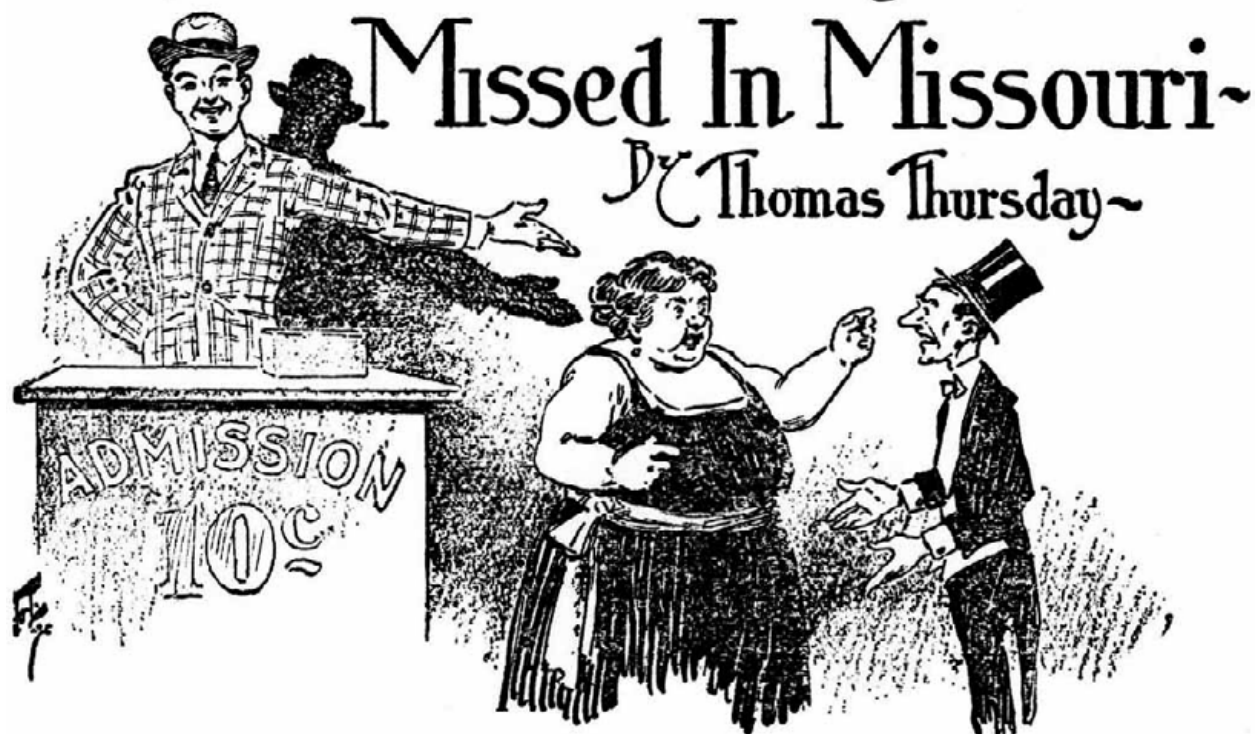


*Adventures with the Move-A-Long Side Show*



**W**HEN the Move-A-Long Greater Circus and Side Show troupers took the first slant at Van Winkletown they thought that J. Twiddle Hemm, the general agent, had pulled a bum joke on the whole trick. It was one of those burgs that mapmakers indicate by a cruller hole, and would have taken a calculating machine to figure out which end was the cemetery.

It looked like a bloomer from the left, right, and the middle. The main drag—called Broadway, of course—resembled a scene from “Way Down East,” while the population had ceased to pop since Barnum went to school.

When we shot the first ballyhoo at the side show, a handful of citizens listened to Bryan G. Zing, my opener, as if he were spieling in Sanskrit. He put enough pep into his talk to sway Congress, but he didn’t convince a single hick that we had the best show on earth. The grinders barked loudly enough to make a dog pound sound like a violin solo, but didn’t attract any more attention than spring water did on Broadway in the olden days.

“Well, Doc,” said Zing to me, jumping off the bally, “it looks like J. Twiddle ignored the

prohibition act before he booked this burg. Take it from me, there’s nothing here but cheese, crackers, and children. If this hamlet’s alive, so’s Napoleon!”

“It sure looks tough, Bryan,” I returned; “but what can we do?”

“Search me, Doc! Maybe we could start a riot or something; but I don’t think it would do any good. Got any dynamite?”

“Wish I had!” I exclaimed. “But it might kill somebody.”

“Notta chance, Doc! You can’t kill ‘em twice! Hemm couldn’t have done worse if he had booked the Sahara Desert. There’s something wrong about this thing somewhere. Why, these beezarks don’t know a circus from a yard of bean soup! You know how I am, Doc; I can’t work unless the push pays a certain amount of attention to my orations.” After which he jammed both hands into his pockets and did a merry-go-round walk.

Just then I slanted Emerson Dreem, press agent par excellence—he admits it—breezing down the lot with a paste pail and an armful of one-sheets.

“Hey, Dreem!” shouted Zing. “Come over and say something!”

Dreem ambled over with enough gloom on his

face to make an undertaker look like a comedian. His lid was pulled down over his eyes, while a cigar butt hung from his lips in disgust.

"Some burg—this!" he raved, setting down the paste pail. "Hemm must have been seasick when he picked it. And what do you think? The boss sends me out to smear the town. I ain't no billposter, I ain't! He said you should lend a hand."

"What happened to our prize billposting crew, hey?" asked Zing.

"Musta died, or something," replied Dreem. "Come along, and we'll plaster this junk all over the works."

On the way up to the main drag Zing kept up a lively chatter, giving his opinion about press and general agents who he claimed should have stuck to the plumbing business. He carried the pail and managed to spill a little over Dreem's pants every now and then.

"You know, Emerson," chirped Zing, "I often wondered how you press birds get by. What did you do in this burg, anyway?"

"What did I do?" snorted Dreem. "What can a feller do when there ain't but one weekly paper in the joint, and that don't come out till subscriptions come in? After we get through, we'll blow in on the editor. I expect to put something over."

He halted us in front of a ramshackle building with a sign proclaiming it to be "Police Headquarters."

"Let's slam the first sheet over the door," he said.

"Might get in trouble," I returned. "That's a bum place to start anything, I'll say!"

"Watch me!" Dreem hurled back. And in less than ten seconds he had a one-sheet plastered on the door, reading: "Move-A-Long Circus and Side Show. Not the Biggest, But the Best!" et cetera, et cetera.

## II.

**D**REEM had no more than tossed the brush back into the pail when the door snapped open, and a bird dressed up like a half a dozen admirals gave us and the poster the once-over. Dreem slanted a quarter's worth of the chap's medals and then made a grab for the pail.

"Hodwy, chief!" Dreem greeted the officer, grinning. "Here's a couple tickets for the world's greatest circus and side show for you. Bring down

the wife and the rest of the force—if there is any. By the way, chief, how—"

Zam! Friend chief grabbed the pail and tossed it high enough to make Ty Cobb quit the game. The liquid gave us one and all a neat shower, while a certain amount made arrangements to slip into Dreem's eyes. The chief noted that his double-barreled uniform was due for the cleaners and added a few more words that weren't invitations to lunch.

"What's the idea?" demanded Dreem, slanting the chief out of one eye.

"The idea, young fellow," replied the chief, shaking Dreem by the collar, "is that you would be before Judge Gimp—only he ain't in town right now. And if you don't get outa here soon, I'll see if we can't find room for you on the inside!"

Well, the chap who argues with a hick chief of police is twin to the bird who tries to stop the midnight express by lying on the track. So we scraped some of the paste off the ground and breezed down the main stem, plastering a sheet on anything that would hold one. Dreem was plumb sore and kept hinting what he would do to friend chief if he ever got him where the sun doesn't shine.

## III.

**W**HEN we landed in front of the *Weekly Budget* building, the same being one story that must have been designed by Columbus' brother, Dreem slapped a sheet on the window for luck. Then the four of us, which included the pail, blew in to see the editor.

We found him busy with his feet upon the desk, while his hands were doing six kinds of nothing. He owned a set of whiskers that needed only a suitable handle to make a good broom. He was wearing spectacles, so he wouldn't strain his forehead, and seemed to be between sixty-five and the next world, if you follow the lingo.

"Morning, colonel!" chirped Dreem, landing two cigars on the desk. "How would a stickful of live circus stuff strike you this glorious day, huh?"

"Bout a cent a word—regular advertising rates," squeaked the editor.

Dreem pulled out two cuts, one of Flesho, Fattest Lady in the World, and Skeletino, the Human Toothpick, with a print of each, and shoved them in the old bird's mitt.

“The female,” said Dreem, “weighs over six hundred pounds, while the male registers thirty-eight, counting the overcoat. They’re engaged to be married. See a story in that, colonel?”

“Haw!” cackled the editor. “That ought to make good reading. But I want to tell you that this town ain’t keen on show folk. No, siree! The last circus that played Van Winkletown has been gone twenty years. They stole everything but the lot and fire house, dang ‘em!”

“Times have changed,” explained Dreem. “This trick we’ve got could get a booking in heaven and leave with a carload of recommendations!”

“Haw! Well, I’ll print your story and pictures at a special rate—five dollars. How’s that?”

“Rotten!” growled Dreem. “Press agents don’t pay for stuff. You ought to slip me something for a story like that.”

To save a week’s debate, Dreem gave Santa Claus a fiver, snatched back the cigars, and we blew out.

We spent the next three hours decorating the hamlet with the one-sheets, sticking them on everything but the sky.

#### IV.

**W**HEN we returned to the lot there’s not a thing stirring except twenty natives and a south wind. It was four o’clock, and the big show was due to open at two—rain, shine, or cyclone. But it was closed as tight as an armful of turtles.

It sure looked sad, I’ll tell the universe. The troupers were parading around, slanting the natives and vice versa. Had J. Twiddle Hemm presented his person upon the lot then he would have been as welcome as a pound of garlic in a perfumery.

I ordered Zing to shoot a couple of ballys, but they fell as flat as a mile of pancakes. We put half of the side show on the bally doing all kinds of stunts, but didn’t succeed in getting more than five beezarks to squander a dime. Stronguyus, Successor to Atlas, did everything but break his neck with his weights, but he did not attract any more attention than a dentist at a chicken’s convention. So I told Zing to lay off and called it a sunset.

Zing and I were moping against the bally, moaning about fate, when the owner of the trick, Almarah D. Ziddleberger—the same being a name,

not the history of Siam—rambled up with his hands behind his back like Napoleon at St. Gibraltar, or wherever the place was. He was puffing a big cheroot like a compound engine going upgrade and looked as happy as a squirrel chained a foot from a barrel of nuts.

“Well, gents,” he chirped, “so this is Missouri! Believe me, if I don’t toss away more than a thousand in this burg, I’ll be lucky! This place has got me puzzled—something’s jimmed up somewhere!”

“Pardon me, Mr. Ziddleberger,” said Zing, “but I would advise you to can J. Twiddle before he books us at the North Pole! What’s the matter with that chap, hey? There ain’t more’n a thousand people in this town—counting those who camped here during the Battle of Yorktown—and they ain’t got no more use for a good show than I got for smallpox. I’m disgusted!”

“I vote the same ticket!” I said, and I meant it.

“Will I can ‘im? Say, gents, that bird ain’t got no more chance of working for me than Jesse James! To think an agent of mine would book a hick burg like this! I wonder what Pete Barnum would have done to ‘im, eh?”

“Shot ‘im three times a day for a week!” suggested Zing. “If we don’t do something to jar this town, it’ll be the worst bloomer in the history of trouping.”

Emerson Dreem came blowing out of the tent with a large stake hammer over his shoulder. “C’mon, you beezarks!” he shouted. “I’ve got an idea. C’mon!”

Zing and I followed him, while Ziddleberger sat on the bally. He took us across the lot, over a couple of fences, and halted in front of the town fire anvil.

“Nothing doing on that stuff, Emerson,” I said. “It means trouble.”

Whang-r-r! Dreem walloped the gong so hard that the hammer split off the handle and landed on Zing’s toes.

“Now, gents, we’ll wait for developments. If that don’t start something, I’ll resign!”

#### V.

**W**HEN we rambled back to the lot we found nothing more exciting than Stronguyus chasing a butterfly with a stake and somebody else’s straw hat.

“Guess they ain’t got any fire engines, Doc,” moaned Dreem. “I bet you could burn the whole town down without attracting any attention.”

Just then the Move-A-Long band began to parade around the lot, blaring out a new kind of harmony. Some were playing “Home, Sweet Home,” some “The End of a Perfect Day,” while the drummer played everything but pinochle. The combination sounded like a tin-can sonata in a boiler factory.

Then the whole Van Winkletown fire brigade came into view, the same consisting of a ten-leg power hose cart with a rusty bell on top. The chief asked Dreem where the fire was.

“I ain’t got it!” says Dreem. “Ask Doc, here; maybe he’s hid it some place.”

The chief put his hand to his eyes and gave the lot the once over. After which he took out a notebook and spent the next half hour writing about the fire that wasn’t.

Dreem was plumb disgusted; Zing was lying on the grass; while the troupers were ambling around, figuring on ways and means to hang one J. Twiddle Hemm should that individual appear in sight. By now we were all satisfied that the town was gassed and that nothing but the Day of Judgment could wake it.

Then the *Weekly Budget* arrived with Dreem’s press stuff about Skeletino, and Flesho—nee Mayme Doodleday Flopper. The editor had changed a few things in the write-up that made Skeletino—nee James Cicero Swatt—appear as if Flesho were dead in love with him, but that Skeletino considered himself too handsome for the said female.

Dreem chuckled and slipped the copy to Skeletino. He took one slant at it, twisted himself up like a pretzel, and looked pleased.

“I’ll show it to Mayme!” he chirped.

“She ought to like me better when she sees it. Think so, Doc?”

“Sure, Jimmie!” I said. “She’ll squeeze you to death.”

“Wait till Mayme slants that stuff,” Dreem remarked to me. “It ought to start a little something, believe me!”

Flesho came wabbling out of the tent just as Jimmie was about to enter. Jimmie collided with her and settled on the ground.

“Look Mayme!” he cried, waving the paper at her. “It’s all about you and me.”

Mayme picked up Jimmie and the paper with one hand and set the first-mentioned article on the bally. After which Dreem and I made arrangements to walk out of reach. Then she slanted the news.

“So I begged you to marry me, you shrimp!” she raved after getting an eyeful. “Me—falling for a piece of string like you. Well, you—”

Bam! Flesho planted that large mitt of hers on Skeletino’s bean, and that slim individual did a complete somersault over a guy rope. Not satisfied, she lifted him up and rolled him around the bally, just for exercise.

“Don’t you like it, Mayme?” he choked out. “Don’t you like—”

Wham! After which Mayme Doodleday Flopper breezed into the tent.

“That didn’t cause much excitement, at that,” complained Dreem. “Too short to wake anything up. I thought she would chase him all over the burg and give the natives an idea that we were here for business. ‘Sno use, Doc; ‘sno use!”

## VI.

**J**UST then Ziddleberger came ambling up as mad as a ton of hornets.

“Trimmed!” he yelled. “Me—Almarah D. Ziddleberger—trimmed!”

“Don’t mean to say somebody picked your pocket in this town, do you?” asked Dreem.

“Worse’n that. Hemm didn’t even settle for the lot. An old chap just sidled up to me and told me to get off his property. Hemm put one over on us; that’s what! He never booked this burg at all!”

Oh, boy! The mystery began to thicken, as the cook said about the stew. Here we are in a hamlet that’s dead three times in the same place, and then find that Hemm had framed us! It sure looked queer, I’ll tell the world.

Well, we didn’t stir a bit for the next hour and then—the cat hopped out of the ice box!

Suddenly a swarm of razorbacks came dashing over the lot with the stake pullers and began to root the outside stakes.

“We’re sloughing!” chirped Zing. “Fine!”

“You mean we’ve been put outa the town!” said Dreem. “I’m glad to hear it, believe me!”

“Here comes Ziddleberger,” I put in; “he’ll give us the right dope.”

Ziddleberger puffed up, badly winded, with a paper in his hand. “Slough, Doc!” he shouted. “Just

got a telegram from Hemm—explains everything!”  
And it did:

ALMERAH D. ZIDDLEBERGER, care of  
Move-A-Long Circus, Van Winkletown, Mo.  
Somebody made a mistake. Perhaps telegraph  
operator. Booked Van Winkletown,  
Mississippi—you're in Van Winkletown,  
Missouri. Big push waiting here. You're day late.  
Hurry! J. TWIDDLE HEMM.

“Well, gents,” said Ziddleberger; “what do you  
think of that?”

“Case of mixing towns, hey?” said Dreem,  
scratching his head.

“Towns? You mean drinks!” corrected Zing.

“Though,” he added to himself as he walked  
away in disgust, “how can a man get addled by  
mixing ginger ale with grape juice?”

**Another story in this series will appear in an early issue of TOP-NOTCH.**