

22 January 1978

Topper Martyn
Götgatan 3
752 22 Uppsala, Sweden

Dear Topper:

Englosed is the article for Genii. I hope you like it. I appologise for the delay. I didn't quite manage to get it finished before leaving for London before Christmas. Then, as soon as I got back to Brussels I was plunged into the Carter visit. I thought I'd be able to get the article finished the following week, but my USIS colleague here got sick, and I had to handle everything by myself during a rather busy period until he got back on his feet. Anyway, here 'tis.

We had a great time in London, as always. It's a good season theatrically this year. Between the Carter visit and Alexandra's school schedule we could only stay two weeks this year - I even had to come back a few days ahead of Carol and Alexandra - so I didn't get to see everything I wanted to. Fortunately I expect to get back for another few days the beginning of March so I can catch some more. Alexandra is old enough for the pantos and other kid shows now, so often I'd take her somewhere in the afternoon, then go out with Carol to another show in the evening. (Of course I ran into Jay Marshall - at a matinee of Dick Wittington, as it happens - though neither of us knew the other was in town.)

The Magic Circle show was pretty dull this year, truth to tell. They had Trevor Lewis doing kid stuff, which was ridiculous in the evening. They should have had him compering instead of the dead loss they did hire for that. Bob Read was disappointing. His stand-up act might go over OK in nightclubs, but it was lost on the stage and his timing on the gags is still close-up. He hasn't learned yet to establish the contact he needs across the orchestra pit, as he can more easily in more intimate surroundings. There were two successor acts I wanted to see - the Wychwood son-in-law and daughter doing the great poodle act and the new team doing the Omar Pasha black art act. The former I found disappointing. The tricks are still good, but ~~the~~ the personality - the gaiety - is gone. The new Omar Pasha - don't know if he's a relation or not - is good, but lacks that enormous presence the old man had. Still, he's good, the act is as startling as ever, there are a few new bits, all good, and that great finish where the magician tosses a sheet over himself and disappears. I enjoyed Terry Rogers, who is a good vent. The rest of the show was sufficiently unimpressive that I can't even recall offhand who they were.

As you say, there is too much being published. I have books on my shelves I bought years ago and ~~g~~ haven't gotten around to reading yet. What with the prices they're going to, too, I've stopped buying everything except the few by people ~~ix~~ whose work I know and consider important. One tip: if ~~you're~~ you're still playing around with mentalism, don't miss Phil Goldstein's stuff. Brilliant presentations. His card work, ~~though~~ though, you can live without.

Love to all,

TOPPER MARTYN

by

William Zavis

In my favorite picture of Topper Martyn he is facing the camera straight on, holding a sculpture of a hirsute gentleman in medieval attire who stands behind an ornate table, gripping a conical object in his left hand. The leg of the table is composed of a devil's-headed dragon with a grin on its face.

Topper is grinning, too.

For that statue is a rare and valuable automaton of a magician performing the cups and balls, and the sheer joy of its possession illuminates the photograph like an arc light. It is a feeling any serious collector - indeed, any lover of magic as something more than transient displays of puzzles - will appreciate.

One could read all sorts of symbolism into that picture, but to me it is, above all else, a souvenir of a close friend in one of his happiest moments. During the four years that I lived in Sweden, it was no small pleasure that whenever I wished I could stop by a certain incredible little shop in Stockholm's "Old Town," whether for a chat or a stroll with the proprietor through the winding streets of one of Europe's more charming remnants of the Middle Ages, usually to end with tea and cake in one of the snug cafes that were always just around the corner. Though we have seen each other but rarely since then, we keep in touch, continue to exchange ideas and experiences, and I feel and value his presence no less keenly now than the day he led me into the tiny room in the back of the shop and, with a gleam in his eye as devilish as the grin on the face of the gargoyle, unveiled that precious automaton he had just acquired.

Topper is that kind of a man. It takes at least a couple of generations to make one.

He was born Victor Clifton Martyn on October 30, 1923, in Maida Vale, a residential neighborhood situated more or less between Hyde Park and Regents Park in London. The eminent English actor, George Arliss, lived next door, but show business roots lay even

closer to home.

If Victor Martyn, Sr. and his elder child, Decima, were unable to be present at ~~the~~^{the} birth of their son and brother, ~~respectively,~~ it was because they were ~~touring~~^{touring} Africa at the time, he as a juggler and she dancing in a troupe headed by, of all unlikely people, ~~the~~ famous classical ballerina, Anna Pavlova. Indeed, had Mama Martyn not been otherwise occupied with the production of young V.C., she too would have been with the company as the other half of Martyn and Florence.

Both Victor and Maude Florence (Nee Thyer) Martyn were born in Australia, and both were entertainers from childhood. Victor, born in Melbourne, January 30, 1885, had started out as a circus performer. He mastered a variety of skills before becoming a conjuror, then struck up a friendship with the young Carmo, in those days still a juggler. The two boys swapped acts, Carmo taking up magic (with well-known results) and Martyn, juggling. Around 1906, he replaced a certain Mr. Cambell in a comedy juggling act known as Jarvis and Cambell, an English team working in Australia at the time. Under that name they toured India and the United States, eventually changing the billing to Jarvis and Martyn and finally parting company in 1910 when Victor married Maude Florence in Melbourne.

Maude had been trained by her father who both played and juggled banjos as a member of a minstrel troupe that had emigrated to Australia. Thyer had, in fact, trained his whole family: five of the children did a trick cycling act, while Maude, the star of the show, was an acrobat, contortionist, singer and dancer. Her big number was to don a pair of ice skates - there is nothing new, even under the hot Australian sun! - and dance on a high marble-topped pedestal, the iron blades of the skates striking sparks from the marble as she stepped and twirled. When the world-renowned Paul Cinquevalli visited Australia, Thyer hired him to teach Maude juggling. Thyer even had boxing kangaroo. With such riches to draw on, Maude was able to play the same theatres for years, continually changing her act.

Martyn and Florence barnstormed their way westwards across the Pacific Ocean, through the island groups and Hawaii, hiring halls to present their potpourri of juggling, magic, trick cycling and acrobatics,

finally arriving in San Francisco with several hundred dollars saved. Deciding to stay in America, they set forth on the vaudeville circuits of the day, ultimately performing in all forty-eight states and Canada.

Their first child, Decima, was born in America in 1911. She studied ballet with the man who had taught Pavlova and after a spell as a member of the famous Russian dancer's company, joined the family act, which then became known as Martyn, Florence and Martyn. Later, Decima did a double act with Dorothy Turner, the daughter of an English comedian who had been taught to juggle by Victor Martyn. Their act, called "Martyn and Maye in a Juggling Cocktail," toured the British variety halls during the 1930's and 40's. Decima eventually married Jack Cooke, a clown and acrobat and the last performing member of the Cooke circus family which dated back to the 18th century. Their comedy juggling act, Martyn and Cooke, played in variety during the late 1940's.

As Decima's career indicates, the Martyns eventually returned to Europe, settling in England but continuing to tour as well. In 1922 they played the London Coliseum, then the top variety booking in the country.

Though born in England and a British citizen, young Victor Clifton Martyn's first appearance on stage occurred in France where, at the age of three, he toddled out of the wings just as his parents were tossing the Indian clubs back and forth in the middle of their act at the Alhambra Theatre, Paris. As he was dressed in overalls, just like Jackie Coogan in the enormously popular movie of the day, Charlie Chaplin's The Kid, the audience thought it was planned and greeted him with shouts of "Jac-que! Jac-que!" Martyn pere knew a good gag when it found him, kept it in the act, and another Martyn theatrical career was launched.

As he grew up, the boy toured with his parents and sister, learning magic, juggling and music along with the more conventional subjects. (At one point he also studied painting and exhibited and sold his works.) At the age of 17 he started performing on his own around London as a magician, juggler and sometime banjo player. The following year - 1941 - he joined ENSA (the British equivalent of the American USO) and toured the British Isles, entertaining the troops. It was during those years that he started emphasizing the juggling over magic, as often there

would be another magician on the same bill.

About that name, "Topper." He originally called himself V.C. Martyn, the use of the initials perhaps reflecting the influence of his idol, W.C. Fields, and eventually his act became known as V.C. Martyn, the Eton Topper (presumably in reference to the top hats worn by pupils at the famous English school, Eton). There was another gentleman by the name of Martyn, however, who had won the Victoria Cross (a British military award commonly abbreviated V.C.) and who used to play the smaller variety halls as "Martyn, V.C." Since the two were often confused, V.C. Martyn asked his agent to change his billing. The agent came up with "Topper Martyn," and so he has been known, even to his wife and daughter, ever since. He still recalls that it cost him a great deal of money to replace all his publicity material, letterheads, etc.

Toward the end of World War II, Topper began appearing in variety halls and revues, finally becoming a regular performer in the popular George Black revues which toured the Moss and Stoll circuit, a major theatre chain in Britain. One of these, a show called Strike It Again which starred the famous British comedian, Sid Field, played for a full year (1944-45) in London's West End. Reviewing that show, the drama critic of the influential magazine, Punch, singled out Topper as one of "the best of the evening."

Though he had given skating exhibitions between the halves of ice hockey matches, Topper joined an ice show for the first time in 1946. A publicity folder from that period shows a pleasant-faced young man with a crew cut, dressed in tails and top hat, on ice skates, juggling cigar boxes as well as the balls, umbrella and suitcase he still features in his occasional appearances as a juggler today.

From 1947 on Topper toured the world, playing both on and off skates in variety, revues, cabarets, ice shows and circuses throughout Europe, the United States, South and Central America and Africa. His bookings included many of the top dates of the day, including, for example, the Sonja Henie and Holiday on Ice shows.

It was, in fact, while playing with Sonja Henie that Topper met his wife, Ingalill, a Swedish skater also appearing in the show. They were married in 1950, continued performing for another nine years, then retired from the ice and settled in Uppsala, Sweden, near Stockholm.

Having been a collector of almost everything imaginable all his life, it was a natural move to open a shop in Stockholm's Old Town, the center of the Swedish art and antique trade. Kändstuboden, as the shop is called, is an indescribable place, bursting at the seams with elderly oddities of every sort. Whatever your interests, Topper is likely to have something for you if he can find it - and if you can find him in. As often as not he will be away, either performing (he remains a busy professional magician, featuring his own comedy routines on club dates, cabaret, TV and, in the summer, outdoor shows); arranging exhibits in museums of his own important collections of antique toys and apparatus of the occult (his latest lark being performances of mentalism in connection with occult exhibits); or seeking out new items for his own collections as well as the shop (which he has been threatening to close as long as I have known him, but never will, because then he no longer would have that splendid excuse to go off "antiquing" whenever the fancy strikes).

And pay no attention to that sign on the door that says "Back in ten minutes." He puts it up whether he's going out for a cup of coffee or a trip to America.

To magicians, Topper is probably best known for the hilarious act which won first prize for comedy magic at the international FISM convention in Amsterdam, 1970, and which is described in his and Gene Anderson's book, Topper's Mad, Mad Magic (published by Magic, Inc.). He also won the grand prix at the 1969 Karlsbad convention, 2nd prize for comedy at the 1973 FISM in Paris (with a different act) and the Academy of Magical Arts' award as Best Visiting Magician at the Magic Castle in 1972. That was the year in which he toured the United States with his lecture and also appeared on the Larsens' It's Magic show in Los Angeles.

I have mentioned Topper's toy and occult collections. He is also a collector of anything pertaining to the history of entertainment and is one of the most knowledgeable people around on the history and literature of magic. His own library is outstanding and contains rarities in several languages. He is equally expert on the circus and circus literature and has contributed to museum exhibitions on this subject.

Over the years, Topper Martyn has performed for just about every sort of audience in every sort of theatre, arena, rink, hotel, nightclub or other surrounding in which one man tries to entertain his fellows. Nowadays, he says, his favorite audiences are children and magicians, and he equally adept at hoodwinking both, and making them laugh while he is about it. He is an impossible man to sum up in a phrase, but perhaps I can approach it with a tale. Of all the tricks I have seen Topper perform, my favorite is the one in which he spreads a handkerchief over his fist, pokes a well in it with his thumb, drops a lit cigarette in the well, then shakes out the handkerchief to show that the cigarette has disappeared.

What's that you say? You have a thumb tip, too?

Yes, of course you do. But you see, after Topper shows the handkerchief empty, he takes his thumb tip off and passes it out for examination. It's empty, too.

Perhaps you're beginning to see what I meant when I said it takes at least a couple of generations to make one like him.