

THE SAGA OF THE ROARING ROAD

On patient reflection, though, I do find that Barney left a few choice crumbs from his banquet of ingratiating phrases for my poor and ravished table—two or three classic anecdotes that he omitted, undoubtedly through modesty; two or three little humorous vignettes, done in the matchless Oldfield technique, that seems to me deserving of such perpetuation as printer's ink can give.

It was back in 1906, if my memory is not faulty, and Charles Dillingham, the New York producer, had a new musical comedy that he was about to put into rehearsal. It was called *The Vanderbilt Cup*, and Miss Elsie Janis was to make of it her first starring vehicle, supported by Otis Harlan as the principal comedian.

Coincidentally, Oldfield was preparing to make his debut as a vaudeville headliner with a novel act in which, as a thrilling climax, he was to drive his racing car on a treadmill similar to those used for the spectacular horse racing scenes of two very popular dramas of that day, "In Old Kentucky" and "Sporting Life."

After two or three rehearsals, however, Barney is said to have lost any desire he may have had to see his name in electric lights on Broadway, and was more than content to spend the winter in unprofitable idleness, due largely to the fact that no vacant theatres were available for developing and polishing the act, and the long rehearsal had to be held between the hours of midnight and early morning on the stage of a playhouse already occupied. Such a schedule was anything but to Oldfield's liking. It interfered with his sleep among other things, and only the forecasts of impending fame, prophesied by Bill Pickens, Oldfield's manager, kept the heavy-eyed protégé from packing his trunk, blowing

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the "big town," and leaving the theatre flat on its back.

This was the status of Barney's vaudeville venture when, one morning, Oldfield and Pickens stopped at the bar of the Astor Hotel for a belated nightcap, and there met up with "Diamond Jim" Brady, New York's famous first-nighter, all-nighter, jewel connoisseur and man-about-town. During the course of the conversation, Pickens acquainted Brady with Oldfield's plan for a season in a two-a-day and of the trouble he was having to keep the smouldering flame of dramatic ambition burning within the race driver's breast.

"Why don't you go see Charley Dillingham?" was "Diamond Jim's" suggestion. "He's got a play in rehearsal now that your stunt was made for—*The Vanderbilt Cup*. He'll grab the act, incorporate it in the show, and feature Barney. You'll get more money from Dillingham for sixty seconds' work than you'll ever get for fifteen minutes in vaudeville."

Brady's proved an excellent hunch, since Oldfield was signed up by Dillingham that very afternoon, and during the subsequent long run of *The Vanderbilt Cup* on Broadway, he drove against Elsie Janis six nights a week—matinees Wednesday and Saturday—incidentally losing every race as the plot and script of the play provided.

In his first, and only, appearance behind the footlights, Barney was a big box office attraction and an unqualified success, yet, so far as Oldfield himself was concerned, there was still something sorely lacking. He had no lines to speak, as did Jim Corbett, another champion, then playing the leading rôle in a virile melodrama down the street, and consequently Oldfield early attempted to remedy the deficiency in his speechless part.