

No Time for Tears

BY PEER J. OPPENHEIMER



Red and Georgia Skelton, pictured with Valentina and Richard, enjoyed many happy days before a family crisis provided their big test.

On a chilly afternoon last January, Red and Georgia Skelton took their nine-year-old son Richard to pediatrics specialists at the University of California at Los Angeles for "diagnosis and observation of an unexplained fever."

Twenty-four hours later, the comedian and his wife were given shocking news: Richard had leukemia. His life expectancy was from five months to a year.

Wealth and fame were useless now. There is no cure for leukemia. The Skeltons joined thousands of other families, in all walks of life, who have stood helpless and bewildered as doctors explained how blood-forming organs malfunction and cause a fatal imbalance in the blood.

Georgia collapsed in tears at the news. Red tried to hold back visible signs of shock, but his anguish appeared in trembling hands and ashen face.

Young Richard, a carbon copy of his father in appearance and personality, was happily unaware of his condition, but Red knew that he, as a father, had to face many immediate problems—for his sake as well as for Georgia and their two children.

The first decision was the most difficult: Should he tell his son? Red decided against Richard's knowing about the fatal malady and instructed his publicist to withhold any news that might get back to his son.

Red had two reasons: 1) It would upset the boy without benefiting him. 2) Red refused to accept the doctors' verdict as final.

True, medical science doesn't yet have an answer to

WHEN TRAGEDY STRUCK HIS FAMILY, RED SKELTON

the dread disease, but there is always the possibility that tomorrow might bring some miracle.

Unfortunately, Red was unable to keep grief locked within himself. He mentioned Richard's illness to a friend—who promptly notified a local television announcer. Six hours later the news was broadcast and telecast throughout the world. One of the listeners was young Richard.

"Perhaps it's better that he knows," Red said the next day. "Now he can cooperate better with the doctors. We are not giving up hope. All of us, including Richard, are praying hard."

RICHARD was still too young to feel the full impact of the news, and Red realized youthfulness could continue to ease the future days. But Red knew, too, that the boy must have help from his family, and before that help could be offered, the family itself must summon all its reserve strength.

It wasn't easy. A week after he learned of his son's critical condition, Red was unable to make his regular TV appearance. A filmed kinescope of a previous show was substituted.

CBS told Red to stay away for another week, or more if he desired. Red refused, and not merely to fulfill the old theatrical tradition that "the show must go on." He was convinced that until he was able to face an audience again, he could never be at ease with his son. Perhaps he also recalled other comedians who cracked under similar shocks and never came back.

His first live telecast after the discovery of Richard's illness was far more crucial to the Skeltons as a family and to Red as a showman than was apparent to the nation's viewers.

Critics reported that his show was the best of the series and credited Red's courageous spirit, as well as the help he got from co-workers—particularly his guest star, pint-sized Mickey Rooney.

There were no sad expressions, no wet handshakes,