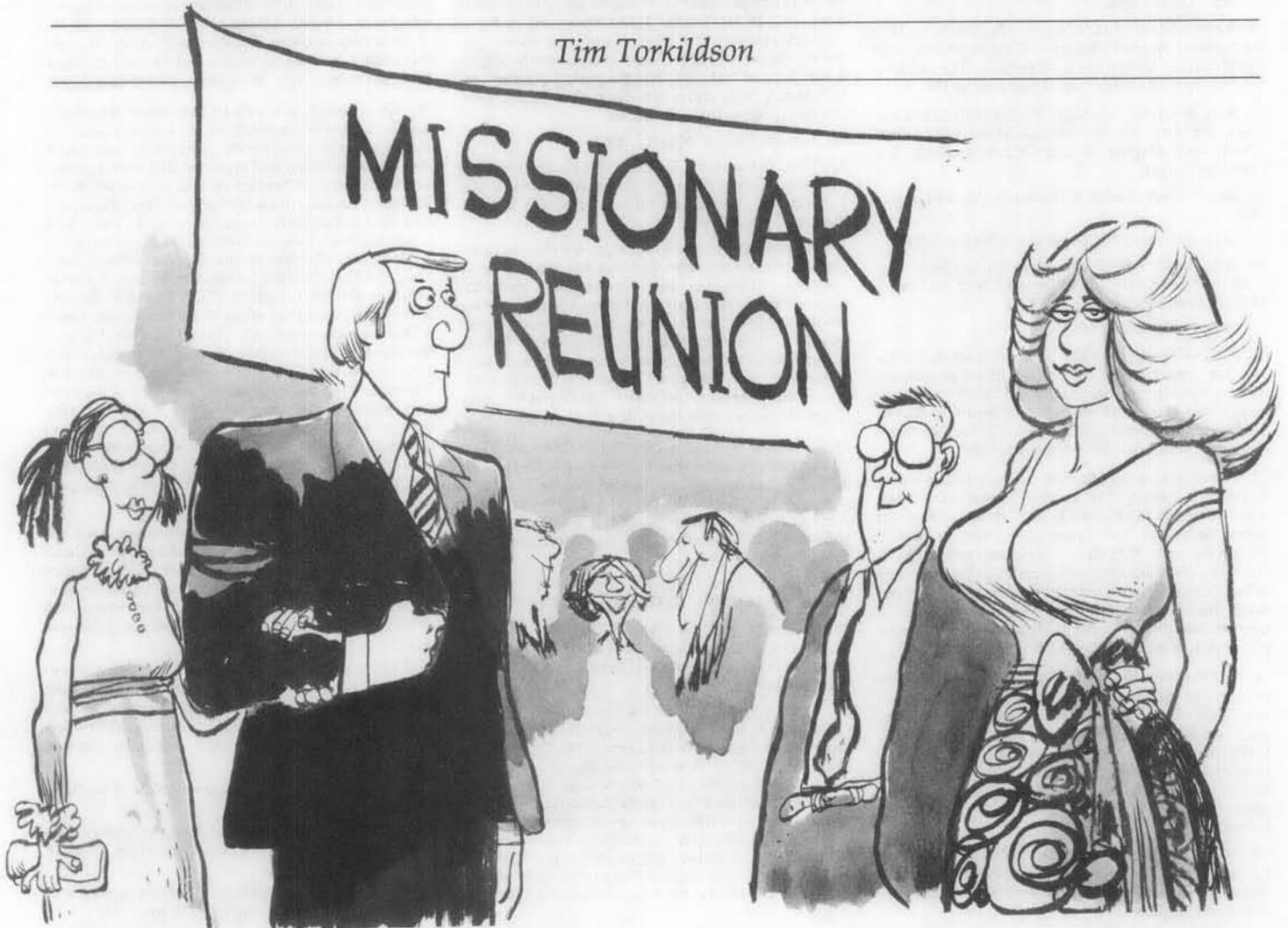

CLINICAL NOTES

ON THE R.M.

Tim Torkildson



THE IMPULSE that propels a returned missionary (RM) to make a fool of himself with women is of mysterious origin. Doubtless, Hugh Nibley could solve the mystery in a moment; but he is busy explaining Egyptian graffiti. It seems quite likely, however, that the initial impetus can be traced back to the Understanding

TIM TORKILDSON hails from Minneapolis. After a thoroughly middle-class childhood and adolescence, he kicked over the traces and joined Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Circus as a clown. After several years traveling with the circus, and a brief jaunt to Mexico to study pantomime, Tim served a mission in Thailand, from 1975-1977. Upon his return, he again joined up with the Big Top, but unfortunately had an argument with Michu the Midget, billed as the Worlds Smallest Man. Tim had the great satisfaction of shoving the Worlds Smallest Man into

(always capitalized) most missionaries in the field have with some sweet young thing (SYT) back home. The SYT unfortunately understands the Understanding somewhat differently than the missionary. While the missionary is either frying in the tropics or freezing in some arctic region, constantly urged on by a dog-eared photo of him-

a nearby wardrobe trunk. Circus management took a dim view of this, however, and Tim found himself free to pursue another profession. He chose the field of broadcasting, and currently is employed by KBTO radio, in Bottineau, North Dakota, as their news director.

Tim has authored several plays, dozens of short stories and poems, and one novel. This is his first piece to see the light of day. If he doesn't get a raise soon, he'll probably write some more. (*Editors' Note: How does one shorten such a bio?*)

self and the SYT, the SYT finds herself widowed at an inconvenient age and does not long remain deaf to the entreaties of other men (usually RMs).

The upshot of all this is that the poor fool (PF) out in the mission field receives a wedding announcement one day, on expensive cream-colored paper, telling him that his Understanding has been misunderstood. Moreover, the SYT artlessly scrawls on the announcement that the PF needn't feel bad about not sending a present—Mr. SYT's daddy is loaded. His final slap in the face occurs a year later when Mrs. SYT writes to the PF, still toiling away in distant regions, saying that they are going to name their first child after him. (Bishops know that this is the self-sacrificing stuff of which Relief Society presidents are made.)

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The foolish compulsion toward the opposite sex blossoms when the dupe returns home as the celebrated RM. After two long, dry years, he finds himself yearning for tieless companionship. He peruses the home ward and decides that unless he wants to marry for spirituality alone, he'd better check out the nearest University Ward. There, instinctively, the RM immediately begins looking for Miss Right. (If he happens to obtain an education at the same time, so much the better.) He flings himself on all available females with the wild abandon that drew praises from his mission president when he applied it to breaking tracting records.

In his mind, the RM begins to misperceive the merely polite response of female ward members and thinks himself irresistible. At this point, he feels obligated to formulate a systematic plan of action and draws up a document listing all the qualities he desires in his mate. Such documents are kept carefully hidden from the public view and are never openly discussed by the author, unless he is invited to address a fireside audience of over five hundred. The RM's list mandates that the longed-for mate be a superb cook, an excellent musician (i.e., she can play Primary tunes flawlessly on any piano), thrilled by the thought of babies by the dozen, able to stay thin even during pregnancy, and unable to utter a cross word. Most of these lists omit good looks—but that is only because the RM assumes that only diaphanous beauties will be coming his way.

While the RM is carefully matching his list with the women he dates, he undergoes an interesting transformation. Hair sprouts from every pore of his face and Levi's are worn like a second skin. Ties are almost uncompromisingly avoided, as are shirts of white or any other color found in nature.

The RM's dating patterns become predictable. His first date is with a cousin. This is to get into practice again. The second date is usually with a chance acquaintance in the University ward, arranged on the spur of the moment. The woman thinks it mundane, but the RM is convinced that a new Understanding has been reached.

For the next two weeks, he flushes in her presence, hums old Bread tunes incessantly, and sells his car to buy the rings. Upon discovering that his Understanding is the woman's Irritation, he goes into shock for at least 24 hours. When he recovers, he does not remember anything between the time he got off his mission and when he came out of shock. Only the fact that his car is missing makes him the slightest bit suspicious about the events in between.

The RM soon feels up to dating again. He has a short fling with an attractive, earthy woman who cooks only organic food. He gags down soy milk and nibbles on tofu-carob casserole before fleeing. After a large antidote of pizza, he generally runs into the female owner of an over-used Kodak Instamatic. She has slides of every single unimportant event in her life, from the Heritage Halls Preference Dance to her recent pilgrimage to New Jersey, where her ancestors once farmed. The RM endures several thousand of her photos before he comes to his senses. He then hides in someone's attic for a month, giving out the news that he has perished at sea, or is waiting for a lady missionary. He emerges from his enforced imprisonment a sadder, but wiser, fellow.

This is usually when he falls in love with someone he home teaches. Though love may be the by-product, home teaching in a student ward is designed to provide RMs with physical exercise. Called upon at least once a week to move yet another female home teacher out of one apartment into another, the RM strains every muscle while cramming the home teacher's solid mahogany dresser into his compact car. While recuperating from backstrain, this helpful RM realizes that he is deeply in love with the home teacher. Not puppy-love, like the previous affairs, but the Real Thing.

The Real Thing lasts exactly one date—during which the female home teacher burns dinner, has an embarrassing fight with her latest set of roomies, and spends the rest of the evening sporting a broad grin which does anything but hide the bright green pieces of broccoli casserole lodged between her bicuspid and incisors.

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Unless the real Real Thing happens at this crucial time, the returned missionary now desires nothing so much as a long bachelorhood. He starts lifting weights and attending social events with other RMs, where he giggles witlessly when he spots a former mission companion with his wife. This final stage lasts anywhere from a few months to several years, depending on the humidity. It is marked by vain attempts to avoid the judgmental gaze of a marriage-minded bishop and to cover a gradually receding hairline, thinning tresses flapped over his scalp from just above the left earlobe. Soon the RM abandons the University ward (except for an occasional visit to look over the new crop of Freshman co-eds) and joins the swelling ranks of Special Interests in the nearest Singles ward.

Here he takes root.