



Professor Punjab

by James Frederick Topping

IT was a busy day for Mrs. McJimsey. Not only was she in the midst of her spring house-cleaning, but the Bashful Maids Musical Comedy Company had arrived at her small theatrical boarding-house, every bashful maid clamoring for the front room. "Birdie" insisting that she wouldn't room with that Belle Marcelle, and Clarice declaring that she wouldn't stop there at all if she couldn't keep her poodle in her room.

By the time the last trunk had bumped up the front stairs, the laundryman departed with a bunch of make-up towels, and the "Big Chorus of Bashful Beauties" had retired in kimonos for their midday nap, Mrs. McJimsey was reduced to a limp and palpitant bulk of indignation.

Livid and quaking, she flounced into the parlor, where the paper-hanger was tearing rolls of moiré ceiling into strips.

"Mister," she exclaimed, wiping her face on her apron and sinking down upon the sill of the open window, "did you see that bunch of chorus-Janes that blew in here? Now I've seen some three-sheeters in my time, but, believe me, this crowd certainly rings down the asbestos curtain. Why, they wouldn't pay the

regular rate at the hotel no more than they'd join the Salvation Army, but they come here and find fault with the rooms, and act as though they'd been stopping at the Waldorf, and then they got the nerve to ask me if I can't do a little better than five a week if they don't eat no breakfast!"

With an outraged snort she swatted a fly on the window screen, and, settling back against the casement, folded her fat hands limply in her lap. The paper-hanger, having finished tearing his paper, began daubing paste on the back of the top strip with his wide brush.

"You might not think it to look at me, mister," resumed Mrs. McJimsey, "but I put in fifteen years in the show business myself. And I've been runnin' this boardin'-house goin' on seven years now, but I never seen but one man that could come up to this bunch. That was a feller called Professor Punjab. He was the finickiest bag of wind that ever stepped on the stage. He was a hypnotist, and pretty well known them times. Maybe you've heard of him, mister?"

The paper-hanger, stooping to rescue his shears, shook his head in dumb negation.

“Well,” she continued, “he was supposed to be a Hindu, but the nearest he come to it was to wear a turban and smoke Turkish cigarettes. The first time I seen him was up in the little Illinois town of Emmetville. I was between eighteen and nineteen then. Kennibrew’s Castle Garden Show had blew up and left me stranded there, workin’ in a boardin’-house, waitin’ for some show to come along that I could join out with. But the town was known all over the country as a bloomer. All the shows slid around it, and I was gettin’ to think I was doomed to spend my life there when along come Professor Punjab.

“Now, mister, a hypnotic show ain’t got much use for women. But I made up my mind I was goin’ to leave that town of Emmetville with Punjab’s outfit, if I had to marry him to do it. He come to the boardin’-house where I was workin’, and these folks that just come in sure reminded me of him. There wasn’t no room in the house to suit him, but he finally decided he could endure one for one night. After I’d moved the bed and turned the mattress inside out—most show folks is suspicious of mattresses—I gently informed him that I was a real actress, and as good a song and dance artist as ever trouped with a show.

“And before he had time to change the subject I braced him for a job. He said he didn’t carry any women subjects, but he wrote me a pass to the show, and told me to come up on the stage that night and he’d try me out.

“I stacked the dishes in the sink after supper, dug my dancin’ shoes up out of my trunk, dolled myself all up, and beat it to the town hall, where ‘Professor Punjab, the Wonder-Working Hindu Hypnotist,’ was billed to show that night. There wasn’t any stage in the place—just a little platform—and he had it all decked out with some ragged-looking Oriental draperies. And on each side of the platform he had some funny little jars with some stinkin’ stuff burnin’ in ’em.

“I went in and sat down, and it wasn’t long

till the place was full of natives.

“I was settin’ there wonderin’ which smelled the worst, those perspirin’ Rubes or the tea that Punjab was burnin’, when out come the professor himself. And let me tell you, mister, that ‘Wonder-Workin’ Hindu’ was a sight to behold! The natives settled back with open mouths.

“When I’d seen him at supper he hadn’t looked no different from any ordinary white man, exceptin’ for his turban, and maybe his skin a little darker around his neck. But there he stood, with rings in his ears, and enough brass bracelets on his wrists and bare ankles to start a ten-cent store. He had a long, flowin’ robe on, and I guess I wouldn’t have knowed him myself if I hadn’t recognized his voice.

“He told ’em what a great hypnotist he was, and all the wonderful things he was goin’ to do, and then he invited anybody in the audience that felt like he needed hypnotizin’ to step upon the stage. I knew that was my cue, but when four fellows that looked more like they needed wakin’ up got up and marched to the front, I just set there like I was glued to my seat.

“I don’t know whether it was the smell of the place or the way the professor was dressed that got my goat, but my nanny was gone, and I’d rather spend a hundred years in Emmetville than go up there on that platform and take any chances on that feller hypnotizin’ me! So there I set, wishin’ I’d stayed to home and done my supper dishes like I’d ought to, while my chances of gettin’ out of that dyspeptic town were exitin’ center door fancy.

“I’d have got up and got out of the place right there, but I was afraid Punjab would see me, so I just squeezed down in my seat as far as I could and held my breath. It didn’t seem to worry the professor, though, whether I came up or not. He never even glanced my way, but set the four ‘subjects’ in a row and started the show by workin’ on the red-headed feller on the end.

“He made a few mysterious passes with

his hands, and after he'd told the fellow to 'keep your eye on my finger,' he shoved his hand right up in front of the red-head's nose and had the poor gink lookin' so cock-eyed that if he'd shed tears they'd a rusted his suspender buckles in the back. Then Punjab told him to close his eyes and roll 'em up in his head like he was tryin' to examine his brains, and after he'd got the guy in that awful fix, Punjab swelled all up and said the man was in his hypnotic power, and no matter how hard he'd try, he couldn't open his eyes.

"Sure he couldn't! Try it yourself, mister! I done it while I was sittin' there, and when I seen there was a trick in it, and that the professor was nothin' but a fake—say, mister, you know how you feel when you've been woke up in the night by some loud noise, and set up in bed, scared half stiff, waitin' for a gunman to take a shot at you from the foot of the bed, and then hear the cat sneakin' out of the closet with a mouse she's collected for the children's lunch? Well, sir, that was just the way I felt after Punjab pulled that first wonder-workin' stunt of his.

"I was sore at myself for gettin' scared, and I was hep to that professor, so I lassoed my fleeing goat and started up there to show Punjab what I could do first, intending to give him to understand that I was on to him afterward.

"The professor saw me comin' up the aisle, and started makin' monkey motions at me like he'd hypnotized me and was makin' me come. I decided that if I was goin' to be part of his show I'd better take my cues, so I looked as pop-eyed as I could, and acted like them folks that are born that way and can't help it. After I got on the stage I didn't wait for any promptin' from his Hindu highness, but busted right into my song.

"There wasn't any piano in the place, and I got it pitched about seven keys too high, and before I'd screeched through the first line my throat felt like it was afire, and I had to start over again. Then I got it too low, and had to

stop and cough, and some Rube thought I was pullin' some comedy and begun to laugh. That settled it. The more I tried to sing the louder them natives would laugh, and if I hadn't started to dance I guess I'd be there yet, tryin' to drown 'em out!

"But if I do say it, they had to go some to beat me dancin' them days! You wouldn't believe it now, would you, mister?"

And Mrs. McJimsey thrust a pair of swollen, flattened feet, shod in run-down bedroom slippers, from under the hem of her bungalow apron and regarded them mournfully from above her succession of chins.

"You wouldn't think it now—that's sure! But them times I didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, and before I'd hit a dozen taps the natives was holdin' their breaths, and Punjab had decided that I was worth carryin' out of town.

"So when the milkman's accommodation pulled out of Emmetville the next morning, me and my trunk was aboard, and the wonder-workin' outfit had joined out a new subject.

"Punjab's next stand was a regular town. Electric lights, steam heat, and runnin' water, and we was billed to show there all week.

"But before the week was over I found out that there were several little things I didn't know about 'hyp' shows, no more than if I'd spent my days in a convent, singin' little hymns and carryin' a candle. For one thing, I mighty soon found out that the red-headed guy and the other three unwashed fellers who had gone up on the stage in Emmetville were part of the outfit, and that they collected their pay every night just as soon as Punjab had settled up with the ticket-seller.

"The red-headed guy was a sleepy, good-natured bum, and it wasn't more than two days before I decided he was hitting the booze, and maybe doping besides. But the other three were a hard lot. Punjab seemed to be kind of afraid of them, and I ain't ashamed to say I was. I kept my dressing-room door

locked, and when we was going back to the hotel I stuck to Punjab's heels like I was Mary's little lamb.

"And Punjab hisself wasn't no Angel Gabriel. He had a temper like a pot of red-fire, and he and his roughneck subjects was always cussin' each other in the wings, and throwing up things to each other, for all the world like the rival beauties on a burlesque show. Punjab had it in for the red-headed guy, and was always prophesying that the red-head would queer the game.

"I didn't know what he meant then. I was an awful simp them days, mister.

"Well, about the second day Punjab begun making curtain speeches, advertising the great stunt we was to pull off the last of the week—the 'sleep,' they called it. It appeared that by the exercise of his wonder-workin' power he was goin' to put the red-headed guy into the 'third sleep,' as he called it, that lasted for forty-eight hours. After the subject was all drowsed up so nobody could wake him, he was to be put on exhibition in the window of the leading grocery-store of the city.

"I guess you've seen them gags done, mister?

"The sleep was to begin on Thursday night, and then the subject was to be woke up on Saturday, when the grocery people would give a free demonstration of some kind of coffee. It was a soft graft for Punjab. I don't know what he got out of the grocery firm, but knowin' the professor, I'll bet it was enough.

"The crowds kept gettin' bigger, and I begun to believe I had landed next to some real money when the red-headed feller disappeared. That was on Wednesday night, and Punjab and the other three like to set the scenery afire cussin', and spent the whole night huntin' the wanderin' boy. It was mornin' before they found him, soused up good and stiff in a dirty, little saloon. Along with the whiskey, he'd imbibed a good, big dose of dope, and he was good for seventy hours of straight jag.

"And that was the day he was supposed to go by-by in the grocery window!

"Punjab came back to the hotel lookin' like he was ready to go out and kill a few hundred good church members. I hadn't believed that he had any Hindu blood in him before that, but that day I begun to discover a few heathen birthmarks. It didn't seem to me any decent white man could swear the way he did and not drop dead like Anias, or whoever that Sunday-school feller was.

"I couldn't see any reason for throwing a fit then. I thought one of the other three roughnecks would do as well for the mysterious sleep as red-head. But I soon found I was wrong. Punjab growled and snarled through his dinner until the poor dining-room girls looked like they'd like to slip him a little ground glass in his hash, and then he come up and knocked on my door. I was washin' out some dancin' tights in the washbowl, and I hid 'em quick, thinkin' it was the landlady; but when I opened the door, there stood the professor with a face on him that would have scared a baby elephant into a spasm.

"He looked at me straight. 'You'll have to go on and do that sleep to-night,' he says to me.

"I had the soap in my hands where I'd been washing, and I squeezed it so hard it mashed like butter between my fingers, I was that scared. 'Me?' I says, all out of breath.

"'Yes, you'." he snaps back. And then a thought struck him, and he give a grin. 'Sleepin' beauty!' he says kind of to himself. 'Why didn't I think of it before?' He grins some more, and seems mighty pleased with himself. 'I'll get out some heralds,' he says—'great stunt!'

"Now, mister, I was pretty young, but I'd knocked around a lot, and I had learned to look out for myself a little. I just fired right back at him. 'Great stunt,' I says; 'but what do I get out of it?'

"Punjab swelled up at that and looked like

he wanted to do a swell little murder scene in one, but he thought better of it, and give a kind of a sickly smile. 'You'll be took care of,' he says. And then, after tellin' me to put on a white dress and a lace cap and not to make up too heavy, he went off.

"Mister, I spent most of my young days punching the lumps out of straw ticks down in a little river town in Missouri. I thought it was a dog's life then. But all that day, while I was wanderin' around that town and walkin' past that grocery window, watchin' the flies crawlin' gaily over the stacks of stale apples and bottles of ketchup, I found myself longin' for the quiet security of that dead and buried little Missouri burg and the little room over the kitchen where I slept with a fat dining-room girl. If I'd 'a' had any money, I believe I'd caught a train on the wrong side. But the first thing you learn in the show business, mister, is to stick to your trunk. And Punjab hadn't paid me anything yet—nor the landlady, either.

"So there wasn't nothing for me to do but hang around and get it over. The theater was packed full that night, and the main piece of scenery on the stage was a little white cot with pink ribbons tied on the pillow and some ruffles of mosquito-netting gathered around the bottom of it. I suppose it looked very pretty to the audience, but to me it looked like it only needed a wreath of those everlasting flowers and a tin plate marked 'At Rest'!

"Of course you know, mister, that sleep was a fake. Punjab couldn't have hypnotized a baby rabbit and kept him asleep forty-eight seconds. So I was supposed to do some high-class fakin', and Punjab had give me a lot of instructions and a lot of gas about what he'd do to me if I threw him. As long as there was anybody on the street I was to play dead, with my chin turned up and my golden locks strayin' on the pillow. About 2 A.M. the professor figured that the last smart guy would give it up and go home and the town marshal relax his vigilance, and then one of the

subjects was to rap on my window, and I was to get up, snap off the night lock, and let him in. This guy would bring me some grub and water, and then I was to go back to sleep. They had already doped some beer for the night watchman the grocery people employed.

"Well, it worked all right the first night. I went to sleep in my little trundle bed, and six husky fellows out of the audience carried me down to the grocery-store, the young ones giggling kind of silly and daring each other to pinch me. I kept my chin turned up at a classy angle, according to instructions, and breathed deep and steady. For a while the strong light shining through my eyelids made my head ache, but after a while the crowd went home, and they put the lights out, all but a dim one in the corner where the safe was.

"The roughneck came around accordin' to schedule and brought me a tray. I waited till I heard the watchman snorin' good, and then I let him in, and ate, and put some mosquito stuff on my face, and went back to sleep. And that time I slept sure enough.

"When I woke up the sun was shining hot on the stale apples, and six million flies had waked up and were ready to greet the glad new day. Two big, greasy railroad men were standing outside staring at me through the glass. I got one squint at their dinner buckets, and then shut my eyes quick and began to breathe heavy, trying to forget that it was morning and that I hadn't had any breakfast.

"Mister, if I live to be a million I'll never forget that day! The crowd began to gather around the window where the sleeping beauty was taking her forty-eight-hour nap. All the folks in town were on the outside, and all the flies in the world were inside.

"Mister, if you want to lose what little decent human feelin' you've got, you just lie flat on your back for an hour or two, with your hands at your sides, and let the flies amble around over your eyes and nose and mouth undisturbed. About noon Punjab came down in his Oriental robes and cheap jewelry and

made a few passes over my nose to assure the crowd that I was sunk in mysterious slumber. He even had a gun shot off close to the glass to prove that no human power but his own could arouse me.

“The sun got hotter and hotter, and the smell of them apples was terrible, and along in the afternoon a clerk came and piled a lot of new cabbage and tomatoes next to the glass so the little flies wouldn’t get discouraged.

“But at last I could feel the heat going out of the big sheet of glass close to me, and the people going by walked faster, and I knew that it was gettin’ close to supper-time. I knew it more ways than one, mister! I tell you, that lonesome midnight hour when my eats would come seemed a mighty long ways off!

“Punjab came back at show-time and gave a kind of free exhibition in the window, putting the tall fellow through some stunts, and then the crowd followed him off to the theater, and I was left alone with the grocery watchman and the man who drove the delivery-wagon. I could hear them talking, sittin’ back on the cot behind the stack of flour-sacks and brooms. I heard them laugh as though something was a fine joke; and once I thought I heard a gun click, but I wasn’t sure—then!

“Then, though I was so hungry I was just one long, hollow ache, I went to sleep again. And when I woke up somebody was rapping on the window in a snappy kind of way as though he was mad all over.

“I got up and tiptoed out over the ketchup and piles of cabbage and started to open the door. I could hear the watchman snoring long and heavy on his cot behind the brooms and probably I got reckless and made too much noise snapping the lock off. Anyway a light blazed up behind me and a gun went off—pow—pow—and the bullet whined past my ear and hit the door frame with a spat.

“Outside the door I could see four figures—Punjab and the three bums of his—and as I dragged the door open one of them

turned and bolted. I could hear the professor swearing at him and the tall guy say: ‘It ain’t the watchman—we got him doped!’ And then the gun went off again and I just dropped down in a heap between two crates of lemons.

“In about two minutes, mister, they were shooting from every corner of that street, and men were running and waving lanterns and charging in and out, stumblin’ over the berry crates and sacks of potatoes and knockin’ down pyramids of oatmeal and canned salmon. But Punjab and his gang had disappeared.

“All there was left of the wonder-workin’ outfit was me huddled there in my little white nightie scared to death and with no idea on earth what all the racket was about.

“After a while a big fellow dragged me up and shook a lantern in my face. ‘Here’s the girl!’ he yells. ‘She’s the inside worker. She let ’em in!’ And before I could say a word a little wiry constable tripped up and clinked a bran-new pair of handcuffs on me with an air of victory as though I was Jesse James or some of them bandits. And me nothing but a simp of a kid that ought to been at home shellin’ the peas for dinner!

“Well, mister, after I’d been in their dirty jail about a week I found out what it was all about. It seems that in every town where Punjab worked his sleep act there was a big robbery pulled off, and some of the sheriffs and jay detectives had been on the watch in this town where we was showin’, expectin’ the grocery to be robbed. And the only reason the job hadn’t been pulled off was because the roughneck subject of Punjab’s who had handed the watchman a bottle of beer had overlooked the man who drove the delivery wagon.

“Well, they never caught Punjab nor any of the three hoboos with him. They fetched the little red-headed feller out of the ten-cent flop house where he was sleepin’ off his stew and put him in jail where I was. A young lawyer got interested in me and got me out by proving

that I had been under Punjab's hypnotic influence when I got up and opened the door! But I guess the red-head is in hock there yet.

"I got out of that town with the kid show of a little eight-wagon circus. I'd got in the papers by then and was kind of famous. But I never quit lookin' for that wonder-workin' Hindu professor. And when I meet him, if I ever do, let me tell you, mister, he's going to pay for them nineteen days I spent in that rotten jail!"

With a labored lurch Mrs. McJimsey rose from the window sill. The paper-hanger was packing his tools into his apron pocket and in the streets the newsboys were shouting the afternoon papers. A faint odor of roasting sifting from the kitchen betrayed the progress of the evening dinner. The paper-hanger wiped his hands on his overalls, kicked the fragments of paper into a heap, and began putting on his collar.

Mrs. McJimsey started out. Then at the door she turned.

"Did you ever notice, mister," she remarked, "how these nervy guys like Punjab, with brass armor plate on their consciences and no consideration for other people's rights

whatever, gits whatever they want in this world? It's funny how folks like you and me will chase ourselves round in circles tryin' to wait on 'em and keep 'em satisfied, though maybe the board of censors would draw a big blue line through the things we're thinkin' about them particular parties. The crop of simps in this world ain't never failed yet, no matter how dry the weather is!"

At that moment there appeared at the head of the stairs a thin and acid-faced "bashful maid" whose scanty hair was rolled upon curlers and who carried in her hands a grayish bit of linen which she flourished dramatically.

"Look-a-here!" she adjured the landlady. "Do you call this here string a towel? Looks like you could give people bath-towels when you're collectin' enough off 'em to run a first class hotel!" Mrs. McJimsey patiently picked up the towel which the bashful maid had disdainfully tossed down the stairs. There was a weary sag to her body as she turned toward the departing paper-hanger.

"What'd I tell you, mister?" she said, "And I'll bet if that girl has a half a chance she'll skip out and leave me stuck for her board!"