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From Socrates to Baseball

Information, Please! 1941 Edition,
 Edited by Dan Golenpaul. Random House.
 New York.

Question: (a) What is the greatest game in the world—educational and yet thrilling? (b) What is, “by popular consent” “the most entertaining and stimulating program on the air?” (c) “What is the most potent form of merri-ment and wisdom?”

Answer: (cried out in unison by a cheerful chorus including the voices of Clifton Fadiman, Dan Golenpaul, Wendell Willkie, John Kieran, Christopher Morley, Franklin P. Adams, Oscar Levant, etc.):

“Information, Please! Information, Please! Information, Please!”

... Millions of people are listening to it each week. Taxi drivers, movie-stars and club-women; elevator-boys, judges and glamour girls. They are all spellbound when “the most astute minds of America” vie with each other in giving Shakespearean quotations or identifying the baseball players with each of the following nick-names: *Boom! Boom! Bad News, Hot Potatoes, Fiddler Bill* . . .

Red Caps, college boys and dentists seem suddenly possessed by a frantic interest in remote details of natural history or in the French Revolution. Housewives brood over the problem of whether a certain statement was made by Socrates or the late Theodore Roosevelt. *Information, Please!* not only conquers the American home, but also invades the movie theatres: “Shorts made by Pathé have won the enthusiastic approval of audiences everywhere . . .” So *Random House* proudly announces in its new edition which includes many “quizzes” that have never gone out over the air waves, in addition to those already familiar to radio fans.

It is a grand book—quite intriguing, indeed. Makes you feel like an idiot if you read the questions while forbidding yourself to catch a glimpse of the answers, in the second part of the book. “Name an athlete who was commonly described as peerless—terrible—wild—mysterious . . .” You might easily look at page 173. But a sort of masochistic stubbornness prevents you from doing so. You prefer admitting your own ignorance—blushingly but frankly. In fact, you are even unable to list offhand five kinds of fish with which man has been compared.

Name five occupations designated by words containing the name of a color or shade . . . (Colored shirts will not be accepted . . .)

Five occupations? Not the slightest idea. Besides, what is wrong with colored shirts?

What plays or movies do the following foods bring to mind and why? Fish fry . . . Corn muffins . . .

There you’ve got me again!

“If you met a man by the name of A. Schikelgruber at a dinner party, by what other name might your hostess introduce him?”—This time I happen to know the answer, in spite of the cunning trick of initialing the mystery man just *A*. Yet, this question, too, strikes me as somehow embarrassing. I don’t like the idea of that dinner party and of the trembling hostess who has to introduce an enigmatic Mr. Schikelgruber: “Ladies and gentlemen, I am sure that all of you have already recognized our guest of honor . . .” —They may take him for Charlie Chaplin . . .

It’s fun, too, to read the answers without knowing the questions they are supposed to cover.

a. A whispering

b. A tinkling of bells,

“Keeping time, time, time,

THIS MONTH IN BOOKS

In a sort of Runic rhyme
To the tintinnabulation that so
musically wells
From the bells."

- c. A prolonged howling, as of a dog
or wolf (or occasionally a soprano.)

Sounds rather puzzling and poetic,
doesn't it?

What an amazing concoction!—the most motley catalogue of knowledge ever produced; a staggering cocktail of figures, names and quotations—a crazy encyclopedia. It offers, indeed, any sort of information you could possibly wish for—: Facts about Greek mythology and modern cooking, tennis and the Bible, Dickens and traffic-regulations, movie-directors, wrestlers, Irish folk-songs, and military units; flowers, Mark Twain, the Magna Charta, and musical comedies; courtesans, industrialists, rivers, tools, Hamlet, Alpine climbing, Aristophanes, and the careers of American Presidents; Jascha Heifetz, insects, prize-fighters, opera-librettos, and the clues in detective stories.

Even more significant, and certainly more intricate, than any of the questions to be found in the book itself, is the very problem of why it is so successful. Why do people of all social milieus trouble themselves with pondering over the meaning of far-fetched historical dates or technical expressions instead of getting a kick out of a detective thriller or a good piece of swing music? The only possible explanation is that an amazingly high percentage of men and women in this country have the honest wish to improve themselves. At the same time, however, they want entertainment. The combination of instruction and fun seems, therefore, still the most promising formula for success.

There is something very fine and

encouraging about this tremendous public appetite for knowledge—this faithful and naive respect for solid scholarship. For we have to admit that the intellectual level on which the *Information* game is played, is comparatively high. The questions referring to serious literature, classical music, history and science are at least as numerous as those dealing with Broadway hits, headline-celebrities and the sports. The fact that Mr. Fadiman and his friends keep mentioning Shakespearean characters and the titles of classic novels, in their sparkling dialogue on the air, might stimulate many a citizen to re-read (or to read for the first time) *Anna Karenina* or *King Lear*.

There are, however, other aspects involved; the child-like eagerness to learn that is characteristic of the American public, also has its disquieting features. The overestimation of knowledge *as such*, for its own sake, has been a mania of the XIXth Century—in fact, it has been a *European* mania, often ridiculed and attacked. The German professor, at once absent-minded and pedantic, made his grotesque appearance, not only in the classrooms and on lecture platforms, but also in musical comedies and the funny papers. He knew by heart all the irregular Greek verbs, the most intricate mathematical formulas and the exact dates of all the battles ever fought since the time of Alexander the Great. Besides, he was in the habit of forgetting his umbrella wherever he happened to go. He was venerable and comic—entirely bewitched by his dusty fetish—his touching and absurd idolatry of scholarship.

It is fascinating to see that learned monster make his triumphant comeback—amazingly transformed, in a brand-new, streamlined disguise. While the old professor managed to make a bore even out of Cleopatra or Madame

Pompadour, his modern re-incarnation, the brilliant radio *causeur*, succeeds in amusing his audience with a dull problem in arithmetic. Yet, the old fellow, for all his stilted gravity, had certain advantages compared with his smooth successor.

Too much of a rigid system in the treatment of cultural and scientific matters can certainly be a nuisance; but the complete lack of any system may become a danger. True, it is a clever idea to mix such timely notions as the nicknames of baseball *vedettes* into the discussion of more serious problems. If *Information, Please!* would omit all question concerning prize-fighters and movie-stars, people might eventually cease paying attention to the Shakespearean quotations. Still, this arbitrary putting-together of heterogeneous facts, or mere fragments of facts, may bring about, not a new and more comprehensive vision of modern culture, but, ultimately, a total depreciation and dissolution of all cultural values. The very capacity of differentiating between significant things and nonsense may eventually crumble when people constantly hear the names of Caesar and Balzac mentioned in the same breath with the slang expressions coined by professional baseball—an arrangement in fact, as frivolous and obnoxious as presenting a swing version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

This may sound as though we were taking an unduly serious view of what is merely a successful radio program (sponsored by Lucky Strike Cigarettes) . . . But we must not forget that this program is recommended to us by noted American writers as a new type of "liberal education"—a modern "education through the ear."

I have tried to point out that *Information, Please!* contains, indeed, elements and possibilities that justify, to

a certain degree, these grandiose characterizations. As an unpretentious stimulus it may prove valuable to the intellectual life of this country. I think, however, that such distinguished men as Clifton Fadiman and Oscar Levant have a great responsibility when talking, week after week, to millions of their less distinguished compatriots. It is, indeed, a *pedagogic* responsibility—whether they want it or not. They should not only tickle their listeners with their *mots*—not only try to impress them with their wit and swiftness: but, above all, ought to warn them against the foolish idea of confounding an indiscriminate pell-mell of facts with real culture and knowledge. The selected group of intellectuals who have the chance and the honor of being heard by the masses, ought to convince their eager audiences that those casual bits of knowledge which they—Mr. Fadiman and his collaborators—are able to offer, have but little significance compared with the vast treasures awaiting those who are industrious and bold enough to conquer them.

There is one fact which "the most astute minds of America" should add to their imposing collection of "more than 1500 questions and answers." They ought to inform their audience that one man may be capable of answering all these questions and still be a fool. And that another man may be unable to give a single answer offhand, and may still be a genius. And that he, who happens to be neither a fool nor a genius but an average citizen, may really get something out of *Information, Please!* if it makes him realize the possible shortcomings of his education; he has little chance to improve simply by listening to a broadcast. His best bet is to turn off the radio and to begin to work.

Klaus Mann