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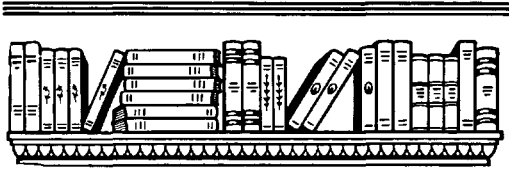
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The Engineer's Bookshelf

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When I read in the newspapers that Comedian Joe E. Brown has been "wowing" the boys in the Pacific war area, and that Big-mouth Martha Raye, among others, has been entertaining the American troops on the African front, I stop to think of the great fun and joy that our soldiers are getting out of those personal appearances. Imagine yourself, surrounded with other soldiers, day after day, occupied with a routine devoted to war activities at all times, suddenly being told that at eight o'clock that evening Martha Raye would give a performance at the town square and that you were expected to attend. Whether or not you ever liked Martha Raye in civilian life, your heart probably would leap with joy at the very realization that within a few hours you would be seeing a live American girl who had travelled thousands of miles just to sing a song or to do a dance for you. The idea would warm the cockles of your heart, I feel quite sure.

In fact, I am more than quite sure; I know. I recall an evening just twenty-five years ago this summer—beware Pvt. Dumble, you will give away your age!—when, as a member of the enlisted end of a Military Police organization, I was lined up in a company street with other men in the company only to be told that supper would be served in the mess hall at four o'clock, and that at five o'clock we would fall in to see a show. As I recall it now, the top sergeant whose English was rather shaky, may not have worded the announcement in that manner; nevertheless, that is what he meant.

All day among the men, speculation ran riot. More latrine rumors were on the wing than those that buzzed about the transport the day before we had landed in England several weeks previously. Who had travelled all those miles to entertain us? Could it be that we were to see one of the famous French shows about which we had heard so much and, to date at least, had seen so little? Expectations were in the air, and when five o'clock arrived no man was absent when the roll call was taken.

We were loaded in camions, rather uncomfortably so, too; that, however, we did not mind. We were going to have a surprise the like of which we had no conception. I believe that we drove for miles—probably I should say kilometers—over the narrow roads winding about the hills and small mountains of the province of Haute-Marne,

when shortly before seven o'clock we suddenly rounded a curve and there came into sight a huge natural amphitheatre where already, seated on the ground, we saw thousands of American soldiers. We alighted from our camions, and after the familiar squads right we reached our places with the others. Down in the valley a small stage had been built, and on it stood a piano, a table, and several chairs. For the next hour soldiers continued to arrive by the hundreds. A few under powered lights were directed on the stage, a large official Cadillac drove up, and out got an officer and two women. It was not until these three reached the light on the stage that I was able to see who they were. Then, actually with a thrill that comes once in a lifetime, I recognized, even from my terra firma seat yards back from the stage, one Elsie Janis. The other woman was her mother, and they were accompanied by an officer.

The name Elsie Janis may mean nothing to members of the present generation, but in 1918 the name had been a theatrical drawing card from one end of the United States to the other. Moreover—and it was when this idea flashed through my mind that my blood began to tingle—Elsie Janis came from Ohio. Elsie Janis was a native of Columbus. Elsie Janis had come all the way to France to entertain the boys from her native state. Before Elsie Janis was ever announced that evening, her name was sweeping from mouth to mouth among the thousands of Ohio boys gathered before her.

Some one, although it was not the accompanying officer, tried to announce to the roaring crowd that Miss Janis would sing some songs. But he did not get very far. Finally with all the grace that is hers, Miss Janis came to the front of the stage, and in a voice that still rings in my ears, shouted: "How are you, gang? All here from Ohio, yell!" The din was terrific, and if I recall, it was many minutes before the "gang" was quieted so that Miss Janis could start her performance.

Then followed a three hour show that banished from our hearts all the unpleasantness of K. P. and rifle inspection and the likes. Miss Janis sang, danced, and told jokes, and may I add with an arch of an approving eyebrow, jokes that soldiers like. Next, she sang request numbers, and among some suggested were "Beautiful Ohio," "Over There," and "Poor Butterfly." Finally, al-

most without warning, some soldiers down front yelled "Carmen Ohio." That was the cue for one of the most famous jam sessions that I ever attended. Many a Saturday afternoon since that day, I have heard the stadium echo to Ohio State cheers and to the full-bodied ring of the notes of Carmen Ohio; but never have I heard such cheering and such singing as I heard on that June evening in 1918 on a hillside not so many miles from Chaumont. Elsie Janis that evening gave a show of shows. She was so genuine and so sincere in trying to please her audience that her reception was spontaneous. Before that time and many times since then, I have paid good American money to see a performance of the "Girl of the AEF," as she became to be known; but never have I enjoyed a show like the one on that evening, June 29, 1918.

If I wish to grow extremely nostalgic about that performance, all I have to do is to unwind the string about a packet of fading letters that I have hidden away in some of my war impediments and read several paragraphs that I wrote home to members of my family. All I have to do is to stand with bared head in the stadium any football Saturday afternoon in the autumn and hear "Carmen Ohio," if I wish to recall that evening in France.

Several months after that June performance, quite by accident I saw and talked to Miss Janis in the lobby of the Crillon hotel in Paris. And not quite by accident but certainly with purpose aforethought, I went back stage at the Hartman theatre in Columbus one rainy winter evening in 1920 to see and to talk to her after one of her performances in this city. Yes, she admitted, with a smile that radiated her personality, she recalled that performance near Chaumont; and too, she recalled the meeting in the Paris hotel. Then, after a few minutes' patter about her stage show that she was doing, she said, "Boy, you don't know how much love I had in my heart for you Ohio soldiers that evening!"

But I could assure her that I did know, that all the Ohio soldiers there did know the great joy she was experiencing in giving her performance. Personally, I believe that I was more thrilled that evening on the hillside in Haute-Marne, or at least just as thrilled, as I was on a sunny and bright morning in February, 1919, when, with rolled pack on my back, I walked up a gang plank at Brest, France, onto the U. S. S. Frederick bound for these United States shore.

In December, 1919 Miss Janis published a book, "The Big Show," an account of her entertainment experience during the war. Today, that book has become a collector's item, and I consider myself lucky to own one. She devotes several pages to the evening I have just referred to, and her last

paragraph in that chapter ends this way:

"It rained all day yesterday and part of today, so that those Ohio boys who sat there for three hours singing and laughing and cheering, were sitting in puddles.

"Do I come from Ohio? Yes, by damn, yes!"

Now you see why I am in favor of such comedians as Joe Brown and Martha Raye winging their way to the Pacific or to Africa to entertain our soldiers. If you happen to be so lucky to be entertained by a ranking star when you are stationed in foreign areas, think of the editor of The Book Shelf who in 1918 was entertained by one Elsie Janis, and who in 1943 is still singing her praises.

EDITOR'S NOTE: If the reader wishes to see the house in which Miss Janis grew up in Columbus, all he must do is to gaze at the old gabled structure that sits on the east side of North High street at the rear of the Dining Car opposite West Woodruff avenue. According to Mr. Dumble, the Janis family name was Beerbaur. Miss Elsie Janis was born Elsie Beerbaur. When she started her stage career she took the maiden name of her mother, and she was billed as Elsie Janis. The Ohio football field at that time was located directly across from the Beerbaur home, on the west side of High street between Woodruff avenue and Seventeenth avenue.
