

Cover Story:

The Story of Charlie McCarthy

By EDGAR BERGEN

REPRINT courtesy the Wittenberg Archives, from FAN MAGAZINE, October, 1938

MACK looked at my sketches, counted for a few minutes on his fingers, and said he'd charge me thirty-five dollars.

I didn't have thirty-five dollars.

I had seventeen dollars—four dollars of which I had earned the Saturday night before, giving a very bad exhibition of ventriloquism at the Elks' Club on Ladies' Night, and thirteen dollars which I had saved from my allowance over a six months' period of painful prudence. My allowance was two dollars a week.

I counted on *my* fingers.

If I gave up movies, and my daily soda at the drug store, I could pay Mack a dollar and a half a week. Twelve weeks of paying off; but maybe I could do it sooner if I could land another club date. I swallowed hard and turned back to Mack.

"Go ahead," I said.

That was the beginning of Charlie McCarthy.

Mack was a wood carver, who had a little shop in the north end of Chicago. I'm afraid most of his work was prosaic cabinet making, but he had a way with a piece of wood and a knife, and I had stopped by his place many times on my way home from school to watch him work before I ever thought of Charlie.

I had been experimenting with ventriloquism for three years. That I possessed the ventriloquist's peculiar voice construction burst upon me when I was thirteen. I rose in history class one afternoon to tackle a particularly embarrassing question about the War of the Roses, cleared my throat to get my bearings, and when I started to talk my voice bounded shrilly from another corner of the room. I sat down and thought it over.

That night at dinner I frightened my mother nearly out of her wits by tossing ejaculations at her from the center of a fresh cherry pie. And the next day I spent twenty-five cents on a beautifully

illustrated booklet called "The Art of Ventriloquism." "The Art" was the only instruction I ever had in "the art."

I made my first dummy myself. He was a little colored boy named Rastus, whose personality was never enough to cope with his papier-maché rustle. Despite this handicap, Rastus delighted my pals in Lakeview High School. And my mother's friends used to feign admiration for my cleverness to the point of inviting Rastus and me to perform at Saturday night church suppers.

It was those first public appearances that fostered the urge for Charlie McCarthy. I wasn't much of an actor, and Rastus' Dixie dialect had more than a tinge of the Swedish accent. I began casting about for a model for a new dummy, determined that this time it should be the real thing. I'd be professional if it cost me my allowance for a year.

THE face which today puts the lie to Charlie McCarthy's top hat and tails grinned at me originally from a little newsboy who used to peddle papers at a street corner near our house. His name was Charlie — I never learned the rest of it — and the map of Ireland was on his face. He never stopped grinning. If he lost a tooth you were conscious of a definite change in the landscape at his particular

APRIL - MAY, 1985



BERGEN AND MC CARTHY

corner. He was forever involved in fantastic financial calculations. "Gee," he would complain after a thorough check of five different pockets, "I'm three cents short." His namesake has the same trouble today.

I sat on the curbing one afternoon and made sketches of Charlie at his work. Tough sales were his meat.

"'Smatter, mister? D' your old woman catch you out late last night?" He sized up a prospect with uncanny shrewdness. The sight of a bowler on an approaching customer prompted "Stock market goes up to—da—y—ee"; while a loud-checked coat evoked "Black Fox wins at Latonia!" When the sale was completed, he would turn to me and wink.

I often wonder what ever happened to that game little guy. I'm sure he was very poor. He never spent the pennies he collected from his sales, but tied the day's earnings in a dirty handkerchief, and started off home with them. I suppose he's still in Chicago, grown up now—married, perhaps—and grinding away at some uninspiring job. But I'll bet he still knows all the answers.

My sketches of Charlie didn't do him justice—despite the fact that my father, a draftsman himself, had considered me a bit of an artist. But with the Irish in my impressions of Charlie, the newsboy, and the Irish in Mack's heart, my Charlie McCarthy couldn't fail. He emerged with an impudent Irish profile, and the Irish spunk.

I think closing that thirty-five-dollar transaction with Mack was the smartest move I ever made in my life. On the face of it, the deal wasn't prudent. I'm sure the people who make the rules for young boy's organizations wouldn't have approved. (I often wonder where they get the wisdom to lay down one rule to meet a million problems.) My own mother was hesitant when I told her the step meant mortgaging my income—if you can call an allowance an income—for three long months. We weren't desperately poor, but mother was a widow and there was no "special occasions budget" for stretching my brother's allowance and mine to provide for extraordinary expenditures. Mother wisely decreed that the expenditure was a thing I should decide for myself, and I am grateful to her for it.

HAVING turned up my nose at the rule-makers in the preceding paragraph, I am scarcely in a position to lay down a rule of my own, but I do feel strongly on the subject of "thrift."

Thrift is a much abused word, and is guilty of much wrongdoing, in my opinion. Whenever I have a chance to counsel a young fellow just starting out, I tell him not to feel that the saving habit early in life is a sure sign of success. I think he should spend his money—all of it—for books, or travel, or for anything else with which he can intelligently broaden his horizon. If he's electrically minded he should buy the short-wave set he wants,

or if he likes to tinker with cameras he should arrange to get the efficient equipment he needs to make good pictures. Pictures are a career, not a mundane job, to many a bright young man these days.

A fellow's first job is so important. If he approaches it with just a little imagination, if he equips himself for something he really wants—and likes to do—with just a little outlay of cash, life is going to have a much brighter pattern as it takes shape for him.

I SEE so many youngsters scared into false ideas of the importance of accumulating a "nest egg" early in life, taking the first job offered to them—drudgery or not. Pretty soon they are married, their obligations are increased, they've had the little promotions which come after a year or two of work. It's too late now to quit and look for a better job, to develop those hobbies which might have been careers.

"Find yourself first," my deep convictions cry out to them. "Do what you want to do or you're stuck. You're stuck!"

I've had my share of jobs I didn't like, too. I was a window trimmer one summer. I worked another summer in a film plant. I even ran a popcorn wagon. But all the time I had Charlie McCarthy, and was equipping myself—through him—for a life I never would have dared to tackle by myself, the most stimulating career, I'm convinced, of them all: show business.

I say I never could have done it without Charlie. That isn't an exaggeration. Many times I would have compromised—perhaps given up entirely—for I haven't the protective shell of self-confidence which gets a bred-in-the-blood trouper over the tough spots. That winter, not so long ago, when we watched vaudeville shrivel up and die; it would have been easy then to slip out of show business. I had been writing my own routines long enough to think I could write for radio. No one—least of all, I—had dreamed that a dummy could be funny on the air. But people in radio were eating regularly. Again, three years

ago, when Charlie and I were kicked out of "The Ziegfeld Follies" after two weeks of the run, there would have been easier paths

than mine. My mother always thought I'd make a good electrician.

But Charlie can take it. Just before Christmas in 1934 we sat in a hotel room and waited three weeks for a vaudeville date in Montreal to roll around. I had never asked for work—not since our first vaudeville booking on the Western Vaudeville Circuit when I was twenty-one. We had never skipped more than a week-end between engagements. Now I not only was making the rounds of the booking offices, but was hearing nothing but "No."

I WAS occupied with serious thought when Charlie and I made the Christmas week trip to Montreal. When I counted up our expenses and discovered that railroad fare, hotel bills and incidentals had eaten up the profits, I knew the end was there.

I determined, when I returned to New York, to try an entirely new field—night clubs—and in preparation slicked up my comedy routines for the sophisticated New York night spot patrons. I ordered a white tie and tails for Charlie, who submitted to the indignity gamely. The very spirit of co-operation, he acquired an English accent for the new life.

We got off to a flying start. We landed a place in the show at Helen Morgan's club. Sophie Tucker was the headliner. The cream of New York dropped in at Helen's regularly, and soon we were making over-the-footlights friends of such habitués as Lynn Fontaine and Alfred Lunt, Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence.

Then came what looked like the chance of a lifetime—an offer to do a specialty in "The Ziegfeld Follies." We got friendly notices when the show opened out of town, but good, bad or indifferent, clicking or not, we got our pink slip at the end of two weeks.

It was the sort of peremptory rebuff, the sudden disgrace which licks you in New York. We weren't wanted in any night clubs then, not even the second-raters. If we weren't good enough for the Shuberts, we weren't good enough for New York. As I have said, I would have quit. I could still be a good electrician.

But Charlie just turned up his eloquent nose at the Brothers Shubert and waltzed me off to New Orleans for a good old-fashioned nervous breakdown, the first prerogative of an actor who has been snubbed. Once below the Mason-Dixon Line, I found I didn't want a nervous breakdown after all, and went directly to work in New Orleans' favorite night club.

THE first night was an ordeal. Failure does something to a fellow's insides. But Charlie was not in the least abashed. "Get in there and pitch, Bergen," he threatened, "or I'll mow you down."

So we pitched.

Charlie McCarthy—or my ventriloquist's trick of facing the world with a quality of impudent assurance which I don't possess in myself—has been getting me out of jams during all the seventeen years that I've had him.

At first, when we were in the experimental stages, it worked the other way. I was called on the carpet by the dean of men at Northwestern more than once for answering classroom roll calls in Charlie's voice for my absent fraternity brothers. Charlie made a shambles of many a sober-sided chapel program, and my Delta Upsilon brothers initiated him along with me, as a reward for the laughs he'd given them.

But with all the fun, Charlie helped me work my way through college. The fees I collected for performances at clubs and conventions, and occasionally at theaters—where I lied about my age in the face of minor-labor restrictions to pick up a six-dollar check for four performances—paid all the bills and helped keep the family budget in the black.

MY brother Clarence and I were the men in the family from our early teens. Father, who was an architect, fell ill when we were lads and retired to a farm in Michi-

gan, where he tried to combine the dairy business with recuperating. He never completely recovered, and died when I was fourteen. Mother never complained of hard times during the years which followed; but I am sure it required close figuring for her to keep the little family together.

During the summers, while I was in college, Charlie and I polished up our act touring the Chautauqua circuits in Northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois. We got our first vaudeville engagement when I was twenty-one, for the old Western Circuit. In a year or two we were traveling the whole RKO Circuit, and having a whale of a time. Charlie made traveling fun: I'd take him into the observation cars on the train with me, and plague the passengers with small talk. One New Year's Eve, when we were on our way to an engagement in Atlanta, Charlie organized an impromptu minstrel show, and passengers, porters and conductors, with Charlie as interlocutor, staged one of the really great shows of the generation.

I was afflicted with a bad case of *wanderlust*, so would turn down lucrative offers in this country to jump on a ship any time a prospective engagement beckoned in South America and Europe. Charlie and I toured England and the Continent one summer, touched a corner of Soviet Russia and wound

CLIP AND SAVE

WANTED

Lionel and American Flyer
TURN YOUR OLD TRAINS
AND TOYS INTO MONEY

Collector Pays Cash
WILL PICK UP
CALL BILL

(312) 699-0268

CLIP AND SAVE

up a gala season with a performance in Sweden for the Crown Prince. In Sweden we amused ourselves, and startled our audiences, by talking to the people in their native tongue. My father hadn't taught me his language for nothing.

This life of touring the world with a wooden-headed rascal has not been all roses. Charlie has been a tyrant in his small way, foiling any ideas I had from time to time concerning romance and marriage.

"Watch out, Bergen," he'd warn me. "You can't ship a wife around the country in a suit case, even if it is velvet-lined. Don't complicate things, Bergen; you've got me to look after."

OTHER people's romances were another story. Charlie took such a violent interest in a fellow-passenger's romantic problems on the ship coming home from Sweden that he nearly involved me in a three-way battle. A lovely young girl was the instigation of the trouble—wooed both by an Englishman with a title, and a young Swedish architect with nothing but charm, she seemed to be leaning too much toward the title to suit Charlie's fancy. He chided her about her choice during a performance in the club salon one night—and both of us had to run for our lives.

The opportunity which gave us our most permanent claim to fame—radio—knocked one night during an engagement at the Rainbow Room, and a sponsor asked his agents next day to arrange for us to do a guest appearance on his radio show. I was leery of the move. I felt our night club routines—"The Doctor's Office"; "Cocktails at Five"—were too sophisticated for the radio audience, and I was afraid revisions might leave them colorless. If any one had suggested a radio series, with a new routine to be perfected every week, I should have fled to China.

We did the spot on Rudy Vallee's show, and the listeners liked it. We went back again—and again. You know the rest.

Charlie and I are motion picture actors now. My thirty-five dollar investment in a hobby is paying dividends. I still feel a little foolish when I stand off and look at myself as an actor, but Charlie is taking the whole thing in his stride.

"Sparkle, Bergen," he prompts me when the cameras start turning. "Don't give 'em that dead-fish look this time."

Charlie likes Hollywood. Charlie loves bright lights, interviews, photographers. They scare me to death.

I shall never forget the night I went down to the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles to accept the special award for "comedy creation" presented to me by the Academy of

Motion Picture Arts and Scientists. The Academy banquet is the white-tie-and-tails event of the year in filmland. Every big-wig of the industry is there, and to me—as I walked up to accept the little wooden statuette which was marked for me—it looked as if they were all sitting in the front row, daring me to be funny.

My heart stopped. I could think of nothing appropriate to say.

"I think," I said, and gulped. "I think I'll go get Charlie."

Charlie was lying in his case in the cloak room. I had expected to go it alone on this occasion and had left him, as always when he is not "alive", out of sight.

We went back to the banquet together. I had failed at the speech-making expected of me, so I left the situation to Charlie. It was a wise decision. From the minute he faced that sea of white shirt fronts and diamonds, Charlie was in complete command of the situation.

It was a full moment before he spoke. He looked the crowd over. He cast a critical eye over the rows of gold statuettes lined up for presentation to the people who had made motion picture history in the year just past.

"Um-m-mm," he said at last. "Knick-knacks."

I love the little guy. I love his impudence, his effrontery. I love it because I haven't it—and never would have made the pull alone.

With all his Esquire front, the monocle and white tie, the clipped British accent—Charlie is still the little freckle-faced newsboy on the corner in Chicago. Mark his loyalty. Charlie hobnobs with the great now—with Andrea Leeds, Carole Lombard, and the rest. But he's never forgotten Skinny Dugan.

CHARLIE has given me a life which is stimulating, and inspiring, and full. So, to me at least, he lives. At home he has a room of his own. He has a wardrobe which would put Clark Gable's to shame. When people who know me talk about him, it is always "Charlie." I wince when strangers refer to him as "the dummy".

I suppose it's sentimental, but whenever it is necessary to operate on Charlie to change his arms, or legs, or wig—I find it an unpleasant task to be got through with as soon as possible. I don't feel I have him until the job is completed.

Charlie's head has never been changed. He has traveled far since he used to amuse the Delta Upsilon pledges and their girls on "date night" at the fraternity house. He's seen the world, and he's grabbed off a piece of it. But he's still Mack's Charlie—and Charlie, the newsboy's, and mine—and well worth the thirty-five dollars he cost me seventeen years ago.