

THE WISECRACK AND THE GAG

By Walter Winchell

WHEN big time vaudeville was downtown or where Mr. Keith's Union Square Theater used to be in New York, no bill was complete without that pair who swapped this one: "If you had eleven apples and twelve horses how would you divide the apples evenly among the twelve horses?"

To which the "straight man" or the comedian's partner would respond: "I don't know, Ignatz. How would you evenly divide eleven apples among twelve horses?"

"Why you simply make applesauce!" was the answer and if the auditors didn't fall right out of their chairs at that joke then the next generation employed the tag line of the old reliable to squelch a braggart or an opinion with which they didn't concur.

So great an army of entertainers employed the applesauce gag that it became the butt for derisive comment. It was in a class with: "Who was that lady I seen you with yesterday?" or "Why does a chicken, etc." In 1925 A.D., a ham who had been laying off in front of the Palace Theater in New York for six months was offering an alibi to a group of flip talkers.

"So I says to my agent, the hell with them. Joe Zilch ain't in this business for the glory. No sir, he's in it for the dough, see? It ain't billing or what dressing room or what spot I get. It's how much money is there in it for little Joe and so when they make up their mind that I don't work for coffee and cake dough li'l Joe will go to work for them."

"Applesauce," said someone in the gathering and another wisecrack was born. The flapper incorporated it into her routine of sassy answers, the collegiate passed it along to his townsfellows via letters and even the small time and the big time players "laughed off" a joke that failed to receive warm response from audiences by twitting themselves with: "So we made applesauce!"

If anything makes the rounds of a com-

munity swifter than a rumor it is the "wisecrack". After it has been swapped by a few wags and the local telegrapher hears it and likes it, he gives it momentum by passing it along to the keyman at San Francisco, Keokuk, North Adams or Canarsie. Often the wisecrack becomes popular enough to make an entire "popular" song which is how "Yes We Have No Bananas!" sold more sheet music than any other ditty.

The creator of that line was T. A. Dorgan ("Tad") whose cartoons are famous. Tad employs it to this day in the corner of his sports pictures and it invariably is placed in the mouth of a mouse or a roach. Tad never received any recognition for the line from the song publishers who made several hundred thousands of dollars on the pattern. A pair of obscure songwriters took advantage of the popularity of the crack, fashioned a ridiculous lyric around it to which they added a melody that the Salvation Army is famous for and bang! Just like that — the greatest song hit ever known was registered.

From "Yes We Have No Bananas" was conceived "Banana Oil", another flip remark employed first by another cartoonist, Milt Gross, who fashioned a daily comic strip after the line. It, too, was employed chiefly to stifle a boaster or replace "That's the bunk!" but it never attained the fame necessary to be fashioned into a song, that is, this recorder doesn't recall such a number. "So's your old man!" — also used to crush a tale-teller — was born out of a smoking-car story.

A fare hailed a hansom cab on a London Street and instructed the driver to fetch him to the Bachelor's Club. Upon arrival the passenger's tip was small and the gay driver is supposed to have queried: "What club is this?"

"The Bachelor's Club," replied the fare, "why do you ask?"

"Are you a member of it?"

"I am," answered the fare, "I am a bachelor."

"So's your old man!" said the driver as he looked at the tip and drove away. A popular song was never designed after the line which belongs to American slang, but a ditty called "So's Your Old Lady" came out of it.

It is an ageless theory that there are only seven original patterns for all the jokes in the world. This may be true but it is difficult to believe, for too many quips, puns, wisecracks and stories have been conceived out of situations. A concrete example is herewith set forth.

The scene was set in a New York night club. Percy Hammond, the dramatic critic, was disparaging a newly built Broadway moving picture theater when Harry Thaw passed the table.

"Speaking of that garrish looking dump," said Hammond, "reminds me that that guy Thaw killed the wrong architect!"

The "nifty", as wisecracks or spontaneous remarks are called, drew a laugh and was recorded by a columnist the following day. Within the week it made other columns but was never credited to the same man. A fortnight later it was sold to a humorous weekly and a month later the same gag was recorded by a Hollywood correspondent who chronicled that it really was pulled by Al Jolson at the première of Sid Grauman's new Chinese Theater in Los Angeles.

In the same night club the same evening a young woman brought up the subject of drama defending and chucked a word bouquet at Mr. Hammond. She remarked: "I don't know why so many dramatic critics are so caustic in their comments. They are merciless at times, never pausing to think that their harsh views may break a player's heart. Percy Hammond, it seems, says the same cruel things but in a more amiable manner."

"Yeh," grumbled a listener, "his is venom from contented rattlesnakes!"

That was a wisecrack. It didn't take long for it to find its way into print and it swiftly made the rounds of the Broadway belt and from there it spread across the country. So renowned a writer as Samuel Hopkins Adams is said to have sold it later to a

weekly, after it was recorded in a tabloid newspaper column.

The story teller who appreciates good stories and takes them seriously is the first to revolt at the person who "ruins" a good gag, which is show business for "joke". True, not all of us are good at passing along stories, particularly when they demand dialect. Second rate dialecticians have spoiled many a genuinely comical story. Milt Gross and Harry Hershfield, incidentally, are two of the foremost and highest paid dialecticians on paper in the world, but they are amazingly disappointing in a parlor. On the other hand there are comics whose dialects are delightfully contagious but who miss the mark by a wide margin when they attempt to put dialect on paper.

Perhaps the best known jokesmith in the East is a wit who is neither an actor nor a newspaperman. He is a lingerie salesman, by name, "Pitzie" Katz. He is a household word in the mercantile business and was formerly a vaudevillian. He fortunately possesses that necessary essential known as "personality" and can keep his prospect interested in his amusing tales if not his line of merchandise. One of his first sales, they say, brought \$50,000 and the buyer was a New Orleans merchant who succumbed on one joke. The gag offered by Katz was the one about Mrs. Finkelstein who was dying. She summoned her husband to the death chamber and said:

"Max darling, I'm dying. So I sent for you, Max dear; I want to make a confession. I've been unfait'ful to you."

"You're telling me!" replied Max indifferently, "why do think I poisoned you?"

Numerous stage wits, including Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, seldom purchase stage material because Pitzie Katz and other admirers keep them supplied with the latest stories. Another Katz contribution was the gag that concerned the Rosenbaums. Mr. R. was reading a Jewish newspaper. "Yi, yi, yi," he yi-yi'd, "it says here in de paper dot in Toikey was wracked de Horiental Haxprass killing seven t'ousand Toiks and one Jewiss travelling salesman!"

"Hmmmmmm," groaned Mrs. Rosenbaum, "de poor fellow!"

Another incident that really occurred in a New York hotel foyer and which was broadcast quickly was the following: The late Sam Bernard was proudly telling a group about a dinner given in his honor. Over twelve hundred well wishers assembled to honor the comedian and it affected him.

"I never dreamed," said Bernard, "that I would live to see the day when so many people would honor me."

"Did you make a speech?" asked Lou Holtz.

"I couldn't," he said, as he pointed to his throat, "up to here I was filled with tears."

"Aw, don't pay any attention to him," kidded George Jessel. "He cries at card tricks!"

James Madison, perhaps, is better known in the show business than Joe Miller, who, it is alleged, first compiled the best jokes in a book a century or so ago. Until Madison clicked out in Hollywood he was the parent of an annual book, sold for one dollar, which contained jokes, puns, quips, repartee, monologues, dialogues and skits. It was purchased in the main by small-time players, coaches of minstrel shows and directors of private entertainments. Another book, difficult to find these days, was "The Encyclopedia of Comedy", a stout tome of some six hundred pages which outfitted the tent showmen and other entertainers during the mauve decade, but which still supplies many of the Broadway revue hits with material for sketches.

It is amusing to observe the more sensitive vaudevillians trying to claim or protect certain bits of comedy. The theatrical publications contain advertisements every week by actors who warn and threaten joke stealers that they will prosecute to "the fullest extent of the law". But they never do. They depend upon The Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association, The National Vaudeville Artists' Club, Variety (the weekly) and Washington, copyrighting their material with each bureau.

In most cases this is merely a gesture. Most actors will tell you that the copyrights do them no good and that the surest way to keep persons from infringing on their stuff is

by catching them at it when they least expect it and taking the offender out into the alley to thrash him. Even then, the culprit waits until he goes on tour again and then continues employing the "lifted" material. The actor's protective organizations, however, do what they can to halt the practice and threaten offenders with cancellation of bookings, but so many defendants usually "go away back" and offer proof that so-and-so did it for Tony Pastor that such threats are useless. The wise entertainer will try his luck at frightening his tormentors with a punch in the nose, but as one of them recently paraphrased: "What's the use? I guess my motto will be 'Live and let lift!'"

Many well known wits who make their living on the stage are a total loss off it. Take Groucho Marx of The Four Marx Brothers for instance. This capital comic refuses to entertain at private affairs or at banquets because he cannot be funny without the atmosphere of the theater. He so declared once when a master of ceremonies kept insisting that he make a few funny cracks. After begging the announcer to let him alone with "I am not funny in a dining room and will embarrass myself and the crowd", the man turned away. If you have ever enjoyed Groucho on a stage you probably won't understand his off-stage fright.

On the other hand, Arthur "Bugs" Baer, one of our most adroit newspaper paragraphers, is annoyingly stage-conscious. His pungent remarks and extemporaneous wit on a dais or in a newspaper fall flat in a playhouse. Last year Flo Ziegfeld recruited Baer to bolster up one of his attractions by making a personal appearance at an enormous salary, but the great newspaper-comedian's delivery behind the bulbs was wasted. If you have tittered, chuckled, laughed or howled at Phil Baker, Ben Bernie, Jack Osterman, Jack Benny, Julius Tannen and other stage clowns, you probably were responding to witticisms supplied by the same Mr. Baer. He feeds more entertainers with gags and wisecracks than any other humorist.

One of Baer's best flip cracks reached Ma Ferguson, ex-Governor of Texas two days after she was elected to office. The Bugs Baer observation was "Out West where men

are men and women are governors". That line flew around the country. His similes are pretty famous, too, and Gilbert Seldes labeled Baer a genius, which all of us on Broadway thought he was a decade ago.

Let it be recorded here that Baer is more modest than Lindbergh appears to be. He seldom complains when a creation of his is stolen by others. Once at the Friars' Club, a theatrical organization in New York, Baer said in a speech: "I would like to get one thing straightened out around here. I just overheard a fellow telling a gag outside and he prefaced it by saying he heard me tell it. It was an amusing quip but I never told it to him nor did I ever hear it before".

It is true, however, that many story tellers in relating gags tag the Bugs Baer label to insure a laugh and also to shelve the responsibility if it fails to get a response. Will Rogers is a puzzle to a lot of people who argue that he doesn't write "all of that stuff". The fact is that Will Rogers does write all of his own stuff and quite marvelous stuff it is. No one has ever been able to supply the name of his "ghost writer", at any rate, nor has anyone found a person who claimed to be his author. Rogers cashed in heavily some years ago with a syndicated item each day which he headed: "The Worst Story I Heard Today". It was a great title. The possibility for material was limitless, for he could use anything. His reputation, of course, excused all.

Irvin S. Cobb's humor is too well known and popular for blackballing but it is true, too, that many a gag told by Cobb got its fame only because he told it. At a cartoonist's dinner once Mayor James J. Walker of New York City said in announcing Cobb: "You lads who make your living with your pens now listen to a man who makes his by his brains!"

Cobb's introductory joke was the one about the Hebrew who refused to pay fare for his little son on a trolley. "He's only four years of age," said the father.

"Well, he looks eight!" growled the conductor.

"Can I help it if he worries?" was the retort.

That joke had been employed by almost

every guest in the dining room at least twice in his career.

Incidentally, hizzoner is quite a wag himself. But he enjoys offering the old stories. His favorite, or at least, the one he tells often concerns a former hod carrier who struck it rich and went on a holiday for a fortnight in the South where he suddenly died. At his funeral two old cronies were mourning over his remains.

"Sure and don't he look healthy?" said one Irishman.

"Why shouldn't he?" answered the other. "Didn't he jist come back from Palm Beach?" That's a bewhiskered one.

Another wag in New York who has been responsible for hundreds of wisecracks and funnyisms is Harry Hershfield, also a cartoonist. He quarreled with a former chum recently on account of a gag. It appears that at a poor performance of "Macbeth" several years ago, at the line "Lay on, MacDuff!" Hershfield, who didn't like the show, whispered to Eugene Kelcy Allen, "Lay off, McBride!" meaning of course that McBride the ticker broker should not buy in on the show.

Mr. Allen beat Hershfield to the foyer of the theater at intermission and spread the quip to the critics, all of whom employed it in their reviews of the play the following day. Hershfield paid little attention to the slight at the time, but many seasons after some writers brought the subject up again and credited Allen with the priceless tale. This burned Hershfield up and knocked him cold. He devoted an entire day to assembling those who heard him tell it to Allen that night and had them sign an affidavit to that effect. The affidavit was mailed to dramatic critics and editors. To such extremes, then, do they go these days to establish themselves as the creators of jokes. Allen contends to this day that he told the critics that Hershfield had told the joke to him.

At one time there was a clearing house on Broadway for gags and wisecracks in the office of Walter J. Kingsley, a press agent for the Keith Circuit. The Broadway mob, knowing that the office was a haven for wits and newspaper columnists, hastened there with the latest story or nifty and demanded

of Kingsley credit for the gag if it should be used by a newspaperman. Alas! Mr. Kingsley's fame for knowing a good gag when he heard one became too well known and he was instructed to conduct a column for a racing weekly; so he has become a "gag-miser".

Gags and wisecracks are at such a premium nowadays, what with so many gag-collectors in Park Row, that some of the paragraphers engage in wars over jokes. A famous quarrel concerned Bugs Baer of The New York American and F. P. A. of The New York World. Baer contended that F. P. A. had been lifting his stuff and signing phoney initials to them, making them appear as contributions. The World columnist retorted that "I'd better begin reading The American", and the matter was dropped. Two evening paper columnists are always at war over stolen material but they talk affably when they meet at premières or on the street. In their papers, however, they call each other old meanies and other silly things.

Speaking of gag wars and credit lines, an editor once counseled this upstart: "Never forget to credit the person telling you the joke. If it is an old joke or a lifted one, the blame goes to the contributor. If it is amusing the average reader won't remember the name of the contributor anyway. He'll say 'Did you see so and so's column yesterday? It had a great gag!'"

Of the cinema gag-men, Ralph Spence, they say, is the highest paid. He supplies Chaplin, Lloyd, Turpin and other stars with comedy. It is also contended that Spence possesses the greatest collection of amusing stories in the world, which he refers to now and then to fit a situation. He has a staff of several former newspapermen who read almost everything and clip for scrapbooks anything that may be revised or rewritten for a film.

Al Boasberg is probably the wittiest wisecracker in Hollywood. He formerly served vaudeville actors. A recent arrival in moving picture land is Wilson Mizner, who at one time was a Broadway playboy and that street's greatest wisecracker. Before deserting Florida for California Mizner who owned land in the south was up on charges during a

land fraud investigation. On the stand his attorney asked him:

"Did you ever tell this man that he could grow nuts on that property?"

"No," replied the wit, "I didn't tell him he could GROW nuts on it, I told him he could GO nuts on it!"

Bert Hanlon is jocularly referred to as "a gag miser" because he retails stories to his friends in the profession. Phil Baker's latest gag was purchased from Hanlon for \$100. Baker employs it with his "plant", Sid Silvers, and it is unfolded like this:

Silvers: "My brother can stay up in a balloon for days and days".

Baker: "That's against the law of gravity".

Silvers: "I know, but he went up before the law was passed".

It is probably a new joke. None of the old timers on Broadway can trace it.

To set forth further that most gags grow out of situations, there is the current tale of the Scotchman who wearied of witnessing other nation's flyers bring glory to their homelands. He got a plane and planned to fly in it from New York to Glasgow.

On the morning of the hop-off his wife asked him how many sandwiches to prepare.

"Make only one," he replied, "I may never reach there."

As a matter of fact that was what Lindbergh told someone before his famous flight.

Speaking of Scotch gags reminds this recorder that most of the allegedly new Scotch gags are re-writes on old Jew gags. When a New York fire commissioner drew the fire of aggrieved Jews in New York for telling jokes at their expense the vogue switched to the Scotch.

The easiest way to get a laugh is to ridicule something or someone. E. F. Albee, head of the B. K. Keith Vaudeville Circuit, only recently issued an edict against artists telling jokes at the expense of local trolley lines or railroads, and threatened offenders with cancellations. Albee was responsible for cleaning up vaudeville and it was his edict that banished all foul punch lines in songs and indigo jokes.

Joe Frisco is quite a wag. Ziegfeld recruited him from a Chicago rathskeller and

made him a "Follies" feature when his specialty was jazz dancing. Later he became known as a wit and his salary jumped. One of his amusing experiences has been told in this manner: Frisco applied to a café for a job and the owner asked him how much salary he wanted.

"Oh, \$1,500 a week," he replied.

"Lord," retorted the astonished restaurant man, "the President of the United States doesn't get that much!"

"I know," answered Frisco, "but he can't Charleston, either."

Frisco's wit, however, is funnier on a sidewalk when he is surrounded by other clowns and wisecrackers. An impediment in his speech is said to be phoney and used only to get a bigger laugh. This is quite true, for once when he was telephoning a girl friend in a pay station booth and waiting for the connection, a friend paused to say: "How is it you don't stutter now?"

"This is a long distance call," he said.

By way of confession, one joke that attained national fame was claimed by a comedian who accused this writer of stealing it from his routine. The story was the one about the former pants-presser who struck it rich and moved to the residential district of the city where he hoped to raise his young son free of the family dialect. He responded to a magazine advertisement which guaranteed to remove all speech imperfections within six months providing the parent and friends agreed not to see the child for six months. The dialectician agreed.

At the end of the term he called at the school.

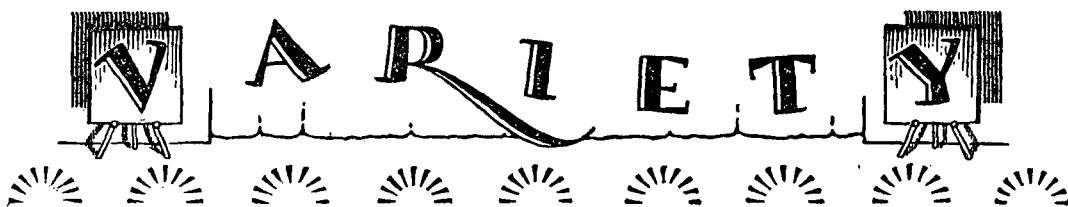
"Nu," he beamed, "how is gattink along my leetle son?"

"Splandeed," replied the professor, "hizz doong dendy!"

That gag first appeared in a Broadway column in a tabloid and was a rewrite on a joke swiped bodily from a British Humor weekly. The original concerned a boy who lisped.

There are countless clever men and women who fashion wisecracks and jokes daily but all of their names do not come at this compiling. Such wags as Jimmy Duffy, Texas Guinan, James Thornton, Paul Gerard Smith, Leo Donnelly, Jack Conway, Lou Holtz, George White, Lew Brown, Grant Clark, Bobby Clark, Fred Allen, George S. Kaufman, Marc Connelly, Arthur Kober, Russel Crouse, Robert C. Benchley, Coleman Goetz, George Jessel, Frank Sullivan, Samuel Hoffenstein, Johnny O'Connor, Sime Silverman, Andy Rice, Damon Runyon, Kalmar and Ruby and the late Tommy Gray and Aaron Hoffman were responsible for many of the best known nifties during the last ten years.

And it is a safe wager to make that any of them will subscribe to Bruno Lessing's sentiments: "There is no joke like an old joke," he said, "old jokes are always funny and when told again carry a wallop. The man who interrupts a story teller with: 'Oh I heard that before!' is the world's most unconscionable pest!"



THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

By Daniel London

BEHOLD in me the exception that proves the rule! When the writing bug bit me, I was wintering in Florida. First I bought a dozen books and subscribed to several magazines dealing with the art of writing and selling manuscripts; then I hunted up half a dozen pseudonyms of pleasing sound, bought me a new bottle of ink, and sat down to write; for I had learned from one of the magazines that the only way to write was—to write.

So I wrote — not in a niggardly, skimpy way, but in broad, sympathetic fashion — on every thing, every place, and everybody I knew anything about. The results were a surprise, even to myself. I had used up reams of paper, and, when I looked the manuscripts over, I found essays, short stories, epigrams, feature articles, fillers, fairy stories, jokes, juveniles, ballads, and even a popular song or two. Surely, this would turn out to be a veritable gold mine!

Great care had been used in the mechanical preparation of the manuscripts. I believed they were flawless. A large book was bought for keeping the record of each, with a place for the sum to be received and the cost of the stamps. After the first batch went off I did not sleep very well; it seemed so new and strange to me to be a great author. But early next morning I was at my desk again, according to schedule, working feverishly to supply the demand which the publication of my first articles would surely bring. There is nothing like *visualizing* in the writing game.

The afternoon mail brought me a magazine containing a brief article on the importance of keeping up with any changes in a

publication, such as change of name, address, editor, style, purpose, etc.; so I got out my list and began to insert all the corrections I could find in the current periodicals. This kept me occupied until evening, when I happened upon an article of human interest, which started me off on a short-story for a juvenile magazine. Thinking that a little criticism might do me no harm at this early stage, I sent the story to an expert, who returned it with these words: "Your story would be all right if you would only leave out those tiresome children".

This was the first blow — but not the last by any means. Like well-trained chickens, all my precious manuscripts came flocking home to roost. Not only the original postage, but also the stamps placed in those neat little envelopes, included for courtesy only, were a dead loss. And some of the editors had been careless enough to use heavy clips and make deep creases on my spotless sheets, which would now have to be re-typed. But I remembered the injunction, "Even to the twentieth time", and bravely put them all in order and started them off again.

All but *one*. This had not been returned and I had high hopes that it had been found "available", which gave me the necessary courage, I think, to persevere. After a month it came limping back with a tag on it stating that the magazine to which it had been sent had expired two years before in the early spring. Evidently something had been overlooked in my notes on "removals".

It was about that time that I happened upon a paragraph by a certain famous editor to the effect that he was not averse to script,