

DAVY CROCKETT

BY CHESTER T. CROWELL

DAVY CROCKETT was born on August 17, 1786. His father was of Irish descent; whether American born or not Davy didn't know. His mother was a native of Maryland. They settled first in Pennsylvania. Davy believed they were married but did not know where. He had heard that his father fought in the Revolution and that his grandparents were killed by Indians. Among his earliest recollections was a tavern owned by his father on the road from Abingdon to Knoxville, in Tennessee. At the age of twelve he was hired out by his father to a passing drover and travelled four hundred miles with the man, receiving in payment five dollars. This sum was so large that Davy correctly guessed the purpose of it: namely, to induce him to remain. But he walked home, entered school and four days thereafter ran away to escape a beating at the hands of the teacher.

At eighteen he "learned his letters" while employed as a plowhand near the paternal home but "concluded that I couldn't do any longer without a wife and so cut out to hunt me one." After several failures he succeeded, and then discovered that he and she would require a place to live. Farm tenancy soon palled upon him, so he cut out again, this time for the unfenced lands farther West, but in the same State. This home had not been long established when the Creek Indians went on the warpath and Davy enlisted to serve in the army under General Andrew Jackson. He frankly confessed that he was afraid and had no taste for war; nevertheless, he served with distinction and learned to like it.

Shortly after his return his wife died, as pioneer wives usually did, leaving him three small children. Whenever he suffered a misfortune he invariably moved. Later that habit was to send him to Texas, but this time it started him in search of new lands farther West. First, however, he "cut out" to replace the lost wife and returned with the widow of a neighbor who had fallen in the recent Indian war. She brought two children with her. Matrimonially, Davy was an oddity: he could never get along without a wife, but just as soon as he had one duty called him away to fight Indians, or to hunt bears or votes. Of the frontier community to which he moved this time he later wrote: "We met and appointed magistrates and constables to keep order. We didn't fix any laws for them, though, for we supposed they would know law enough." He himself was one of these magistrates and tried many cases; the whip was used freely. Finally, the improvised government was recognized by the State and judges were required to issue written warrants and to keep records; this annoyed Davy, because writing was still very difficult to him. However, his constable could write fluently, and did. At this time Davy had never read so much as one page of a law book, nor even a newspaper.

In 1821 he offered himself as a candidate for the Tennessee Legislature, solely for the sport of running, "which was a branfire new business to me." "It now became necessary," he wrote years afterward in his autobiography, "that I should tell the people something about the government and an eternal sight of other things that I knowed nothing about." On his first at-

tempt to speak in public he "choaked up" but managed to baffle his opponent by leading the crowd away with the remark: "I'm dry as a powder-horn and I think its time for all of us to wet our whistles." A delegation called upon him to present a proposal to change a county line and ask him to state his position. "There's no devil," he wrote, "if I knowed what this meant, and so I kept dark, going on the identical same plan that I now find is called non-committal." He was elected by a large majority. Soon thereafter, "one of Noah's freshes" came down the river and destroyed a mill and distillery he had built, so he moved farther West once more, and out of his district.

Not long after his new home was established he happened to overhear three politicians in a barroom parcelling out candidacies among themselves. Instantly he decided to offer himself for the Legislature again, and again he was elected. As a campaigner he says that all feared him, as indeed they might. Listen to this: "I would have me a large buckskin hunting-shirt made with a couple of pockets holding about a peck each; in one I would carry a great big twist of tobacco and in the other my bottle of liquor; for I knowed when I met a man and offered him a dram he would throw out his quid of tobacco, and after he had taken his horn I would out with my twist and give him another chew. And in this way he would not be worse off than when I found him."

As to what happened when the Legislature met or what he thought of its deliberations Davy left us no record. Campaigns, indeed, interested him vastly more than offices. He entered all of his political combats save one without a platform. In 1824, during his third term in the Tennessee Legislature, various delegations came to ask him to run for Congress. "I told the people I couldn't stand that; it was a step above my knowledge, and I knowed nothing about Congress matters." Nevertheless, they forced him into the race and he was defeated. He gives the following rea-

son: "But Providence was a little against me in this hunt, for it was the year that cotton brought twenty-five dollars a hundred and so Colonel Alexander would get up and tell the people it was all the good effect of this tariff law; that it had raised the price of their cotton, and that it would raise the price of everything else they made to sell. I might as well have sung psalms over a dead horse, for they knowed their cotton had raised sure enough and if the Colonel hadn't done it they didn't know what had."

But he suspected that the tariff had not actually raised the price, so he waited patiently. At the end of Colonel Alexander's term it was down to six dollars a hundred. Immediately Davy decided to "take another hunt," and this time he was elected. His platform seems to have been confined to the single proposition that if Colonel Alexander had raised the price of cotton he must also have lowered it.

II

With what zest he describes his campaigns! On one occasion while his opponent was delivering a speech "on government matters that I knowed nothing about" a flock of guinea-fowls appeared, making their usual clattering uproar. Crockett had no speech to deliver nor did he know how to answer his opponent, so he called out that the very guinea-fowls were saying: "Crockett! Crockett! Crockett!" This so delighted the crowd that they followed after him "to wet their whistles."

On another occasion, with that solicitude for the human whistle which played so important a part in all his campaigns, Davy led the throng to the bar and to his dismay confronted a sign reading "No Credit." As usual, he was without money. Embarrassed, but far from defeated, he hastened away into the nearby forest and shot and skinned a coon. Returning, he threw the hide on the bar, and ordered a quart of whiskey. Coon skins were cash at

that time, and so the quart was forthcoming. While the crowd drank Davy observed where the coon skin was deposited, and, seeing the bartender busy, recovered it. Half an hour later he again threw it on the bar and ordered another quart. This performance was repeated until finally the crowd got on to the trick, but they said nothing. Ten quarts were obtained with the one skin. The bartender was a Yankee and had often boasted that no one could get ahead of him. Davy relates with gusto that he won the crowd because they thought that anyone who could get ahead of a Yankee "in fair trade" was "the man for them in Congress."

During all this political activity he was also trying to advance his fortunes otherwise, but business had a way of frowning upon the gay adventurer. However, his fame as a bear-hunter spread far and wide. In one year he killed a hundred and five bears; seventeen in one week. Reading his accounts of his hunting trips one might conclude that Bruin stood still for his shot and then promptly dropped dead when he fired, but occasionally some suggestion of danger slips through. Very few of his neighbors hunted bears. Most of the frontier settlers, in truth, were neither good shots nor competent woodsmen. In a country abounding with game they lived miserably and were often short of meat. Bears terrified them, so they ate razor-back hogs.

Davy's first term in Congress, with John Quincy Adams in the White House, merely entertained him, but when Andrew Jackson was inaugurated in 1829 so many things happened in rapid succession that—to his own astonishment—he began to feel a serious interest in public affairs. President Jackson did whatever he pleased and answered his critics by saying: "I will take the responsibility." That sort of procedure was new and startling, and so, when Davy spoke of Jackson as "the Government," millions laughed. Old Andrew was obviously grooming Martin Van Buren to be his successor and that was also something new. Davy called Van Buren "the little

flying Dutchman" and again the people roared. Thus Congressman Crockett, within a very short time, became the nation's favorite wool-hat wit. For fourteen years thereafter he was a power in politics, whether elected or defeated; the public recognized him as one of the most interesting personages of that gaudy, noisy, hot-tempered, pistol-toting era. No politician since his day has ever so unmercifully caricatured politics and politicians; he did not even spare himself. At a time when men in public life quaked at the mere mention of Jackson's name, Davy lampooned him with the crude humor of a Tennessee backwoodsman. Nor was that humor always crude. In some unaccountable manner this backwoodsman could understand simple economics, and soon he found himself associated with the soundest minds in Congress.

That was a day when the issue of sound money or paper offered the demagogue his ever-recurring opportunity to bellow for the peepul and paper. But Davy stood for sound money. Grafters were rampant in high places and he called them what they were. Federal funds were being scattered among small, insecure country banks; he denounced the business grotesquely, but devastatingly. Public lands were being disposed of on questionable terms; he spoke against it without mercy and without grammar, but with abundant wit. The conservative East thus liked him, even if he was a professional bear-hunter. Just how he happened to be sound on all these economic questions remains among the mysteries of politics, but the record proves that he was. New England marvelled and applauded. He was all the more a hero because everyone knew that Tennessee worshipped Jackson.

However, in 1830, Davy made the political error of letting his constituents know how strongly he disapproved of the President. He was trapped into this by his own sincerity; the United States government was young then—Jackson was only our seventh President—and Davy innocently

believed that the nation could not possibly survive his assaults upon the Constitution. He was alarmed. He records that every lawyer and editor in his district fought him in this campaign, but that they accomplished almost nothing because they dared not meet him in public. This boast must have been true, for in the last five days of the campaign his enemies resorted to a trick that shows their state of mind. They arranged more than a score of debates, all in different places, and failed to notify him. Thus, just before the polls opened, they were able to taunt him in his absence with failing to appear. The strategem succeeded and he was not reelected. While he was out of office they gerrymandered his district, but in 1832 he was nevertheless returned to Congress by a large majority, still opposing Jackson.

III

Davy was proud of his prestige in Congress, but he did not realize that he had become a national figure until April, 1834, when he set out to see the big cities of the East. He went first to Baltimore and innocently relates that the hotel man there seemed glad to see him. He rode seventeen miles in fifty-five minutes on a railway train. The chief wonder of this trip was that when he spat out of the window "it flew back in my face." He arrived in Philadelphia by boat and was amazed to discover flags flying and an enormous crowd waiting at the dock to see him. Philadelphia offered him a continuous round of banquets. In front of the Philadelphia Stock Exchange he estimated his crowd at five thousand.

The theater interested him, but he thought that some of the things said there were not fit for ladies to hear and he wondered why each fiddler played a separate tune. "It was all twee-wee-tadlum-tadlum-tum-tum-tadle-leedle-tadle-leedle-lee." The stiff, formal dancing of the East displeased him because one could not hug the girls. "I do not think from all I saw that the

people enjoyed themselves better than we do at a country frolic, where we dance till daylight and pay off the score by giving one in our own turn. It would do you good to see our boys and girls dancing. None of your straddling, mincing, sadying; but a regular sifter, cut-the-buckle, chicken-flutter set-to. When one of our boys puts his arm around his partner it is a good hug and no harm in it." In Philadelphia, Davy was presented with a gold watch charm that "cost thirty dollars" and a rifle that he declared could not be excelled in the world. He and that rifle perished together at San Antonio less than two years later.

New adventures awaited him in New York. He nearly broke up one reception in his honor by dashing wildly to the door on hearing a fire-alarm. His host explained that professional fire-fighters were hired to attend to such business, but he was ill at ease during the remainder of the evening. Conscience told him that he should be helping a neighbor in distress. Theater managers announced in their advertisements that he would occupy a box and then brought pressure upon him to attend, even if only for a few minutes. He was forced, time after time, to go and make a bow.

Finally, he took ship for Boston, and, being told that the following morning would find him out of sight of land, rose before sunrise to verify the fact. On the ship he was constantly the center of pawing crowds; in fact, he relates that it was necessary for him to make his toilet several times daily and he describes this proceeding in detail: "I combed my hair and swallowed a tumbler of brandy." All of New England delighted him, especially the factories employing women. He was stoutly in favor of women having plenty of useful work. At the banquets "champagne foamed up as if you were supping fog out of speaking trumpets." The East, he thought, was amazingly populated with "patriotic citizens bent on eating a dinner for the good of their country." Evidences of gambling displeased him, however, for

he believed there was only one lawful and gentlemanly bet, "a quart of whiskey on a rifle shot." New England's stone fences made him wonder what sort of cows the people had; his own would have gone over them almost without effort.

The country roared with laughter over his comment upon being shown the venerable *Constitution*, which was then in Boston harbor. "She was lying in dry dock and had been new-timbered in grand style. The likeness of Andrew Jackson was placed on her for a figurehead. I was asked if it was a good likeness. I said that they had fixed him just where he had fixed himself, that was, before the Constitution." By now his sporting attitude toward politics had begun to desert him, and he was desperately alarmed about the future of the country. For instance, at Bunker Hill, "I felt as if I wanted to call them up, and ask them to tell me how to help to protect the liberty they bought for us with their blood." That sentiment sealed his doom as a politician.

Meanwhile, he had a chicken-flutter set-to with art in the effete East. For instance: "I did not like the statute of General Washington in the State House. They have a Roman gown on him, and he was an American; this ain't right." On being invited to visit Harvard, he was in a panic and declined the invitation with scant politeness. He spoke of the university as "a place where they keep ready-made titles or nicknames to give people." If he should come off with an LL.D. he felt certain that Tennessee would translate it "lazy, lounging dunce." In this connection he recalled a deputy quartermaster-general who placed over his door the letters "D.Q.M.G." and was promptly dubbed "Damned Quick Made Gentleman." Harvard probably had no designs upon him, but Davy was being mentioned for the presidency and could not afford to take a chance. In Massachusetts he had his first encounter with a dry hotel and promptly abandoned it for another where he could get "the stuff that runs friends together and makes them for-

get which is which." In New York he found the politest man in the world. This paragon was Philip Hone, who invited him to have a drink, set out the various bottles, and then turned his back. What a comfort that must have been to a man whose regular dram was half a pint!

IV

Davy returned to Washington a week before the session closed, but in time to vote on nearly all of the important bills on the calendar. He says that it was the custom to put all business off until the last few days in order to get more time for talking. Listening to the speeches, he said, "made the splitting of gum logs in the dog days child's play." After Congress adjourned he accepted every opportunity to speak against Jackson. His return journey to Tennessee was one long triumph. At last he knew something about "Congress matters," but the knowledge made him unhappy in spite of his jokes.

On arriving in Tennessee, he announced his candidacy for reelection and opened his campaign with all of his usual confidence. But Jackson had scattered the Federal funds far and wide in small country banks, and so there were corn-fed financiers all over Davy's district who felt it necessary to defeat him. He relates that the price of votes went up to twenty-five dollars and adds: "This is a pretty good price for a vote and in ordinary times a round dozen could be got for the money." The judges of election, he learned, had bet all they had on the outcome of the contest—and against him. In spite of all this the opposition began to flee in panic before his lethal wit, but he defeated himself in the end by suddenly becoming earnest. He descended to patriotic gargling and implored his astonished neighbors to stand by the Constitution and save the ship of state. That wasn't their idea of Davy Crockett at all; he was out of his rôle. They admired Andrew Jackson and they loved Davy; therefore, they had intended to vote for both. But it

now seemed to them that Davy objected to this. They concluded that he had spent too many years in Washington, learned too much about Congress matters, and wasn't funny any more. He gave them a poor show and they gave him a stunning defeat. His two previous failures had made him laugh but this one hurt. As soon as the result was announced he delivered his farewell address. It follows: "I am going to Texas and you can go to hell."

The open road revived his sense of humor and there was one more laugh before his towering figure disappeared. He tarried for a few days in Little Rock, Arkansas, and, as usual, was the guest of honor at a banquet. Of his speech there he later wrote:

I told them that I would lay down a few rules for their guidance, which, if properly attended to, could not fail to lead them on the highway to distinction and public honor. I told them that I was an old hand at the business and as I was about to retire for a time I would give them a little instruction gratis.

Attend all public meetings,—says I,—and get some friends to move that you take the chair; if you fail in this attempt, make a push to be appointed secretary; the proceedings, of course, will be published, and your name is introduced to the public. But should you fail in both undertakings, get two or three acquaintances, over a bottle of whisky, to pass some resolutions, no matter on what subject; publish them even if you pay the printer—it will answer the purpose of breaking the ice, which is the main point in these matters. Intrigue until you are elected an officer of the militia; this is the second step towards promotion, and can be accomplished with ease, as I know an instance of an election being advertised, and no one attending, the innkeeper at whose house it was to be held, having a military turn, elected himself colonel of his regiment.

If your ambition or circumstances compel you to serve your country, and earn three dollars a day, by becoming a member of the Legislature, you must first publicly avow that the constitution of the State is a shackle upon free and liberal legislation; and is, therefore, of as little use in the present enlightened age as an old almanac of the year in which the instrument was framed. There is policy in this measure, for by making the constitution a mere dead letter, your headlong proceedings will be attributed to a bold and unshackled mind; whereas it might otherwise be thought they arose from sheer mulish ignorance. "The Government" has set the example in his attack upon the Constitution of the United States, and who should fear to follow where "the Government" leads? When the day of election approaches, visit your constituents far and wide. Treat liberally, and drink freely, in order to rise

in their estimation, though you fall in your own. True, you may be called a drunken dog by some of the clean shirt and silk stocking gentry, but the real rough-necks will style you a jovial fellow, their votes are certain, and frequently count double. Do all you can to appear to advantage in the eyes of the women. That's easily done—you have but to kiss and slabber their children, wipe their noses, and pat them on the head; this cannot fail to please their mothers, and you may rely on your business being done in that quarter.

Promise all that is asked, and more if you can think of anything. Offer to build a bridge or a church, to divide a county, create a batch of new offices, make a turnpike, or anything they like. Promises cost nothing; therefore, deny nobody who has a vote or sufficient influence to obtain one. Get up on all occasions, and sometimes on no occasion at all, and make long-winded speeches, though composed of nothing else than wind—talk of your devotion to your country, your modesty and disinterestedness, or on any such fanciful subject. Rail against taxes of all kinds, office-holders, and bad harvest weather; and wind up with a flourish about the heroes who fought and bled for our liberties in the times that tried men's souls. To be sure you run the risk of being considered a bladder of wind, or an empty barrel, but never mind that, you will find enough of the same fraternity to keep you in countenance. If any charity is going forward, be at the top of it, provided it is to be advertised publicly; if not, it isn't worth your while. None but a fool would place his candle under a bushel on such an occasion.

These few directions,—said I,—if properly attended to, will do your business; and when once elected, why, a fig for the dirty children, the promises, the bridges, the churches, the taxes, the offices, and the subscriptions, for it is absolutely necessary to forget all these before you can become a thoroughgoing politician, and a patriot of the first water.

This is old stuff today, but it was not yet shopworn in 1835.

The reader will observe that Davy apparently wrote "I says" in some places and "I said" in others. Friends, anxious about his political future, edited his autobiography, in spots, until he stopped them. Davy was not ashamed of his lack of education and said so in his preface: "I don't know of anything in my book to be criticised on by honorable men. Is it on my spelling?—that's not my trade. Is it on my grammar?—I hadn't time to learn it and make no pretensions to it." Nevertheless, his friends did enough to the book to rob it of all possible greatness. In their opinion Davy had already won a permanent place in American history. He still stands, in-

deed, among the few Congressmen of any period with an instinctive sense of national unity; he chortled over good roads and canals in Pennsylvania or harbors and industry in New York and Massachusetts with the same enthusiasm that he felt for a sensible Indian bill. This quality is still rare enough, but in that day of superheated parochial devotions it was nothing less than sensational. Something of the prophetic vision of Washington and Franklin had been re-born in this waif of the primeval forest. Sensing this, his friends believed it was their patriotic duty to present him, in his book, as an inspiration to youth. It is my surmise that they mutilated one of the best autobiographies ever written.

V

But we left him in Arkansas. Just before leaving Little Rock he had met an itinerant preacher selling a pamphlet entitled "God's Revenge Upon Drunkenness." Davy disliked the man, but later on, encountering him on the road, his horse and buggy stuck in a creek, and the old man fiddling quite merrily while waiting for help, he went to his assistance and they got drunk together, and the preacher delivered such an eloquent sermon that Davy wept because of the nearness of God and the realization of

His glory. With a new-born conviction of the beautiful immortality awaiting him he rode on to Texas, enlisting a shell-game river-boat gambler on the way. Together the two cut their way into the Alamo through the encircling Mexican lines. On March 6, 1836, when the little fort succumbed, Davy was behind a breastworks constructed of the bodies of the dead—in one hand a dripping butcher knife and in the other the wreck of his Philadelphia rifle. Having arrived just in time for the siege, he knew nothing about Mexicans or the province of Texas or the war then in progress, so he made the ridiculous error of surrendering. General Santa Anna was conducting a war of extermination, not of subjugation, so he nodded to his officers when Davy was brought before him and five swords were buried in the Tennessean's breast.

If telegraph wires or war correspondents had been available that morning few American editors would have asked for more than one hundred words on the Battle of the Alamo, but they would have taken all they could have got on the death of ex-Congressman Crockett of Tennessee.

Today, Davy is a Texas hero. He lives also as the small boy's favorite bear-hunter. However, no man appreciated a joke more than he.

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

FIRMIN GÉMIER, of the Théâtre National de l'Odéon of France, invited to display the splendors of his art to the natives by the United States government! The event held a hotsie-totsie promise. A proclamation of welcome was issued and signed by such rabid apostles of æsthetics as John Aspegren, James M. Beck, Paul D. Cravath, James K. Hackett, David Belasco, John W. Davis, Victor J. Dowling and George W. Wickersham. Following the proclamation, a banquet was spread by Otto Kahn at which the guest of honor, seated between the dramatic critics for *Women's Wear* and the *Delicatessen Dealers' Digest*, was greeted with a dozen affectionate and eulogistic speeches, including eleven long ones by Mr. Kahn himself. There was a visit to Washington during which the French artist shook hands four times with President Coolidge, was kissed on both cheeks by the Secretary of the Navy, was given an autographed photograph by Louis Brandeis, laid a wreath on the grave of the Unknown Soldier, and was taken to the top of the Washington Monument and allowed to drop an apple over the edge to see how long it would take to fall to the ground. Returning then to New York, the M. Gémier laid wreaths on Grant's Tomb, on General Sherman's statue at the entrance to Central Park, on the statue of William Cullen Bryant in Bryant Park, on the statue of Admiral Farragut in Madison Square, and on Saks and Company's new store in Fifth Avenue. Luncheons, teas, receptions and dinners were tendered in the official visitor's honor by the president of the Board of Aldermen and by Lee Shubert, Frank A. Munsey, Jackie Coogan, Larry Fay of the El Fey Club, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Columbia

University football team, Samuel Shipman, the Keene Twins, Samuel Rothapfel, Texas Guinan, the Rev. Dr. Percy Stickney Grant and Ted Lewis' Jazz Band. The M. Gémier was, further, given a key to the city, a season pass to Minskys' Winter Garden, a trip around the city in the police boat, a front table in the Lido restaurant, free sittings at White's, Campbell's, Murray's and other photographic studios, six cases of Silver King mineral water, a view of Brooklyn from the Woolworth tower, a trip to the synthetic champagne factories over on Staten Island, and was taken to the Saturday services in St. Bartholomew's Church. The town buzzed with the glories of the eminent French artist for two excited weeks, and then the curtain went up in the Jolson Theatre. The play that Firmin Gémier, chief exponent of modern French theatrical and dramatic culture, revealed to his admirers was "L'Homme Qui Assassina," a melodramatic potboiler by the potboiling Pierre Frondaie out of a potboiler novel by Claude Farrère. And the play that Firmin Gémier, chief exponent of modern French theatrical and dramatic culture, next revealed was "Le Procureur Hallers," an even more melodramatic potboiler by the potboiling MM. de Gorsse and Forest out of a doohinky by Max Lindau.

But, after all, Shakespeare and Molière were announced to come later, so the M. Gémier's admirers might, they meditated, preserve their enthusiasm by giving over their attention from the plays themselves to the M. Gémier's acting in the plays and his staging and direction of them. Yet the M. Gémier's acting, they found, showed the effects of too many banquets and Otto Kahn speeches. Or something. For the performances that the distinguished visitor