

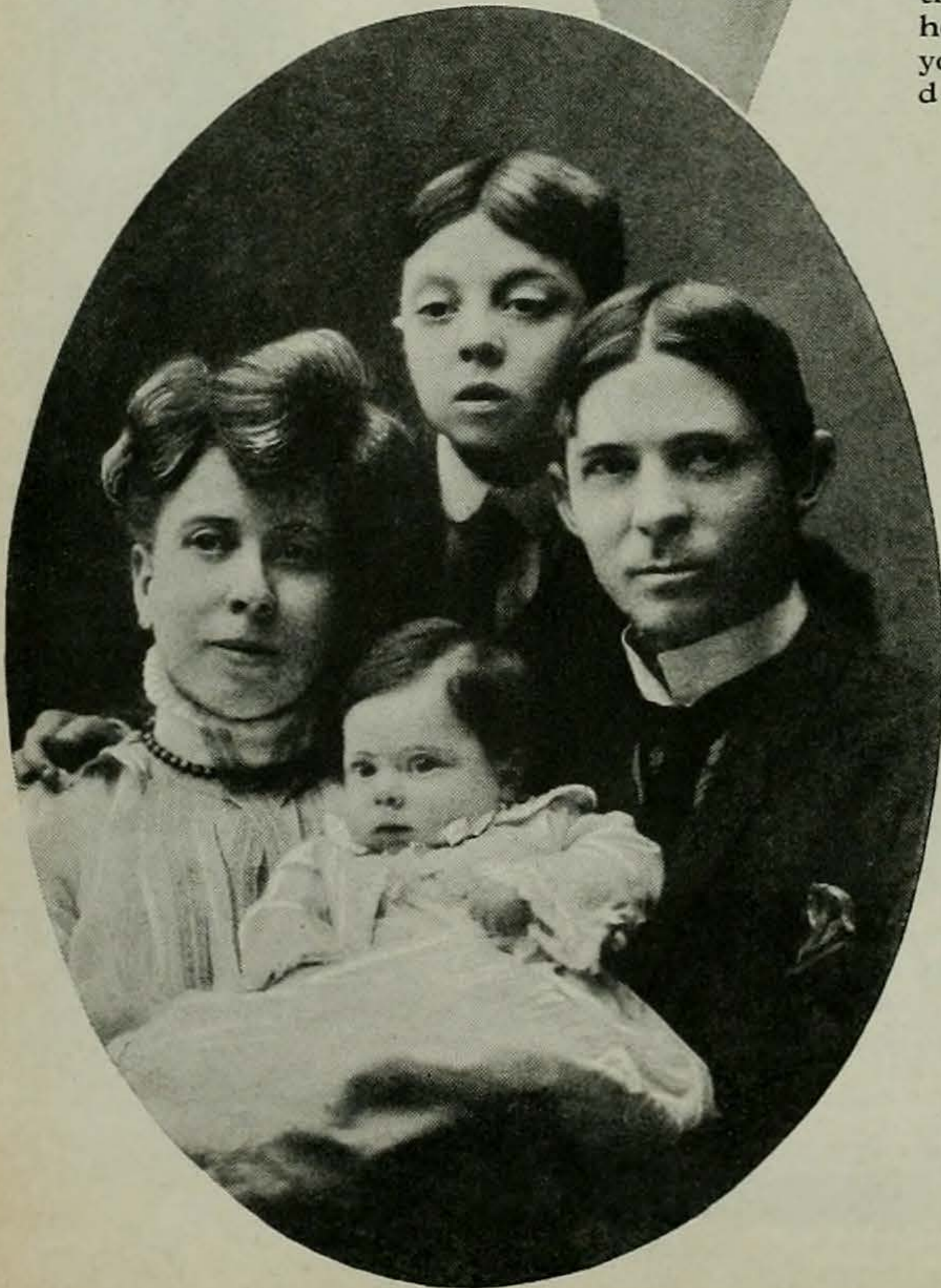
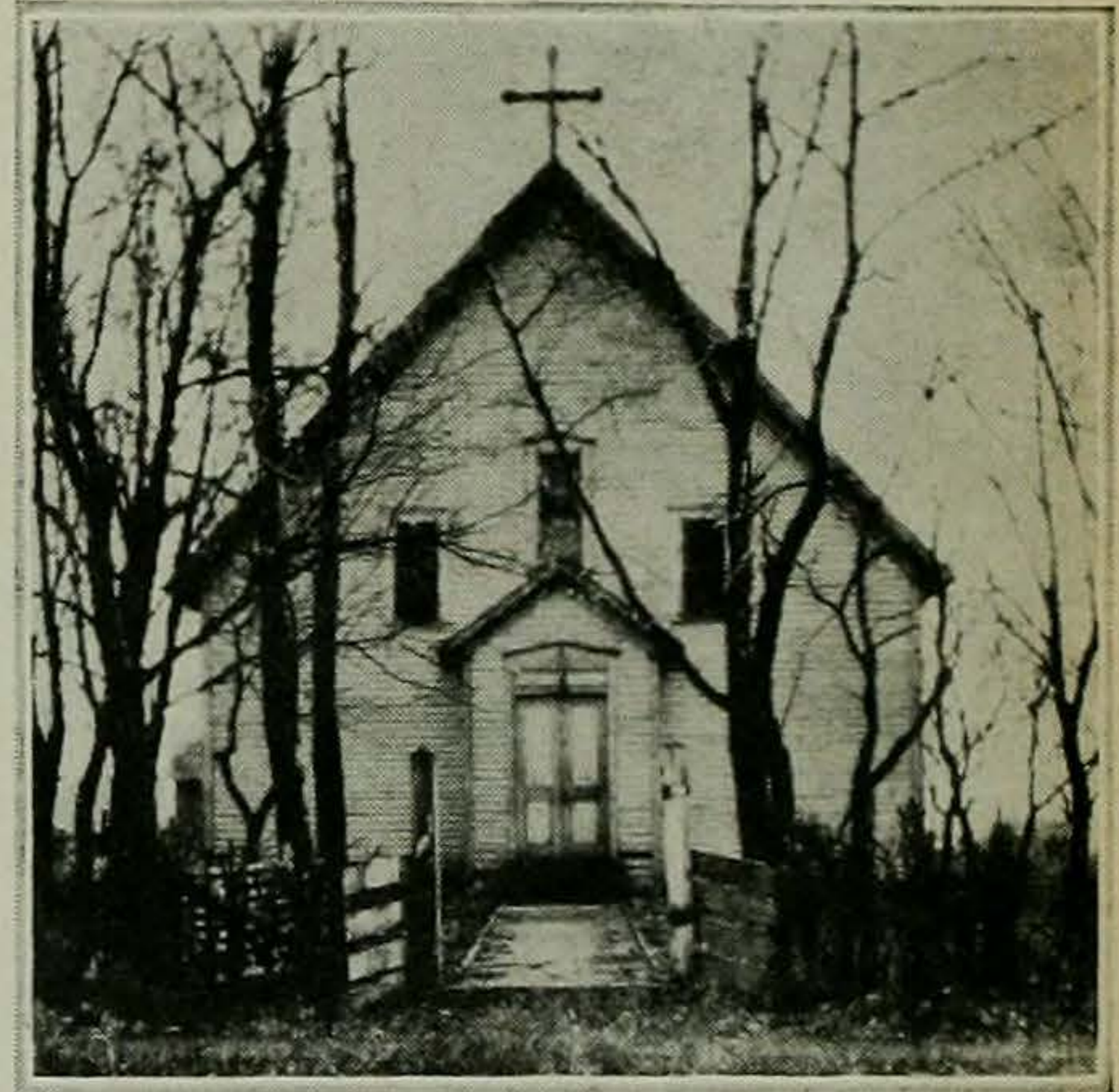
The Cyclone Baby

By Joe Keaton

Buster Keaton was blown into this world in Piqua, Kansas, on October 4, 1895

Mr. & Mrs. Joe Keaton, Buster (aged five), and Harry. Papa Keaton gives an amusing account of Buster's early years as a trouper. Read it and laugh

Here is the church in Piqua where Buster made his first public appearance, at the age of 24 hours — the youngest stage debut on record



THE cyclone that hit Piqua, Kan., on October 4, 1895, blew our tent away and almost wrecked the town.

We had a medicine show in those days with a "stock company," playing high class melodrama.

There were four in our troupe and on the nights we essayed to play "Kathleen Mavourneen," which called for a cast of twenty-four, the results were nothing less than astounding.

Between the acts we sold patent medicines, guaranteed to cure everything and stop anything—including cyclones.

But, after the cyclone passed all we had left was the repertoire. The tent and the medicines were gone.

That evening, when I got back to our little rooming house in Piqua, after chasing our tent all over the county, the landlady told me our troupe had been increased to five.

My wife had given birth to a son—our first baby.

I was awfully glad. I could see the time coming, when the little feller got some older, when I wouldn't have to play the bloodhound in "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Those people in Piqua were awfully kind hearted. I guess they had to be to put up with cyclones and medicine shows.

Right across the street from our rooming house was a little Catholic church. The next morning the priest came to me and said:

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The Cyclone Baby

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"I feel mighty sorry for you people stranded here this way. I'd like to do something to aid you. Why don't you give a performance in the church?"

Well, that night the "theater" was packed. With our leading lady temporarily out of the cast, my partners and I had to give them vaudeville—and lots of it.

THE crowd was ready to laugh at anything—even us. I remember I got my silk hat caught in the open flue at one end of the "stage." It was a stove-pipe hat right.

At the end of the act I brought the new baby out and showed him to the audience. It was just like waving the American flag.

So, Buster Keaton made his first appearance on any stage when he was just twenty-four hours old.

It was several years later that we hit Syracuse, N. Y., just like that cyclone hit Piqua.

Syracuse was a tough show town in those days. A crowd of hoodlums had a custom of coming to the theater on certain nights of the week and cleaning up the show.

They would simply run the actors off the stage and sometimes tear up the scenery and the furniture.

Billed as "The Three Keatons," Buster, his mother and I had a burlesque acrobatic set in which my wife and I threw Buster about the stage like a human medicine ball.

On this particular night I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to stand any more abuse from this Syracuse crowd, so, when the racket started, I singled out a big fellow in the front row.

"Stiffen yourself, son," I said to Buster.

Catching him by a valise-handle-like contraction we had fastened between his shoulders, I gave him a fling.

The next instant Buster's hip pockets flattened the nose of that trouble-maker in the front row.

WHEN I received our salary at the end of the week Jules Delmar had deducted the price of a hat. I lost the next week's work and spent \$59 following Jules to New York.

"Now, look here, Joe," he said, when I finally caught up with him. "You can't use your son to club the spectators with. And, besides breaking that fellow's nose, you ruined his new brown derby."

Well, the upshot of it was that Jules and I parted still friendly and he had agreed to pay me twenty-five cents every time we met.

That was more than twenty years ago, but to this day each time I see Jules he hands me a quarter. He has repaid me for that hat many times but we still keep up the game. It's a sort of tradition with us now.

If I don't see him often enough I write him a letter and he sends me a remittance.

The other day I got a letter from him.

He hadn't heard from me for a long time, he wrote, and was inclosing a two-cent stamp on account.

Buster made another decided, if not good, impression during those early days.

It was upon the late Harry Houdini.

The great magician was a little late with his act one night and Buster, still just a boy, was sent on to hold the audience with some imitations.

Seriously, and with no idea of being facetious, Buster announced:

"Mr. Houdini may not be able to appear tonight. He lost the key to his dressing room."

The audience howled and Harry, who once had escaped from a Siberian prison train, and who was supposed to be able to get out of, or into, anything in the world, "burned up."

After that we used to pull the same gag on



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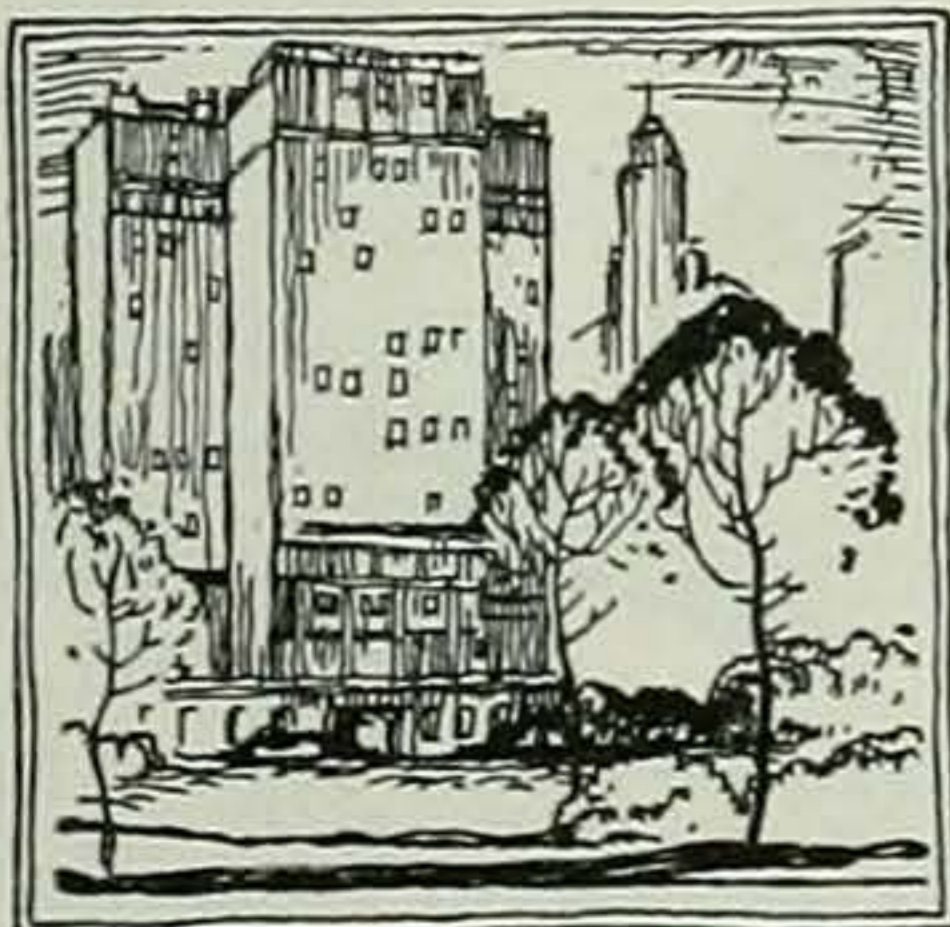
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him occasionally, for we were often on the same bill.

Will Rogers was with us, too, at times and I believe I heard the Oklahoma cowboy make his first smart-crack on the stage.

It was in the Union Square theater in New York City. Will had a fancy roping act with a couple of cowboys and some horses. One night he said:

"A feller up here doesn't have such an easy time. If he misses a trick, he cain't cuss."

THE crowd laughed and it wasn't long until Rogers got rid of his cowboys and other animals and came out with nothing but his rope, his chewing gum and his wit.

For twenty-seven years we played the vaudeville houses of America, working with all the famous entertainers of the generation.

When Buster was just a baby I bought an autograph album for him and in that book you will find the signatures of most of the great ones of vaudeville history.

Elsie Janis, Louise Dresser, McIntyre and Heath, Bert Howard and Leona Bland, George Munroe, Fred Niblo, Tom Sharkey, James J. Corbett, John L. Sullivan and hundreds of others wrote their names and some little bit of sentiment on those pages.

Fred Niblo, now one of the best motion picture directors in the business, was a monologist in 1902 when we appeared on the same bill at Richmond, Va.

"The Girl with the Auburn Hair," wrote those words there twenty-four years ago.

Her tour of the country was one of the greatest exploitation stunts of the past fifty years.

She was the wife of J. J. Murdock, now an executive in the Keith-Albee organization but in those days manager of the Masonic Temple theater in Chicago.

I INDUCED all of the pioneer managers of theaters to write their signatures upon a doily and my wife embroidered the signatures with multi-colored silk.

It is one of our most prized possessions for on it are names like B. F. Keith, Tony Pastor, S. Z. Poli, Henry W. Behman, John D. Hopkins, Charles E. Kohl, F. F. Proctor, Jr., and M. Lehman.

Most of them are dead now.

Poli paid Buster, his mother and me \$40 for working a week in his theater in New Haven.

That was big money in those days.

Questions and Answers

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 102]

BARBY LOU.—Why should I say horrid things about Gloria Swanson? Gloria is really a very sweet girl, fond of her mother, in love with her husband and a devoted mother to her children. Gloria has a beautiful home in the country so I suppose she has plenty of pets. But about her dogs—I must confess I don't know what breed they are or how many. Gloria isn't planning to retire for some years. Write to her at 522 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

EDNA OF PECKVILLE.—Delighted. Shirley Mason was born in Brooklyn, N. Y. Monte Blue was born Jan. 11, 1890; Norman Kerry, in 1894; Dorothy Mackaill, March 4, 1904; Irene Rich, Oct. 13, 1897. I am sorry to tell you that *Peter the Great* is dead.

PAUL H., RANDOLPH, VA.—Edith Roberts and Theodore Roberts are not related. Sally O'Neill was born Oct. 23, 1908. Buck Jones is thirty-eight years old; William Russell was born April 12, 1886; Monte Blue is thirty-seven; and Rod La Rocque is twenty-eight.



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