

Charles Addams, His Family, And His Fiends

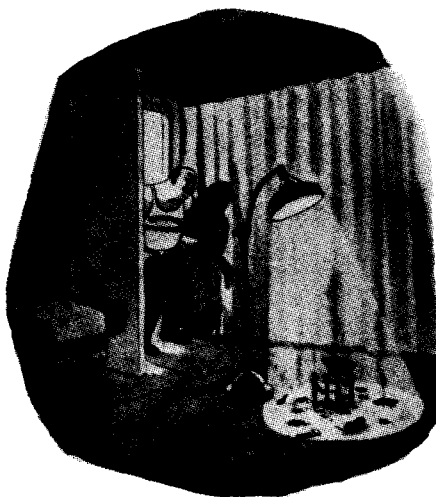
DWIGHT MACDONALD

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SHORTLY before the United States entered the Second World War, Dr. Paul Josef Goebbels's *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* reprinted a cartoon from the *New Yorker* by Charles Addams that showed a Boy Scout discovering his father about to hang himself and shouting, "Hey, Pop, that's not a hangman's knot!" "Jokes of this sort," observed the Nazi editors with obvious distaste, "often appear in magazines which are convinced of their mission in the American Century." And more recently, a newspaper in eastern Europe reprinted a page of Addams cartoons as documentary evidence of the "cannibalistic decadence" of western capitalism.

There must be a special reason why Americans find Addams's stuff refreshing. Perhaps it is because the cartoons, which deal largely with family life, provide a healthy antidote to the saccharine treatment of the same subject in our advertisements and other forms of mass culture. After the depressingly cheerful families of the beer ads, the pious celebrations of marital bliss on the radio, the sentimental gushing over the kiddies everywhere except in the home, it is wonderfully relaxing to see these themes treated with a reverse twist, a bend sinister. Addams works this profitable vein with great diligence.

HE ALSO, of course, exploits the American public's peculiar, and in some ways rather frightening, fascination with violence. Just as the detective story, once an exercise in rational deduction, has become a pretext for the intimate description of extreme violence, just as the so-called comic books have more and



more gone in for the gruesome and the sadistic, so there is a certain significance in the rise of Addams as the most popular and distinctive of the cartoonists whose work appears regularly in the *New Yorker*. In the 1920's and 1930's, it was Peter Arno satirizing the pomposity and the amours of the leisure class. Arno still appears regularly and is as deft and witty as ever, but it is Addams who is the characteristic *New Yorker* cartoonist of the war and postwar period.

Three Formulas

Callousness is not funny, but it becomes so when carried to the pitch of the matron in flowered bathing suit running along the beach and shouting up at her husband, who, as the shadow on the sand all too clearly reveals, is being carried off by a huge bird of prey: "George! George! Drop the keys!" Even an auto-da-fé becomes comic when we see a stolid householder reflectively puffing on his pipe as he rakes the autumn leaves on his lawn into a neat pile

around the feet of his plump and indignant spouse, bound firmly to a tree. The contrast between the homely, familiar form of the situations—autumnal leaf burning, loss of the bathhouse keys, a marital spat—and their ghastly content removes them from the range of our experience and leaves us free to laugh.

Addams has, furthermore, a deadly eye for the less attractive aspects of the middle-aged American male and female, and they themselves express emotions appropriate to the banal form of the situations but not to the gruesome content. The placid, ruminative expression of the portly householder raking the leaves to burn up his wife, and her own matronly figure and expression of malignant, impotent indignation—these make the scene funny instead of horrible.

THESE ARE ordinary people doing sinister things in an ordinary way. But Addams has a reverse formula, and it is the one for which he is best known: sinister people doing ordinary things in a sinister way. His *Weird Family*, his *Bad Boy*, and his flabby, fungous *Moral Monster* pursue their evil ends with wholehearted earnestness; they have their code of morality, which happens to be just the reverse of ours.

Living in domestic affection in their cobwebby Victorian haunted house, the gruesome Family happily watch the installation of a picture window with a superb view of a cemetery, put a sign on their gatepost: BEWARE OF THE THING, send over to the neighbors to borrow a cup of cyanide, and entertain the kiddies at bedtime with shadow pictures of a vampire bat. The *Bad Boy* makes a guillotine from

his Erector set, pushes a toy school bus onto the tracks in front of his speeding toy train, and, accompanied by his sister, crouches behind a sign that reads WARNING, CHILDREN AT PLAY, with a huge boulder poised to roll in front of an oncoming car. The Moral Monster, seeing a truck approaching on a narrow bend of a mountain road, helpfully signals the car behind him to pass; sitting on a bench in the park, he feeds limp goblets of flesh to a flock of vultures with the same gentle enjoyment as the gentleman on the next bench no doubt derives from feeding crumbs to the pigeons; surrounded by a weeping audience at a movie, he alone giggles delightedly. Fair is foul and foul

is fair as Addams's people hover through the fog and filthy air.

THERE IS one other distinctive Addams formula: the juxtaposition of the remote, archaic past and the brisk, cellophaned present. Hansel and Gretel read a neat inscription on the witch's gingerbread cottage: CONTAINS GLUCOSE, DRY SKIMMED MILK, OIL OF PEPPERMINT. . . . One witch says to another as she empties a box labeled WITCH'S BREW into a kettle teeming with writhing horrors, "It's marvelous! All you do is add water!" The Colonial bellman makes his nightly round: "Ten o'clock and all's well. Yes, sir, and all's well, too, with toothsome, savory, mild Royal

George Snuff, made from the finest Old Dominion tobacco leaf."

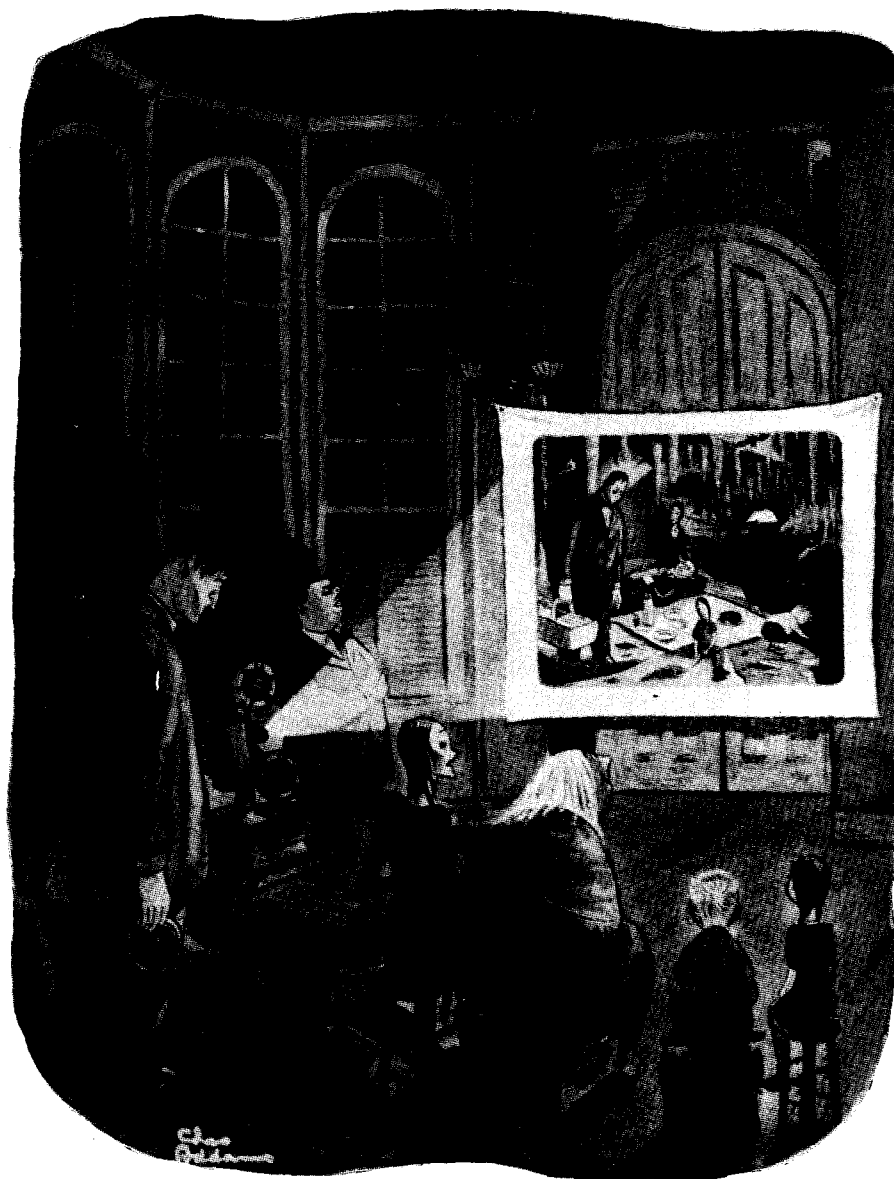
Addams generally brings a sinister quality even to his use of the familiar cartoonist's device of taking a cliché and giving it a twist, a procedure known in the trade as *The Switch*. "Oh, I like missionary all right," one cannibal explains to another, "but missionary doesn't like me."

Man or Monster?

Because the public tends to assume a one-to-one correlation between a man and his work, legends have tended to gather around Addams. It is whispered that he produces his cartoons during frequent seclusions in a mental home, or, contrariwise, that his editors watch his work closely and when it becomes too morbid send him off to a sanitarium. Although Addams has occasionally encouraged such myths by answering his mail on a letterhead inscribed "The Gotham Rest Home for Mental Defectives," the fact is he has never been in a booby hatch or even on an analyst's couch.

A tall, ruddy, solidly built man with an imposing nose, Addams is quiet, gentle, and courteous; his friend and colleague Saul Steinberg calls his behavior "aggressively normal." Children take to him immediately, perhaps because of his gentleness, perhaps because his cartoons give them the idea he sympathizes with antisocial urges discouraged by parents and teachers. As Wolcott Gibbs observed when Addams gave a skull to Gibbs's eleven-year-old son because he felt the boy could use it better than he could: "Charlie likes the monster in children. When it's not there, he invents it."

Addams likes to drink, to be in the company of pretty women, to dress well, to own and drive fast cars, and otherwise to divert himself in ways generally considered normal. He divides his time between an apartment in Manhattan and a house in Westhampton, Long Island. As his vogue and income have increased, his consumption has become correspondingly more conspicuous. Thus right after the war, when Addams's popularity was just beginning to burgeon, he got around in a Buick sedan. This was shortly replaced by the first of



"It's a lovely spot—so unspoiled."

a series of sports cars, the most dramatic of which was a Mercedes-Benz with an interminable hood out of which exhaust pipes snaked like entrails; his present mount is an iridescent Aston Martin. He is a member of the Sports Car Club of America and sometimes enters the Club's races suitably helmeted and goggled.

ON THE OTHER HAND, it won't do to exaggerate the point: Addams is hardly conventional by Park Avenue or even *New Yorker* standards. "He is a polite man, but not a conformist," Steinberg has said, and there is a connection between his own tastes and his cartoons. A full suit of armor stands in the living room of his apartment. Fifteen crossbows line the walls; he picks them up in antique shops at two hundred to four hundred dollars apiece and believes that he has the biggest private collection—eighteen in all—in the country. His house at Westhampton, while it in no way resembles the haunted houses of the cartoons, does have a living room, formerly used to house carriages, that is forty-five feet long and three stories high with clerestory windows and a large executioner's ax over the fireplace, the whole giving the effect of a medieval wassail hall. His home furnishings have included a miniature guillotine, a stuffed bear, a colored papier-mâché anatomical model of a man whose skin has been removed for greater visibility, and a child's tombstone he picked up from a monument maker. ("It's all right," he explains to his guests. "It wasn't attached to anybody.")

Addams's interest in Addams-like houses is personal as well as professional. He seeks them out on trips, collects photographs of them, and has given much thought to the subject. He finds a gloomily fantastic exuberance in Victorian architecture. "But the most sinister place of all," he once remarked, "is a modernistic house that is going to pieces. It has a strange mausoleum quality, especially in the moonlight, all that blank dead-white cement with cracks running across it, those rusted iron pipes and huge glittering dead windows." He is also fond of visiting insane asylums and snake farms. As noted



above, it won't do to exaggerate the distance between Addams and his work.

Family Life

Charles Samuel Addams, an only child, was born in Westfield, New Jersey, in 1912. He thinks the extra "d" was put in his name by an eighteenth-century ancestor named Robert Adams, a Pennsylvania settler who wanted to avoid confusion with a neighbor also named Robert Adams; the other celebrated two—"d" Addams, Jane, was a second cousin of the cartoonist's father. The father was New York City wholesale manager for the Aeolian piano company, a calling he took up after trying in vain to make a decent living as a ship designer. "Father drew well himself," Addams has recalled, "though his style, like most architects', was rather dry and sparse. He encouraged me to draw. But Mother always wanted me to get a regular job. I was making a lot in cartooning by the time she died, but she never thought it was actual money." His education was spotty: grammar and high school in Westfield, a year at Colgate, a year studying fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania, a year at the Grand Central Art School in New York, and—what he considers his most valuable art education—almost two years (1932-1933) in the art department of Macfadden Publications, where he embellished a long line of crime, mystery, sex, and adventure pulps. He had mixed feelings about one of his chores: retouching photos of murder victims to make them less harrowing. "Some of those corpses were kind of interesting the way they were," he says.

Cartooning had always been Addams's main interest ever since he drew for the Westfield school paper, and when he began to sell enough work to *Collier's*, the old *Life*, and other magazines to average fifty dollars a week, he disappointed his mother by throwing up his steady job with Macfadden and turning free lance.

HIS FIRST *New Yorker* cartoon, in the February 4, 1933, issue, showed a hockey player shivering on the ice in his stocking feet and explaining to solicitous teammates: "I forgot my skates." Despite this inauspicious beginning, Addams managed to sell two more cartoons to the *New Yorker* that year, three in 1934, and a dozen in 1935. By 1936, his work was appearing in every second or third issue—as it has been ever since.

He soon developed his distinctive style and themes. After a few line drawings, he began to use almost exclusively that dark-gray wash which admirably suits his somber fantasy.

The first cartoon that is immediately recognizable as an Addams appeared in April, 1935: A museum night watchman finds two bottles of milk and the morning paper outside the door of an Egyptian tomb. By 1936, Addams was concentrating almost exclusively on ghosts, witches, mediums, cannibals, freaks, monsters, vultures, suicides, and murderers.

The Addams Family began to materialize in 1938: A dapper vacuum-cleaner salesman is making his pitch in the cobwebby Addams House to the Young Witch and the Sinister Butler, while a furtive creature with a pointed nose, who may be called Cousin Willie, peers down through the moldering banisters. The second Family cartoon did not appear for more than a year. Again, it was just the Witch, the Butler, and Cousin Willie, but this one established the canon: The first Butler was a bearded pirate, but now *the* Butler arrives, a square-headed, misshapen monster out of Boris Karloff by Frankenstein; the Witch has achieved a decent degree of emaciation, and her hair, sleekly coiffed in the first drawing, is now properly dank.

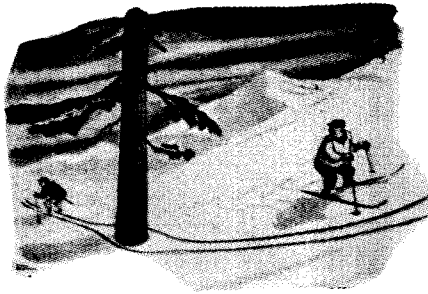
In 1941 the Leering Grandmother made her debut, and in the fall of

1942 Addams gave the Witch a husband or at least a paramour (he says he can't bear to think of them as married): a wide-headed, gap-toothed, pug-nosed degenerate who is shown dreaming by the cold family fireside with his arm affectionately around the Witch. "Are you unhappy, darling?" he asks. "Oh yes, yes! Completely," she replies with a wan smile. It was not until 1944 that the Family circle was completed, with the Bad Boy and the Morbid Little Girl—though the Boy, in various preliminary guises that finally evolved into the brutal, stocky, bristle-haired little fiend with which we are familiar, had been appearing by himself for several years. In 1947, we got a glimpse of Uncle Eimar, or rather of his hand grasping the heavily barred peephole of a door in the attic: "We've had part of this floor finished off for Uncle Eimar," the Witch explains to a visitor.

The last major Addams character to make his entrance (in 1944) was the flabby, fungoid Moral Monster. A solitary bachelor of furtively unspeakable habits, he appears only by himself, apparently being too depraved for family life, even in the Addams sense.

THE ADVENT of the Husband-Paramour may or may not have been prophetic. At any rate, it coincided with the cartoonist's meeting, in his home town of Westfield, New Jersey, a girl named Barbara Day who looked remarkably like the Witch-Wife he had been drawing for five years. Addams married Miss Day in the spring of 1943, a few months after he had been drafted. (They were divorced last year.) He served three years in the Army, mostly in a Signal Corps detachment in Astoria, Queens, made up of professional artists who animated educational film cartoons for the Army and did other odd jobs; Addams illustrated a manual instructing the troops in the art of barbershop harmony. In the Army Addams became a close friend of another young soldier-artist, the late Sam Cobean, who improved his time by producing a daily cartoon depicting himself and Addams, whose majestic nose fascinated him, in a series of improbable and mostly unpublishable situations.

Addams's three years in the Army were the most productive in his career. Stimulated by the tedium of military life and the fear of losing his identity and his place in the civilian world, he drew furiously and became, so to speak, a family man. Only eighteen of the 130 cartoons in his first book, *Drawn and Quartered* (1942), have domestic themes; four of the Family, two of Bad Kids, twelve of Marriage. *Addams and Evil* (1947) has thirty-one domestic vignettes, al-



most all of the Family and the Kids, while fifty-one of the cartoons, well over half, in *Monster Rally* (1950) are on domestic themes.

ALTHOUGH most of Addams's copious mail consists of suggestions for cartoons, his fans wanting to take part in his work as well as admire it, they are rarely helpful, usually because in their enthusiasm the writers have trespassed beyond the humorous into the just plain gruesome: "Show a 'hung' jury" . . . "A child in a toy store holding a machine gun and all the employees are dead" . . . "Have your bad boy fill his water pistol with sulphuric acid" . . . "a subway door filed to a shining knife-edge; the conductor, of course, would be the bloated, leering fellow you draw so often." Some ideas are sent in again and again: bath towels marked "His," "Hers," and "Its"; apes or ghosts making a product labeled "Untouched by Human Hands"; a hearse going through a parkway tollgate with a shrouded arm reaching out to pay the dime.

Sometimes Addams himself goes over the line, at least in his editors' opinion. One rough rejected as *too* rough—it was actually drawn by a colleague as a burlesque—showed a father receiving his baby from a hospital nurse with the remark, "Don't wrap it, I'll eat it here."

Das Ist ein Scherz, Sohn

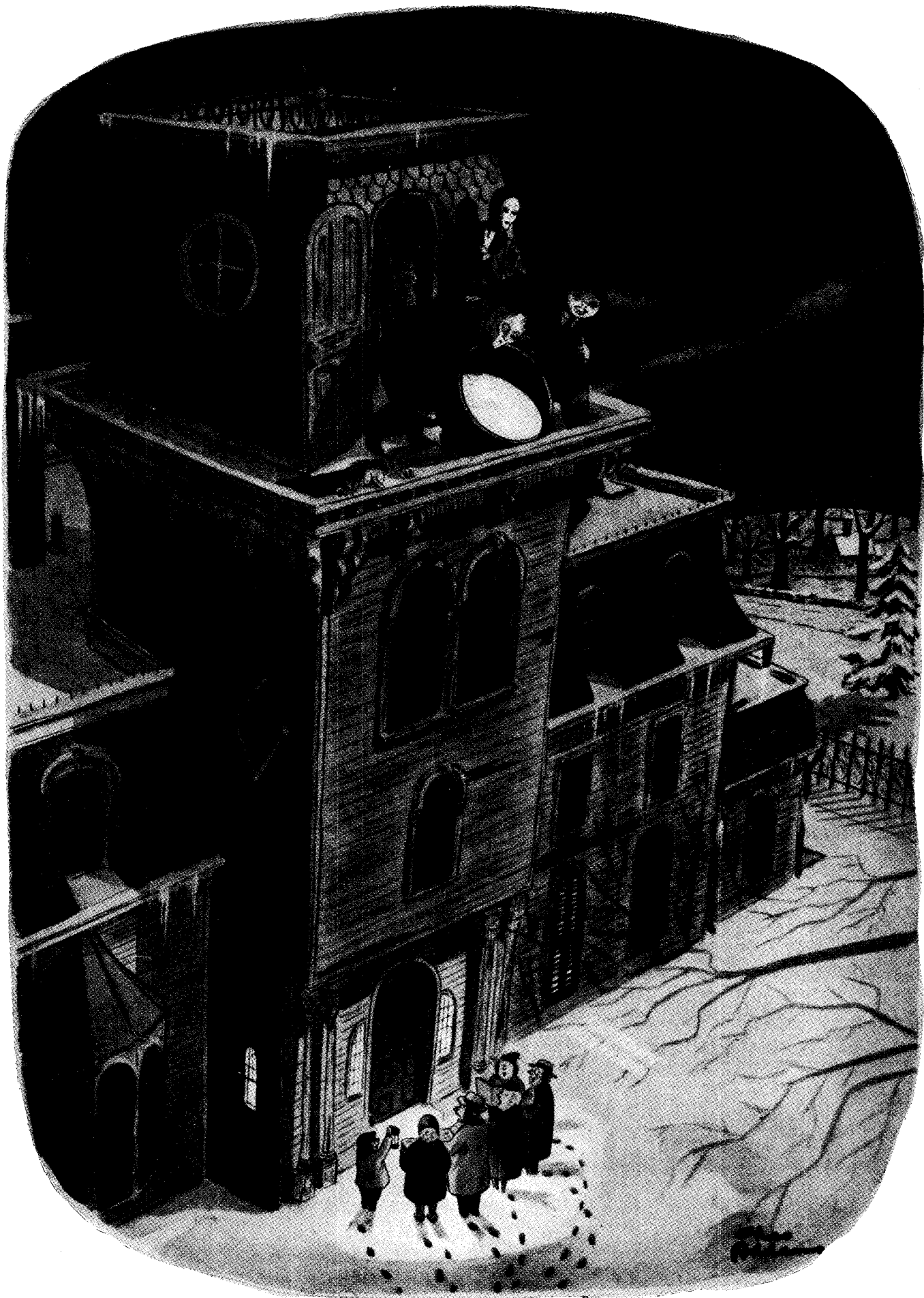
The most popular single cartoon Addams ever produced is not a "horror" cartoon at all. It appeared early in 1940 and shows one skier looking with amazement at another who has just passed a tree leaving tracks that separate to go on each side of the tree.

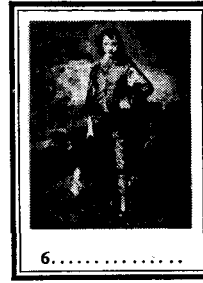
There are at least two sizable groups of people who don't see anything funny in the ski cartoon. A psychiatrist at an Illinois home for the feeble-minded asked her charges whether they saw anything absurd about the picture. Those with a mental age of ten or more saw that the tracks could not in fact have been made by the skier, while those under that level saw nothing wrong. No inmate, of any age level, saw anything funny.

Neither did the logical Germans when *Heute*, a German-language magazine put out by the Americans in the first year of the occupation, reprinted the cartoon. Hundreds of readers wrote letters like: "I don't see how this is possible. Please print the answer to this puzzle." Others supplied answers: two one-legged skiers; the skier went down on one ski on one side of the tree, returned and went down on the other ski on the other side; the skier slipped a foot out of one ski's harness just before reaching the tree; etcetera. There was, it must be said, a reader in Nuremberg who advanced the hypothesis that it was some sort of joke and went on to develop a general theory of humor.

SMALL WONDER the Germans missed the point, since the ski cartoon, like much of Addams's work, is very much in the American grain, a lineal descendant of the tall tales of the frontier told by deadpan liars. Exaggeration seems to flourish in the American climate, and the impossible appeals to us as the essence of the comic.

In this sense, Addams's depiction of the prosaic in bizarre terms and of the bizarre in prosaic terms is in the line of the Paul Bunyan stories. Perhaps only an American humorist, with an American's knack for shifting gears between the real and the fantastic, could so consistently extract comedy from the macabre.





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