

A Movie Star Who Knows What Makes You Laugh

The story of Harold Lloyd, whose big, round glasses are a comic label worth millions of dollars to him as a screen star, but whose real success comes from the active, hard-working brain behind those glasses

By Mary B. Mullett



This is Harold Lloyd as he looks without the big round glasses which are his trademark in the movies. They are not glasses, anyway, but only frames; and these frames have been specially designed so as not to hide his changes of expression. Lloyd is a hard and conscientious worker. He keeps himself in condition physically because many of his stunts require strength and endurance as well as a clear head.

LESS than ten years ago, a young high-school student in San Diego, California, was running around like mad, doing so many different things that he hardly had time to sleep. He was full of go—he had to be, to keep up with his daily schedule—and all the folks who knew him liked him.

But all the folks who knew him at that time were probably only a few scores; whereas to-day he is known to millions of men, women, and children. I'm willing to wager that all these folks like him, too; because I have heard thousands of them shout with glee at the mere sight of him.

Ten years ago, he was earning a few dollars a week to enable him to keep on going to school. This year, after he pays a whopping income tax, settles the running expenses of a fine home, supports a couple of high-priced cars, does a good bit of traveling, and so on and so forth, he will salt away more than half a million dollars! Yet not one of us will grudge him a cent of all that money, even though we helped to pay it. We contributed our share gladly, because he has given us in return something we all need and want—a lot of good wholesome laughs.

Mighty few people will need to be told who Harold Lloyd is. Everybody that goes to the moving pictures knows him and his big, round, shell-rimmed glasses. Those spectacles have become for him a sort of trade-mark that is worth millions of dollars.

When he began to wear them in the pictures, they were about his only claim to originality as a comedian. But he has traveled a long, long way since that time, even though it was only a few years ago. The glasses were a clever idea, of course; they put a



HAROLD LLOYD

label on him which people could recognize and remember. But if he had been content to cash in on only one clever idea, the cash would have been a mere trickle compared with the golden flood that now pours into his pockets. He has earned that flood by everlastingly hunting for more and more and more new and clever ideas.

Almost from the time Harold Lloyd was born, in the little town of Burchard, Nebraska, he has been on the go. Before he developed any powers of locomotion of his own, his father and mother moved from Burchard. They continued to move with such agility and rapidity that the list of places where the boy lived sounded like a railway time-table. He learned his letters in one town, started the primer in a second, finished it in the third, and so on.



He attended so many schools in so many different towns that his education was only a succession of hasty nibbles, until the family finally alighted in San Diego. They couldn't go any farther in that direction without jumping off into the Pacific Ocean, so there they "stayed put;" at least for a while.

The life which young Harold Lloyd lived in San Diego would have been impossible for an ordinary boy. Perhaps it would have been impossible for him, if he hadn't been on the jump ever since he was a baby.

He told me about it himself, on one of his flying trips from California to New York. You would not recognize him if you should see him off the screen. He

HAROLD LLOYD

doesn't wear those big glasses, or any glasses at all. And he's not a bit of an off-stage comedian. He has a frank and spontaneous laugh, but not a trace of the clown. He is a handsome, athletic-looking chap; serious and thoughtful about his work, modest and unassuming in manner, but keenly alive and charged with an almost electrical energy. He would impress you as just the sort of up-and-coming fellow you'd like in your office if you were a business man.

"When we lived in San Diego," he said, "my father had a small store; and one of my rather numerous jobs was to help with the work there. While we had been skipping around the country, I had done all kinds of things. I'd been a bell boy, an errand boy, and every other kind of a boy. But in time my jobs simmered down to those around the theatre. I was usher, 'candy butcher,' property boy, assistant electrician, and almost everything else you could think of.

"But the climax came in San Diego. In the first place I wanted an education, so I entered the high school. They were building a new one there, and the old one was so crowded that there were two 'shifts' of pupils: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. I was in the morning shift, beginning at seven-thirty.

"That made two jobs—store and school. In addition, I went to a dramatic school, where I was also assistant to Mr. Connor, who ran it. I taught the beginners. That's three jobs. But the biggest one was with a local stock company. I don't mean that I had big parts. They were only fairly long, but it took quite a bit of time to learn them. We played every night, gave two matinées a week, and had a rehearsal every single morning at ten o'clock, for we produced a new play each week.

"I had to be at school for four classes in the morning before I chased off to the theatre for the rehearsal. I did my studying at night after I got home from the performance. And I had to be up and on the school job again at seven-thirty. Oh, yes! I had a fifth job part of the time. I was keen about athletics and wanted like everything to be on the football team. No amount of juggling with my daily program could make that possible; but I did become the manager of the team. So, while the football season lasted, I had five jobs to keep me out of mischief.

"IT SOUNDS like kind of a hard life, but it wasn't. I had no end of fun, padding around from one thing



HAROLD LLOYD



to another as fast as I could go. I wasn't any shining light at school, but I managed to get by, and would have graduated if the Edison moving picture company hadn't come to San Diego to take some scenes for a film play. I went in as an extra, at five dollars a day, and that sealed my fate.

"When the company went back to Los Angeles, I quit school and followed them. That was eight years ago. Up to that time, I never had thought of being a comedian. In the San Diego stock company I had played character parts. In the Edison company I was a little of everything and not much of anything. It was about the same in the Keystone company, where I next went.

"There was another young chap there, named Hal Roach. I happened to make good in a small part in which they had first tried Roach, and naturally he thought that if I was better than he was I must be pretty good. His ambition was to be a director; and as someone left him a bit of money about that time he started his own company, and asked me to come with him at fifty dollars a week. That was about six years ago.

"I was to be a comedian; and that was an entirely new deal for me. But I'd have agreed to be a hippopotamus for fifty dollars a week! So I started in. At that time, there was just one conception of a movie comedian—Charlie Chaplin. Because Chaplin wore a little mustache, every comedian had to wear a mustache. Because his clothes were funny, every comedian must wear funny clothes.

"Still, I wanted to be more than an imitation Chaplin, so I fixed up a different kind of mustache, and instead of baggy clothes like his I wore mine skin-tight. The character I played was called 'Lonesome Luke;' and we made one hundred and fifty 'one reelers' around that character. They were just slapstick farces, ground out at the rate of one or more a week.

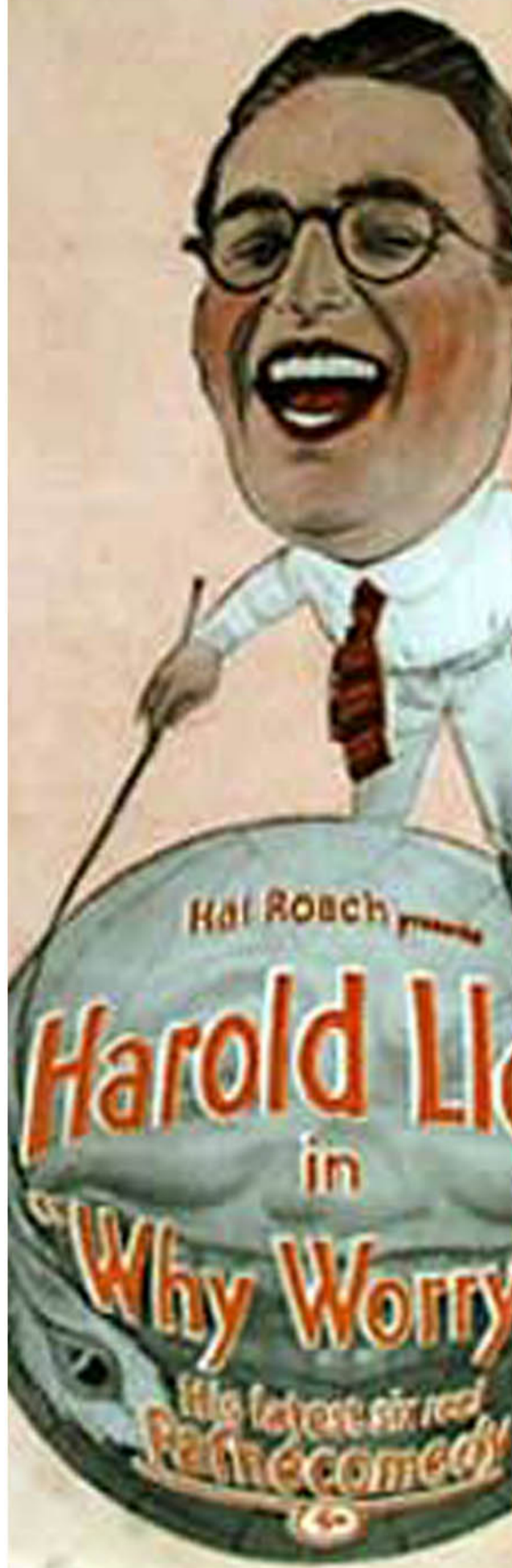
"They were successful, so far as being popular was concerned; but they didn't satisfy me. I didn't want to do that kind of stuff, and I knew it wasn't getting me anywhere. In the meantime, I'd found an idea for a different sort of comedy character. I had seen an actor in another company wear big shell-rimmed glasses in a picture, and I realized that here was a chance to get an entirely new comedy label. The other man hadn't taken advantage of this possibility, so I had the chance to use my idea.

"I HAD begun then to make a serious study of comedy—which sounds like a contradiction, but which is not, I can assure you. There isn't a harder job in the world than to make people laugh. I work at that job night and day; always thinking and studying over it. No matter where I go, or what I do, it is constantly in my mind. I

HAROLD LLOYD

am always asking myself why people laugh when they do laugh, and why they *don't* laugh when someone has tried to *make* them laugh. When I go to the theatre I am all the time analyzing the things that get a laugh, and the things that fall flat. Wherever I go I watch people and listen to them, trying to get a line on what strikes them as funny.

"Back in the 'Lonesome Luke' days, I decided that slapstick was good enough for children and for grown folks with the minds of children, but that most people want something different. I didn't want to be laughed at just because my clothes were funny. I wanted them to laugh at a cleverly comical idea. People like to see amusing things happen to a real human being like themselves, especially if it is something which might happen to them. Your friends don't wear skin-tight trousers and have pies thrown at them. That kind of a character isn't real; and the things that happen to him in a slapstick farce are not real.



"But take my big glasses, for instance. You can't walk a block on the street without seeing someone wearing the same sort of spectacles. You may wear them sometimes yourself. Still, they are just striking enough—especially on the screen—to make me conspicuous. By always wearing them, I could make them my trade-mark. And at the same time I could dress like other human beings and so be real to the audience.

"**B**UT that meant I must give up an easy task for a tremendously difficult one. I could go on playing slapstick, which is easy. If I tried the other thing, it meant that I must work with my mind. If I couldn't fall back on *looking* funny, I would have to *be* funny; and that is a million times harder. But I knew that if I stuck to the easy way, I never would amount to much, or get much. If I succeeded in the hard task, I would reap a big reward.

"I wanted to take the chance. But when Roach put it up to Pathé, who had been distributing our pictures, they said: 'No! We've been featuring "Lonesome Luke." We're not going to drop him and feature Harold Lloyd! We'd have to start in all over again—and he may not make a success of his idea, anyway.'

"'All right!' I said. 'My contract is up. I'll leave and go somewhere else.'

"Well, when they found that I would leave—which would stop the 'Lonesome Luke' series, anyway—they consented to let me try my scheme; and with an increase of salary too. We began making the comedies, and from the very start they were a success.

HAROLD LLOYD

"I insisted on another condition: that I should not always play the same type of character. If you build up a reputation by doing just one kind of thing, it is almost impossible to break away from it. People expect you to do that same sort of thing, and they won't accept anything else from you. But the longer you do it, the harder it becomes to top your past performances. Two things happen: One is that people unconsciously idealize what is in the past. They think you were better than you really were. And the other is that, again unconsciously, they are getting rather fed up with the same old thing. So they begin to say: 'He isn't as good as he was.'

"I had figured this out, and I insisted on playing different types; merely keeping my big glasses as a label. Those glasses, too, by the way, have taken a lot of study. Of course they are not really glasses; they are only the frames. But the frames have been designed very carefully. If they went up high enough to conceal my eyebrows, for instance, they would hide some of my changes of expression; so the upper rim has to fit in exactly under the eyebrows. The whole frame, in fact, has been specially designed so as not to hide the expression.

"UNLIKE most moving picture companies, we never use scenarios. I wonder if you realize what that means. It means that we start simply with an idea, and that we build up the story as we go along. For instance, take my latest picture, called 'Have a Heart.' The title itself is a play on the theme with which we started.

"For two years I had been thinking about making a picture with, as its central figure, a young man who is a failure because he lacks confidence in himself; he doesn't think he can do much of anything; he's afraid everybody will lick him—in a fight, in business, in love, in everything. But by some scheme, he is led to think that he has a powerful and infallible help from outside. In this case it was a fool little piece of metal which he *thinks* has magic powers. Believing this, he tackles any old proposition and gets away with it. Then he finds out that it was only a trick and that he succeeded because he *believed he could*.

"Well, that was the idea; but it took two months of thinking and planning and working to build up the incidents. And each incident itself was built up bit by bit. For instance, we got the idea of having the boy embarrassed by wearing a suit in which some moth balls had accidentally been left. Not much to start with, was it? But this was what we made of it:

"First, he wears a suit of clothes which he has bought with a guarantee that they won't shrink. But he is caught out in the

HAROLD LLOYD

rain and reaches home with his trousers shrunk half up to his knees and his sleeves half up to his elbows. He is in despair, because he was going to see his girl that evening; but his grandmother tells him he can wear his deceased grandfather's suit. When he puts on the clothes, she takes a lot of moth balls out of the pockets, and he goes off happy. (*Continued on page 110*)

"But some of the balls, in the breast pocket, have been overlooked; and when he is sitting on the sofa with the girl she begins to sniff, as she catches the odor. He soon realizes the source of the smell, but doesn't know what to do about it. Finally, when she goes off for a moment, he takes out the moth balls, looks wildly around for a place to put them, and has only time to drop them into a box of candy, before she comes back.

"Then, as many a girl has done in real life, she tells him to open his mouth and shut his eyes, and she reaches around to the candy box, picks up a piece, and puts it in his mouth. He loves this little attention, and begins to chew the piece, which of course is one of the moth balls. He is too bashful to get rid of it, and is mumbling in misery when his deadly rival enters and crowds in between him and the girl. The rival, being a greedy guy, reaches back and takes *two* pieces out of the candy box—two moth balls! Then both chaps are up against it, until the girl again goes away for a minute, when they both rush madly to the kitchen.

"That's a brief outline of the episode, but you can see that it can be made very funny; and people respond to it because it *might* happen. Moth balls are real. They are not something invented just for a moving picture play. Everybody knows how they smell. Lots of people have tasted them. Anyhow, they know how they *would* taste.

"**H**ERE'S another example of how a scene is built up. This was in 'The Sailor-Made Man,' a picture in which I played a rich young fellow who thought he could have and could do anything he wanted. Through a sequence of incidents he enlists in the navy and, much against his will, he has to go to sea. They take all the nonsense out of him there! His shipmates make a man of him, before they get through. So you see that the central idea was a real one; that hard knocks will bring out a man's mettle, if he has any.

"One of his mates—a rough, hard-fighting fellow—despises the raw new 'gob' until the boy happens to show that he *can* be a good sport. Then the two become buddies. The recruit one day happens to knock out a regular prize-fighter. He does it accidentally, by slipping on a piece of soap. His buddy doesn't see how it happened. He merely sees the pugilist lying there, knocked cold; so he thinks the recruit is some fighter! And from that time the newcomer is kept busy living up to his reputation.

"In the Orient they have shore leave, and get into a row with eight of the natives. Remember, every one of these incidents is full of details, carefully built up into a series of laughs, while at the same time they carry on the main idea and develop the character. We spent two days thinking and planning for that one little scene of the fight with the natives. And yet the scene, when finished, lasted only a

HAROLD LLOYD

few minutes.

"When the two sailors find themselves menaced by eight men, the big one—my buddy—says to me, 'You take four and I'll take four.'

"He sails into his bunch, and they keep him so busy that he doesn't see what I am doing. I've had no experience in fighting and am scared blue with four men against me. I crouch down, as if I were going to attack; then I spring the old trick of pretending to see something on the ground. While my antagonists are trying to find out what I'm looking at, I start to crawl away. That shows them that they needn't fear *me*; so they join the attack on my partner.

"He is now fighting eight men; but in the mix-up he doesn't know *how* many there are. I don't want him to find out that I'm not the grand little fighter he thinks I am; so, when he knocks one man cold, I watch my chance and drag this fellow over to my side. When he knocks out another, I drag that one over, too; and so on, until I have four men on my side, all lying there, dead to the world. When he finishes the whole bunch, I am sitting calmly on an upturned pail, with my supposed victims around me. The foot of one of them is resting against the pail I'm sitting on. I take out a cigarette, nonchalantly strike a match on the sole of this fellow's shoe, light my cigarette, and say to my panting buddy, 'What took you so long?'

"IT MAY sound simple to tell this. But it took a lot of thought to develop it. I might have just dragged the men over and laid them in a row, but that wouldn't have had the right effect. Anyway, people are interested in what you are doing with your mind; they want action, but it must be action that has some motive and meaning. So, as I dragged the men over, one by one, I took a lot of pains to arrange each body in an attitude that would fit in with my scheme of making believe that I had knocked them out. That keeps the audience interested and thinking. They like the excitement of following the actor's thoughts.

"The man who despises the intelligence of other people makes a big mistake. Moving picture audiences are more widely representative of all the people than any other gatherings. Each picture is shown in every section of the country: to city people and to country people, to high-brows, and low-brows, to rich and poor, to young and old. And I want to tell you that there isn't much difference among them when it comes to understanding. If the things you do have *reality*, they will 'get' you without any trouble. If they don't understand, the fault has been with your own intelligence, not with theirs. Your mind did not work straight enough. You tried to put over some artificial trick.

"As I said before, I never take a day off from studying human nature. I'm always getting new slants on it; but there are some traits that are universal. For one thing, people want to like you. If they laugh at someone they don't like, it isn't real laughter; it is a gloating satisfaction at getting even. That isn't comedy; it's a sort of cruelty. So I always try to win the sympathy and interest of an audience. If I succeed, then there is kindness even in their laughing at me; and people enjoy feeling kind. They sure do.

HAROLD LLOYD

"You might think they wouldn't like me for letting my buddy do my fighting. But I've already planted in their minds the idea that I am trying to live up to his belief that I'm a brave fellow. It is because I want to keep his good opinion that I play the trick on him. He's able to take care of himself. So they forgive me, laugh at the fun, and am glad that I got away with it.

"I figure on all these things just as any business man figures on his job. You see, I'm not selling anything so simple as clothes, or furniture, or food. I'm not selling to people's bodies; I'm selling to their minds and hearts. If I don't understand what they like to think and to feel, I can't do 'big business' with them.

"**O**NE thing I know is that folks like to be surprised. Isn't that true of yourself? It wakes you up, if something unexpected happens. If someone is telling you a story, and you see the point of it long before he gets to it, you lose interest. But the best kind of a *comedy* surprise is when you're all set for one thing to happen, and something else happens instead. That does make you sit up! You *like* that.

"But there is one thing you must remember: If you have made people expect something, you must either give them *something else* as a surprise, or you must give them what they expect. Never plant an expectation—and then give *nothing*. People feel cheated and confused. They are left up in the air. They resent it. If you give something better than you seemed to promise, that's fine. But if you can't do that, be mighty careful about making them anticipate a particular thing.

"Don't make them expect something pleasant—and then give them something unpleasant. Nobody likes that kind of a surprise. Suppose a person came up to you, grinning from ear to ear as if he were going to give you some good news—and then told you your house was on fire. That's like having a friend slap you in the face. On the other hand, if you're expecting bad news, and you get good news instead, you are doubly happy.

"I work that idea out by making the audience expect that I'm going to get into trouble of some sort. Then, when they're already sympathizing over my approaching discomfiture, I get out of the difficulty in some amusing way. That gives them more than one reason for laughing. Make people want you to succeed; make them afraid that you're going to fail; then surprise them by the way you turn the tables. That's the way to make them root for you.

"I do a lot of thinking and studying; but I also do a lot of hard physical work. People like that, too; because they can see it for themselves. I'm naturally athletic; but I couldn't do the stunts I have done if I let myself get soft physically. Take pictures like 'Never Weaken,' for instance. You must have a clear head and well-trained muscles to walk around on the steel girders of a building in construction as I did in those pictures. There were mattresses on the ground below, when I was running around up there; but if I had fallen, I should have broken some bones at least. You mustn't fall! That's your only real safety.

"The hardest stunt I have done was one that perhaps didn't look very hard. It was

HAROLD LLOYD

a play in which I get on a Pullman train without having a ticket. I go into the washroom, climb out of the window and up onto the top of the car, thinking that I will climb back again after the conductor has gone through. But the porter closes the window and I'm shut out. I'm standing there on top of the car when the train approaches a tunnel. It will knock me off, so I start running back along the roofs of the cars.

"Believe *me*, the top of a Pullman train is no easy promenade! The cars have rounded roofs, and there are lots of little chimneys, or ventilators of some sort, especially at the ends. The train was going pretty fast, and I had to keep humping to escape that tunnel; and when it came to jumping over and among those little chimneys, and getting from one toboggan slide, at the end of each car, to the toboggan slide on the next car, I had my work cut out for me. I managed to get to the end of the last car, where I fell flat and hung on as we went through the tunnel. I didn't know how much coal smoke and cinders a locomotive gives out until I took that tunnel trip. I've read somewhere that ninety per cent of the coal used in a locomotive goes up in smoke. I believe it! When I came out of that tunnel, I could have played a darky character without putting on any make-up.

"In most of my pictures I do some hard stunts. Personally, I try not to take unnecessary risks; but you would be amazed at the recklessness of many movie actors. It seems as if they will do *anything* when the camera starts to grinding.

"On the other hand, if it is a scene that doesn't call for stunts, but for regular acting, a good many people get what we call 'camera fright' as soon as they know the photographer is turning the crank. Camera fright is just as bad as stage fright. In fact, many actors who can walk out on a regular stage without a trace of self-consciousness will get chills and fever in front of the camera.

"Often, when we are working up a scene, the company will do it beautifully in a rehearsal. Then, when we go over it again, to make the picture, they are so conscious and worried that it is a failure. Sometimes I fool them by telling them we will rehearse the scene; then, when I see it is going nicely, I give the photographer the signal to turn the crank, and in that way we get something free and spontaneous."

IT MUST be evident from all this, that Harold Lloyd's success is built on a solid foundation of hard work and careful study. It is not due to any simple little trick, like wearing big glasses, any more than the success of a big business is due to its trade-mark. He intends to keep on wearing the glasses, just as a business goes on using a trade-mark by which it has identified and advertised itself. But he doesn't take things easy, on the theory that his trade-mark will continue to sell his goods.

"I have bought a comfortable home," he said; "and my father, who attends to a good deal of my secretarial work, lives there with me. I am keen on motoring and have two good cars. I haven't married—yet. But I like people, like to dance, and to have recreation. I live comfortably, but I don't throw my money away. I buy good bonds with it, instead.

HAROLD LLOYD

This year will see me with enough money saved up to enable me to live on the income from it the rest of my life.

"Not that I have any notion of retiring! Work is more fun than anything else. But with an assured income, I shall be independent. I can take a chance, if necessary, and can put my ideas about people and human nature to a larger test. I don't want to stand still in my work. I make five pictures a year. The whole five could be shown on the screen in one evening; yet months of work go into them. I don't mean to try to go too fast. I'm young and can afford to build slowly and solidly. And I mean to do it. After a while, I'm going to make longer pictures. They won't be solid comedy. That's one curious thing about being funny; people can't stand a long, unbroken stretch of it. Leon Errol hit it right when he said that people 'laugh themselves out.' You must give them a little pathos along with it, and practical common sense. In fact, it all comes back to what I said before: People like to see real human beings going through the sort of experiences which *might* happen in real life, but which seldom do happen, and which *never* happen so fast and so furiously. In other words, they want the usual, flavored with the pep of the unusual."

The
E N D



OldMagazineArticles.com

American
July, 1922: p. 32