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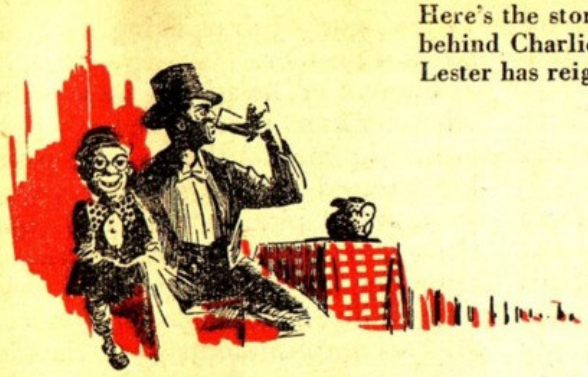

Here's the story of the man behind the man behind Charlie McCarthy. For 50 years the Great Lester has reigned as king of the dummies

Stepfather to Charlie McCarthy

by DON DRURY

IT REALLY seems quite simple. First you put a dummy on your right knee. Next you hoist a glass of water in your left hand and, as you drink, you make the dummy open its mouth and emit a clear and continuous tone.

Easy? Even Edgar Bergen hasn't mastered this remarkable trick of his trade although, like other ventriloquists, he has known about it for years.

And that brings us to The Great Lester, né Maryan Tschaikowski, the only man on the globe who *can* do this stunt. That's not surprising, for Harry Lester, the man who taught Bergen and many other great entertainers, is the world's greatest ventriloquist.

It is quite likely, if you are under 40, that you have never heard of the 69-year-old Lester.

But in the night clubs, in the theatres, in private clubs and in any other place where vaudeville is revered, Harry Lester is known as the father of modern ventriloquism. He is to this ancient and wonderful art what the Smith Brothers are to coughs. A ventriloquist's ventriloquist who "can throw his voice so far it comes back with whiskers," he was taking bows in the big time 50 years ago.

Lester was the first to use a dummy with movable glass eyes, and the first to work practically on top of the footlights. Still later he went right down into the audience, where he scared elderly ladies who thought his dummy was a live midget. He originated the stunt of carrying on a phone conversation with three imaginary friends—a tremendous feat in muscle control. And finally, he is the sole virtuoso of the show-stopping drinking trick.

Most of Lester's pupils are nonprofessional. There are men who simply want to entertain their friends, there are detectives who find the art useful in crook-catching, there are broadcast announcers, teachers and others who have discovered that ventriloquism improves their diction. Lester carries on correspondence with men overseas who want information about the profession, and he already has a couple of discharged servicemen

whose lessons are being paid for by the government's rehabilitation program.

The strange art to which Harry Lester has devoted his life is as old as civilization.

Lester once saved himself from a stiff fine for speeding. The local constable would have none of his explanation and the situation was becoming out of hand when Lester heard the sound of a river nearby.

"Listen, what's that?" Lester said suddenly.

The constable listened. And from the river came clear, high-pitched cries.

"Help, help! Save me!"

"You wait here!" the officer yelled. "Somebody's drowning down there." And with that he rushed off. So did Lester.

Lester could not have fooled the constable if he had not been situated between the man and river. Contrary to popular belief, the voice cannot actually be "thrown" anywhere; ventriloquism is a matter of artful deception wherein the tongue is quicker than the ear. Ventriloquists can originate sound to their right or left and above or behind them, but they cannot "throw" their voice past the ear of a listener.

Lester, whose father was a cousin of the great Russian composer, Tschaikowski, was born in Poland in 1876 and came to the United States as a baby. He dispensed with the polysyllabic Slavic name early in life and became plain Harry Lester, a boy who startled his neighbors by eating fire, swallowing swords, and saving pennies to buy some Siamese twins.

The boy left home when he was 14 and got a job assisting a circus balloon jumper.

Thereafter, he admits, he was the all-American pest to every performer he met on the sawdust trail. He painted a little sign with one word in capitals: "WHY?" and hung it over his bed as a constant reminder to investigate the mysteries of life, including such wonderful accomplishments as magic, mind reading, bareback riding, being buried alive and rope twirling. He stayed with the circus until he fell off a balloon basket one day and received a shoulder injury that was to make him walk slightly stoop-shouldered the rest of his life.

ABOUT THAT time the entertainment world was being startled by a great ventriloquist named O. M. Mitchell. Harry Lester heard his act just once. Thereafter the boy rushed to the nearest library for all available books on ventriloquism.

He was not yet 20 years old when he booked for his first European tour, and it was aboard the liner *Friedrich Der Grosse*, en route to Germany, that he discovered the value of his throat.

Some wag on the ship bet the boy one hundred dollars he couldn't stop the liner in mid-ocean. He didn't have the hundred dollars, but he took the wager.

That night, standing by the rail with one of the officers on the late watch, Lester for the first time tried the stunt he was later to use on the Connecticut constable—the fake call for help.

The officer immediately rushed to the bridge shouting, "Man overboard!"

Bells clanged, the big steamship

slowed down, and a boat was lowered in a matter of moments. Appalled by what he had done, Lester forgot all about his wild wager and took refuge in his cabin.

But the incident was the turning point of the boy's life. In the next 30 years, Lester played all the great vaudeville houses of the world for as much as $1500 a week.

While he was playing in Chicago during World War I a young man came to his dressing room after the show and introduced himself.

"My name is Edgar Bergen," he said. "I want to be a ventriloquist."

Lester says he admired the boy's forthright approach, and his earnestness. Bergen was obsessed with the subject, just as Lester had been years before, and wanted lessons from the man whose performances he had watched again and again. Lester agreed, and Bergen appeared almost daily for some three months, to learn the fundamentals. He was a feverish pupil, Lester recalls, and the master, remembering his own struggles, refused to charge Bergen for the lessons. Years later, on one of his early broadcasts with Rudy Vallee, Bergen admitted he had learned the art from Lester, and acknowledging him as the greatest ventriloquist he had ever known.

Lester is as frank in his appraisal of his star pupil today as he was then.

"Edgar's sole drawback," he says, "was a mild voice that never achieved much volume, and he still hasn't learned how to talk without moving his lips."

Bergen's dummy, the brash Charlie McCarthy, came from the same workshop that produced all of Lester's figures. The genius in this curious trade is Frank Marshall of Chicago, who has fathered these articulate wooden personalities for almost a quarter century.

Alongside Charlie, Lester's current dummy, "Broadway Eddie," is a sad little creature indeed. Once, traveling on a bus to Dallas, Lester had Eddie wrapped in a blanket so that only the feet showed.

Two ladies, concerned over what was obviously inhuman handling of a baby, stood it for some 20 miles. Finally one of them rasped:

"That man ought to be reported to the juvenile authorities!"

Without turning around, Lester slipped his right hand inside the dummy and used the other to jerk off the blanket. Eddie's head swiveled, and his ghoulish eyes impaled the two good ladies.

"Go lay an egg," his flapping lips said.

Nowadays, alternately living in New York and San Francisco, Lester devotes most of his time to teaching. He guarantees to make a ventriloquist in three months out of any man, woman or child who can talk and who has the patience to practice. He has developed a complicated set of words, such as *Ayhee*, *Teeay*, *Haitch* and others which help the student to learn the principles of speaking without moving the lips. One of the beginner's exercises is a simple phrase, "Ah-Ha," which I tried with minor success in one short lesson.

Today, as he approaches his seventieth year, Harry Lester is tall and as lean as Grade A bacon. He lives quietly, takes an occasional engagement to keep his throat supple, and enjoys harmless practi-

cal jokes with his breath-taking art. Just the other day, for example, he and his wife were walking through the woods when he spotted a crew of men working with a handcar on a railroad track.

"Watch this," he said mischievously.

Hiding behind a tree close to the men, he gave one of his best imitations, the mournful sound of a train whistle in the distance. Galvanized into action, the track crew hurriedly lifted the handcar off the rails, and waited. Nothing happened, and in a moment they put the car back on the track. Lester blew through his mouth again, and the men stopped working with a puzzled expression, lifting the handcar off once more.

Lester quietly rejoined his wife, who was convulsed with laughter.

"It's still pretty good, isn't it?" he asked with a grin.

No argument there.