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Report on Groucho

On a recent lecture tour in California, I phoned my closest and not-to-be-too-trusted friend, Mr. Marx, who told me he had just turned eighty-one. A spry and agile-minded eighty-one, I discovered later. For years he had been telling me, and I believed him, that he was seventy-four. I was surprised at the way he flaunted his eighty-one. Doubtlessly expecting to hear, "You certainly don't look it."

I obliged him by saying it that evening when he invited me to his home for dinner. After all, what are friends for? Our friendship began, rather evanescently, about forty years ago, when I, as a lad (one-upmanship), was serving as drama critic on the Kansas City Post. For a week I sat at the feet of the Great Man seeking advice, trying to cull from his flow of rhetoric, sprinkled with outrageous puns, the essence of humor—what makes people laugh and why. The day he left town, Groucho handed me a long, narrow book. "To fit your overcoat pocket," the flap on the book read.

"Here," he said. "If you're thinking of sticking to the humor racket, you'd better read this."

The title of the book was *Is Sex Necessary?*—and that was forty years before Dr. Reuben was afraid to ask. The book was written in collaboration by the two greatest, Messrs. E. B. White and James Thurber. I still have it, treasure it, often read it. And there are torturous days when I wonder why I'm still sticking in the humor racket.

At eighty-one, and having fully recovered from a "major minor operation," as he told it that night, Groucho leads no sedentary senior-citizen existence. He is disgruntled with show business. As he sees it, show business has dwindled to appearing on talk shows at coolie wages. He has other commitments. He will lecture, appear in a one-man concert at Carnegie Hall this month, and has been invited to fly to Paris to be decorated with the Legion of Honor rosette. "Like Chaplin," he says. "Only he's richer than I am."

Aside from his public appearances, his private life goes on humorously apace. For him, all the world's a stage and everyone is a straight man. Stop him on a street corner, invite him to a small dinner party, telephone him, and the curtain rises, the footlights come aglow, and Groucho is on with quixotic quotable quips sprinkled with the unusual quota of pun upon pun.

If I am giving you the impression

that here is a brash eighty-one-year-old upstart who is always trying to prove to all comers that he still has it, you are wrong. Often his humor is for his own private amusement, humor—sometimes even poignant, plaintive—that reveals a measure of the man himself. Some years ago I was in Hollywood on a picture-writing assignment. Groucho had learned of my coast trip. He wrote me, phoned, even telegraphed that I was to be a guest in his home. I told him I had made other plans, and he replied that our friendship was ended if I didn't accept his invitation to stay with him.

So, of course, I finally accepted and arrived early one morning. I found him seated at breakfast. The attendant came through with my suitcase, a small briefcase, and a portable typewriter. "Well," greeted mine host, looking at the luggage, "three bags? How long are you staying?" The maid offered me orange juice. I drank it, and she asked if I wanted more. I said, "No, thank you." Mr. Marx said, "I'm glad. Oranges don't grow on trees, you know." He handed me a key. "It's for the back door. We don't like writers coming in the front." OK, that's par for the Groucho course.

That evening when I returned from work, I found Groucho alone in front of a music stand with a guitar, softly singing Gilbert and Sullivan. He nodded and continued singing. A moment later, the maid came in and whispered something to him. He nodded, went on singing. Pretty soon, in came the maid followed by a man, his wife, and two small children. He nodded as they passed through to the rest of the house.

When he finished playing, I asked, "What was that?"

"That was *Pirates of Penzance*," he replied.

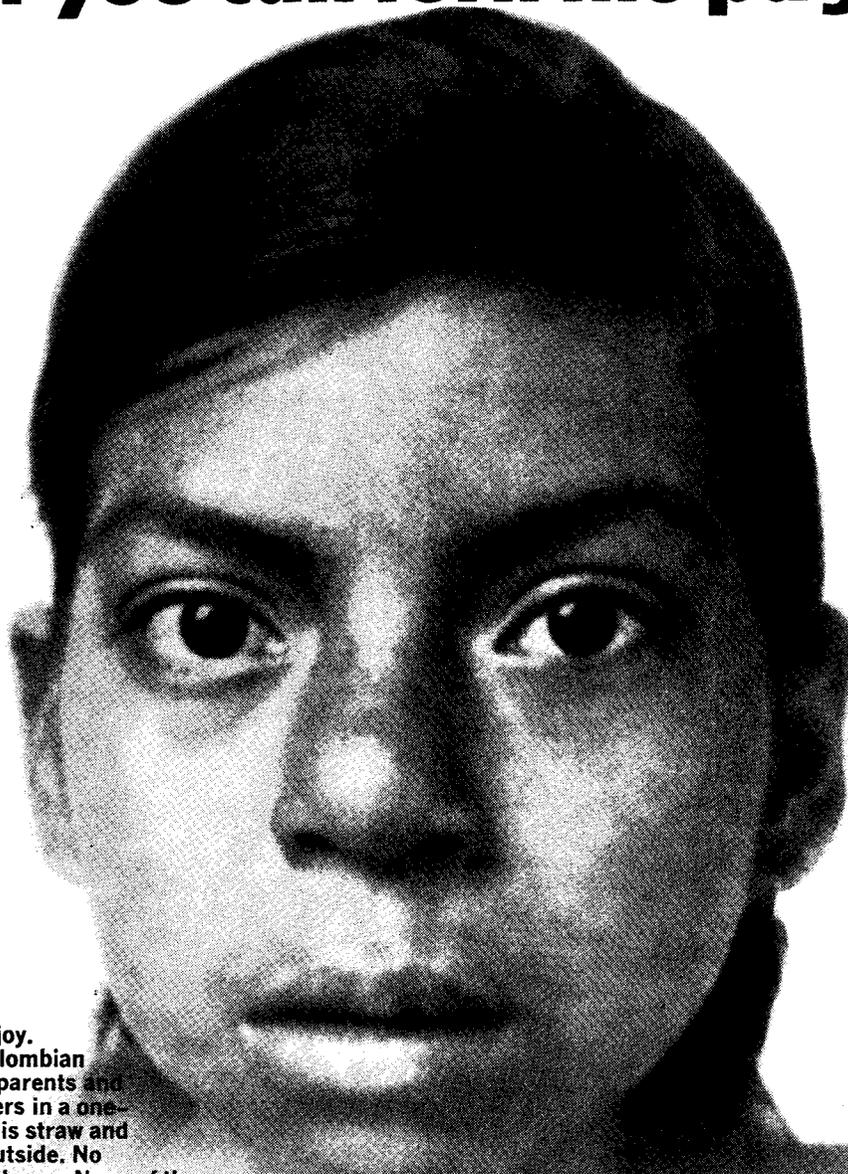
"No, I mean those four people who just walked through."

"Oh, that," he said. "A year ago my doctor told me I shouldn't walk upstairs. Since my bedroom and office are upstairs, I decided to sell the house. I ran an ad in the L.A. Times. Then Harpo came to dinner one night and told me how he had handled the stairs. He had installed an inclinor on the banister, and he rides up. So I bought an inclinor and didn't have to sell the house."

"There must be more to it than that. How about those people?"

"I never took the ad out of the paper. It's the only way I can get people to come see me." □

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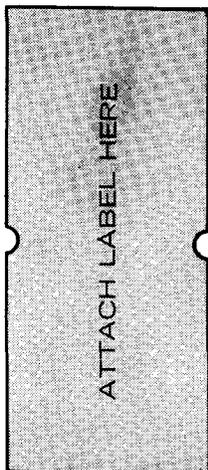
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Howard, Greta, Richard, and Mao

When Howard meets Greta
They'll meet behind curtains
And all will be possibly
(Nothing for certains)

When Howard meets Greta
There'll be certifying
That each is the other
(Not somebody trying)

When Howard meets Greta
Both must be undraped
(Not a sign of the meeting
Can be filmed or taped)

When Howard meets Greta
Not a word must be spoken
For words can be keys
(And a door might spring open)

When Howard meets Greta
They'll exchange preserved flowers
And preserves sealed in glass
(Like kumquats and hours)

When Howard meets Greta
Let light be subdued
(The moon has been walked on
The sun can be rude)

When Howard meets Greta
They'll speak softly of duty
(Of fame, time, and money
Of eyes, ears, and beauty)

When Richard meets Mao
The firmament shivers
(When Howard meets Greta
The universe quivers).
Harvey Jacobs

All-Purpose Title

Now that most of us have accepted "Ms." as the word to replace "Miss" and "Mrs.," I suggest a further step. Since "Ms." serves only to blur the distinction between a married and an unmarried woman, we need to do something about what is even more discriminatory or, to use the word of the day, chauvinistic. I mean the distinction that continues to be made between a man and a woman.

As long as we continue to use "Mr." and "Ms." we will perpetuate something almost as bad as racism and in some ways more fundamental. I have a suggestion for an all-purpose, all-sex title that will remove this last and most important instance of identification and discrimination. It is so simple and so obvious that I wonder that it has not been suggested before.

What I propose is that the title "M."

be used for everyone—married or unmarried, male or female. "M." is the one letter that "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Miss," and "Ms." have in common. It therefore seems the natural choice for a title that would, at last, bring us all together. Except for the superstitious, who may worry because M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, everyone should be happy to accept it.

I am pleased also to discover that in Bantu languages the prefix "M-" means a human being, a person, an individual, and that is what we wish our common title to signify, is it not? By adopting "M." as our common title we would also, as a fringe benefit, forge a linguistic link with those who speak such Bantu languages as Zulu-Kaffir, Swahili, and Kongoese. Followers of the women's liberation movement will be additionally pleased to know that the Bantu languages pay very little attention to gender.

A further advantage of "M." is that, when spoken, it is free of sibilants, having none of the hissing and buzzing of "Miss," "Mrs.," and "Ms." To put it simply, the sound of "M." is that of a sonant, bilabial continuant, made by stopping the oral passage at the lips, the soft palate being lowered at the same time so that the sound is given a nasal resonance. There is a sort of humming about it, suggestive of bees, honey, hummingbirds, and other pleasant features of the garden. While saying "M.," one purses the lips as if preparing to give and receive a kiss.

May the day soon come when everyone—married or single, man or woman—bears the mellifluous title of "M." Mmmm. . .

Richard Armour

Nothing New Under the Moon, Either

Manufacturers of water beds, while touting them as the greatest thing in bedding since the discovery of sex, modestly concede that they originated in England "years ago." This seems logical enough, considering Great Britain's long tradition of dominating the waves, but credit for this particular creation goes back further than that—by more than a thousand years.

It is reliably reported (by no less an authority than Will Durant) that Khumarawayh, Mohammedan caliph of Egypt and the playboy of his time (884-895), "taxed his people to provide himself with a pool of quicksilver on which his bed of inflated leather cushions might gently float to win him sleep."

E. V. Girand