

M-M-M-MEET J-J-J-JOE F-F-F-FRISCO

By PETER LIND HAYES

The famed stuttering comedian has been at the top of the heap for 25 years. During that time so many of his gags have been pirated that nowadays he's accused of stealing his own material

A topflight young comic himself, Peter Lind Hayes has been in show business since he quit school at sixteen to join singer-comedienne Grace Hayes, his mother, on the stage of the famous Palace Theater in New York. Now thirty-six, Peter shares top billing with his wife, pretty Mary Healy, on the Star of the Family TV show over the CBS network

WHEN a young man sets out to attract the notice of a reluctant world, he should start by emulating the thinking of an older man who has already arrived at the young man's goal. This wasn't apparent to me, however, until I had wandered through two years of show business in a state of paralyzed astonishment—until, to be specific, my meeting with the stuttering, cigar-smoking, rock-candy-chewing, doughnut-eating little man who has been my idol ever since.

It was 1934. I was eighteen and had been touring the vaudeville circuit with my mother in an act you may recall, billed as Grace Hayes & Company. My mother was a singer and, since hers was a "class" act, she had to dress up the stage with a handsome young piano player. And to make it a full-fledged company, she added me. I did impressions of everything from Cab Calloway to the Spirit of Radio (a routine in which I was the voice inside a big papier-mâché dummy set) and showed, we fondly hoped, considerable promise. Everything looks promising at eighteen.

The act was signed to appear in Manhattan, at the Eighty-sixth Street Theatre. We turned up for rehearsal at eight thirty in the morning in the dead of winter and were waiting impatiently for the star of the bill to finish a run-through of his act. Suddenly he tripped and tumbled halfway down the stairs into the orchestra pit. Everyone stood spell-bound until a crumpled derby and a shredded cigar appeared above the footlights. As they emerged, the little apple-cheeked man to whom they belonged pointed a reproving finger at a placard bearing his own name and stammered, "You're n-n-n-not working n-n-n-next week." Laughing, I walked over and introduced myself to the greatest character I have ever met.

His real name is Louis Joseph, but to the theater and night-club-going public he is known as J-j-j-Joe F-f-f-Frisco. (Some people claim that Mr. Frisco stutters in order to get his punch lines over more solidly. But whatever the reason, Frisco's stutter is as much a part of him as his ever-loving derby and his constant cigar.) This was the begin-

ning of a solid friendship that has lasted for 17 years. It was also the beginning of my approach to comedy through the tutoring of my favorite comic genius, the most literate illiterate in the history of humor.

Joe Frisco, who was one of the biggest stars on Broadway in the twenties, whose acts have been imitated until he is accused of stealing his own stuff, has become a special sort of institution in the entertainment world. For years, the dapper little comic's chain-lightning wit has contributed a whopping percentage of the gags used with complacency by the cream of today's comedians.

At sixty-two, Joe is still touring the country, do-

Frisco long before I did. It was back in 1915, when she first started as a night-club singer-comedienne in Big Jim Colosimo's renowned night spot in Chicago. Frisco was then a penniless "busker," dancing for whatever uncertain amount the public would throw him. My mother used to sneak Frisco and Loretta McDermott, his dancing partner, in the back door and let them dance for nickels and dimes until the warning was given that Big Jim was returning. Then they were whisked out the way they came. Big Jim did not like actors dancing in his place for tips.

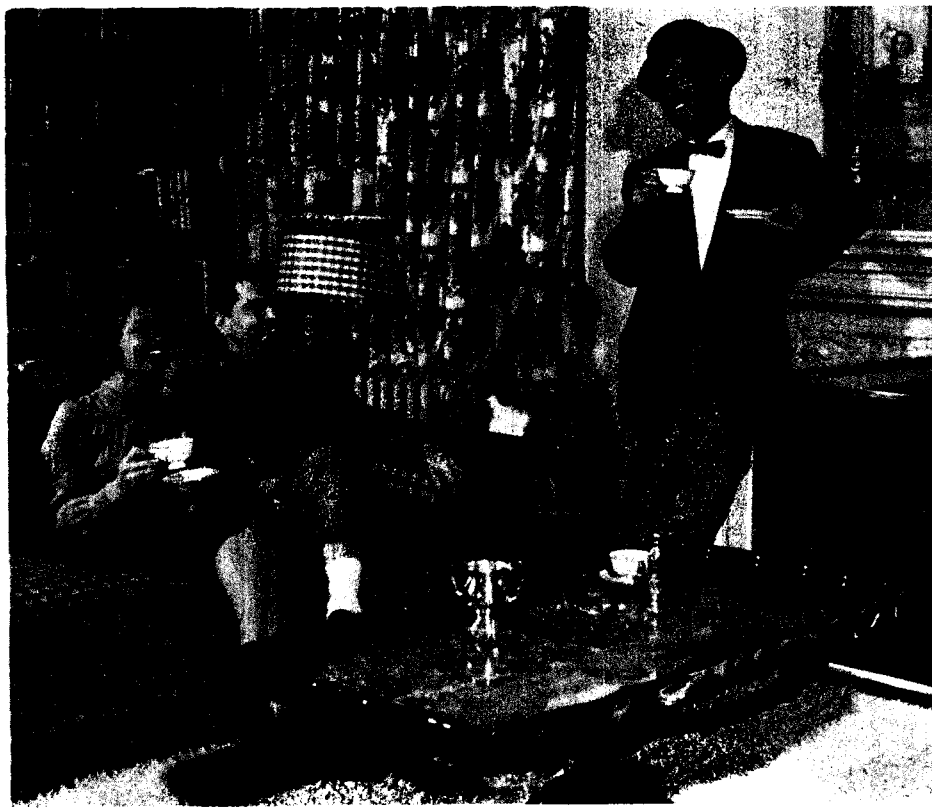
A few years went by and Mother finally decided to try to make a go of it on Broadway, where by this time the same Joe Frisco had become a sensation. One night at a very elegant party, my mother was introduced to Frisco. She started to give him a big, friendly "hello," but Joe just said coolly, "Hello, I'm g-g-glad to meet you." Several nights later, at another party, she again greeted him cordially and the same thing happened. After several such incidents, my mother's Irish temper finally took over. She grabbed Frisco by the collar, dragged him into a quiet room and said, "Don't forget, I'm the gal who knew you at Colosimo's and used to sneak you in the back door so you could pick up enough change to eat. Now, what's the big idea?"

Frisco answered, "Q-q-q-quiet, g-g-g-girlie, I'll never give you away."

Joe and my mother are still the best of friends. Sometimes when wandering from East to West, or vice versa, Frisco will stop off especially to see her at the Red Rooster, the supper club she now operates in Las Vegas, Nevada. Mother is quite a story herself. She has been star performer, bartender and doting parent. Last year, she ran for constable of Las Vegas—"most human office in the world"—against solid male opposition. (She lost by only eight votes.)

If you ask Joe where he comes from, he will say, "R-r-r-Rock Island and D-d-d-Dubuque," just as if they were twin cities. To Joe they are, I guess. Although he was born in the little town of Milan, near Rock Island, Illinois, he was only a kid when his family moved to Iowa. Frisco went to school in Dubuque for a while, then worked as newsboy, bellhop and bus boy, in fairly rapid succession. Somewhere in this sequence he ran into a man named Andrew Coffee, who had an act. By then Joe had his eye on the theater and had worked up a pretty good soft-shoe routine. He and Coffee decided to team up, and since (Continued on page 50)

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The author and his wife entertain an honored guest. The derby and cigar are a Frisco trade-mark which he won't surrender even while drinking tea indoors

ing his imperishable routines in the nation's night spots, and pulling off some of the most crushing ad libs in the annals of repartee. But Joe's wit is unique; and a great many of his admirers, unable to understand why some people don't appreciate the Frisco brand of humor, insist that he always has been ahead of the times. I agree; and I also like to think that if Charles Dickens were alive today, you would see them together a lot—Frisco, with his cigar and his derby, and Dickens with a pencil and paper.

So, just call me Charles.

My mother had the pleasure of knowing Mr.



ILLUSTRATED BY AL HERSCHFELD

The FRENCH DOLL

By WILLIAM FULLER

Kathleen's first war had been a time of gaiety and fulfillment. Now there was a new war, and she would have her exciting suitors back again

KATHLEEN TAYLOR lived with her mother in a small, two-story house on Central Avenue. There was an open porch all the way across the front of the house. There was a hammock at one end of the porch, where Kathleen liked to lie and rest on summer evenings after a long, hot day at the typewriter in Judge Wilson's law office. On the lawn in front of the house there was an iron deer—the only one in town—and there were several pink, plaster-of-Paris flamingos that Freddy Baker had given to Kathleen's mother for Christmas in 1948.

The parlor in the house was dim and cool. The furniture in the parlor was dark and heavy. On one side of this room there were two bookcases with glass doors. On the other side of the room there was a piano that no one in the Taylor family had ever known how to play. On the mantel were several brilliantly colored pottery vases that Mrs. Taylor had bought at a native handicraft mart in the Ozarks in the early thirties, and an engraved walrus tusk that her Uncle Jeff, the black sheep of the family, had sent her from Nome, Alaska, when she had been a little girl, in 1898. The pottery vases were full of old recipes, receipts, addresses, buttons, and rusty keys to no one knew what.

Kathleen often sat sadly alone in the parlor, remembering the war years, when the huge air base just out of town had been in operation and the skies had resounded to the exciting roars of bombers, fighters and trainers, and the streets of the town had been crowded and noisy with throngs of khaki-clad young men, and the parlors of most of the houses in town, the Taylors' included, had been open all day and most of the night to the brave young fliers so far away from their own homes. The air base was still there, beyond the town; empty now, deserted—a stricken, brooding giant. The sight of it—the staring, sagging buildings, the crumbling company streets,

the weed-choked runways—always saddened Kathleen. She went there often.

Kathleen spent a great deal of time in her own room. She was there now, dressing, getting ready to go with Fred Baker to a Merry-makers' Club party at Ruth Trumbull's house. She loved her room; it was, she felt, so much a part of her. It was a very young, very feminine room, with chintz curtains, soft, fuzzy white rugs, and a ruffled bedspread on her bed.

The walls were lined with snapshots. There were several pictures of Kathleen—pictures taken in high school or at the university—in which she looked very sweet, pretty and demure. Many of the pictures were of young men Kathleen had known in high school or at the university. Most of these were inscribed in some manner, such as: *All my love, Baby—Butch*, or simply *XXXXX! Piggy*. On a small chest of drawers, hidden behind the closet door when it was open, was a picture of Fred Baker, looking serious and intent and businesslike,

but slightly bug-eyed behind the thick lenses of his eyeglasses. It was signed: *Faithfully yours always, Fred*.

But all over her dressing table, in the most favorable light, were pictures of the boys she had known at the air base during the war. Many of the pictures were inscribed, also, in this manner: *The next zero is for you, Kat—Sammy*, and *These Italian babes got nothing on you, Sweetie—Roger the Lodger*. And right in the middle of the dressing table was the most prized one of all: a picture of Bill Mason standing beside a B-17 with seven black swastikas painted along its fuselage and her name, KATHLEEN, painted in big letters on the side of its nose. Bill was dead now.

Lying limply across the bedspread on Kathleen's bed was the French doll that Bill had sent her from Paris. The cloth, china and sawdust of the doll had been artfully fashioned in the image of a pertly smiling mademoiselle in her early twenties. The doll was dressed in black velvet slacks and a sheer little blouse.

When it had come to Kathleen, its hair had been black. It had been necessary for Kathleen to experiment several times with various blonde rinses to change the doll's hair to a shade similar to that of her own hair. It was still not the exact shade of her own hair, but it was pretty close.

After all, Kathleen had decided, the doll's hair, though real human hair, was dead, and couldn't be expected to glint and glisten as her own hair did. Kathleen was very proud of her own hair. She was thirty-three, but there wasn't a single gray hair in her head. She looked every night before she went to bed.

Kathleen was all dressed when she heard the doorbell ring. It was exactly seven thirty, so she knew it was Fred Baker. Freddy was never late, never early. He had been dating Kathleen Wednesday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons for almost three years now. He had been proposing to her on an average of once a week for the past year and Kathleen was still telling him that she wasn't quite sure.

She hated to have to admit it to herself, but she supposed she would have to marry him sometime.



He was a C.P.A., and just about the most substantial C.P.A. in town. But there was nothing very exciting about Freddy. He had been in the war, too, but he had been a finance officer in Atlanta, Georgia, the whole time. Kathleen really didn't consider him good enough for her.

Kathleen decided to keep Freddy waiting downstairs for a while: she wasn't just any girl, all ready and waiting and panting for her date! And besides, she wanted to show her mother that what she had told Kathleen for the umpteenth time earlier that evening had gone right in one ear and out the other.

"I think it's simply awful, the way you treat poor

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