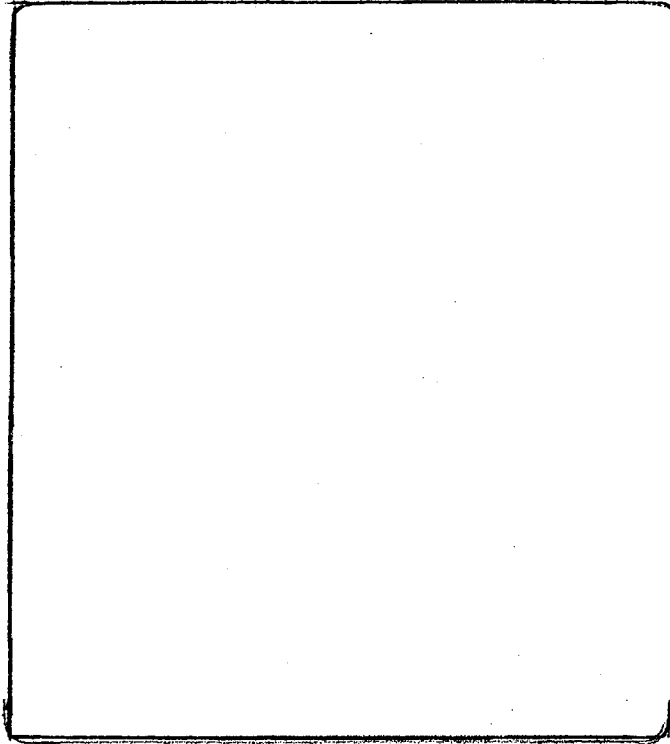


THEY'LL BREAK YOUR HEART

by

GEORGE BALZER

DEDICATED WITH DEEPEST ADMIRATION, RESPECT,
AND GRATITUDE TO:

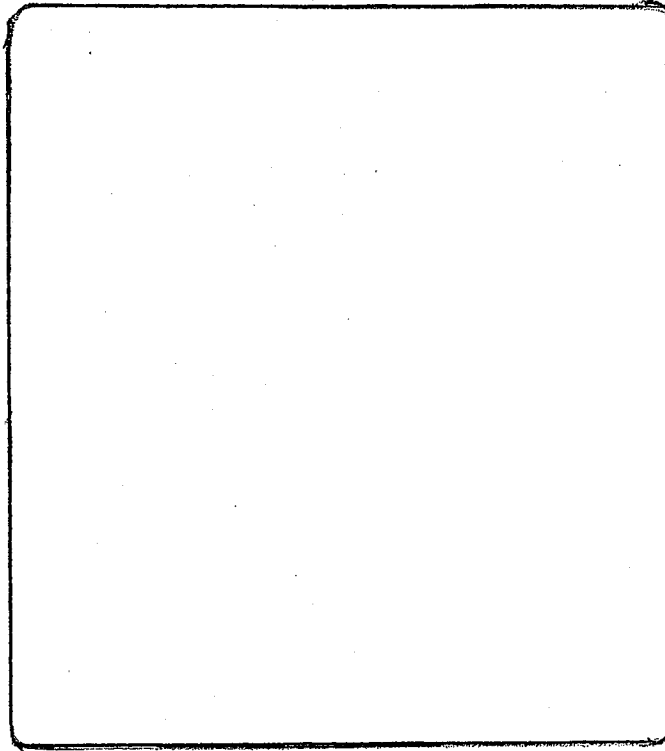


JACK BENNY
1894-1974

"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