

MY BROTHER GROUCHO

by Chico Marx



WHEN GROUCHO was born, he was named Julius. And if today he seems a trifle cynical and unbelieving, blame part of it at least on the fact that he was swindled on the very day of his birth. Minnie (we always called Mother by her first name) had read some place about a fabulously wealthy old man who had left his fortune to an impoverished nephew simply because the nephew had the good sense to be named after him. It seems, also, that this rich old man had gone through life cherishing his millions in solitude; not a soul suspected him of possessing so much as a dime!

Minnie's brother-in-law, Julius, answered this description in that nobody suspected *him* of having even a nickel. So, in the hope that Uncle Julius had a few hidden millions, Minnie named her newborn after him.

It was a great shock to Minnie, and a still greater shock to Groucho, when Uncle Julius finally passed to his reward. If he did have hidden wealth, he kept it hidden so

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well nobody ever found it. All he left to his heir and namesake was a paper suitcase containing two shirts, a checkered necktie, and an ancient patent medicine almanac.

The Marx flat on 93rd Street in New York was the General Headquarters of the family. There, midst the bubbling of an always-simmering coffee-pot, the constant din of conversation, and the calculated madness of five boys, we grew to young manhood. Chico (Leonard) was the oldest, then me (originally Adolph, later Arthur), then Groucho (Julius), then Gummo (Milton), and finally Zeppo (Herbert).

Being an apt pupil who enjoyed books, Groucho had no trouble in school. He was constantly in love with his teacher, no matter what she looked like. In fact, Groucho's love for the written word was equaled if not surpassed only by his love for the opposite sex. He has liked girls since he was two years old. (For a Marx Brother, he was slightly backward at two.)

Groucho's infatuation with the language has been the backbone of his entire life and has, undoubtedly, played the largest single part in shaping him into one of the greatest wits of our time. Groucho doesn't regard words the way the rest of us do. He looks at a word in the usual fashion. Then he looks at it upside down, backwards, from the middle out to the ends, and from the ends back to the middle. Next he drops it in a mental Mixmaster, stirs it thoroughly, and studies it

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again from every angle. Groucho doesn't look for double meanings. He looks for quadruple meanings. And usually finds them.

THE FACT THAT the Marx family was broke had far-reaching effects on Groucho's career. It caused him to regard money with the healthy respect it deserves. And it taught him to have an alert social consciousness that plays an important part in his present philosophy. Groucho knows, because he went through it himself, that there are a great many people in this wonderful land who find the bare struggle for existence an ever-present reality. He will call me on the telephone and verbally horsewhip me for saying it, but I think you should know that he is, in a shy way, a very generous and thoughtful person.

The constant struggle for food, and even more pressing, for the rent money, sent all of us on regular excursions having to do with raising a few bucks. I remember one time the city was ripping up the car tracks on Third Avenue. In the process, workmen piled large iron plates at regular intervals, the plates being necessary to hold the tracks in place when traffic was resumed.

Groucho, with a keen eye for a quick dollar, hit upon the plan of trading for cash as many of the plates as we could lift. With all of us thus employed for several hours, we hijacked and subsequently traded for cash more than 1,000 pounds of plates. For this, the junk dealer paid us a total of ten cents.

Groucho's wariness, shrewdness, and general monetary talents were of great importance to him in later

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of great importance to him in later years. You will see what I mean in a moment.

It was a lovely fall day in New York in 1929, and Groucho and his old and equally shrewd financial friend, Max Gordon, the famous Broadway producer, were strolling the links of an exclusive golf club on Long Island. As they played their game, smoking dollar cigars, hitting the ball with gold-plated clubs, and generally personifying the public's picture of Men of Obvious Distinction, Groucho turned to Gordon and asked: "How long has this been going on?"

He could well ask such a question, since he was turning over thousands of dollars a day with his shrewd manipulations on Wall Street. The next day, Black Friday, he was sound asleep, innocently dreaming of life as a multimillionaire, when the phone woke him.

"Groucho?" asked a gruff voice.

"Yes," was the sleepy, platinum-lined response.

"The jig's up!" And the receiver banged in his ear. It was Pauper Gordon notifying Pauper Marx of the crash.

There is disagreement within the family today over the exact circumstances surrounding My Brother's first job as a professional entertainer. I'll give you my version of it, to which Groucho half-heartedly subscribes.

At 13, he had a clear, fine soprano voice much admired by Groucho himself, the neighbors, and most sincerely of all by Minnie. So when Mother heard that a boy soprano was needed in the Episcopal Church choir on Madison Avenue, she pulled enough strings to wangle the job for Groucho.

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Sing he did . . . for five Sundays in a row, at a dollar a Sunday. Then he lost the job. It is in the losing of same that the family disagreement centers.

According to some, the congregation went off for summer vacations. This may be true, but it doesn't sound quite correct to me, since I've never heard of church congregations taking vacations in a body. Another version has it that Groucho fell in love with one of the worshipers' daughters and spent more time making goo-goo eyes than he did exercising his larynx, and thus got fired.

But the version I'm sure is correct involves a long hatpin and the bellows of the old church pump organ. It seems Groucho punctured the bellows.

It was an important incident in his life, since Minnie now was convinced her son could sing professionally. It wasn't long after that she sent him hustling to see a man named Le May about a job for a boy soprano in a trio that was planning to tour the country.

In brief, Groucho won out in competition with two dozen other aspirants, and thus began his professional career as an entertainer. His pay was \$4 a week.

I'll not attempt to describe the life he led on the road, since I wasn't along and don't know what happened anyway. Sufficient to say that he lost his job when the trio reached Denver. Two causes were responsible for the dismissal: Mr. Le May couldn't pay his salary, and Groucho's voice changed from soprano to a leaky baritone.

TODAY, THERE isn't much that passes that Groucho doesn't instantly understand and comment

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upon. He has an instinctive knowledge of current events, politics, philosophy, and economics. He interprets these things in his own way. Others do this too; the difference lies in the frequency of Groucho's opinions and his lack of inhibitions about voicing them.

About the only world he does not understand is the world of mechanics. His lack of feeling for things mechanical could easily have wiped out the Marx Brothers during one of our early Broadway shows. The action called for use of a large pistol in the hands of Groucho. That was a mistake.

Groucho had been assigned the job of acquiring some blank cartridges for the pistol. What he bought were some that didn't quite fit. So he carefully tapped them into the pistol with a hammer.

Even at that, all went well until Groucho pressed the trigger to fire the last cartridge. But that blank was not blank. It contained a real bullet which traveled an amazingly circuitous course through the scenery, the drapes, my theatrical trunk, and the left leg of the trousers I had neatly packed within. You can imagine the relief with which I tell this story, for Groucho had been aiming the pistol at me!

Perhaps I'd better take advantage of this opportunity to clear up the details of how I joined Groucho and Gummo on the stage. I've read many accounts of this, but here are the facts.

I was a bellhop at the Hotel Seville in New York, while Groucho and Gummo were out in the hinterlands singing and acting. Mother liked to keep her brood together so she could maintain a motherly vigil, and this she found difficult to

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do with the three boys scattered.

One day she appeared at the Seville in a taxicab. She collared me, dragged me to the cab, took me to the small theater where Groucho and Gummo were appearing, and literally shoved me on the stage.

Naturally I had no experience, no instructions, only a sense of complete confusion. But I stood there, dumb as a telephone pole, while Groucho and Gummo ad-libbed me into the act.

Among the many later successes we enjoyed on Broadway, I think we had the most fun in *I'll Say She Is*, our first big show. Its "Napoleon" scene is considered, within the family, to be the funniest we've ever done.

Groucho, as "Napoleon," is bidding farewell to Josephine. He is dressed in a tricorne hat, a frock coat bearing epaulets the size of cantaloupes, hip boots, and a sword that trips him with every step. He takes the lovely Josephine in his arms, and utters one of the theater's now-classic lines: "Jo, your eyes are shining like the seat of a blue serge suit!"



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With that he departs, and the rest of us, Josie's lovers, come out from beneath the sofa, behind the drapes, and down from the chandelier. There is a noise, and the lovers spring back into their hiding places. Groucho, tripping on his sword as he re-enters, suspects a slight case of infidelity in his wife.

"Jo," he says, "you are as true as a three-dollar cornet."

From the window comes the sound of martial music. "Ah," says Groucho, "the *Mayonnaise*! The Army must be dressing."

"I am true to the French Army," says Josephine.

"Thank Heavens," says Groucho, "we have no Navy!"

And again he departs. And again the lovers come from their hiding places. And again Groucho returns to the boudoir of his beloved. And again he's suspicious.

Snuffbox in hand, Groucho makes a tour of the room, dusting lightly as he goes. From behind the sofa comes a violent sneeze. From behind the drapes, a volcanic eruption. From the closet, a hideous moaning and groaning.

At this point, I come up from beneath the sofa, wearing a gas mask, as Groucho, in a high soprano voice, sings: "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

To select Groucho's funniest single line on Broadway is a difficult assignment, even for Groucho. In the family, we have a number of favorites.

In *The Cocoanuts*, for example, I am center stage, playing my harp. The lights are dimmed except for a soft spot on me. The audience is quiet. The mood is perfect. Softly I play. Still softer. Still more softly.

At this point, Groucho's inimi-

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table voice interrupts like a cannon shot from the wings. "Softer! I can still hear you!"

Then there's the one from *A Day at the Races*. Groucho is a quack doctor and in the course of a party he decides to give me an examination. As I lie flat on my back, asleep, he takes my hand, feels the pulse, listens professionally to my heart, looks at his watch, and says: "Either my watch has stopped, or you're dead."

Now I'd like to tell you about My Brother's mustache. Originally, in his character as Groucho the Madman, it was painted on. Then he went into his radio show, "You Bet Your Life." Producers of that show, principally his partner John Guedel, convinced him the public expected Groucho Marx to wear a mustache. So Groucho, for the first time in his life, grew a mustache. This was fine, except that his pretty young wife Kay objected strenuously.

"When you kiss me," she complained, "it's like kissing a Fuller brush. That . . . *thing* . . . has got to come off." And off it came.

Guedel and the public screamed. So back came the mustache. Kay screamed. Off came the mustache.

This off-and-on dilemma lasted for 13 months. Finally Groucho gave in. He kept his mustache.

When the average American thinks of Groucho, he pictures him chasing a voluptuous blonde, bilking a gullible dowager, racing in that hilarious slinking crouch from one slightly fraudulent experience to another.

Groucho with a real mustache is a new character. The new Groucho is actually the real Groucho, more sensible, wittier, warmer, and more believable.

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Actually, the Madman character that millions of stage and picture fans know is an imaginary character who needs three other imaginary characters to give him substance. The Marx Brothers, as a complete unit, are no more. We all feel those days are done, and each is going his separate way.

So far, Groucho has done extremely well alone. His radio show, "You Bet Your Life," sponsored by De Soto-Plymouth, is one of the most successful on the air. Here's how he conducts it.

Picture a simple, uncluttered stage, in the center a high stool with a music rack alongside. The microphones stand a few feet away. Groucho, usually dressed in sport shirt and slacks, loafs on the stool, cigar in hand, twinkle in his eye. His contestants stand opposite him, nervous, smiling, and frightened.

Groucho never sees them until he meets them for the first time on the air. His staff goes through the audience finding housewives, plumbers, carpenters, doctors, grocers, butchers, and everyday people whose occupations might provide fuel for his trigger brain. And though he's talked to more than 700 people on the air in 118 programs, he has yet to have a bad show.

ONE OF GROUCHO'S pet hobbies through the years has been baseball, and several nights a week during the season will find him rooting for his favorite team, the Hollywood Stars. But his interest in the game once led to a humiliating experience.

When we took our shows on the road, we always had a company baseball team, made up of ourselves and the actors we engaged. Wherever we went, we challenged

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local teams. We met our come-uppance in San Diego, California.

Our opponents were a team of theater ushers that had been mopping up everything in a winter semipro league. We, being from the big town, took it for granted we could easily handle anything west of the Hudson.

As the game began, we noticed the huge size of the ushers, but gave little thought to it. As things turned out, we should have.

Groucho took his station at short-stop, Gummo was on first base, Chico covered third, and I scampered about in center field. The first usher took his stance at bat, looked at the left-field fence, and announced: "I think I'll put the ball over that one." And he did.

The second usher tapped his bat professionally against his shoes, adjusted his cap, and announced: "I think I'll put this one over the right-field fence."

This fellow was an awful liar, though. He put it over the center-field fence.

At the end of the first inning, the score stood: Marx Brothers, 0; San Diego Ushers, 30.

What had happened? Well, the Marx Brothers had been taken for a colossal gag. We were playing practically the entire first team of the New York Giants!

But usually the gag is the other way around. Just recently, Groucho and I were in the Hollywood

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Brown Derby when a cheery little old lady, her white hair curled in ringlets, approached us, autograph book in hand. Looking squarely at Groucho, she boldly asked: "Are you Harpo Marx?"

Groucho looked at her a moment and raised an eyebrow.

"No," he replied. "Are you?"

Coronet

February, 1951

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