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THE PHOENIX NEST

Ernie Kovacs

Edited by Martin Levin

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Until critics in chorus began to
crow
I did not know, just did not know
And never had the tiniest sus-
picion
Man had a tough, incurable con-
dition.
But now I know and everything
is plain:
'Tis man's condition causes all his
pain.
It was a wonderful discovery
For critics, letters and for me.

—BRYLLION FAGIN.

• • •

ERNIE

ERNIE KOVACS, who died with startling suddenness last month, was the nicest man I ever met, in or out of show business. I guess no one in the four years he was in Hollywood made a greater number of firm friends than he did. Since his start as a cooking-show M.C. on a Philadelphia TV station, he carried around with him more troubles than even a comedian should, but he stashed most of them away somewhere in the back of his head and he was never anything but a charming companion, a sympathetic listener, and a quiet doer of favors for a great number of people. I remember his saying to me once, "There's nothing wrong with me that \$80,000 wouldn't cure." He said another time, with lots of emphasis, "The best thing I ever did in my life was marry Edie." When he starred on TV in New York he was far and away the favorite guy of stagehands—a group of technicians who do not bestow affection lightly.

He was the most creative person TV has been blessed with and he was enlightened enough about TV executives and advertising people not to let them sabotage his ideas. Among other things, he gave us teasers, surrealistic vignettes, and some of the best commercials seen on TV. Writer, actor, comic, director, parodist, Ernie was always full of surprises.

The main thing about Ernie, though, was that he was Ernie. I remember going to his home in Beverly Hills a few years ago to be met at the door by a huge (to me, anyway) burro. This

burro used to spend most of its time in Ernie's workroom—a giant paneled studio whose walls were covered with antique weapons—because it liked to stand by the fireplace. But every once in a while the burro would go on a rampage, not only interrupting Ernie at one of his projects but chewing up some of Ernie's best material. Ernie never got sore about it, so far as I know.

One time in Beverly Hills, on his way to a panel show he emceed, Ernie happened to roll through a stop sign in his Lincoln and was overhauled by a motorcycle cop. Ernie looked at the officer in surprise and, as the latter started his talk, summons book in hand, he produced a black notebook from his pocket. With the officer staring in some bewilderment, Ernie called up the captain of police on the phone he had in the front seat of his Lincoln. After an exchange of pleasantries, Ernie casually mentioned the officer standing by his car. A few more words followed and Ernie thrust the phone through the window. "The captain would like to speak with you," he said.

That was Ernie. He'll be missed.

—REX LARDNER.

• • •

PRAYER TO AN ANALYST

Here a little child I stand,
Lifting up my either hand;
One is dirty, one is clean—
I'm the problem in between.

—ROBERT NATHAN.

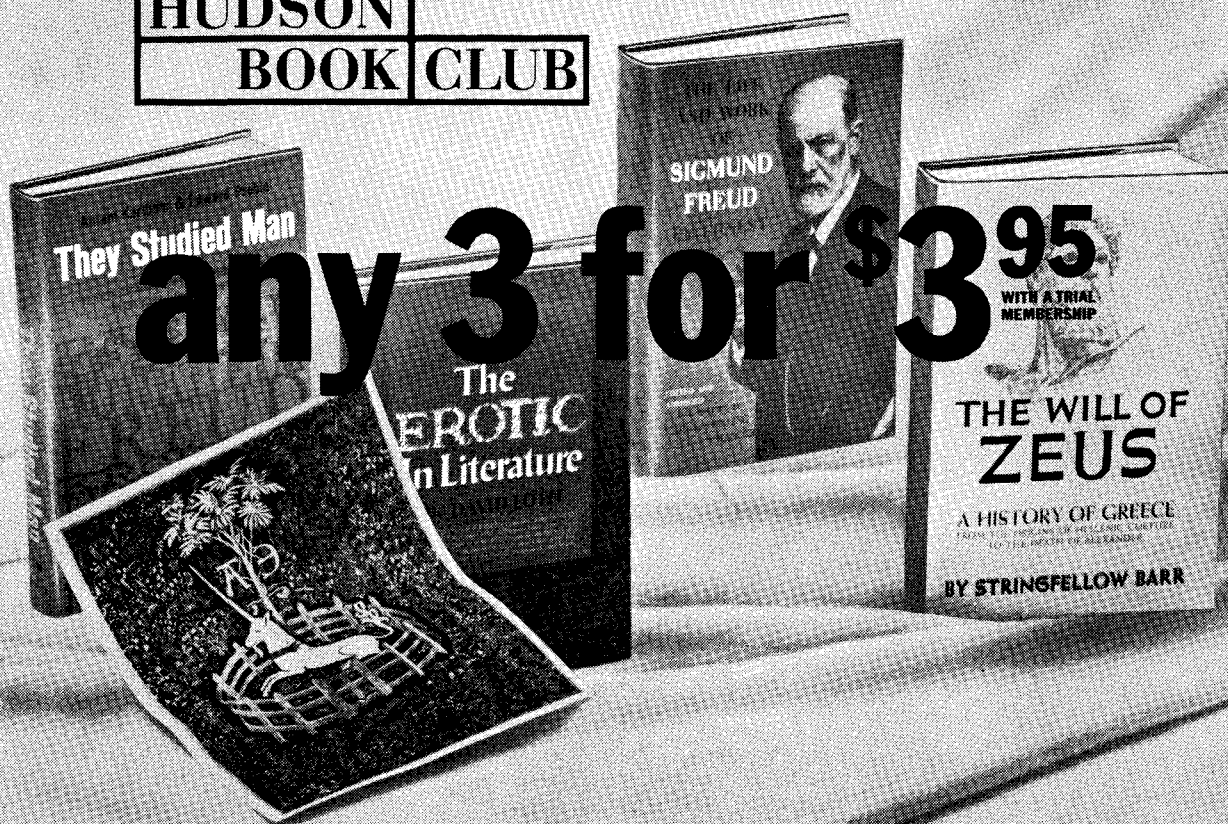
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MY SIMPLE PLEASURES

CHILDREN nowadays think they must always have something to play with. They are really spoiled rotten. I know this fellow, a lonely bachelor, who is short and thin, and who certainly doesn't take up much *lebensraum* wherever he happens to be. (He is not even German; he is Irish on his mother's side and English, if I'm not mistaken, on his father's.) He has been turned away from the homes of several friends he has tried to visit lately. There's no room for him because there are so many toys, games, sets of things, giant miniature bridges, miniature giant ferris wheels, great big frightening life-sized dolls, battle-grounds, and I don't know what all. People say to him: "Come back later,

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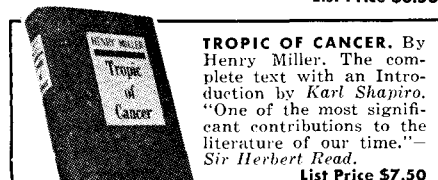
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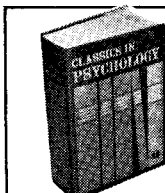
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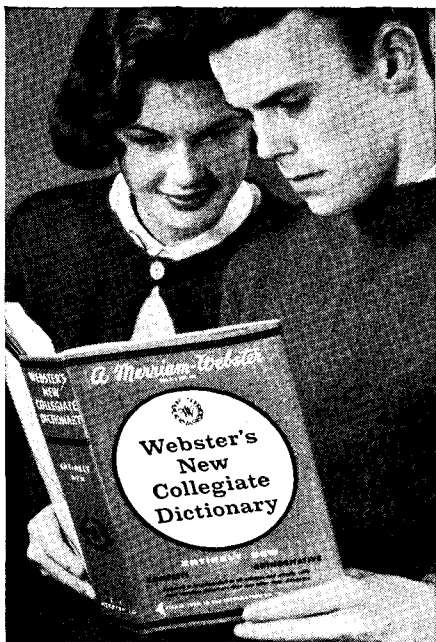
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Bill, when the kids are grown.” Isn't that terrible?

When I was a child we made our own fun, and Harding was President.

I used to have this small ten-cent notebook. With only that and a stub of a pencil I would keep out of everyone's way for an entire afternoon. What I did was walk round and round our block, taking house numbers. To take house numbers you just walk up in front of a house, look at its number, and write it down. A bright child, with practice, can take every house number in a given block in ten minutes. I myself have done it in five. If you will go with your child a few times until he gets the hang of it he will thank you some day.

There are people, I should warn you, who prefer not to have their house numbers taken. There was a woman like that on our block. Every time she saw me out front with my notebook (and I was a fairly cute little tyke, too, with a Buster Brown haircut) she would call my mother on the telephone.

“He's taking my house number again,” she would say.

My mother wasn't the type to be intimidated. “Well? What of it?” she would ask.

The woman always said it made her “ner-r-vous.” There was no getting around it; she *was* nervous. One time she was crying when she called.

“He's taking it again,” she wailed.

My mother promised her that she'd speak to me when I got home, and she did. She said she was sorry, but from then on I'd better skip the woman's house. I promised I would.

But what nobody has known to this day is that I actually never failed to get that number down. I had written it, you see, so many times on my previous lists that all I had to do was go around the corner, look it up on an old list, and fill in the blank! I think it served the woman right.

Even now, because of this early experience, I am able to amuse myself for hours with only a paper and pencil. My doctor and every one of my nurses will tell you that I have a minimum of “things”—toys and whatnot—around, and yet I always seem to be cheery, and having a grand time.

—HAYES B. JACOBS.



Offhand

WE ARE THE Hyphen-natives, the Ameropean-Eurocans, the Atlantics, those of the Lost Continent; we don't belong. With the roots over there, the foliage over here, absent there from the sky, here from the earth, a useless bridge between two worlds.



WE TAKE NO HEED of European winds, no juices from the American soil, yet if a child kicks at our roots in Europe, the foilage suffers in America. If American winds batter our crown, the roots will creak in Europe. Wrongly oversensitive and wrongly indifferent, always at the wrong time in the wrong place, misnamed, misunderstood, we don't know who we are, why we are here and why still over there, why always living on the envy of fools who don't know how we live or they would laugh at us.



IN EUROPE it's the American Dream (all wrong, we know, yet we fall for it the first day we go back, feel proudly American, touch our passport in our pocket lest it, too, prove a dream), here it's the Ex-Appeal of an old Europe that no longer exists but in novels and lies. The worst Americans are still the Europeans (we sound like American Indians), gadgeteers, gigantomaniacs, noisy, greedy, jittery and childish, and the worst Europeans are now the Americans, old-fashioned, snobbish, military-minded, frightened of opinions, pioneering in nothing and subservient in everything. We feel equally foreign to both, and also to ourselves, but we keep it a secret. As a service to whom?



OUR FRUITS do not fall on our roots as they should, but closest to our foliage: a mistake, because our foliage does not dance in the sun as it should: it drags in mud and touches ground only with shadows, which is also a mistake, and our children despise us for this reason.



THEY ARE the first Americans to deny us recognition and to laugh at our accent, living like orphans in our house, with us restless but dead, impotent witnesses to their impotent pride, ghosts from a world of fairy tales they rejected as false while it was true and they are false as long as they don't see the roots and speak our language.

—NICCOLO TUCCI.