# PHIMSY

### *What I am doing here*

"Look, Phimsy, we don't need your stuff." That's what the boss said when I told him I was going to write for his paper.

"But, boss," I told him, "you and the PHYSICS TODAY staff are so busy with important things—all those stories about hypergeometric complicated wave functions and cohesive photons and whole electron combinations. Who's going to write about the little things? They matter too, you know."

"Like what?" he says with his usual frown. "Not that it matters. We wouldn't have room for it anyway."

"Well," I says, hoping I'm catching his interest, "like suppose something funny happens when somebody is cranking up a cyclotron. You guys would be too busy counting MeV's or down time to see that it was funny."

"Look, Phimsy," he says. "What with putting periods at the ends of sentences and taking 'em out after Dr and Mr, we've got all we can do around here even when nobody's sick. We got no time to waste on anything funny—if anything is."

"But that ain't all," I says. "Look, here are all you editors tapping away on your typewriters all the time and all your readers taking it all in without knowing where it comes from. They ought to know whether you're really mad at the President's budget or just feeling grumpy about the weather. You ought to give this paper a personality."

"Phimsy," he says, "it's not a 'paper,' and it doesn't need a personality. What we need is the facts and we're having trouble enough getting 'em. We don't need you, we don't have room for you, and we don't want you. Now scram." And he starts to reach for the red button that rings bells.

"But, boss," I says, "you aren't even getting all the physics. A fellow told me yesterday you can't even keep a car on a model racing track without it. He said lots of scientists don't know why bread stays fresh in the ice box. Why does it?"

"Don't bother me," he says. "You almost made me miss a typo."

So I never did convince him. I had to slip this column in when he wasn't looking, and when he sees it, I'm sure it'll be the last of old Phimsy around here. They'll be getting somebody else to stoke the boilers and melt down the type metal. It's too bad, too, because I sure would like to have my chance to liven things up a bit.

### *Accentuating the practical*

I snuck into a meeting the other day. First I heard Edward Purcell handing out some pats on the back for the word "practical" in the title of N. Henry Black's old textbook *Practical Physics*. Right afterwards I got quite annoyed at hearing a lecture in a typical hotel meeting room. Whenever the speaker looked up, we heard his voice direct; when he looked down, we heard it from off to the right somewhere through the public-address system. I said it was damned hard to hear, and the fellow beside me, a sort of psychologist type, said all my attention mechanisms (whatever they are) were fighting to recognize the words through the competition of two sound sources.

He said the experience was the opposite of one he used to have at the University of Maine fieldhouse. The whole student body could gather and sit on four sides of a large indoor playing field, many of them, as he remembered, on a raised gallery. Despite the arrangement they could apparently hear the words of a speaker straight from his mouth. I used to go to a church once where you got the same effect. The secret is simple, my new-found accoustical friend told me. A high-fidelity amplifying system with the public-address speaker right straight over the human speaker's head. Ears, he said, differentiate in quality and azimuth but not in elevation.

With all that physicists and psychologists have been able to learn about hi-fi reproduction and stereophonic hearing, I'm surprised that the simple task of getting a speaker to his audience is usually bungled so badly. Sometimes I wonder whether all the efforts to understand the world and use what we find out are somehow missing the mark.

### *Finding what's old*

Socrates, a fellow tells me, has been rediscovered. Some crafty professors rigged up what looked like a computer and told some children the machine would answer all their questions about nuclear physics. Of course a few of their answers were really on tape, but most of them came from one of their own nuclear types whom they hid in the hardware.

Surprise! The kids who had the chance asked a lot of questions and learned a lot of physics. So, after 2400 years of fooling around with it, the fellow says, we have now got real scientific evidence that the Socratic method works. Now they're all going to look around to see whether they can find something to do with it.

### *You can just subscribe*

"If a reduced overseas membership fee is not possible I would like to resign my membership. However, I would like to subscribe to PHYSICS TODAY if that is possible. The main reason I have kept my membership for so long whilst I have been in this country has been to receive the excellent journal." That's what an Englishman wrote to the membership department a while back. I told the boss I admired his judgment.

The boss said, though, that he might as well strike out the fine print where it says on page 5 something about subscriptions for $4 and $5. He says that although PHYSICS TODAY is *edited* mainly for the society members, it has never been intended that only they should have access to it. He says even mathematicians, chemists and engineers are welcome to send in their subscriptions.