

THE COMICS

An investigation of what makes Kid Eternity tick and of the wartime publishing bonanza in "funny books."

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MAYBE you were amazed to learn that science, after juggling around with a few neutrons and some stuff called plutonium, had come up with an atomic bomb that could wipe out a whole city. Maybe you thought those plans the Germans had of burning their enemies to a crisp by means of a solar mirror 50,000 miles up in the air were strictly the old craperoo. Maybe you'd be startled if you saw a man stop in the street and casually push over a skyscraper. If so, it's time you curled up with a couple of good comic magazines and got a load of the shape of things to come—maybe.

Indeed, if anyone ever had the right to say "I told you so," it would seem to be the boys who cook up the plots for the colored strips which appear in the 150-odd so-called comic magazines that are being published in the States these days. As a matter of fact, it would not have been too surprising if, in the reverberations of the explosion of history's first atomic bomb, there had been the delicate overtones of a razzberry—sounded, of course, by the comic-magazine people in the direction of the would-be sophisticates who have always looked upon such publications as a substitute for an opium pipe and a not very good one, at that.

For, as everyone knows who has ever put in half an hour with one of these stimulating periodicals, the primary aim of most of them is not to be comic but, in the best Superman tradition, to play up feats of human and scientific prowess which, until Hiroshima, seemed as out of this world as—well, an atomic bomb.

Even the comic-magazine standbys like Tip Top, which features such newspaper-born comic creations as Li'l Abner and the Captain and the Kids, have gone in for similar features in a big way. Forced by Post Office Department regulations pertaining to second-class mailing privileges to give at least 20 percent of their space to "new" (hitherto unpublished) material, they have devoted practically all of it to Superman-type strips.

Now, as the time approaches when people will think no more of cracking an atom than they do of breaking an egg, it remains to be seen whether comic-magazine fans, feeling that their faith in this form of reading matter has been justified, will become increasingly loyal to it or will take the attitude that truth is beating the pants off fiction and change their reading habits.

In all events, it seems highly likely that the new vistas opened up by the smashing of the atom are going to have a profound effect, however unpredictable at the moment, upon the contents of comic magazines. This, therefore, would appear to be as good a time as any to take stock of what these forward-looking periodicals were up to on the eve of the new era.

The comic-magazine industry is only about 12



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years old, but it has been one fast-growing baby. At the moment there are some 150 of the publications on the market, most of them monthlies costing a dime apiece, and they have a combined circulation of around 30,000,000 copies, a total that has been fairly well frozen lately, thanks to the paper shortage. But this figure is only the beginning, because people who go in for comic magazines in a big way have a habit of passing their treasures on to their pals. After making a survey of the situation not long ago, the Market Research Company of America estimated that 70,000,000 people, or just about half the population of the U.S., are addicted to comic magazines. So you can see that if you happen to be one of those who have been bit by the bug, you've got plenty of company.

Some people have been inclined to be harsh in their criticism of comic magazines. The *Chicago Daily News*, for example, once called them "badly drawn, badly written and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems." The *News* apparently felt that the comic-magazine public consists mostly of kids. If it did, it was wrong, because figures show that plenty of adults are just as hepped on the strips as are youngsters. Market Research found that these "books," as comic magazines are often called by their admirers, are read by 95 percent of all boys and 91 percent of all girls between the ages of 6 and 11, by 87 percent of all boys and 81 percent of all girls from 12 to 17, by 41 percent of all men and 28 percent of all women in the 18-to-30 age group, and by 16 percent of all men and 12 percent of all women 31 or over.

It's no news to anyone who has ever killed a Sunday sprawled on his sack in a barracks that GIs go for comic magazines in a big way. At PXs in the States purchases of these books run 10 times higher than the combined sales of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*. What's more, we've got Market Research's word for it that 44 percent of all Joes in training camps read the books regularly and another 13 percent take a gander at them now and then.

FAR fairer than the *Chicago News*' attitude toward comic magazines was a recent article in *Science Digest* which had this to say about the people who do and don't read them: "Those who have escaped addiction look upon the comics as the pabulum of the half-witted and emotionally infantile. But certainly many celebrated adult addicts are men and women of intelligence and maturity." It has been found, continued the article, that whereas 25 percent of those adults whose education carried them only through elementary school read comic magazines regularly, 27 percent of those who got through high school but no farther are similarly sold on the books. Among college graduates, 16 percent can't leave their comics alone.

Okay, that's enough background. Now let's have a look at two or three of the strips which captivate those many "men and women of intelligence and maturity" as well as millions of others. One of the things you have to admire about the gents who get up these magazines is the broad sweep of their imagination and their refusal to let themselves be tied down by that attention to minor details which cramps the hand

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Blackhawk is the name of the hero, a character who, although he hangs out at the American Army Intelligence Headquarters at an advanced Pacific base and pals around with the brass there, wears a blue uniform. Offhand, therefore, you might assume that he's in the Navy, but he ain't. He's a little Army all by himself and as such presumably will be called upon sooner or later to sign the United Nations Charter.

With a babe named Golda, Blackhawk in the September issue of *Military Comics* flies over the Jap lines and gets shot down. The two of them bail out and parachute cosily to earth, arm in arm and chatting as they descend. Golda is wearing a kimono which, fortunately for the magazine's mailing privileges, clings about her legs instead of acting as an auxiliary 'chute. Upon landing, the pair is attacked by a company of Japanese Infantry who are well armed but considerately hold their fire, preferring instead to let themselves be knocked out by Blackhawk's numerous haymakers to the jaw. Returning to his base, Blackhawk has a ticklish time in landing because he's flying a Jap plane and his buddies on the ground take a few pot shots before he quiets them by standing up in the cockpit, flinging his arms out wide, and hollering above the roar of his engine, "It's Blackhawk, gang! Let me land!"—thereby making everything jake.

That's only the beginning of this strip, but it's undoubtedly enough to give you an idea of what it's all about.

Or take Kid Eternity, the head man of a strip by that name in *Hit Comics*. The Kid is dead, but has been given "strange, immortal powers," a fact which, in addition to making him quite a guy, gives his creators considerable leeway in the action they dream up for him. As the strip currently in circulation opens, we find The Kid sitting on a cloud discussing the situation with a portly individual known as Mr. Keeper, who is apparently sort of a St. Peter, or even God, and whom the Kid refers to chummily as "Keep." The Keeper suddenly recalls that down on earth the Cards are playing the Dodgers and whips out his portable radio, remarking, "These mortals have some wonderful inventions. No one up here could have invented the radio." Old Keep would seem to be selling heaven short.

Anyway, right in the last half of the ninth inning, with the score tied and the bases full, Keep's radio goes dead and, with a noise spelled as "WHRAMM!" he and The Kid take off for earth to find out what's wrong. It seems there's plenty wrong. A chap named Mr. Silence has rigged up a machine which puts an end to all sound just so that his henchmen can break the glass in Diffany's jewelry store window and loot the joint without being heard. Even The Kid and Keep can't hear each other speak. "I wish I knew what this is all about!" exclaims The Keeper, who for a celestial being seems rather befuddled.

The Kid gets into a lot of fist fights with the evil forces of silence, reincarnates Daniel Boone (complete with coonskin cap) to help him, and finally noise and order are restored. Then back go The Kid and The Keeper to their cloud, where The Kid lies back and relaxes happily while Keep laments the fact that he forgot to find

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out how the game between the Cards and Dodgers came out.

Or take Plastic Man, the hero of the lead strip in *Police Comics*. Like The Keeper in "Kid Eternity," Plastic Man has a nickname by which he is known to his cronies. Plas, they call him, and he's a humdinger because not only can he stretch his arms, legs and neck to any desired length but he can turn himself into a chair that bounces around conking evildoers on the noggin. Plas wears dark goggles and a tight-fitting red jerkin with a yellow-and-black belt. When he becomes a chair the tell-tale belt can be seen circling its back but what happens to the goggles isn't exactly clear. Absorbed into the upholstery, probably.

PLAS seems to be a self-appointed cop in a big city, and his main concern is checking up on the activities of a fellow named Oscar, who looks very much like Coo-Coo, the Bird Girl, in Barnum & Bailey's freak show. You can take Oscar's word for it, it's no fun having Plas on your tail, because you never can tell when he'll crane his neck a mile or so and look you in the eye. Oscar, in the September issue of *Police*, bones up on witchcraft and then hustles up to the State Legislature to ask for an appropriation of five million dollars to enable him to go into magic in a big way.

The lawmakers listen attentively to this reasonable proposal until Plastic Man, getting wind of what's going on, hotfoots it to the capital, stretching out his legs like a couple of pythons. His head and shoulders enter the legislative chamber while his feet are still somewhere down on Main Street, and he tells the assembly that Oscar is a crook. At this the august gentlemen rise as a body and bellow, "Hit the road!" Oscar is assisted in doing so by Plastic Man's arms, which reach all the way down a flight of stairs to ease the bum out.

A really bright guy would probably feel he was licked at this point, but not Oscar. He figures he'll get rid of Plas for good and calls a meeting of some magicians and sorcerers to do him in. Plas outfoxes them by showing up at the meeting disguised as a magician and bringing along a dummy of himself which he goes through the motions of killing by hypnosis. Thinking Plas is out of the way, Oscar and some of his pals return to the capital, planning to get some money out of the legislators by threatening them with death by magic. But Plas is there first, now disguised as a chair, and he bounces around on the heads of Oscar and the gang. When they try to escape he resumes his semi-human shape, turns his arm into a lasso and traps them all. It's just the good old TS for Oscar from there on in.

Or take—but maybe that's enough.

You might get the idea from all this that the editors of the comic magazines spend their whole time pondering the imponderable, scrutinizing the inscrutable and contemplating their cosmic navels. Such, however, is not the case. Like ordinary mortals, they have their lighter moments in which they turn their attention to the world of the shapely gam and the burgeoning bust. In addition to the old-line comic books which

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feature newspaper-strip humor, there are many of the magazines which regularly devote at least one strip to the antics of the younger set, antics in which the moon is treated as a spur to romance and not as an object to reach in a rocket.

THE youthful heroes and heroines featured in this lighter phase of the art frequently converse in a hepcat jargon which may well be the voice of the future. If so, it might be better to smash all the atoms there are right now and call it quits. Possibly just one example of such strips will suffice, and a fast-moving number called "Candy" in *Police Comics* will do as well as the next to give you an idea. Candy is the name of a young and leggy lass whose blond boyfriend called Ted has been known to make some readers wish they'd lower the draft age to 16. We first find him calling for Candy in his car to take her to the beach for a picnic, and the young lady is, of course, ready for the occasion in a tight-fitting yellow bathing suit.

"It's a super-duper day, Ted!" Candy screeches as she sprints for the car. "I can hardly wait to hit the waves!" The two of them start out along a placid little suburban street, and before they've gone 10 feet the exuberant Ted makes it clear that he's having the time of his life. "Wowee!" he exclaims. "This is terrific!" Candy isn't having such a bad time, either. "Now you're steaming, demon!" she says, not straining for a rhyme. "Whoops! Bank this buggy around the bend!" Ted falls right in with this hot idea and turns the corner. "This isn't the shortest way," he explains, "but anything you say, honey child! Just name it!" It is interesting to note that, although this particular strip was drawn before the end of gas rationing, Ted seems to have no trouble at all keeping his tank full enough to drive Candy all over hell and gone.

It develops that Candy wanted to take the detour in order to pick up one of her girlfriends, a chick by the name of Trish. "Okay, Mac! Sand your hack! Whoa boy!" is the diffident manner in which she suggests that Ted pull up in front of Trish's home. Ted doesn't care much for the idea of lousing up his date by taking along another quail, but there doesn't seem to be much he can do about it, and pretty soon he discovers that Candy plans to make it a real outing when she commands him to stop and take aboard a couple more babes. "Candy, this is going to turn out to be a real hen-huddle!" Ted complains petulantly, with the help of the inevitable exclamation point. But Candy puts him in his place. "Don't be such a droolie!" she says.

Once at the beach, Ted goes off by himself, moaning, "What a predic!" At this point he is approached by a strange gent in an oversize Panama hat who says, "I don't think you're handling this situation kee-rect!" and advises Ted to make Candy jealous by mousing around with some of the other tomatoes. "Wow!" shouts Ted, never one to embrace an idea half-heartedly. "That sounds all reet!" So he grabs one of Candy's friends and dunks her in the water, exulting, "Hot diggety! This is keen strategy!"

Things get pretty involved when Ted finds Candy and the guy in the Panama hat sort of fooling around together in the woods. They get

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even more involved when it starts to rain and the Panama Kid drives off with Candy and the other girls. "Boy, what a king-size mess!" Ted shouts to himself, tooling home alone in his open car through the rain. "Picnic ruined!" he continues, itemizing the ingredients of this major catastrophe. "Rain! And Candy riding off with another guy—a stranger! I wouldn't blame her if she *knew* the creep! But this is too much!" Ted goes around to Candy's house for "one last good-bye." She's not there, so he waits outside, hiding behind a tree, until 9:30 p.m., when she arrives home from a night club with Panama, who asks if she would mind giving him a good-night kiss. "Of course not, you old swoonie!" Candy replies. Next we are shown a close-up of Ted going nuts behind the tree while Candy and Panama embrace, producing a sound like the crack of a rifle—"SMACK!" All's well that ends well, however, for at this point Candy says, "So long, Uncle John!" thus disclosing that Panama is a legitimate relative and not the lecherous city slicker Ted had imagined.

And is Ted happy? Well, you bet. "Oh, wowie zowie, Candy!" he whoops, as Uncle John drives off down the street with lipstick all over his avuncular puss. "You're a sugared honey bun!" Candy settles down on a couch, and for a minute it looks as if our hero were about to make some time. "Oh, hush, Ted!" she says, and you can hardly blame her for that. "Turn on the ether box and come sit beside me, you old gooney!" Ted figures he's in. "Oweeeee!" he purrs. "Candy, this is super-elegant! Come on and snuggle, bunny!"

THE average girl would probably be unable to resist such a smooth approach, but Candy is made of sterner stuff. Instead of snuggling, she jumps up from the couch and starts tinkering with the ether box, which obligingly brings her the voice of her favorite crooner. Poor Ted, it seems, is in the soup again. As the strip winds up, we see him tearing his hair and crying, "Ohhhhhh! Ohhhhhh!"—a highly vocal Lothario to the bitter end.

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