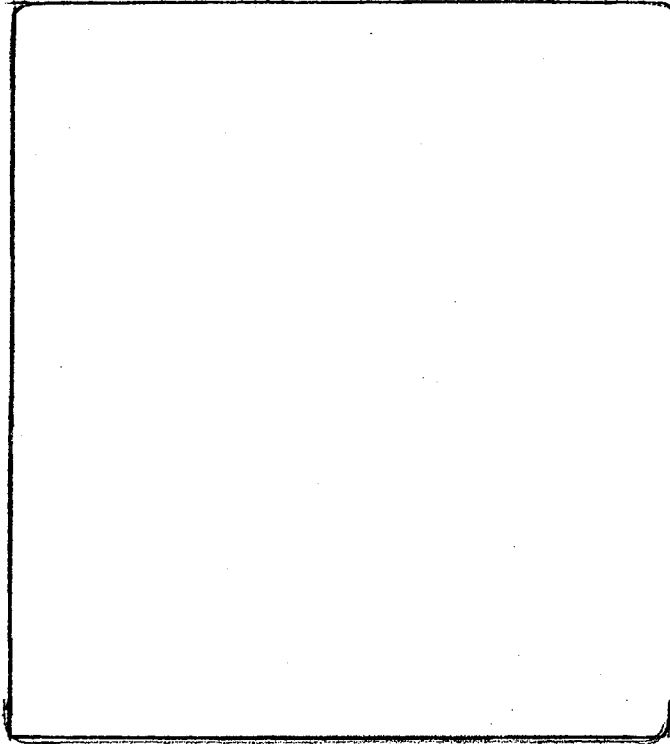


THEY'LL BREAK YOUR HEART

by

GEORGE BALZER

DEDICATED WITH DEEPEST ADMIRATION, RESPECT,
AND GRATITUDE TO:

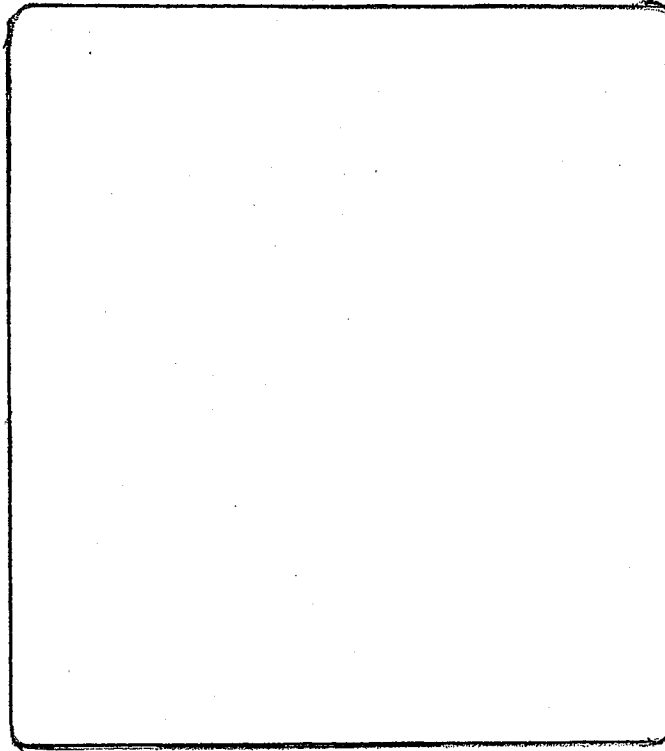


JACK BENNY
1894-1974

"I am first, because I'm the star and it's my show. Next to me come my four writers. After them, the director -- the parking lot attendant -- the producer -- the shoe shine boy -- the usher -- my manager -- and in any order you want to put them, but don't ever put anyone between me and my writers."

- MY FRIEND AND EMPLOYER -

AND TO:



ANDY DEVINE
1905 - 1977

...Whose help and encouragement came at the time
it was needed most -- when I was trying to get
started.

CHAPTER I

It's seven o'clock Sunday evening. My wife, Ada Marie, and I are sitting in the living room listening to Don Wilson, the radio announcer, say, "The Jack Benny Program - presented by Lucky Strike." This always happy announcement is punctuated by the Phil Harris Orchestra attacking a bright up-tempo arrangement of "Love In Bloom". After a few bars, the music fades out and L. A. Speed Riggs verbally triple tongues the dollar numbers in the chant of the tobacco auctioneer, ending with the melodic "All Done American". After the commercial, the "Love In Bloom" music fades back in and continues under, softly accompanying Don Wilson as he proudly intones the full billboard:

"THE LUCKY STRIKE PROGRAM STARRING JACK BENNY..
WITH MARY LIVINGSTONE, PHIL HARRIS, DENNIS DAY, ROCHESTER,
AND YOURS TRULY, DON WILSON."

The music hits full and comes to a finish. Then with his jovial voice reverberating against the silence of anticipation, Don sets the program theme with an appropriate introduction, finishing with, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, here's the STAR of our show, JACK BENNY."

After the applause dies away, that beautifully distinctive voice known to millions says, "Thank you, thank you. Hello again. This is JACK BENNY talking."

I have heard that phrase hundreds of times but never has it had the impact it had tonight. You see, this is not a Sunday evening back in the nineteen thirties or forties. It's Sunday, December twenty-ninth, 1974, and only a few short hours ago my wife and I returned from Hillside Cemetery where we attended the funeral services and said our last goodbye to JACK BENNY.

As evening came on, I couldn't resist selecting from my collection of tapes a recording of one of Jack's old radio shows and playing it. When I heard his voice say, "Hello again..." I had an eerie feeling that somehow, somehow, he had followed us home.

The recording, which I had picked at random, was a radio show broadcast from Palm Springs, California, on February Eleventh, 1951, just three days before Jack's birthday. In his introduction Don Wilson said, "JACK WAS TANNED BY THE DESERT SUN, TOUCHED BY THE DESERT WIND, AND FRIGHTENED BY THE DESERT PRICES." After the familiar "Hello again" greeting, Jack continued:

"...Don, you're right about one thing. I have got a beautiful tan..and why not? Every day I lay out beside the pool at the beautiful Palm Springs Biltmore Hotel. It's the most exclusive -- "

"Wait a minute, Jack...I don't like to correct your grammar, but it isn't 'lay' by the pool, it's 'lie'."

"Don, in this case, we're both right... You see, I don't live at The Biltmore... so in order to lay by the pool, I have to lie to the life guard...I've really got him fooled, too...I borrowed a bathing suit from Mary, and he thinks I'm Esther Williams."

This reference to Esther got a big laugh because everyone knew she was the popular swimming star. Don, as always, pursued the topic.

"Jack, you mean to say you wore Mary's two-piece bathing suit?"

"Uh huh...I'm gonna have a hard time explaining my tan to the boys in the steam room. Anyway, to change the subject, Don, did you get the invitation I sent you to my birthday party next Wednesday?"

"Yes, Jack, and there's something in it that I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Well, it says: 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'...Then down in the corner it says, 'Fifteen..Nine...Thirty-four.' What do these numbers mean?"

"They're the sizes of my shirts, slippers, and underwear. I used to put R.S.V.P., and I got nothing."

At this point, Mary Livingstone entered and was greeted with applause. Jack acknowledging her entrance said:

"Mary, let me look at you...I've never seen you looking so good. You've only been in Palm Springs four days and you're darker than I am."

"Well, Jack, I should be...I'm out in the sun from morning 'till night, and I walk all the time."

"Gee, I didn't know you were so athletic."

"Who's athletic? I can't find a room."

"Oh...Oh...Well, it is awfully crowded down here."

"You're not kidding...Yesterday I put a penny in a gum machine, pulled the lever, and a woman stuck her head out and said, 'Sorry, no vacancies'."

"Oh, yes, I know that gum machine...
it's called The Juicy Fruit Hacienda...
They're booked up until April."

Don, always one to help, interjected:

"Mary, if you wish, I'll try to get
you a room at the Park Lane Hotel where I'm
living."

Jack then suggested:

"And Mary, if you can't get into the
Park Lane, why don't you try the place
I'm staying?"

"Oh, you're at The Bon Aire, aren't you?"

"Well, I couldn't get in there so I'm
staying at The El Tonto Trailer Camp."

"Trailer Camp? Jack, you haven't got
a trailer."

"Mary, they rent you the space..how you
sleep they don't care...It's very informal.
At night we all sit around the camp fire
and sing Western songs."

Jack then gave a corny imitation of a singing cowboy:

"I'm an Old Cowhand..from the Rio Grande."

This caused Mary to laugh and Don to ask:

"What are you laughing at, Mary?"

"At Jack...You should have seen him yesterday standing in front of the drug store wearing that cowboy outfit of his."

Jack, defending himself:

"Mary, when you're in Palm Springs, you're supposed to dress like a tough westerner."

"Some tough westerner. Your spurs still had dough on 'em from cutting out cookies."

"I made 'em for my party...You're gonna come, aren't you, Mary?"

"Yes, Jack, but there was something on your invitation that I didn't understand. It said, 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'...and down in the corner it said, 'N.M.B.S.' What does it mean?"

"Need man's bathing suit, how long can I keep fooling people?"

Then Dennis Day, the always popular Irish tenor stepped to the microphone and was greeted by Jack:

"Oh, hello, Dennis."

"Hello, Mr. Benny...Well...here I am."

"So I see. What are you gonna sing, Dennis?"

"Can I have some dialogue first, I got friends in the audience."

"Oh yes, yes, of course...I'm sorry. Tell me, kid, have you been having fun while we've been here in Palm Springs?"

"OH BOY, HAVE I!"

"Good."

"I will now sing 'Goodnight Irene'."

"Now wait a minute...you said you wanted some dialogue, didn't you?"

"My friends just left."

"Oh, well, go ahead and sing."

"Okay, Mr. Benny, but first do you mind if I ask you something?"

"No, kid, what is it?"

"Well, I received your invitation..and it said: 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'"

"Uh huh."

"And down in the corner it said: 'B.T.B.T.K. W.I.N.' What does that mean?"

"Go to Bullocks, They Know What I Need...

Now let's have your song."

While Dennis was singing, my wife commented on the incongruity of that beautiful Irish voice coming from a radio character that was supposed to be so stupid. Though the sad events

of the past three days kept running through our minds, we continued to listen. Dennis finished his song and after the applause, Jack said:

"That was 'To Think You've Chosen Me', sung by Dennis Day...But Dennis, you said you were gonna sing 'Goodnight Irene.'"

To which Dennis replied: "You gotta watch me, I'm cagey."

"I'll watch you, I'll watch you... Well, anyway, it was very good, and it would've sounded even better if the orchestra wasn't out of tune."

This disparaging remark about the orchestra caused Phil Harris to spring to the defense of his musicians:

"Wait a minute, Jackson, hold it... hold it..hold it!"

"Phil!"

"Now look, Jackson, I don't mind your picking on me personally, but lay off my boys. They held a meeting and they don't want you to make any more remarks about them."

"Remarks?"

"Especially when we're away from home... They demand respect."

"Oh, they do, eh? They want respect. Phil, just look at they. Take Sammy, your drummer...His head reminds me of my baby picture...And the way Bagby plays the piano, he looks like he's typing a letter to his parole board...And finally with great delight we come to Remley."

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with Remley?"

"What's wrong with him? Take a look at the coat he's wearing. On the back it says 'NO PARKING.'"

"Well, how do you like that, they must have painted the curbs last night."

"Yes, they must've...But Phil, as long as we're on the subject of music, we might as well settle it right now...Not only did your boys play Dennis' song badly, but it was a very poor arrangement."

"Look, Tonto, just tend to the comedy and keep your nose out of my business."

"Well, it happens to be my business, too. After all, who's the star of this show?"

"When I see my pay check, I know it ain't me."

"Phil -- "

"Alice gets more than I do just for signing her autograph."

"Then the moral of the story is 'learn to write.'"

The routine between the two of them continued, reaching a point where Jack finally told Phil to go sit down, to which Phil replied:

"Okay...Jackson..But there's something I want to ask you about that invitation you sent me and my orchestra boys."

"What about it?"

"Well, it says: 'You and your boys are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'... And down in the corner, it says, 'W.T.F.'... What does that mean?"

"Wash Their Faces...On second thought, don't wash Bagby's face, I hate to think what might be underneath."

"Ad lib another one, Jackson, I love the way it makes your eyes sparkle."

"Thank you. It's about time you appreciated my ---"

The reels of the tape player went 'round and 'round with every turn releasing those bright, familiar voices out of the past. Hearing them again helped to blot out the sadness that was in our

hearts. In the last scene Jack was supposed to be building a home in Palm Springs. It was nearly complete and he went out to the property to see how things were coming along. The part of the contractor was played by Frank Nelson. Frank was the character who always answered Jack's "Oh, Mister.. Mister," with an elongated "Yyyeesssss."

In this particular scene when Jack inquired, "Are you the contractor?" Frank with his usual sarcasm replied, "No, I've got these blue prints just because they match your eyes." Later, on the tour of inspection, Jack, pointing to some windows, said, "Do these windows open?" and Frank, used this opportunity to hit him with his emotionally enthusiastic, "Ooooooooh, do they!" The tour of the new home continued:

"...And here, Mr. Benny, is the hallway."

"Say, Mr. Nelson...we've been going all through the house and I haven't seen any bathroom."

"Oh my goodness, we forgot to build one."

"You forgot to build one? Well, what're you going to do?"

"I'm gonna give you a flashlight and a pair of slippers."

"You are not, you're gonna build one... Now Mr. Nelson, where's my bedroom?"

"The Master Bedroom?...Here it is,
right here."

We then heard a door open, followed by Jack saying:

"Say, it looks kinda...ROCHESTER!"

"OH...OH...OH....HELLO, MISTER BENNY."

Hearing this scratchy gravel voice of Jack's Negro butler, the audience roared with laughter and broke into applause. Roch was always a highlight. Jack continued.

"Rochester, what are you doing here?"

"I moved in already."

"But the house isn't ready yet...and besides, your room is over the garage."

"You ain't got a garage."

"What?"

"Last night the termites had a party and served it buffet style."

"Rochester, you mean to tell me that termites ate up my whole garage?"

"All but the cement floor...They saved that for dancing."

"Well, this is terrible...I left my violin in there."

"They ate that, too."

"How do you know?"

"They sent out for bicarbonate of soda."

"Rochester, if you saw them eating my violin, why didn't you stop them?"

"By the time I got here, they were using the strings for dental floss."

"Look, Rochester, you can stop all this silly talk and you're not getting the Master Bedroom...Now take your twelve trunks and get them out of here."

"Okay, you win...Come on, Jezebel."

To Rochester's command, a dog barked several times.

"Oh, fine, he had to bring a dog in my new house."

"Don't worry, Boss..I gave him a flashlight and four bedroom slippers."

"Good, good."

A few minutes more and it was over. Because the show had played well, the spread (time allowed for laughs) was insufficient, causing Jack to quickly say, as he had so many, many times, "We're a little late, goodnight folks," followed by Don Wilson's "The Jack Benny Program is written by Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, and John Tackaberry."

The "Love In Bloom" music again faded in to be joined by loud studio audience applause and together they both swelled to a finish, which was abruptly followed by...silence. A silence broken only by the loose, flapping end of the dangling tape.

As I turned off the tape player, I had a great sense of personal pride for I was indeed one of Jack's writers. It was a privilege and a relationship that lasted for twenty-five years --

covering radio, television, stage concerts, benefits..any public appearance requiring prepared material. He considered his writers a part of his family. I heard him say in interviews -- and to me, personally -- when talking about his staff:

"I, Jack Benny, am first because I'm the star and it's my show."

This he would always say with a twinkle in his eye, then continue more seriously, "Next to me come my four writers -- after them, the Director, the parking lot attendant, the Producer, the shoe shine boy, the ushers, my manager -- and in any order you want to put them, but don't ever put anyone between me and my writers."

He was sincere. To him, his writers were the closest members of his professional family. This was known by all and resented by some.

With the passing of Jack Benny, an era in the world of entertainment came to an end and I shall always be grateful for having had a small part in it.

CHAPTER II

Outside in the darkness a chilly wind was blowing. My thoughts took me back -- back beyond the sadness of the past three days -- back to what, for me, was the beginning ---

It was mid-summer nineteen forty-three, when the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency told me that I was one of those chosen to make up the new writing staff for the top-rated Benny Radio Show. Up to this time, I had never met Jack; nor would I be able to meet him until we started working. The reason was, at the close of the previous season, he had immediately headed up a show for the U.S.O. and had spent the entire summer entertaining American Armed Forces in North Africa. A few days later, when I signed the contract, I was told that the opening program would originate in New York City and I would have to go there to meet Mr. Benny when he returned from overseas.

Driving home, I kept thinking to myself -- New York-- New York -- was there really such a place or was it just a fictitious city they wrote songs about? Songs in which people asked other people to give their regards to a street -- and some Square named Harold to whom or which they wanted to be remembered. And what about this alley that was famous for its tin pans? Well, I was soon going to find out.

On a Friday morning in September, Ada Marie drove me downtown to the Los Angeles Union Station. World War II was in full swing and Union Station, like all railroad stations throughout the country, was a scene of frantic activity. Due to military requirements, train space was at a premium. People, in and out of uniform, were running in all directions. Arrivals and departures were constantly being announced over the public address system, but not once did a crazy train announcer say, "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUC--A--MONGA." The reason being my writing for the Benny Show hadn't started, so that character, so beautifully played by Mel Blanc, hadn't been created yet.

While my wife and I stood there waiting for the exciting "Alll-abooooard", we could hardly believe how fast things were happening for us. We had only been married about a year and a half, and now, with a bulging suitcase, I was leaving to join Jack Benny. She was staying home because she was about six months into a slight case of pregnancy evidenced by the usual swelling. I guess, in a way, you could say we were both packed.

At the station, I met for the first time Mary Livingstone (Mrs. Benny) and their daughter, Joan. Joanny was about eight years old at the time and was accompanied by a governess, a lovely English lady named Miss Valance. Mr. Bert Scott, Jack's personal secretary, would be travelling with us to handle all the details. I also met a fellow writer named Milt Josefsberg. Milt had written a few years for Bob Hope and now he, too, was joining the Benny staff. Suddenly, the P.A. System reminded us of what we were waiting for by calling out: "ATTENTION, ATTENTION, PLEASE -- NOW LOADING ON TRACK EIGHT, THE SANTA FE CHIEF, FOR SAN BERNARDINO, BARSTOW, ALBUQUERQUE AND CHICAGO --ALLLLLLL-ABOOOARD."

While walking down the long corridor to the loading platform, I was very much aware that up to this moment my travelling, except for a trip west from Pennsylvania at a very early age, had been confined to a small area of California. When we arrived at the train, Bert Scott handed me my ticket, my baggage check and my hotel reservation. Though I was twenty-eight years old, I was tempted to ask him to write a note with "If Lost Instructions" and pin it on my lapel.

I kissed Ada Marie goodbye and a few moments later, as I sat at the window, the train started to move and I was on my way toward the unknown. The train soon left the city limits of Los Angeles, stopped momentarily in Pasadena and then clickety-clacked its way eastward. It did not go through Anaheim, but it did go through Azusa and Cucamonga. Within the hour, I was further east than I had been in over twenty years.

Milt and I shared a compartment, and since we were both comedy writers starting on a new job, we had much to talk about. I soon learned from Milt that he was once a Press Agent. This bit of information I have always remembered, not only because I was impressed, but because he never let me forget it. Jack's previous writers, Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, were with Jack Benny for five or six years and toward the end were joined by Bob O'Brien. At the close of the last season, Morrow was drafted into the Army, Beloin wanted to write for pictures, and Bob went with Eddie Cantor. I didn't know much about them, but Milt told me that Bill was quite a heavy drinker. In his travels with the Benny Show, he would come to the railroad station with his two large suitcases filled with liquor. Over his arm he would be carrying his suit, sport coat, two or three pair of slacks, ties, shirts, sox and underwear. When I heard this, I said to myself, "That makes a lot of sense. When a man is in a condition where at any moment he might fall down, it's certainly a lot more comfortable to fall on an armload of clothes than an armload of bottles."

I later discovered that Milt was also addicted to the bottle. Only in his case it wasn't liquor, it was Ketchup. That's right, Ketchup. Not just any kind -- it had to be "Heinz", and he wouldn't trust a label. In the years that followed, on more than one occasion, I have seen Milt in a crowded restaurant shaking his finger in the waiter's face accusing him of filling the Heinz bottle with a different brand. There is

no food on which Milt will not put Ketchup. You haven't lived until you've had dinner with a man who orders ice cream and then proceeds to make a Ketchup Sundae.

The second night out we were sitting in the Parlor Car discussing our trip to New York. I again learned from Milt that he used to be a Press Agent. I also learned he was born in Brooklyn. He told me for him this trip was really going home. As he said the words, "going home", a smile appeared on his face. I thought to myself how nice for a grown man to still find time to be sentimental. Upon our arrival in New York, I found out his smile did not come from sentiment. It came from knowing, instead of living at a hotel, he would be sleeping and eating at his mother's house and putting the expense money in his pocket.

The next morning I got up early, excitedly anticipating the arrival in Chicago. In Chicago, New York passengers would leave the Chief at the Dearbourn Station, have a leisurely lunch at a fine restaurant, such as Henricis, then casually cab over to the LaSalle Street Station where they would board New York Central's crack train, The Twentieth Century Limited. At precisely five o'clock the train would embark on its overnight run to New York -- by way of Toledo, Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo and Albany -- arriving at nine in the morning, right smack in the center of the City. However, on this day, due to rail priorities given trains moving military personnel and supplies, the Chief due in at noon rolled into Chicago four hours late.

Knowing that Mr. Scott would be taking care of Mary and Joanie, Milt suggested that we grab our bags and, even before the train came to a stop, head for the forward end. He explained, "In this way we will save time." I still think it was an ingenious excuse to go through the dining car so he could say a last good-bye to a bottle of Ketchup.

After a wild cab ride across town, we boarded the Twentieth Century Limited just as it was pulling out. We looked at each other and verbally sighed, "We made it." Little did we know our space had been sold. The conductors worked feverishly, and after hours of juggling and doubling, all the passengers had a place to sleep. However, thinking of the next morning's destination, I don't think I closed my eyes all night. After tossing and turning through Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo and Albany, I was up, dressed, and sitting in the Observation Car when the train started down along that last leg, the Hudson River. I looked out the window and noticed we were passing Sing Sing Prison, a place I had learned about through a radio program called "Gangbusters." A short while later, the train arrived at its destination, on time, and in the center of the city.

With suitcase in hand, I quickly found my way out of the station. As I stood there on the corner, I didn't know if it was Eastside of Westside. I only knew that for the first time in my life, I was on the sidewalks of New York. A taxi took me to 54th and 6th Avenue. The subway took Milt to Brooklyn. At about the same moment I checked into the Warwick Hotel, Milt was checking into his mother's refrigerator.

Check-out time was still two hours away, so my room was not yet available. This situation gave me a choice. I could sit in the lobby and wait, or I could stroll around the city. Since there was so much I wanted to see, it was an easy decision. I started out and soon I was walking down Fifth Avenue past Saint Patrick's Cathedral -- Rockefeller Center. I was so interested in the height of the buildings, three different times I walked into trash barrels. After begging their pardons, I continued on and several blocks later I took a right turn and suddenly realized I was doing exactly what I had been urged to do every Friday Night by the M.C. of a radio program called "First Nighter." "Up 42nd Street across Broadway to the Little Theater off Times Square." It was the imaginary locale for a series of radio plays starring Don Ameche, June Meredith, Betty Lou Gerson, Les Tremayne, Olan Soule and Barbara Luddy. It was only a mythical theater, but nevertheless, it had a strict rule which permitted "smoking in the outer lobby only."

When I reached the famous crossroads, the sidewalks were filled with people and the streets were not only bumper to bumper, but curb to curb with taxi cabs. When I first saw that mass of yellow, I wondered if maybe the hour of midnight was approaching and all the exciting events of the past few days were turning into a pumpkin. I convinced myself that the very thought of such a thing was absurd, silly and ridiculous. I then caught myself looking down to see if I was wearing a glass slipper. I assure you, I wasn't. I had on a plain, ordinary

pair of shoes, one of which had a hole in it. It was no fantasy. I was truly there in Times Square with the bottom of one foot actually on the sidewalks of New York.

As I started up Broadway, I had a feeling I was someone important. And why not? The man on the Camel Sign was blowing smoke rings at me, and on the traffic island under the Coca-Cola sign, stood the head of my reception committee, Father Duffy. Father Duffy was a Chaplain in the First World War and upon closer inspection, I discovered he was now a statue. I thought this discovery was brilliant until I noticed an abundance of evidence that hundreds of pigeons had made the same observation. As I stood there feeling sorry for Father Duffy, I guess I must have been quite motionless, because soon, I, too, suffered the same fate. At first I was upset. Then I realized it taught me a lesson I hope I'll never forget. The lesson being, "When a man is tempted to be egotistical, it only takes one bird to express an opinion that is probably shared by many people." Yes, that pigeon gave me a message. My only regret was that it wasn't tied to his leg.

Back at the Hotel, I took the elevator and arrived at my room just as the previous occupant was leaving. I was tired and really looking forward to taking a nap, but I didn't particularly care about getting into a strange bed that was still warm. As I sat there in a chair, I couldn't help thinking, "Here I am in one of the world's largest cities and yet I am all alone." My thoughts were of my wife who was three thousand miles away.

I decided that being lonely in New York was entirely unnecessary, so I stepped over to the phone and called the desk clerk. He was very nice and gave me the information I wanted. I straightened my tie, put on my coat and, following the desk clerk's directions, I took the elevator up three floors. I stepped out into the hall, found the room number I had been given and knocked on the door. While I stood there waiting, I don't mind telling you I was a little nervous because for me this would be a first time. I was about to knock again when the door opened and framed in the doorway -- wearing nothing but a flimsy dressing gown -- stood John Tackaberry. John was the third member of the new writing staff and we had not previously met.

I introduced myself and Mr. Tackaberry invited me in. He explained his delay in answering the door was because he was in the shower. From his accent and the little puddles at his feet, I was able to deduce he was a wet Texan. This was confirmed when he told me his home town was Houston. From the bathroom where he was getting dressed, he called out to me, "If you're interested, I have a bottle." I quickly replied, "No thanks." He might be another Milt and I wasn't in the mood for Ketchup.

After addressing him as Mr. Tackaberry several times, he asked me to please call him Tack. Not because he was sharp as one, but "Tack" having only four letters was shorter than Tackaberry, which to me made sense, until I figured out his first name "John" only had four letters, too. Tack's previous

writing assignment was with Horace Heidt on the Pot of Gold radio program. We hit it off well and after some lengthy light conversation, we decided to go to dinner. As we walked up 54th Street, he said, "George, isn't New York an exciting city?" Because I didn't want a Texan to think I was easily impressed, I answered with a casual, "Oh, I don't know - when you've seen one city, you've seen 'em all." Having told this blatant lie, I promised myself the next time I passed Father Duffy's statue, I would go to confession.

We had dinner at Jack Dempsey's Restaurant. While waiting for, during and after our food, Tack had several cocktails, completely dispelling the question I had earlier about the contents of that bottle in his room. On the way back to the hotel, we made a decision that would be financially beneficial to both of us. We decided to share a room. The next morning he moved in. This meant Tack and I were each saving half on our hotel room expense. Now if we could only find a way to share in that food Milt was getting out of his mother's refrigerator.

During the next few days, there was time for more sight-seeing...Radio City Music Hall...Rockefeller Center...Wall Street...The Battery...I shall never forget my first view of the Statue of Liberty. When I saw that arm - that hand, raised skyward, I silently wondered if maybe she was -- just then a skid-row bum who was standing nearby and had evidently observed the expression on my face, interjected with, "Don't get conceited -- she waves at everybody."

Then word came -- the military plane flying Jack Benny and his U.S.O. Troupe home from North Africa had landed in New York and we were alerted to stand by and be ready for a meeting as soon as it could be set up. Because we had to stay close by, Milt came in from Booklyn and had a surprise for me. The previous Friday evening he was having dinner with his family and the label on the Sacramental Wine bottle caught his eye. In small print it said, "This wine was blessed by Rabbi Balzer." When he showed the label to me, I said, "I find that very interesting. However, I don't think I'm a Rabbi because only yesterday I was in Saint Patrick's Cathedral fulfilling my Sunday obligation."

Which reminds me of another interesting thing that happened. It was the first time in my life I had ever been in the world-famous Saint Pats. During the Mass I sat there minding my own business, when all of a sudden an usher put a basket in my lap and signaled I was to help take up the collection. I was a little stunned. I had taken up collection before -- in several churches -- but now I was being asked to play the Palace.

While working my section of the pews, I looked across the aisle and saw a gentleman named Jim Farley performing the same duty. For those who may not remember, during the Roosevelt years, Mr. Farley was one of the country's important political leaders. In fact, he served in President Roosevelt's Cabinet as Postmaster General. In later years, this coincidence gave me

opportunities to have some fun. At parties, whenever politics would be the subject of conversation, I would casually throw in, "You know, at one time I had the same job as Jim Farley." Having aroused everyone's interest, I would then walk away. Before the evening was over, at least a dozen people would call me aside and ask me about it. I would then explain to them the incident at Saint Pats and then they would walk away -- obviously disappointed. Years later, I had occasion to meet Mr. Farley in person. I told him how at one time I had the same job as he had. Then after I explained the whole story, he looked disappointed. I guess it was better when Mr. Farley and the joke were both twenty years younger.

CHAPTER III

The waiting hours, filled by playing Gin Rummy, were brought to an end by the ringing of the phone. It was a message from the Advertising Agency, "The writers are to be at Mr. Benny's hotel at three o'clock." It was a nice day and we decided to walk, notwithstanding the hole in my shoe which by now was considerably larger. A hole which got there in the first place, not with standing, but with walking.

When we arrived at The Sherry Netherland, we were directed to a conference room crowded with reporters, photographers and newsreel cameras. After a short wait, Mr. Benny and the members of his U.S.O. Troupe walked in. Introductions were made and when Jack Benny and I shook hands, neither of us had the slightest idea it was the start of an association that was to last almost thirty-five years.

The Newsreel Cameras were ready to roll and the members of the U.S.O. Troupe, Larry Adler, Winnie Shaw and Anna Lee took their positions around the Star. However, Jack, being a man who always wanted things done properly called the writers aside and asked if we could think of something that would keep the interview from being dull and stilted -- something to make it more entertaining. After a little thought, I made a suggestion. I suggested that as each of the reporters directed their questions about the overseas trip to Jack, the other Troupe members should take turns, jumping in with the answer after the Star had said only a word or two. The idea was nothing momentous, but Jack liked it and as each question was asked, Jack's attempt to respond was always interrupted by others supplying the answer. At the end of three minutes of questions, Jack's verbal contribution was a "well", two "buts", one "oh", an "I think" and one or two other innocuous phrases.

During the filming there was an added fillip for me. There were more questions than there were newsmen and Jack asked me if I would play the part of a reporter. Being a bit of a ham, I jumped at the opportunity. While the cameras were rolling, I asked my question, and I don't remember if Jack answered with a "well," a "but", or an "oh." I do remember, however, when the cameras and lights were turned off, I put down my prop notes and casually walked over to the window. I looked out at the city and mentally summed up all that had happened to me -- a country boy -- in such a short time. The trip to New York, temporarily holding the same job as Jim Farley -- meeting Jack Benny -- having my first suggestion accepted -- and now

in a few hours, I would be seen in newsreels all over the country. I must admit, because I'm human, I enjoyed a personal inner satisfaction. As I stood there at the window, my ego continued to expand. Then suddenly, I looked up and saw a pigeon circling overhead. I don't know if pigeons can smile, but this one had a look on its face that seemed to tell me I was fortunate I wasn't out on the balcony.

With this first meeting over, we went back to our hotel. That night Milt stayed in the city. I don't remember exactly why, but it could very well be he had to attend a Ketchup Anonymous Meeting.

A day or so later, we were summoned to meet with Jack in his suite on the 33rd floor of The Sherry. It was at this meeting I first met the fourth writer, Cy Howard. Cy was the only member of the new team hired directly by Jack, if I remember correctly. Jack was on his way to North Africa, and while changing trains in Chicago met Cy in the railroad station. At the end of this short meeting, he had the job. This is understandable when you realize that Cy is a man of effusive enthusiasm. When talking to you, he gets very close. So close, if you were putting your coat on at the time, you would button him in. If perchance your coat was already on, your lapels became boat bottoms and he was a barnacle. At the end of a conversation with Cy, you don't just part, you scrape him off.

Another person I met at that time was a young lady named Jane Tucker. She was a script girl and had worked the show the

previous year. When we got down to discussing the various elements of the show, Jane took it all down in shorthand and the next day she handed each of us a typed copy.

The purpose of this particular meeting was to get a premise for the opening broadcast. Jack worked with us, and before the day ended, we knew exactly what he wanted to do. At the close of this meeting, Jack called me aside and said, "George, where's Sam?" He was referring to Sam Perrin, my writing partner. Sam had done some writing for Jack previously, but had difficulty making a contractual agreement with those in charge and elected to stay on the west coast until the show returned. I explained this to Jack and he immediately placed a call to California and straightened things out. Sam would join the show later when we got back to Hollywood.

The four writers and Jack met again the next day, reviewed our premise and got down to serious writing. Since Jack was a comedian who hated to contrive, his shows were based as much as possible on true happenings. In this case, he had just been in North Africa, therefore, our premise was simple. On our opening show, we would do a scene at the airport where some members of his cast were waiting for his plane to land. There would then be a cab ride to the hotel where Dennis Day, Phil Harris and Rochester would be waiting to greet the returning star.

The first day we wrote three or four pages of script. All words and lines that were agreed upon were taken down by

Jane to be typed that evening and handed out the next morning. The next day we took the newly typed pages and carefully fixed and changed right from the beginning. Then we wrote another five or six pages of fresh material and the following day it, too, received the same scrutiny. Jack was being very careful and understandably so. He was radio's top comedian with writers who had never worked for him before and he wanted to sure everything was just right.

During that first week, each writer became concerned about how they, personally as an individual writer, were doing. In seeking an answer to this important question, I soon found a guage that could be relied upon. At that time, Jack was a man who used many cigars. I say "used" rather than "smoked" because after lighting one, he would soon lay it down and that would be it. Jack's cigars cost one dollar each and on any one of them he would smoke no more than the sales tax. Sometimes, after the cigar went out, he wouldn't relight it, but would continue to chew on it. Not wanting this "cigar chewing" to become habitual, he was trying very hard to quit. His method was to keep an empty pipe in his mouth. Of course, when you suck on an empty pipe, saliva accumulates in the bowl. All day long as we continued writing, Jack would have that pipe in his mouth. With his great sense of humor, he laughed very easily. If he was particularly pleased at a funny line, he would not only laugh, but would approach the writer who had said it. Then, as you sat there in the chair, he would hover over you, still laughing,

and supporting himself by putting his left hand on your right shoulder. Now, that alone would be appreciation enough, but he didn't stop there. Jack, still laughing, would pump his right arm, the one holding the pipe, up and down on a forty-five degree angle from your right shoulder down to your left hip. From centrifugal force, the moisture in the pipe bowl would work its way back up the stem and out onto your coat. I experienced this several times, but didn't say anything because I realized this angular trail of moisture was my gauge. I told the others, "If you come out of the writing sessions looking like an ambassador, you know you've had a good day." You didn't even have to worry about shrinkage. All you had to do was start a conversation with Cy and he'd automatically stretch your lapels back into shape.

Several days later, the script was finished and sent off to be mimeographed. On the following Saturday at noon the entire cast gathered at the N.B.C. Studios at Rockefeller Center for rehearsal. It was at this meeting I first met Don Wilson, Phil Harris, Dennis Day and Eddie Anderson (Rochester).

After the script reading, all were dismissed except Jack, the writers, Jane, the script girl, and Walter Bunker, the producer. During the next two hours, we put in some new jokes, polished others and cut the script to time. On Sunday afternoon we had a microphone rehearsal, trimmed another thirty seconds out of the script and at 7 P.M. Sunday evening, October 19th,

the Jack Benny Show went on the air with the opening program of the 1943-44 season.

As I indicated earlier, the premise was simple. Don Wilson set the scene saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen, as you probably know, Jack Benny has just returned from a camp tour overseas...So let's go back a few days to La Guardia Airport and show you what happened when his plane arrived."

We then did a scene at the airport where Mary and Don awaited Jack's arrival. This was followed by a short scene in the airplane involving the pilot and Jack. The plane landed and after the welcome back greetings from Don and Mary, the three of them took a taxi to Jack's hotel, The Acme Plaza.

When Jack told the cab driver where it was located, the driver said, "I know, I know, I used to live there...then I got a job."

Jack, of course, defended the place and urged the driver to hurry because he had been on a long trip and wanted to take a bath. To this, the driver quickly replied, "Don't worry, Bud, I'll get you there so fast, you'll be the first in line."

Jack then started telling Don and Mary about an exciting incident that happened one night overseas saying, "You see, Larry Adler was with me and Winnie Shaw and Anna Lee and we --"

Discovering who Jack was and that he had been in North Africa entertaining the troops, the cabby interrupted to ask, "if Jack had run into his brother whose name was Crowley, 'Joe Crowley?'" Jack said no, he hadn't. Then returning to his story, "Well, anyway kids, Larry and I and the girls were at this camp..

it was midnight and there was a full moon...and, of course, no one ever thought..."

The cabby again interrupted with, "Funny..Joe's the kind of guy you'd pick out anyplace."

"I'm sorry, driver, but I didn't see him...So Mary, get this...here it was midnight and nobody was..."

"Cracks his knuckles a lot, funny you didn't hear him."

Jack, frustrated and wanting to get his point across, "Look, driver, I travelled 32,000 miles...I was all over North Africa..I met thousands and thousands of soldiers."

The driver pursued with, "But Joe's a Corporal."

Jack, hoping to close the subject, "Well, I'm sorry, I didn't see him...Now Mary, where was I?"

True to her character, Mary, taking advantage of the situation, replied, "It was midnight and Joe was a Corporal."

Before Jack could finish his story, they arrived at the Acme Plaza Hotel where we did routines with Dennis, Rochester, and Phil. Also, Don Wilson did an integrated commercial for Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes. (For a good many years, listeners associated The Jack Benny Show with Jello and its six delicious flavors: strawberry, raspberry, cherry, orange, lemon and lime, but actually Jello was the sponsor for only two seasons.)

During the show, we planted the fact that Jack had written letters to all the members of his cast while he was overseas, but not one of them were ever received. When pressed about how he

sent them, Jack explained he heard there was a current in the Mediterranean that goes into the Gulf Stream which flows around the tip of Florida, then northward to New York. So, he wrote the letters, put them in bottles, threw them in the ocean and he "can't understand what held them up." This, of course, brought forth much ridicule from the cast.

At the very end of the show there was a knock on the door. Rochester answered it and announced, "There is an octopus here with a special delivery letter for Miss Livingstone."

With this revelation, Jack looked at Mary and said, "You see, you see, I know what I'm doing every day of the week, sister."

At exactly seven twenty-nine and thirty seconds, it was all over. With the N.B.C. chimes ringing in my ears, we left the Studio.

Yes, the first show was finished, but the moment of truth was yet to come. In the morning papers, the radio critics would have their say.

A short while after sunrise, I found myself in the hotel lobby waiting for the newsstand to open. When it did, I picked up a paper, quickly turned to the radio section and read a column called:

LISTENING IN

With Ben Gross

"Triumphing over handicaps that would have downed a less lucky and talented comedian, Jack Benny opened his new radio season last

evening (WEAF-7). Just back from a 32,000-mile trip overseas, where he had entertained our soldiers, Benny started his series with but little preparation - and with an entirely new group of script writers.

His broadcast was by far the best of his openers in recent years. Jack, as you know, has had a reputation for starting his seasons a bit weakly and then really getting hot as the weeks go on. Last night, however, he and his old gang came across with an airing that was smooth, slick, polished and packed with laughs.

EXCLUSIVE!...Four new writers made this show possible. Here for the first time, their names are revealed. Their identities have been the biggest secret of Radio Row for the last week. But here they are: George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, former press agent and last year with Bob Hope, John Tackaberry, and Cy Howard."

The review continued in the same vein to the very end. It put me in such a good mood, I bought the paper. On Wednesday, WEEKLY VARIETY hit the streets and again we were delighted to read:

"JACK BENNY...No returned program to the networks this season has stirred so much post-initial broadcast comment in the trade as Jack Benny's. The show had the cognoscenti shaking their heads over the comic's ability to sit down with an entirely new corps of writers and within the space of ten days whip together a program that sounded about as explosively entertaining as anything turned out in the heyday of Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow.

The cross fire centered completely around the comic's recent tour of U.S. service camps in Africa, Sicily and the Middle East and the decorum, taste and fine sense of comedy values with which Benny treated this background might well serve as a model for his confreres in the medium. The reunion of Benny with his troupe was replete with the old, skilled touches of fast jibe and barb. The material was fresh, crisp and scintillating. Benny's regular line-flinging henchfolk were all alertly on the mark. The special complement of bit contributors added much to the laugh din and Dennis Day was in extremely fine voice. In brief, it was grade AA Benny fare."

After reading these reviews, I was sure of one thing. The Jack Benny radio season was made up of thirty-five shows and at this point we were one down with thirty-four to go.

On Wednesday the second show got under way. Our working pattern remained pretty much the same, except for one change. Cy Howard felt he could write better working alone rather than in a group. This he did, while Milt, Tack and I continued working directly with Jack. The second show premise was also simple and had a continuity carried over from the opening show. Again we used the cab driver who couldn't understand why Jack hadn't met his brother, Corporal Crowley, in North Africa. We also incorporated an idea having Jack be very military because of his recent experience with the troops in the war zone. His attitude was that of a General and Mary referred to him as "Old Blood and Guts"...after General Patton. We did one routine where Jack had his new writers out in the hall drilling them. The final spot was a sketch based on the picture "Casablanca."

When the script was finished, Jack informed us that the parts of the new writers would be played by none other than his new writers. Now, this news about appearing on coast to coast radio frightened the other writers, but not me. Show business was in my blood and I had great experience. After all, just ten days ago, wasn't I in a newsreel? But seriously, we were all a little nervous about our radio debut. However, Jack believed his shows worked better when he used the real people, so we agreed to do it.

The rehearsals with script polishing and cutting were a duplication of the week before, and Sunday evening at seven o'clock Eastern Time, the second program of the new Jack Benny season went on the air.

For those who might be interested, the following routine is the one Jack did with the writers:

(SOUND: COUPLE OF FOOTSTEPS,
DOOR OPENS, MARCHING
FOOTSTEPS)

JACK: (AS TOUGH DRILL SERGEANT) Hup, tup, thrup,
four...Hup, tup, thrup, four..WRITERS...HALT!

(SOUND: MARCHING FOOTSTEPS STOP)

JACK: PRESENT...PENCILS!...A fine bunch of comedy
writers...recruits from the Fred Allen
program...Rookies, every one a rookie...
Just look at you...BALZER, PULL IN YOUR
TYPEWRITER.

GEORGE: Yes, sir.

JACK: AND JOSEFSBERG, YOUR PENCIL..LOOK AT THAT POINT.

MILT: That's my head, sir.

JACK: I mean the one with the eraser on it...And
Tackaberry...Where's Howard?

TACK: He went A.W.O.L. to Red Skelton, sir.

JACK: He did, eh?...NOW LISTEN, MEN, THIS IS NO PICNIC,
YOU KNOW...YOU GOT A JOB TO DO AND I'M GONNA SEE
THAT YOU DO IT...AND YOU...LOOK AT YOU WITH YOUR
HAIR HANGING DOWN IN YOUR FACE..I NEVER HAD THAT
TROUBLE WITH BILL MORROW.

TACK: But sir, wasn't he bald?
 JACK: That's beside the point.
 MILT: That's my head, sir.
 JACK: DON'T GET SMART...I HAD ANOTHER WRITER WITH
 ME FOR EIGHT YEARS...EDDIE BELOIN...DO YOU
 KNOW WHERE HE IS NOW?

GEORGE: In a sanitarium, sir?

JACK: Now cut that out, Balzer. ALL RIGHT, MEN,
 GO DOWNSTAIRS AND START WRITING NEXT WEEK'S
 PROGRAM.

GEORGE:

MILT: Yes, sir.

TACK:

JACK: ABOUT...FACE! FORWARD...MARCH!

(SOUND: MARCHING FOOTSTEPS)

JACK: HEY, LOOK OUT FOR THAT WINDOW!

(SOUND: TERRIFIC GLASS CRASH, THEN
 SOUND OF BODIES FALLING AND
 LANDING SEVERAL FLOORS BELOW.
 AFTER A PAUSE, DISTANT MARCHING
 FOOTSTEPS START AGAIN AND FADE
 OUT)

JACK: Well, I guess they're all right, darn it...

Oh boy, thirty-five weeks of this.

The lines were short, but they were long enough to reach from coast to coast. Thankfully, the show played well and ended with Jack again leaning into the microphone to say, "We're a little late, goodnight, folks."

At the end of the broadcast, I couldn't tell you how I stood as an actor, but as a writer, I was sure of this -- we were now two down with thirty-three to go.

CHAPTER IV

Monday was get-away day. We were going home. I awakened early and packed my bags. In the afternoon, in settlement for our food and lodging Tack and I paid our hotel bill and Milt kissed his mother. At 5 P.M., aboard The Twentieth Century Limited, we pulled out of Grand Central Station. We were on our way back to California.

Later that evening, the three of us were in the Dining Car having dinner. Due to war-time travelling conditions, we had a long wait and by the time we got served, we were really hungry. Jack and Mark walked into the diner and when Mary saw how frantically we were devouring our steaks, she said to Jack, "Look at your writers. They're eating as if the Japanese were on the roof."

That night, while being rocked to sleep by the motion of the train as it sped westward, I kept turning over in my mind the events of the past few weeks -- the people I had met -- the places

I had gone -- the things I did. I also thought about something I didn't do. I was in New York almost three weeks and not once did I attend a performance in a legitimate theatre. And yet, though I had no way of knowing it then, just two short years later, I had my own show on Broadway.

On the train trip west, I was even more excited than on the trip east, which is only natural when you consider I was going home to my one and three-quarter family. At 8:30 A.M., Thursday morning, the Santa Fe Chief glided into the Pasadena Station. Pasadena was a point of disembarkation for Hollywood celebrities. Here there were no crowds and chauffeurs could park the Cadillac limousines close by.

When I got off the train, my chauffeur was there, too, in a 1940 Buick Convertible with a rip in the top, which meant, since it was a typical California day, I could immediately start regaining the tan I had lost in New York. I told Ada Marie I would drive when I noticed she and what's-its-name were having difficulty getting under the wheel. Since we had written most of the upcoming show on the train, the writers were able to take the day off for unpacking, laundry and other things they had gotten behind on.

The next morning the writers and Jane, with her poised pencil and notebook, converged on the front porch of the Benny's luxurious home on Roxbury Drive in Beverly Hills. We rang the chimes and were soon greeted by the Butler -- not Rochester -- a real butler. We were escorted into the library where we were soon joined by Jack. The morning was spent changing and polishing the material we had written on the train.

After a lunch of delicious sandwiches and coffee, (contrary to Jack's radio character, there was no charge) we spent the afternoon writing the last scene. On Sunday evening, from the N.B.C. Studios in Hollywood we broadcast another show that carried the Benny trademark -- running gags and routines based on actual happenings -- in this case, the train ride home from New York, and a sketch on Algiers, reflecting the North African trip.

On the fourth show of the season, Sam Perrin joined the writing staff. Sam and I had previously written together for two years and from this time on we remained partners for over thirty years. In a very short time, Jack's confidence in his staff increased and the hours working directly with him decreased. We soon had a set working routine. Monday off -- Tuesday set the premise with Jack -- then Sam and I would split the show with Josefsberg and Tackaberry and on Wednesday and Thursday each team would write their half. We kept in touch by phone to insure a perfect blend and to sustain continuity. On Fridays we would go to the Benny home in Beverly Hills. The butler would let us in and when the script was fixed and polished, Jack would let us out. Weekends, as always, were rehearsals and broadcast.

In mid-November we did our first broadcast from Palm Springs. In 1943 Palm Springs was a beautiful desert resort village and a mecca for Hollywood celebrities. Its attraction was the sun and the air accompanied by equal parts of sand, wind, peace and quiet. At the busiest intersection there could have been a traffic light with all four ways turned to green and you would never have seen

an accident. This desert spa had only one golf course and it was bordered by a 700 square mile trap. It was only nine holes so you played it twice -- or only once if you wanted a respectable score.

Even though this jewel of the desert was only a hundred miles from our home, my wife and I had never been there before. We drove down on Monday and checked into the luxurious Lone Palm Hotel. During the next four days, the writers wrote the script sitting in the sun around a crystal-clear Olympic-size swimming pool. It was a tough life, but when you're just getting started in this business, you've got to make sacrifices.

During the ensuing weeks, we did shows from military bases within a hundred mile radius of Hollywood. This travel restriction was necessary because Jack was under contract to star in a picture for Warner Brothers and they were preparing to start shooting in January. Shortly after the first of the year, Cy Howard decided he wanted to leave the Benny writing staff. If I remember correctly, he was offered a part in a play, so Jack gave him his release. From that time on for the next eight years, the Benny writers remained Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg and John Tackaberry.

During the filming of the picture, which by the way was "The Horn Blows at Midnight", the writers would meet with Jack at Warner Brothers Studios in the San Fernando Valley. This arrangement worked out well because we lived in the valley. Also it gave me an opportunity to see what a motion picture studio was like on the inside. For me this was another first.

And speaking of firsts, while the Warner Brothers were producing Jack's picture, my wife, on January 24th, 1944, gave birth to a baby girl. We titled our production 'Bonnie Jean'. Time proved that my wife was a better producer than the Warner Brothers. "The Horn Blows at Midnight" had a very short run, but Bonnie Jean is still going strong. In fact, she has even done some producing herself. His name is Sean.

Although "The Horn Blows at Midnight" was a flop at the box office, it was a big success in another department. The picture was a great source of comedy for the radio programs and later on the television shows. Mary Livingstone best summed up the picture's failure when she said, "The Horn Blows at Midnight, and the audience blew at 10:30."

During the shooting of the picture, Jimmy Starr, a Hollywood columnist, asked Jack to be a guest writer of his movie column which appeared daily in a Los Angeles paper and was also syndicated throughout the country. Jack, of course, accepted and then asked Sam and me if we would write it for him. Of course, he knew we didn't have to say "yes" and he also knew that at our salaries, we wouldn't dare say "no".

We needed a little gimmick so we patterned it after a column written in those days by Eleanor Roosevelt called "My Day". We wrote about Jack's day -- from the time he got up in the morning, drove to the studio, his troubles getting past the guard and his hours in make-up. We told about his problems of filming and then took him back home. It was all done in a humorous fashion

and was fun to write. It appeared in newspapers all over the country and was well-received -- or so we were told. I mention the above assignment merely to illustrate how staff writers are subject to working on anything the STAR might need.

In April, with the picture finished but not forgotten, the Benny Show was invited to Vancouver, Canada, to open the Canadian War Bond Drive. Instead of going directly to British Columbia, we worked our way north, playing military bases. Our first stop was an Army Air Field near Stockton, California. Bob Hope's brother, George, was stationed there as a Sergeant and he was our guest on the show. We used him as a springboard to do our version of Bob's show. In the sketch the phone rang and Jack, playing the part of Bob Hope, answered it with: "Hello, this is Bob Hope speaking." Rochester was on the other end and when he heard Jack say that, he countered with: "Who?" Jack then repeated, "Bob Hope." Roch again said, "Who?" Jack, still playing the part, replied: "Bob Hope". Rochester then came back with, "Oh, boss, why don't we just settle down with what we've got and do the best we can."

Soon after the broadcast was over, the whole troupe -- about thirty people -- boarded the train in Stockton and we were on our way north to Seattle. An hour or so out, the conductor entered our car and started asking for tickets. We directed him to Burt Scott who always took care of such matters. That is -- always except today. Today, he didn't have the tickets, either. It seems that when Burt left the hotel, his briefcase with the tickets inside was still sitting in the lobby. The ticket problem was solved when the Army agreed to pick up Burt's briefcase and fly it

to Seattle. Of course, we didn't let Burt forget the incident for one minute and I guess we were getting a little out of hand when we were told to stop picking on "little ol' Mr. Scott". This order to desist came from Henrietta, Mary's maid, and we knew she meant it.

Henrietta was a large, buxom black woman. She had worked for the Benny's for many years and was a beautiful person. She had a way of expressing herself that was priceless. For instance, I recall a time when Jack and the writers were working on a script at the Benny home in the library and Mary sent Henrietta in to get her something to read. The magazines were next to a chair where John Tackaberry was sitting. In order to get a magazine off the bottom shelf, it was necessary for Henrietta to stoop way over. While she held this position, looking through the magazines, Tack became entranced with the rather large target that loomed up beside him and, unable to restrain himself, he took his script and lightly touched what, for reading purposes we'll call the "bull's eye."

At this point, Henrietta straightened up, somewhat involuntarily, and standing there at her full height, looked down at John and said, "Mr. Tackaberry, you do that again and you're gonna need only one more white shirt."

Hearing this, the rest of us roared with laughter. As Henrietta strode from the room, she had a twinkle in her eye which told me she knew she had just gotten a laugh which was as big as any the nation's top comedian ever had.

Late that evening we arrived in Seattle. Burt picked up the lost tickets and we proceeded north on into Vancouver, B.C. Incidentally, Vancouver is the true birthplace of Mary Livingstone, even though we say on the program she was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, and that Mama and Papa still live there. Though we arrived close to midnight, we were greeted by a bagpipe band which escorted us off the train, through the station and out onto the street where official cars were waiting to take us to the New Vancouver Hotel. We were also greeted by an individual who, in a very confidential manner, informed each of us if we wanted something to eat, there was great food at a place close to the hotel called Oscar's. After we checked into the hotel, some of us were hungry so, taking the suggestion of the man at the railroad station, went to Oscar's. We walked in and you-know-who greeted us at the door. The same fellow -- he was Oscar. Every country has its skills -- but for doughnuts?

During the next several days, Jack, Mary and the members of the cast visited Canadian Military Hospitals and entertained the patients. Meanwhile, we writers were holed up in our hotel rooms preparing the script for Sunday's broadcast. It turned out this was one show we knew was "on ice" before it hit the airlines. We did the broadcast from a hockey rink. Shortly after the ticket-holders filed in and seated themselves on the folding chairs, we went on the air and the show was enthusiastically received. For this we were very grateful. It's not easy to get a hot audience with cold feet. I don't know if their applause was sincere or if

they were just trying to keep warm. The radio program, coupled with a two-hour stage show that evening, served to officially open the Canadian War Bond Drive.

The next morning with the gratitude of Canadian Government Officials ringing in his ear, Jack Benny herded his whole gang aboard ship and we set sail for an overnight visit in Victoria. Victoria is located on an island and is absolutely beautiful. We arrived about two-thirty in the afternoon and at four o'clock we were having tea in the lobby of The Empress Hotel. We sat there holding our tea cups with extended pinkies while a waitress passed out crumpets. One of our group, terribly impressed with the Old World atmosphere, commented, "Gee, this is just like England." Hearing this utterance come from an apparently uneducated American, the waitress straightened up and quickly announced to one and all, "This is England." Then throwing back her shoulders and with her crumpets sticking straight out, she floated out of the room. If she had been walking on her English pride, she would have been tall enough to be bronzed and placed in Trafalgar Square.

Late Tuesday afternoon we again boarded ship. Leaving a wake that trailed off into a setting sun, we soon glided through the merging waters of the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca. Or to say it less romantically, "We went to Seattle."

After checking into the Olympic Hotel, a few of us found a Seafood house, had dinner and checked out the town. Returning to the hotel around 2 A.M., I picked up my key and saw my room for

the first time. It was very evident that after the last occupant checked out the bed had not been changed. I was exhausted, but by condensing my energy into one finger, I had strength enough to dial the front desk. Voicing my complaint, I was informed the housekeeper was off duty. After hanging up the phone, I stood there, looking at the used bed, and knew I at least had a choice. I could sleep standing up or I could crawl in. Since Seattle was a Navy town and a point of Embarkation, the odds were a hundred to one the previous body to sleep in my bed belonged to a sailor who by now could be in the bowels of a submarine, bound for Guadalcanal. If so, the least I could do was to minimize my fuss about sharing his sheets. So, without further ado, I slipped into bed with limp muscles and a patriotic heart.

In the days that followed, the routine was unchanged. Jack, Mary and the cast made the rounds of hospitals while the writers worked on the script. Sunday's broadcast came from Bremerton Naval Station. Dick Haymes was the guest singer, substituting for Dennis Day. Dennis left the show one week earlier to be inducted into the Navy, where he served for two years as an Officer using his real name, Eugene Patrick McNulty.

The following week we were flown to the Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island. It was very close to Seattle so the plane no more got up then it had to come down. I knew exactly how the Wright Brothers must have felt. It was also my first ride in an airplane. Stepping off the plane, I thought to myself -- Orville, Wilbur and George.

We moved on to Portland, Oregon, and did a broadcast from Camp Adair, an army base located in Corvallis. This was our last show of a five-week road trip and arrangements were made for the Army to fly Jack and the other members of the cast back to Los Angeles. After the sign-off, we all drove to the airport where a military plane was waiting. My partner Sam, his wife, Peggy, Mary Livingstone and myself not wishing to fly, would leave by train the next morning.

As Jack, Don, Phil, Rochester and members of the cast and crew got into the military plane, I happened to notice a little screw lying on the floor of the aircraft. I picked it up and showing it to Jack said, "Jack, does this mean anything?" Everyone laughed and continued taking their places on the bucket seats positioned against side walls of the plane. Amidst waving from those who stayed behind, the plane took off and headed south. Sam, Peggy, Mary and I started the seventy-mile auto trip back to Portland.

When we arrived at the Benson Hotel, there was a message that Mr. Benny had called and left a number. Mary returned the call and Jack, who was now at a hotel in Corvallis, told her the story of what had happened.

Shortly after taking off, the plane ran into extremely bad weather and was so violently bounced around, the pilot decided to return to Corvallis, that is-- if he could. For several moments it was questionable if the plane was going anywhere except down. Fortunately, the pilot was able to right the craft and get it headed back toward the base where it landed safely.

This very dangerous situation was not without its humorous overtones. After the plane landed, Phil Harris, pointing to his hand that was still tightly clenched around a 3/8 inch rod that ran the length of the plane, said, "Fellows, I don't know how scared any of you were, but when I grabbed hold of this rod, it was four inches thick." Then stepping off the plane said, "Take me to a one-story hotel."

Later Jack said to me, "George, when you showed me that loose screw in the plane, I should have used that as an excuse to cancel our flight."

We arrived back in Hollywood with two shows remaining on the schedule. These were broadcasts from N.B.C. Studios on the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Vine Street. During the week of writing and rehearsing for the final show, I had time to mentally review my first complete season on the show. Needless to say, I learned a lot. Because the Jack Benny Show went on the air at seven o'clock Sunday evening in the east, we actually did the show at four o'clock in the afternoon on the Pacific Coast. This, of course, because of the three hour difference in time. Later, a recording would be released at seven o'clock for the western part of the country. This gave us a chance to hear the repeat show in the quiet of our homes. With this arrangement, I became aware of a psychological aspect. If we left the studio feeling the show we had just finished was a little disappointing, that it didn't play as well as we expected, when we later heard it at home, it was always better than we thought. Conversely, if we left the studio thinking the broadcast was absolutely sensational, when we heard it at home, it wasn't quite that good.

I also learned that the ego of people in radio -- writers and performers -- made them believe that when their program was on the air, the world stopped turning and people everywhere in absolute silence focused their attention on what was coming out of their radios. This, I discovered, is not so. At my own house we would listen to the West Coast Benny broadcast while having dinner and more than once, at the precise moment one of my gems, my most precious comedy punch lines, was being delivered, a member of my own family would cover it with a brilliant, "Pass the mashed potatoes," and then during the studio audience laughter, dip into the gravy bowl without even the decency to ask, "What did he say?"

I also learned that each family was primarily interested in that element of the show in which their father, husband or brother was involved. For example, when Mahlon Merrick, the musical arranger and conductor, would go home after the show, his wife, Jean, would say, "Honey, the music today was absolutely beautiful." When George Foster, the audio engineer, would go home, his wife, Tillie, would greet him with, "Sweetie, the sound was perfect, every word was so clear." Don Wilson, the announcer, would arrive home to be met by his wife, Lois, saying, "Donald, your enunciation and diction during the commercial was marvelous." Then I, a writer, would go home and as I quietly let myself in, my wife would say, "Where have you been?" I would answer, "I've been down at the show." This reply would be greeted with, "What show?" followed by a bawling out for being away all day. Now, of course,

this part about my wife's reaction isn't true. I just thought I'd toss it in for what it was worth. (Later, when my wife typed this, she told me it isn't worth much.)

During that first season, we writers took advantage of all the built-in features of the show, including the Maxwell, the violin and the famous Fred Allen-Jack Benny feud.

For those who don't remember, the Benny-Allen feud started innocently enough in the late thirties. On one of Fred's radio shows he had as a guest a young boy, eight or ten years of age, who played the violin. On that particular night the young musician gave a marvelous rendition of "The Bee". In fact, he played it so beautifully, Fred was prompted to ad lib, "If Jack Benny calls himself a violinist, he should be ashamed of himself."

Jack, a great fan of Fred's, heard the remark and on the next Sunday's broadcast, answered it with a comment or two of his own. Fred, of course, didn't let it go at that end and on his next show responded. Before long, the Benny-Allen feud was sweeping the country. As the weeks went by, the personal jibes got broader and broader. Jack's remarks often appraised Fred's appearance, such as: "With those bags under his eyes, Fred Allen looks like a short butcher peeping over two pounds of liver." Or, "With those wrinkles, he looks like a convertible with the top half way down." Fred would always counter with stinging remarks of his own. "Jack Benny isn't cheap. It's just that he has short arms and carries his money low in his pockets."

Then there was the time Jack was invited back to his home town of Waukegan, Illinois. On Sunday he did the radio show from the local auditorium and on Monday the Mayor, the Chamber of Commerce and the visiting celebrities gathered in the town square. Amid much pomp and ceremony they planted a tree in Jack's honor. Jack then returned to the West Coast and a few days later the tree died. No one could figure out why, except Fred Allen. Fred said, "How in the hell can a tree live in Waukegan when the sap is in Hollywood?" The feud was all in fun and much to the listening delight of the combined Benny-Allen fans.

On June 4th we did the last show of the 1943-44 season. Summing it up, it was a good year. We did shows for military personnel who were confined to hospitals and did Sunday broadcasts from the following bases: Marine Air Station, Mojave; Marine Air Base, El Toro; Army Air Field, Muroc; Terminal Island Navy Base; March Air Field, Riverside; Army Air Field, Lemoore; Naval Air Station, Livermore, Calif.; Army Air Field, Stockton; Bremerton Navy Yard, Washington; Whidbey Island, Washington; and Camp Adair at Corvallis, Oregon. Among the guest stars, we had Barbara Stanwyck, Alexis Smith, Raul Walsh - director of "The Horn Blows at Midnight", Mark Hellinger, Larry Adler, Groucho Marx, Louella Parsons, Basil Rathbone, Dick Haymes and Danny Kaye.

When the last broadcast was finished, it was a happy moment. The writers would be off for seventeen weeks and Jack

would be off for the South Pacific where he would again spend his summer with a U.S.O. Troupe, entertaining the American Armed Forces.

CHAPTER V

In July of 1944 Myrt Blum, Jack Benny's business manager, called my home and asked me to meet him in his office in Beverly Hills. I knew the subject of the meeting would be my new writing contract -- that is, if there was to be a new contract. In a business where a thirteen-week association was considered to be good and you'd been retained for thirty-five, one still couldn't be sure. When I arrived at Mr. Blum's office, I was announced by his secretary who then proceeded to usher me into the inner sanctum. After an exchange of greeting, Mr. Blum informed me that Mr. Benny would like to have me on his writing staff again for the upcoming radio season. He then pushed a contract in front of me and asked me to look it over.

As I sat there reading, I made a great effort to conceal any reaction to the terms. The new contract called for a full season, not the usual short option periods. Also it contained a very substantial increase in salary. I finished reading and,

still hiding my pleasure, casually placed the contract back on his desk. I'm sure my unemotional attitude completely fooled Mr. Blum. However, I think he might have suspected something when he handed me a pen and pointed to the dotted line. I signed so fast, I wrote half my name on his finger. There was even room on his hang nail for my middle initial.

On October 1, 1944, we did the opening broadcast of the new season -- a season in which there would be two major changes. First, with Dennis Day in the Navy we had to find a replacement. Second, we changed sponsors. General Foods, the makers of Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes would no longer be with us.

At the close of the last season, Jack's contract with General Foods had expired and Mr. George Washington Hill, head of The American Tobacco Company, made a bid for the show and got it. At first the product was to be Pall-Mall Cigarettes. During the summer we had a few meetings in which we actually worked on an opening and commercials for Pall-Mall. Suddenly word came that Mr. Hill had changed his mind. He wanted The Jack Benny Show to be the flagship of his number one product, Lucky Strike Cigarettes.

This change of sponsors reminds me of an interesting side-light. George Washington Hill was a man who ran the American Tobacco Company with an iron fist and had a reputation of getting involved in all programs sponsored by any of his products. If there was anything he didn't like, it was changed. By the way of illustration, the Lucky Strike Hit Parade was also one of Mr. Hill's programs. It was a show with an orchestra and singers doing the hit songs of the week. The previous season Mr. Hill

was in the control room when the program went on the air for its opening show. At the end of the broadcast, Mr. Hill stood up and shouted to the Producer, "Fire the orchestra!" The Producer explained how that would be impossible. There were twenty-six musicians under contract for thirteen weeks at large salaries. Mr. Hill still insisted that they be fired. When the Producer asked, "Why?" Mr. Hill informed him, "Because they play music my wife and I can't dance to." The order was carried out and the second show was done with a new leader and new musicians. Whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Hill came to the studio every week and danced in the control room, I don't know.

This true story was known to Jack and, not having signed a contract yet, he was apprehensive about having a sponsor who might inject himself into the script content of the show. Jack was also aware that Lucky Strike did commercials that were raucous attention getters and he didn't particularly care for this kind of product selling. Now, Mr. Hill, aware of Jack's feelings, became apprehensive; and being a resourceful businessman, he sent word to Jack that he would stay out of the program if Jack would stay out of the commercials. Shortly after that, the contracts were signed.

Jack Benny and George Washington Hill had never met one another and did not meet until almost two years later. Even then, it was not a business meeting, but only a friendly luncheon. After that the two men never met again, even though Lucky Strike remained the Jack Benny sponsor for fifteen years. I think this

physical separation was planned. Otherwise, Jack might have wound up as Mr. Hill's dancing partner.

The opening show got underway with the chant of the tobacco auctioneer done by L.A. Speed Riggs of Goldsboro, North Carolina and F. E. Boone of Lexington, Kentucky. The sell lines in this one-minute commercial were done by three announcers and a sound man, using a telegraph key to punctuate the LS/MFT - LS/MFT Lucky Strike Means fine tobacco. The commercial finished with more chanting from the tobacco auctioneers.

An interesting point very few people realized was, in the beginning, the opening and closing commercials were all done live and came from New York City. The network would then switch over to Hollywood, or wherever we might be, to pick up the program. Even later, when the commercial people moved to Hollywood, they still worked out of a separate studio.

On the first show, following the policy of doing programs based on reality, we covered the subject of Jack's return to the air, after a summer overseas -- plus the problem of replacing Dennis, and the introduction of a new sponsor. Script-wise, it was handled in the following manner:

We opened the show with Rochester alone in the Benny kitchen preparing breakfast for "the Boss" who was still asleep. His efforts were interrupted by a knock at the back door. With a verbal "Coming", Roch stepped to the door and opened it.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Milkman."

"Good mornin', Rochester...I see by this note you left, you want me to start deliverin' milk again and stop leavin' cream."

"Yeah, Mr. Benny's back!"

"Oh yes, yes, he's been overseas, hasn't he?"

"That's right."

"Say, Rochester, is it true that Mr. Benny's program will no longer be sponsored by Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes?"

"Yes, sir..From now on, he's gonna be with LS...MFT."

"You mean Lucky Strike means fine tobacco?"

The milkman's question gave Rochester a chance to repeat: "Yes, Lucky Strike means fine tobacco... fine, fine, FINE!"

"Well...tell Mr. Benny I'll be listenin' to him..Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Before leaving, the milkman, thinking of some unfinished business, said, "Oh, by the way, there's a little matter of last month's bill..And here it is."

Rochester took the bill and reacted as he read the details.

"Mmmmm Mmmmmm...Twenty-eight dollars for cream...Okay..I'll write you out a check."

He then reached into his pocket and brought out two ivory cubes.

"Wait a minute..Is that a pair of dice you took out of your pocket?"

"Let's just call it my Central Avenue fountain pen...Mr. Milkman, lay that bill down on the ground."

The hand holding the dice began to shake and the milkman protested:

"But Rochester, I don't want --"

"It's too late now, I'm wound up!"

"Oh, all right."

"HERE GOES!"

The shaking continued for a moment, then Roch's palm opened, the cubes danced on the ground, then came to a halt with the numbers favoring their master, causing Roch to announce: "There it is in black and white!"

The milkman accepted the results with, "Doggone, I've been homogenized again."

Rochester then tore up the bill with a fitting farewell: "Goodbye, and better luck next month."

Shortly after Roch's return to the kitchen, Jack Benny, the star, made his entrance.

"Oh good morning, boss..Sit right down and have your breakfast."

"Thanks, Rochester. Gee, it's good to be home."

"It's good to have you home, boss..You'll never know how much I missed you."

"Did you, Rochester?"

"Yeah..the three months you were away, this old house was so lonesome..I'd go into the living room and see your big easy chair settin' there with no one in it, and I'd feel like cryin'."

"Gee!"

"The trees outside were in bloom, but they looked barren to me."

"Aw, Rochester."

"The birds were singing, but I never could seem to hear them. The sun was shining, but I never saw it."

"Really, Rochester?"

"Yeah...I NEVER GOT UP TILL EIGHT O'CLOCK AT NIGHT!"

The beauty of the build-up was abruptly destroyed by the confession of the punchline. Jack quickly ordered Rochester to cut out the nonsense and get him something to eat.

A moment or two later, Mary Livingstone arrived at the house and she and Jack immediately got into a discussion about who was going to replace Dennis Day. Jack then told Mary he was thinking of getting Bing Crosby. Mary told Jack he wouldn't get Crosby for thirty-five dollars a week.

Hearing this, Rochester, chimed in with, "You ain't gonna get him for what you're thinking, either."

A little later, Phil Harris entered and did a routine about how he spent the summer replacing Kay Kyser. Kay Kyser, an orchestra leader, had a program called The Kollege of Musical Knowledge and Phil played the part of The Professor for thirteen weeks.

Don Wilson did the middle integrated commercial about "Lucky Strike being so round, so firm, so fully packed." This was followed by the final scene which took place in the office

of the sponsors where we discovered Fred Allen, the guest star, already trying to get Jack's job. In just thirty minutes it was all over. Happily, the morning reviews told us that once again, "The Jack Benny Show was off and running."

Through the first five programs, the search to find a replacement for Dennis was kept alive; not necessarily the major subject matter, but it was injected into each script. The second season with the new writers proved to be a year of several innovations. In the second show Frank Sinatra was our guest star and at the time Frank was the star "The Hit Parade." He did his weekly Saturday evening show from New York City, making it necessary for his appearance on our show to be done by remote. For the writers, this presented no problems. We merely scripted the Benny gang to be at Jack's house on a Saturday night and by a simple story device of turning on a dial, we were able to work Sinatra's song into the program.

When Frank finished singing, Jack got very excited about the possibility of hiring him for his singer and wanted to talk to him immediately. This, of course, meant making a long distance phone call to New York. Since this was before direct dialing, Jack had to go through the operator. After three short dials, he heard a female voice say:

"Long distance."

"Oh, operator, I want to speak to New York...

I'd like to get Frank Sinatra."

"So would I, kiddo."

"Look, Miss, will you please ring Mr. Sinatra for me? Person to person -- he's on The Hit Parade in New York."

"Just a moment -- I'll try the New York Circuit. Los Angeles calling New York -- Los Angeles calling New York."

After a moment she was able to raise the New York Operator who answered with, "Hello, Los Angeles, this is New York. How are you, Los Angeles?"

"Fine, thanks..and how are you, New York?"

"Oh, I'm feeling grand, but Brooklyn's got the mumps."

Jack, somewhat perturbed at this personal gossip, cut in, "Look, operators, I don't care if San Francisco's got water under her bridge, I want to speak to Frank Sinatra."

"All right, all right, keep your shirt on. I haven't talked to New York since she had a baby."

"Well, congratulations and get me my number."

"I'm sorry, the line is busy..we'll call you back when it's clear."

Eventually, Jack got to talk with Sinatra and the two of them did an appropriate routine. This, along with his singing, made for a very successful guest appearance. However, there was another high-light which made all concerned very happy. It was the spot done by the two telephone operators. The two characters,

with voices that had Brooklynese intonations, were played by Sara Berner and Bea Benedaret. By their audience acceptance the writers and Jack immediately knew we would be using them frequently. To facilitate this, we took them both out of long distance and put them on the mythical switchboard at N.B.C. Studios and gave them names to match their characters -- Mable Flapsaddle and Gertrude Gearshift.

During the remaining ten golden years of radio, Mable and Gertrude played the operators many, many times. With the passage of time their characters and jokes got broader and broader. Once when Jack asked Mable what kind of perfume she was wearing, she told him it was something new called Transportation.

"Transportation! Why would a perfume be called Transportation?"

"It's condensation of steam that's been forced through a Motorman's glove."

I remember we once had a line that described Mable and Gertrude almost perfectly, but wouldn't use it because it smacked of bad taste. The line in question was, "They are the only two girls who can step out of a swimming pool and smell of perspiration." In 1944 the line was not used because it was too rough. Today it probably wouldn't be used because it isn't rough enough.

On the sixth week, the search to find a new singer came to an end with the discovery of a young man named Larry Stevens. Once again, using the Benny format of writing about reality, we did a program based on Jack finding Larry. On radio, at the time, there was a very popular show starring a man named Dunninger.

Dunninger's claim to fame was that he could read minds -- tell you not only the past but could delve into the future. On the Dunninger radio program, people would appear before him with all sorts of troubles and Dunninger, through his psychic powers, would give them advice and solve their problems.

It just happened that Dunninger was on the west coast doing his radio show and also making a two-week personal appearance at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. We found out he was available and asked him to be our guest star.

In our script, we had Jack take Mary to the Shrine Auditorium to see Dunninger for an evening's entertainment. As the two of them sat there watching this man do his mind reading act, Jack in his asides to Mary was very skeptical. Dunninger read the minds of several people and Jack continued his whispered degrading comments to Mary, when suddenly Dunninger said:

"And now, I have thought waves coming to me from a man in the fourth row..I get the name of Bennett..or Benny..Jack Benny."

Mary, nudging Jack with an urging whisper,
"Jack, that's you..stand up."

Jack, embarrassed at this turn of events,
"Oh, I don't wanna, everybody'll look at me."

Mr. Dunninger persisted, "Mr. Benny, please cooperate..Stand up."

"Yes, Mr. Dillinger..or Dunninger..Darn that Phil Harris."

"Mr. Benny, a thought comes to me that two weeks ago you lost a dollar bill."

"Yes, yes sir, I did."

Dunninger continued, "The serial number on that dollar bill was K 155134...Wait a minute, I don't seem to get the last three numbers."

Jack, without the slightest hesitation, "Five one eight..That's what it was."

Dunninger, surprised, asked, "Jack, how did you know?"

And Mary quickly added, "What do you think he reads at night?"

After Jack shushed Mary, Dunninger zeroed in: "Now Mr. Benny, you have another problem. You are looking for a singer..Is that correct?"

"Yes sir..and I have looked everywhere."

"Well, Mr. Benny, I think I can help you."

"Really?"

"Let me concentrate...I see...I see a gas station..It's on the corner of Third and L-A-C-I-E-N-E-G-A."

"Third and La Cienega?"

"Mr. Benny, if you'll go to that gas station.. you will be waited on by a young man with red hair.. I get the name of..Stevens...Larry Stevens."

"Larry Stevens?"

"Yes..This boy has never sung professionally.. He has been working in this gas station for several months, since he was honorably discharged from the Army Air Force."

"Gee!"

"He is twenty-one years old..Weighs a hundred and sixty-five pounds..and is a graduate of Fairfax High School in Hollywood."

"Larry Stevens, eh?"

"He has a very nice voice and sings all the time..even while he's working."

"He does?"

"Yes..Now Mr. Benny, the thought is fading away, and that's about all I can tell you."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Dunninger."

As our broadcast continued, our script had Mary drive Jack to the gas station on the corner of Third and LaCienega, and sure enough, the attendant was a young man with red hair and while he pumped gas into Mary's car, he sang. Jack had to admit that Dunninger was right. This kid did have a beautiful voice and his name was Larry Stevens. Jack asked Larry if he'd like to be on his radio program. Larry said he would and everything was settled. Weelll...not quite everything...We didn't have Larry agree on a salary because we knew with Jack's cheap character this little item would be good for at least another four or five shows.

The reason we used a gas station location for finding Larry was because that's where he really worked.

Incidentally, in the scene at the Shrine Auditorium, did you notice in Dunninger's line, "It's on the corner of Third and La Cienega", he spelled out L-A C-I-E-N-E-G-A? The reason for this was in rehearsal he couldn't pronounce La Cienega. This struck me as being very funny. I mean, if a man can really read minds, look into the future and solve big problems, shouldn't there be something in his psyche to tell him how to pronounce a word?

On a morning several weeks later, having finished the rough draft of a script, Sam, Milt, Tack and myself, along with the script girl, arrived at the front door of the Benny home. Again we were ushered in, but this time before we could step into the library, Jack, still in pajamas and robe, stood at the top of the spiral staircase and silently signaled us to come up. As we approached, he placed a finger over his pursed lips and whispered, "Shhhh..Mary's still sleeping." For a quick moment I realized that in their own homes big important stars are not allowed to shine, but merely twinkle -- and then only if they twinkle quietly.

After tip-toeing down the hall to Jack's room, he closed the door and explained he had a little cold and wanted to stay in. He then propped himself up in bed, pulled up the covers and started reading a copy of our script. As Jack read, we sat silently -- waiting. After reading about three pages, the bedroom door, untouched, opened. Without perceptibly looking up and continuing to

read, Jack threw back the covers, got out of bed, stepped over to the door and closed it. Still reading, he returned to the bed, got back in and again pulled the covers around him..never once taking his eyes off the script. He read on for another three pages or so and once again the bedroom door opened. Without looking up, still reading, Jack threw back the covers, got out of bed, walked to the door and closed it. Eyes still glued to the script, he returned to his bed, got in and pulled up the covers. Three pages later, the door opened and a third time Jack, continuing to read, went through the same routine, covers off -- out of bed -- walk to door -- close it -- back to bed -- eyes still on script.

At this point I got up out of my chair, walked over to the door, quietly opened it, and using a coin for a screw driver, I removed the strike plate. With my pen knife, I cut a little sliver of wood from the door frame, replaced the strike plate -- moving it over just a trifle, and closed the door. I then returned to my chair. All the while, Jack kept reading.

A moment later, as if on cue, he stole a glance at the door which didn't open. He read on and again he looked toward the door. It still hadn't opened. Almost in disappointment, he looked at me and said, "George, what in the hell did you do?"

I explained what I did and why the door would now stay shut. He looked at me in utter disbelief and said, "I'll be a sonovabitch. I paid over three hundred thousand dollars for this house and for six years I've been getting out of bed every four minutes to close that door."

Hearing this, I said, "Jack, you could have had your butler or your handyman fix it."

He replied, "I suppose so, but I just didn't want to bother anybody."

As the years went by, I realized how much that phrase "I didn't want to bother anybody" was the key to the true character of this gentle man.

Jack's lack of mechanical know-how served us well as a facet of his radio character. For example, I remember how the writers called upon it when writing a routine about Jack and Rochester fixing a flat tire.

"How much longer before you'll have the spare on, Rochester?"

"Just a couple of minutes."

"Couple of minutes..It would have been fixed long ago if I'd done it myself."

"Hand me the wrench, will you, boss?"

"Okay...here."

"That's the screwdriver."

"Oh, the wrench..Here."

"That's the pump."

"Oh...Here."

"That's the hub cap!"

"Oh, you want the wrench...Here."

"You're back to the screwdriver again!"

"Oh - yes."

"You know, boss, you sure ain't mechanically minded."

"I am, too."

"Then why do you call me every morning to screw the cap back on your toothpaste?"

"Look, just hurry with the tire."

"I'm almost finished."

"Good..you know, Rochester, I just can't understand having a blow-out...It's a very good tire..It's a General."

"I know..but you've run that General down to a buck private!

"Stop being silly..that tire hasn't got so many holes in it."

"It hasn't, boss! The inner tube could be arrested for indecent exposure!"

"What?"

"Even the wheel is ashamed to go around with it!"

"Rochester, that's a terrible..terrible joke."

"Hee hee hee."

"What are you laughing at?"

"You always say that, and two weeks later it shows up on your program."

"Never mind..now let's get to the studio."

CHAPTER VI

On Monday, January 8, 1945, of the '44'45 season we started an extended road trip which took the show to New York, Chicago, St. Joseph, Missouri, and Denver, Colorado. The show from New York was to open the March of Dimes Infantile Paralysis Drive. For the broadcast of January 7 radio listeners heard a show evolving around preparing for the trip and the departure. In the opening scene, Jack was at home packing and happily singing:

"East side, West side..All around the town..

La la la la la ...Oh boy, New York! Bright lights...

Broadway..There's so much excitement in New York...

subways, taxicabs, people rushing around..And that's

where you see all the old vaudeville acts..Powers

Elephants, Sharkey the trained seal, Finks Mules,

Fred Allen...Let's see..I'll cash a check when I get

to New York, but I'll need some money on the train..

I'd better figure out how much I'll need...
There'll be nine meals in the diner at fifty
cents a meal...That's four fifty...Hmmm...maybe
I should get Rochester to pack some sandwiches...
Nahh, how often do you go to New York...Besides,
you get jelly all over the berth...Anyway, nine
meals, that's four fifty..Yeah, that'll cover
it nicely...But to be on the safe side, I'll
take five dollars....I'd better get it out of
my vault."

Having prompted himself into action, we
then heard:

SIX FOOTSTEPS...THE TURNING OF A HEAVY
IRON HANDLE WITH CREAKING OF CHAINS
FOLLOWED BY THE SOUNDS OF A HEAVY IRON
DOOR SLOWLY CREAKING OPEN.

There were now more footsteps and by their increasingly
hollow sound, we knew Jack was descending into a cavern-like
cave. The footsteps stopped again in front of a second door.
We then heard the turning of an even heavier iron handle and
a louder creaking of chains ending with the squeaky-creaky open-
ing of the thick metal door. Jack started in and suddenly we
heard a strange voice say:

"Halt...who goes there?"

It was the man in the vault, supposedly hired by Jack and
put down there many years ago to guard his money.

"It's only me, Ed...It's okay."

"Oh hello, Mr. Benny."

"How've you been, Ed?"

"Fine, fine..Oh, by the way, Mr. Benny --"

"Yes?"

"Who won the election?"

"Roosevelt...it was pretty close."

"So Hoover's out, eh?"

Though Jack was referring to the election of 1944, Ed was thinking of 1932, the last election he knew anything about.

"Yes, a long time ago...Oh say, Ed, did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Yes..Quiet, but nice."

"Good, good...Oh, Ed, I just want to open my safe now for a minute."

"Yes sir...shall I turn my back?"

"No no, it's all right...Now let's see..The combination is right to forty-five...(LIGHT TURNING SOUND)...Left to one-sixty...(LIGHT SOUND)...Back to fifteen...(LIGHT SOUND)...Then left to one-ten...(LIGHT SOUND)...There.

Next we heard the sound of a:

HANDLE TURNING...FOLLOWED BY TERRIFIC
STEAM WHISTLES, BELLS, ETC.)

This ear-piercing racket caused Jack to comment:
"Oh darn it, I forgot to turn off the alarm...Now
Let's see..Oh, there's a loose five dollar bill."

With that comment on his negligence, Jack picked up his travelling money, said "Goodbye" to Ed and retraced his steps back up to the surface of his living room where he resumed packing.

This first use of the famous Benny Vault was written by Milt and Tack and was such a complete success that "going down into the vault" became a standard. The vault was the second of the season's innovations and from then on was used whenever the situation permitted.

In each subsequent use the writing became progressively exaggerated. The vault went from deep to deeper, the locks, chains and alarms went from loud to louder, while Ed, the guard, played by Joe Kearns, went from old to older. The human protection for Jack's cash was augmented by a creaky draw-bridge necessary to cross a moat containing wild alligators. Ed's command of "Halt, who goes there?" was sometimes made from a sitting position -- his struggle to rise from his chair being thwarted by massive cobwebs. Eventually Ed, himself, was depicted as a veteran of the Civil War, and this, his isolation from the real world, became most apparent when on one visit Jack happened to mention the word "Girl" and Ed could not comprehend its meaning. Making an effort to help, Jack explained to him that a girl was a member of the opposite sex. To this Ed responded, quizically, "Sex?" which indicated he had either forgotten or never known.

Since this was radio, the listeners heard only words and sound effects, which meant the picture had to be formed in their individual imagination.

When the writing assignments for this same show were being decided, my partner Sam and I took the second half which included the departure. Without knowing it, at the time, we created two more elements which became fixtures on the Benny Show.

In writing our half of this show, based on the trip to New York, we started with Jack leaving the house with bags packed and five dollars in his pocket. As always on the trip east, he was accompanied by Rochester. Since they were going by train, they took a cab downtown to the Los Angeles Union Station. Upon arrival, the usual argument over the fare and tip took place. That settled, Jack and Roch entered the Railroad Station where their ears were greeted by a blasting P.A. System informing passengers that a train was "LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE...FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA." Ignoring the information, Jack turned to his butler and said, "Rochester, put on your red cap and carry my bags to the train."

Rochester, obeying the orders, left Jack as Phil Harris approached with his effervescent, "Hi ya, Jackson." The two of them exchanged comedy lines until interrupted by the P.A. announcer making a second attempt. "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA AND CUCAMONGA -- DOES ANYBODY WANT TO GO TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA OR CUCAMONGA?"

The announcement fell on deaf ears as Don Wilson joined Phil and Jack. The three of them continued conversing when a man who apparently knew Jack walked by saying:

"Hi ya, Jack -- where ya been -- I haven't seen you around."

"What? -- Oh,hello, hello."

The man then continued on his way. Phil then inquired, "Who's that, Jackson?"

"Oh, he's a race-track tout who used to hang around Hollywood Park."

With that Jack excused himself and headed toward the ticket window on the other side of the station. At this point the P.A. System blared out once again: "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA...AW, COME ON, SOMEBODY MUST WANT TO GO TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA AND CUCAMONGA."

As Jack was approaching the ticket window, the race-track tout quietly moved in from the side and in a voice exuding confidentiality said:

"Hey, Jack -- Jack -- Come here a minute."

"Huh -- Oh, it's you again..What is it?"

"I didn't want to say anything while you were with your friends -- but -- where ya goin'?"

"New York."

"What train ya takin'?"

"The Chief."

"Uh - uh."

"What's the matter?"

"Take the El Capitan."

"But I like The Chief."

The tout realized this might be more difficult than expected and urged Jack to come even closer with another, "Come here a minute."

"Yeah."

"Take my tip, bud..The El Capitan will beat the Chief into Kansas City by three lengths."

"What?"

"According to yesterday's performance, it can't miss."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm taking The Chief."

"Look..come here a minute."

"Huh?"

"I was talkin' to the engineer who's ridin' the El Capitan and he tells me that today she's ready."

"Well...I don't know -- "

"And look at the breeding..El Capitan is by Twentieth Century out of Golden State Limited."

Jack deciding that, when it came to trains, he could make his own decision said, "Well, thanks for the tip, but I'm going to stick to the Chief."

To this the tout replied, disappointed, "Why?"

With this question Jack saw an opportunity to turn the tables. He quickly assumed the character of a tout and said, "Come here a minute...Don't nose this around, but I found out the Chief is a sleeper. So long, fellah."

The tout shrugged it off with, "Okay, okay, it's your trip."

Jack continued toward the ticket window. After a couple of steps, the P.A. System blared out again. This time the announcer's voice had more urgency. "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE..FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA"...followed by a tearful, "LOOK, WE'RE NOT ASKING MUCH..TWO OF YOU..OR EVEN ONE OF YOU...JUST SOMEBODY TO KEEP THE ENGINEER COMPANY!"

Jack then stepped up to the ticket window and inquired of the man behind the bars: "Pardon me, are you the ticket clerk?"

The clerk, responding to this rather silly question said, "Well, what do you think I am in this cage, a canary?"

"Well, don't get huffy about it, all I want is a ticket on The Chief."

"Oh, would you like the sixty dollar ticket or the hundred and forty dollar ticket?"

"Well..uh..what's the difference?"

"With the hundred and forty dollar ticket you ride inside."

"Well, naturally, I want to ride on the inside.. After all, I'm not as young as I used to be."

"You're not as young as anybody used to be."

It was another battle of insults between Jack, the Star, and Frank Nelson, his perennial nemesis. The verbal exchange continued until cut off by still another announcement over the P.A. The voice now had a tinge of panic.

"LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE..FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA." Then frantically, "LOOK, LOOK.. THERE ARE FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE IN THIS STATION... ISN'T THERE SOMEBODY..ANYBODY...ARE THERE ANY VOLUNTEERS?...PLEASE, PLEASE..PLEASE..I GOT A JOB TO DO...I'LL GET FIRED IF I DON'T GET SOMEBODY ON THE TRAIN GOING TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA!"

We were now nearing the end of the show and Jack still hadn't gotten his train ticket. Trying to be patient, while waiting for the irritable clerk to find him space, etc., he heard the all-important legitimate announcement:

"ATTENTION, PLEASE, ATTENTION..THE SANTA FE CHIEF NOW LEAVING FOR CHICAGO AND NEW YORK."

To the accompaniment of the train bell in the background, Jack pleaded with the ticket clerk to hurry. Over the sound of escaping steam, Rochester called, "Boss, Boss, the train is startin' to go!"

Jack grabbed his ticket and hurried toward the moving train. Over his running footsteps he heard, "THE TRAIN ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA HAS JUST BEEN CANCELLED."

With the crying sobs of the announcer fading in the background, Jack continued running after his moving train with Phil, Don, Mary, and Roch shouting encouragement from the rear platform of the

Observation Car. As the theme music faded in, Jack managed to climb aboard. Once again, the whole Benny gang was on its way to New York.

These two elements, added to the phone operators and the vault, raised the season's score for new innovations to four.

On this trip to the East Coast and return the Sunday broadcasts emanated from military bases and hospitals. That is, all except one which was done from the historic city of St. Joseph, Missouri. Jack had been invited to pay the city a visit and I think it's rather interesting how it came about. Three years earlier Jack did a program in which the writers thought it would be funny for Rochester, with his scratchy voice, to sing a song. The song selected was the then popular "Blues In The Night." So the next Sunday's program went on the air with Rochester moving through the house doing his chores, singing:

MY MAMMA DONE TOLD ME
WHEN I WAS IN KNEE PANTS
MY MAMMA DONE TOLD ME, SON
A WOMAN WILL SWEET TALK
AND GIVE YOU THE BIG EYE
BUT WHEN THE SWEET TALKIN'S DONE
A WOMAN'S A TWO FACE
A WORRISOME THING
WHO LEAVES YOU TO SING
THE BLUES IN THE NIGHT.

FROM NATCHEZ TO MOBILE
FROM MEMPHIS TO SAINT JOE

At this point, Jack, who was sitting near-by in his easy chair, came in with a reminiscent, "Saint Joe -- they loved me there."

It got a good laugh and on several shows to follow the device was repeated, always ending with Jack's comment, "Saint Joe -- they loved me there."

Before long, the City Fathers of Saint Joe wanted to show Jack that, indeed, they did love him there and extended him an invitation to do a broadcast from the town auditorium. On this trip, some three years later, he was able to work it in.

It was really a fun week and the local citizens making up the audience were very receptive. Our guest, Jane Wyman, the popular movie star, was a native daughter of Saint Joseph. Saint Joe was also the home of Jesse James. Jesse, with his guns, killed people in Missouri and Jane, with her pictures, killed audiences all over the world.

The following week's broadcast came from Fitzsimmons Military Hospital in Denver, Colorado. That same night we boarded the train and with a puff of steam and a toot on the whistle, we were homeward bound.

For the next several weeks the show was anchored to N.B.C. Hollywood. One of these broadcasts was done on Easter. In getting the premise for this particular show, someone pointed out that we could do a story based on the Easter Parade. We all thought this was a good idea and one of my colleagues went so far as to enthusiastically exclaim in all sincerity, "And aren't

we lucky..this year Easter comes on Sunday!" I just looked at him..then I realized his apparent discovery was very explainable. To most of the comedy writers, the word "Lent" has only one meaning -- it's the past tense of "loan".

We closed the season doing shows from Palm Springs, Santa Barbara and San Francisco. The show from San Francisco was in celebration of "I am an American Day", and was broadcast from the Civic Auditorium. Our guest star was the then governor, Earl Warren. In the years after, not only did our shows continue to improve, but so did Mr. Warren. He went from Governor to Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

1944-45 was a productive season. The new elements created were the telephone operators, the vault, Jack's comedy "age", the railroad station, the tout and Professor leBlanc, the French violin teacher. The four of us were a happy bunch of writers.

For me and my partner, Sam, it proved to be a year that was doubly exciting. On the January trip to New York we were offered a contract to write the book for a new musical comedy, scheduled for a fall opening on Broadway.

This opportunity came about when producers Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardener were looking for writers and we were recommended to them by Harry Ackerman who at that time was a top executive of C.B.S.

With Jack Benny's blessings, Sam and I spent the summer in New York writing and Jack travelled through Germany doing military shows for the U.S.O. On this trip his troupe consisted of Ingrid Bergman, Larry Adler, Martha Tilton and David Le Winter.

CHAPTER VII

In Mid-August, after six weeks in New York City, Sam and I finished the book for the Broadway Show. If two writers ever had a hot typewriter, we did. I say this in all modesty because I'm using the word "hot" literally. In those days, air conditioning was a rarity and temperatures of ninety degrees -- with even higher humidity was a certainty. For the duration of our stay we leased a penthouse. Penthouse, meaning we had a room on the very top of a tall building where, with all the windows open, we could get soot-laden warm air from all four directions. Day after day we sat there at the hot typewriter, wearing only our undershorts. I can't tell you the ratio of soot to air, but there were times I called Sam "Amos" and he called me "Andy". On us, black wasn't beautiful. On some days we could have made our own carbon paper. Our typing would have been easier to read if we used a white ribbon.

During the worst of the hot spells, the better restaurants had revolving doors and some kind of cooling. The place where we ate had neither, but they did the next best thing. When you came through the entrance, the manager would grab you by the shoulders, spin you around three times, then hit you in the face with a wet towel.

On August 14, 1945, the Japanese surrendered and the celebration that took place in Times Square was really something to see. The smoke rings from the man on the Camel Sign were bigger than ever. Over-joyed civilians and servicemen were kissing and hugging. Two Marines and a sailor were dancing with the Statue of Father Duffy, completely ignoring the pigeons that were trying to cut in. It was a night I shall always remember, even at the risk of forgetting Pearl Harbor.

Our musical comedy was adapted from a book by George Malcomb Smith, entitled "Slightly Perfect." It was a story about a young insurance actuary who becomes involved with a Carnival. For Broadway we changed the title to "Are You With It?" The music was written by Harry Revel and lyrics were by Arnold B. Horwitt. In the cast we had Joan Roberts, the original Laury of "Oklahoma" and Johnny Downs, supported by Lew Parker, Dolores Gray, Kathryn Lee and Jane Dulo.

The middle of September, shortly after rehearsals started, we returned to Hollywood where we rejoined Milt and Tack and started preparing for the fall radio season.

It was to be another year of innovation -- characters, ideas and situations that stuck with the Benny Show for a long time to come -- not only in radio, but on into television. While we were writing the fourth show of the season, "Are You With It?" had its out-of-town opening in Philadelphia at the Shubert Theatre. The date was Wednesday, October 17, 1945. Sam and I were in California working, so all we could do was wait for a report from the East. Along with our wives, we decided to spend the waiting hours together.

When it got to be 10:00 P.M. Pacific Time, we knew the show must be over and, not having had one phone call from anybody, we started calling. First we called the theater, which was closed, and the phone was answered by a night watchman. At this point, we would settle for an opinion from anybody, so we asked him if he liked the show. His answer indicated that he couldn't care less. We then started calling hotels, hoping to find the Producers or anyone who might tell us something. About two hours later, which was three o'clock in the morning there, we managed to locate a member of the cast. He had difficulty talking and really didn't tell us anything about the show. However, through his mumbling, we did learn that after the performance, the entire company got together for a Champagne party. When we heard the word "Champagne", we knew we had a hit.

The next morning, the reviews came out and they were unanimously good -- some were even excellent. They all pointed out that "Are You With It", with a little cutting and fixing would be ready for Broadway.

When we showed the reviews to Jack, he was delighted and he insisted that Sam and I leave immediately for Philly to do whatever was needed. While we were gone, he had Hugh Wedlock and Howard Snyder, a team of writers who had worked for him in the past, fill in on the radio show until we could get back.

That same evening we left by plane and after a twelve-hour wait in Chicago, managed to get a flight into Philadelphia. During the next five days, Sam and I cut and fixed our musical comedy script. By this time, more notices had been printed in the West Coast papers and this prompted Jack to send us the following telegram:

SAM PERRIS:

RITZ CARLTON HOTEL

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

HAVE JUST REALIZED HOW CLEVER YOUR PARTNER
BLAZER IS. HE CANNOT ONLY WRITE A PLAY BUT
ALSO FIX MY BEDROOM DOOR. GOOD LUCK AND HOPE
THE SHOW IS EVEN BETTER THAN YOU EXPECT. WILL
BE ANXIOUS TO KNOW ABOUT IT.

JACK BENNY

Did you notice the mis-spelling of the names? PERRIS for PERRIN, and BLAZER for BALZER? It was Jack's little joke; his way of saying, "don't get too big!" In other words, he was doing the same thing that pigeon did to me on my first trip to New York.

With the polishing job finished, we returned to the West Coast and radio. Then on November 19, 1945, "Are You With It?"

opened on Broadway at the Century Theatre in New York. Again, for this more important and exciting occasion, we remained in Hollywood, but the reviews told us what we wanted to know. As one critic wrote, "Are You With It? is no longer a question, it definitely is." And it remained so, running for well over a year.

Jack's interest in the success of our Broadway venture was always present. Three or four weeks after the opening he insisted on giving it a plug on the radio show. This was done in the following manner:

Larry Stevens had finished singing his number and, as the applause died away:

JACK: That was "Just Beyond the Rainbow" from the newest Broadway smash hit, "Are You With it?"..And now, folks --

MARY: Say, Jack, talking about "Are You With It?", Didn't two of your writers, Sam Perrin and George Balzer, write that show?

JACK: (MAD) Yeah.

MARY: Well, you oughta be proud. What are you mad about?

JACK: Look...I give 'em the summer off, they go to New York, write a hit show, come back and make my life miserable.

DON: What do you mean, Jack?

JACK: Every time they come in with a radio script and I happen to say, "That joke isn't funny", they tear out the page and jam it down my throat..When they say, "That's a belly laugh," they're not kidding.

MARY: Well, Jack, if you feel that way about your writers, why don't you get rid of them?

JACK: I can't, they've got me signed for two years yet...Oh, well.

One of the great strengths of the Benny radio show was the selection and use of the guest stars. They had to fit, not only into the situation, but also into the mold, and none filled these requirements better than Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Colman. Ronald Colman was an English actor and, of all the movie stars, he was the epitome of class and dignity. His actress wife, Benita Hume, had these same qualities and together they were the ultimate of high society.

The original idea of having them as guests on the radio show came from Jack, himself. I remember when he told us he felt that Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Colman would be a great contrast, not only to the Benny character, but to all the members of the cast. Jack had no story idea, but he felt the ingredients were there. Knowing that his basic thinking couldn't be argued with, Sam, Milt, Tack and I immediately started kicking ideas around and came up with a premise which served well for the first of the many Colman appearances.

In our story line, we had the cast assemble at Jack's home. In their conversation we established that the Ronald Colmans lived next door and on that very morning Jack had been invited over to their house for dinner. Mary and the rest found this hard to believe, so Jack read them a note written by Mr. Colman, himself. It said, "Dear Jack: Glad to know you are safely back in America. Benita and I would love to have you for cocktails and dinner Sunday evening. We'll expect you around eight. Signed, Ronald Colman". Jack then mentioned he must remember to caution Rochester about getting careless because he found this invitation on the back porch.

When Mary questioned the phrase about "being back in America", Jack explained the Colmans were referring to his trip overseas last summer. Jack then excused himself and went upstairs to get dressed. Because the Colmans were such classy people, Jack put on his top hat, white tie and tails.

At the Colmans' house before Jack's arrival, we learned in beautifully English-accented dialogue that the "Jack" they were expecting was a Jack Wellington, an old friend whom they had known since the old days in England. Mr. Colman explained to his wife, Benita, that he had phoned Wellington about coming to dinner because the note he had written him had blown out the window. We also planted that the Colmans were going to stay in their casual clothes because that's the way their friend, Jack Wellington, would want it. At this point the butler, who was also English, entered.

BUTLER: I beg your pardon, Mr. Colman.

COLMAN: Yes, Sherwood?

BUTLER: Mr. Jack Wellington has arrived.

COLMAN: Oh, good, good.

BENITA: Come, Ronnie.

(SOUND: FEW FOOTSTEPS)

BENITA: Jack, Jack!

COLMAN Wellington, Old Boy!

WELLINGTON: Hello, Ronnie..Benita..It's so good to see you again and so nice of you to have me over for dinner. I came direct from the tennis courts. I hope you don't mind my being in just slacks and a slipover.

BENITA: No no, of course not, we hate formality.

The three of them moved back into the living room and in a few minutes of conversation it was established that the Colmans do not think too highly of their neighbor, Jack Benny. Also, when Wellington asked, "Is this Benny you're talking about the blighter who is on the wireless?" he was told he most assuredly was. Wellington said he was not too fond of him, either. About this time the butler reappeared.

BUTLER: I beg your pardon, Mr. Colman.

COLMAN: Yes, Sherwood?

BUTLER: There's a gentleman at the door, sir. Here's his card.

COLMAN: His card?...Hmm.."Jack Benny, star of stage, screen and radio..And will sing "Oh Promise Me" at weddings...Has own tuxedo?!"..Jack Benny here? What in the world could he possibly want?

This unforeseen turn of events left Ronnie, Benita and Wellington staring at each other, not knowing quite what to do. Then Ronnie, hoping to get rid of the intruder, instructed his butler:

COLMAN: Sherwood, tell him I'll call him later, we have a guest for dinner.

BUTLER: But Mr. Colman, he said that you were expecting him for dinner.

COLMAN: For dinner? Benita, did you invite Jack Benny for dinner?

BENITA: No, darling..Are you sure you didn't?

COLMAN: I'm positive.

WELLINGTON: I say, Ronnie..is this the eccentric chap you were telling me about?

COLMAN: Yes. Well, his coming here is obviously a mistake, but we may as well make the best of an awkward situation..Sherwood, show Mr. Benny in..and set another place for dinner.

The butler returned to the front door, then re-entered the room followed by the uninvited Jack Benny dressed in white tie and tails.

JACK: Well, well..Hello, Ronnie..Benita..

COLMAN: ...Uh...uh..Hello, Jack...Come in.

BENITA: Yes yes, come in.

COLMAN: We're just about to have a cocktail.

BENITA: Mr. Benny, this is our friend, Jack Wellington.

WELLINGTON: Pleased to meet you, old chap.

JACK: Well..I didn't expect anyone else to be here, but that's just like the Colmans..always room for one more..Ha ha ha ha ha!...Yes, sir!

After a few cocktails, which did nothing to make the moments less awkward, Jack, aware of his own attire and the casualness of the others, said, "Well..I'll just sit here and read a magazine while you three go and dress."

Ronnie quietly explained it was just an informal gathering. For the rest of the evening Jack was an overdressed square peg in a round hole. At dinner his contribution to the conversation was a nine-course serving of boredom. For the Colmans and their friend, Wellington, Jack's presence was a disaster -- so much so, by nine o'clock they were throwing broad hints for him to go home -- none of which was understood by Jack. After awhile, however, he volunteered.

JACK: ...Well..I guess I better be running along.. Time for me to go home..Goodnight, Mr. Wellington.. very happy to have met you.

WELLINGTON: Goodnight, old boy..and with my luck, we'll probably meet again.

JACK: Yes yes, thank you.

Ronnie and Benita escorted Jack to the front door, but before exiting:

JACK: Well, goodnight, Ronnie, old boy..I had a swell time. (LOWERS VOICE) And say, I'm awfully sorry about Wellington.

COLMAN: Wellington? What do you mean?

JACK: Oh, I know you're loyal to your friends, but isn't it awful the way a guy like him can throw a damper on a party?

COLMAN: You know, Jack, there's a lot of truth in what you say.

JACK: You're telling me!..Well, goodbye.

(SOUND: DOOR SLAMS FAST)

JACK: I'm not out yet!

COLMAN: Oh, oh, pardon me.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS)

JACK: Well, goodnight, Ronnie.

COLMAN: Goodnight.

(SOUND: DOOR SLAMS)

Earlier in the show while Jack was still at home dressing, we planted that the pants to his full dress suit were very, very tight. So tight, in fact, he should at all times avoid stooping over. After leaving the Colmans' he walked toward his own house, so enthralled with the evening, he forgot the warning.

JACK: (HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)..Gee, they're nice people, the Colmans..(HUMS)...That Wellington seems to be a nice chap, too...But I can't understand him just dropping in uninvited...Oh well...(HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)...On, darn it, I dropped my gloves.. (FOOTSTEPS STOP)..(JACK GRUNTS)..

(SOUND: LONG RIP OF CLOTH)

JACK: Hmm..

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS PICK UP)

JACK: Can it be the breeze that fills the trees...

With this, the theme music hit and another show was over.

During the rest of that season and throughout the remaining radio years, it was always a delight for us and the listeners whenever we had the Colmans as our guests.

In late spring, the Navy Department invited the Jack Benny Show to broadcast on April 21, 1946, from the flight deck of the Aircraft Carrier U.S.S. Saratoga, which was anchored in San Francisco Bay. On the morning following our show, the Saratoga was to leave for the Bikini Atoll, a series of islands in the South Pacific, to participate in a history-making atomic bomb test-- a test that meant the destruction of this great ship.

Starting with Don Wilson's opening announcement, "And now ladies and gentlemen, from the U.S.S. Saratoga, which is affectionately called 'Old Sara', we bring you another old lady and here she is, Jack Benny," the next half hour was filled with the laughter of Navy and Marine personnel. Then at the finish, Jack read this tribute to the Saratoga -- "A Gallant Lady":

"Ladies and gentlemen..I'd like to read a farewell message that was written by Captain M.S. Sheehey, the former Chaplain of the U.S.S. Saratoga. It was written in behalf of all the men who have had the privilege of serving aboard this ship...Here it is... 'Dear Sara..This is a love letter because you have been the great love of thousands of us who have paced your flight deck, and boasted of your proud record.

'Nineteen years ago, Sara, with bands playing and admirals standing stiffly at attention..you were grandly launched upon your career. For most of those nineteen years you sailed a peaceful course. Then suddenly, out of that peace, came your courageous dash to Pearl Harbor, where you assumed your responsibility. Soon you were standing alone..the only American carrier between Tokyo and San Francisco.

'We'll never forget Guadalcanal..Bougainville.. Rabaul..Nauru and Tarawa..We'll never forget those twenty-six strikes on the Marshall Islands..And your last engagement..that rendezvous with the kamikazes. You staggered, fought back, landed your combat air patrol..and the next day one hundred and twenty-three of your men were buried at sea off Iwo Jima.

'That was a black day, Sara, but we, your boys, remember the other days as well..all your gay parties.. the celebrations given for every thousandth landing.. the squadrons coming home like weary birds..the glory of dawn patrols..the long chow lines and the Sunday services. We remember how our hearts lifted when every plane took off and how they sank when we counted the missing ones.

'To us, Sara, you were more than a ship, and so we, your boys all over the world, want to say farewell. You are going to perform your last service for your country..perhaps that atom bomb will put you in Davey Jones' locker.

'You won't be lonesome there, for the old Lex, and the Wasp, and the Hornet, and the Yorktown, and your little sister ship who died so gallantly, the Princeton, will be there to welcome you. And we men of the Navy want you to know that wherever your hulk may be, your spirit..the spirit of the U.S.S. Saratoga..will go marching on, and on, and on.'

The orchestra faded in playing "Anchors Aweigh", then up full to the finish.

A few weeks later, Jack and our whole gang left on another train trip east. As we entered the Los Angeles Union Station, the crazy announcer again reminded millions of listeners that trains were still leaving on track five for Anaheim, Azusa, and Cuc---a---monga. We boarded the Santa Fe Chief and were soon on our way to New York City. From there we did the remaining three shows of the season. On the final broadcast, Jack again paid tribute to his writers. For us it was a most gratifying year.

CHAPTER VIII

The calendar year 1945 saw a challenging of the lofty position of the Benny radio show. Imperceptible at first, the slow descent continued and by the start of the new season the show was out of the top five.

The advertising agency analyzed the situation and concluded that the slide was not due to any deterioration in the program quality, but rather to the success of other programs such as Bob Hope, Fibber McGee and Molly, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and others. In essence, they were getting a larger share of the ratings pie. In other words, the fringe listeners of the "old favorite" were shopping the dial for new favorites. This high-sounding explanation was not readily accepted by Jack. His own conclusion was simply, "Maybe they don't want me anymore". These words, of course, were uttered by a man with a punctured ego. His past lengthy perch on the mountain peak exaggerated the depth of the present valley.

In September we started the new season and after several weeks the ratings didn't get any worse, nor did they get any better. Jack's concern became more intense and our determination to do something about it increased. One morning the writers and Jack were at his home having a script conference. At this meeting we kicked around the idea of doing something that was a little bigger than usual -- something that would attract more listener attention. It was at this meeting the Jack Benny innate sense of showmanship came to the fore.

While we were discussing several possibilities, Sam came up with an idea. He suggested that we ask our listeners to write lyrics for a song and send them in to the program. Then Mahlon Merrick, our musical conductor, would set them to music. After a certain length of time these lyric writing contributions would be judged and the best ones would be awarded prizes. Jack's reaction to this was several degrees on the cool side of luke warm. Nevertheless, we all explored its possibilities. The idea was being mulled over when I, in the spirit of making a joke, said, "Jack, today on radio there are so many programs asking the listeners to write in, using twenty-five words or less, to tell why they like such-and-such a soap or so-and-so toothpaste. Every ten minutes there is a radio announcement asking people to write in why they like something."

By this time I had Jack's full attention and continued, "Why don't we have a contest asking people to write in and in twenty-five words or less, tell why they hate Jack Benny."

After the last word came out of my mouth, there was no laugh -- just silence. Jack sat there looking at me with absolutely no expression on his face. The stares of the other writers told me I had just made the world's biggest blunder. The eerie silence continued for what seemed an eternity. Then Jack rose from his chair, walked over to me and said, "That's it -- that's what we're going to do. I'm going to ask people to write letters saying why they hate me."

Thinking he had gone crazy, we four writers all started talking at once, trying to convince him that he couldn't possibly do such a thing -- it was dangerous -- it didn't make sense. He still wasn't convinced, so in a final effort we pointed out that it wouldn't be good to use the word "hate", especially now with the close of World War II so recent. Jack agreed on that point, but still wouldn't let go. He kept asking, "What other word can we use?"

During the following weeks he even tested the other members of the cast to get their opinion. They all agreed that the word "hate" was too harsh. Reluctantly, he accepted the verdict. Then a day or so later John Tackaberry arrived at a meeting and told us he'd been doing some thinking about the word hate and thought he had a replacement and suggested the phrase "can't stand."

Jack thought for a moment, then audibly tried it. "I can't stand Jack Benny because --- I can't stand Jack Benny because ---" Then, almost happily, he said, "That will do it. That will work. We'll ask people to write in and tell in twenty-five words or less why they can't stand me. And for the best three letters,

I'm going to give away ten thousand dollars."

By this time we began to see what Jack saw in the very beginning -- the great humor that could be done with this ridiculous idea. One of the first suggestions was made by Jack himself. "We couldn't possibly restrict the letters to twenty-five words because people wouldn't even get started on the reasons why they can't stand me."

We all knew that the contest was our new baby. Our first problem was how to present it. We knew it must be done in such a way as to insure the audience accepting it in the proper spirit. To accomplish this, we used the device of making the contest the brainchild of Steve Bradley, a fast-talking crazy publicity man played by Dick Lane. On the program of November 25th, 1945, we did a teaser by having Steve appear on the air and tell Jack he had a great idea for a publicity stunt and it would only cost him ten thousand dollars.

Jack's cheap character reaction was, "Steve, are you crazy?"

Steve assured him that he wasn't and that his idea was sensational. It would sweep the country. Nothing like it had ever been done before.

When Jack asked what the idea was, Steve answered, "I've got an idea for a contest and you'll give away ten thousand dollars in prizes."

Jack pressed for more details, but Steve refrained, saying, "I can't tell you about the contest until next week. But believe me, Benny, it will be the most sensational thing you ever heard

of. This will be the best way I've ever spent your money. So long, Benny, see you next Sunday."

With that, he exited leaving Jack and thirty million listeners wondering what this contest was all about.

Needless to say, this teaser generated much interest. On top of that, our real publicity man worked all week planting items in newspapers all over the country about the coming contest announcement on the next program.

When the big day came, we kept the subject of the announcement alive throughout the first and middle part of the program. Toward the end there was a knock on the door and Jack answered it with his customary, "Come in." Steve Bradley, the mythical publicity man, entered. Following is that portion of the script which illustrates how the contest was presented to the radio listeners.

STEVE: Hi ya, Benny, hello, everybody. Hello, hello, hello..It's me, Bradley, Steve Bradley.

JACK: Well, Steve, it's about time you got here. I've been up in the air all week about this contest idea of yours.

STEVE: Wait 'til you hear this. Sit down, everybody, sit down and let me do the talking. Now about the contest, Benny..This is the greatest thing to ever hit radio, so listen, Benny, and listen carefully.

JACK: I'm listening. Now what's the contest?

STEVE: I'm coming to that. Now for years programs have been having contests. They ask their listeners to write letters on why I like this.. Why I like that..Why I like so and so..Why I like such and such. People are tired of that stuff. I've got something brand new..something that people will enjoy.

JACK: What is it?

STEVE: We're gonna ask people all over this country to write in letters in twenty-five words or less..

JACK: Yes?

STEVE: Telling us "WHY THEY CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY!"

JACK: ...WHAT! Steve, would you mind repeating that?

STEVE: Gladly. We're gonna ask people to write in letters finishing this simple sentence.."I CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY BECAUSE--"

JACK: ..Steve..Steve, look at me..Have you lost your mind? Have you gone crazy? Asking people to do that? Why, people like me, they love me.

STEVE: Wait a minute, Benny, wait a minute.

JACK: What?

STEVE: How many people listen to you every Sunday?

JACK: Well, about..about thirty million.

STEVE: And how many people are there in the United States?

JACK: About..a hundred and thirty million.

STEVE: THERE YOU ARE..THAT MEANS THAT A HUNDRED MILLION PEOPLE DON'T LIKE YOU.

JACK: What? A hundred million people don't like me?

STEVE: And that's only in this country!

JACK: Gee, I don't know. Mary, you talk to Steve, will you..and tell him how crazy this whole idea is. I can't do a contest like that.

MARY: Wait a minute, Jack, maybe it's not so bad. At least it's different.

JACK: But Mary, all those people saying they can't stand me.

MARY: Look at Fred Allen, he's been saying that for years.

JACK: Well, he knows me. I mean, he should know better.

MARY: But Jack, maybe there are a lot of other people that feel like Fred Allen does.

STEVE: Certainly. This will give 'em a chance to put down on paper what they've been thinking for fourteen years!

JACK: And for that..for that I should give away ten thousand dollars?...I've got an old bridge lamp I'm not using..Would that --

STEVE: No no, Benny, it's gotta be ten thousand dollars.. AND WHAT'S MORE..IT'S GOING TO BE IN VICTORY BONDS.

JACK: Oh.

MARY: You know, Jack, that's a good idea. What can be better than Victory bonds?

JACK: I like the idea of Victory Bonds, but -- Oh, I don't know..This sounds so ridiculous. Ten thousand dollars for writing a letter..(SLOWLY AND SOFTLY) "I can't stand Jack Benny because.."

MARY: Jack, put down that pencil, you can't be in it.

JACK: Well, if I'm going to give away Victory Bonds, I've got as much right to try and win as anybody else.

STEVE: Go ahead, Wilson, read that announcement I gave you.

JACK: But Steve, let's talk it over a little more.

STEVE: It's too late for that. Go ahead, Wilson, read it.

JACK: But, Steve --

DON: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE LISTEN CLOSELY, HERE ARE THE DETAILS. TO ENTER THIS CONTEST ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS WRITE A LETTER COMPLETING THIS SENTENCE IN FIFTY WORDS OR LESS.."I CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY BECAUSE..."

JACK: But, Don --

Over Jack's protests, Don continued giving all the details and rules, including the mailing address, ending with:

DON: THE DECISION OF THE JUDGES WILL BE FINAL AND THE SUPREME JUDGE WILL BE..THE HONORABLE FRED ALLEN.

JACK: Fred Allen! How can they do this to me! I'm really a nice guy. I grow flowers, I pat little kids on the head, I give milk to cats.

MARY: Wait a minute, Steve. Suppose there's a tie?

JACK: Yes, Steve, suppose there's a tie?

STEVE: That's impossible, Benny, people can't stand you for different reasons.

JACK: Oh, that's right. I should have known that.

DON: IN CASE OF A TIE, DUPLICATE PRIZES WILL BE AWARDED.

JACK: Duplicate prizes! Mary..Don..Phil..Say something!

PHIL: Okay..Play, boys.

JACK: I oughta have my head examined.

During the closing commercial Jack, thinking about the contest he was now saddled with, supposedly fainted and in the tag Phil Harris assisted Mary in bringing him to.

MARY: Phil..Phil, I'll rub his wrists while you pour that cold water on his forehead.

PHIL: Okay.

JACK: (GROANS)

MARY: He's coming around, Phil..Do you feel better, Jack?

JACK: (GROANS) Yes, I guess so.

PHIL: Say look, Jackson, three thousand letters came in yesterday telling why they couldn't stand you.

JACK: That's my regular fan mail, they don't count!
Mary, I'm too weak, you say it.

MARY: Okay..Goodnight, everybody.

JACK: Thanks.

DON: DON'T DELAY, FOLKS, WRITE THOSE LETTERS TONIGHT.

Within a very few days the showmanship, the genius of Jack Benny started to pay off. The mail came pouring in. We had to hire a staff of ten women to do the preliminary reading and sorting. Our fears were allayed when it became evident that ninety-nine per cent of the letters received were written in the spirit intended. Oh, yes, there was some crank mail, but these were letters which would have been written whether there was a contest or not.

The I Can't Stand Jack Benny Contest ran for ten consecutive weeks. It was a great source of comedy and public interest. Two weeks after its inception the Jack Benny Show was once again the nation's Number One radio program.

On the tenth and final week Fred Allen, the final judge, handed down his decision and appeared on the program to announce the winners.

The first prize, twenty-five hundred dollars in Victory bonds went to Mr. Carroll P. Craig, Sr., 735 Radcliffe Ave., Pacific Palisades, California. The second prize, fifteen hundred dollars in Victory Bonds, went to Mr. Charles S. Doherty, Hotel Bolton Square, Cleveland 6, Ohio. The third prize, a one thousand dollar Victory Bond, went to Miss Joyce O'Hara, 1014 Dragoon Avenue, Detroit 9, Michigan.

The additional fifty winners of one hundred dollar bonds were notified by telegram. This information caused Fred to add: "If Mr. Benny should deliver any of these telegrams personally, please tip him generously. He has been through a terrible ordeal.. ..I am happy to say."

Though the contest proper was finished, we continued to get mileage out of it. The very next Sunday we devised a situation whereby Jack's next door neighbor, Mr. Ronald Colman, would read the winning letter.

In our story Mr. Colman got Jack's top coat by mistake and as he was going through the pockets, a folded piece of paper fell to the floor.

RONNIE: Benita, look..It's one of the contest letters.

BENITA: You mean the "I Can't Stand Jack Benny" Contest?

RONNIE: Yes, and there's a little notation on it that says it's the winning letter -- the one that won first prize.

BENITA: First prize? Oh, Ronnie, I wonder what the winning letter was like. Read it, please.

RONNIE: All right..It's a poem..

He fills the air
With boasts and brags
And obsolete
Obnoxious gags.

The way he plays
His violin
Is music's most
Obnoxious sin.

His cowardice
Alone, indeed,
Is matched by his
Obnoxious greed.

And all the things
 That he portrays,
 Show up my own
Obnoxious ways.

Benita, isn't that clever?

BENITA: Yes, it has such a good thought behind it.

RONNIE: Yes..(READS SLOWLY)

And all the things
 That he portrays
 Show up my own
Obnoxious ways.

You know, Benita, maybe the fellow that wrote
 this letter is right. The things that we
 find fault with in others..are the same
 things that we tolerate in ourselves.

BENITA: That's so true, Ronnie.

RONNIE: It certainly is.

The "I Can't Stand Jack Benny Contest" gave the writers
 subject matter for eleven weeks. And this by no means signaled
 the end of it. In the years that followed, any reference to the
 contest was always greeted with gratifying audience reaction.
 The contest more than served its purpose. It rejuvenated listener
 interest to such an extent that the Benny Radio Show never again
 relinquished its leadership.

For the contest idea I never expected, nor did I ever seek,
 any credit. My only hope is for recognition of a very interesting
 fact. Namely, had I suggested the same idea to any other comedian,
 it would have cost me my job.

CHAPTER IX

In writing about the first three years of my long association with the Jack Benny Show, I have covered the seasons in general, some individual broadcasts and a few routines specifically. Now, as we ride the crest of the rating wave, it's only appropriate we give recognition to the people -- the people whose names Don Wilson so proudly enunciated at the opening of every program: "Jack Benny, with Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Rochester, Dennis Day and yours truly, Don Wilson." So, in that order:

"THE STAR OF THE SHOW"

-JACK BENNY-

If my purpose were to discuss the on-stage character, rather than the man, it would be difficult to do because in many areas the two are entwined. The believability of the character depended so much upon the public's admiration and acceptance of the man.

In writing about the man, it's not a problem of knowing where to start, but where to stop. As one critic put it after he had written a review that had several barbs in it and then a few days later met Jack and was told, "I'm sorry you didn't like my show. Fortunately all the other reviewers did." The critic's reply was, "Jack, I liked it, too, but it makes for dull reading when I go on week after week and year after year writing nice things." So at the risk of being dull, I shall pursue the path the critic feared.

In 1932 Jack made his very first appearance on radio as a guest on a fifteen-minute program featuring a newspaper columnist named Ed Sullivan. When Jack was introduced by Ed, he leaned into the microphone and said to the listening audience, "This is Jack Benny talking. There will now be a slight pause while you say 'Who cares'."

At that moment he may have been right, but only a short while later -- after he started his own radio show -- it was not a question of who cares, but how many, and the weekly ratings indicated the numbers were in the millions.

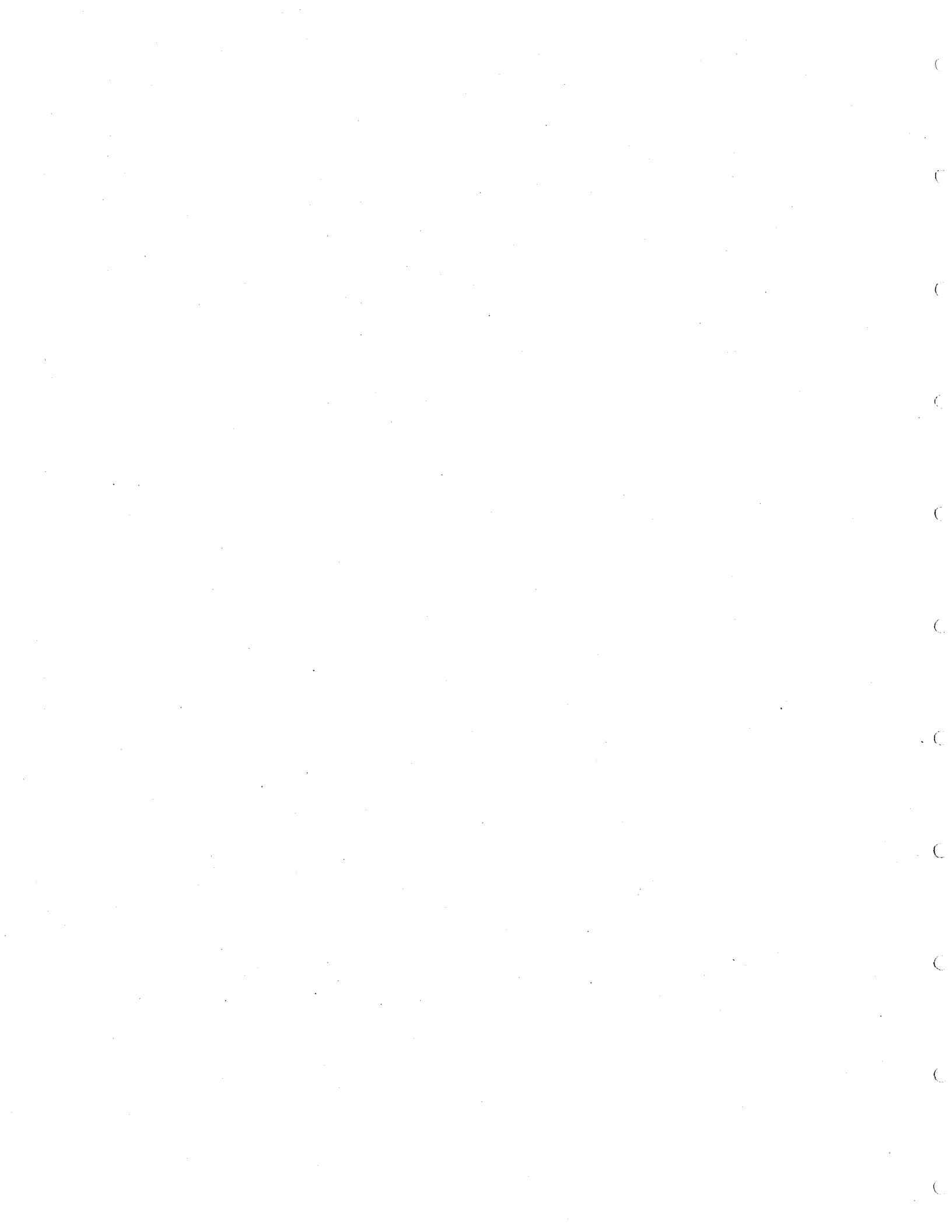
Jack had the reputation of being a worrier. Personally, I never went along with this evaluation. At least, it wasn't evident when we four new writers joined him that September in 1943. If he really were a worrier, how could he have gone off to North Africa and left the task of finding a new writing staff to his business agent, then returning to the States with just enough time to prepare his opening show. Oh, he was always concerned,

but not worried. I'm happy to say that after a very few weeks even the concern seemed to lessen.

Most comedians spend their lives rejecting help as they flounder in a sea of insecurity. Maybe Jack was insecure, too, I really don't know. However, if he was in need of security, he knew what to do. He surrounded himself with good people. He paid them well, and by his manner of treatment, they knew they were highly valued. In return, he got their best efforts and respect. Jack's reward for this simple common sense approach was two-fold: Good shows and an industry classification of "genius".

Although he worked very closely with his writers and his contribution was very significant, he never took writing credit on the air or on the screen. He felt for a star to do this had a cheapening effect. Jack believed a star performer had an obligation to himself to be involved with the writing of his shows and credit for doing so was covered in his "star" billing. His ability to evaluate comedy was perhaps best described by himself. He often said, "I don't claim to always know what's good, but I always know what's bad."

In the writing sessions, Jack played the role of a writer. His opinion carried no more weight than that of any other member of the creative staff. His great contribution was in knowing the kind of things he wanted to do and then after the basic writing was finished, he became the editor. He was more a partner than a boss.



Whenever there was disagreement about the strength of a punch line, majority ruled. If the five of us, the writers and Jack, agreed on the final wording of a joke, you could bet your life it would get a laugh. If four of us thought it was right, you could bet all your money it would get a laugh. If three of us thought it was funny, you could still bet your money, but only half of it. If only two of us thought it was funny, you couldn't bet at all because it wouldn't go in.

Jack believed writing comedy should be fun. Many times we'd be working on a script and we would be digging for a line. After a while, tension would creep in and Jack would say, "Now let's just relax and take our time. We'll get it." And, of course, we always did.

I remember one time in particular during my first year on the show we were at NBC cutting and fixing a script and Jack had a strong feeling about one of the jokes. When he came to it, he said, "Fellows, I need something stronger in here." The writers greeted his comment with silence. He continued, "Something better --- something --- funnier ---."

With his little one word comments, he kept picking on the joke and we just remained silent. Then for a long moment he didn't speak, but you could tell he was still holding out for a different joke. He then said, "This just won't play."

At that point I looked at him and said, "All right, Jack, we'll change it."

A grin of victory appeared on his face. Then, looking right at me, he said, "Oh, you agree, eh?"

I said, "No, but it is possible the four of us could be wrong."

You never heard such a howl in your life. He not only laughed, but slid right out of his chair and sat there on the floor laughing. By this time everyone joined in. As the laughter died away, Jack picked himself up, saying, "Fellows, I wouldn't change that joke now for a million dollars." And he didn't.

When we were on the air, Jack delivered the line in question and it got a tremendous laugh. He turned to the control room where the writers were and, by the look on his face, we knew he was thinking, "You cocky bastards." Most comedians, if they accepted the writers' judgment against their will, would have purposely misread the punch line and killed the joke just to make their point.

In radio, Jack Benny was perhaps the most knowledgeable performer in the business. When the writers finished a script and it had his and our final approval, that was it. That was the way it was done unless we changed it. If Jack had new thoughts, he discussed them with his writers. If the writers had a suggestion, we discussed it with him. This was understood by everyone. There was no outside tinkering.

Although the onstage character of our blue-eyed comedian had many facets, the one that was best known was his miserliness. For the writers the cheap angle was a most fertile area. The mere mention of money, coupled with Jack's reaction, was always good for a laugh. If it were a sum he was expected to pay, the laugh would be even bigger.

Jack once did a monologue in which he gave a very graphic demonstration of this. He told about how he wanted Gregory Peck to be a guest star on his show. Gregory indicated he'd be delighted.

Jack, thrilled at his acceptance, said to Gregory, "How much money will you want for your appearance?"

Greg replied, "Fifteen thousand dollars."

Jack then told the audience, "When I heard this amount, I didn't bat an eye, I didn't move a muscle -- I think they call it..temporary paralysis."

Another example of using this built-in cheap, money-loving character so effectively is the time we had as a guest star a very prominent, successful movie writer named George Seaton. Mr. Seaton had just won an Academy Award, and Jack felt it would be very timely to have him on the show.

As I remember it, Mr. Seaton was introduced to our audience and then he and Jack continued on with some give and take dialogue, during which Jack told him that he must be very happy having won the Academy Award, and Mr. Seaton replied, "Yes, I am, Jack. However, I consider it such an honor I'd be just as happy winning that Oscar if it were made of papier-mache instead of solid gold."

Jack, not believing his ears, said, "What did you say, George?"

Mr. Seaton repeated, "I said, I'd be just as happy winning the Oscar if it were made of papier-mache instead of solid gold."

Jack merely looked at the audience and got the first laugh. Then he said, "I ask him to come on the show to add a little class and he talks like an idiot." This, of course, got an even bigger laugh.

The ability of the cheap character to think of excuses for avoiding paying for anything was fantastic. We once did a scene in a French restaurant which was very crowded when Jack and Mary arrived. Jack spied Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., sitting alone and suggested they go over and share the table with him. Mary was reluctant saying, "Maybe Doug wants to be alone." Jack insisted and dragged Mary over to the Fairbank table. They were graciously received and after dinner the waiter brought the check.

Mr. Fairbanks picked it up off the table and Jack quickly and firmly said, "No, no, Doug, let me take it. After all, it was your table and Mary and I barged in -- So I insist on paying it."

When Doug said, "No, Jack, I'd feel better if I paid it," Jack quickly followed with, "Well, if your health is involved, go ahead."

Jack's cheapness was so well established that we could get laughs by using just a phrase or a single word and, in many cases, just a sound. In one of our scripts we had Jack driving Mary out through the country. It was a beautiful day and Mary sat there beside Jack as he manned the wheel. By the sound of the motor, you knew they were traveling at a fair rate of speed.

Suddenly, Mary said, "Oh, Jack, look at that sign.. Peanut Brittle 39 cents a pound. Let's get some."

Jack immediately replied, "Mary, we just had lunch."

A quarter of a mile down the road, Mary again spoke up, "Jack, look at that sign..Stuffed Dates 27 cents a pound. Let's stop and get some."

Jack answered, "We haven't got time."

A little further on Mary again said, "Jack, there's another sign..Pecans 20 cents a pound. Let's stop and get some."

Jack admonished her with, Mary, what are you trying to do, spoil your dinner?"

After a pause and again over the whirring motor, Mary announced, "Jack, there's another sign. It says Candied figs, free samples."

After hearing the word "Free" and hardly waiting for "Samples", true to the character, Jack's reaction was indicated, not with dialogue, but with the sound of the damnest screeching of brakes and sliding of tires that has ever been heard by listening America. The listeners then knew his real objections to Mary's wanting the peanut brittle, stuffed dates and pecans.

Speaking of sound effects, the sounds heard on radio were rarely made by the objects they were supposed to represent. For instance, the sound of marching soldiers was made by a rack of suspended rubber pegs thumping in rhythm against a hard surface. Horses hooves were half coconut shells beating in a box of sand. A man's footsteps in snow were made by squeezing a bag of corn starch, etc., etc., etc.,

In one of the shows we took advantage of this fact and had the sound effects man, Ray Erlenborn, explain to Jack how he created the various sounds. Completely enthralled with the information, Jack asked, "In that scene I just did where I was dancing with that beautiful girl, there was a moment where we were cheek to cheek. It was so delicate. How did you make that sound of my cheek touching hers?"

"Easy, I just took a hot water bottle and slapped it with a pound of raw liver."

One of the most publicized jokes played off the parsimonious character was done in the following situation.

Late one dark night Jack was walking home all alone. As he neared his house, a voice came out of the darkness.

JACK: Hey, Bud -- Bud.

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS STOP)

JACK: Huh?

MAN: Got a match?

JACK: Match? Yes, I have one right here in my --

MAN: DON'T MAKE A MOVE..THIS IS A STICK-UP!

JACK: What?

MAN: You heard me.

JACK: Mister..Mister..Put down that gun.

MAN: SHUT UP. NOW COME ON..YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE.

(LONG PAUSE) LOOK BUD, I SAID YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE.

JACK: I'm thinking it over.

I wish I could lay claim to this "Money or your life" joke, but I can't. It isn't mine. Truthfully, the line, "I'm thinking it over," came into being quite by accident -- which, in itself, is a rather interesting story.

After setting the premise for the broadcast of Sunday, March 28, 1948, we split the show. My partner, Sam, and I took the first half and Milt and Tack took the second half. On Friday we all met with Jack for the usual clean-up session. While we were reading the second half of the show and came upon that joke, we had to agree with Jack's character, it was sensational. At this point, Milt explained what happened when he and Tack were doing their assignment.

"As we started to write the scene with the holdup man, I paced the floor while Tackaberry reclined on the sofa. We threw a few tentative lines at each other, none worthy of discussion. Then I thought of a funny feed line, but couldn't get a suitable punch to finish it. I told this to Tack saying, "Supposing we have the crook pull the classic threat on Jack, 'Your money or your life.' Jack will get screams just staring at the crook and the audience -- and if we get a good snapper on it, it'll be great." Tackaberry seemingly ignored me. I kept thinking of lines and discarding them as mediocre or worse. Finally one line seemed better than the rest. I threw it half-confidently. I said, "Look, the crook says, 'Your money or your life' and Jack stares at him and the audience, and then the crook repeats it and says, 'Come on, you heard me -- your money or your life?' And Jack says, 'You mean I have a choice?'"

"Now frankly, that wasn't too bad an answer, but Tacka-berry made no comment, good or bad. I got angry and yelled, 'Dammit, if you don't like my lines, throw a couple of your own. Don't just lie there on your fat butt daydreaming. There's got to be a great answer to 'Your money or your life.' And Tacka-berry angrily snapped at me, 'I'm thinking it over.' In a split second we were both hysterical. We knew we could never top that."

They had stumbled onto the kind of a line they had been looking for. But whether it's mumble, bumble, or stumble, it was and still is a great joke.

I have often been asked if Mr. Benny was as stingy in person as he was on the air. The answer to that, of course, is definitely not. He was most generous. Not only in his business affairs, but in other ways. On many occasions I have stopped by the Benny residence to drop off a script or have a word with Jack. Since I was expected, I was ushered in and told to go right up stairs. There I would find Jack and Mary in their bedroom eating a dinner which consisted of a small chicken sandwich, with the crust trimmed, and a cup of tea. Meanwhile, downstairs, the household staff of eight people would be sitting around a table eating steaks or prime rib and all that went with it. I don't know if the help had drinks before dinner, wine with, and creme de menthe after, but they knew it was there if they desired it.

Another source of much Benny comedy was his blue eyes, which, incidentally, were not just blue but described as being "bluer than the feet of a Sicilian wine crusher" or "bluer than

the thumb of a cross-eyed carpenter" or "Bluer than the stomach of a dachshund that's been chased through a huckleberry patch."

Now, of course, these descriptive lines are exaggerations, but his eyes really were blue -- so blue they picked up lint.

My relationship with Jack Benny can be better appreciated when I tell you that I, personally, know some writers who after a script session with their comedian, would run to the nearest men's room and literally throw up. This regurgitation was an emotional reaction to the treatment and degrading remarks their hard work had received. In some cases, it was an expression of their feeling toward their boss -- and I'm sure he, or she, richly deserved it. I once said to one of these gastronomically upset writers, "Why don't you quit?" He answered, "Because I've got to eat." When you think about it, he's absolutely right. If you are going to continue on a job where you keep throwing up, you've got to eat.

In rehearsals, Jack was always in charge. Frequently, he would make suggestions on proper readings. Sometimes a bit player, making a first appearance on the Benny Show would be so eager to please he or she would over-emphasize certain words. Jack in a very gentle kind manner would say, "No, no, don't read it that way..just keep it conversational -- Otherwise we have no laugh. Now let's try it again." He was always helpful and always had great respect for other performers.

Because of this, the Benny Show never had difficulty getting guest stars. The biggest names, not only in show business, but in government and the business world, were always eager to appear with Jack. They knew they would be treated with dignity and given good material. Some of these guest stars had the reputation of being very difficult to work with and yet on Jack's show they quietly did their job. The fears they had elsewhere did not exist with us.

Jack Benny loved to laugh, even when the joke was on him. What I'm about to tell you is a true story -- it really happened. On a broadcast we did in New York we used a popular black singing group called "The Ink Spots." They sang commercial lyrics about Lucky Strike Cigarettes to the melody of their big hit recording, "If I Didn't Care." It was very impressive and Jack really enjoyed it.

About two months later, Jack appeared on a big benefit show with several other stars. When he walked into the rehearsal hall, he noticed a black quartet sitting over in the corner. After taking his place which was some distance away, Jack thought it would be cute if he reminded the quartet of the appearance they recently made on his show, so, without moving closer and projecting his voice, he sang in a very corny way, "If I didn't care - would I feel this way. Would my every prayer begin and end with just your name - Boo - Boo - Boo - Boo -- Boo --, etc." When they heard him, they looked up and Jack took off his glasses and gave them a big wink. A little later Jack got their attention and again started singing "If I didn't care - would I feel this way.. Would my every prayer begin and end with just your name..etc."

Again he gave the quartet a big exaggerated comic wink and they smiled back.

A short while later Jack repeated the whole thing -- got their attention, sang in his corny way, "If I didn't care, etc., etc." He again finished with a big wink. At this point a member of the quartet got up, crossed the room to Jack and said, "Mr. Benny, you must be thinking of 'The Ink Spots' -- We are 'The Mills Brothers'." And so they were.

This is a true story and Jack didn't hesitate for a moment telling about his embarrassing situation. It was the kind of thing he would do on the air.

In real life, Jack was always interested in the affairs of his country, but on stage he played no political favorites. I remember April of 1945, we were in Palm Springs working when the news came of President Roosevelt's death. Jack immediately turned to us and said, "Fellows, I'm not going on the air Sunday with a comedy show." He made this decision many hours before the Network had decided to use Sunday for a memorial program. A program on which Jack appeared.

He was a close friend of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford. Jack would not do a political joke unless it was obvious it was all in fun and meant no criticism or harm. In later years he told me it disturbed him to see young comedians use their shows as a platform to espouse their own personal political leanings. As he put it, "They had neither enough maturity or class."

CHAPTER X

"WITH...MARY LIVINGSTONE"

As everyone knew, off-stage Mary Livingstone was Mrs. Jack Benny. They first met when Jack was on a vaudeville tour which brought him to the Orpheum theatre in downtown Los Angeles. At the time Mary was a clerk behind the stocking counter in the May Company. I never did know what brought Jack to a silk stocking counter, but I presume he was buying something for his sister Florence who lived in Chicago. Not too long after they first met, Jack and Mary were married and soon she started appearing with Jack in his stage routines. Later when Jack went into radio Mary came along and for many years performed as a regular member of the cast.

Her marital relationship to the star never in any way dictated her position on the show. To the writers, Mary was

a call girl -- (Hm, that doesn't sound right.) For the writers whenever the services of a female were needed, Mary would -- Uh, let me put it this way. If the Benny Show were a baseball team, Mary would be known as a utility player. Mary was a girl whose laugh and voice were always a welcome contrast in scenes and routines which otherwise would have been all male. Her onstage relationship with Jack was that of a friend -- not a girl friend. In situations where Jack needed help, he got it from Mary. When the script called for him to be picked on, it was done by Mary. If the story had Jack in a romantic situation, it was always done with some other female -- a guest star, or just a bit player. However, Mary was always within hearing distance so that she could get in her remarks.

A perfect example of Mary analyzing the situation and then moving in with just the right comment took place in a scene we did which supposedly took place right after a concert. Dorothy Kirsten, the famous operatic singer, was our guest star. In our story she had just finished performing and Jack, Mary and Don Wilson went backstage to visit with her. While Miss Kirsten and Don discussed the musical details of the evening's performance, Jack stood silently by trying to find something to elevate himself by forcing his way into the elite conversation. Mary, of course, was aware of this. She also was aware that Jack knew nothing about opera.

In writing the scene, Mary's attitude was very clear, and all I needed was a short incisive line to sum it up. As the two-way conversation continued between Don and Miss Kirsten, Mary patiently waited for Jack to make his move. The dialogue went like this:

DON: Miss Kirsten, I want to tell you that I saw you in "Madam Butterfly" Wednesday afternoon and I thought your performance was absolutely magnificent.

KIRSTEN: Well, that's awfully kind of you, Mr. Wilson.. but who could help singing Puccini, it's so expressive..particularly the last act starting with the allegro vivacissimo.

DON: Well, that's being very modest, Miss Kirsten, but not every singer has the necessary Bel Canto and flexibility or the range to cope with the high tessatura of that first act.

KIRSTEN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson, didn't you think in the aria "Un Bel Di Vedremo" that the strings played the Con Molto Passione exceptionally fine and with great sostenendo?

JACK: Well, I thought --

MARY: Oh, shut up.

JACK:Mary, I was only trying to be sociable.

Mary's three word directive was not only effective, but got such a tremendous response from the audience, Jack many years later, gave it a special evaluation.

Another memorable area of Mary's performances were those frequent occasions when she read those letters she got from her mother. The audience always knew a letter had arrived when Mary would start laughing, followed by Jack asking, "Mary, what are you laughing about?" Mary would then explain she got another

letter from Mama and Jack, delighted at the news, would inquire using a line such as, "What does Plainfield's cure for the hiccups have to say?"

Mary would then clear her throat and start reading. The following is a sample of Mama's correspondance.

"My darling daughter Mary..Everything is fine at home and the weather is getting to be real nice. We're pretty sure that winter is over now because last month the Ground-hog came out of his hole, saw the sunshine and went back in again to wake up papa. Papa came out, saw me, and punched the Ground-hog in the nose."

Jack, of course, always injected his little comments, such as, in this case, "Oh, your mother just put that in for a laugh."

Mary continued, "Now where was I? Oh yes..Even though it's nice now, two weeks ago we had a very severe blizzard, and when your uncle Harry came in from the barn, his milking hand was frozen."

"Gee."

"I hope it thaws out soon as I'd like to get the cow out of the house."

"That's the silliest thing I ever heard."

"And oh yes, Mary, I have some exciting news for you. Last Thursday a whole gang of us went out for a drive and your sister Babe and her fiancee were riding in the rumble seat. We hit a bump and the rumble seat snapped shut."

"My goodness!"

"We worked for hours and couldn't get it open..so we called the minister and he married 'em through the keyhole."

"Can you imagine that?"

"Your Cousin Bobbie blew rice at 'em through a straw!"

"Oh boy, what a family."

"No other news..all my love, Mama."

CHAPTER XI

...PHIL HARRIS...

Phil was the orchestra leader -- a tall, good-looking curly-haired individual who believed that Phil Harris was God's gift to Phil Harris. He no doubt felt that this egotism was forgiveable because of his willingness to share himself with others. His personal evaluation was evidenced by an assortment of entrances, such as:

"Okay, folks, the show may be floppin',
But Harris is here to start things poppin',
Appreciate me -- appreciate me."

Or:

"Okay, folks, here's your favorite pixie.
Harris is here and he's right from Dixie."

Or:

"Up to here you've had nothin' but corn.

Now Harris is here and a Star is Born" -- and then had the conceit to add:

"Oh, Philsy, you're so pretty, it's too bad you're not two-faced."

I do not present the above lines because they have any semblance of cleverness, but only because they accurately define Phil's stage character. In our routines, Jack (whom Phil always called Jackson) would chastise him for his overbearing self-appraisal. This, in turn, would make Phil defensive and in pleading his case, the ignorant portion of his character would surface. This was done by having Phil mispronounce words and say things which displayed the character's total lack of education.

Phil's value to the show was not his music but his personality. His stage character would not have been possible were it not for the great sense of humor contained in the real person. In serious conversation, Phil had a way of making his point and getting laughs at the same time. One incident in particular comes to mind.

Shortly after World War II started, Phil and his long-time buddy, Frankie Remley, the left-handed guitar player, were walking along a deserted stretch of beach. Night was beginning to fall and they both were in a very sober, somber mood. Their thoughts were on the war and the impending draft.

Many years ago, in a boyhood accident Phil had lost a toe on his right foot. After a long while of silent walking,

Phil turned to Frankie and said, "Frankie, do you think the Army would take a man with one toe missing?"

Frankie, sensing the reason for the question, and trying to be helpful, replied, "Well..I don't know, Phil, but I would guess that, yes, they would take a man with one toe missing." Having asked the question and heard the answer, Phil trudged on without comment. After about fifty silent, deliberating paces he spoke again, saying, "Frankie, do you think they'd take a man who had two toes missing?"

A short while later both Phil and Frankie joined the Coast Guard, which indicates Phil never got around to any self-surgery.

Though Phil was billed as the band leader, the actual chore fell to a very fine arranger-composer named Mahlon Merrick. Mahlon's musical career with Jack spanned almost thirty years. This is not to imply that Phil never led the musicians, because he most certainly did. In our scripts, however, he did more miss-leading.

As for the "boys in the orchestra", what a great bunch of fellows they were. We did a hundred jokes about Remley and his guitar, Charlie Bagby the pianist, Sammy Weise, the drummer, and also the names of Wayne Songer and Hollis Bridwell and others became known to all our listeners. According to our scripts, Phil and his boys consumed more liquor than any group ever assembled on the airwaves. Here, too, the jokes were usually tied to something topical. I recall years ago there was a coal mine strike which forced the steel mills to shut down. There was much publicity telling how if the mills would bank their furnaces,

they would be ready to renew operations on short notice. However, if the furnaces were allowed to cool, it would take weeks to start them up again. With this background information we had Phil make his entrance late in the show, causing Jack to accuse him of being off in a bar somewhere.

Phil protested saying, "No no, Jackson, not anymore. I'm on the wagon."

Jack, surprised, said, "You...you on the wagon?"

"Yes, siree. All I take is two drinks a day."

"Phil, if you're on the wagon, you shouldn't drink anything."

Phil answered that with, "Look, Jackson, my stomach is like a steel mill..you can shut it down, but don't let the fire go out."

In one of the shows Phil was telling about a particularly wild party he and the boys had and when the number of empty liquor bottles was mentioned, Jack became concerned about the safety of the party participants and asked, "Phil, in their condition, how did they get home?"

"Oh, it was easy. You know that white line down the middle of the street?"

"You mean they followed it?"

"Followed it! They were holdin' onto it!"

We certainly were not the first to do drinking jokes nor were we the last. However, between Phil and the boys in the band, we did enough of them to supply the industry for years. Oh, other shows would switch them a little, but some would use them word for word.

We also used to kid the orchestra about their appearance and the fact they knew nothing about music. Such as the time it was necessary to add two harps and Frankie the guitar player protested because when the harps arrived, he thought they were fencing him in. Another time, Bridwell had a crew cut and Jack described him by saying, "The way his hair stands up, he looks like the warden gave him a pardon thirty seconds after they threw the switch."

On one occasion Jack summed up the band by introducing them as "Phil Harris and his international orchestra -- International meaning they are just as well liked in San Diego as they are in Tijuana."

At this point I think it's only fair to tell you the truth. The members of the band were actually very fine musicians and in their personal life they could not possibly live up to those awful things we used to say about them. As a matter of fact, most of the musicians were also engaged in other trades or professions. Some actually owned and operated their own businesses. One musician in particular, after several years of playing saxophone in Phil's orchestra left the world of music and entered politics. His name is Ernani Bernardi and for many, many years now has served the San Fernando Valley as a member of the Los Angeles City Council. At one time Ernani was given serious consideration to be a candidate for the office of mayor.

Yes, Phil Harris and all that came with him were a definite asset to the radio show and his on-the-air character permitted him

to remind Jack of that fact. On one particular broadcast after a highly successful routine, Phil looked right over the top of his microphone and said to the star, "Jackson, you need me."

The gall of such a statement evoked the desired audience response and as the laughter died away, Jack replied, "Phil, I need you like a moose needs a hatrack."

Though Jack's line beautifully filled the purpose of the moment, it did not receive the audience response we all expected. This, I'm sure, was due to their lack of familiarity with the after-death utility of a moose's antlers -- a use which is so prevalent in the public buildings of small backwoods towns. By those people who were able to conjure up the mental picture, the smartness of the line was greatly appreciated. The "hatrack" joke was created by Sam Perrin and in the years to follow has been used verbally and in print -- and always without proper credit.

CHAPTER XII

...ROCHESTER...

For many years the Rochester character, played by Eddie Anderson, was always a highlight of a Benny Show. At the time, Eddie was perhaps the only black man playing a continuing role on a major comedy program. In his role of a butler he served his master well...also, by being a companion and confidant. There were also times when he was an advisory. When confronted for occasional laxity, his comments excusing his action or lack of action were such exaggerations they were classics. Each week at the point in the program when Jack answered the ring of the telephone and heard a scratchy voice on the other end saying, "Hello, Mr. Benny, this is Rochester," you knew someone was in trouble and it could be either one.

Eddie Anderson, the man, was to a degree a Rochester. More than once the almost unbelievable things that happened to

Eddie became hilarious routines for "Roch." This can be clearly illustrated by an incident that happened after a script for a Sunday broadcast had already been written.

Late Friday afternoon, the news wires and radio flashed a bulletin saying, "Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson has been lost at sea." It then went on to say that on Thursday, Roch and a couple of his friends went out deep sea fishing in a small boat and hadn't been heard from since.

When the writers heard this news, we felt terrible because it meant if the Coast Guard didn't find Rochester, we'd have to write another spot for the show. Of course, I'm only kidding, but it is true that knowing Rochester as we did, we found it hard to give this particular perilous situation all the seriousness it deserved. Sure enough, early the next day more bulletins were broadcast saying that Rochester had been found and was now safely ashore.

With this happy ending no change in our script was necessary. However, because the news item had national coverage, we took advantage of it and rewrote the Rochester spot. We had Jack home alone listening to music on the radio when suddenly an announcer's voice cut in:

MEL: We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin. Rochester Van Jones, who has been adrift in the Pacific Ocean for the last two days, has been found by the Coast Guard and towed into port.