

¶He is a brassy, sniggering blockhead—

HIS NAME IS CHARLIE McCARTHY

A BLOCKHEAD who wears 3½-size hats and 2AAA shoes has built up a radio following of millions of Americans within a short time. His name is a household word; his wisecracks are widely quoted by table wits and in current newspapers; his habits and manners are subjects for learned editorial comment. Millions who wouldn't recognize a photograph of Milikan, Einstein, or Edison, know his picture at a glance.

Not that Charlie McCarthy is a favorite merely with low-brows. Great wits of the day hang on his words, too. Noel Coward, who thinks up some fast ones himself, discovered Charlie at an Elsa Maxwell party and gave him his start.

The appeal of the talking dummy is universal.

To heighten the effect, the ventriloquist's dummy can—and does—get off unpadding impertinences no human actor would dare to utter. He can pick pomposity, jab at false dignity, and lower false pride with reckless conversational thrusts that take shape in our own minds but are repressed by social niceties or inhibitions.

Few current-generation youngsters know anything about ventriloquists or ventriloquism, yet ventriloquism is older than the most ancient cornerstone of Athens or Jerusalem, and talking dummies pop up in the earliest pages of human history. The teraphim kept in ancient Jewish and Aramaean households are supposed to have been dummies that would talk—though only for priests. Rachel, fleeing from her father, took the family teraphim with her. "And Rachel had stolen the images that were her father's. (Genesis, xxxi, 19.)

The Chinese had their talking dummies, too, thousands of years ago, but like the teraphim they spoke only in the presence of the keepers of the temple.

They were in particular demand for Chinese widows who were anxious to consult departed husbands. The priests would hold them against their stomachs, repeat the questions asked, and the dummies would answer in deep sepulchral tones. The trick lay, of course, in expert ventriloquism.

The great oracles of Greece, historians suspect, went in for

somewhat the same sort of flummoxing of a gullible public anxious to communicate with the dead. So did the high priests of the Pharaohs. The Louvre has a statuette of Anubis, the Egyptian god, that is built pretty much along Charlie McCarthy lines, movable jaw and all.

Almost anyone, it seems, can learn ventriloquism.

Never is the voice actually thrown. The illusion is created, for the most part, by acting and by changing normal speech and keeping it within the glottis. The result is a crude caricature, so to speak, of the natural voice. Incidentally that distortion is one of the things that makes audiences laugh. It is the voice of Punch.

In the trade that exaggerated tonal effect is known as the "grunt," and the grunt is the basis of all near work. For distant work—the kind where the voice actually seems to come from some remote part of the room or stage—much more practice is required. The basic sound for that is known, professionally, as the "drone." The farther the drone is forced to the back of the throat, the more distant it seems to the listener.

Training for the art, the beginner usually starts with imitations of insects and animals

—speech comes last, because it is the most difficult part.

Radio ventriloquism is easier than stage work or parlor performance, and will be until television comes in. No need for the radio performer to strain at keeping his lips still over difficult labials and aspirates. Working for a visible audience, though, the ventriloquist must restrict his vocabulary. He can't, for example, get away with a line like: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"; usually he avoids b's and p's as much as he can.

Charlie McCarthy is famous because his master, a keen wit who was graduated from Northwestern University in Chicago with an A.B., had the foresight to subordinate his own personality to the blockhead's. He saw to it that Charlie became an individual in his own right; relegated himself, more or less, to shadowy background. That was sound psychology and perfect press-agentry.

Even in rehearsals Bergen maintains the pretense that his red-thatched blockhead is not only an individual, but an individualist. Before he ever takes Charlie out of the valise, studio hands can hear the blockhead screaming for release.

At one rehearsal Bergen called for the script, though he usually works without one—*ad*

libs a lot. The page boy hurried over, Bergen looked at the lines and prepared to go on. Before the boy got to the door, Charlie McCarthy called after him, a bit sharply: "Bring that thing back! I want to see it myself." Without a second thought the lad hurried back; blushed as Bergen waved him away. Charlie chuckled.

When W. C. Fields came to sign the dual contract for his radio appearance with Bergen, Charlie happened to be out of his box. The comedian, hat tilted down on his glowing nose, was chewing a sodden toothpick. "Ah there, my diminutive little pal," said the great Fields. "I think you need a hair cut." Charlie eyed him, leered. "Okay, my fat friend," he said in his nastiest, "but you could do with a new toothpick, too." The retort was so unexpected that the great Fields almost swallowed the toothpick.

The blockhead makes pretty free with his master. Whenever Bergen gets a telegram or any other personal message, Charlie will try to horn in on it; has an insatiable curiosity about such things. "Let's have a look, Bergen," he'll say, "that may be for me." He is always the saucebox, always treating Ber-

gen as something less than an equal, and Bergen encourages the idea.

Bergen discovered his gift for ventriloquism one day while talking with schoolmates in the corridor. It was an accident. Something he said seemed to have come from 'way down the hall and the listeners turned to see who it was. Even Bergen was flabbergasted for a minute, but it gave him an idea, and he sent off to a correspondence school for a book on ventriloquism. Like most professionals, he is self-taught.

He made Charlie's body himself but couldn't carve the head. He gave that job to the late Charles Mack, a doll carver, but submitted his own specification, a charcoal cartoon of a Chicago newsboy he knew. Originally the blockhead was dressed as a gamin, in overalls and cap, and had his haircomb painted on. Now he sticks pretty much to top hat and tails.

There have been other famous dummies in history, but none that ever got the publicity or commanded the tremendous audiences that Charlie does. Learned Friar Bacon, early in the thirteenth century, fashioned a head of brass that could talk. The scholastic philosopher Albertus Magnus made a mechanical doorkeeper, too,

but Thomas Aquinas destroyed it; thought it was sacrilegious.

Archythus of Tarentum turned out some amazing androids, or automata, 400 years before Christ.

None of those, though, was a real ventriloquist's dummy; they were merely unusual mechanical gadgets without the personality and character of a Charlie McCarthy. Even today most professional ventriloquists dummies are pretty flat, lack the vital spark. Their lines are dull. Bergen writes Charlie's dialogue, superior stuff.

Psychologists say that Charlie McCarthy differs from other dummies because he has definite spiritual qualities. His throaty, almost lecherous chuckle is a haunting thing; his whole atti-

tude of Weltschmerz is astonishingly real. He says things that a human actor would never dare to say in public, and gets away with them. It doesn't matter whom he's talking to. At house parties in New York, Hollywood, and London (he was a guest at Barbara Hutton's place in Mayfair) he never dreams of pulling his punches.

"Make no mistake about it," said a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, "he (Charlie) is a bad egg."

And he is. A little vulgarian, a brassy, blustering, cheeky, sniggering blockhead, but we wouldn't harm a splinter in his hollow head.—*Meyer Berger, condensed from The New York Times Magazine.*

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Symbols

THE TEACHER was explaining the difference between the beautiful, stately rose and the modest violet.

"You see, children," she said, "a beautiful, well-dressed woman walks along the street, but she is proud and does not greet anybody—that is the rose. But behind her comes a small creature with bowed head—"

"Yes, teacher, I know," Tommy interrupted. "That's her husband."
—*Pearson's.*