

Back of Chester's Whiskers

By Hugh Leamy

Chester Conklin knew what he wanted from the start, but the path to his goal was circuitous. For one thing, it led through a baker's shop, where he got the cue for his make-up. Later he watched Charlie Chaplin one rainy afternoon devise his on the spur of the moment

OF COURSE you could hardly say it was Mr. Schultz, the baker, who gave him the idea of becoming an actor. The worthy Mr. Schultz' mind was too completely taken up with his ovens, with the mixing of dough and batter calculated to tickle the palates of the good people of Des Moines and with the obvious incompetence of that boy Conklin whom he had retained as assistant at the weekly fee of \$4, 90 per cent of which threatened to be a total loss.

Still, Chester might well have proved a more valuable aide had not so many of his working hours been devoted to fascinated contemplation of the amazing facial adornment of his employer. The Schultz whiskers were remarkable not only in themselves but in the incredible gyrations which they performed during the course of a conversation or even a meditation over the mixing vats. And they came, in time, to furnish the inspiration for a make-up which has become—even though applied with gum arabic—an important part of Chester Conklin.

But it was while he was in school in Oskaloosa, Iowa, some years before, that Chester had set his heart on the stage. For a time he had thought seriously of the law, but that was before that day when he was assigned to do a humorous recitation, *The Dutchman's Serenade*, for the edification and delight of his schoolmates, teachers and some visiting parents. Well, sir, as they say around the National Vaudeville Artists Club, he wowed 'em with that one. And what a cost to the legal profession!

It was on the impetus of the applause which greeted this effort that Chester scurried off to Des Moines, without going through the formality of farewells and, pending a whack at the stage, apprenticed himself to Mr. Schultz, after a brief career as newsboy and bell hop.

So, you see, he probably never would have made a good baker, anyhow, even if it hadn't been for the whiskers.

And Three Dozen Limes!

As it was, however, he stuck with his new job only until he could equip himself with a crowd of mustaches as nearly like that of the German baker as crêpe hair could be and nerve enough to knock at the door of a theatrical manager's office.

He did, between the bakeshop and the theatre, outfit himself with some sort of monologue, and his confidence must have been sublime when you figure that he elected to start his career behind the footlights with the toughest kind of an act—going out cold, alone before



Anything was good for a laugh in the old Keystone Comedies. Chester Conklin, in case you don't know, is seated at the table with his head on his hand

You don't recognize him, do you? How could you in the absence of his fuzzy-wuzzy crêpe mustache and his goggle glasses? Ladies and gentlemen, meet the real Chester Conklin



an audience, and trying to make them laugh. Still, it worked. Not always smoothly or successfully, but well enough to carry him along over the bumps to ultimate stardom as a movie actor.

About Conklin today there's nothing of the \$2,500 a week movie actor. Indeed, there's little of the Chester Conklin that you know on the screen. Without the mustache and the glasses you'd never recognize him, although that peculiar swinging gait of his might strike a familiar chord.

As I hurried with him recently through crowds waiting to get into a big movie theatre over which his name was displayed in lights and into the subway and through the crowds headed for trains in the great Pennsylvania Station in New York, no one gave any sign of recognition. And why should anyone have recognized him?

The public expects the movie idols to appear off the screen in costly motor cars, modish British-made suitings and dapper hats. The stoutish little man who was briskly making his way to the platform where a private car on the Broadway Limited awaited him wore a soiled summer suit of palm beach cloth that would have snapped at an invitation to a pressing. His straw hat may have been this season's, but if it was it had been out on many a rainy night. He wore a shirt (silk, it is true) with lavender and white stripes, that bulged out over his belt and hung downward in graceful folds. It was a shirt that had been places and seen things. So had the detachable soft collar that topped it.

The train was due to leave in ten minutes or so, but we had to stop in the arcade to buy many things. To buy playing cards and cigarettes and three dozen limes. To buy some ash trays and other quite unnecessary gadgets that caught the comedian's eye—and to get a \$10 bill changed into nickels. (You've got to have small change handy to play pinochle com-

fortably.) To buy a Wall Street final and see what Anaconda had closed at and to send a telegram to Mrs. Conklin on the Coast.

All of these little errands, were Conklin a right-thinking 100 per cent, according-to-page-eight movie star, would have been attended to by a flock of secretaries. But that's what Conklin isn't. He's a likeable roughneck comic with that magic something added that makes him a screen personality, and he's not going to try to be anything else. Not at his age. He's been over the bumps too often, and they've left their dents.

The bumps started almost immediately after he had left the floury haven of Mr. Schultz' bakeshop. With a booking here and there at \$5 a night, Conklin managed to get out to the Pacific Coast.

"Chester, You're Terrible"

Not that he had any particular object in heading for the Coast. That was just the geographic direction which his bookings and routings took. And if he had heeded the advice of one able manager, he might never have known what an ocean looked like.

This friendly fellow sent for Chester after he had finished his act one night.

"Chester," he said, "I like you, and I want to do you a good turn. I want to give you a little piece of advice. Chester, get out of the business—you're terrible."

From all accounts he was. But he stuck, none the less. Maybe it was because there wasn't anything else he could do. Maybe the applause that greeted his rendition of *The Dutchman's Serenade* still jingled warmly in his ears.

In 'Frisco Conklin tried hard and long to get booking on the Levy time,

which was then regarded as the most desirable. Finally they agreed to play him and his mustache in one theatre, and if he went over they'd give him the time. Unfortunately the theatre selected—perhaps with malice—for his début under Levy auspices was on the edge of Chinatown.

"By then," says Conklin, "I'd dressed up the act a bit with a couple of comedy songs, and I thought it was pretty good. But when I walked on, all I could see was rows and rows of stolid Chinamen sitting there daring me to make 'em laugh. Did you ever try to make a Chinaman laugh?"

"Well, I went into my stuff and gave 'em *Heinz is Pickled Again*. Remember it? Well, it was very popular then. It went like this:

*"Heinz is wabbling down the street.
Vot's de matter mit Heinzie's feet?
Ach! Mein! Dot's de trubbel mit men.
Heinzie's been in fifty-seven saloons,
Und Heinz is pickled again."*

As Conklin started singing and slipped into his routine of years back, you couldn't help feeling a little bit sorry for the bored Celestials who returned him only silence for his efforts.

"The verdict was guilty. I never did get the time. So I hooked up with those other guys who were broke, and we got hold of four girls. Then we went all around town picking up any paper we could get (Continued on page 40)

Very Local Color

By Frederick Skerry

A SHORT SHORT STORY

OVERNIGHT the little tailor shop, and with it Max the Tailor, had been popped into the public eye. A gaping crowd had gathered before the door of the distracted little man. First had come the police and newspaper reporters, then the coroner and detectives, and after them more reporters and photographers, but from the first, ever changing, never relaxing, was the crowd, waiting, staring. After the body of the tailor's murdered lodger had been taken away the crowd remained. There was nothing more to see, yet it stayed, in relays contributing stares and reminiscent comment.

Somebody, some time on Sunday night, had killed the man on the fourth floor back, one James Stone, for two months a lodger there. The woman who came in every morning to make the beds and tidy up the rooms, finding the door ajar, had gone in, taken one look at the battered bloody head, and promptly shrieked her way to the basement. No one in the house recalled having heard a sound in the night—least of all its owner, who lived in two basement rooms back of his shop so that the full four floors above should bring in rentals. The police were at a loss. There was not a clue, not even a finger print, to encourage them.

The little tailor was numb with misery. His was the apathy of despair. All his thoughts, all his unhappy murmurings, pivoted on the fact that his house had been disgraced. His house! Some loafer had come in the night and torn out his heart!

HE HAD been very proud of his house: the single neat one in a shabby brick row, all connected with a flat, continuous roof and a coronet of weather-beaten board fence set with tin-covered penthouses. It had cost him years of toil; its price had been laboriously acquired by mingling of midnight oil with the sweat of his brow. And he was proud of it. He gloried in the prestige it gave him as a property owner.

On that precious house he lavished a loving care. He was always inspecting, tinkering in his spare time from the shop; here a nail or two, there a touch of paint. And now, of all the block, his house had been disgraced!

By the end of a week Max was still beset by questions from the police. But the crowd and the reporters had sought fresher fields.

Only occasionally now did curious eyes peer into the shop at its grizzled proprietor, bowed sadly over his work.

On Saturday night his next-door neighbor came in.

"Hello, Max!" she greeted, dropping an armful of clothing on the counter.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gill!" he re-

turned but kept his head bent over his work.

"Nothing new, I suppose," Max shook his head. "A fine thing!" Mrs. Gill complained. "We can be murdered in our beds, for all the cops can do about it. And, anyhow, who's going to pay you for your empty rooms if your people all get out?"

The tailor was silent. Confound the woman! Did she have to rub it in?

"One of mine got out this week," she went on, regardless of the tailor's indifference, "and he left a couple of suits. See if you can fix them up—cleaned and pressed. They fit my man."

Raising his eyes from his iron, Max glanced at the clothes. "All right, Mrs. Gill. It'll be about Wednesday—I'm behind in my work."

When he had finished his pressing he picked up the suits and carried them nearer the light. One was a dark mixture, worn but still serviceable. The other was a lightish gray, in better condition, but on the right coat sleeve was a large, violet smear of paint. Max was about to toss the coat on to a table when he hesitated and looked again at the stain.

Wonderingly he examined it, turning it this way and that under the light. Then, his lips set grimly and his eyes glinting behind their spectacles, he searched the coat for identifying marks. He found none. Carefully he inserted a hanger and hooked it over a pole.

Within an hour he admitted to his living quarters Inspector McNeil, who was handling the murder case.

"Well, here I am," McNeil said briskly as he took the proffered chair. "What's up?"

"Why, nothing special, Inspector—Only that I got an idea. Supposing a feller kills another feller—well, he must have a reason, yes?"

"You mean a motive? Sure. There's generally a motive."

"A motive, yes. Well, Inspector, can you find out where this Stone feller came from?"

"We know that already—his people claimed the body. Why?"

"Because maybe you could also find out where another feller came from and if he had a reason—a motive."

"Say," exclaimed McNeil impatiently, "if you know anything, spit it out!"

"Listen, Inspector," Max pleaded earnestly. "I got only an idea. But I got troubles enough already; more I don't want. If you find out a reason for this other feller—then I know that I got a good idea. See?"

"Who is this other man?"

"I don't know," Max shrugged. "But this week a lodger leaves Mrs. Gill's, next door. She can maybe tell you who he is."



Illustrated by
John Alan Maxwell

After the body had been taken away the crowd remained

Three days later, accompanied by a superior, McNeil returned eagerly to the tailor shop. Mrs. Gill's former lodger had proved choice material for investigation. He had come from the same town as the murdered man, whose testimony had sent him, vowing vengeance, to jail for bootlegging a year back. That was a motive, all right. They knew where he was. Now what did Max know?

THE tailor got the gray coat from behind the shielding curtain and explained the possession of it. Then he exhibited the smear of violet paint.

"Look at that!" he cried triumphantly. "You can't buy that color paint—too fancy. Listen. That Sunday I paint the door on the roof. I got only a little red and only a little blue, so I mix them together. That makes this, see?" The officers admitted having excellent vision. "I leave a stick in the door to keep it open, so the paint dries. And then"—his bitterness could be restrained

no longer—"this loafer comes and gives my house a bad name!" "You've hit it!" McNeil exulted. "Over the roof—door open—hid in Stone's room and waited! It's a case, dead open and shut!"

"Yeah," said the deputy dryly, "thanks to our friend here."

Max the Tailor sat in his shop surrounded by newspapers. Some contained his picture—one with the title "Prince Street Sherlock"—but all held complimentary accounts of his prowess as a detective.

In that repute, however, he found no elation. What thrilled him was that one paper called him a useful citizen. A useful citizen! In the paper!

People still gazed into the shop, but now Max did not mind; the morbid stares were absent, and smiles replaced them. His status in the community had been reestablished. After all, a murder may happen anywhere. But, anyhow, his house had not harbored a murderer.