

Round Instead of Flat

M A R I E C H A Y

ONE OF THE things my brother and I never wanted to do after we got through the third grade was to go backstage to see famous people of any kind even though we had been stage struck from the time we could remember. We were always very happy to see actors, politicians, or commencement speakers on stage or on the screen but never away from either.

Once, through a friend, we even had the chance to meet Philip Morris after we watched him put on his "Caw-el for Philip Mawrissss" act in front of a Denver hotel, but we didn't accept. We watched Philip Morris's face carefully all through his act, and even though we saw nothing but a gentle, kindly look about him, and he seemed so much to want to please, we didn't want to see any more about him than was there out in the open in his act. That was enough for us and all we wanted.

My brother and I had our reasons for this. We grew up on a small mountain ranch near the mining camp of El Ganado in the southern Colorado Rockies and there we more or less had to entertain ourselves by games, movies, and reading. We had dozens of heroes in baseball, in the movies, and in the cowboys we saw around us, but these were all grown-ups. These were heroes we wanted to be like when we grew up, but that was years away. Right now we wanted someone our age and we had him in Buster Brown who advertised the shoes we wore.

We had never seen him in person, of course, but we knew exactly what he and his dog Tige looked like. In the shoe section of the company store was a huge picture of the two, while we had a much smaller one tacked on the wall of our "office," a small shed in our orchard.

In the evening newspaper from Tulipán,

the county seat, and in the Sunday papers, we often saw little items about Buster Brown and his pet. Once in a while in the monthly magazines my mother took we could read more about him and his dog who could do all sorts of miraculous tricks. My brother and I probably knew more about Buster Brown and Tige than we knew about some of our friends and their pets.

In the pictures, Buster Brown stared out at us as if unaware that wearing short pants and a short jacket and blouse with round white collar and cuffs showing wasn't something embarrassing. We knew better because my brother when he was dressed up had to wear that costume but without the collar and cuffs. Instead, he wore an ordinary white shirt, but he also wore the long ribbed stockings held up by invisible garters and the famous Buster Brown round-toed oxfords.

Fortunately for him, my brother didn't have to wear the Buster Brown hat, a large straw with the brim turned up all around, a black ribbon around the crown, and streamers down the back. Most of the other boys in the camp dressed as my brother did when they had to dress up, but the son of the mine superintendent and the son of the office manager weren't so lucky. Their mothers were rivals, each trying to show she was the head woman of the camp. So for dress up these two boys had to wear the full costume—collar, cuffs, hat, and all.

At first my brother and the boys in our group wavered between feeling sorry for Buster Brown and resenting him because of his costume. It was only when one of the girls in our group came up with the idea that Buster shouldn't be blamed for the boys' costumes, that all the boys not only forgave him but became even more loyal in supporting him.

Didn't Buster have a mother too, the girl had asked. Probably he too wanted to wear long pants and a shirt but wasn't allowed to.

This stopped them and after a moment of looking around at each other, they nodded.

Well, then, Mrs. Brown was to blame, not her son. He was no better off than we were. He was a child just as we were and like us he had to do what he was told.

"And Tige too," my brother said to me later on when we talked about this because Blackie, our own dog, also had to abide by our mother's rules.

After this the sympathy of our whole group for Buster Brown increased every time we saw a picture of him advertising his shoes. While my brother and his friends could come home and take off their "Sunday" suits and put on old shirts and overalls, Buster Brown was stuck with the same old suit. Not once in the many pictures we saw of him did he ever wear anything but his Buster Brown costume.

"You think he's got a dozen?" my brother asked me once, worried. As a girl I would be more familiar with such problems.

I said that I thought he probably had even more. My brother had six pairs of overalls, and even when they got dirty the dirt didn't show on them too much. With white collars and cuffs on a suit that was worn day and night, I thought a dozen was hardly a beginning.

"Gosh" my brother finally said when he realized what this meant to poor Buster Brown.

We continued admiring Buster Brown, feeling sorry for him too, and hating his mother for what she was doing to him and to the boys in our group who had to dress like him. If we could only meet Buster Brown, we would tell him all these things and then he would feel better knowing there were so many back of him.

Not long after this, my brother and I read somewhere that Buster Brown traveled around advertising his shoes.

"Tige goes too!" my brother said, and

we tried to picture what it would be like to see them.

"During school?" my brother said after we had gotten over our shock. Our faith in what we saw in print was about to be questioned until I remembered that of course it would only be on week-ends to places somewhat distant from where he and his family lived, and after school for nearby towns.

What bothered us even so was when Buster Brown get his lessons done, but we decided so famous a child surely had ways that weren't known to ordinary children like us.

When we were in the third grade, the manager of the company store startled everyone by saying that Buster Brown and Tige would be at the store the last of June. None of us could believe it. This wouldn't be just the picture of Buster Brown we knew by heart. This was to be a real live person who would stand right in front of us and whom we could touch if we wanted. As my brother said, he would be round instead of flat. Besides this, we could also see Tige perform and from him learn tricks we could teach our own dogs.

Best of all, Buster Brown would be in El Ganado during vacation so that all of us would have plenty of time to sit around and talk and not have to worry about going to school or about getting our lessons.

My brother planned to ask Buster Brown how he could stand wearing long stockings in the summer. He himself only had to wear them for "Sunday," but that was bad enough.

The two boys in our group who actually had to wear Buster Brown hats to top off their authentic Buster Brown costumes felt that because of their misery they were closer to Buster Brown than any of us. When they said they would speak to him first and the longest, we deferred to them. It was only right.

During the two or three weeks before Buster Brown got to El Ganado, we discussed how he would get there. Would he come up from Tulipán, the county seat ten miles away, by the plough horse C&S train, as we called it because it was all coal cars with one car just before the caboose half passenger and half baggage? Would he come up by "stage," the stage being a three seated Packard Twin Six touring car? Certainly he wouldn't come up by horse and buggy as so many of the older people still did.

We finally decided that, naturally, being a famous boy which meant rich, he and his parents owned their own touring car and would come up that way with Mr. Brown driving, if he could get off work, Mrs. Brown beside him, and Buster and Tige in the back with what suitcases couldn't fit in the luggage carrier.

One of our group said that that was the way an aunt and uncle and cousins of his from Denver did it, and Buster Brown was certainly as rich as they were, and maybe even more so.

The day Buster Brown was to come, none of us needed to be told to scrub our faces and ears. We had had a meeting the day before at which we decided the girls would wear their white "Sunday" dresses, white cotton stockings, but with our Buster Brown oxfords instead of our black patent leather Mary Jane pumps.

In deference to Buster Brown, the two boys whose mothers made them wear Buster Brown suits said they would wear the full costume, and for once the other boys envied them, even their hats. All they could do was wear their "Sunday" suits and Buster Brown shoes.

We were at the company store long before nine o'clock when Buster Brown was to arrive with his parents and Tige. We stayed close to the door at the front, each of us hoping to be the first to see the Brown

car come down the cinder-covered road in the center of the camp.

After a while, Mr. Landon, the store manager, called us to the back part where the shoes were, and there, standing no taller than we were, shorter even than some, was Buster Brown and Tige looking just as we had so often seen them in pictures except that now, for some reason, Buster Brown looked even funnier in a Buster Brown suit than the boys in our group did.

Even so, we started to rush toward him and then stopped. We looked at the two boys with Buster Brown hats who had wanted to be first, but they were slowly stepping backwards to the back of the group.

When the store manager asked us to come up and say hello to Buster Brown, we went up a little further until we were finally looking into a face that was wrinkled and hard with a wide, loose, unsmiling but not stern mouth.

The thing that impressed us the most was his eyes even though he only gave us a sweeping glance, then closed one eye in a wink without changing his expression one bit, opened the eye just as mechanically and then concentrated his attention on the eighth grade girls who had also come to the store but not with us and who were now in a group to one side.

When Buster Brown continued to look at them, the eighth grade girls began to giggle and drew closer together. We waited for him to look at us again, but when he didn't we looked at Tige who had come in with his master. He looked at us just as Buster Brown had, yawned and sat down on his haunches, his front legs held up straight and stiff. With his tongue out as he panted and with the white ring around one eye, he seemed to be leering whether he looked straight ahead or to the left or right as he did now and then.

A strange man who had been standing

at the back of the shoe section began to walk up and down and to clear his throat every time he made a turn and started walking back again. After a while, Buster Brown stopped looking at the eighth grade girls and looked at our feet.

"Ya like Buster Brown shoes?" he asked in a raspy voice which sounded just like a boy in our group when he was imitating one of the store clerks.

When we nodded, Buster Brown told us to go on wearing them because they were good for our feet. He snapped his fingers several times and after a while Tige rolled over slowly two or three times, then stood on his hind legs and walked around. Taking a running start, he jumped up in Buster Brown's arms, stood a moment, and then got on Buster's shoulder and jumped back down.

He grabbed what seemed to be Buster Brown's shoe laces and then tugged at them, shaking his head and growling. When Buster snapped his fingers again, he finally let go, though we noticed the laces were barely wet.

All of these things Tige did in a perfunctory, insolent way and when he was through, he sat back down on his haunches and started to pant again.

After a while, looking first sideways and then back at the eighth grade girls who giggled more than ever, Buster Brown walked out the back of the store followed by Tige and the other man.

We stood around for a few moments, wondering whether Buster Brown would return, not really sure we wanted him to, and then we slowly walked out the front door. For a few minutes we stood in front of the store, some of us taking a few aimless steps, not saying anything much except for the boys with the Buster Brown costumes who complained about having worn them. Then everyone started drifting away, thinking only of going home, changing clothes,

and going out to play.

My brother and I walked around to the back of the store with Blackie following and started off down the road to our ranch. In the back of the store, we saw a large dark green touring car and attached to it at the back was a small slanting green tent. When we came around to the front of the tent, we saw that inside there were a table and two chairs. In the chair closer to the opening was the man who had been in the back of the store, now leaning over the table writing. In the other chair in the shadows, his hat off, his Buster Brown bangs pushed back and with his feet propped on the table was Buster Brown smoking a cigar and holding a glass.

"For Criz sake," we heard in the same raspy voice we had heard in the store.

In almost one motion, Buster Brown took the cigar out of his mouth, put the glass on the ground, flipped his feet off the table, gave his head a shake, and clapped his hat back on. At the same time, the other man jumped up, grabbed the tent flap as he came out and snapped it shut.

It all took only seconds, and my brother and I weren't even sure of what we had heard or seen.

"Well, the show's over, kids," the man said to us just as Tige came out from under the tent. "Buster Brown has to get ready

for the next show up the valley. Lots of mining camps to get to, you know," he said, smiling and putting his hands on our heads.

We looked at him and then at Tige who was also being looked over by Blackie. After a few disdainful looks and sniffs, Blackie turned away with the look he used when he didn't like anyone.

"He wasn't like us at all," my brother said as we walked disconsolately home.

"Even Tige wasn't---wasn't---," I said, trailing off.

"Was it really Buster Brown?" my brother asked after a while.

I shook my head, as perplexed as he was. "It sorta looked like him," I said, still half loyal.

My brother thought a moment. "Yah, his clothes and hair did," he answered.

"Should we keep his picture?" my brother asked when we got to our office" and stood looking at Buster Brown's picture facing us as we went in.

I nodded a little hesitantly, waiting to hear what he would say.

"All right," he said, much more positive than I had been, "but not here anymore. Here I'm going to put Lou Gehrig."

I agreed completely. Grown-ups, much as we hated to admit it, were safer. They were already old to begin with and so they would never change.