

by Joseph N. Bell

ON A MARCH NIGHT in 1943, a wildly cheering standing-room-only crowd at New York City's Copacabana greeted a plaintive little man wearing a smashed hat, a lecherous leer, and a magnificent nose. Behind him, a second entertainer, clad impeccably in top hat and tails, cake-walked into the spotlight. Then, unexpectedly, from the shadows of a ringside table, a lithe form hurdled a chair, slid gracefully across the floor, and bounced to his feet.

The first two men looked at the third in startled wonderment, then ecstatic joy. The fabled team of Durante, Clayton, and Jackson was reunited. They hadn't appeared together for 12 years, and they never would again. This night was one of the great dramatic moments in show business.

If Jimmy Durante had to single out a few highlights of his remarkable career, this would be one of them. For Lou Clayton—along with Jimmy's wife, Jeanne, and his father, Bartolomeo—was a great driving force in his life. All three are gone now, but Jimmy, the greatest clown of our time, appears indestructible. He has been a headliner in every aspect of show business—vaudeville, night clubs, radio, television, motion pictures, and records—for almost 40 years. And he has been a headliner as a gentle, generous, thoroughly good guy for much longer.

Jimmy's philosophy of life is simple and to the point: "There are more good people than bad ones in the world." An associate once said of Jimmy: "The only thing about him bigger than his nose is his heart." There are few dissenting votes to this summation of Durante. Jimmy has constantly looked for the good in his fellow men.

Practically everything about Durante is fabulous, from his age (he admits to 65, but some of his friends think he is older) to his peculiar eating habits (an affinity for hot water, cornflakes, and powdered milk) to his steadfast loyalty to friends. His insistence that Eddie Jackson and other long-time pals share in his success is well known.

Less well known are the dozens of times each year Jimmy goes out of his way to help an acquaintance—or a total stranger. When he was in New York recently for a television show, he got up with the commuters, subwayed to Brooklyn, and shook hands with customers of an old friend who was opening an appliance store. It took 30 cops to hold back the crowd. But as Jimmy pointed out with his unshakable logic: "A friend in need is a friend in need."

Durante is living proof that a youngster raised with good judgment in a God-fearing family will seldom go wrong, regardless of temptations. Jimmy was spawned in a rugged Bronx neighborhood, but his parents were never in want, even though Bartolomeo, a fine barber, cut his neighbors' hair for nothing as often as he charged for it.

The Durantes wanted Jimmy to be a musician, and they gave him piano lessons when he reached the eighth grade. But instead of the classical music his parents preferred, Jimmy took to ragtime. He was good at it, and he landed a job in a Coney Island saloon when he was in his mid-teens—playing all night, every night, for \$25 a week.

Jimmy was exposed to a constant procession of drunks, streetwalkers, and hoodlums. Yet the only

A LIVING LEGEND:

JIMMY DURANTE

For almost 40 years, he's been a top star



part of it that ever rubbed off on him was his accent and a deep understanding and compassion for all sorts of people. He has always been a virtual teetotaler, and to this day he looks upon all women as great ladies. Jimmy is impulsively generous yet so self-effacing that he wouldn't ask the simplest favor of someone he had befriended.

Maybe these are the things that make Jimmy's friends love him. After he had graduated from Coney Island to the Harlem night clubs, Jimmy met a young singer named Maud Jeanne Olson who applied to him for a job when he was playing piano and directing an outfit known as "Jimmy Durante's New Orleans Jazz Band." Jeanne Olson got the job—and a year later she got Jimmy.

At about the same time, Eddie Jackson tried

out for Jim's show with a vaudeville partner. The team didn't make the grade, but Jackson stayed to become Durante's lifelong companion. Several years later Lou Clayton, an established soft-shoe dancer, joined the team. "Took it over" would be a more accurate term.

Clayton recognized the genius in the gravel-voiced Durante, and neither Clayton nor Jackson got in Jimmy's way, years later, when offers came for Durante to do a single. But throughout the Prohibition period, Durante, Clayton, and Jackson operated a spot in New York known as the Club Durant, where they supplied the entertainment.

Clayton took Jimmy away from the piano and put him on the floor as a comedian. The team did a combination song, dance, and patter act that

JIMMY DURANTE

in every branch of show business, and it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

defies description but will never be forgotten by those who were privileged to see it. The Club Durant was packed every night with an audience ranging from socialites to the most vicious gangsters of that stormy period. Clayton, a tough customer himself, maintained the peace. Patrons had to check their firearms before entering, and consequently there never was a shooting in the club. But there was just about everything else.

Twice, soft-hearted Durante was fast-talked into letting in visitors who claimed to be childhood friends. On both occasions, they turned out to be Prohibition agents who closed the club. But no matter how many times Jimmy was fooled, he was always fair game the next time.

Clayton once said wonderingly: "God gave Jimmy Durante his great talent. A thousand Lou Claytons could never have put that talent into this man. But I loved him and I knew then, as I know now, that he was a true genius in his own way."

Broadway and motion pictures next beckoned to Durante and his partners, and shortly after their stage debut in Florenz Ziegfeld's "Show Girl" (with Ruby Keeler and Duke Ellington), they were signed by Paramount Pictures.

THE TRIO'S first break-up came in the early '30s.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer offered Jimmy a five-year contract—alone. Jeanne Durante was overjoyed, Jimmy heartbroken. He went only on condition that Jackson and Clayton go along. Clayton stayed with Durante as his manager through the next decade of making mediocre to bad movies; Jackson finally drifted away after a few years to try show business on his own.

During this period, Jimmy conquered radio, too. Although he was making a great deal of money, he couldn't hang onto it. He insisted on paying Clayton a third of his income; his staff and taxes took large bites; and the rest he distributed with typical Durante openhandedness. He was a sucker for every hardluck story, but the fact that he was being taken never bothered Jimmy.

"I only wish," he said many times, "that I was Rockinfellow."

In 1940, the world turned topsy-turvy for Jimmy Durante. Within two years, he lost his brother, his father, and his wife. Jeanne died after a prolonged illness, and Jimmy worked little during this time. He lost interest in everything.



Youthful Jimmy Durante in his Harlem days with his original jazz band (above), and cutting a caper with two other great favorites, friends George M. Cohan and Claudette Colbert (right).



Jimmy's wife, Jeanne, who first came to him as a young singer, was a driving force in his career.

His losing battle with the English language is no phony. Since Jimmy's early Bronx and Coney Island days, when his associates talked out of the sides of their mouths, his English has been a curious mixture of lower East Side, Mrs. Malapropisms, and an elegant vocabulary. His fascination with big words without knowing how to handle them has resulted in such Durante classics as "financial typhoon," "exterior motive," "stupendous," "catastrastroke," and hundreds of others.

Jimmy, who seldom hides anything from anybody, has managed to preserve one secret over the years: the identity of the "Mrs. Calabash" to whom he says good night at the end of each of his radio and TV shows. This started back in the early '40s, and has since become a ritual. Jimmy was quite disturbed on several occasions when his shows ran long and he was cut off before he could say good night to Mrs. Calabash. No one—not even Lou Clayton, who was closest to him—could discover the origin of the remark. Questioned about it today, Jimmy just looks skyward and says, "A guy's gotta have some secrets."

Currently working under a contract with NBC which has five more years to run, Jimmy probably will be back on television with a weekly half-hour show next Fall, although the deal hasn't been closed yet. In the meantime, he plays a few choice night clubs and appears as a TV guest star.

Jimmy has regained, and probably will never again lose, his place as America's most beloved clown. If he wears his mantle carelessly today, he has earned the privilege after almost a half-century in show business. And millions of Americans are hoping that Mrs. Calabash, whoever she is, won't be saying good night to Jimmy Durante for a long time to come.

But several months after Jeanne's death, Jimmy heard through the Ritz Brothers that Eddie Jackson was holed up in Akron, O., running a third-rate night club, divorced from his wife, and desperately unhappy. Jimmy sent for Jackson, and Clayton prevailed on the two of them to go back to work—at the Copacabana in New York. That's where Clayton joined them for one night, in the final appearance of Durante, Clayton, and Jackson.

Meantime, Hollywood had forgotten Jimmy, and there were long periods of idleness when he returned to the West Coast. In desperation, he even took a part in a Gene Autry movie where he had to be lashed to the horse to stay aboard.

"I'd never rode a horse," Jimmy recalls, "and the horse never had been rode. So we both started out on even terms. It was a catastrastroke."

Jimmy's final triumph and one of his greatest losses came almost simultaneously. In his last illness, Lou Clayton arranged the beginnings of Jimmy's television career. He never lived to see the resurgence of Jimmy in this new medium that projected the Durante warmth to a whole new generation of Americans.

TODAY, Jimmy is as busy as he wants to be, but he is also lonely. He craves companionship, and four men surround him constantly: his manager, Lou Cohen, pianist Jules Buffano, drummer Jack Roth, and Eddie Jackson. All have been associated with Jimmy through most of his entertainment life. Scarcely an evening goes by that these four aren't hanging out at Durante's modest eight-room house in Beverly Hills, which is distinguished mainly by the plaques, awards, and other mementos of a lifetime in show business.

Unless some dire emergency—such as working—dictates otherwise, Jimmy arises about noon. He calls anything earlier a "predieckalous hour." Once he's up and going, though, he operates in a whirlwind of feverish activity.

One of Jimmy's few concessions to Hollywood living is a swimming pool which he uses with the same gusto he displays in everything else he does—looking in a bathing suit something like Mahatma Gandhi on a cigar-smoking binge. Jimmy also enjoys fishing, horse racing, reading, and song writing when he gets around to them, which isn't often. He's a terrible eater and has been concerned about his waistline for so long that he just nibbles on a weird assortment of nonfattening foods.