

**Humor.** Since one of the happiest ways of bidding a friend a Merry Christmas is to give him something that will make him laugh, many solid citizens use books of humor as Christmas gifts. For this reason, each year a number of enterprising publishers gather together a pound or two of risible material, whether in pictorial or textual form, bind it between boards, and put it into the nation's book stores in time to succor harried gift givers. Devotees of pictorial humor will find much to delight them in Peter Arno's "Sizzling Platter" and Whitney Darrow, Jr.'s "Please Pass the Hostess." Of this season's written humor two of the better collections are reviewed below: "Chips off the Old Benchley," last pieces by the late Robert Benchley, and "Listen to the Mocking Bird," by the still very much alive S. J. Perelman.

## A Couple of Funny Fellows

### CHIPS OFF THE OLD BENCHLEY.

By Robert Benchley. New York: Harper & Bros. 273 pp. \$3.

### LISTEN TO THE MOCKING BIRD.

By S. J. Perelman. New York: Simon & Schuster. 153 pp. \$2.95.

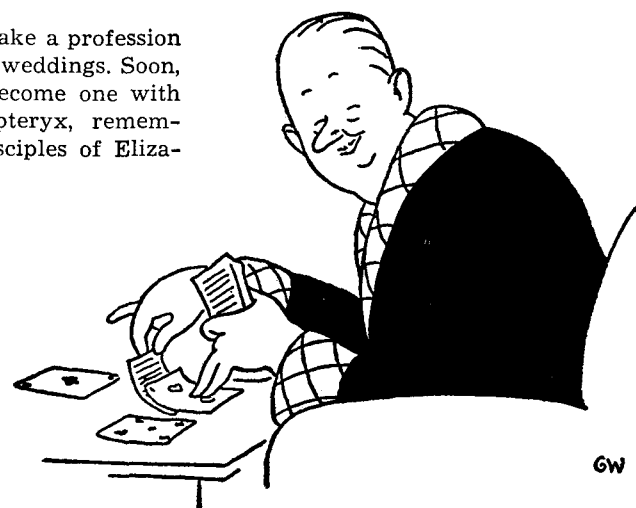
By LEE ROGOW

THERE seems to be a slather of public and private money available for the endowment of various worthy projects—rural electrification, development of rocket fuels, novels promoting the Christian ideal, even obscurantist poetry. I wonder if a smidgeon of that loot could be siphoned off to encourage a valuable but declining literary form—the short comic essay. The masters of this ill-paid craft are becoming as rare as

the gentlemen who make a profession of tying ascot ties for weddings. Soon, I fear, the art will become one with the dodo and the apteryx, remembered only by the disciples of Elizabeth S. Kingsley.

Unlike its dead-pan cousin, the serious essay, the short comic piece has lost none of its audience. The production of potential customers reached new heights during the war and the maternity hospitals report only a mild slackening off since. But for some reason I have not been able to determine the shortage of new apprentices in the field of "casuals" is something fierce.

I say something's got to be done. Benchley has been gone for four years now. Will Cuppy, Wallace Irwin, and Russell Maloney are gone. Death has long since also taken away Stephen Leacock. Perelman's fast balls have lost much of their zip and he's relying on control alone. Donald Ogden Stewart is in Hollywood, Dorothy Parker is occupied with other matters. James Thurber and Wolcott Gibbs and Frank Sullivan are with



—Illustrations from the book.

us all too seldom. We decidedly need some new funny fellows in print.

The fact is that the material in "Chips Off the Old Benchley" is hardly up to the gentleman's best work. There is only an occasional gleam or turn of phrase to indicate that the man was one of the two or three funniest fellows in the English language.

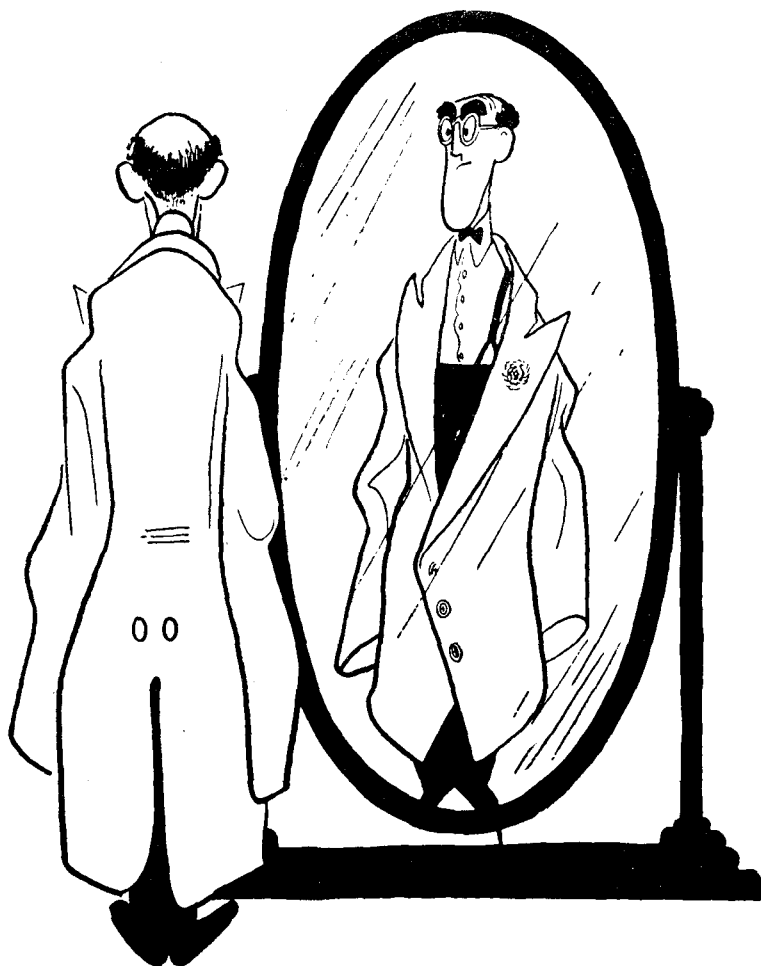
Chalk this up as run-of-the-mine Benchley and—but wait a second. This is a fatiguing craft. (The only man I know who manages to be funny day after day is Nick Kenny, radio columnist of the New York *Daily Mirror*.) And besides Benchley was clearly one of the princes of the earth, and he could write things like:

"People are constantly writing in to this department and asking, 'What kind of dog shall I give my boy?'"

"Or, sometimes, 'What kind of boy shall I give my dog?'"

And, "A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around





—Illustrations from "Listening to the Mocking Bird."

"Perelman the Glass of Fashion."

three times before lying down. . . ."

The illustrations are by Gluyas Williams, of course.

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**B**ACK in the middle Thirties a curious legend began to grow among the simple and superstitious folk who were the passengers on the Boulevard Transit Line, a bus company which plied between Bayonne, New Jersey, and Times Square. It was whispered among the *moujiks* that at certain times of the day a vision could be seen in one of the rear seats of a company bus. The vision was of a young man, much too noble of brow, much too cosmopolitan of manner to have sprung from the purlieus and pothouses of Hudson County. He was attired in garments which would have wrung gasps of despair from at least eight of the ten best-dressed men of the year—a sports jacket with a belt in the back, electric green slacks, dirty white shoes, and a felt creation which used to be known around the amusement parks as a whoopee hat. The sight of this incredibly debonair young man was in itself enough to set the peasants a-scratchin' of their woolly

polls, but there was something about him which inspired even greater awe. At certain intervals he would break into fits of uncontrollable laughter.

Since it is doubtful whether any copy of this magazine will ever penetrate to the remote fastnesses of Bayonne, I think I shatter no local legend by revealing here that the young man was myself, the garments I have described were a careful selection from the racks and shelves of Charles Strunsky's Young Men's Clothing Center, and the reason for my laughter was that I often read the works of S. J. Perelman.

Ah, that was *le vrai, le seul* Perelman, king of gusset-splitters, prince of yock-makers, champion rib-tickler. (He won the championship in a contest at a Third Avenue barbecue joint, tickling well over twice as many plates of ribs as his nearest competitor.) There was no one with a keener ear for the absurdities of language, no one quicker to clip a cliché or to roast a chestnut. He was without question the funniest man writing English, a delight to read, and a frightening influence on the young men who write the funny letters which girls show around to their friends.

A great deal of Perelman's distinctive wit and style may be remarked in the pages of "Listen to the Mocking Bird," his latest collection of pieces from *The New Yorker*. But it is my melancholy duty to report that this is not the 100-octane, chemically pure, gingervated Perelman of "The Dream Department," "Crazy Like a Fox," and "Keep It Crisp." There are moments, to be sure, when the lights go on and the bells ring, and Perelman makes all other American humorists look like so many *schleppers*. Certainly no one writing today can equal the demented satire of "Mortar and Pestle," a vignette of the Los Angeles drugstores, and "Many a Slip," which is about two gents from the garment center who are taking a slip to Wilmington for an out-of-town tryout. But these are two out of twenty, and most of the others aren't even in their league. In particular, I didn't much care for the seven "Cloudland Revisited" pieces, in which Perelman has made rather mild fun out of reporting on his rereading of the pulse-quickenning novels of the Twenties.

At his high moments, Perelman is right up there in the silver balloon with Professor Piccard, but there aren't enough such moments to keep me from being a bit disappointed in the Master. It's very hard to say just *why* something isn't very funny. If pressed for an analysis, I'd say Perelman has overdone the nervous breakdown ending, and that he has written too much of things that happened to him, neglecting the satire of custom, language, and literary convention which he does so superbly.

There is one wonderfully funny crack in the book. It's to be found on the dust jacket. Under the heading, "An Appreciation of S. J. Perelman, by George S. Kaufman," there is the following quotation: "I appreciate S. J. Perelman. (Signed) George S. Kaufman."



"Perelman the Writer."

**Music.** As this issue goes to press the Metropolitan Opera initiates its final season under the aegis of Edward Johnson. During Johnson's fifteen-year period as general manager performances of the Wagnerian repertory have been of a particularly high standard. The participation of such singers as Flagstad, Lehmann, and Melchior, and of such conductors as Fritz Busch and George Szell, greatly swelled the rank of "perfect Wagnerites" in America. On page 64 we review an analysis of "Wagner's Operas," by Ernest Newman, who is acknowledged to be the greatest living authority on the master of Bayreuth. . . . It is an index of the esteem in which Igor Stravinsky is held today that three critical estimates of his music should be published in one year. Two of the 1949 crop are reviewed this week, a symposium edited by Edwin Corle and a study by Alexandre Tansman; also a new biography of Sigmund Romberg.

## Sigmund Romberg in Fact and Fiction

DEEP IN MY HEART: A Story Based on the Life of Sigmund Romberg. By Elliott Arnold. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 511 pp. \$4.50.

By SIGMUND SPAETH

SIGMUND ROMBERG is a kindly gentleman and an excellent musician. Admitting the difficulty of putting the biography of a living person into semi-fictional form, it must be conceded that Elliott Arnold's "Deep in My Heart" makes good reading.

Romberg's career has perhaps been too consistently successful to create the excitement or suspense that one would expect in an actual novel. But his story is pleasantly entertaining and it has many significant contacts with the development of America's popular music from the artificial sentimentality of the naive Nineties to the impressive art form that it is at its best today.

The importance of Sigmund Romberg goes beyond the creation of charming operettas whose tunes will be hummed and whistled indefinitely. He has been a vital force in American show business, a founder of the Dramatists' Guild, a director of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), and a long-time president of the Songwriters' Protective Association. Starting as an expert performer on both piano and violin, he has become not only a composer but an orchestral conductor, an efficient executive, a broadcaster of parts, and (privately and confidentially) a true humanitarian.

Mr. Arnold's book stresses all of these activities except perhaps the last. He presents Romberg as an appealing personality from his European childhood to his current state of emi-

nence and economic security. His solid training in music, his courageous recovery from occasional setbacks and disappointments, his adaptability to American conditions and the vagaries of the Broadway stage, his happy marriage, and the integrity of his artistic development are all sufficiently emphasized.

It has been the fashion among music lovers to label Romberg an eclectic composer, possibly even a super-aranger of other men's melodies, and this may be due largely to the fact that his best-known score, "Blossom Time," is frankly and logically based upon the tunes of Franz Schubert, who happens to be the hero of that work. Actually Sigmund Romberg has in-

vented plenty of good tunes of his own, including the "Deep in My Heart" which supplies the title of this book. Aside from any basic originality (which no great composer has ever considered of primary importance), the Romberg songs display a dependable musicianship of the sort that has marked the work of Herbert, Kern, Gershwin, Porter, and Rodgers, setting a new standard of popular music which no other country in the world has thus far approached.

"Deep in My Heart" begins with something of the atmosphere of a juvenile biography, full of clearly manufactured dialogue and artless references to people and things that we now know to have been exceedingly significant. But the story gathers conviction as it progresses, particularly after the scene changes to the United States. Reminiscences of the Vienna of Johann Strauss and Franz Lehar lead to a vivid parade of living American characters—Al Jolson, Irving Berlin, Vivienne Segal, the Shuberts, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, Jeannette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy, Louis B. Mayer, Peggy Wood, Billy Rose, with reminders also of the late George Gershwin and Jerome Kern, Marilyn Miller, Dorothy Donnelly, and Edward Sheldon. The world of musical comedy definitely comes to life in these passages.

One realizes also that writing for the musical stage is not just a rosy succession of enormous hits and fabulous royalties. There are problems of contracts and options and production costs and mistaken judgment. The  
(Continued on page 64)

