

(October 3, 1932)

Believe It or Not

By MR. R. L. RIPLEY

PRESIDENT CHALMERS:—Mr. Ripley and gentlemen, I think we may say that variety is the spice of the Canadian Club program. Already this year we have listened to an address by the Astronomer Royal, an address by the former Lord Chancellor of England, an address by the leading British economist. We have had as our guest a very illustrious Japanese educationalist and the President of the Canadian Bar Association, and to-day we have as our guest a man who satisfies at second hand, I admit, our lust for travel and our thirst for the curious things of life. Mr. Robert L. Ripley is interested in everything going on in the world except the everyday ordinary matter-of-fact things. The self-evident facts of life have no interest for him, and his job is to make us believe anything that is too incredible to believe, and if we did not know it before we started reading Ripley's daily cartoons, we know now that there is nothing in life that is too miraculous not to have happened, nothing in life too curious not to be true.

It is hardly necessary for me to tell you much about Mr. Ripley because all of you have had opportunity during the last week or two of reading several thousands of words about him, and I am certain there is practically nothing left untold about Mr. Ripley. You have been told for instance that he gets a million letters a year. Actually it is something like two million. You have heard about the 280 papers that run his cartoons every day. I can tell you more curious things than anything I have seen in his cartoons, and it is for two years during his career as a producer he drew both salary and cartoons and not one of them appeared in any newspaper.

While we are busy at our businesses Mr. Ripley is prying into the nooks of far off countries; he is doing what we would all like to do ourselves and telling us about it. It may be it is not literature; it may be it is not art, but I think you will all admit it is at least the truth and it is at least life according to Ripley and Sinclair. Both have helped to make the depression bearable.

Mr. Ripley is one of the creatures of the modern newspaper. The modern evening newspaper, is not primarily a paper for giving you the ordinary daily news. It is a paper that has a wider conception of news than our forefathers had in their newspapers. I introduce Mr. Robert Ripley.

MR. RIPLEY:—Mr. President and members of the Canadian Club, I feel deeply the honor that is mine to follow such a distinguished line of speakers at your organization meetings here. I must confess this is probably the first time that you have had a speaker who is utterly useless to you because no one believes anything I say. But I don't mind that, gentlemen. Confidentially, I am rather flattered any time one calls me a liar or does not believe anything he sees in my cartoons. Of course that to me is sincere flattery. It means, if it means anything, that if anyone has been deceived they have been only deceived by the truth, because we all know everything you see in the "believe it or not" cartoons is true and also that truth is stranger than fiction. And that is the way I make my living.

I receive many letters and this year more than ever. I try to avoid that in a way by making each newspaper answer their own mail, because it grew so great and was so cumbersome and wasteful of time to the headquarters in New York. In two months in this year I received more than one and one half million letters. Last year there was a sort of vogue went on in the U.S. as to who could address an envelope in the strangest manner and still have it arrive at its destination in the "believe it or not" department. They were written on all kinds of things and in all sorts of ways. They would simply put a letter in an envelope and just tear it a little indicating "rip" and I would get that; and they would put a wiggly line which was supposed to be a "rippy" line.

Sometimes even those who are amused by this sort of vogue would hold a little child about eight or ten months and let it make any kind of mark on the envelope and even that would be delivered. And they didn't put any address on the envelopes at all and they were all delivered to me too. To show you to what extent I received letters, New Year's Day I received a New Year's card which was twenty-eight feet long by nineteen feet high. And at almost the same time I received a Chinese postage stamp that had been mailed in China and on the back of this little Chinese stamp there had been written just "Ripley, U.S.A." by the daughter of the American consul in Nanking. She had dropped it in the mail box in China and I received that at my home without loss of time. Also when they were in a hurry to reach me evidently they simply wrote "biggest liar" in the corner and I would get that right away. This went on until the United States postal authorities got tired of it. They did not like their employes wasting their time on such things and an order was issued telling the postal employes not to waste time deciphering such letters for "Believe it or not" but to send them to the dead letter office, and so someone got this order out and posted that and I got that.

What I consider the most unusual letters I have received were letters written on a grain of rice. A man in Pennsylvania, E. W. Blythstone, has for the past several years been writing me long letters on grains of rice and naturally you have to have a magnifying glass to read. But they are very plain in the manuscript and only recently the same man wrote me an unusually long letter in which he said this was the longest letter he had ever written on a grain of rice. In other words this is a world's record and he wrote on a single grain of rice, which I have with me upstairs by the way, two thousand eight hundred and seventy-one letters, on a single grain of rice, and, gentlemen, believe it or not, this man wrote this long letter with his eyes shut. He could not write it any other way. Nothing unusual about that. It is impossible to read in this microscopic fashion with your eyes open because you cannot see anything anyway.

It is all written by instinct, and so when this distinguished rice-writing Pennsylvanian writes to me, the first thing he does is to close his eyes.

I guess the question they most often ask me in this mail is, "How did you happen to start to draw these 'Believe it or not' cartoons?" When I am asked that I feel very much ashamed, particularly when I have to admit it before an audience of business men, it reflects such little credit on me. But the "Believe it or Not" cartoons were conceived in ignorance and born of dumbness. They were an accident. One day some twelve years ago when I was drawing cartoons on a New York newspaper the dead line was so close—and you must have it in; no excuses; you have to have your work in story or picture; and four o'clock was fast approaching and I did not have any cartoon at all, so in desperation I gathered a lot of odds and ends on my desk and pasted them on a square sheet of paper and sent them to the engraver, and for no reason at all called it "Believe it or Not" and went home having the idea I had probably done the worst day's work of my life and I was afraid to look at it. And to my surprise the editor said, "That picture you made yesterday was far better than anything you have been doing for this newspaper." That newspaper failed soon afterwards. That was the old *New York Globe*. It was what you called amalgamated by Munseys. Of course I am not talking to newspapermen, but to business men. It was merged and that is the explanation of what your president said that for two years I was paid a salary and drew cartoons which did not appear in a newspaper. This editor said, "Make another one," and I made another and I made one once a week and twice a week and now I do nothing else. I even annoy people at their lunch.

I think the other question most often asked is, "How do you gather this material you put in these cartoons?" Well, that is hard. Anything you draw you must go out and gather it, and so I have been travelling for the last ten or twelve years, going abroad several times each year, and I visited a good many countries. After you have gone to more

than one hundred it probably amounts to nothing after all. Very few people can name forty countries but I assure you there are more than two hundred and I hope to see them all some day. I just returned a few days ago from the postage stamp countries of the world. I call them postage stamp countries, not so much because they are small in size but that their chief source of revenue is from the sale of postage stamps. They are very small but at the same time completely independent self-governing countries. I first visited Andorra, San Marino, Arlon-Luxemburg, and Città del Vaticano. That is the smallest country in the world, less than one sixth of a mile square, it is so small that it could be utterly covered with gold plate from a single ounce of gold. It is the richest country in the world. Its ruler rules over three hundred and thirty million of people. Of course you know what I am talking about now. This country is entirely independent of any government in police force and in army, it has its own railway, the finest equipped railway in the world, and yet its railway tracks are only six hundred feet long in this great country, the smallest country in the world. And when I visited the Pope at Rome I was escorted through it—of course you know I am talking about the Vatican City. There is no wealth in the world ever gathered to equal the wealth of the Vatican. I was escorted by the Swiss Guard with their uniforms, and it is a most beautiful thing to do.

Later I went to visit another country, the next smallest country in the world, Andorra, which is a little country, with a few thousand people, high up in the mountains between France and Spain. When I called on the President and when I knocked at his door, a cow stuck her head out of the door. Because it was only a stable and the President of Andorra lived upstairs. I waited. He didn't come down. Someone told me he was not at home. He was up in the mountains herding his cows and he would be down in about two days. The mountains all through are rather steep and you cannot take your cows to pasture and bring them back the same day. So I waited two days for the cows to come home and along with them came the Presi-

dent. He was a little old man, all covered with mud. He had been on the mountain side all this length of time. Being the only American citizen in there for a long time, I said I was representing the United States of America. Well, he said, "I have no time to bother with the United States of America. I have more important business than that. I am away behind and I have to take in my cabbage patch. If you will excuse me I will go about it."

I said, "Let me take your photograph." "Well," he said, "I don't do that, because the sunlight hurts my eyes." I said, "You have lived around here fifty or sixty years, has not the sunlight bothered you before?" He said, "No; when you are herding your cows you do not have to look up." So I thought, after all there are greater men of greater countries who have become blinded in their office too.

But the "Believe it or Not" cartoons, although they require great trouble to gather material, are really very simple. Of course the simplest things are most interesting. We know so many things that aren't so. For example there is no lead in a lead-pencil. There is no soda in soda-water; a Turkish bath is not Turkish and not a bath. A cork leg is not made of cork. It was named after the man who invented it, Dr. Cork; and so on. The more sardines you put in a can, the more profit there is to the manufacturer. Naturally, for the oil is worth far more than the sardine.

To give you an idea how simple it is, I asked a question not long ago this year to which I received more than thirty thousand answers in a few days and not one of them was right. The question I asked is, "How long is a snake's tail?" Everyone has seen a snake. It applies to a long or short one. I would like to dispel the suggestion of the great length of snakes. I am hearing about snakes twenty-five and thirty feet long and I may remind you how ridiculous that is. In New York my friend the curator of the Zoological gardens, one of the greatest experts on snakes, has a standing offer of \$10,000 for a snake twenty feet long and that offer has been up many years and no one has produced a snake that long. In some museums you will

see long snake skins, thirty or more feet long. But you can stretch a snake skin about six or eight feet after the snake is dead, but you cannot stretch a live snake. But when I asked how long was a snake's tail—well, the answer is: a snake's tail is exactly six times as long as its neck. Well, of course, a snake's neck is exactly three times as long as its head. We finally arrive at a common denominator. That is true and it applies to all snakes.

I have travelled not only in these postage stamp countries. Their entire income is from stamps. They are all printed in Vienna by the way, on common paper. You can buy a newspaper there for one cent and you can imagine how many stamps could be made from a newspaper. And they make a profit of \$300,000 or \$400,000 any time they issue a new set of stamps. They are most beautiful stamps—all sorts of colors. I also went to the South Seas this year, to the Far East, and I see my friend Mr. Sinclair here, who is a very travelled young man. I think he has the best opportunity of becoming a great man of anyone I have met in a long time. Many people travel, who might as well be travelling in a subway, for they see nothing. They come back and say, "I had a wonderful dinner in China." That is all they know about China, or Hong Kong. But Mr. Sinclair has the ability to portray those interesting things of far away places very delightfully. I am glad you have the opportunity to read him in the *Toronto Star*.

I have annoyed more people here yesterday than anyone who ever came to Toronto. Fourteen times I attempted to talk to people and my voice is gone if I had one. I was telling him to be sure, when you go to the Hawaiian Islands, to see the waterfall that falls up instead of down. And there is one. And I said, "Be careful, always carry your umbrella because even though the sun may be shining brightly and the sky blue, it will start to rain on you there. That is that famous liquid sunshine that they have in Hawaii. If anyone of you have been to Hawaii you might think I mean "Oke" as they call it, which is the drink of the islands and it is nice to know how this famous drink

or liquid sunshine was found. When they passed this law in the United States it applied to the Hawaiian islands and of course they did not like it. They sent over to America a leading chemist from the Eastern states, and brought out and paid him to see if he could not concoct some sort of drink out of the native fruit or plant. And this chemist created "Oke." It is made out of the palm and the pineapple. This distilled liquor is made in a dry country, after the passage of the prohibition law, and won first prize over the finest Scotch liquors at the Paris Fair. That is the liquid sunshine I am talking about; but it is absolutely true rain will fall out of a clear sky in Havana and that there is a waterfall which falls up instead of down and the reason is due to the land formation. Havana is surrounded by a mountain range and there is a wind that blows and stops the clouds and there is rain every day in Havana. There isn't a day in years but what it has rained some time. The clouds are held around the city. It is like being in an amphitheatre. And the waterfall is eighteen miles out. This waterfall breaks into spray and the same prevailing wind catches up the spray, blows it back over the cliff again where it condenses into rain and goes the other way.

I might call attention to what I think is the greatest natural wonder of the world. I refer to the cave of the Glowworms in New Zealand. I am sure it is the most beautiful natural thing on earth. It is south of Auckland about seven or eight hours by automobile. There is no indication of it. It has existed for hundreds of years. Civilization was even there and they did not know of it. They discovered it only recently; and you go inside this mountain side and there is an underground river and you go on into the middle of this mountain, and in the vast cavern there are millions of glowworms hanging from the ceiling. It creates a sort of twilight. I cannot describe it. But I know it is the most beautiful natural wonder in the world.

I went to China. I was there for the trouble with Japan. And it was very serious. Chapei was a city of a million people and was utterly destroyed. The Japanese are very

determined and I was reading in the paper to-day of an effort to try and oust them out of Manchuria. Well, you can believe it or not, you will never get the Japanese out of Manchuria, for they haven't the slightest intention of leaving and the whole world is not going to make them get out of there. The world Court or League of Nations—they will resign from them. They won't worry about the League of Nations. They are going to stay in Manchuria and they use very rough methods. The Japanese is a very good soldier. He is very cruel. I landed in Mukden and I passed along a roadway in which were twelve human heads hanging. That is the way they do. If you don't agree with the Japanese you are immediately a bandit and they cut your head off. And you do not even have to be a Chinese to be a bandit. I think their diplomacy is very crude. They cannot understand why the world did not agree with them, why the world seemed to sympathize with the Chinese. With all their diplomacy they have a lot of propaganda going around the world, thinking that they were being opposed, and imagining us sympathizing with the Chinese bandits instead of with the Imperial Japanese Government.

However, all my trip over there was not so unpleasant as my stay in Manchuria. When I was in Peking, I think I saw the most interesting man in the world. I am sure he was the oldest, despite the fact that his name was Young. However that might be qualified because his family name was Li. But he has been authenticated by a University Professor as being more than two hundred and fifty years old. He has seen his eleventh generation and to see your eleventh generation you must be a great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather. But time in China means nothing. That China is old everyone knows. How old, no one seems to agree. When a building falls down they do not bother to carry it away; they build something on top of it. I think the Chinese idea of a long time is one of the most delightful I have ever heard. They believe that away up north near the north pole, a rather vague location, there is a huge rock of granite. This huge rock is one

hundred miles high and one hundred miles long and one hundred miles wide and they believe each year a little humming bird flies all the way up north from Sunchow to sharpen its beak on this great rock and they believe when this little humming bird wears away this rock by sharpening its beak on it, then one second of eternity has passed.

Only a few months ago I was in Nanking and, if any of you gentlemen have ever had a Chinese dinner, I am sure you will sympathize and understand what I am telling you. I did not have chop suey. They never heard of chop suey in China. It is not a Chinese dish at all. The great Chinese dish is spaghetti. The Chinese were eating spaghetti for thousands of years before Rome was founded. The average Chinese dinner lasts six or seven hours. They have forty or more courses. Every now and then when you think you are finished and you are ready to go home they bring more food and you start all over again. And they give you soup made of birds' nests. I tried everything. The birds' nests are not made of straw but of a gelatine substance the bird secretes to fasten its nest together. It is like a gelatine soup. But if you are not annoyed enough by the soup they will bring out something else that is bound to give you indigestion. The only dish I liked in China was their one hundred year old eggs. A hundred year old egg is not bad. I mean by that, believe it or not, if an egg is bad long enough it is good again. So I enjoyed the one hundred year old egg. They have egg cemeteries. They bury eggs. They have grave stones for the eggs giving the name of the hen no doubt. I cannot read them. It gives the year and if you don't like an egg one hundred years old you can have one eighty-nine years old. They don't taste like you imagine. They are blue in color. They taste like pickle or something. It is hard to describe a hundred year old egg.

I won't go too much into the meal. We have just had our lunch. But I fell asleep. I think the girls they brought in knocked me out. Worst singing I ever heard. Shrill falsetto voices and they scream at you and twang these guitars or something and in desperation you will eat another course making the fifty-seventh you have had on

the night. Anyway I went to bed and fell asleep. I dreamed the Chinese were marching over the end of my bed. All night. You say you can live a whole life time in a few minutes in your sleep but when I awakened next morning all the Chinese marching over my bed disappeared. It aroused my curiosity and I started to figure out how many Chinese there were in the world and I arrived at the conclusion, and it is correct I assure you, if all the Chinese in the world were to march four abreast past a given point they could march forever and ever and never finish passing. Now the reason that is true is because there are six hundred million Chinese in the world. That is a fair estimate. Of course the reason it is so fair and I feel so confident about it is, there has never been a census of China taken. Any estimate you have read in a school book is just as authentic as mine because they don't know either. If you ask a Chinaman how many Chinese in China, they always say there are too many Chinese. And all the wonderful work done by philanthropic and religious people on this continent to help them in a sanitary way has received no encouragement whatever from the intelligent Chinese. They say why preserve the health of the Chinese? Let them die. There are too many anyway. They mean that seriously. And it is true. I hate to think of anyone dying, but when you think they starve to death by famine—it is nothing for several millions to starve to death in famine or perish in flood. A flood merely indicates a famine. Assume there are six hundred million of Chinese in the world, if six hundred million Chinese were to march in customary military formation, twenty-six million eight hundred and forty thousand Chinese could pass a given point in one year. Now assume the birth-rate in China is 10 per cent which is very low, and allow that even half the new-born Chinese die before they are able to walk, there will still be more than thirty million new-born Chinese coming on each year to join this long procession, and, believe it or not, the longer the Chinese marched the more Chinese there will be. I published that in a cartoon and I got a letter from a writer who said, "I do not believe that because how is it possible if the

Chinese are marching all the time, how can they all raise families?" Well, they are mighty clever, these Chinese.

I have even gone to Hell, to show the extremes necessary to gather this material, and I can assure you that when I did go to Hell I never enjoyed myself so much in all my life. The best days of my life I spent in Hell and Hell, you may or may not know, is a most delightful little city in Norway, and I was there about a year ago and it is a very pleasant little place. Hell reminded me of Toronto—all green trees and public parks. I have not been able to find since I came here whether I am just entering a public park or leaving it. There doesn't seem to be any way for a stranger to tell. Hell in the Norwegian language means gentle slope and as I sat on this gentle slope, and the Scandinavian girls are very pretty, they do not mind when you "skol" them. "Skol" there is a toast. They drink *acqua vitae* water and drink beer for a chaser. But Hell is a delightful place. I am sure I cannot wish any man in Toronto any better luck if he decided to leave Toronto than to go to Hell.

PRESIDENT CHALMERS:—That was a most interesting and entrancing forty minutes and the audience has expressed its pleasure and gratification at your address and we shall all enjoy reading your cartoons as they appear in the *Toronto Star*. Before I sit down I would like to say the Canadian Club of Toronto wishes to thank the *Toronto Star* for bringing Mr. Ripley to Toronto and making him available to this Club. On behalf of the Canadian Club I thank you.