

TIPTOE THROUGH THE TOADSTOOLS

IN a letter from a Mrs. St. Clair, who represents herself as chairman of the program committee for the Sub-Teen Group at my children's school, in Westchester County, I have been informed that I am soon to receive a telephone call from another committee member, asking me to speak at the group's next monthly meeting on the general topic "How Teen-Agers Can Make Money."

"Baby sitting, paper route, cookie sales are familiar ways," Mrs. St. Clair writes. "Won't you tell the boys and girls how *you* made money as a youngster? Most of us did something." Her feeling is that, as parents of ten-through-twelves, we should encourage our children to prepare for gainful employment. The letter ends with a rather long paragraph about character building, and as I finished it I was taken back to the lovely year when I was sixteen, and gainfully employed as a writer of horror and adventure strips for comic magazines.

Perhaps I never realized, before reading Mrs. St. Clair's letter, how worthwhile this experience was. At the time, I thought mostly of the money. Yet not only did this work contribute a great deal, I'm sure, toward keeping me out of trouble but it even got me out of some trouble I was already in. The year before, fresh from an Episcopal convent school, I had begun college in New York during a financial panic of my parents'—we were then living here in the city—and it was arranged for me to work in the college office three afternoons a week after classes, to help pay my tuition. This job gave me no end of trouble. Letters had to be mimeographed. Envelopes had to be addressed. The work was so dull that toward the end of my freshman year I had a dream of finding tuition money on the boardwalk of an amusement park and riding the roller coaster off into the high white clouds.

Knowing I had always wanted to be a writer, a cartoonist friend of my father's suggested that I could earn some quick money if I could learn to write comics. This was during the Second World War, and the horror and adventure strips were booming. Captain America battled the Nazis and the Japanese, Captain Marvel zoomed back through the ages righting wrongs, Submariner—part man, part fish—was forever getting stranded out of water, and in separate thriving books the horror monsters lived by their own curious

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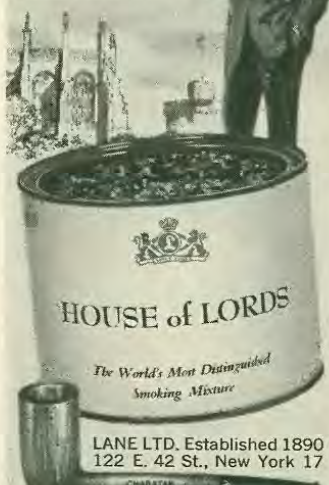
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rules, plagued by intricate family curses, by vampirism that was transmitted like rabies, and by a poignant inability to lie down when dead. I studied these magazines, all of which I was slightly familiar with, and they soon made their impress on my teen-age character. Then I tried writing for them, and within a few weeks I had made my impress on them.

Early in the summer, on the day I created the Ice Monster ("That huge clump of ice, over by the house—it's—it's moving! It's alive!"), my editor said to me, "This is, with you, a gift," and I felt the thrill of accomplishment that is so important, I think, to a youngster's self-esteem.

I can recommend to our sub-teens, too, the disciplinary value of mastering the art of the horror comic. Here, for example, is part of a page of one of my scripts:

Panel 4. (*Jackie holding black four-leaf clover in one hand, black rabbit's foot in other. Sweat beads face. Clock in background reads one minute to twelve.*)

JACKIE: He—he's come—Mr. Black Magic! By day, he's only a clerk in a furniture store! By night, he's the ruler of darkness—and death!

Just in this one panel an enterprising ten-through-twelve can find something to emulate. The menacing time shown on the clock, the clever business with the lucky charms, the straightforward information conveyed by Jackie combine to give us a panel 4 of which we can well be proud.

On to panel 5:

Panel 5. (*Tight closeup of Jackie. Wild terror on face. Clock, dimly seen, says twelve.*)

JACKIE: Why, it's—it's getting darker in here! The—the lights are dimming! Wha-what's happening?!?

See the emotional progression? The clock again, but tension now stretched to the breaking point—midnight. The boy's face seen more closely, seen almost, as it were, from within. The confused apprehension of doom in his speech, ending in skillfully chosen punctuation. This leads us smartly to panel 6:

Panel 6. (*All black*)

BALLOON: EEEEEEOOOWW!

Subtle, and succinct. So much for Jackie.

In creating a monster, it pays to be original. A trite monster makes a trite script, and while it may be effective, occasionally, to employ the catalytic action of the full moon, still it is tedious to go on and have someone turn into an out-and-out werewolf. How is the artist going to make those fangs or that furry



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pointed face look any different? Instead, why not let your hero wait till Midsummer Eve, and then have him turn into an ambulant mass of vines and come creeping through the garden, to crush the heroine to death as she stands by the birdbath? She could smell the sad, sweet perfume of honeysuckle, borne to her hauntingly on the night air. Then all at once: EEEEEEOOOWW!

Of course, there's always somebody ready to discourage any sort of enterprise. Every kid should learn to be resigned to these people. In my day, they were the editorial and article writers, who kept crying, "When the creators of groan-and-gore strips collect their pay checks, do they ever stop to think of the effect their stories have on the young minds of their readers?"

I can't speak for the profession of horror writers as a whole, but as far as I was concerned the readers were on their own. When I was writing a strip called "The Human Torch," in which the title character changed himself at will from flesh to flame and threw fireballs at his enemies, the editor gave me a fan letter from a soldier that read simply, "I like the Human Torch. I like the way he flames up without giving no reason." I'll admit I thought about this soldier. But I can't say I ever worried about him.

PAYDAYS for me were washed with a guiltless holiday joy. The teen-age rage of that summer was cotton dirndl skirts that you washed, twisted, and wrapped around a broomstick to dry. They were worn with white peasant blouses, white bobby socks, and dirty saddle shoes. My hair was shoulder length, held out of my eyes by a silver barrette. I jingled perpetually from a silver charm bracelet my father had bought me on Cape Cod. Usually, it took me quite a long while to get into these simple things. But on payday I was dressed, fed, and in the bank—most of each check went into a tuition fund—in time to reach Times Square before ten o'clock in the morning. It was wonderful to drift in and out of stores, conscious of my escape from the mimeographing machine, with spending money in my purse, and on the lookout for any inspirations for dialogue that might develop into next week's check. In Stern's basement there were



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dresses to try on, and new patterns in broomstick skirts to look at.

"Why are you sharpening that broomstick?"

"The only way to kill them is with a stake through the heart."

Hot dogs were then a nickel at Nedick's, and orange drink was a nickel, and the frozen malteds in the Forty-fourth Street five-and-ten were a dime. The malteds were so thick a spoon almost stood up in them.

"They told me this bog led to the fountain of eternal youth! But I'm sinking down—in quicksand!"

"Poor George! He wanted to stay young forever! Now he knows no one can escape the sands of time!"

Benny Goodman played the Paramount, and so did Tommy Dorsey and Frank Sinatra. I stood in line for all of them. Once inside, I never sat in the front of the orchestra, in the swooning section. I preferred the front of the balcony, where I got a better view of what was happening. A person in my line of work felt pleasantly at home. The theatre was refrigerated to a temperature that suggested the tomb, and when Mr. Sinatra was on hand, the girls below me sat there screaming like my threatened heroines or else fainted and were carried up the aisle one by one.

At last, in late afternoon, I would come out again into the summer heat of the city. If it was not too close to dinnertime, I stopped off for a last frozen malted in the five-and-ten, and a happy tour of the store. In those days, the lipsticks weren't kept under glass. Each golden case could be picked up and the color tried on the back of your hand.

"Look, Mathilde, at the present I've brought you from Haiti! It's over there, in that giant golden case! Go ahead, my dear, and—heh-heh!—pull up the lid!"

"For me? How sweet! Doesn't it open easily! But—but Henry—there's a dead man inside! And—he's looking at me!"

When the salesgirl stopped me on the lipsticks, I sometimes went to another counter and bought a little bottle of Blue Waltz perfume, and maybe an artificial gardenia. By the time the perfume was on the gardenia, and the gardenia clamped in place by the barrette, it was time to take the subway home, pressed in with the rush-hour crowd.

"Meanwhile, the Walking Dead gathered in the underground tunnel..."

THOSE were good days. Perhaps it is a lucky teen-ager who can kill off her monsters with a stake through

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the heart. You must remember to vary your stakes. The doomed creature can be dropped chest downward on a picket fence, stabbed with an icicle, or reduced in size by a magic pill and then run through with a carpet tack.

There are so many things I could tell our sub-teens, and I bet they'd be interested. What's the use, though? The business has changed. Last week, I was talking to one of the editors I used to write for. He was very young when we worked together, only a few years older than I was, and he is forever associated in my mind with youth, and death, and money. I asked him if any of the

old horror magazines were still going.

He said no. "We're not supposed to use werewolves any more. We're not supposed to use vampires or zombies any more. We have this Comics Code now. Things aren't the same as they were when we were kids."

Somehow it seems wise, everything considered, to decline to speak at the school meeting. I'll think up an excuse before Mrs. St. Clair's committeewoman calls. Then she won't catch me—Ulp! Zowie! Gasp!—unprepared. Of course, if she persists, I can simply flame up without giving no reason.

—ELIZABETH STARR HILL

CLEAR DAYS ON THE INTERLINGUAL SCENE

[From *Le Guide Bleu* "New York et Ses Environs," Librairie Hachette, Paris, 1954]

GLOSSAIRE

AMÉRICAIN—ANGLAIS—FRANÇAIS

Il nous a paru intéressant de comparer, ici, un certain nombre de mots américains et anglais.

AMÉRICAIN	ANGLAIS	FRANÇAIS
Accommodation	ooms or seats	places (hôtels ou trains)
According to schedule	ars arranged	comme prévu
Balcony	dress circle	balcon
Barn	stabble	écurie
Baron	magnate	magnat
Boby socks	socks	socquettes
Breakman	guard	chef de train
Commencement	speech-day	jour de fermeture (université)
Compensation ticket	salary	salaire
Danceroll	dancing saloon	dancing
Divide	watershade	ligne de partage des eaux
Drugstore	chemistry	pharmacie
First floor oo	ground-floor	rez-de-chaussée
main floor		
Fo flag	to signal	donner un signal
To get a kick	to receive a sharp stimulant effect	être stimulé par
Good for you!	welle done!	bien!
I guess not	no indeed	je suis sûr que non
To hammer	to criticize severely	passer au crible
Highball	wisky and soda	grand verre de whisky
Horse sense	common sense	bon sens
Joint (argot)	low drinking-place	petit bistro
Layer cake	jam sandwiches	gâteau fourré
To low down	to give all the facts	donner tous les détails
Mixer	person with social gifts	sociable
Peck-a-boo	hide and seek	cache-cache
To pet	to flirt	flirter
To plan	to hope	espérer
Pool	affluence	affluence
Port warder	harbour master	commandant du port
To pump the track	to run off the line	dérailer
Rubbers	over shoes	snow boots
Sea-food	shell fish	poissons et fruits de mer
See here!	look here!	Tiens!
To shoot to death	to shoot dead	tuer
Speakeasy	nking placeillicit dri	bar clandestin
To take in	to visit	visiter; rendre visite à
That is the limit!	that is the last straw!	c'est le comble!
Track of railways	line of railways	ligne de chemin de fer
Tubes	wires	lignes (radio)
Watch out	look out	surveillance
White color	black coat	employé de bureau
Yesman	man without independant stand	l'homme sans autre opinion que celle de son supérieur

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