is directed at themselves. Self-criticism is one of the earmarks of Jewish comedy. Now and then, of course, self-criticism becomes self-pity, but who among us will deny this indulgence to a fellow man?

For thousands of years the Jews have had to laugh off their troubles because they were never powerful enough to control the circumstances which produced them. That is the real reason why even today in the United States, where Jews are no longer forced to live in ghettos, there is still a tradition of humor that runs in the blood and produces such popular funnymen as Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, Red Buttons, Jerry Lester, Ed Wynn, Charlie Chaplin, George Burns, Morey Amsterdam, Henny Youngman, Jack E. Leonard, Milton Berle, Larry Storch, Danny Kaye, Jan Murray, Joey Adams, Phil Silvers, Robert Q. Lewis, Eddie Cantor, Jerry Lewis, the Ritz Brothers, Arnold Stang, Henry Morgan, Parkyakarkus (Harry Einstein), Paul Winchell, Bert Lahr, Phil Foster, Myron Cohen, Ben Blue, Abe Burrows, Phil Baker, Irwin Corey, Sid Caesar, Georgie Jessel, Dick Shawn, Fletcher Peck, Buddy Hackett, Shecky Green, Georgie Kaye, Alan King and Sam Levenson. Behind these public figures stand, in addition, hundreds of top-notch comedy writers and humorists of Jewish extraction, such as S. J. Perelman, Max Shulman, A. J. Liebling, Milt Gross, Rube Goldberg, Bennett Cerf, George Kaufman, Moss Hart, Dorothy Parker, Leonard Q. Ross, Arthur

Kober, Ira Wallach, Al Capp, Ben Hecht, Harry Kurnitz and Art Buchwald.

The world owes a great debt to the Jewish humorists.

It must be borne in mind, however, that all this sort of thinking involves only a broad generalization. Many comedians are Jewish, but that does not mean that most Jews are comical. Generalizations of this sort pertain to matters of relative degree. For example, many of the popular singers in this country—such as Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Mario Lanza, Julius La Rosa, Al Martino, Frank Parker, Dean Martin, Frankie Laine, Tony Bennett and Vic Damone—are of Italian extraction. The Italians are also noted for their love of opera. From this evidence one might draw the erroneous conclusion that most Italians sing well. The fact is that probably something like six per cent of the Italian people are capable singers. But with another people, such as the Swedes—the figure might be as low as two per cent.

Applying this knowledge to the relationship between Jews and humor, we see that we must not expect every Jew to be a humorist; we must simply expect to find a markedly higher degree of amusing people among the Jews than we would among, say, the Germans or the Chinese.

A musician friend of mine once made an interesting observation. "You rarely," he said, "find a square Jew or a square colored man, but when you do they're the squarest."

The opposite of "square," in this connection, is "hip." To be hip does not simply mean to be well educated. What my friend was trying to say about the Jews and the Negroes is that adversity has taught them to roll with a punch, has made them philosophers and poets. It has made them funny. It has sent them to the stage, the typewriter, the easel, the microphone.

It has given them the quality of worldly-wiseness, even though they may as individuals be forced to wallow in ignorance. When they *are* square, of course, they seem squarer than they are only in that they have not lived up to their potential.

All this, while not precisely necessary to an enjoyment of Sam Levenson's humor, is nevertheless pertinent. Sam's is a typically Jewish humor, and yet it may be universally appreciated, for the experiences of which he speaks are universal. Sam laughs and you laugh with him. You know what he's talking about. You've been through it.

Another thing about Sam's comedy that identifies it as Jewish is its concern with things gastronomical. I believe the Jews enjoy talking about food more than any other people. The reason is simple. Through many centuries they lived in enforced poverty. If the Jews could not invent food out of thin air, they could at least invent stories and jokes about it to take their minds off their misery.

It has long been a matter of fascination to me that Jews who have cut themselves off from all ties with their religious heritage still will often observe the culinary customs of their ancestors. A psychiatrist once told me the story of a young Jewish agnostic who had completely convinced himself that the religion of his fathers was stuff and nonsense. He visited the psychiatrist, however, because every time he ate pork he became deathly ill.

Sam does not ordinarily tell jokes. He does not make funny faces. He does not look amusing. He does not sing funny songs. He does no funny dances. He does not perform in comedy sketches. In fact, he is not even able to do so. He does, in short, practically none of the things that other comedians do by way of amusing audiences.

He just tells stories.

But what wonderful stories! How real they seem! So real are they, in fact, that by a certain definition they might not be considered stories at all. They are certainly not the kind of stories other comedians relate. Usually they have no particular finish. They contain no surprises, no trick endings. By dramatic standards they are more delineations of character than narrations of events.

Our laughter at Sam's rambling accounts of incidents from his childhood is of a very special sort. It is the laughter of *recognition*. It is something akin, I think, to the laughter of the first savage who ever looked into a mirror. We see something that is familiar to us, and yet it is slighty distorted. We associate ourselves in the most personal of ways with the matters which Sam discusses and therein lies the power of this particular sort of humor. The things that stimulate our risibilities most vigorously after all are not the jokes we hear on the radio or the sketches we see enacted at the theater; they are, rather, the incidents with which we actually become involved in our everyday lives.

Think right now of the wildest laughing fit to which you ever succumbed. I'll tell you the times *I* laughed the hardest. Once was when I fell down in a crazy-barrel at an amusement park in Venice, California. I laughed at losing my balance and the harder I laughed the more difficult it became for me to stand. In the end an attendant had to rescue me. He hauled me out disheveled and still laughing, and I still get the giggles thinking about the incident. Another time, when I was about fifteen years old, I was walking down a street in Chicago one day with a friend when I happened to hear an elderly newsboy crying loudly to passers-by the details of a tragic disaster at

sea. (I am tempted here to digress on the fascinating connection that may obtain between the tragic and the comic. But I won't.)

"Extra paper!" the man shouted. "British battleship explodes. Six hundred men lost at sea."

Then, as I drew abreast of the newsboy, he added, almost to himself, "Sailors, most of 'em." There was something about the unexpectedness of this remark, something about its utter logic and at the same time its utter unnecessity that struck me as funny. Perhaps, too, I was aware that the subject matter rendered laughter inappropriate and I was, therefore, caught on that painfully delicious rack usually reserved for the especial torture of laughter in church. My friend and I repaired to a drugstore and laughed so loudly there that we were at last compelled to leave our chocolate sodas unfinished at the fountain and to stagger out into the street, where we laughed the more. It was actually many months before the recollection of the newsboy's trivial remark lost its power to double me up.

Everyone could relate dozens of such incidents. They all point up the strength of the *actual* in humor. All good storytellers rely heavily on this point. They don't tell a story about "a man"; they tell it about a particular man, or they paint briefly such a clear picture of the man that he might as well be a particular, actual man. They don't say he was walking down "the street." They make it Forty-second Street, or Michigan Boulevard, or Main Street in your home town. By every possible means they create the illusion of reality. And your enjoyment of their story increases in direct ratio to the completeness with which you are able to throw yourself into the story, to believe it.

Sam Levenson is an expert at making you believe, making you recognize, making you remember.

Of course, not all his stories have to do with family reminiscences. He also discusses contemporary things: child psychology, television, dieting, taxes. But whatever he talks about it is always with an eye to making the audience relate in a personal way to his material. The real humor of life, after all, is about us. It needs only to be pointed out. Our existence is rich in paradox, veined with frustration. Levenson simply mines this rough ore. He does not *create* humor so much as he directs our attention to it, as if to say, "Look, while your eyes searched the horizon for something to make you laugh, what you sought was before you, under your nose, all the time."

Speaking of his own humor, Sam says:

> Basically, I seek the common denominator, the emotion, the fact, the memory, the experience that brings men closer together, and very often I find the common denominator in the "little things": the "shame-to-throw-out drawer" (the drawer with the million and one little odds and ends that were really junk, but, well, you know . . .); the "good-night closet" (near the front door we had a closet; people always said "Good night" and then walked into that closet); the drawer full of jar covers and the cupboard full of jars, no two of which ever matched; the fat aunt with the considerable derrière who always complained that she had a "pain in the *small* of her back"; the guy sitting down in the front of the first car of the subway train who is "driving"; the slices of pineapple with toothpick and cherry that you always get at parties. (The slices seemingly cannot be removed. In fact, the same pineapple can be used for the next party.)

There is an added clue to the heart of Sam's comedy in the punctuation of the above paragraph; it is illustrated by his

liberal use of quotation marks. These signs, when they are not used simply to indicate chunks of talk, imply a *familiarity* with the ideas they bracket. They are commonly used to denote the cliché. And that is what Sam does: he digs up the clichés of our existence. Currently, for example, through a large strata of American society it is considered the thing to own a deep-freeze unit. So Sam can make you laugh by saying, "These days we all marvel at that wondrous invention, the deep-freeze. Do you know that there are children sitting tonight in wealthy homes, starving to death as they huddle around the kitchen table, waiting for hours and hours for lamb chops to defrost?"

Or take the matter of child psychology and its popular distortions. "One mother," says Sam, "wrote a note to the teacher. If Gregory is a bad boy, she says, don't slap him. Slap the boy *next* to him. Gregory will get the idea."

The point then is obvious. Levenson makes us laugh by holding up a mirror to life.

But why is it that we love to laugh at ourselves? Why do we derive so much pleasure out of being reminded of experiences from our past? There are several reasons. I think the first one has to do with pride. We love ourselves. We may criticize ourselves and our loved ones, but actually we think it is the rest of the world that is out of step; *we* are all right. This self-interest is almost impossible to exaggerate. Although my approach to comedy is quite different from Sam's, I have always tried to use the self-consciousness of my audiences as a handy lever for prying laughter from them. I can tell them a remarkably amusing story about someone else and they will laugh, but if I make the audience itself (or a member of it) the subject of a joke the laughter is quicker and more powerful.

Sam's humor is almost never concerned with jokes as such. He simply identifies the commonplace and, using exaggeration as a tool, fashions powerful humorous impressions.

"Years ago," Sam says, speaking of Christmas and toys and the giving of presents, "children used to say hello. Now they say 'Whaja bring me?' And what treatment the kids get today! Grandma says, 'There's nothing too good for that child. He's a genius.' When I was a baby I slept on a pad, but today the child has a carriage. It's chrome-plated, has white side-wall tires. He's sleeping under seventeen monogrammed blankets. He's *suffocating*!

"And the toys! He's got thirty thousand dollars' worth of toys and he still keeps running up to his mother and saying, 'What should I *do* today?' Or else it's '*Take* me someplace!' My father used to have the right attitude when we'd make demands like that. He'd say, 'Listen, kid, I'm not your friend; I'm your father.' But today it's 'You *promised* me!' You promised to take the child to the park? It doesn't matter if there's a blizzard, if the *polar bears* are freezing, you *promised*!"

Sam also tells of the child who had the bad habit of demanding, "Whaddaya gonna get me?" He finally changed. Now he says "Whaddaya gonna *give* me?"

Speaking of presents, Sam explains that his father believed in *practical* gifts, like a haircut. He explains that nobody cared much about what his shoes looked like when he was going to school. His feet used to stick out so far, he claims, that his shoes looked like spats. He felt as if he were going to school formal. But today, ah, what a difference! The child must have *corrective* shoes. There's nothing wrong with his feet, but still he needs corrective shoes. And you don't just take him to an old-fashioned shoe store. Now you take him to a *professor* at

a *clinic*. They stick his little feet into an X-ray machine. The poor little thing hasn't even got bones yet, but they're X-raying his feet. Then they finally put a pair of shoes on him, give him three balloons for being a good boy, and he *floats* out of the store."

This is humor at its best. It is a pleasant relief from the usual diet of sketches and jokes, jokes and sketches. Sam Levenson gives us humor with a bit of philosophy to it.

Jerry Lewis

ALTHOUGH their styles are in no way similar, I believe Jerry Lewis is the funniest visual comedian since Charlie Chaplin. Like Chaplin, Lewis's appeal is almost entirely physical. Although Charlie was physically funny by virtue of the necessity posed by working in silent pictures, Jerry's greatest appeal lies solely in his actions, even though he has appeared in radio, television, night clubs and motion pictures—media that also involve the spoken word.

When a comedian has attained a certain peak of popularity, it is difficult to dissect his talents and classify them separately. You are so used to laughing at the over-all impression the man creates that at first it may be hard to believe that you laugh at what he says chiefly because of the face he makes when he says it.

Lewis has the fortunate faculty of bringing to his verbal delivery such a powerful physical assist that only through the medium of radio can anybody notice how lopsided his comic talents are. Although the tremendous popularity of Jerry and his partner Dean Martin made their appearance on radio a foregone conclusion, I think they would never have been employed to broadcast a radio series were it not for their success

in other fields. You listen to a Martin and Lewis broadcast and immediately wonder at the riotous reaction of the studio audience. "What in the world," you ask, "are they laughing at?" The answer is, of course, that those fortunate enough to be present in the studio are enjoying an in-person performance, and in person Dean and Jerry are unfailingly entertaining.

Gifted with the emotional ability to plunge into complete physical extroversion, Lewis can pull out all the stops in his attack on an audience. There are those who would not appreciate the subtlety of a comment by Robert Benchley, the witty sarcasm of a thrust by Groucho Marx, or even perhaps the play on words of a Colonel Stoopnagle, but there is not a person alive who can suppress a guffaw at a perfectly timed prat fall.

Lewis is a master at gathering a full share of laughs at his own physical expense. He will pretend to allow a piano top to fall on his hand, he will take a pie in the face, he will trip and fall on his face while dancing, he will get Martin's little finger accidentally hooked into his ear, and in the performance of all these antics he will prove that there is something to the theory that laughter has its basis in a feeling of superiority on the part of the observer. Slip on a banana peel and you are not amused. Watch someone else do it and it's a scream.

Jerry's knack of *doing* funny things is to some extent shared by Red Skelton, Jerry Lester, Lou Costello and a host of other physical comedians. Lewis's advantage over most of his competitors lies in his exceptionally comic appearance. With his close-cropped, monkeyish hair-do, his limber, impish face and his thin, angular body, he is equipped with a vital plus that

makes his success as a clown seem to have been predestined. It is difficult to imagine *not* laughing at Jerry Lewis. If he had not become an entertainer it is likely that he would still have been an awfully funny stock clerk or shoe salesman.

Another of Jerry's assets is his youthful, almost childish appearance. It allows him to indulge completely in the physical lunacies that have become his stock in trade. Milton Berle or Red Skelton may also take a pie in the face or a fall into an orchestra pit, but somehow these older men have a certain touch of stature and dignity under their clown's clothes. An Ed Wynn or a Groucho Marx may also slide down a banister or fall into a swimming pool, but they do so with the explicit if unspoken understanding that they have momentarily taken leave of their senses. When Jerry Lewis performs these same actions he does so with no dignity whatsoever. He is a *complete* buffoon, the hundred-per-cent fool, of whom insanity is expected and hoped for. There is still much of the child in Jerry; on stage he does not *revert* to idiocy, he sometimes seems to *be* an idiot, and the effect is wonderfully, heart-warmingly hilarious.

In case the exclusion of Dean Martin's name from the heading of this chapter should be considered unwarranted and unfair, let it be pointed out that I don't mean that Lewis could operate successfully as a single. Jerry's comedy is so completely, fiercely uninhibited that it requires *setting off*; it is necessary to compare it to something. Having a straight man is as much of a necessity to Jerry Lewis as it would have been a burden to Will Rogers. Jerry is not a true humorist, nor even a capable joke comic. He is not at his best alone on the stage. He is not unusually amusing in isolation; it is necessary that he be brought into contact with others. What they do to him and

his reactions to what they do—therein lies the heart of Lewis's comic appeal.

Martin is, therefore, necessary to Jerry's success, although if he were not predominantly a singer his capabilities as a straight man would be somewhat more in suspicion. Experience has by now welded these two into so polished a team that I don't believe there will ever be any real danger of their splitting up. The public would not readily accept them now without each other, despite the constant rumors.

Another unique thing about Lewis: he is the only leading comedian who regularly employs pantomimed effeminacy as an effective comedy device. Since the American attitude toward homosexuality is a confused one, there has been only confused and scattered resistance to this particular facet of Lewis's work. He is, of course, heterosexual. His normality is not in question, so the issue is not at all one involving public entertainment by an obviously abnormal individual. He does, nevertheless *pretend* at times to be effeminate. That he is seemingly able to do so without being offensive is explained, I think, by his childishness. If a child is effeminate he is simply a "sissy," or a weakling. The condition is not recognizable as an abnormality until the individual becomes an adult and it is observable that he has not become the sort of adult that one had expected.

In explaining this line of reasoning to a friend I was surprised to hear her say, "How dare Lewis do that sort of thing! What on earth is supposed to be funny about homosexuality?"

A question like this is meaningless. If my friend had any idea at all, it should have been expressed as either "Homosexuality is not funny" (in which case the answer is "But people laugh at its manifestations"), or "Why do people laugh at

homosexuality?" (in which case I must hold myself firmly in check so as not to begin writing a different book altogether).

It is a fact that *anything* can be funny. "Oh, come now," you say. "A great many things are potentially amusing, obviously enough, and if one is ingenious one can probably create humorous commentaries on a million and one subjects that would not seem entertaining to most people; but certainly it is a gross exaggeration to state that anything and everything can be funny."

It is, I repeat, a fact that anything can be funny.

"Preposterous," you answer. "What about holy things? What about serious questions? What, indeed, about tragedies and horrors and physical misfortunes?"

Since I am writing your lines, dear reader, it must follow that I am going to win this argument.

Humor is not inherent in anything. It is at its heart a matter of subjective reaction. There is nothing amusing about an orange, for example, in and of itself, but I can make you laugh at an orange simply by saying, "There's something wrong with this apple," and then holding up an orange. You are laughing at other things besides the orange, of course. You are laughing at my ignorance and at a frustrated expectation. But it is the actual sight of the orange that produces your laughter.

Aristotle's definition of the comic as a defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive is, like most other definitions of philosophical concepts, fine and dandy but not all-inclusive. It omits an essential. A defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive is amusing *only to one who is emotionally prepared to be amused.* We have all seen defects and ugliness which were not particularly painful or destructive and yet did not amuse us. The very fact that you can tell a joke

to two men and amuse only one of them points up the incompleteness of Aristotle's definition of the comic.

Consider the following joke:

Dracula, the monster, paced nervously up and down the waiting room of a maternity hospital. Mrs. Dracula was having a baby. The fiend smoked cigarette after cigarette, growling ominously. At last a nurse approached him with a tiny bundle in her arms.

"Here is your baby, Count Dracula," she said. "Shall I wrap it up so you can take it home?"

"No," he roared. "I'll eat it right here!"

Regardless of our disgust at the various component parts of the joke, or perhaps *because* of it, the fact remains that nine out of ten people laugh uproariously at the story. Yet it would be hard to imagine a more unpleasant subject.

The objection may be raised that a distasteful subject matter can be amusing only if fanciful; that, in other words, we laugh at this story because it is only a story; that if a real Dracula ate an actual baby the humor of the situation would disappear.

The answer is that *in most cases* observers truly enough would not be amused; but there is still a germ of the comic in this situation that would appeal to a few abnormal minds. Some authorities have felt that all laughter derives from the shout of gleeful triumph with which our prehistoric ancestors laid their enemies low in battle. It is not difficult to identify in our own time the simple laugh of superiority, the laugh of the snob, the laugh of derision, of mockery. It is not a far step from this sort of laughter to the laughter of the sadist, the laughter of the SS guards in the German concentration camps, the laughter of the superintendents who ordered lamp-

shades of human flesh. A bit of this evil passion exists in all of us. It is common to peoples engaging in wars to think of their own troops as brave and true and humane and to look upon the forces of the enemy as subhuman, cruel and sadistic. Yet many American servicemen can recall laughing in triumph at the sight of a direct hit upon an important enemy position, or the sight of an enemy ship or airplane scored upon. It would seem, then, that there is no human misfortune so tragic that it might not include also some element that man can perversely regard as comic.

There is ample evidence that other peoples may be vastly amused at things that would shock us. For example, in Basil Thompson's book *The Fijians* we find this passage:

> Stunned by a blow, the prisoners to be eaten were placed in heated ovens so that when the heat made them conscious of their pain, their frantic struggles might convulse the spectator with laughter.

The Chinese, in certain instances, derive pleasure from witnessing the spectacle of a flogging. The ancient Greeks thought nothing of making a cripple the butt of their laughter. In fact, young children of our own time and place, before they can be impressed with the mores of our society, will often laugh at deformed persons, ugliness, stuttering, poverty and a great many things that might seem to contain not an iota of humorous potential.

So a man's acting like a woman is, after all, ridiculous. It is amusing even to the naïve. Hence, Lewis's mincing, limp-wristed gestures will make you laugh, whether or not you hate yourself in the morning.

Just as Jerry's childishness sugar-coats some comedy pills

that would seem bitter if prescribed by Bob Hope, Milton Berle or Red Skelton, it also seems to make him unusually attractive to the young. Teen-agers who would be relatively unimpressed at the personal sight of Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle or Jack Benny revert to near idiocy when Dean and Jerry appear among them. In what is perhaps a reflection of Lewis's own lack of social inhibition, they descend upon him and Martin like locusts, ripping at the pair's ties, pleading to be allowed to cut fragments from their suits, stealing their handkerchiefs, and expressing their adoration in various other destructive ways.

I think one of the reasons they are attracted to Jerry is that they feel he is one of them. He doesn't seem far above them like Jackie Gleason or Sid Caesar. He seems rather like a high-school boy who made good. Also it is probable that his disrespectful attitudes toward characters who represent authority enable the young to rebel vicariously.

Another way in which Lewis's humor is unique is that it has little relation to reality. Jackie Gleason's sketches often mirror life, Sid Caesar holds a wonderfully satirical prism up to reality, Charlie Chaplin presented the reactions of an eccentric to the cruel thrusts of actuality, but Jerry Lewis's lunacy is often silliness for its own sake.

As a child, Jerry showed signs of developing into a professional clown. He was the neighborhood "Crazy Kid," which did not surprise those who were aware that his father, Danny Lewis, was a burlesque singer and comic, and his mother, Rea, an accompanist for his father. Jerry broke into show business at the age of fourteen at Brown's Hotel in the Catskill mountains, training ground for so many top comedians. While officially serving as waiter and busboy, he copied an old parlor

entertainer's gimmick that involved pantomiming to phonograph recordings of operatic singing.

So enthusiastically were his efforts received that the following year Jerry was making his theater debut at a burlesque emporium in Buffalo. A year or so later he met Dean Martin in New York and the two became friends. It was not till four years after that, however, in 1946, that they became partners while working on the same bill at the 500 Club in Atlantic City. Dean, working until that time as a singer, and Jerry, until that moment still doing his pantomime act, suddenly found themselves working together. With no real act, they began to improvise, telling old jokes, doing imitations, breaking dishes, insulting the customers, making faces and making things tough on each other. Dean would sing and Jerry would try to break him up. They were a first-night smash. In less than two years the boys were in the $5,000-a-week class and were playing such plush spots as the Copacabana. Dean, with his romantic good looks and his Crosbyish voice (Bing is still his supreme idol), proved the perfect basis on which to construct Jerry's insanities. He had a Mississippi river boat gambler's sort of charm (he actually had worked for some years in Steubenville, Ohio, as a roulette stickman and card dealer), which proved a fascinating contrast to Jerry's bad-boy brashness. Dean may not be the same sort of polished, old-time straight man as George Burns or Bud Abbott, but what he lacks in technical know-how he makes up for with a youthful charm and a fine sense of humor that make him better suited for the job of working with Jerry than one of the old-timers would be. Nothing Jerry can do will surprise him; he rolls with every punch, and his easygoing relaxation makes Jerry's nervous explosions more palatable to audiences.

As creative as Jerry is, there is little of his humor worth quoting. He is a doer rather than a talker. His humor on stage is much like his humor off, which consists of practical jokes, of cutting off his friends' neckties, of kissing strange secretaries in offices, of pouring water in people's pockets. I was sitting in Sherry's restaurant in Hollywood one evening when Jerry came in. Seizing one of those canvas and aluminum frames on which waiters rest loaded trays, he began walking up and down the dining room shouting, "Deck chairs; get your deck chairs, right here. Fifty cents. Get 'em while they last!" The place was convulsed. Or he might call a friend long distance. "Hello, is that Sam?" he'll ask. When Sam says, "Yes, it is. Who's calling?" Jerry says, "I'll be seeing you," and hangs up.

Most of this humorous extroversion is Jerry's own and originates in wellsprings of his personality, but a certain part of it is probably traceable to the influence on Jerry of one of the great clowns of our time, Harry Ritz. Jerry has borrowed a few of his professional mannerisms from Harry, including ways of walking, facial expressions and gestures. There are dozens of comics, however, who have copied Ritz's mannerisms, but only a comedian of truly exceptional ability like Jerry could have risen far above and beyond the scope to which his imitative gestures would have limited him. There is some evidence that Jerry has also been influenced by the popular night-club comic Gene Baylos.

One thing about humor and its relation to television that never fails to fascinate me is this business of "exposure." "The comedians are wearing out their welcome," people say, "and ought not to be seen so often." Whether this is truth or not is, of course, a matter that can only be determined after

the question "What comedian are you talking about?" has been answered.

If you're talking about Martin and Lewis it would appear that you've got something. When Dean and Jerry are funny, they're so exceptionally funny that you have to go on a sort of vacation from them to get over it. They're not subtle or warm or gentle or sophisticated or fey. They're down your throat, in your ears, and buzzing in your brain. The jokes come so fast, the Seltzer bottle squirts so often, the prat falls are so hilarious, that once a month seems enough. NBC has been wise enough to use them on this basis the past couple of years, and proof of the wisdom of the policy, if any were needed, is that the redoubtable Ed Sullivan, who usually rides the Neilson-rating seas unchallenged, does not even try to compete when Dean and Jerry are his competition on the "Colgate Variety Hour." Every other week Ed is top man, but when Martin and Lewis are scheduled opposite him Ed just pulls in his belt, saves a little money, and books second-drawer talent, with a few exceptions. The public may complain about the boys but they keep on looking and that's what counts.

There's one complaint, by the way, that I'd like to put on the table and discuss, for I hear it all the time lately. The point has been expressed simply by Philip Minoff, writing in *Cue* magazine. "There is nothing remotely comic," Mr. Minoff pontifically observes, "in Jerry Lewis's repeated impersonations of imbecilic children. His portrayal of a teen-aged baby sitter who is himself petrified at being left without *his* mother would have been more suitable for 'Medic,' which doesn't even pretend to be a comedy show."

Right off the bat I would like to digress by asking why it

is that critics never seem to hear studio audiences laughing. Maybe they *do* hear them, but you wouldn't know it from the way they so freely comment that a particular sketch wasn't remotely comic. If the sketch wasn't comic then what the hell were the seven hundred people in the audience laughing at? What Mr. Minoff meant was that the sketch wasn't funny *to him*. I sometimes think that the title of Heywood Broun's old column "It Seems to Me" should be taught to children along with their ABC's and earliest prayers. It is entirely conceivable, of course, that there can be such a thing as an unfunny sketch, and it is also conceivable that there could be an audience which wouldn't even titter at it, but I believe my point is still valid.

To return now to my main point, about Jerry's acting "like an imbecilic child," I would like to state it as my opinion that complaints against this particular approach to humor on Jerry's part are based on a misconception. It is true that there would be nothing pleasantly humorous about acting like an imbecile, but this would be the case only if a given audience clearly understood that such was the comedian's intention. I am sure that Jerry has been very shocked to learn that his mugging and monkeylike speech have been interpreted as a thoughtless burlesque of handicapped children. (It is not entirely beside the point here to point out that Dean and Jerry are among the most tireless workers in the country in the fight against celebral palsy and muscular dystrophy.) If acting "dopey" has suddenly become a crime, then generations of comedians are culpable. What, one might also ask, is funny about Chaplin's imitating a starving derelict? What is funny about Red Buttons' portrayal of a sassy delinquent? What is funny about Jackie Gleason's portrayal of a poor soul who is

so mentally incompetent that he has practically lost the power of speech? What is so funny about Peter Lind Hayes' impersonation of a prize fighter who has been punched so often his brains are literally scrambled? The answer, of course, is that behind nearly all comedy there is the specter of tragedy. But that is a philosophical answer and these do not seem to be very philosophical times. So let me just point out the overlooked pragmatic fact that acting stupid has been a part of clowning since the pre-Christian era. We are all born as imbeciles. We progress to being idiots, then morons, and at last, with luck, to relatively normal adults. It seems a little late in history suddenly to begin noticing that all the looking cross-eyed, blank-faced and idiotic, all the stuttering, howling and fumbling, all the mincing, staggering and skipping that comedians have been doing for a thousand years have a basis in tragic reality.

Admittedly parents of a handicapped child might recognize some infinitesimal thing depressingly familiar in some of Jerry's gestures, but so might fat people feel personal pain at all the jokes about fat people, so might political rightists feel resentful at jokes about Senator McCarthy, so might—but my point must be obvious. If we ever begin taking all our humor seriously it will disappear. As those of us who do comedy on TV know, there is hardly a joke we can create that could not conceivably be offensive to *somebody*. You would not believe many of the letters received at my office that support this statement. "What do you mean making cracks about Republicans?"; "What makes you think it's so funny to talk about Liberace?"; "How dare you make jokes about South Carolina?"; "By what right do you presume to

be funny at the expense of those who wear false teeth?" You may laugh at those who write such letters and feel superior to them, but there are probably a few subjects concerning which *you* would be a little touchy were they to be used as fodder for the jokesmiths.

To return to the heart of the matter, I think this whole business of Jerry Lewis's being criticized for acting "like handicapped children" is pointless, because he *isn't* acting like handicapped children. Sometimes the columnists can get each other steamed up over a point like this and keep it hot for months. Eventually, of course, they forget it and move along to something else. Unfortunately an unpleasant memory is often left in the minds of their readers.

Red Skelton, parenthetically, has an interesting observation on the subject, having done considerable entertaining at children's hospitals. "I was leery about doing any funny walks," he says, "but they begged me to do Willie Lump-lump, the staggering drunk. Oddly enough, children crippled with polio laughed the most when I hobbled along. A couple of kids who hadn't walked in a long time decided to get out of bed and try it. They thought they could do as good a job as I did."

Jerry Lewis is, in my opinion, a truly great comedian. That more "authorities" do not recognize him as such I can attribute only to his youth and his aforementioned lack of adult dignity. Perhaps older folks are reluctant to admit to Olympian heights a comedian who seems to be only a "funny kid." A few years from now, however, when some newer comedians have been tried and found wanting, and when Jerry himself has matured a bit and presented to the public the charming

and warm side of his personality that his friends know, and that is from time to time exposed to audiences at present, we may make restitution to him. If you are fortunate enough to have the opportunity, see Dean and Jerry on a night-club floor. No one will ever make you laugh more.

Groucho Marx

GARSON KANIN tells a story about an incident that occurred at a benefit show at New York's old Winter Garden some twenty-five years ago. Harry Houdini, then at the peak of his popularity, announced that as his part of the evening's entertainment he would present a new trick, one he had been laboring to perfect for many years.

"I shall place in my mouth," he said, "a dozen needles and a loose piece of thread. Without using my hands, and in less than one second, I will thread all the needles." Magic fans of today will recognize the stunt as one that can be purchased in novelty shops for a small sum, but in those days it was magic indeed.

"I will need a volunteer," Houdini said, running an eye over the audience, "to testify that I have nothing hidden in my mouth." Quickly the famed magician looked through the people seated in the first few rows, mentally rejecting the celebrities whose personal fame might distract the attention of the audience or make the stunt look phony. At last he selected a small man sitting in an aisle seat.

"Do you see any needles or thread hidden under my

tongue?" Houdini asked the man, after he had trotted on stage.

The man peered into the magician's mouth but said nothing. "Speak right up," Houdini urged. "Tell the audience what you see."

"Pyorrhea!" said the little man.

The audience laughed for two minutes. Houdini had been so unfortunate as to choose from an audience of 1,600 people *Groucho Marx*, whom he hadn't recognized without his grease-paint mustache.

This is a priceless joke for two reasons: first, because it perfectly derails the train of thought, presenting the mind with a new and valid idea in a completely unexpected and dazzling way; second, because of the brazen flippancy of it all.

The joke is not a simple insult. Many comedians deal with the insult-quip. This particular joke is rather what one would typically expect from Groucho. The barbed witticism is not, except incidentally, his basic stock in trade. Groucho's specialty is a sort of insane, bold, puckish effrontery and he is so identified with this sort of thing that he can get away with lines that would sound downright rude coming from other comedians.

There is a small segment of television viewers who persist in regarding Groucho's banter with the contestants on his "You Bet Your Life" program as rude anyway, but, as Roger Price says at such times, "These people are wrong thinkers."

That, at least, is my opinion. A dozen years of catering to the shifting and uncertain tastes of radio and television audiences have convinced me that you're not going to please *everybody*, no matter what you do. Consequently, if five per cent of Groucho's viewers think he's rude—well, that's the

way she goes, and let's just concentrate on the fact that the other ninety-five per cent don't think so.

I believe that those who are offended vicariously by Groucho's comments to his thick-skinned foils are wrong for two reasons. The first, I think, involves their own emotional make-up, which probably is overstrong on sympathy capacity. There is nothing wrong with sympathy, of course, but some people have so much of it that they will lavish it often upon an unwilling world. I once read of an old lady who filled her mansion with cats. Her home was a smelly shambles, and the cats would have been happy if she had just put out food, but she insisted on treating them as if they were human. Her sympathy, in other words, had been turned to an essentially unproductive purpose.

If there was ever any class of people who deserved no sympathy whatever, and in all honesty did not court it, it is that ever-growing group who comprise Groucho's contestants. As has been patiently explained in dozens of TV fan magazines, their interviews are not really ad-libbed and they are not dragged all unwilling from the studio audience to cower before the rapier wit of the cruel master.

The contestants are usually chosen many days in advance of the actual filming of the show, and their interviews are prepared by a staff of comedy writers. "We try to make the show as professional as possible," explains writer and co-director Bernie Smith. "We feel an obligation to the folks who watch at home every week. Because we're in show business we feel a certain amount of preparation is justified."

Anyone learning these facts for the first time need not really feel cheated. After all, Groucho is one of the few comedians who really *can* ad-lib, and in a pinch he could actually do a

whole program extemporaneously. The only thing is it wouldn't be quite as funny that way. The man never lived who could be amusing every time he opened his mouth, so there's no question but that the best way to do "You Bet Your Life" is largely with prefabricated interviews and well-rehearsed contestants.

The preparation for the broadcast is done by twelve members of producer John Guedel's staff. "We leave very little up to Groucho," explains Bernie Smith. "He feels that the less he has to do with the contestants in advance the better." There are two points the staff members keep in mind when they conduct a hunt for likely contestants. One is that applicants must have something interesting or unusual to say (which accounts for the large number of contestants with novel occupations, lots of children, six toes or what have you) and the other point is that the interviewers must be willing and able to speak right up when they finally come before Groucho. To that end, Guedel's crew may interview two hundred people a week. From this number only the six best are selected.

Many contestants are chosen after having written in about themselves, others are picked up from the studio audience (but not, obviously, the night of the broadcast) and others are sought out by the program's staff. Those chosen for the show are put through an extensive interrogation. What the questioners are looking for is things that are funny in themselves, or things that can serve as grist for Groucho's mill. ("Your husband is a traveling salesman, eh? Were you a farmer's daughter?") A beautiful girl is often selected for the show simply because she's beautiful. American audiences have for many years been conditioned to laugh at the combination of

Groucho Marx and a beautiful woman. He doesn't have to say anything exceptionally funny in a situation like that to make people laugh.

The day before the program is to be filmed the writers sit down with Groucho and outline the background of the various contestants. They also explain to him what sort of questions they want him to ask. They then tell him what the contestants will answer and offer him a number of jokes with which he can respond. From there on Groucho is on his own. He does not see the contestants before the show, believing that a certain amount of spontaneity would be lost if he did. It is important to set down right here that Groucho *does* ad-lib his way beyond the confines of the script. This is one of the reasons the program is broadcast on film rather than in the present tense. Nobody, least of all Groucho himself, is ever certain as to exactly what he's going to say. Frequently his tongue gets ahead of his better judgment and—well, it's just safer to have the show recorded first, then edited, then broadcast. Another reason for using film is that the program is much funnier that way. Groucho may shoot an hour's worth of film to get a half-hour show. That means all the jokes that didn't turn out as expected are just snipped away into the wastebasket. What's left is the cream.

To create the illusion in the minds of the studio audience that the interviews are completely spontaneous the producers allow the audience to help in the last-minute selection of the contestants. For example, on the night of the filming announcer George Fenneman might tell the crowd that three firemen have been invited to drop in. All three are taken up to the microphone and spend a few minutes chatting with Fenneman. Then the audience, by applause, selects the one

of the three it likes best. Naturally all three have been processed by Guedel's staff.

To get back now to the matter of misplaced sympathy. It should be obvious that Groucho's contestants would all give their eyeteeth to get on the program, that they are interested warmly in winning prize money, that they are extremely familiar with the show and with the sort of things that Groucho will say to them, and that they therefore never feel any of the emotions that the bleeding hearts at home impute to them. If they feel any emotion besides stage fright, it is probably just gratitude for the opportunity to win a sizable sum of money. Groucho himself takes home a comfortable amount as a result of his week's work—something in the neighborhood of five thousand dollars. "And," he admits, "that's a nice neighborhood to be in."

As a comedian, Groucho rates among the giants for two reasons: his delivery and his wit. Most writers tend rather to ignore the former, but Groucho's delivery is that of the practiced artist and it makes his lines sound funnier than they sometimes are. Not that they are not now and then classically amusing. Groucho *is* a great impromptu jokester. It's just that his delivery is so slyly brittle that he can get a laugh with almost any line. One night on the 20th Century-Fox lot I ran into him at the sneak preview of a motion picture in which I appeared: *I'll Get By*. As I passed him going into the theater we shook hands. "Steve," he said, "you'll be great in this picture. I have every confidence in you." Then, after a split-second's reflection, he added, "Well, not *every* confidence." I laughed uproariously, as did all within earshot. A few minutes later it occurred to me to wonder just what it was I had been laughing at. The line isn't inane; it's just that no one

else could have gotten a laugh with it. The same thing is true of a great deal of the material on his quiz program. It's largely present-tense humor—humor that does not package and store well. Trying to tell the boys at the office about how funny something was on last night's "You Bet Your Life" will usually get you nothing but stony stares.

Groucho's real-life humor, of course, is something else again, although it has become almost impossible to separate the things Groucho has said from the things he has not. It has also become fairly difficult to determine accurately just when he first gave voice to many of his most famous witticisms.

Partly to blame for this is the ever-growing custom of attributing to prominent persons amusing statements that a writer desires to make seem *more* amusing. The great American press agent and his steady target the columnist are probably the two chief culprits in this deception. If you are a press agent it is your job to get your client's name into the newspapers. Unless he has done something actually newsworthy the only part of a paper in which you have any hope of planting his name is a column. This is frequently accomplished by opening a book of old jokes, picking out a line and sending it to the columnist in the form of a barefaced lie that your client created the joke the night before while dining with his wife. (Once upon a time the names of established humorists or at least public figures well known for their sense of humor were employed in this way, but of late it has become commonplace to read that some of the most sparkling witticisms of our time are coming out of the mouths of people like Sammy Kaye, Bobo Rockefeller or Sherman Billingsley.)

Writers never seem content just to put a funny story on paper. They insist on crediting it to somebody. Not infre-

quently, therefore, one reads jokes credited to Groucho which actually originated elsewhere. This is certainly nothing to Groucho's discredit. In all fairness, it must be admitted that he says a great many amusing things which never find their way to print (frequently on moral grounds).

It sometimes happens that jokes which *are* Groucho's are credited to him in various inaccurate ways. Leo Rosten, for example, writing in *Look* magazine, gives the impression that the line "Either this man is dead or my watch has stopped" was first spoken on Groucho's quiz program about a contestant who had clammed up because of a bad case of stage fright. It adds up to a nice story, but the line actually comes from one of the Marx Brothers' old comedies, in a scene where Groucho, in the role of a horse doctor, poses as a fashionable neurologist and examines a luckless patient. A great many of the better-known Marxisms, which are often referred to as if they were first spoken in living rooms or beside swimming pools, are simply from the scripts of early-day Marx Brothers revues or motion pictures. I once read part of a monologue which has probably become the most quoted Marxism of all ("Once I went big-game hunting in Africa. What an active life we led! Up at six, breakfast at six-fifteen, back in bed by six-thirty. One day I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I'll never know."), and the writer forgot to mention that the bit was from *Animal Crackers*, creating instead the impression that it was something that had popped into Groucho's head one day on the golf course. The same situation prevails with exchanges like "The garbage man is here"; "Tell him we don't want any"; and "Jennings has been waiting an hour and is waxing wroth"; "Tell Roth to wax Jennings for a while." Writers

like S. J. Perelman and Harry Ruby turned out lots of this early material.

Groucho is not, of course, one of those comedians who simply deliver lines written by comedy writers and make no creative contribution of their own. He is a true humorist and has written a lot of the material for which his various writers have received credit. In many of the Marx Brothers' revues or motion pictures, the brothers themselves either created or revised much of the final material, Groucho being the most prolific contributor of the four.

Groucho also writes almost all of his magazine pieces, something quite unusual in the field of mass-produced humor. Many of his personal letters are classics, and his everyday conversation, if he is in a funny mood, is apt to be sprinkled generously with high-powered *mots*. In fact, Groucho at certain times finds it almost impossible to carry on an "intelligent" conversation. He is apt to twist any remark out of your mouth into a joke. At Larue's in Hollywood a waiter endeavored to get him to try a specialty of the house, rolled pancake. "If I decide to roll anything," said Groucho, "it won't be a pancake."

An attractive girl, after listening to Groucho all afternoon, once said to him appreciatively, "Mr. Marx, you're a man after my own heart."

"And that's not all I'm after," said Groucho.

Talking to Earl Wilson, Groucho revealed that not only does he make a straight line out of almost anything anyone else says, but that he also will twist his own words. "Earl," he said, "they tell me you're getting to be one of our biggest columnists. Tell me, how tall *are* you?"

It is actually Groucho's normal conversation that most

clearly reveals an important highlight of his comic style. He is the humorist helpless in the grip of his talent. To his sort of mind words are not just what they are to everyone else. They are rubbery, many-sided globs of thought that can be knocked about like plastic into all sorts of shapes.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, I have long maintained that it is possible to make a joke based on any sentence at all, or any phrase, or any subject. The very witty Morey Amsterdam does an act with what he calls a Joke Machine. "Give me any subject," he calls out to his audience. "Just say anything at all, and this machine will grind out a joke about it." Naturally the machine is just a box with a blank roll of paper inside. When somebody yells "Texas," or "mother-in-law" or "Zsa Zsa Gabor," Morey simply calls upon his phenomenal memory, and the business of fumbling with the machine gives him eight or ten seconds to come up with some gag or other from the prodigious file in his head.

For another instance, I suppose almost everyone has heard the story of Samuel Johnson's identical boast that he could spontaneously create a joke on any subject. "The King!" someone proposed. "My dear man," said Johnson, "the King is not a subject."

Groucho's technique is not the File Heading business that Amsterdam specializes in. He goes in for the play on words, the zany, startling twist, the lightning-quick Double Meaning:

"I don't like Junior crossing the tracks. In fact, I don't like Junior."

GROUCHO: What champagne would you like?

GIRL: Mumm's twenty-eight.

GROUCHO: I don't care how old your mother is, what champagne do you want?

Another reason you laugh at Groucho in a unique way is that much of his humor, because of its brashness, touches upon your repressions. Groucho does not deal in what we might call, to apply the most common designation, "dirty jokes," but if I may I will employ the concept of the "dirty joke" by way of illustrating a point.

When you laugh at an off-color story you laugh at it for one or two reasons. One of the reasons might be that the story is genuinely witty, so constructed mechanically that you could clean it up and still find it amusing. The other reason you laugh is that the mere telling of the story (assuming it is not so degraded that it actually arouses your disgust) allows you, for the moment, to bring a particular *verboten* subject out into the open.

There is this idea of "ought-notness" to a great deal of humor. If you have ever suffered the deliciously painful and embarrassing experience of getting a giggling fit in church you know what I mean. Your laughter starts at some small and eventually unimportant point (a choir singer hitting a flat note, or some such thing), and then suddenly the enormity of your offense hits you. It is a dreadful thing, you believe, to laugh in church, and all at once you're powerless. I have known people to giggle off and on for thirty minutes under such circumstances. What keeps them laughing is the element of repression.

For another example, jokes about drunkenness and alcohol have always amused man for reasons that are not too mysterious, but it was only when the Congress of the United States

passed the Eighteenth Amendment that people began falling all over themselves at the mere mention of terms that related to drinking. Until the repeal of the act fourteen years later Americans laughed at an endless parade of jokes about bathtub gin, bootleggers, hijacking, speak-easies, Sterno, the blind staggers, near beer, hang-overs and hip flasks.

In the case of the erotic story, you laugh at it because the story contains a mechanically humorous element, but your laughter continues and is louder than the laughter that would greet a story about baseball or politics because in the sexual areas are encountered man's most important taboos and repressions. That is all there is to the mystery of why certain comedians employ off-color material when they work night clubs and theaters. They have learned that audiences will invariably laugh louder at that sort of thing. We may deplore the fact, but that does not make it any less a fact.

On radio and television, naturally, there is no place for the joke that oversteps the bounds of good taste, but there is a narrow area, it seems, just *this* side of good taste wherein the idea of sex may be humorously discussed. Kissing, dancing, hand-holding, dating and flirting are, after all, activities that are sexual in nature, and jokes may be made on these subjects ad infinitum. Interestingly enough, though all these areas may be invaded with impunity by the television humorists, audiences will usually react in accordance with their repressive conditioning. They will laugh loudly but with a certain embarrassment, all other things being equal.

That explains one reason Groucho is so amusing, but, though some of his jokes involve sexual repressions, I do not want to put the emphasis on the word *sexual* here. It is the word *repression,* I think, that is more important. A number

of Groucho's jokes destroy, to some extent, the dignity of those at whom they are directed or those whom they concern. It isn't actually "nice," we think, to say some of the brazen things that Groucho says and it is precisely this idea of "ought-notness" that makes us laugh the louder, assuming (as I have taken pains to make clear) that the joke does not go too far. It is actually a great tribute to Groucho's finesse as a comedian that he can make so many jokes palatable that in the hands of a lesser craftsman would approach the offensive.

Much of Groucho's humor is intensely personal. In line with my own approach to audiences, I have learned that people will laugh loudest at a joke that affects some member of their own group, even though the joke might not be particularly praiseworthy. When I make a benefit appearance or address some particular organization I usually make it a point to acquaint myself with the names of a few of the important people connected with the group before which I am to appear. Then any little quip that detracts mildly from their dignity usually gets an enthusiastic reception. Groucho is especially funny on his quiz show and also in real-life banter because so many of his jokes are "on" somebody. In his son Arthur Marx's excellent book *Life with Groucho* there is the explanation that Groucho originally fell into the habit of employing jokes of this particular type as a sort of defensive gesture. If he were ill at ease in someone's presence he would throw a funny line at him, thus giving himself the mastery of the conversation and the situation. It is fascinating, by the way, to observe in the character of so many leading funnymen the great sensitivity that led them to erect a humorous defense. Far from being the overconfident buffoons the layman might think, most of the leading comedians are somewhat shy, pessi-

mistic worriers whose greatest fault is a lack of confidence rather than an excess of it.

One of the most fascinating things about Marx's humor, to me, is that a certain segment of it must be understood as coming from Groucho to be amusing. To be more explicit, many of the funny things he does would seem pointless coming from someone else. This is rather unusual. A good joke is usually a good joke whether you hear it come out of Bob Hope's mouth or read it later in one of Bennett Cerf's collections. Not so with many of Groucho's "jokes." In fact, often they are not jokes at all. They may be simply illogical, puzzling speeches whose purpose often is to confuse or embarrass their target and hence arouse a sort of sympathetic laughter from a third party.

Herewith some examples quoted by Goodman Ace in his very amusing *The Book of Little Knowledge* (Simon and Schuster):

> We walked past St. Patrick's on Fifth Avenue, where a small wedding was taking place, and as the bride passed us Groucho softly tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I've tried it twice; it's no good."

> In front of Saks Fifth Avenue stood a barker announcing the bus for Chinatown leaving in ten minutes.
>
> "How much?" asked Groucho.
>
> "Dollar and a half," the barker replied. "Leave in ten minutes."
>
> "That's a lot of money," said Groucho. "Do they have real Chinese down there now? I hear they get a lot of men and make 'em up to look like Chinese."
>
> "Oh, no," said the barker, "there are more Chinese now than ever. Since the war."
>
> "Which war was that?" Groucho wanted to know.

The man shifted his argument. "Bus leaves in five minutes. Better hurry. How about it?"

"We'll sleep on it," said Groucho.

These stories I find hilariously amusing, true, but take the name Groucho out. Fill in Jackie Gleason or your brother Charlie and you'll see what I mean. Gleason just wouldn't get a laugh and your brother Charlie would probably get punched in the mouth. There's something about Groucho that makes him funny just standing there, some mysterious long-time conditioning that has grown up around the man and his relationship with the American people that makes all of us love this Peck's Bad Boy of humor. Fortunately, Groucho has always been the particular darling of writers. Scores have written about him and he is, as much as any talking humorist of our time, well represented and accurately captured on paper. For that reason he will always be with us. He will always be able to make us smile.

Phil Silvers

ONE night at Toots Shor's restaurant Phil Silvers was telling a bunch of us a funny story—a true one—about the time a misguided casting director at M-G-M gave him the role of a cleric in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Phil pointed out that when the studio heads learned about the casting they agreed it was somewhat on the questionable side, and, since Phil did too, all hands decided to forget the whole thing.

To tell you the truth I don't think it was such unlikely casting at all. You see, the Phil Silvers you know from his successful Tuesday-evening TV show "You'll Never Get Rich" is nothing at all like the true Phil Silvers. In reality Phil is gentle, considerate, soft-spoken, sensitive and sentimental. In a living room, except during those moments he is actively amusing you, he seems much more like a clergyman than he does a harum-scarum Broadway comic.

Unlike many comedians, he seems to have no enemies. Like Jack Benny, whom he much admires, he is the soul of kindness. In 1948, when as a late-night Hollywood gab-jockey I was toiling in what is usually referred to as relative obscurity, I opened my meager supply of fan mail one day to find a

two-page letter from Phil—whom I had never met—written in his own hand and filled with lavish praise. The letter was naturally tremendously encouraging to me.

In fact, his kind gesture made such a profound impression that, in later years, I now and then take time to emulate Phil's example, sending a little note of encouragement to some newcomer by way of, as it were, passing along Phil's good deed.

I don't expect to surprise my readers this late in the book, of course, with the information that a great many comedians are relatively withdrawn in private life, but I think the difference between Phil's professional self and his offstage self is more pronounced than in any other comedian I know. On stage Phil is loud, brash, fairly oozing with confidence and back-slapping geniality. In a living room you notice that his face is really a sad one, unless he is smiling, and that, if he talks about himself, he is apt to be dispensing a bit of rather melancholy philosophy. Occasionally newspapermen, noting the Jekyll-Hyde streak in a prominent comedian, make the error of assuming that one or the other of his personalities is not "real." One part of Phil is just as genuine as the other. Nor is he amusing only on stage. He is certainly not the death-of-the-party type. In fact, his Hollywood career is memorable to Phil chiefly for the fact that he was always in great demand as a parlor entertainer. He still bridles at the recollection of the several years he spent in Hollywood, entertaining at the village's most important homes, convulsing producers who always seemed to give juicy roles to *other* comedians.

"Oh, I made a lot of pictures," says Phil, "but I always seemed to play the same part. I was always Blinky, the hero's friend, who in the last reel told Betty Grable that the guy really loved her."

Phil entertains at parties not by dazzling Fred Allenish displays of extemporaneous wit but by performing certain "bits" and specialty numbers in much the same way he would on a night-club floor. Like Milton Berle, against whom fate has pitted him during the past season, Phil is a veteran of clubs and vaudeville theaters. Also like Berle, he is supremely polished at handling an audience. But whereas Milton, because of his many years as a vaudeville single, still retains his monologue style, even in sketches, Phil, trained in burlesque, is the champ at sketch technique. Like Bob Hope and Jack Benny, he is an artist in the matter of comic timing.

For all his easygoing spirit Phil is a powerhouse on stage. More vigorous than Hope, he even approaches the physical dynamism of Berle. More than one Broadway musical has coasted to box-office success on the strength of his electric vitality. I saw *Top Banana* opening night, Phil in the starring role. A few months later I saw the show with Jack Carter playing Phil's part and realized for the first time what an imperfect production it was.

The comparisons to Hope and Berle are not random, by the way. Phil, for all that he won a 1956 Emmy as the "Best Actor in a Continued Program," is not really an actor in the sense that Jackie Gleason and Jack Benny are. Phil was not particularly effective in motion pictures for the reason that he is basically a *performer,* an *entertainer.* Ideally he needs a live audience to work to as certainly as a musician needs his instrument. He is superb as Sgt. Bilko, the genial con man, not because he brings a sense of realism to the portrayal, as does Gleason to his Ralph Kramden, but rather because he invests the part with a marvelously happy, hokey, burlesque-comic polish. Phil's acting always seems to be just that—*acting*

—but it is always vital, always funny. In a very fundamental way it is something like the acting of Bert Lahr and Bobby Clark despite the many obvious differences between Phil's work and the method of these two veteran stage clowns.

This quality of make-believeness, by the way, allows Phil to indulge in a certain type of humor that audiences will not tolerate from most comedians: the comedy of boasting. Strong dramatic comedians risk offending if they manifest conceit, and comedians of the Fred Allen–Jack Paar–Henry Morgan type dare not, even in the most obvious jest, appear overconfident for the reason that audiences truly believe them; they are appearing "as themselves," not as make-believe characters, and in reality conceit is never amusing.

Phil, however, can stand up at a show like the Emmy Award program and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, I shall be brief tonight. I am perhaps the most amusing man here . . . but I shall be brief." He can say a thing like that because of the marvelous air he has of *playing*. We know he doesn't mean it, so we roar at the simple audacity of the remark; the joke loses its potentially unpleasant sting.

At benefits, in Broadway shows, on night-club floors, Phil often assumes the pose of the conceited ham, and we accept it in something like the same way we will accept a boast from Jimmy Durante, Abe Burrows, Joe Frisco, Gene Baylos, Joe E. Lewis, or others of their type. These are not "gentlemen" comics; their speech retains an earthy New Yorkishness. They seem to be grown-up pool-room habitués, card sharps, race-track touts, "regular guys," for all in reality they may be intelligent and/or well educated. So when they act uppity we react the way we did when in the far-gone past one of the neighborhood drugstore cowboys would tip his hat down

over his eyes and polish the fingernails of his right hand on his dirty jacket and "put on the dog" just for the hell of it, just to be cute. We take it, to put it most simply, because we know they don't mean it. We "know" we are superior to them, so we will be tolerant of their posturing and reward them with a sort of affectionate regard that we will often withhold from comedians to whom we feel inferior, subconsciously or otherwise.

With typical modesty Phil claims that his humorous creativity pertains only to routines and bits of business, not to funny lines as such. He asserts also that he cannot ad lib, but those who know him will disagree. He is perhaps not quite in the Fred Allen or Groucho Marx class when it comes to off-the-cuff wit, but some of the lines that have occurred to him under fire are often quoted by other comics with great admiration. One time, for example, he was booked to appear at a formal Washington, D.C., function which boasted as honored guests President Eisenhower, members of the Cabinet, the Congress and the Supreme Court. "I was pretty nervous before the show," Phil recalls, "and then I stepped into the middle of the room, surrounded by all these important people—the President and everybody—and I just stood there looking around at all of them for a long time. And then I said, 'My God, who's minding the store?' "

In 1951 a musical called *Make a Wish* failed on Broadway. One of the reasons given was that it lacked a good score. The show did evidence, however, strikingly handsome production effects. "So all right," Phil philosophized, "people will go out of the theater humming the costumes."

When Phil deprecates his ad-libbing ability, by the way, it must be understood that he is referring to the matter of

creating jokes spontaneously, for at thinking on his feet, saying the right and funny thing at the right time, he is a true craftsman. Sparring with an audience is ninety-five per cent a matter of throwing old punches anyway, but comparatively few comedians are well equipped for it.

Phil, because of his extensive experience, is a smoothly oiled joke machine on stage, rarely if ever making a false move. Besides being an art, comedy is a business, and Phil knows its technicalities as well as any performer alive. At the Emmy Awards dinner, when Mary Martin received in absentia a citation for her performance in *Peter Pan,* her charming daughter went to the dais to receive the trophy. After thanking the audience she said, "My mother is in South America right now, and Mr. Phil Silvers said to say that she would have been here tonight but the wire broke."

The joke was not a new one as of that particular evening, but it was an example of Phil's gift for knowing when to say what.

Phil's good judgment is also evidenced by his selecting the format of his television show as that best suited to his abilities as well as to current trends of TV comedy.

It is fascinating that the state of war or the preparation for it, being so morally base, so animalistic, should give rise to so much humor; and yet it is not puzzling, for comedy, as noted earlier, is often the reverse side of tragedy or is a special way of looking at it. So it is that not only are men able to laugh at war but in our civilization war seems actually to stir up a people's sense of humor along with their other emotional activities. War, or the fear of it, calls forth a nation's best efforts in industrial production, agriculture, the sciences and

the arts, and the humorist is often moved to creative heights under its spur.

The First World War had its popular vaudeville sketches, its innumerable motion-picture "doughboy" comedies, and its "Dere Mable." The Second World War proved a boon to all radio comedians, a commercial benefit to Hollywood, and brought to Broadway such successes as *Over Twenty-one, Margin for Error, The Voice of the Turtle, This Is the Army, Winged Victory, Call Me Mister, Mr. Roberts* and *South Pacific.* It was the war, too, which brought to our attention such humorists as Marion Hargrove and Bill Mauldin. In connection with the Korean campaign Mac Hyman's book *No Time for Sergeants* comes to mind. In play form it is currently Broadway's funniest. So it will be seen that in creating "You'll Never Get Rich" for Phil Silvers, Nat Hiken has not trod any jungle paths through the land of humor but has struck out in a well-defined, well-traveled and eminently satisfactory direction.

Because Hiken is such a vital member of Sgt. Bilko's battalion (one might really refer to him as its commanding officer) it is necessary, I think, to pay him detailed attention. Nat not only created the Sgt. Bilko show; he produces and stages it and writes about ninety per cent of its script. He is the first to point out, however, that he does not wish to continue to be a one-man production machine. Since the project took concrete form last year he has tried over two dozen writers in hopes of being able to give his own typewriter a rest, but as of spring 1956 he was still forced to do the bulk of the work.

"This is an unusual script," he has explained to J. P. Shanley of *The New York Times.* "There are practically no gags. It's all Phil. I know what he will do with a line that doesn't

look particularly funny on paper. It's a hard thing for other writers to visualize. For most comedy writers, the joke is the safest thing. And a new writer is not likely to give you visual comedy. He doesn't realize that in TV the joke comes after the visual laugh. The gag is a clean-up. Television came in after twenty-five years of jokes on radio. Right from the start there were monologists on TV. Even the best of them didn't last with monologues alone. They needed action. Things had to move."

Oddly enough, for a writer who today emphasizes physical comedy and the humor of situation, Hiken started in gag-dom's big time by working seven years for Fred Allen. He also labored three years in Milton Berle's employ. Some of his most creative and distinctive work, however, was done during the three years he wrote the Martha Raye show. Martha, who is probably our funniest comedienne, was at her peak performing Nat's material and has suffered somewhat since his departure from her staff.

In preparing for Phil Silver's introduction to television CBS gave Silvers and Hiken a contract and told the two of them to come around when they'd decided what kind of show they wanted to do. They moved into Nat's cold-water West Side office and began considering dozens of formats. For a while they toyed with the idea of having Phil play the manager of a minor-league baseball team; Phil has always been a rabid sports fan and likes to hobnob with athletes. But baseball seemed too limiting, so they thought of making Phil the proprietor of a gymnasium where actors and prize fighters might logically mingle. Then they gave some thought to that stock comedy type, the gabby brother-in-law. Somewhere in a maelstrom of ideas—some good, some bad—the Army idea popped

up. "When Nat first thought of it," Phil says, "I didn't like it, believe it or not, but it had one major quality in its favor—it wasn't show business. I'm fed up with comedies about show business."

For a time Nat and Phil veered away from the Army situation. Eventually they picked it up again and created Sgt. Ernie Bilko, who bamboozles the world with a big smile, a phony line of patter and a streak of larceny which is made palatable by Phil's gift for being likable and sympathetic. They salvaged the gymnasium idea by casting as Bilko's Army buddies a number of ex-fighters: Middleweight Walter Cartier, Lightweight Maxie Shapiro, manager Jack Healy, and others. These worthies give the cast an earthy Army-private sort of realism. They are leavened by such pros as Harvey Lembeck and Herbie Faye.

There is evidence, however, that both Phil and Hiken are aware that the specter of TV's mortality rate could eventually force them to make drastic changes in the show's format.

"I think maybe one of these days Bilko could get out of the Army," Phil says. "This is the only way I know of to beat the TV jinx which drains a comedian and his material right out of existence. Of course," he adds, "that would give us a problem, because the general approach I use, on this show in particular, is to knock down authority. That appeals to practically everybody."

Hiken and Silvers showed wisdom, of course, in making Bilko a sergeant. As a private he would have lacked all authority and thus almost all opportunity to put his grandiose schemes into action. As an officer he would have been authority and would have therefore been unable to play the underdog. As a sergeant he can function on that happy middle ground from which he can attack both those above him and

those below him. At first it might surprise the student of comedy to learn that Phil can be funny and sustain sympathy by taking advantage of his inferiors, but the solution to the puzzle lies, I think, in his burlesque technique. Many of his funniest stage bits involve his trying to teach a stupid colleague some simple thing. In these situations the audience laughs at both the ignorance of the supporting player and the overbearing audacity of the comedian. Another good example of this sort of relationship is that between Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton. Ralph is dumb but Ed is dumber. Ralph is ridiculous but Ed is more so. Laurel and Hardy approached comedy from this direction, unlike Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis or Abbott and Costello, who exemplify the smart-guy–dumb-guy relationship.

The Army-life setup is a natural for humorous rebellion against authority, and Phil knows that if he worked in mufti the scripts would have to dig a little deeper to tap this same sort of vein. The present popularity of his show indicates that he can probably put the problem out of his mind for about another three years. For one thing, he keeps his show filmed many weeks in advance, a circumstance made possible by the fact that CBS's confidence in "You'll Never Get Rich" was so great that twenty-one programs were in the can before the network even bothered to solicit sponsors. They tell a funny story about this situation. There was so much speculation as to just who would end up buying Phil that Silvers himself called up Jackie Gleason and said, "Look, Jackie, you've just signed an eleven-million-dollar contract. Why don't *you* sponsor my show?" Jackie said, "Well, Phil, that sounds like a pretty good idea, but how about the commercials? What would we say in the commercials?" Phil said, "Oh, that's easy. We'll just say 'Jackie Gleason is *good* for you.' "

Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis—speaking of funny stories—love to tell about the time they were working at the Copacabana, the night club that occupies the basement of the hotel Phil was living in. Thrashing around in the throes of insomnia one morning about two o'clock, Phil remembered that Dean and Jerry were starring in the show downstairs. Putting on slippers and a robe, he left his apartment, got into the elevator and went down to the club, where the boys were in the wildest part of their act. Walking sleepily to the microphone, Phil lifted a hand for attention. Jerry and Dean dropped their jaws and stared. The club fell silent. "Fellas," Phil said softly, "could you hold it down a little? I'm upstairs trying to sleep." Then he walked off and went back to bed. Dean and Jerry consider this the funniest single bit of business they ever saw a performer do on an ad-lib basis.

Only a man with Phil's wide experience could have felt at ease on a night-club floor in his pajamas. Born in 1911 of poor Russian parents, he grew up in the toughest section of Brooklyn and, at the age of thirteen, joined the famous vaudeville act "Gus Edward's School Days." For over a year he trouped with Edwards as a boy soprano, and then one day his voice broke and he was out of the business. At the time he regarded it as a tragedy to leave the stage for the schoolroom, but his voice was left with a comical crack and before long he was back working with a vaudeville team named Morris and Campbell who needed a boy in their act. There followed several years of vaudeville, borscht-belt appearances and two-reel movies, during which he developed his stage technique. Then in 1934 he started a five-year stint in burlesque. Phil admits now to close friends of being secretly ashamed at the rawness of some of the bits he was obliged to work in and also will poo-poo the common belief that burlesque was a

wonderful playground for comedians. "Baloney," Phil says. "Guys came to burlesque to see the strippers take their clothes off. Years and years ago maybe it was different, but in the thirties, when the comedians were on, some of the audience would read newspapers. A comic had to be real dirty to make them stop reading."

When the chance presented itself Phil was glad to break out of burlesque and into the legitimate theater by way of a musical called *Yokel Boy*. His reviews in this production were so good that he was called to Hollywood by M-G-M. His career marked time, more or less, until he returned to Broadway in *High Button Shoes,* a good musical that he made seem great. By the time he appeared in *Top Banana* he was a Broadway star of the first magnitude. TV waited with open arms until he decided he was ready. There is something ironic, incidentally (in the light of Phil's bumping Milton Berle from the top of the TV heap during the past season), in the fact that in *Top Banana* Phil played the part of a noisy, overbearing TV comedian who ran his rehearsals like a traffic cop, laughed off insinuations that he stole other people's jokes and was, in other words, modeled on Berle. Far from taking offense at the characterization, Milton was immensely flattered. Opening night I saw him almost fall out of his seat laughing at the characterization, and during intermission as we passed in the lobby he said with mock seriousness, "I wonder who they're doing up there?" His reaction to the satire, of course, showed Milton's great good sense. He and Phil are friends of long standing.

Phil is sorry that his own success meant trouble for Milton. "We're not trying to bump anybody off," he has said. "We're just trying to do a good show."

While I agree that "You'll Never Get Rich" is a fine pro-

gram, I think the press has erred in considering the Tuesday-night situation a Silvers–Berle battle. Milton, because of the fact that he has been on TV for so many years, was ripe to fall from his high position even if his program had improved. Jackie Gleason's "Honeymooners" seem funnier to me in this '55–'56 season than they ever did, but Gleason is having rating trouble simply because Perry Como is on opposite him with a new program and a budget large enough to afford top-name guest stars. I am sometimes amused at the lengths to which critics will go to try to "fathom" the mysterious reasons for the success of a show like Perry's or like Ed Sullivan's. Perry is a wonderful singer and a kind man. Ed is lovable and friendly. But if either of them ever tried to hold up a show more or less alone, in short order Ed would find himself back at his typewriter and Perry would be back doing his old quarter-hour musical show. Both shows simply have the budget to hire top-grade performers, and in addition Perry has good assistance from his writers. A successful variety show is actually the easiest form of entertainment to produce for television. But I digress. The broader point I am making is that when two good shows are on the air at the same time they will hurt each other and neither of them will be in the top ten. Put Berle opposite a symphony broadcast or a dramatic show next season and he'll be right back where he was.

In another season or two, TV being the cut-throat industry it is, I suppose people will be trying to knock off Phil Silvers. Whether they do or not, Phil will still be Phil. He will still be one of our great comics. In about four years when the jackals begin howling for his skin, I suggest you take out this chapter and read it again. Television is such a terrible grinding machine that we occasionally have to be reminded of just how great our great comedians are.

Red Skelton

RED SKELTON is one of the great clowns of our time. I cannot imagine why he is having trouble with television. But this chapter cannot end with this sentence, so I will try.

Red did not slip into TV, like many of us, from below. He entered it from the top down. That made it tougher for him to be accepted, as it has for Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Fred Allen.

Red was so good on the radio, so funny in pictures (when they were good pictures), that most of us could hardly wait to see him on TV. When we finally did I think we had oversold ourselves. "The Berles and the Gleasons and all the rest who were not successful on radio and in pictures," people said to themselves, "are doing okay in television. But just you wait until the real giants step into the medium. Just you wait till Hope, and Benny, and Skelton, and Fred Allen roll up their sleeves and go to work. Then you'll see something." Nobody can follow a build-up like that. We were expecting too much. If we got anything short of sensational it wasn't good enough.

It just may be, of course, that the giants stayed out too long. A lot of big people stayed out of radio so long, afraid to get

their feet wet, that when they were finally willing to visit the medium nobody particularly cared. New stars had been created and there just wasn't any demand for all the old-timers from the theater, vaudeville and night clubs. There just wasn't room for everybody.

It was the same thing when motion pictures first came along. A great many stars of the theater chose to bide their time, to make pictures only after it became important to make pictures. Alas, when the stars finally informed Hollywood that the time was ripe, Hollywood sent back word that it wasn't interested. Hollywood had made its own stars. So did radio. So does television.

Now as to Skelton: What has he to offer television?

A great deal, I think. Physically he is one of the funniest men in the world. With the possible exception of Leon Errol, nobody else has ever been able to give such a wonderful impression of a drunk trying to walk across a room. Skelton's struggle with gravity, his breath-taking battle with his equilibrium, always fractures his audience. His face, too, is his fortune. An attractive face in repose, it becomes a true mask of comedy with very little distortion. Combined with Red's knack of twisting a hat into the right sort of shape to match a particular facial expression, it is a tremendously valuable plus. Skelton, by the way, is one of the few remaining comics who goes in much for the hat business. Ted Healy used to get a lot of mileage out of a hat. Joe Penner couldn't work without one. Burlesque comedians have long known the value of a funny hat. Ed Wynn and Jimmy Durante are two more tried-and-true hat men. Skelton does a lot with his hat. When he's not turning it upside down to give a sort of Harvard mortarboard effect, he's rounding out the crown and pulling

it down over his ears to establish the idea that he's intoxicated. Or else he's apt just to be fondling it, using it the way some comedians use a cigar or a microphone, just as something to play with while they move from one idea or sketch to another.

Another physical stand-by with Skelton is his ability to take a fall. His falls into orchestra pits are famous, and TV audiences took a long time to tire of the routine in which, while trying to say good night in front of a curtain, Red is suddenly yanked from sight by two men who reach under the velvet, grab his ankles and pull back hard. His drunk's falls, too, are classics. A friend once asked me just what was so funny about a man falling down.

Well, it's all in the way you look at it, and I'm not beating around the bush. It's not funny if a baby falls down. It's cute, or sad, or normal, but it's not really funny. What distinguishes a man from a baby then? What quality does he have that makes his falling funny? I think it's his dignity. A baby has a great many things but it has no dignity. Only a mature adult can have dignity, and every adult has some shred of it. When he falls down he momentarily loses it. Skelton's comedy makes much of defects and ugliness and falling down and stumbling and getting seasick and looking cross-eyed. These things all represent a loss of man's normal stature, and the loss, if it is sudden enough, shocks us in a pleasant way. When you are shocked in a pleasant way you laugh. Every time.

Another factor in Skelton's favor is that he is not weak "as himself." A great many top comics are strong only when in a sketch or playing a part. Sid Caesar and Jackie Gleason, to name only two, are both happier when they are in character. They rarely are amusing when standing close to the footlights, being "themselves." Skelton, on the other hand, is a fine

sentence. While Skelton is perfectly capable of ad-libbing his way out of an awkward situation, it is a fact that many of the "mistakes" that occur on his programs (such as stagehands forgetting props, characters forgetting lines or getting their tongues twisted) are written into the script, along with a suitable "ad lib" for Red. Perhaps TV audiences are finally becoming aware of the lack of genuine spontaneity in these asides, which is, in a way, something of a shame, since the device served Skelton so well for many years on radio. Television has a way, however, of demanding the more legitimate approach.

It is an axiom of the TV-comedy business that the less realistic you are the bigger your jokes have to be. If you're not being at least a little true to life, your script has to blast a laugh out of the audience every few seconds because their emotions are not much involved. But, if the audience is intensely interested in *what happens* to your characters, they will laugh amiably at almost any little joke you sprinkle the story line with. Consider for a moment the case of Mr. Peepers. His adventures resolved really into a dramatic presentation. A Mr. Peepers script rarely contained a good, rich, belly laugh, but it was delightful nonetheless. Once you became interested in what was going to happen to Robinson Peepers and his friend Wes and their colleague Mrs. Gurney, you were a push-over for any little quip that fell from their mouths. But when you're watching Skelton it's got to be one big joke after another or your interest lags. Skelton is actually being funnier, in a sense, but you're not laughing as much.

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stand-up comedian. He is a good storyteller and handles one-liners, as they are called in the trade, better than most. He is not quite as adept with an opening monologue as Bob Hope, or as quick at playing on an audience's weak spots as Milton Berle, but his ability to address an audience directly and amusingly is widely respected.

Red is also a much better dramatic actor than the average comedian and he brings to television an established line of comic characters. Clem Cadiddlehopper, Cauliflower McPugg and the others are already established favorites with millions of fans.

A TV producer, discussing Skelton's characters recently, said, "They were all sure-fire on radio, but only time will tell whether or not they'll hold up for television audiences."

That the question should even be raised points up an interesting difference between radio and TV. For some reason, not as yet clearly defined, television comedy calls for more realism. On radio Jerry Colonna could say, "Well, here we are on the moon," and the imaginations of listeners would go to work and construct a complete set in their mind's eye. But on television the imagination is not a help, it's a hindrance.

So, too, with a character like the Mean Wittle Kid, audiences could visualize a three-foot brat of any particular form that appealed to them. On TV the eye is merciless. The imagination cannot function: the character goes down the drain. If the late lamented Fanny Brice were still with us she would have the same problem with her Baby Snooks character. There was a different Snooks in the mind of each of the millions of listeners whom Fanny entertained so wonderfully, but there was never any actual physical Snooks that would have had a future in television.

Parenthetically, I actually heard talk a couple of years ago that one of the major networks was talking about producing the Snooks package with an adult in the title role. After a few weeks a vice-president with intelligence happened to hear about this particular idea. It was taken off the drawing boards and referred to the nearest wastebasket. The adult involved, by the way, was the very clever Audrey Meadows, who has worked so successfully with Jackie Gleason. Presumably the producers hoped to find some nine-foot actors to work in the Snooks property with the five-foot-four Miss Meadows.

On this somewhat negative note we now arrive at a close examination of the reasons that seem to be militating against Red Skelton's full success in TV. His characters, in the main, lack realism. There are a few successful comedy characters that lack realism, to be sure, but the characters that score most heavily are those that have the closest semblance to reality.

Jackie Gleason, for example, is most successful as Ralph Kramden, the bus driver, less successful as Reginald Van Gleason, the baggy-pants playboy. Red Buttons and Milton Berle are two other comedians who have indicated over the past few seasons that they have come to an understanding of the importance of realism. TV audiences will laugh at exaggeration and fantasy, but when it comes to an enlistment of their emotions they find it impossible to become seriously involved with an entirely make-believe character. At the risk of belaboring the point, I cannot help observing that Gleason never destroys the realism of a sketch by an aside to the audience, whereas a great part of Skelton's comedic approach in a sketch is the "ad-libbing" he directs toward his studio audience.

There is a reason for the quotation marks in the foregoing

sentence. While Skelton is perfectly capable of ad-libbing his way out of an awkward situation, it is a fact that many of the "mistakes" that occur on his programs (such as stagehands forgetting props, characters forgetting lines or getting their tongues twisted) are written into the script, along with a suitable "ad lib" for Red. Perhaps TV audiences are finally becoming aware of the lack of genuine spontaneity in these asides, which is, in a way, something of a shame, since the device served Skelton so well for many years on radio. Television has a way, however, of demanding the more legitimate approach.

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Another low card that Red holds is his habit of laughing at himself. I found this out quite by accident one night while

watching one of his broadcasts. The living room was full of people. About every fifth joke Red would join the audience in a brief appreciation of it. He would pretend to try to go on with his lines, but would be overcome by his risibilities and would succumb to a brief fit of the giggles.

"I wish he wouldn't do that all the time," one of the women in the room said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Laugh like that," the woman said. "He was there for rehearsal. He's heard these jokes all week. What's he laughing now for? A comedian is only entitled to laugh at an ad lib or a mistake."

There followed a very unofficial survey, which revealed that about fifty per cent of Red's audience wished he would just tell the jokes and let the audience do the breaking up. This is a habit, though, which Red may find hard to overcome. It's wrapped up with his manner of delivery. He's a *happy* comedian on stage. He smiles and laughs a lot. He enjoys himself. Once in a while, for all I know, maybe he really *does* get the giggles.

A great many comedians, especially those who have worked, as Red has, in vaudeville, employ the giggle device as a cover-up and a come-on. In a big theater it sometimes takes a second or two for an audience to absorb a joke and respond to it. Lots of comedians fill that empty spot with some sort of nervous mannerism. George Burns and Ken Murray wiggle their cigars, Bob Hope pretends to be sailing right into the next sentence, although he rarely says more at such times than "I-uh" or "but I really." Some comics (for example, Pinky Lee) make a sort of grunting or chuckling noise to cover the

unbearable silence before the laugh comes. If Skelton is to break this habit it'll be a struggle and before he even tries I suppose he should take his own survey.

But perhaps all this theorizing is mere quibbling. The great important fact still stands out clear and undeniable: Red Skelton is funny. Not only is he funny on stage but he is funny off. He is funny to his very soul. The rehearsals for his programs are often so riotous that they disrupt the workday schedule at CBS's television studios in Hollywood. Executive scoldings finally had to be put up on office bulletin boards forbidding workers to leave their desks during Red's dress rehearsals, between 3:00 and 4:00 P.M.

Red is no mere comedy actor but a natural clown who is "always on." While he is generally described as a visual, physical comic, he also has a sharp knack for the humor of words and ideas. His squelch of a night-club drunk several years ago—"You show possibilities of developing into a total stranger"—is still being quoted. Recently, in dressing down, with tongue in cheek, a prop man on his show named Martella, he said, "Listen, Martella, you're not important around here. You're really just a myth. Mith Martella." When he tripped over a prop rock while walking off stage he ad-libbed, "Whaddya know, one of Liberace's fillings."

The son of a circus clown who died before Red was born, Skelton has been making people laugh since he was a child. "When I was ten years old," he recalls, "I went to a medicine show in my home town of Vincennes, Indiana. I told the head man I wanted to work for him, singing or something, but the Doc had no ear for music and he sent me out into the crowd to hustle his bottles of elixir. Running back to the plat-

form for a new supply, I tripped on the steps and took a nose dive. It got a big laugh and I was hired. As a diver!"

His earlier career encompassed practically every possible facet of show business. Showboats, burlesque, marathon dances, vaudeville, and finally radio, pictures and television have all proven grist to Skelton's mill.

I remember the first time I saw him. I was about fifteen years old. He was playing the Chicago theater, headlining, doing his famous doughnut bit. This involved sitting at a table, showing the various methods people employ to dunk doughnuts. (There was the sneaky dunker, who looked around to make sure nobody was watching and then slid the cruller furtively into the cup. There was the "Oh, look what I did" type who pretended "accidentally" to drop the whole doughnut into the cup.) During this bit Red used to eat about eight or ten doughnuts. Doing five shows a day—well, you can see why his doctor finally had to order him to cut the routine from his act. Fortunately, he had plenty of others. One, his Guzzler's Gin monologue, in which he gives an impression of an announcer doing a commercial for a brand of gin, is a true comedy classic. After each paean to the gin, the announcer takes a little sip. Naturally he soon is too drunk to speak clearly. The result is hilarious, whether you're seeing the bit for the first or the fiftieth time.

Red frequently employs food or drink as a comedy prop. One of his greatest sketches involves his role as a starving tramp who is mistaken for an actor *dressed* as a tramp. The actor doesn't show up and Red is shoved into the breach. The first scene is supposed to take place at a restaurant table and the comedy reaches great heights as Red tries to eat the food

on the table, but the director keeps insisting that he forget the food and concentrate on the business at hand, which involves welcoming a girl who plays the role of a starving waif. Red finally goes berserk from hunger and does one of the funniest bits of pantomime I've ever seen when he picks up the girl's hand and mistakes it for a piece of chicken. His business of separating the fingers as if they were chicken bones and picking out the imaginary pieces of meat from between them is a comedy delight.

Unfortunately, sketches this strong cannot be written every week; from the very first a great many of Red's difficulties have stemmed from that old bugaboo, a shortage of strong material.

"In my first year on TV," says Red, "I used up a hundred and sixty-five routines. Some of it was stuff I'd spent years putting together."

One of the reasons Red has a material problem is that his comedy is, as mentioned before, relatively unrealistic. It's broad, burlesquey, sketchy. That means all the jokes have to be big, all the blackouts have to be strong. With the more realistic approach you can coast along by combining comedy with some semblance of story line, with a dash of character interest thrown in for good measure.

Another reason Skelton has had a tough row to hoe is that he's pretty much the whole show by himself. Jackie Gleason depends heavily on Art Carney and Audrey Meadows. Sid Caesar needs a comedienne and Carl Reiner and Howard Morris. Even Bob Hope will not do a show without an important guest star or two. But Red, although he sometimes employs supporting players and guests, has never built up a cast of people upon whom he could depend for help as have Jack

Benny and Milton Berle and others. He had some characters helping him out on radio, but they never really panned out as pure gold and they didn't survive the move to television.

Red isn't sure precisely how to lick the problem. Like many a funnyman, he's got emotional problems that sometimes complicate his professional activity. He hates to sit for portrait photographers, he uses ten cigars a day but never smokes them, he lives in the sports-clothes capital of the world but never wears sports clothes, and he hates to use the telephone.

Everybody likes Red, though; in fact, he's one of the few comedians in the business for whom nobody seems to have a bad word. And the public likes him, too. They seem to be rooting for him as, week after week, he comes smiling onto their TV screens. I think it would be a shame if Red ever went off television to stay. He is still one of our greatest clowns. His tramp character is not only classically funny; it has tender Chaplinesque pathos when Red's writers remember to call the quality to the fore. Perhaps CBS ought to throw some top-bracket production help into Skelton's camp. He's too rare and valuable a property to be wasted.

In Closing . . .

Some of those to whom I early showed this manuscript professed to be puzzled by my choice of subjects. "Why," they said, "did you leave out Danny Thomas? Why not a chapter on Martha Raye or Gracie Allen?"

Why indeed? The sixteen men I've written about are not *necessarily* the funniest or the most important. They are just men concerning whom I found I had a certain number of things to say. Many of my personal favorites (Martha, George and Gracie, Victor Borge, Jonathan Winters, Herb Shriner) are not included. Perhaps I shall write another volume.

Purists may want to point out that in the body of this treatise I have frequently digressed and wandered off down pathways of strictly personal speculation and recollection. Very well, let them point. The book was not meant to be a text. My intentions were informal. And I trust, in attempting this work at all, that I have not seemed to be setting myself up as an "authority." Such was not my intention. I simply love my work. The field of comedy fascinates me. I love to talk about it. I own a typewriter. That's the way books happen.

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About the Author

STEVE ALLEN *is a bespectacled young writer who wandered into television a few years ago and is now faced with one big problem: how to find enough time to write. The networks keep him so busy that he has difficulty also in finding time to write songs, finish a novel he's working on, get his hair cut regularly, appear in motion pictures and the legitimate theater, play the piano, and be a father to his three sons and a husband to his charming wife, Jayne Meadows.*

Somehow, however, he manages to keep up with all these activities. Several years ago he wrote a series of columns for Down Beat *magazine that attracted nationwide attention and eventually grew into the stories included in his book,* Bop Fables. *Last year he published a collection of short stories,* Fourteen for Tonight. *This year, in addition to writing* The Funny Men, *appearing on his television show and doing a regular monthly column for* Cosmopolitan *magazine, he starred in the Universal-International movie,* The Benny Goodman Story.