

EXIT PAGLIACCI, BEEFING

DO you suppose I'd get anywhere if I made a timid suggestion to the New York Times, a publishing enterprise that has managed to keep its head above water for ninety-nine years without my suggestions? I have a wrinkle that may not have occurred to its directors, an all-purpose hunch guaranteed to swell their coffers, fatten the take-home dividends, and delight the readership, all at the outlay of not so much as a bent farthing, and I'd like to see the efficiency engineer who could score a comparable triple play. Nutshell-brief, the idea is this. At present, the Times appears in four different forms: There is the ordinary newsstand, or bloodcurdler, edition; the international edition, for overseas subscribers; the microfilm edition; and the permanent, rag-paper version, beamed at libraries and cornerstones. What I contemplate is a fifth form, of a volatile nature, which would disappear instantly upon being read and thus hamstring children from using it to humiliate their parents. It might even be printed on some edible substance like tortillas or Swedish health bread, so you could swallow the pages as you finished them. I'll leave flavor and physical details to the composing room; my only interest is in checkmating juvenile initiative at the source. If I can just prevent items like "Proud Father" from falling into the hands of my young and kindling their imagination, the sceptre is mine again. In other words, God and Sulzberger

willing, the Times will be slightly invisible to adolescents; there'll be no petards, and nobody hoist.

"Proud Father" was a dispatch contained in the Times Sunday movie section and was concerned with an acute case of paternal love that had stricken a wealthy sawmill operator named Dan Gunn, Jr. This worthy, the report stated, "came up to Hollywood from his home town, Woodville, Texas . . . to see about putting his 9-year-old daughter Judy on the screen. But," the dispatch continued, "Gunn had no ambitions to make her a film star. All he wanted was to get her into a picture so that people—lots and lots of people—could hear her play the piano. Moreover, he had no foolish notions about convincing some producer that he ought to risk his own money on such a project, arriving fully prepared to spend his own dollars for the purpose. So last week, as Papa Gunn looked on proudly and producer-director Wes Beeman had everything in order, the first scenes of a two-reel musical short in Ansco color entitled 'Fantasy for Judy' went before the cameras at the Eagle-Lion studio. As a showcase for the little pianist, it will bring her to the screen playing three numbers, Mozart's 'Turkish March,' Grieg's 'Nocturne,' and Chopin's 'Ecossais,' while a troupe of ballet dancers directed by Michael Panaieff enlivens the scene in pantomime. This little venture into the world of the cinema will cost Judy's

father between \$25,000 and \$30,000. 'But shucks,' he said, 'if it does what I want it to do, that will be cheap. Definitely,' he added, 'I'm not raising no movie star. This is a case of genius—musical genius—coming out in a 9-year-old child, and I just can't hoard it. But I'm glad I got money enough so that no one else can own so much as one of her fingernails.'"

Snatching at an opportunity to draw a vivid moral lesson, I clipped the story, scrawled a disdainful "Fulsome" in the margin, and left it on my twelve-year-old daughter's vanity, together with a bag of sweets. There, I reflected, this will demonstrate that one needn't spend thirty grand on a valentine to prove his fatherly affection. Faugh on parvenus who subsidize their children's love with bread and circuses. I made no further reference to my magnanimity other than to mention it to my wife and intimate several times to the child that the confections had cost ten cents, throwing in a homily decrying the folly of parvenus who subsidize their children's love. I can conscientiously say that up to that juncture I was boss man of the family and big wheel, and that no domestic sparrow fell without my cognizance.

OVER the next couple of months, though, I began detecting a chain of suspicious eddies in the smooth current of our household life. A strange acquisitiveness suddenly possessed my daughter and her fourteen-year-old brother. They demanded increased allowances, liquidated for a sizable quantity of cash the stamp collections they had amassed, economized on their lunches, and banked every penny. They had both been earning substantial salaries from part-time work, soldering cheap jewelry after school hours in a closet I had fitted up for them with a real electric bulb. To my chagrin, I discovered they were diverting the money, which had permitted me Havana cigars, massages, and other small luxuries I could not otherwise have afforded, into their own savings account. I remonstrated with them, denouncing such avarice as indicative of a contemptible meanness of spirit, but they countered with double-talk and evasive fleers. Undoubtedly they were emboldened by my temperate approach, for they now spread their wings. Taking advantage of the reputation for probity I had built up across the years in rural Pennsylvania, they secretly negotiated a second mortgage on our farm—a chilling instance of the guile youngsters conceal under a cloak of innocence. Just as they were about to



pawn my studs at Simpson's, my patience evaporated and I lowered the boom on them.

"What in Tophet's going on around here?" I shouted. "You little devils are cooking up some mischief, and, by the Eternal, I'll root it out if it's the last—"

I stopped short as my son withdrew a letter from his jumper and extended it to me. "This just came for you," he said. "We were going to surprise you after dinner, when you're logy, but you're bound to know anyhow."

Blinking, I unfolded and read the note. It was a blunt, matter-of-fact message from Iris Productions, Inc., a documentary-film group with studios located on Tenth Avenue. Shooting on "Fantasy for Sidney," the one-reel novelty featuring my chalk-talk specialty, would commence the following morning at nine, and I was instructed to report in full makeup on the set with my easel, smock, and a change of Windsor ties.

"Good grief, I'm no movie actor!" I sputtered, overwhelmed. "Why, I haven't given a chalk talk since the Older Business Boys' Get-Together at the Providence Y in 1919!"

"No, but you've been gassing about it ever since," said my wife, a woman afflicted with total recall. "Two drinks and you start browbeating our friends with that stale patter of yours. The evenings I've spent—"

"One moment, Mrs. James Gibbons Huneker," I said crushingly. "If I'd wanted to exploit my talent, I could have had my name in lights."

"And you still will, Daddy," chimed in my son loyally. "This is a case of genius—artistic genius—coming out in a forty-six-year-old man, and we just can't hoard it. Promoting the geetus for your celluloid bow has tested us tads to the utmost, but we deem it measly for a progenitor which he's gifted beyond mortal ken."

Hot salt tears welled up at the spontaneous tribute that had sprung from a candid heart, and I resolved on the instant to vindicate his faith. Long after the family had retired that night, I paced



"See, Grouchy? We haven't missed a thing—the score is still nothing to nothing."

the floor composing graceful sallies to refurbish my routine, cultivating the ironical raised eyebrow that had boosted Jan Kiepura to fame, and practicing deep, pear-shaped tones. Silly as I knew it to be, there nevertheless kept recurring in my mind's eye a vignette of myself in a vicuña coat, piloting a sleek yellow Jaguar into Romanoff's amid envious whispers. I didn't know how I was going to get it through the front door, but I felt certain Mike would have a table ready for the town's foremost Thespian. I envisioned myself dancing with taffy-haired starlets at the Mocambo, trading punches with Humphrey Bogart at Chasen's over some trifling insult, responding to toasts at Academy dinners. Come hell or high water, I determined to raise a hairline mustache.

"THEATRICAL HISTORY" is not a phrase to bandy about, but I know no other to describe what I made the next forenoon at the Iris studio. Mustard-keen and as poised as Lowell

Sherman, I showed I was that rare player who can surmount a disastrous head cold, a jealous director, and bungling technicians, and deliver a virtuoso performance. After a slow start, due to straying into a production that dealt with cross-pollination, I quickly picked up momentum. With lightning strokes, I limned a hundred amusing conceits: a profile of William Jennings Bryan, his hair curled into a bird's nest full of eggs; a bag of money that transposed astonishingly into a silk-hatted capitalist; a simple hieroglyph of a bayonet and a canine tail that represented a soldier leading a dog past a fence. This repertoire, deftly interthreaded with witticisms that ran like quicksilver, tickled every funny bone; even the electricians, inured to the antics of professional comedians, unashamedly held their sides. In stealing the spotlight from the director, naturally, I incurred his undying enmity. He cunningly tried to inveigle me into accepting a Hawaiian singing ensemble in the background, on the plea that the

audience would welcome intervals of musical relief, and, when rebuffed, proposed to cut in flashes of Smith & Dale, the old Palace favorites, belaboring each other with pig bladders. The poor chap did not realize that you do not enhance the beauty of the Venus de Milo by setting a clock in her stomach. Philistine that he was, he doubtless had never seen sheer perfection before, and it blinded him.

"When d'ye think the thing'll be ready to preview?" I asked him carelessly as the cameras quit grinding. "I'd like to ask a few friends." He made some inarticulate remark about giving them corrosive sublimate instead and stalked off. I saw at once that my screen career hung on the whim of a madman, and might well end on the cutting-room floor. Yet when I got home I gave no hint of disquiet to the children, who were waiting eagerly. Their faces glowed with anticipation at the thought of my film debut; I knew that in their naïve pantheon I already outshone even such gods as Red Skelton and Donald O'Connor.

PERHAPS the tryout of the picture would have been more auspicious had I not intrusted it to my offspring but instead arranged it in person. It was unveiled at an owl show in a Forty-second Street flea bag, complementing an Italian sex thriller called "Vesuvio," in which Anna Magnani kept erupting from her shirtwaist, and "Cuties in Bondage," a sociological study of Hollywood high-school girls shanghaied into white slavery. An audience of sailors and dice hustlers, while visibly impressed, received it quietly, according me the respect of muting their laughs so that my every syllable emerged distinctly. Indeed, at times I seemed almost *too* audible; whenever I cleared my throat, a reedy noise like a musical saw issued from the sound track, inspiring a gang of toughs in the balcony to reply with cat-calls. The reactions of our guests, two couples we had entertained at a small dinner party prior to the showing, were of necessity fragmentary, since they had to leave in the middle to judge some beagles at Fishers Island. The children, who had been allowed to stay up late as a special treat befitting producers, gave the short an unhesitating accolade. They stamped their feet and applauded wildly, alerting everyone around them to the presence of the star and the fact that he was available for autographs. Peacockery of that sort, however, has always been distasteful to me, and I arose, muffling my face in my coat collar. The whole family, with the exception of my

THE SAINT TO THE CHIMNEY SWALLOW

At the streaking of the sky
The fledglings wake, and so do I,
To the tumult echoing
From the ruffle of your wing,
And gape their cavern-throats above:
Is it hunger? Is it love?
In my garden you will spy
Droning beetle, drowsy fly.
Welcome to whatever meat
Hungry swallow-babies eat,
Welcome to the transient nest:
We are both Another's guest,
Who drops the fruit about my door,
And sings with your impatient four,
And teaches them to cling and crawl,
Breast against the blackened wall,
And the morning they are gone
Whispers "Dare to fly alone."

Then hark the hymn in Eden sung,
Hark the rapture of their tongue:
The canticle of brotherhood
High above the budding wood
To the bird that bred and hatched them
And the man who fed and watched them.
Amen: If but a sparrow fall,
He sees within my cobbled wall.
I kneel below the empty flue,
I meet His mercy's eye of blue,
I worship His eternal throne
Through the telescope of stone.

—GEORGE HOWE

wife, besought me to remain for the vulture show, at 2:30 A.M., but Sardi's called to the actor's blood in my veins, and the summons could not be ignored.

Nothing is ever left undone to stifle a masterpiece, and one day posterity will agree that "Fantasy for Sidney" shared the usual fate. The jackals of the press, aware that it presaged a revolution in the flicker industry, united in a ruthless campaign of silence. Finally, one exhibitor more courageous than his fellows released it in his art cinema below Fourteenth Street, in concert with two experimental subjects depicting a Meccano set interpreting a Sibelius symphony and Jean Cocteau shaving his right

eyeball. "Morpheus Rides Again," as the package was styled, opened of a Friday night. By Saturday morning, six pickets from the Children's Aid Society were patrolling the sidewalk. They flaunted placards condemning parasites who use child labor to forward their careers, and urged a boycott and a police investigation. Midway through my sequence in the evening performance, a bomb planted by some fanatic exploded, but as there was nobody in the theatre at the time, the damage was relatively minor. On Sunday, the management announced the return of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" by popular demand, and the Wizard of the Chalk Talk was as extinct as the passenger pigeon.

Since then, I've rather lost touch with pictures and, in fact, with my children. I understand they're out on the Coast currently, trying to interest a Texan (a sawmill tycoon, I believe) in producing "Sappho," with his nine-year-old daughter in the part created by Olga Nethersole. They'll probably want me for a character bit, but, frankly, it's not my medium. I'll take an armchair at the Lambs, a tin of Velvet Joe, and the ephemeral edition of the New York Times. All the rest, for my dough, is illusion.

—S. J. PERELMAN

