

O. Henry

The Gentle Grafter

Jeff Peters as a Personal Magnet

Jeff Peters has been engaged in as many schemes for making money as there are recipes for cooking rice in Charleston, S.C.

Best of all I like to hear him tell of his earlier days when he sold liniments and cough cures on street corners, living hand to mouth, heart to heart with the people, throwing heads or tails with fortune for his last coin.

"I struck Fisher Hill, Arkansaw," said he, "in a buckskin suit, moccasins, long hair and a thirty-carat diamond ring that I got from an actor in Texarkana. I don't know what he ever did with the pocket knife I swapped him for it.

"I was Dr. Waugh-hoo, the celebrated Indian medicine man. I carried only one best bet just then, and that was Resurrection Bitters. It was made of life-giving plants and herbs accidentally discovered by Ta-qua-la, the beautiful wife of the chief of the Choctaw Nation, while gathering truck to garnish a platter of boiled dog for the annual corn dance.

"Business hadn't been good in the last town, so I only had five dollars. I went to the Fisher Hill druggist and he credited me for half a gross of eight-ounce bottles and corks. I had the labels and ingredients in my valise, left over from the last town. Life began to look rosy again after I got in my hotel room with the water running from the tap, and the Resurrection Bitters lining up on the table by the dozen.

"Fake? No, sir. There was two dollars' worth of fluid extract of cinchona and a dime's worth of aniline in that half-gross of bitters. I've gone through towns years afterwards and had folks ask for 'em again.

"I hired a wagon that night and commenced selling the bitters on Main Street. Fisher Hill was a low, malarial town; and a compound hypothetical pneumocardiac anti-scorbutic tonic was just what I diagnosed the crowd as needing. The bitters started off like sweetbreads-on-toast at a vegetarian dinner. I had sold two dozen at fifty cents apiece when I felt somebody pull my coat tail. I knew what that meant; so I climbed down and sneaked a five dollar bill into the

hand of a man with a German silver star on his lapel.

"Constable, says I, 'it's a fine night.

"Have you got a city license, he asks, 'to sell this illegitimate essence of spooju that you flatter by the name of medicine?

"I have not, says I. 'I didn't know you had a city. If I can find it to-morrow I'll take one out if it's necessary.

"I'll have to close you up till you do, says the constable.

"I quit selling and went back to the hotel. I was talking to the landlord about it.

"Oh, you won't stand no show in Fisher Hill, says he. 'Dr. Hoskins, the only doctor here, is a brother-in-law of the Mayor, and they won't allow no fake doctor to practice in town.

"I don't practice medicine, says I, 'I've got a State peddler's license, and I take out a city one wherever they demand it.

"I went to the Mayor's office the next morning and they told me he hadn't showed up yet. They didn't know when he'd be down. So Doc Waugh-hoo hunches down again in a hotel chair and lights a jimpson-weed regalia, and waits.

"By and by a young man in a blue necktie slips into the chair next to me and asks the time.

"Half-past ten, says I, 'and you are Andy Tucker. I've seen you work. Wasn't it you that put up the Great Cupid Combination package on the Southern States? Let's see, it was a Chilian diamond engagement ring, a wedding ring, a potato masher, a bottle of soothing syrup and Dorothy Vernon—all for fifty cents.

"Andy was pleased to hear that I remembered him. He was a good street man; and he was more than that—he respected his profession, and he was satisfied with 300 per cent. profit. He had plenty of offers to go into the illegitimate drug and garden seed business; but he was never to be tempted off of the straight path.

"I wanted a partner, so Andy and me agreed to go out together. I told him about the situation in Fisher Hill and how finances was low on account of the local mixture of politics and jalap. Andy had just got in on the train that morning. He was pretty low himself, and was going to canvass the whole town for a few dollars to build a new battleship by popular subscription at Eureka Springs. So we went out and sat on the porch and talked it over.

"The next morning at eleven o'clock when I was sitting there alone, an Uncle Tom shuffles into the hotel and asked for the doctor to come and see Judge Banks, who, it seems, was the mayor and a mighty sick man.

"I'm no doctor, says I. 'Why don't you go and get the doctor?

"Boss, says he. 'Doc Hoskins am done gone twenty miles in de country to see some sick persons. He's de only doctor in de town, and Massa Banks am powerful bad off. He sent me to ax you to please, suh, come.

"As man to man, says I, 'I'll go and look him over. So I put a bottle of Resurrection Bitters in my pocket and goes up on the hill to the mayor's mansion, the finest house in town, with a mansard roof and two cast iron dogs on the lawn.

"This Mayor Banks was in bed all but his whiskers and feet. He was making internal noises that would have had everybody in San Francisco hiking for the parks. A young man was standing by the bed holding a cup of water.

"Doc, says the Mayor, 'I'm awful sick. I'm about to die. Can't you do nothing for me?

"Mr. Mayor, says I, 'I'm not a regular preordained disciple of S. Q. Lapius. I never took a course in a medical college, says I. 'I've just come as a fellow man to see if I could be off assistance.

"I'm deeply obliged, says he. 'Doc Waugh-hoo, this is my nephew, Mr. Biddle. He has tried to alleviate my distress, but without success. Oh, Lordy! Ow-ow-ow!! he sings out.

"I nods at Mr. Biddle and sets down by the bed and feels the mayor's pulse. 'Let me see your liver—your tongue, I mean, says I. Then I turns up the lids of his eyes and looks close that the pupils of 'em.

"How long have you been sick? I asked.

"I was taken down—ow-ouch—last night, says the Mayor. 'Gimme something for it, doc, won't you?

"Mr. Fiddle, says I, 'raise the window shade a bit, will you?

"Biddle, says the young man. 'Do you feel like you could eat some ham and eggs, Uncle James?

"Mr. Mayor, says I, after laying my ear to his right shoulder blade and listening, 'you've got a bad attack of super-inflammation of the right clavicle of the harpsichord!

"Good Lord! says he, with a groan, 'Can't you rub something on it, or set it or anything?

"I picks up my hat and starts for the door.

"You ain't going, doc? says the Mayor with a howl. 'You ain't going away and leave me to die with this—superfluity of the clapboards, are you?

"Common humanity, Dr. Whoa-ha, says Mr. Biddle, 'ought to prevent your deserting a fellow-human in distress.

"Dr. Waugh-hoo, when you get through plowing, says I. And then I walks back to the bed and throws back my long hair.

"Mr. Mayor, says I, 'there is only one hope for you. Drugs will do you no good. But there is another power higher yet, although drugs are high enough, says I.

"And what is that? says he.

"Scientific demonstrations, says I. 'The triumph of mind over sarsaparilla. The belief that there is no pain and sickness except what is produced when we ain't feeling well. Declare yourself in arrears. Demonstrate.

"What is this paraphernalia you speak of, Doc? says the Mayor. 'You ain't a Socialist, are you?

"I am speaking, says I, 'of the great doctrine of psychic financiering—of the enlightened school of long-distance, sub-conscientious treatment of fallacies and meningitis—of that wonderful in-door sport known as personal magnetism.

"Can you work it, doc? asks the Mayor.

"I'm one of the Sole Sanhedrims and Ostensible Hooplas of the Inner Pulpit, says I. 'The lame talk and the blind rubber whenever I make a pass at 'em. I am a medium, a coloratura hypnotist and a spirituous control. It was only through me at the recent seances at Ann Arbor that the late president of the Vinegar Bitters Company could revisit the earth to communicate with his sister Jane. You see me peddling medicine on the street, says I, 'to the poor. I don't practice personal magnetism on them. I do not drag it in the dust, says I, 'because they haven't got the dust.

"Will you treat my case? asks the Mayor.

"Listen, says I. 'I've had a good deal of trouble with medical societies everywhere I've been. I don't practice medicine. But, to save your life, I'll give you the psychic treatment if you'll agree as mayor not to push the license question.

"Of course I will, says he. 'And now get to work, doc, for them pains are coming on again.

"My fee will be \$250.00, cure guaranteed in two treatments, says I.

"All right, says the Mayor. 'I'll pay it. I guess my life's worth that much.

"I sat down by the bed and looked him straight in the eye.

"Now, says I, 'get your mind off the disease. You ain't sick. You haven't got a heart or a clavicle or a funny bone or brains or anything. You haven't got any pain. Declare error. Now you feel the pain that you didn't have leaving, don't you?

"I do feel some little better, doc, says the Mayor, 'darned if I don't. Now state a few lies about my not having this swelling in my left side, and I think I could be propped up and have some sausage and buckwheat cakes.

"I made a few passes with my hands.

"Now, says I, 'the inflammation's gone. The right lobe of the perihelion has subsided. You're getting sleepy. You can't hold your eyes open any longer. For the present the disease is checked. Now, you are asleep.

"The Mayor shut his eyes slowly and began to snore.

"You observe, Mr. Tiddle, says I, 'the wonders of modern science.

"Biddle, says he, 'When will you give uncle the rest of the treatment, Dr. Pooh-pooh?

"Waugh-hoo, says I. 'I'll come back at eleven to-morrow. When he wakes up give him eight drops of turpentine and three pounds of steak. Good morning.

"The next morning I was back on time. 'Well, Mr. Riddle, says I, when he opened the bedroom door, 'and how is uncle this morning?

"He seems much better, says the young man.

"The mayor's color and pulse was fine. I gave him another treatment, and he said the last of the pain left him.

"Now, says I, 'you'd better stay in bed for a day or two, and you'll be all right. It's a good thing I happened to be in Fisher Hill, Mr. Mayor, says I, 'for all the remedies in the cornucopia that the regular schools of medicine use couldn't have saved you. And now that error has flew and pain proved a perjurer, let's allude to a cheerfuller subject—say the fee of \$250. No checks, please, I hate to write my name on the back of a check almost as bad as I do on the front.

"I've got the cash here, says the mayor, pulling a pocket book from under his pillow.

"He counts out five fifty-dollar notes and holds 'em in his hand.

"Bring the receipt, he says to Biddle.

"I signed the receipt and the mayor handed me the money. I put it in my inside pocket careful.

"Now do your duty, officer, says the mayor, grinning much unlike a sick man.

"Mr. Biddle lays his hand on my arm.

"You're under arrest, Dr. Waugh-hoo, alias Peters, says he, 'for practising medicine without authority under the State law.

"Who are you? I asks.

"I'll tell you who he is, says Mr. Mayor, sitting up in bed. 'He's a detective employed by the State Medical Society. He's been following you over five counties. He came to me yesterday and we fixed up this scheme to catch you. I guess you won't do any more doctoring around these parts, Mr. Fakir. What was it you said I had, doc? the mayor laughs, 'compound—well, it wasn't softening of the brain, I guess, anyway.

"A detective, says I.

"Correct, says Biddle. 'I'll have to turn you over to the sheriff.

"Let's see you do it, says I, and I grabs Biddle by the throat and half throws him out the window, but he pulls a gun and sticks it under my chin, and I stand still. Then he puts handcuffs on me, and takes the money out of my pocket.

"I witness, says he, 'that they're the same bank bills that you and I marked, Judge Banks. I'll turn them over to the sheriff when we get to his office, and he'll send you a receipt. They'll have to be used as evidence in the case.

"All right, Mr. Biddle, says the mayor. 'And now, Doc Waugh-hoo, he goes on, 'why don't you demonstrate? Can't you pull the cork out of your magnetism with your teeth and hocus-pocus them handcuffs off?

"Come on, officer, says I, dignified. 'I may as well make the best of it. And then I turns to old Banks and rattles my chains.

"Mr. Mayor, says I, 'the time will come soon when you'll believe that personal magnetism is a success. And you'll be sure that it succeeded in this case, too.

"And I guess it did.

"When we got nearly to the gate, I says: 'We might meet somebody now, Andy. I reckon you better take 'em off, and— Hey? Why, of course it was Andy Tucker. That was his scheme; and that's how we got the capital to go into business together."