

The Medicine Show

BY STUART WALKER

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CHARACTERS

LUT'ER.

GIZ.

DR. STEV'N VANDEXTER.

THE SCENE is on the south bank of the Ohio River. An old soap box, a log and a large stone are visible. The river is supposed to flow between the stage and the audience. In the background, at the top of the "grade," is the village of Rock Springs.

[PROLOGUE: This is only a quarter of a play. Its faults are many. Come, glory in them with us.

You are a little boy once more lying on your rounded belly on the cool, damp sands beside the beautiful river. You are still young enough to see the wonder that everywhere touches the world; and men are in the world--all sorts of men. But you can still look upon them with the shining eyes of brotherhood. You can still feel the mystery that is true understanding. Everywhere about you men and things are reaching for the infinite, each in his own way, be it big or little, be it the moon or a medicine show; and you yourself are not yet decided whether to reach for the stars or go a-fishing. Brother!

Lut'er enters or rather oozes in.

He is a tall, expressionless, uncoördinated person who might be called filthy were it not for the fact that the dirt on his skin and on his clothes seems an inherent part of him. He has a wan smile that--what there is of it--is not displeasing. Strangely enough, his face is always smooth-shaven. He carries a fishing pole made from a tree twig and equipped with a thread knotted frequently and a bent pin for hook.

Lut'er looks about and his eyes light on the stone. He attempts to move it with his bare foot to the water's edge, but it is too heavy for him. Next he looks at the log, raises his foot to move it, then abandons the attempt because his eyes rest on the lighter soap box. This he puts in position, never deigning to touch it with his hands. Then he sits calmly and drawing a fishing worm from the pocket of his shirt fastens it on the pin-hook and casts his line into the water. Thereafter he takes no apparent interest in fishing.

After a moment Giz enters.

Giz is somewhat dirtier than Lut'er but the dirt is less assimilated and consequently less to be condoned. Besides he is fuzzy with a beard of long standing. He may have been shaved some Saturdays ago--but quite ago.

Giz doesn't speak to Lut'er and Lut'er doesn't speak to Giz, but Lut'er suggests life by continued chewing and he acknowledges the proximity of Giz by spitting and wiping his lips with his hand. Giz having tried the log and the rock finally chooses the rock and acknowledges Lut'er's salivary greeting by spitting also; but he wipes his mouth on his sleeve.

After a moment he reaches forward with his bare foot and touches the water.]

GIZ. 'Tis warm as fresh milk.

[Lut'er, not to be wholly unresponsive, spits. A fresh silence falls upon them.]

GIZ. 'S Hattie Brown came in?

[Lut'er spits and almost shakes his head negatively.]

She's a mighty good little steam-boat.

LUT'ER. She's water-logged.

GIZ. She ain't water-logged.

LUT'ER. She is.

GIZ. She ain't.

LUT'ER. She is.

GIZ. She ain't.

[The argument dies of malnutrition. After a moment of silence Giz speaks.]

GIZ. 'S river raisin'?

LUT'ER. Nup!

[Silence.]

GIZ. Fallin'?

LUT'ER. Nup!

GIZ. Standin' still?

LUT'ER. Uh!

[The conversation might continue if Giz did not catch a mosquito on his leg.]

GIZ. Gosh! A galler-nipper at noonday!

[Lut'er scratches back of his ear warily.]

GIZ. An' look at the whelp!

[Giz scratches actively, examines the wound and anoints it with tobacco juice.]

The Play would be ended at this moment for lack of varied action if Dr. Stev'n Vandexter did not enter.

He is an eager, healthy-looking man with a whitish beard that long washing in Ohio River water has turned yellowish. He wears spectacles and his clothes and general appearance are somewhat an improvement upon Lut'er and Giz. Furthermore he wears what were shoes and both supports of his suspenders are fairly intact. He is whittling a piece of white pine with a large jack-knife.

Seeing Lut'er and Giz he draws the log between them and sits.

After a moment in which three cuds are audibly chewed, Dr. Stev'n speaks.]

DOCTOR. What gits me is how they done it.

[For the first time Lut'er turns his head as admission that some one is there. Giz looks up with a dawn of interest under his beard. Silence.]

DOCTOR. I traded a two-pound catfish for a box of that salve: an' I don't see how they done it.

[Lut'er having turned his head keeps it turned. Evidently Dr. Stev'n always has something of interest to say.]

GIZ. Kickapoo?

DOCTOR. Ye'. Kickapoo Indian Salve. I don't think no Indian never seen it.

[He looks at Giz for acquiescence.]

GIZ. Y'ain't never sure about nothin' these days.

[Dr. Stev'n looks at Lut'er for acquiescence also, and Lut'er approving turns his head forward and spits assent.]

DOCTOR. I smelled it an' it smelled like ker'sene. I biled it an' it biled over an' burnt up like ker'sene.... I don't think it was nothin' but ker'sene an' lard.

GIZ. Reckon 't wuz common ker'sene?

DOCTOR. I don't know whether 't wuz common ker'sene but I know 't wuz ker'sene.... An' I bet ker'sene'll cure heaps o' troubles if yer use it right.

GIZ. That air doctor said the salve ud cure most anything.

LUT'ER [*as though a voice from the grave, long forgotten*]. Which doctor?

GIZ. The man doctor--him with the p'inted musstash.

LUT'ER. I seen him take a egg outer Jimmie Weldon's ear--an' Jimmie swore he didn't have no hen in his head.

DOCTOR. But the lady doctor said it warn't so good--effie-cacious she called it--withouten you took two bottles o' the buildin' up medicine, a box o' the liver pills an' a bottle o' the hair fluid.

GIZ. She knowed a lot. She told me just how I felt an' she said she hated to trouble me but I had a internal ailment. An' she said I needed all their medicine jus' like the Indians used it. But I told her I didn't have no money so she said maybe the box o' liver pills would do if I'd bring 'em some corn for their supper.

DOCTOR. Y' got the liver pills?

GIZ. Uh-huh.

LUT'ER. Took any?

GIZ. Nup, I'm savin' 'em.

LUT'ER. What fur?

GIZ. Till I'm feelin' sicker'n I am now.

DOCTOR. Where are they?

GIZ. In m' pocket.

[They chew in silence for a minute.]

DOCTOR. Yes, sir! It smelled like ker'sene ter me--and ker'sene 't wuz.... Ker'sene'll cure heaps o' things if you use it right.

[He punctuates his talk with covert glances at Giz. His thoughts are on the pills.]

DOCTOR. Which pocket yer pills in, Giz?

GIZ *[discouragingly]*. M' hip pocket.

[Again they chew.]

DOCTOR. The Family Medicine Book where I learned ter be a doctor said camphor an' ker'sene an' lard rubbed on flannel an' put on the chest 'ud cure tizic, maybe. *[He looks at Giz.]*

DOCTOR. An' what ud cure tizic ought ter cure anything, I think.... I'd 'a' cured m' second wife if the winder hadn't blowed out an' she got kivered with snow. Atter that she jus' wheezed until she couldn't wheeze no longer. An' so when I went courtin' m' third wife, I took a stitch in time an' told her about the camphor an' ker'sene an' lard. *[Ruefully.]* She's a tur'ble healthy woman. *[His feelings and his curiosity having overcome his tact, he blurts out.]* Giz, why'n th' hell don't yer show us yer pills!

GIZ. Well--if yer wanner see 'em--here they air.

[He takes the dirty, mashed box out of his hip pocket and hands it to the Doctor. The Doctor opens the box and smells the pills.]

DOCTOR. Ker'sene.... Smell 'em, Lut'er. *[He holds the box close to Luter's nose.]*

LUT'ER *[with the least possible expenditure of energy]*. Uh!

DOCTOR. Ker'sene!... Well, I guess it's good for the liver, too....
Gimme one, Giz?

GIZ. I ain't got so many I can be givin' 'em ter everybody.

DOCTOR. Jus' one, Giz.

GIZ. She said I ought ter take 'em all fer a cure.

LUT'ER. What yer got, Giz? [*Calling a man by name is a great effort for Lut'er.*]

GIZ. Mostly a tired feelin' an' sometimes a crick in th' back. [*Lut'er displays a sympathy undreamed of.*]

LUT'ER. Gimme one, Giz.

GIZ. Gosh! You want th' whole box, don't yer?

LUT'ER. Keep yer pills. [*He spits.*]

DOCTOR. What's ailin' you, Lut'er?

LUT'ER. Oh, a tired feelin'. [*There is a long moment of suspended animation, but the Doctor knows that the mills of the gods grind slowly--and he waits for Lut'er to continue.*] An' a crick in m' back.

DOCTOR. I'll cure yer, Lut'er. [*Lut'er just looks.*] If that Kickapoo doctor with the p'inted muss-tash kin cure yer, I guess I can.

GIZ [*who has been thinking pretty hard*]. Got any terbaccer, Doc?

DOCTOR. Yep.

GIZ. Well, here's a pill fer a chaw. [*He and the Doctor rise.*]

[*Giz takes a pill out of the box and the Doctor takes his tobacco from his pocket, reaches out his hand for the pill and holds out the tobacco, placing his thumb definitely on the plug so that Giz can bite off so much and no more. Giz bites and the Doctor takes over the pill. Lut'er*

not to be outdone takes a battered plug of tobacco from his pocket and bites of an unlimited "chaw." The Doctor takes his knife from his pocket and cuts the pill, smelling it.]

DOCTOR. Ker'sene! [*He tastes it.*] Ker'sene! Now I been thinkin' things over, Lut'er and Giz.... [*He tastes the pill again.*] Ker'sene, sure! [*He sits down on the log once more, spits carefully and crosses his legs.*] I got a business proposition to make. [*Silence. Lut'er spits and crosses his legs, and Giz just spits.*]

DOCTOR. There ain't enough home industry here in Rock Springs. We got a canning fact'ry and a stea'mill; but here comes a medicine show from Ioway--a Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show from Ioway! Now--what we need in Rock Springs is a medicine show! [*He waits for the effect upon his audience.*]

LUT'ER [*after a pause*]. How yer goin' ter git it?

DOCTOR. Well, here's my proposition. Ain't we got as much horse sense as them Ioway Indians?

LUT'ER. A damn sight more. [*That is the evident answer to the Doctor, but Lut'er develops a further idea.*] We got the country from the Indians.

GIZ [*after a moment of accumulating admiration*]. By Golly, Lut'er, yer right.

DOCTOR. Now, I got some medicine science. I'd 'a' cured my second wife if it hadn't been for that busted winder.

GIZ. Yeh, but what come o' yer first wife?

DOCTOR. I could 'a' cured her, too, only I hadn't found the Family Medicine Book then.

LUT'ER. Well, what I want'er know is--what's yer proposition.... I'm in a hurry.... Here comes the Hattie Brown.

[The Hattie Brown and the whistle of the steam-mill indicate noon. Lut'er takes in the line--removes the fishing worm and puts it in his pocket.]

DOCTOR. Well, I'll make the salve an' do the talkin'; Giz'll sort o' whoop things up a bit and Lut'er'll git cured.

LUT'ER. What'll I get cured of?

DOCTOR. Oh, lumbago an' tired feelin' ... crick in the back and tizic.

LUT'ER. But who'll take a egg out o' somebody's ear?

DOCTOR. Giz'll learn that.

LUT'ER *[with a wan smile that memory illuminates.]* An' who'll play the pianny?

DOCTOR. Besteena, my daughter.

LUT'ER. Where we goin'?

DOCTOR. We'll go ter Lavanny first.

LUT'ER. How'll we git there?

DOCTOR. Walk--unless somebody give us a tote.

GIZ. We kin go in my John-boat.

LUT'ER. Who'll row? *[There is fear in his voice.]*

GIZ. We'll take turns. *[Lut'er looks with terror upon Giz.]*

LUT'ER. How fur is it?

DOCTOR. Three an' a half mile.... Will you go, Lut'er?

LUT'ER *[evidently thinking deeply]*. How fur is it?

GIZ. Three an' a half mile.

DOCTOR. Will yer go, Lut'er?

LUT'ER. Uh-h.

DOCTOR. Huh?

GIZ. He said, uh-huh.

[Lut'er chews in silence.]

DOCTOR. I thought he said uh-uh.

GIZ. He said uh-huh.

DOCTOR. He didn't say nothin' o' the sort--he said uh-uh.

[They turn to Lut'er questioningly. He is chewing intensely.]

LUT'ER *[after a pause]*. How fur did yer say it wuz?

DOCTOR. Three an' a half mile.

[Silence.]

GIZ. We'll each take a oar.

[Silence. A stentorian voice is heard calling "Stee'vun." The Doctor rises, hastily.]

DOCTOR. What d'yer say, Lut'er?

LUT'ER. It's three an' a half mile ter Lavanny--an' three an' a half mile back.... Pretty fur.

DOCTOR. We kin come back on the current.

LUT'ER. Three an' a half mile air three an' a half mile--current or no current.

[Again the masterful female voice calls "Stee'vun." There is no mistaking its meaning. The Doctor is torn between home and business. Lut'er takes up his rod, rebaits the hook with the fishing-worm from his pocket and casts his line into the river.]

LUT'ER. I'll think it over ... but I ain't givin' yuh no hope.... Three an' a half mile one way air pretty fur ... but two ways--it's turruble.

DOCTOR. Come on, Giz. We'll talk it over.

[The Doctor and Giz leave Lut'er to his problem. Lut'er is undecided. He is at a crisis in his life. He spits thoughtfully and looks after the retreating Doctor and Giz.]

LUT'ER. Three an' a half mile.... *[He takes in his line and removes the fishing-worm. He rises and looks again after the Doctor and Giz. He hesitates.]* ... two ways.... *[He starts in the opposite direction, as he justifies himself to his inner self.]* Rock Springs is fur enough fur me! *[When he disappears the play is over.]*

[Curtain.]