

THE MAD WORLD OF WILLIAM M. GAINES PART III

(Continued from page 27)

up. However, their first action was to vote to outlaw the words "crime," "horror," and "terror" in comics. Gaines rose from his seat. "This isn't what I had in mind," he said, and walked out of the hall.

Gaines or no Gaines, the publishers rushed to atone for previous sins. They formed the Comics Magazine Association of America, and then on September 16, 1954, named Judge Charles F. Murphy as comic book czar, with full power to ban all horror books.

Two days earlier, Gaines had thrown in the bloody towel. He announced that he was stopping the publication of his horror and suspense comics "because of a premise, that has never been proved, that they stimulate juvenile delinquency. We are not doing it so much for business reasons as because this seems to be what American parents want - and the parents should be served."

At once, Gaines was transformed from filth-mongering villain into high-minded hero. The press extolled him. Editorialized the *New York Daily News*:

"Here it seems to us, is an illustration of the principle we've long contended for: that there is only one right kind of censorship in a free-

press country. That is censorship by public opinion - by the customers who buy the product.

Thanks to Gaines for spotlighting these ancient truths once more."

The fact of the matter was somewhat different. Gaines couldn't stand the pressure from his wholesalers. "I'd been told that if I continued publishing my magazines, no one would handle them. I had no choice."

"Bill was crucified upon a cross of comics," Feldstein

has observed, his metaphor becoming doubly mixed when one remembers that Gaines is an atheist.

Now that his horror line was dead, what would Gaines do? He would inaugurate a new run of comics. These were the New Direction comics, which offered non-controversial titles such as *Aces High* (flying), *Extra!* (newspapers), *Impact* (adventure), *Piracy*, *Valor*, *MD*, and *Psychoanalysis*. All but one were edited by Feldstein, who was still hanging in with *Panic*. And, of course, there was Kurtzman's *MAD*, which had been changed from a comic into a twenty-five-cent slick, but more about that later.

Unlike the horror comics, which died a slow, agonizing death, the New Direction books expired quickly, almost in their sleep. Stack after stack came back, unopened by the

wholesalers. Gaines knew why. He didn't subscribe to The Code.

The Code was a set of rules laid down by Murphy and the new Comics Magazine Association. Among other taboos, it forbade the use of "horror" or "terror" in a comic book title. It also prohibited all scenes of cannibalism, excessive bloodshed, depravity, and other old EC standbys. Gaines detested The Code because it smacked of censorship. "This is what our forefathers came to America to escape," he wrote in an appeal to his wholesalers.

But what really griped him was The Code's attitude toward crime comics. Murphy had accepted his job as comic book czar on the condition that horror and crime be eliminated. The Code, however, allowed "crime" in a title just so long as the word was used with "restraint." Gaines felt betrayed. He had, after all, been forced to discontinue his horror books, and now Murphy's crew was allowing crime.



Panic (above left) and *Shock Illustrated* appeared at the end of the E.C. comics era.



Gaines implored the wholesalers to handle his magazines even though the books didn't bear the association's Seal of Approval. "Ours is a clean, clean line," he stressed.

The appeal fell on deaf ears. Clean line or not, sales continued at a turtle-like clip. And there was a persistent rumor around the industry that a major publisher, who subscribed to The Code, had dropped strong hints that all magazines published by that troublemaker Gaines be blackballed.

The profits from the horror days were going fast. Resentfully but realistically, Gaines swallowed his pride and joined the Association. With his new comics bearing the Seal of Approval, they would now be distributed and would make money.

He was mistaken. Sales improved hardly at all. The painful truth was that Gaines was Puck's bad boy and that any EC comic, blessed with the Seal of Approval or not, was judged unfit for human consumption.

Gaines stayed with the association for ten months, during which time, he recalls, "Murphy's censors ripped our stories to pieces." He then resigned, vowing never to work under The Code again. "What it did to my stomach is unspeakable," he has said.

There was a way out of the mess, he felt, and that was to inaugurate still another line — magazines that kind of looked like comics but weren't comics at all. Technically, comics were ten-cent magazines in color, with balloons containing the dialogue. Gaines's magazines would sell for twenty-five cents, would be printed in black-and-white, and would contain pictures with a run-

ning text above each panel. Not being comics, the magazines would not be bound by The Code and could, therefore, contain tales of horror and unrestrained crime.

Thus were born the four maga-

Gaines detested The Code because it smacked of censorship

zines known as Adult Picto-Fiction — *Terror Illustrated*, *Shock Illustrated*, *Crime Illustrated*, and *Confessions Illustrated*. Alas, they arrived stillborn and lasted two issues apiece. Gaines knew they were bombs almost immediately, but he kept them going through the Christmas season of 1955. His reason?

"I couldn't bring myself to fire anybody before Christmas. Besides, I'd built such a paternalistic organization that I couldn't conceive that any artist could make a living anywhere else. I was sure they were all going to starve. Needless to say, a week after I let the boys go, they were all working for other publishers and doing quite well."

Unlike the festivities of previous years, the EC Christmas party in 1955 was something of a wake. The big year-end cash bonuses were a thing of the past. Gaines tramped the Bowery and found a store selling \$4.95 sterling silver salt and pepper shakers. He bought twenty and handed them out as bonuses.

In early 1956, the Picto-Fiction books ate up the last of the horror profits. Gaines was stony broke, back where he started when he took over the business almost ten years earlier. He would have to give up Picto-Fiction, perhaps stop publishing altogether. Fortunately, he was

owed \$110,000 by his national distributor, Leader News, which would just about cover what he owed his printing broker, George Dougherty. The only way Gaines could be hurt further was if Leader News got in trouble, and this was impossible because no national distributor had ever gone under in the history of American publishing.

The phone rang. The call was from another publisher. Had Gaines gotten the word? Leader News was bankrupt.

Gaines was now \$110,000 in debt, and he had nothing left.

Nothing but MAD.

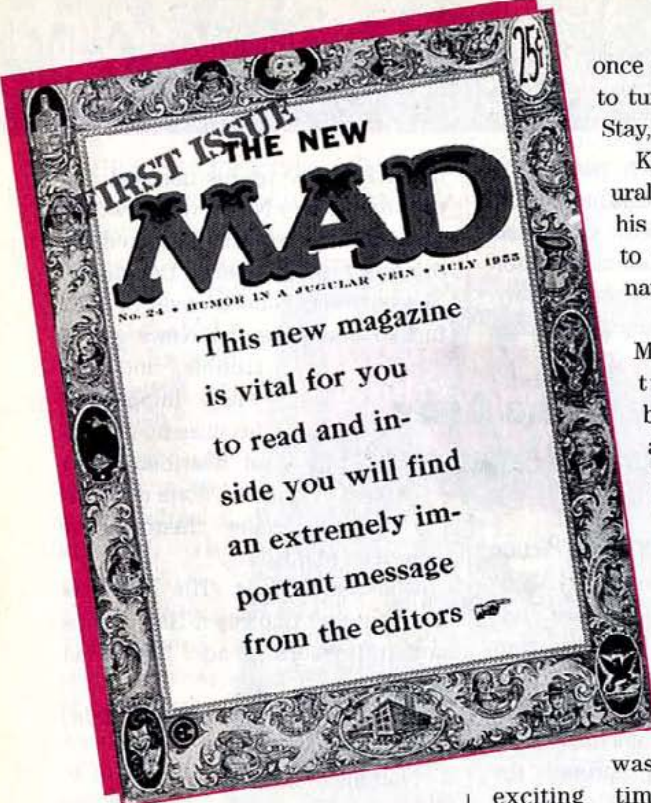
CHAPTER 8

HELLO, HARVEY... GOODBYE, HARVEY

With twenty-three issues of MAD under his belt, Harvey Kurtzman was feeling his oats. He was editing the wackiest comic book in the industry. His readership actually included a coterie of thinking adults, and among the books in the EC stable MAD was the only one that escaped unscathed, despite the assaults of the press and the Senate committee.

Kurtzman disliked the horror comics. He found them offensive, a view that bothered Gaines, who liked team spirit and was distressed by dissension in the ranks. But even though Kurtzman sided with the Senators, Gaines believed his maverick editor was irreplaceable. What's more, outside the office they had good times. Gaines





and Nancy spent many pleasant evenings sitting around the Kurtzman fireplace, chatting with Harvey and his wife, Adele.

But Kurtzman was restless in comics. "I never felt I was a part of the legitimate publishing establishment," he recalls. "Comics were a bastard form. I wanted to get into the world of slicks. That was publishing. Of course, with the advantage of hindsight, I don't feel that way now."

That he did then was due, partly, to a 1954 article about MAD that appeared in *Pageant*. Later that year, *Pageant's* editor offered Kurtzman a full-time job as his right-hand man. Kurtzman was tempted. *Pageant* was a slick. Also, comic-book censorship was coming and he feared that MAD was too freewheeling a book to survive it. He told

Gaines that he wanted to take the new job. Gaines made a counterproposal.

"Harvey, you

once told me you wanted to turn MAD into a slick. Stay, and I'll let you do it."

Kurtzman agreed, naturally preferring to head his own magazine than to work as a subordinate someplace else.

Gaines felt relieved. MAD would become a twenty-five-cent, black-and-white magazine of humor, satire, and parody. The changeover would keep Kurtzman in the fold and would save MAD from The Code, which applied only to comics.

"The next day was one of the most exciting times in my life," Kurtzman recalls. "I ran down to the newsstand and bought a bunch of slick magazines to see what other people were doing. Eventually, I decided on a format that would departmentalize day-to-day events. It was a big experiment. I was scared to death when we abandoned the comic format, and I couldn't sleep wondering whether MAD would succeed in its new format."

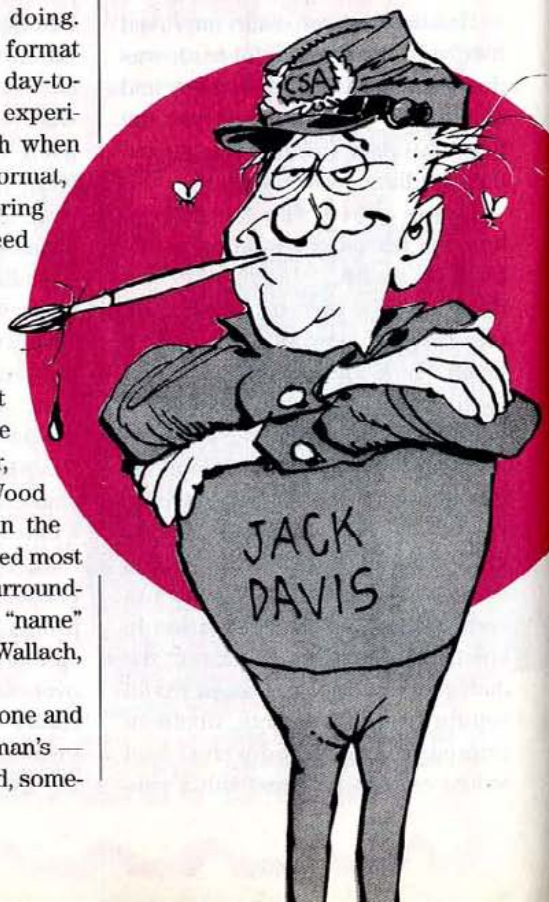
It would. The first issue sold out and had to be reprinted, which was something that just didn't happen in the magazine industry. Artists Will Elder, Jack Davis, and Wally Wood were as effective as ever in the new format. Kurtzman scripted most of the magazine himself, surrounding his own material with "name" items by Ernie Kovacs, Ira Wallach, and Stan Freberg.

Nonetheless, the overall tone and sense of humor were Kurtzman's — wild, unpredictable, cluttered, some-

times sophisticated, sometimes sophomoric. But MAD sold like pizza on Mulberry Street, and despite Kurtzman's disregard for deadlines — "I got too involved on the detail level, which I shouldn't have" — EC had a surprise winner.

The trouble began in late 1955, shortly after Gaines had raised Kurtzman's salary and Kurtzman had agreed to edit MAD for the coming year. But personal income was secondary to Kurtzman. His primary goal was higher rates for his contributors.

Thus began a running battle between Kurtzman, who didn't want to be concerned with matters of thrift, and Lyle Stuart, who did. Stuart had urged Kurtzman to stay with MAD at the time of the *Pageant* offer, but on the whole the two men didn't get along. Their conflict came to a head in December, when Kurtzman told Gaines that unless Stuart resigned Kurtzman would. Reluctantly, to preserve MAD,



Gaines let Stuart go.

Now, Kurtzman and his Right-hand man, Harry Chester, were dealing directly with Gaines on all levels. Gaines was not pleased with Kurtzman's spending, nor was he happy that MAD, officially a bimonthly, was coming out only four times a year because of his editor's deadline problems.

Friends offered advice. "You've got to realize that you can't be dependent on one man," said William Woolfolk. "MAD is a concept, and a concept runs itself. There is no one-man total genius in the world. You've got to lay down the law." But Gaines was afraid. To him, Kurtzman was the indispensable man.

As I said, Kurtzman never pushed for more money for himself. In January, he made what Gaines has called "a strange and generous request." Would Gaines cut Kurtzman's weekly salary by fifty dollars and let him spend the money to beef up the editorial fees of the magazine? Gaines agreed, and calm reigned for a while, at least at MAD.

During this period, of course, Gaines was watching his abortive Picto-Fiction eat up the last of his horror profits, and when his distributor, Leader News, went bankrupt, he wasn't sure that he could keep MAD, his one remaining success, going. He talked it over with Kurtzman.

"I'm trying to work out a deal to pay off my printing bill, but until I do, we're going to have to stop MAD."

Kurtzman urged Gaines to hold on. "I can make MAD work, but it's going to take money."

"Then we'll have to talk to my mother," Gaines said. "She owns half the business."

Both Gaines and Jessie had been left a sizable inheritance. Kurtzman, who can be quite per-

Thanks to self-appointed do-gooders, the new, restrictive Comics Code and the birth of MAD, Bill Gaines went through many mood swings in the tumultuous 1950s.

suasive, convinced Jessie to keep MAD going. She and Gaines each contributed fifty thousand dollars.

Meanwhile, Kurtzman had struck up an acquaintance with *Playboy's* Hugh Hefner, and the two men hit it off at once.

"We felt a great admiration for each other," Kurtzman has said. "He made no offer, but he led me to believe I could work for him any time. The big thing that happened was the vibrations between us."

In outlook, Hefner was the opposite of Gaines. Hefner has never believed in standing pat, and his expansionist views brought home to Kurtzman the frustration he felt at MAD.

"I wanted control of the editorial package," Kurtzman has said. "I didn't have it really. Bill gave me the freedom to write what I wanted, but there were larger questions, like the design of the magazine and how much we could spend on it. I had no power in this area. I tried experiments with new kinds of material and talent, but the rates I wanted to pay were more than Bill wanted to pay. There's some value in trying new things. With Bill, it was always promises, promises."

In early April, Kurtzman told

Gaines that he wanted a chunk of EC stock. Gaines offered him 10 percent, adding that it was the last and best offer he would make and that he was not pleased with Kurtzman's pressure methods.

Ten percent would not solve Kurtzman's dilemma. A day or two later, via Harry Chester, he threw out a demand that would provide a final solution.

"Harvey wants fifty-one percent of the business," Chester told Gaines.

Gaines picked up the phone and called Kurtzman, who was home.

"Hello there, Harvey. Harry tells me you want fifty-one

percent of the business."

"That's right, Bill."

"Harvey! You want fifty-one percent of my business?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Goodbye, Harvey."

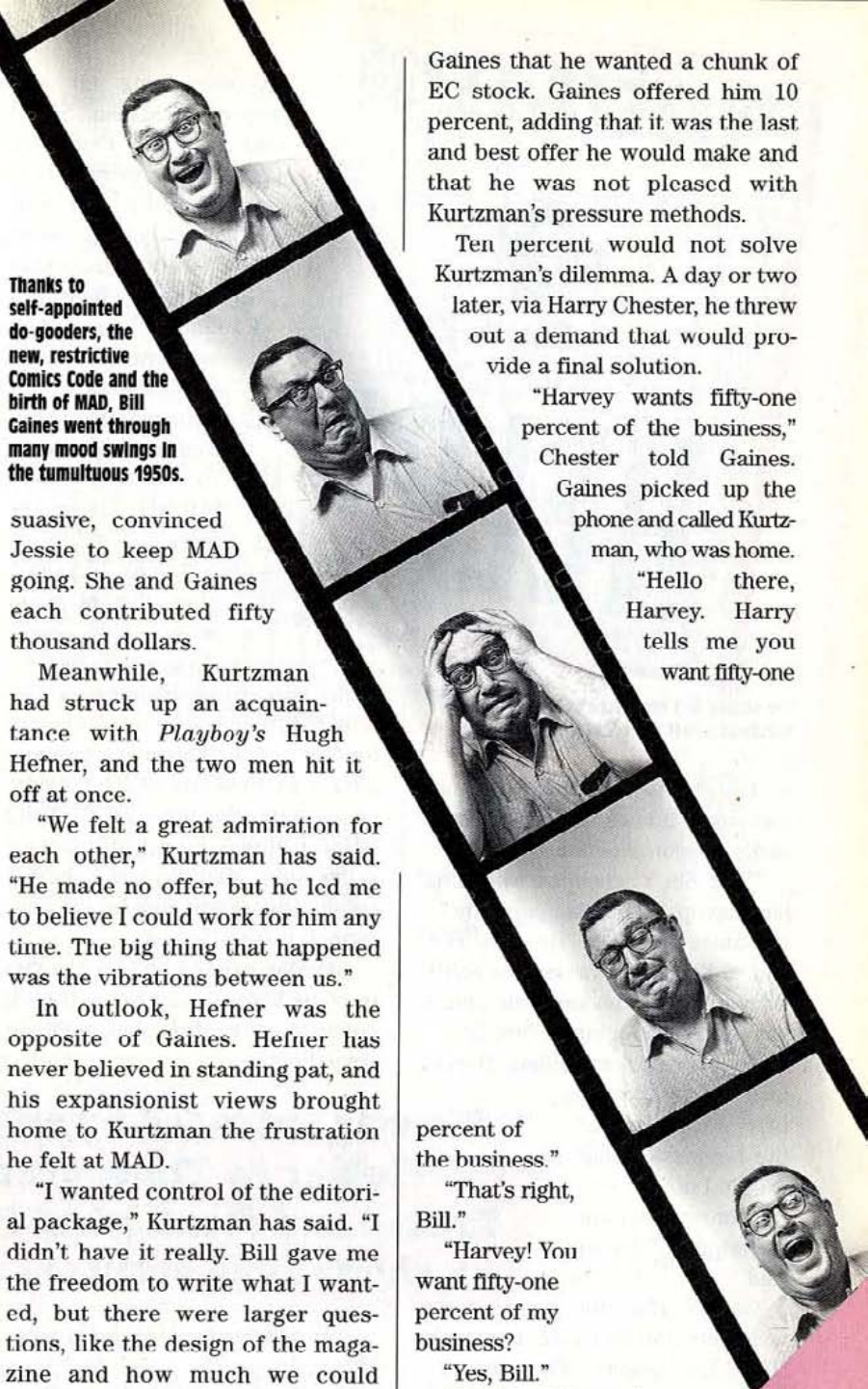
"What do you mean?"

"Goodbye, Harvey."

"You'll be sorry, Bill."

"Goodbye, Harvey."

Gaines was thunderstruck. He ran





The second and final issue of *Trump* — Harvey Kurtzman's first project after leaving MAD.

to his attorney, Martin Scheiman, and asked him to call Kurtzman to verify the conversation.

"Yes, Bill," Scheiman said after hanging up. "You heard correctly."

Gaines felt lost. He was convinced Kurtzman was irreplaceable. He got on the phone with Stuart, who was vacationing in Florida.

"Lyle, I've got a problem. Harvey and Harry want fifty-one percent of the business. What should I do?"

"Throw them out the window," Stuart said.

Gaines did not welcome the levity of the reply. "Lyle, I'm serious. What should I do?"

"I repeat — throw them out the window."

"Well, I guess that's the end of MAD."

"Get Feldstein."

"I'm not sure he can do it."

"Of course he can. He did *Panic*."



Gaines hung up and brooded. Feldstein. Stuart said to get Feldstein. Gaines remembered a conversation he'd had with William Woolfolk when they were discussing Gaines's reliance on Kurtzman. "I may not be your average reader," Woolfolk had said, "but I was never able to tell the difference between Kurtzman's early MAD and Feldstein's *Panic*."

Gaines talked over the problem with new wife Nancy. "I agree,"

she said. "Get Feldstein."

Al Feldstein had been out of work for four months. Late one afternoon, after a fruitless day of job-hunting, he was returning home on the Long Island Railroad. He got off the train at his stop, Merrick, and beheld a familiar figure standing on the platform. It was Gaines.

"Al, Harvey's left and I'd like you to come back. I don't know if we'll continue with MAD, but we'll do something."

He was outraged by an article on Hefner in *Time*, plumping *Trump* and dismissing MAD as "a short-lived satirical pulp."

"We should do MAD," Feldstein said.

"Well, whatever we do, you'll go all the way with me."

As for Kurtzman, his swan song had ended but his memory lingered on. He had known, of course, that there was virtually no chance of Gaines relinquishing 51 percent of the business. If Gaines had, through some stroke of insanity, agreed to the demand, Kurtzman would have



acquired full editorial control.

But Gaines had refused as expected, and now Kurtzman was free to do what he pleased. Within a month, he and Hugh Hefner were drawing up plans for a humor magazine known around the *Playboy* offices as Project X. Kurtzman would be editor with full control. The magazine would require a staff of zany artists, naturally, and Kurtzman knew where to look first — to MAD and to Will Elder, Jack Davis, and Wally Wood. The problem was that Hefner wanted them exclusively, and, well, er-ahem, all three had been working for Gaines for several years.

It was an awkward time for the artists. Least so, perhaps, for Elder, who for years had looked on Kurtzman as an older brother. "I left MAD reluctantly," Elder says. "I liked it, it gave me liberties in my art I never had before. I'd been working exclusively with Harvey, sharing a studio with him, and I left with him. Did I desert MAD? It's a matter of semantics. MAD was taking off. If it had been failing, I don't think my leaving would have caused any problems."

Jack Davis agonized for weeks whether to stay or go. "I knew how upset I'd be if I left Bill, but Harvey

started MAD and was a close friend. I had a choice and I went with Harvey."

As for Wally Wood, he didn't want to be owned by anyone, so for a month he worked for both outfits. Hefner, Kurtzman, and Chester came to Wood's apartment with an ultimatum. "Either you're with us or against us," Hefner said. Wood said he'd sleep on it. The next morning he told Hefner he was sticking with MAD.

Project X made its debut in November, 1956, as *Trump*, a fifty-four-page, full-color humor magazine printed on sturdy, non-comic book paper and featuring a *Playboy*-sized fold-out. Gaines browsed though it with mixed feelings.

He was still boiling over Kurtzman's departure, coming, as it did, only two months after Harvey had persuaded Gaines and his mother to pour \$100,000 into MAD.

He felt resentment toward Hefner, with whom he had exchanged cordial correspondence earlier in the year, and who now had raided MAD's art staff and was publishing a competing magazine.

He was miffed each time a reader, confused by Kurtzman's switch, ordered a *Trump* subscription from MAD.

He was outraged by an article on Hefner in *Time*, plumping *Trump* and dismissing MAD as "a short-lived satirical pulp." Hefner had worked for *Esquire*, and many people believed *Playboy* was eating into *Esquire's* audience. Gaines intemperately wrote *Esquire*, suggesting that it and MAD publish articles about each other. "I feel it would be to the advantage of both of us," Gaines wrote, "if he [Hefner] were to fall on his face and drop some of those profits he's reaping from *Playboy*." Nothing came of the scheme.

But most of all it was Kurtzman. After reading the first *Trump*,

Gaines sent his ex-editor a letter:

Harvey Kurtzman
New York

November 21, 1956

Dear ole Harv--

Saw *Trump*. Some very nice art--Wally's "Hansel & Gretel", Willie's "Epic of Man", and Jack's "Hunting." Also a very funny piece--Annual Report! Beautiful print job. I wish you great success.

But frankly, I doubt it! Not at half a buck! I'm not that impressed. In fact, we were all quite relieved around here.

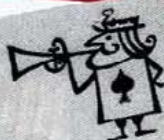
Which brings me to the point of this letter.

You've taken certain actions which if *Trump* fails I don't see how you're going to square with your conscience. For many years I listened to you expounding morals and scruples in business, but what you've done transcends business. What you've done is traded on your friendship for Willie and Jack to gain what you believed would be a business advantage for yourself. You've hypnotised both of them into accepting less money from *Trump* with no contracts over more money from MAD with personally guaranteed contracts.

Kurtzman replied:

TRUMP

New York N. Y. Telephone LExington



Dear Bill:

After five years of mutual friendship, you now sit back there figuring what a rat I actually am and what jerks Willy and Jack actually are and how it's all because of hypnotism.

We have both done well by each other and I want nothing that rightfully belongs to you.

What do you want from my life?

sincerely,

Harvey



"It was Harvey and his magnetism. He had a way of getting you excited about what he was doing."

The fact is that Gaines did believe that Kurtzman held some sort of spell over his followers. Gaines had offered both Elder and Davis one-year, guaranteed contracts, payable in full out of Gaines's pocket should MAD fold. Elder refused immediately. Davis thought about it, then also refused even though Gaines offered him three thousand dollars more per year than Hefner.



Humbug was another short-lived post-MAD Kurtzman project.



Gaines's offer of a contract led Davis to demand a similar arrangement at *Trump*. He was the only artist who did. After *Trump* folded, Hefner was obliged to buy cartoons from Davis for *Playboy* to fulfill the remainder of the contract. Considering *Playboy's* generous rates and the excellence of

Davis's art, both sides presumably wound up happy.

What was it about Harvey Kurtzman that in-

spired such allegiance? Does the so-called Kurtzman charisma really exist? Let us examine the experience of Al Jaffee.

While editing MAD, Kurtzman became convinced that Jaffee, a writer as well as an artist, would be a prize addition to the staff. Jaffee, however, was earning a comfortable living, packaging two teen-age comics for Stan Lee at Timely Comics. He didn't especially enjoy churning out adolescent potboilers, and, after selling Kurtzman two pieces, became intrigued with MAD and its brand of wacky satire.

Kurtzman urged Jaffee to become a regular contributor. Here, after all, was an outlet where a humorist could really express his talents, could really cross into a fresh field. Jaffee, visions of MAD dancing in his head, seized the moment to give up one of his teen-age comics. Lee asked Jaffee to reconsider. Jaffee refused, then called Kurtzman to announce the news.

"Harvey, I've given up one of my books. Now I'll have time to do more work for you."

"There's something I have to tell you," said Kurtzman, the "something" being that he had left MAD.

"But I've burned half my bridges behind me," said Jaffee.

"There may be a new project coming up," Kurtzman hinted, "but I can't talk about it just now."

The new project was, of course, *Trump*, and a week later Kurtzman invited Jaffee to become a full-time contributor at a yearly salary that was one-half of what Jaffee had been making. Jaffee responded by giving up his other teen-age comic and joining the *Trump* crew.

Today, Jaffee is a topflight freelance, whose accounts, in addition to MAD, include *Esquire*, *Playboy*, and numerous advertising agencies.



Yet he looks back on that decision to halve his income with no particular feeling of astonishment.

"It was Harvey and his magnetism. He had a way of getting you excited about what he was doing. It was like he was organizing a grand adventure, and being asked to join made you feel unique. He's always been happiest bringing together a group to produce a special product, just so long as he's Number One and everyone's on his wavelength."

Jaffee remains intrigued by the relationship. "I'd work five days on a piece and take it up to Harvey's house. I'd hand over what I'd done and wait for a reaction. There wasn't any. Harvey would take it and tell me he'd look it over later. Finally

(Continued on page 85)

