



A Fray Down South in Dixie ~

By
Thomas Thursday ~

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

PAY no attention to the radio for the next few minutes and I'll try and put you to sleep myself. As "Babe" Ruth remarked to the opposing pitcher, it's all fun!

Speaking of sly-class vaudeville acts, have you seen Cook and Coe, in "A Cure for Baldness"? Well, I'm "Windy" Cook, and if it wasn't for a streak of absolute luck, me and "Doc" Coe wouldst still be peddling Chief Piepans' Hair Remedy hither and yon about the country. So listen, good people, and you shall hear just how it came to pass.

It was while me and Doc were touring the Sunshine State—fla-fla for Florida—that he got the nifty notion of putting our high pitching stunt in a theater. Previous to that we had been wasting our talents on the desert hot air, trying to peddle the chief's goo from the back of a tin you love to touch, made in Detroit.

After romping ruthlessly around the chin whisker of America—see map of U.S.A.—we settled finally in a drum entitled Rio Kumquat, gem city of Grapefruit County. This slab was one of the numerous mushroom burgs that was tossed speedily together during the Great Sand Rush of 1925.

When the boom collapsed, the place had two drugstores, four groceries, one bakery, four jails,

and sixty-three real-estate offices; not to mention, though that's what I'm doing, the Royal Palm Palace of Refined Vaudeville.

"Windy," said Doc to me, as we stood in front of the new theater, "keep your big mouth shut whilst I unfold an idea I should have thought of years ago. Listen! Instead of peddling our ointment from the various street corners, at the risk of getting lynched now and then, suppose we put the stunt into a theater? In different words, we become actors and sell our remedy over the footlights."

"You poor ape," I said politely, "you must be dizzy from this climate. Do you think you'll find any theater manager cockeyed enough to stand for that?"

"Chump!" he retorted, with the same politeness. "Which one of your toes do you do your thinking with? As far as the manager is concerned, he won't know what it's all about! D'yer suppose I'm going to tell him our intentions?"

"Then how do you fool him—with chloroform?"

"Easy. Take a look at the program in this trap. I bet they ain't even smalltime acts. What the manager would be tickled silly to get is something new, something novel, something nifty. That, stupid, is us! Meantime, let's go in and see how punk the show may be."

We took our seats just in time to witness the first act, “The Six Sighing Saxophonists.” They would have been better if they had left the instruments at home. Their opening number was entitled, “Every Ambitious Lad Should Strike Out for Himself—But Not With the Bases Full.” Fifteen minutes later they bowed off the stage, midst a tremendous wave of silence.

The next treat was laboring under the tasty title of “Atlas—the Man With the Strength of Gibraltar.” The lad was as strong as a whole family of garlic. He juggled tables on his chin, bounced iron balls off his beak, and concluded by lifting a safe by his teeth. When he made his last bow, two of the cash customers woke up in time to clap their hands.

Doc poked me in the ribs. “Are you awake, Windy?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“Le’s go!” he suggested.

“Where?”

“Out to see the manager of this Midsummer Amateur Night’s Dream. We couldn’t do worse than them flatfoots if we tried!”

Five minutes later we faced the manager, one Oliver J. Twinn, and Doc spent ten minutes telling him how good we were.

“Our act,” repeated Doc, “is a positive riot. The wow of wows! We can knock ‘em out of the seats at each and every performance! We’re in a class by ourselves! We’re—”

“Where have I heard that before?” Mr. Twinn moaned. “Er—what do you call your act, if anything?”

For a moment, this had Doc stumped. He had failed to think up a name, a slight error on his part! “D’yer mean our act’s name?” he replied, sparring for time. “Why, my dear Mr. Twinn, I thought everybody heard of us! D’yer mean to say that you never heard of *us*?”

“Who are you, the Washington Monument or Niagara Falls?” snapped Mr. Twinn. “You may be better known than the Battle of the Marne, but I ain’t seen any headlines about you.”

“Well, I declare!” ejaculated Doc.

Seeing that Doc was sinking fast and furiously, I did some snappy thinking myself. “You mustn’t mind my partner, Mr. Twinn,” I said. “He can’t get over anybody not having heard of us. Ha, ha! As to our names, we’re known from the rock-bound coast of Maine to the sunny shores of Flori—I mean,

California, as Cook and Coe, in ‘A Cure for Baldness.’”

“Gosh, I thought you knew that, Mr. Twinn!” piped Doc, wiping forty beads of perspiration from his pan. “I’m Coe, and this flatfoot is Cook. I could tell you more about our act, but we want to surprise you.”

“If you’re any good, you will,” said the jovial manager. “Anyway, I’ll give you a chance, beginning next Monday. We change our program once a week—if the customers don’t make us change it before. It’s a great life—if you don’t manager a vaudeville house.”

“Cheer up!” Doc beamed. “Just wait till you see us act!”

II.

WE raced back to the hotel and Doc got down to business.

“Now, then,” he said, “as I remarked before, our act will be about the same as the one we pull off on the street corners, except for the flivver. I might also wear a Tuxedo suit, if I can meet some head waiter my size who is willing to listen to reason.”

“What do I do?”

“You have a cinch. All you got to do is stand in the wings, left or right stage, and wait till I have concluded my regular lecture on the power and the glory of Chief Piepans’ Golden Hair Remedy. You will then pick up a basketful of the tonic, which you are to keep by your side, and hop over the footlights and proceed to peddle the goo to the audience. Nothing to it!”

“So’s your elderly gentleman!” I squawked. “D’yer think for one or even two moments that the manager will stand for anything as rough and raw as that? He’ll toss us into the Gulf of Mexico, you sap!”

“That’s where you’ll come in handy. If the lad begins to scent a rodent, you are to hold him in leash until I conclude my lecture; then I’ll come back and hold ‘im while you go down the aisle and peddle the goo. It’s as easy as rolling down the Pyramids.”

“You mean rolling up the Pyramids!” I yelled. “My mamma never raised no stupid children.”

“Then you must have been raised by an aunt. However, only Eskimos are entitled to cold feet, and you ain’t never seen Greenland. As to Mr. Twinn, if he can’t appreciate our high-class

entertainment, let 'im go and tie up a noodle. Of course, we may be tossed out on our shell-like ears, but if we ain't used to that, we ain't used to anything!"

The following morning, meaning Saturday, we prepared one hundred bottles of the chief's cluck ointment, the same being one part kerosene and nine parts Gulf of Mexico.

Monday night the theater was packed like tourists on the Dixie Highway, and Mr. Twinn had booked several other acts besides ours to annoy the customers. Princess Meningitis, the Patagonian Mystic, opened the show with a feat of mind reading. She could tell your past, present, or future—whether you had any or not.

A very bright girl, I'll tell whoever's tuned-in! She concluded her act by playing a selection on a Florida foghorn, or whatever the darn thing was. Two more acts followed, and then came the beginning of a perfect fray. In other words, boys and girls, we came on!

As the curtain ascended, the orchestra played our entrance music, a gem entitled: "Although Only a Piano Tuner, He Was Square, Upright, and Grand."

Doc was dressed in a soup-stained Tuxedo, borrowed from the head waiter of the Quick and Greasy Cafe, and it fitted him the same way a giraffe's feet fit an elephant.

After the entrance music subsided, Doc adjusted his tie, patted down his six hairs, and started for the footlights. Halfway, he made the slight mistake of tripping over a bear rug, and collapsed against the piano. Although this wasn't in the act, the customers let forth a whinny of joy, and gave Doc a fair hand.

"Er, what sort of act is this?" demanded Mr. Twinn, coming up to my side.

"You'll be surprised!" I said. "I bet you never seen anything like it in your life. Meantime, please don't fall over them bottles, will you?"

"What d'yer do with the bottles?" he asked.

"They belong to our act. You see, we pass 'em out among the audience, just to make our act seem true to life."

Without another word, the manager walked away, and went to the other side of the stage. Meanwhile, Doc limped to the center of the stage, and began to tell a few wisecracks about Florida, where summer spends the winter, and where the tourists spend the money. Concluding his remarks

about the Sunshine State, Doc started his regular lecture on the merits of Chief Piepans' remarkable hair-hoister.

Two minutes later, Mr. Twinn came racing up from the other side, looking madder than a squirrel nibbling a tin nut.

"Hey, you!" he hissed at me, "what are you fellers trying to put over on us?"

"A darn good act," I said calmly. "What did you think we were trying to put over—Niagara Falls? I guess you ain't used to big-time stuff!"

"H'm!" He sniffed. "Well, if this ain't on the up and up, I'll run you ragged, big boy!"

"Pipe down, 'Frohman,'" I fired back. "Trouble with you hick managers is that you don't understand any acts later than 'Punch and Judy'."

III.

DOC kept right on with his lecture. What the audience thought, I don't know; but I began to suspect that Mons. Manager was thinking. A couple or three minutes later, when Doc was declaiming at the top of his voice, Mr. Twinn began to breathe hard and heavy. He looked madder than a sideshow fire eater with celluloid teeth.

"Enough!" he finally bettered. "You can't put anything over on me; you're just a couple of tinhorn, street-corner fakers. Hey, Roscoe!"

Roscoe was the property man, and so big that both Tunney and Dempsey would have to come into the ring with an ax in order to flatten him out.

"D'yer want me, boss?" asked Roscoe, swaggering up.

"I do!" hissed he. "See that big false alarm out there? Well, I want you to go right up to him, grab him by the neck, and bring him in to me!"

"Listen, you proper pinhead," I snorted at Roscoe, "if you interrupt our act, I'll personally see that you become a treat for the local embalmer!"

"Never mind this tramp!" raged Twinn. "Go out and chase his partner off that stage, and I don't mean maybe!"

"If you do," I glared, "you'll have to settle with me!"

"Is 'at so?" chirped Roscoe, lubricating his hands. "Well, I'll jus' settle with you now!"

He brought back a right hand, and then swished it through the air at my innocent head. However, I am glad to report that I ducked the blow with the

greatest of speed. Roscoe's hairy paw flashed over my head and connected with the edge of a drop curtain. Then the hilarity began!

With a howl of pain and rage, Roscoe stuck his hand in his mouth, then promptly announced to all and sundry—mostly me—that somebody was due for a successful pasting.

Believing Roscoe was telling the truth, I promptly decided to become a tourist. No use being killed whilst so young, what I mean! With the best of good intentions, I decided to examine the nearest exit. Not so good!

Roscoe, scenting that I was about to leave his company, stuck out his right foot, and I tripped headfirst into one hundred bottles of Chief Piepans' mock tonic. The crash must have been heard as far away as old man Baffin's Bay, and I bet some of the audience bounced out of their seats.

Doc stopped dead in his lecture, and looked our way. With forty pints of liquid streaming all over me, I dashed out upon the stage and collided with Doc. We did a little act of collapsing and the cash customers applauded.

Whilst me and Doc were blinking around, Roscoe came rushing out like the Twentieth Century, flopped over a chair, and joined us on the floor. The three of us tried to rise and shine at once, but got tangled up like cotton in grandpop's whiskers. Meanwhile, Mr. Twinn charged out like a whole family of buffalo, swinging a bottle of tonic in each hand.

"You fakers!" he yelled. "Trying to make a fool out of me, are you?"

Smack!

He aimed the bottle at Doc's well-shaped head. Doc jerked to one side and the bottle crowned our jovial playmate, Roscoe, on the same spot that real kings and queens have always been crowned. Noting his little mistake, the manager started to apologize to his property man, but Roscoe was busy taking the count of ten on the bear rug.

During this melee, the patrons rocked the house with laughter, especially a chubby-faced little chap in the rightside box. This boy seemed to think it was all fun, and maybe it was. However, it was a lucky break for us that this box seat holder was in our midst.

Roscoe revived, wiggled his ears, and made a beeline for Doc. Doc began a Paavo Nurmi around the stage, and I followed him. Not wishing to be left out of the marathon, Mr. Twinn gave out a few

well-bred howls, picked up a bottle of tonic, and followed me.

With Doc in the lead, we made about nine laps around the stage, without anybody scoring a single lap. On the tenth lap, Doc stopped suddenly, made a leap frog backward, and Roscoe took a nose dive over Doc, and disappeared into the wings.

"Hold 'im, Roscoe!" fumed the manager. "Don't let 'im get away!"

Well, to come to the end of a perfect fray, the farce kept up for another five minutes, much to the entertainment of the audience.

"Follow me, Windy!" shouted Doc suddenly.

The next second he leaped over the footlights like a well-trained greyhound, and landed upon his feet in the center aisle. Roscoe attempted to follow him, but he slipped and flopped midst the amazed orchestra leader.

"Hurry up!" yelled Doc. "What are you waiting for—salary?"

Not being as agile as Doc, I put both hands on the footlight rim and sprang over into the aisle, safe and sanely.

"Le's go!" said Doc.

With the audience in an uproar, we raced down the aisle, out to the street, and then to the hotel. The profit was all a loss!

IV.

"WELL, that's that!" said Doc, falling into an armchair. "We didn't make the grade; hey, Windy?"

"Nope," I said, "we didn't even make a dime, if you ask me!"

There came a rap on the door.

"More trouble," I whispered.

"Fine!" said Doc. "Come in."

The door eased open and in came the fellow with the chubby face, who had been sitting in the right-side box.

"Whew!" he began, mopping some Florida climate off his cheeks. "I'm—I'm all winded. Tried to follow you fellers, see? Didn't want to lose you."

"Sit down, sheriff," said Doc. "What's the charge?"

"It ought to be murder," said the puffing stranger. "Never laughed so much in my life. No fooling, you boys should be playing the Big Time circuit. You're good, what I mean!"

"Thanks," said Doc, baffled. "Er, suppose you

get down to business. I'm not much good on crossword puzzles."

"Listen," said the newcomer. "My name is Joe McGurk, and I'm a scout for the Big Time Vaudeville people. I happened to see your act, and I'm here to offer you a chance to do your stuff in our theaters for real money. Your act is a positive novelty, and it looked real. I bet you boys must have had some actual experience selling hair tonic from street corners, what?"

Doc looked at me and I looked at Doc. Will wonders never cease?

"Mr. McGurk," said Doc, "if you're not kidding us, make us an offer."

"I think they'll give you two hundred and fifty a week to start, and much more to finish," said McGurk. "See anything wrong about that?"

"If there is," retorted Doc, "there's also something wrong about sunshine!"