Hitchcock's familiar TV trademark was drawn by himself.

"I've never gone in for the creaking-door type of suspense," says Alfred Hitchcock. "To me, murder by a babbling brook, drenched in sunshine, is more interesting than murder in a dark alley."

I CALL ON ALFRED HITCHCOCK

BY PETE MARTIN

A Post editor exposes the tricks of TV's master of suspense, who makes your flesh creep with his gruesome practical jokes.

Alfred Hitchcock's office was on the first floor of the Paramount Studio. As I walked in, it all came back to me. I had been in that office before, to talk to Frank Capra or to Willie Wyler. I couldn't remember which. It had been a long time ago and both Capra and Wyler had been gone from Paramount for years. For all I knew, they might be on their way back. Things happen that way in Hollywood.

The small round man who occupied that office now had a long pink nose and a slow

A touch of Hitchcock's British humor: In "The Lady Vanishes" (1938), two men (left) coolly discuss cricket scores as Europe falls under the Nazi fist.

In "Foreign Correspondent" (1940), the assassin (left) shoots a diplomat with a pistol concealed by a camera. A year later, a real assassin imitated this method in Teheran.

Hitchcock interrupts shooting on location at Marrakech, Morocco, to be sure that an actor (left) "bleeds to death" properly.

voice that wheezed as he talked. He was neither Capra nor Wyler. Instead, he was his own highly individual self, but a number of intelligent people believe that in his own bailiwick Alfred Hitchcock has no remote rival as a directorial genius.

I'd been trying to see him for a week, but he'd been very ill. Then he was reported convalescent. At last I got the word if I'd be at Paramount at three o'clock the following afternoon, he'd be happy to talk to me. When I saw him he looked amazingly well. I was surprised. I'd met him once before while covering the Hollywood beat and he looked better now than he had then.

"I hear you had more than one operation," I said. "Coming one on top of the other, they must have been quite a shock."

"The biggest shock was the indignities to which institutions of healing subject your person," he told me. "I'm not a squeamish man, but some of the things they do to you in hospitals are no less than obscene. When they came in to prepare me for surgery and tied a label on my wrist with my name on it, I thought, *They must think I'm ready for the morgue.*

"'It isn't that,' they told me, laughingly. 'We just don't want you to get mixed up with anyone else and have the wrong operation.' That in itself was a thought-provoking notion.

"I had colitis, which was painful, and I'd had an umbilical hernia for years, and I had done nothing about either. I had those things taken care of; then I developed a pain in another place and I had jaundice. So, after profound study, the medical brains decided, 'You must have stones in your gall bladder,' and they took those out too. Their attitude reminded me strongly of the fight manager who says to his pug, 'Get in that ring and slug it out, boy. They can't hurt us.'"

"Speaking of physical indignities," I said, "it seems to me that the way various people describe you comes under that heading. Your nose has been called pendulous, your lower lip has been compared with a sugar scoop. If I asked you to describe yourself physically, how would you do it?"

"A New York doctor once told me that I'm an adrenal type," he said. "That apparently means that I'm all body and only vestigial legs. But since I'm neither a mile runner nor a dancer and my present interest in my body is almost altogether from the waist up, that didn't bother me much."

"Who drew that cartoon of you I see on my TV screen?" I (Continued on Page 71)

A bemused Hitchcock confronts some bizarre local scenery in Marrakech, where he directed, "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956). This fall, he takes on ten one-hour TV shows, plus his weekly half-hour program.

I Call on Alfred Hitchcock

(Continued from Page 37)

said. "The one composed of two or three lines that gradually turn into you."

"I drew it myself," he said. "I began to draw it years ago, when I was a movie art director. With one exception, there's been little change in it since then. At one time I had more hair. All three of them were wavy."

"TV viewers are funny," I said. "I've noticed that one of the things about you which seems to appeal to them is the fact that when they stare at you on a TV screen, you stare right back at them contemptuously. But what seems to fascinate your viewing audience even more than your superciliousness is your lack of reverence for your sponsor."

"Remember the old saying, 'A knock is as good as a boost,'" he said. "My guess is that my sponsor enjoys my lack of obsequiousness, but in the beginning they had difficulty in getting used to my approach and they took umbrage at my less worshipful remarks. However, the moment they became aware of the commercial effects of my belittling—they took a look at their sales charts—they stopped questioning the propriety of my cracks. But there's no getting around it, I did take getting used to. The tradition is that the sponsor must be coddled. In such an atmosphere I was a novelty.

Long before boys step into their fathers' shoes, daughters nowadays slip into their shirts.

CHARLES RUFFING

"The type of humor I wanted to use on TV was the type I employed in my film, The Trouble With Harry. In that film, Harry was a dead body who was a botheration to those who were alive. The awkward question, 'What'll we do with Harry?' was always popping up. There were those who found the notion gruesomely amusing, so I told myself that if no reverence for a dead body is amusing, no reverence for a live sponsor might be amusing too.

"In selecting the stories for my television shows, I try to make them as meaty as the sponsor and the network will stand for. I hope to offset any tendency toward the macabre with humor. As I see it, that is a typically English form of humor; even a typically London type of humor. It's of a piece with such jokes as the one about the man who was being led to the gallows to be hanged. He looked at the trap door in the gallows, which was flimsily constructed, and he asked in some alarm, 'I say, is that thing safe?'

"A story about the comedian, Charles Coborn, is cut from the same bolt of cloth," Hitchcock said. "I mean the original Charles Coborn, not the Hollywood one, whose name is spelled slightly different. The first Charles Coborn, who was famed for singing The Man That Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, attended the wartime funeral of another comedian named Harry Tate, who'd been hit by some antiaircraft-shell fragments. A large assembly of comedians was gathering at the graveside. Old Charles was so ancient that he was retired, and as the coffin was being lowered into the grave, one curious young sprout leaned over and whispered, 'How old are you, Charlie?'

"'Eighty-nine,' Coborn said.

"'Hardly seems worth while your going home,' the young 'un said.

"That's an example of the kind of humor I'm talking about," Hitchcock said. "But in case you've already heard that one, here's another story about two charwomen having a day off at a fair. They were in a side show watching a man whose quaint notion of entertaining the public was to bite the heads from live rats and chickens. In carnival lingo, parties who purvey such entertainment are called 'gooks.' The two chars stared at the gook, horrified, but one of them couldn't help trying to make a bit of a joke. 'Wouldn't you like a piece of bread with it?' she called out."

Hitchcock looked at me with a pleased expression, as if he'd just unburdened himself of a fragile and delicious witticism, but I was glad that I'd already had my lunch. However, his mention of hens triggered my next remark.

"I hear your father was a poulterer," I said.

"He was," Hitchcock told me. "And there's a theory that I've never liked eggs because of my father's occupation. It's true that I do regard eggs as loathsome, and to me, the most repulsive smell in the world is that which reeks up from a hard-boiled egg, but my father's occupation has nothing to do with my reaction. I hate the whole idea of eggs so much that when I can, I drop one of them negatively, shall we say, into my pictures to cover them with the obloquy they so richly deserve. For example, in To Catch a Thief I had a woman stub out her cigarette in an egg yolk."

"I do remember that," I said, "but it's the only one of your egg scenes I do remember."

"In a picture made years ago, Shadow of a Doubt," he said, "there was a moment in which I wanted a man to be shocked by something someone had said. His knife was headed straight for a fried egg, and at the instant the remark was made, the knife punctured the yolk and immediately yellow goo spread all over his plate. To me, it was much more effective than oozing blood.

"People constantly ask me, 'Why are you so interested in crime?'" Hitchcock went on. "The truth is I'm not. I'm only interested in it as it affects my profession. Actually I'm quite terrified of policemen; so much so that in 1939, when I first came to America, I refused to drive a car, for fear a policeman would stop me and give me a ticket. The thought that if I drove I would face that possibility day after day frightened me horribly, for I can't bear suspense."

My face must have registered amazement, for he hastily explained, "I mean I hate it when I'm on the receiving end. People told me, 'Maybe if you will open a door in your subconscious, behind which you are concealing a psychosis acquired in your childhood, you'll lose your fear of policemen.'

"I grubbed back into my memory and opened the following door: when I was a small lad my father sent me to the local chief constable with a note. The constable read the note, laughed and locked me into a cell for a minute or two while he said, 'That's what we do to naughty boys.' It was my father's idea of teaching me an object lesson. When they hear that, everyone says, 'Of course! That's why you're afraid of police.' Unhappily, however, the fact that I have exposed that incident to the light has not allayed my fears. Cops still give me goose pimples."

I told him that one of my favorite Hitchcock touches was the sequence in the film, The Lady Vanishes, in which the

two Englishmen discuss news of the latest cricket scores.

"You mean Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne," he said. "When I discovered Wayne, he was a compère at a cabaret in the Dorchester Hotel in London. A compère is a man who is not really in the show at all. He can be the anonymous flunky who hands the illusionist the silk hat stuffed with rabbits. In Wayne's case, his compèring meant that he announced each act and said a few words between turns. Radford was the leading man in the original company of Night Must Fall—he is also known for his portrayal of the commander of the Home Guard in the film, Tight Little Island—but I'm proud of the fact that, having found those two, I put them together. They formed a combination that complemented each other as happily as arf and arf or fish and chips."

"To me," I said, "one of the all-time classic motion-picture scenes was that pair, sitting in a small station in a European city with all hell breaking loose in the world around them while their only concern was to find out what the cricket scores were back in England. As an American," I went on, "it was the quintessence of Britishness. Did the British think it thoroughly British too?"

"No," Hitchcock said. "They knew that it was merely a humorous exaggeration. Such things have been called the Hitchcock touch, but they're really examples of English humor based on carrying understatement to an absurd extreme.

"I suppose you might call it the oblique approach to melodrama. Melodrama is the most highly colored form of storytelling. Its villains, heroes and heroines are usually played heavy-handedly and bumblefootedly. I approach it somewhat differently. I've never gone in for the creaking-door type of suspense. To me, murder by a babbling brook drenched in sunshine is more interesting than murder in a dark and noisome alley littered with dead cats and offal.

"My hero is always the average man to whom bizarre things happen, rather than vice versa. By the same token, I always make my villains charming and polite. It's a mistake to think that if you put a villain on the screen, he must sneer nastily, stroke his black mustache or kick a dog in the stomach. Some of the most famous murderers in criminology—men for whom arsenic was so disgustingly gentle that they did women in with blunt instruments—had to be charmers to get acquainted with the females they murdered. The really frightening thing about villains is their surface likableness.

"Not long ago I did a piece for The New York Times Sunday Magazine describing the appeal of the true murder tale as opposed to the fictional variety. Once more I made the point that part of the fascination of the true murder lies in the fact that most real-life murderers are very ordinary, very polite, even engaging. I've heard the complaint that a true murder lacks mystery. I don't agree that that's a weakness. To me, suspense is immeasurably more potent than mystery, and having to read a fiction murder story through in order to find out what happened bores me.

"I've never used the whodunit technique, since it is concerned altogether with mystification, which diffuses and unfocuses suspense. It is possible to build up almost unbearable tension in a play or film in which the audience knows who the murderer is all the time, and from the very start they want to scream out to all the other characters in the plot, 'Watch out for So-and-So! He's a killer!' There you have real tenseness and an irresistible desire to know what happens, instead of a group of characters deployed in a human chess problem. For that reason I believe in giving the audience all the facts as early as possible."

I could hardly wait for him to finish, to tell him that I couldn't agree with him more; that one of my hobbies—in fact, my principal hobby—is the collecting, reading and rereading of accounts of true crimes, with a special leaning for those which took place against a British background. "Someday," I said, "I hope to find an editor interested in persuading me to compile an anthology of such diverting writings. I would have cheerfully paid my own way over to England to cover the trial of Doctor Adams, the Eastbourne physician with the strange appeal for elderly and generous English gentlewomen." Reluctantly I stopped riding my hobby and returned to a discussion of the Hitchcockian technique.

I asked, "How would you handle a potential bomb explosion in one of your stories?"

"The point is to let the audience know where the bomb is, but not let the characters in my story know," he said. "For example, you and I are sitting here chatting. We needn't talk about death or anything of serious consequence, but if the audience knows that there's a bomb under my desk, set to go off, the suspense will be harrowing to them. But if we don't tell our audience about the bomb ticking away under my desk, and it goes off and blows us to smithereens, the only thing the audience will get is a shock, and a one-second shock at that, as opposed to sixty to ninety minutes of breath-holding waiting."

"The thing you do that really wrings me out," I said, "is that sometimes you have a device like a basket or a box slowly

opening while I'm sitting on the edge of my seat, waiting to see what nameless horror will emerge from it. Then something as dangerous as a small black kitten wanders out. You've prepared me for something catastrophic, but what happens is something harmless."

"By judicious hinting it is possible to persuade an audience to put a shattering interpretation on the most innocuous things," he explained. "But you must be careful not to disappoint them completely. They'll react with a gratifying crawling of the flesh to things that turn out not to be so bad as they thought, but only if you ultimately come through with a real marrow chiller. Otherwise they'll feel let down and they'll leave your show resenting you as a cheat."

"I've noticed that you let the public supply its own conclusion for some of your TV half-hour shows," I said. "That's a new technique to me. At least I've never seen it done before."

"It's quite a trick to find thirty-nine shows a year, each with a twist at the end," he told me. "So we sometimes let you supply your own twist after you switch your set off, based, of course, on what you've just seen and heard."

"They tell me you'll be doing something different on TV this fall," I said. "But I'm not quite sure just what it is."

"In addition to our weekly half-hour show, I'll do ten one-hour shows," he said. "I'll have more time to develop character in them. For that matter, some stories deserve a longer telling than others. One of the first stories I'll do is the Cornell Woolrich story, Three O'Clock. It's about a man who makes a homemade bomb because he suspects his wife of having a lover and he's determined to blow them both up, even if it means blowing up his own home. However, immediately after he's started his bomb's timing device going, two burglars break into his house, truss him up and put him in the cellar while they rob the house. Then they leave. There he is, helpless, facing his own ticking bomb and not finding the situation all that it might be. In fact, he feels that it's extremely doubtful if there's any future in it."

I waited; then I asked, "Well?"

Hitchcock blinked large, oyster-shaped eyes at me and said, "If you think I'm going to tell you what happens, you're quite wrong. I suggest that you tune in this fall and find out.

"I've never thought of the motion pictures I've made as being primarily commercial," he said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, I've usually encountered a firm insistence from the front offices of the studios for which I've worked that I attach a satisfactory ending. In this community, to have what is known as an unhappy ending is to commit the unforgivable Hollywood sin called 'being downbeat.' And while you'll find heated denial in film circles that the average movie audience is only of teen-age intelligence, and whereas a number of people in motion pictures take it for granted that TV is only for morons, the truth is that we who make TV films are allowed to end our stories on a downbeat note as often as not. So, in spite of bleats from some TV writers, we have more freedom on TV than we do in motion pictures. Perhaps all that this proves is that people will accept more mature entertainment if they don't have to pay for it. It may be that when they pay to go to a movie they feel they have bought the right to come out with a satisfied feeling.

"It has been said of me that if I made Cinderella, the audience would start looking for a body in the pumpkin coach," Hitchcock went on. "That's true. Although my product hasn't been wholly melodramatic—I once tried an ill-starred comedy with Carole Lombard—there's no point in denying that I'm thoroughly typed. If an audience sees one of my productions with no spine-tingling, they're disappointed."

"Do you remember Robert Vogeler?" I asked. "He was the American businessman who was mysteriously snatched on a journey between Budapest and Vienna, disappeared as if a crack in the earth had swallowed him, although he finally showed up in an Iron Curtain prison and eventually was released. As I read about him I thought, *How can Alfred Hitchcock make any more motion pictures, now that things are happening in real life which once only happened in his films?*"

"That question has presented a problem," he said. "After all, I couldn't dream up a more bizarre episode than Rudolf Hess' flight to Scotland during World War Two. The fact is, if I had put that into a movie before it happened, nobody would have believed it. Not only that, things have reached a point where those who live a life of wild and improbable adventure are copying devices from my movies."

"Such as?" I asked.

"Such as my picture, Foreign Correspondent," he replied. "In it, a man was assassinated by a pistol concealed in a camera. In my film a photographer said, 'Just a moment,' to a diplomat on the steps of a large building; then pointed his camera at him and shot him dead. It gave me a turn when, a year later, the same thing occurred in real life in Teheran."

"I can see how it might rock you," I said.

"At first I thought I had suggested a *modus operandi* to the real-life assassins," he admitted, "but eventually I comforted myself with the thought that the whole thing was a coincidence. But I have to be careful that the pressure of real-life competition doesn't make me go too far with the bizarreness of my film situations, for the key to effective suspense is believability. The simpler and more homely the peril, the more real that peril."

"You've edited a book called Stories They Won't Let Me Do On TV," I said. "I've noticed it in the bookstores. Why were those stories turned down?"

"Too macabre," he said. "I won't try to outline the plot of the short story called Two Bottles of Relish, by Lord Dunsany, for you, because I'm sure your editor would be stuffy about it and find it distasteful, but there's another one in that book of mine that he may not find unpalatable. In it, a man murders his wife, then transforms her into chicken feed. Afterwards he serves a pair of his chickens to the local police inspector when he has him in for dinner."

I gulped and fished a piece of paper from my wallet. From it I read aloud this statement written about him by Ernest Havemann for Theater Arts:

> "Almost any director can come up with a good, rousing historical epic or he can translate a first-rate Broadway play to the screen, but it's something else to take a simple little idea for a melodrama and use it in such a way that it keeps the audience half swooning with fear and half falling out of their seats with laughter."

"It *is* something else," Hitchcock said. "The secret is the way in which the story is pieced together. With me, all the little bits of business and the situations must be planted and established before a camera rolls. Sometimes I plan as many as six hundred camera setups before I begin to shoot. If I ever tried to improvise a plot structure on the set, I couldn't get the effects or the reactions I want to get."

"There must be very little wastage when you're done," I said.

"There's practically no spare footage," he told me. "It's been said of my stories that they are so tightly knit that everything depends on everything else, and that if I ever made a change before the camera I might as well unravel the whole sweater. That's true too. Take a ready-made stage play like Dial M For Murder. As the director of that play in its filmed form, there was almost no work for me to do. The various bits and pieces had already been put together on the stage. I've often wondered why so many successful stage plays fail as movies. I think the reason is this: someone has decided to 'open up' the stage play with added exteriors and turn it into a movie and, as a result, the tightness and tautness of the stage play is lost."

One of the questions I wanted to ask him was: "In one of your stories is one of your problems the job of offering an explanation for all the hush-hush stuff; the mayhem and the villains still pursuing? In other words, don't the baddies have to be after something?"

"That is what I call the McGuffin," he told me. "It's the gimmick; it's what the excitement is all about. In a spy story the McGuffin is what the spies are after. In The 39 Steps the spies were after an airplane-engine formula, but the odd part of it is that the McGuffin never matters very much. It can be anything I like. In a film called Notorious I had Ingrid Bergman go to South America and get mixed up with some German spies. The question arose, What were the spies after? In other words, what was the McGuffin?

"Although it was a full year before Hiroshima, I said, 'Let's make it uranium samples.' I had a hunch that somewhere some spies from some country or other must be after an atom bomb or the knowledge of how to make one. So with Ben Hecht, the writer of my film story, I went to see Doctor Millikan, of Cal Tech, to ask him what to us was a natural and not startling question: 'How big is an atom bomb?'

"Doctor Millikan almost dropped his teeth. 'Do you want to be arrested?' he blurted. 'Do you want me to be arrested too?' But after those anguished questions, he pulled himself together and spent an hour telling us how impossible it was to make an atom bomb. We didn't know it, but the Manhattan Project had already been launched, and Doctor Millikan was one of the big wheels in it. It must have given him quite an odd feeling when we walked in with our question, but, as I say, he did his best to keep his knowledge top secret by telling us how ridiculous our notion was. However, when we left, I said to Hecht, 'I'm going ahead with the uranium McGuffin anyhow.' We made the picture and it grossed seven millions. Today, it would gross two or three times that much."

I asked him to explain the origin of the term "McGuffin."

"Using the McGuffin to mean the papers, jewelry, whatever the spies are after, is my own adaptation of the word," he said. "It comes from an old English music-hall joke about two men on a train. One of the men says to the other, 'What's that package on the rack above your head?' and the other man says, 'Oh, that's a McGuffin.' The first man asks, 'What's a McGuffin?' and the second man replies, 'A McGuffin is an apparatus for trapping lions in the Adirondacks.'

"'But there are no lions in the Adirondacks,' the first man says. 'Then that's no McGuffin,' the second man says."

I said I had heard that he had a reputation as an outstanding practical joker.

"I have pretty much outgrown that now," he said. "And I'm afraid that if I tried to describe them to you, they'd seem pretty flat and contrived, but I still have a little fun in elevators. Sometimes in a crowded elevator I turn to someone with me and say, 'Of course, I didn't know the gun was loaded, but when it went off it blasted a great hole in his neck. A flap of his flesh fell down, and I could see the white ligaments uncovered. Presently I felt wetness around my feet. I was standing in a pool of blood.' Everyone in the elevator stiffens; then I get out and leave them standing there. Once when I described that imaginary shooting, one woman begged the operator, 'Let me out of here, please!' and she got out at the next floor."

I asked him where he got such Hitchcock touches as people losing themselves in funeral processions or ducking into amusement parks or into halls where political speeches were being made to hide from their pursuers.

"I simply look around and ask myself what background I can use next," he explained. "Someday I'll have a character dash into a hospital, pretend to be a patient, lie down on one of those litters on which they wheel you into the operating room, and before it's over, I'll have him operated on."

I had heard that he'd once told one nervous young actor who was jittering around in front of a camera, "I can't understand why you are all of atwitter. There's nothing depending upon your performance except your whole career."

I wanted to ask him what had happened to that young man. Had his career taken him on to become an Academy nominee? But I didn't get a chance to ask.

He stood up and said, "I know you'll forgive me, but I'm fifteen minutes late to look at screenings of various actresses I am considering for my next film. It turns out that the girl I had selected for the part has made a previous engagement with a bird who has a nose even longer than mine—a stork."

There are some things that even a great director, who anticipates every move before he turns a camera, can do nothing about. THE END