

# HE SETS THEM WONDERING



PHOTO BY IRENE DREW-OGGIANO  
To look at Dr. Clyde R. Miller, you wouldn't suspect his sole form of recreation is playing practical jokes.

By FRED C. KELLY

TO LOOK at Dr. Clyde R. Miller, bald-headed, solemn-faced intellectual of the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University, you wouldn't for a moment suspect that he has in him a streak of Peter Pan; that one side of his nature is of a boy who never grew up. Either in spite of, or because of, a deeply serious outlook on the world, Miller gets his perspective and his balance by means of a peculiar hobby. His sole form of recreation is playing practical jokes. But they are not the common variety, for he has a brand all his own. Doctor Miller's practical jokes never cause the victim distress or embarrassment. They simply create in him an intense wonderment. Nor does the doctor derive his amusement from actually seeing the outcome of his pranks. He devises his bit of deviltry, often with great care, winds it up and goes away and leaves it, chuckling inwardly over what he knows will ultimately happen.

His jokes wouldn't seem so astounding if they came from someone less deeply devoted to the serious side of life. But Miller since early youth has been a zealous student and a hard worker in intellectual pursuits. In college he was elected to both the outstanding fraternities: Sigma Xi, for original work in science, and Phi Beta Kappa, for scholarship of distinction. Various other honors have come to him in journalistic and academic circles. His course in Public Opinion and Education at Teachers College has frequently been voted by his students the most valuable course they have taken at Columbia. When he became secretary, director and moving spirit of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, his serious side was uppermost. Yet it was probably the same seeking for balanced perspective which led him to try to find out what propagandists are up to and to analyze their work. His non-frivolous side shows, too, in that he is identified with conservatism in politics and religion—a Lincoln Republican

and Methodist, besides being a Son of the American Revolution. Perhaps Miller's unconscious motivation is like that of Charles Beard, Booth Tarkington, and the late Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who have understood serious affairs better by playing jokes, viewing the funny side of life and deflating pomposities. At any rate, unlike many educators, Miller does not let his academic distinctions or his grave countenance prevent his getting laughs as he goes along. He simply applies the same careful thought and ingenuity to a prank that he does to preparing a course of college lectures.

The doctor and I visited a friend's farm one day and found the farm tenant in the midst of dehorning a resentful bull. When Miller noticed a pair of horns on the ground in the barnyard he casually inquired what would be done with them. Assured that the farmer had no use for them, he asked if he might have them as souvenirs. I don't think he yet had any idea what he would do with them, but merely felt sure that a brace of horns would somehow, someday, come in handy. He wrapped them in a newspaper and carried them back to his apartment in town. In the elevator he nodded to a man who lived in the house. He knew the man only slightly, but was convinced, he afterward told me, that he took life seriously. At once the doctor saw what to do with his horns. He would ship them to his neighbor. Just how this should be done was a detail requiring careful thought. He recalled that he knew a certain vice-consul in Cairo, Egypt, who might prove a willing ally. The next day he went to the corner cigar store and got a box that had once contained packages of Egyptian cigarettes. After carefully cleaning and polishing the horns, he packed them in tissue paper in the box, which he wrapped and addressed. I got my laugh when I read the card he enclosed: "Thought you would treasure these horns from the Sacred Bull of



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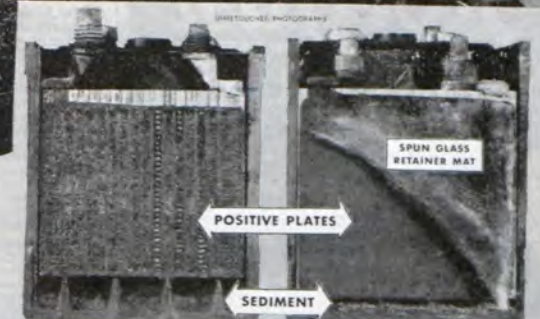
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Aah," signed "Caesar Youtz." Then Miller rewrapped the package and forwarded it to his friend in Cairo, at the same time sending a letter containing international reply coupons, and a request that the box be stamped and dropped into the mail after the outer wrapping had been removed.

It was two or three years before Miller received any word of the horns. But he didn't mind the long silence, for he had many a chuckle thinking how the recipient must be wondering and asking himself: What is or was the Sacred Bull of Aah? Who might Caesar Youtz be? Had he once known him and if so why was the name so unfamiliar? What possible motive could there be in sending such a token?

When, after he had become better acquainted with his neighbor, and was a guest in his apartment one evening, Miller was somewhat astonished to hear his host say: "Here's something that might interest you—a pair of horns from a sacred bull, found in the tomb of King Tut, sent to me by an old friend. I am going to give them to a museum."

Miller's unblinking comment was: "They're probably worth a lot of money."

"Yes, of course," was the reply. "I've had a number of big offers for them."

As another example of his immediate use of whatever devices he happens to come upon, Miller, while in his dentist's office, noticed a tray heaped with teeth that his friend had extracted. They had been sterilized and kept as specimens of various aspects of decay. Amused by Miller's obvious interest, the dentist, laughing, told him to help himself. Thereupon Miller put a handful in his pocket.

These molars suggested a new field of activities and today Miller nearly always carries a few old teeth with him. "Nothing like a tooth in an unexpected place to perplex a person," he says. He surreptitiously drops one in a friend's coat pocket, or watches for an opportunity to slip one under a pile of letters on an office desk. One evening, sitting next to a pompous woman at a formal dinner, he hung back as the guests were leaving the dining room and, when no one was looking, dropped a once-precious tooth into the woman's coffee cup. He assumed that the cook would report the find to the hostess, and he knew that she would never cease to wonder how that ever happened.

### Made-to-Order Toothaches

Possibly my friend is blamed for many pranks that he didn't play, but persistent rumor is that he once dipped the pronged roots of two or three teeth in red ink to make them more realistic and carried them in his pocket awaiting the ideal moment for their introduction to a favored few on a subway car. One morning as he neared his getting-off place, he noticed that none of the passengers near him was reading. It was a rare moment and one he sought. He nervously dropped his paper to his lap, made a wry face, as if in sudden pain, reached into his mouth, drew out a blood-red tooth he had palmed, and tossed it nonchalantly to the floor. Several passengers gasped, but Miller, unmindful, slowly folded his newspaper and started for the exit just in time to hear a fat and wide-eyed woman breathlessly wheeze, "Well, did you ever!"

Sometimes, if he has a friendly accomplice with him, Doctor Miller will

make a game out of trying to see how many people he can lure from a crowded streetcar to satisfy a curiosity he has aroused by talking in a confidential tone to his companion about a mysterious murder. Neighboring passengers overhear snatches of conversation: . . . "Yes, a beautiful woman and well-dressed. . . . We can't understand why nobody touched her diamonds and why the body was left in a vacant lot. . . . I'm on my way there now to meet the coroner; better come along with me."

Then he and his accomplice get off the car and walk leisurely homeward, Miller looking out of the tail of his eye to see how many people are following him. His ambition is to empty a car completely, but his record so far is five men and four women trailers.

### Mystifying the Headwaiter

Others of the doctor's pranks require a stooge, someone to whom he can make his bewildering statements. I met him one day walking briskly along lower Broadway. After friendly greetings he asked me to go with him on what he called an important errand. Into one of the biggest buildings in the Wall Street district he went and, without pausing, on downstairs into a restaurant that looked about the size of Madison Square. Not many customers were there, as it was too early for lunch. Miller paid no attention to the headwaiter, who stepped forward smiling and bowing, but studied the walls and ceiling for a moment, and then carefully paced off about twelve feet, after which he stooped down and made a heavy pencil mark on the tile floor. He had suddenly become a building contractor. With a wave of the hand he turned to me and said: "The new partition goes right along here. That opening yonder is to be walled up, and over there we'll put the row of washbowls."

By that time the manager of the place had stepped up to ask: "What's this all about?"

"We just came in to see about the alterations," replied Miller, as he whipped out a small tapeline and began to measure the width of the front door.

"But what about the lease?" asked the manager.

"I wouldn't know nothin' about no lease," said Miller, looking up at the ceiling as if planning to put in a new one. "I just follow orders and go according to the blueprints." Then to me: "You'll have all the specifications in the morning. Start on the job Monday."

As if too preoccupied to have heard other questions the manager was asking, he dashed out, and I lost no time following him, for it was a terrible strain to keep from laughing.

Once again on the sidewalk, Miller, quietly chuckling, said: "That restaurant chap is telephoning to the building manager by now, and the building manager will get in touch with somebody else. Think how perplexed they'll be, trying to figure out what it all means. Every one of the waiters will go home and tell his wife about it. Say, wouldn't it be fun if we could walk into a meeting of the directors of some big corporation and start spraying the walls with germicide?"

My friend, the doctor, has a genius for turning the most commonplace situation into a mystery. While walking along New York's Sixth Avenue, he noticed a girl turning pancakes on a

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(Continued from Page 146)

griddle in the front window of a nationally known restaurant. He stared at the operation for several moments as if in deep study, then tapped on the window, pointed to one of the slabs of batter, and made a motion with his hand to indicate that he wanted that particular cake turned next. The girl, perhaps thinking the serious-looking spectator might become suddenly violent, humored him and did as directed. Instantly he pointed to another cake and the girl, now a bit alarmed, turned it also.

After a minute or two of this, Miller took a notebook from his pocket and pretended to jot down memoranda, as if for a report. Then gazing for a moment at the girl, he continued his stroll. The bewildered girl doubtless reported the episode to her boss, and both presumably are still wondering what could have been the purpose of that inspector's visit.

Most of Miller's pranks, however, do not require his open participation. His favorite method is by use of the mails. Not long ago he mailed a dozen cookies to a friend, with a card that read: "Mother wanted you to have these in appreciation for all the nice things you have done," signed "Ruth." He has not yet found out what the friend thought, but he is sure the fellow has wondered much about "Ruth" and what were the nice things he had done for "mother." Probably no other cookies ever created so much curiosity.

When some friendly publisher sends Miller a dull book, he immediately forwards it to one of his friends, with a note purporting to be from the book's author, saying: "I hope you will like the references in this little volume to yourself and that you will not mind the free use that I have made of your name."

The idea is that the recipient can hardly resist reading all the way through the dull book in the hunt for his name.

### A Christmas Dilemma

Another bit of mischief was to send a box of half a dozen beautiful red apples to a friend with a note saying: "Your trouble may be from not eating enough fruit. Try these and see if you don't have a better outlook on life." The signature was a name the friend had never heard of.

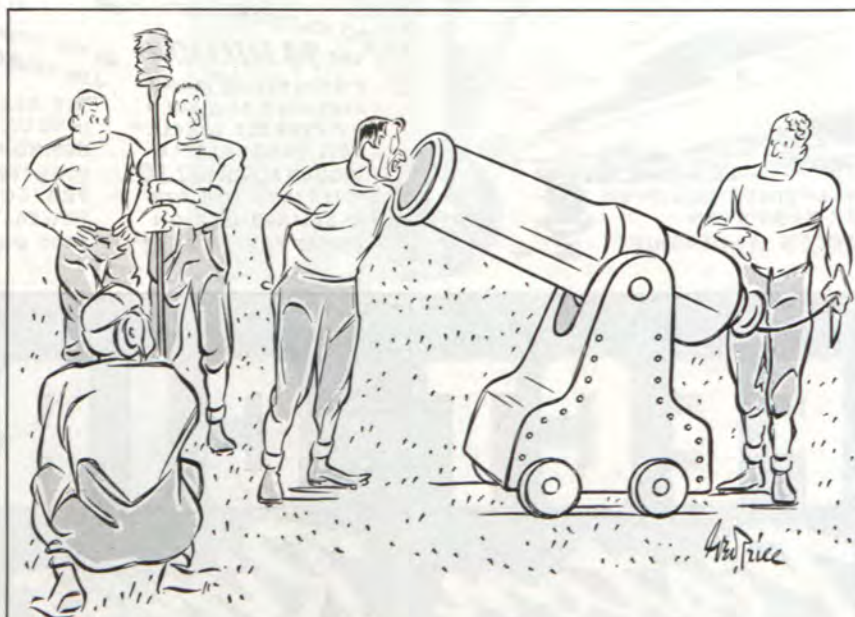
Last year, two or three weeks before Christmas, Miller received a half dozen samples of Christmas cards along with an order blank and a high-powered sales letter. They were evidently cards the printer had saved from previous orders, as they bore customers' names. One was a greeting from Doctor and Mrs. James R. Montgomery, another from George and Helen McFarland, and so on. Miller remembered that he had in his desk a bundle of holiday cards he had received the previous Christmas. Altogether, counting the sample cards, he had about fifty. These he mailed to various friends, making sure that the names on the cards would not be familiar to them. On each he wrote with pen and ink a brief intimate message: "Cousin George finally got the job. He would love to hear from you." "Ben and Hattie have a new baby. They are naming it after you." It is easy to imagine the brain-racking that went on, trying to identify the senders.

### Advertising the Diplomats

Not long ago Miller heard that a certain business college had duplicated the stationery of various well-known corporations for the use of students in typewriting. He arranged in some fashion to get hold of a score of these letterheads. Then, after typing this mysterious message, "We are sorry to say your suggestion does not interest us," he mailed them to his most serious-minded friends.

The last time I saw Doctor Miller, he had his vest pocket filled with calling cards that he was about to distribute where they would do the most good. He had recently been in Washington at the home of a friend high in Government circles and had noticed on a silver tray in the hallway a number of cards left by various prominent officials and their wives. Miller had begged for some of these and his host had yielded. Back in New York, Miller made a round of calls on acquaintances he knew were not at home. When the housemaid came to the door he would leave a Washington card. That's why a number of families on Riverside Drive, in Greenwich Village and elsewhere have been wondering how they happened to receive a call from a foreign diplomat they'd never met.

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