

COAL OIL JOHNNY

BY HERBERT ASBURY

THE first of America's famous playboys, and the nation's favorite symbol of prodigality for more than half a century, was a twenty-one-year-old Pennsylvanian named John Washington Steele, otherwise Coal Oil Johnny, who was probably the most talked-about character of his time; he was better known than most of the famous soldiers of the Civil War. Exaggerated accounts of his exploits appeared in the newspapers, a popular song was written about him, a cigar and a brand of soap were named in his honor, and his drinking, carousing and extravagance were the subjects of innumerable editorials and sermons in which he was held up to scorn as the world's number one horrible example. From the late autumn of 1864 to the early summer of 1865, a little less than six months, Coal Oil Johnny threw away three or four years' revenue from one of the best oil producing properties in Pennsylvania—the famous Widow McClintock farm on Oil Creek, where drilling operations

were begun soon after Edwin Laurentine Drake had completed the world's first oil well near Titusville on August 27, 1859.

Legend says that Coal Oil Johnny's spendings aggregated a million dollars; actually, not even the young spendthrift himself ever knew how much money had passed through his hands. But it is a good guess, based on available records, that he got rid of about \$300,000, though one oil region authority estimated the amount at \$500,000. In the story of his life, written forty years after his brief but lively career, Coal Oil Johnny listed expenditures of approximately \$100,000, but accounted for only about \$60,000 of income, including a considerable sum which was found in the Widow McClintock's safe after her death. John L. McLaurin, a noted oil region historian, said that the widow's hoarded wealth amounted to \$200,000, but Johnny always insisted that the safe had contained only \$24,500.

Coal Oil Johnny was born in

1843 on a farm near the village of Sheakleville, in Mercer County, Pennsylvania. His parents died when he was little more than a year old, and he and his sister, Permelia, two years his senior, were adopted into the family of Culbertson McClintock, son of one of the original settlers of Oil Creek, who owned a hundred acres of land on the west side of the stream opposite Rouseville and about four miles above Oil City. McClintock died in 1855 and left the farm to his wife during her lifetime, in trust for Johnny Steele; and in March, 1864, the widow was burned to death while trying to light a fire in her kitchen stove with crude oil. The property thus passed to Coal Oil Johnny, but since he lacked a month or two of being twenty-one, a guardian was appointed and he was kept on a modest allowance until he had attained his majority.

After he came into his inheritance, Johnny had nothing to do but "loaf around, smoke good cigars and watch my bank roll swell." While engaged in these pleasant pursuits, he became acquainted with William H. Wickham, afterward Mayor of New York, who was in the oil regions looking for investments. He offered Johnny a hundred thousand

dollars for his royalty interests in the Hammond well, but before the deal could be closed the gusher was flooded with water and quit producing. Wickham, of course, withdrew his offer, but he continued to manifest great interest in Johnny and when he returned to New York in June, 1864, the boy went along as his guest, and was lavishly entertained. "I smoked his Havana cigars, played billiards with him, drank his good wine, and feasted sumptuously," Johnny wrote. "I considered myself 'It.'" Johnny's wife and year-old child — he had married in 1862 — joined him in the metropolis, and the family proceeded to Philadelphia, where Mrs. Steele remained to consult a physician while Johnny returned to Oil Creek.

Wickham followed Johnny to the oil regions within a few weeks, and offered him a million dollars for the farm. At first Johnny refused to sell, but after considerable negotiation Wickham agreed to pay \$1,200,000 for the property. But Johnny was unable to obtain a clear title because of a suit filed by his foster-father's brother, and Wickham suggested that he rent the farm for six months at five thousand dollars a month, the entire rental to be paid in advance and to form a part of the final pur-

chase price when the litigation had been settled. Johnny accepted this offer, and for six months beginning about January 1, 1865, Wickham operated the farm as his own, selling leases and pocketing royalties which had hitherto been paid to Coal Oil Johnny. Incredibly, Johnny signed a note for the \$30,000!

When Coal Oil Johnny returned to the oil regions from New York he met Seth R. Slocum, the black sheep of "a most excellent family" of Erie, Pennsylvania, who more than any other one person was responsible for the dissipation of Johnny's fortune. A flashy dude with a little curling mustache, glib of tongue and smooth of manner, with a first-hand knowledge of high life in a dozen cities, Seth R. Slocum was a slicker who lived, and lived well, by his wits. When Coal Oil Johnny encountered him on Oil Creek he was ostensibly looking for a job; actually he was looking for a sucker, and in young Steele, already dizzied by the attention which had been paid him in New York, he found the prize sucker of the century.

The wolf in dude's clothing and the woolly lamb from Oil Creek visited Philadelphia several times during the summer of 1864, and on these trips Johnny made a few

extravagant gestures under Slocum's expert tutelage. But the boy didn't really hit his stride as a spendthrift until he had concluded the deal with Wickham and, as he thought, assured himself of more than a million dollars in less than a year. Sometime in the late autumn of 1864, Coal Oil Johnny and Seth R. Slocum settled themselves in sumptuous apartments at the Girard House, one of Philadelphia's leading hotels, and Johnny's bankroll was deposited in a private box in the hotel safe. Then the pair began their self-imposed task of awakening Philadelphia. Both were drunk within a few hours after their arrival in the city, and Johnny at least remained more or less in that condition for the next six months.

Slocum soon complained that every time he wanted money he had to ask for it, and to spare his friend this embarrassment Coal Oil Johnny generously signed a power-of-attorney which gave Slocum access to the money box and empowered him to make contracts and run up bills in Johnny's name. His first thought was to array himself and Johnny in raiment befitting their position as dashing young men about town, and to that end they visited the most expensive boot-makers, tailors, jewelers and hat-makers in Philadelphia. "The

finest of clothes adorned our persons," Johnny wrote, "diamond pins sparkled from our neckties, diamond rings glittered on our fingers, expensive gold chains encircled our necks and were attached to the most expensive watches." Most of Slocum's cronies were similarly bedecked at Johnny's expense and several attached themselves permanently to the oil prince's entourage, living high and sending all their bills to Slocum.

One of Johnny's first purchases was a carriage, which cost \$1600 and was probably the most striking vehicle ever seen in Philadelphia — it was painted a bright red, from wheel spokes to dashboard, and the doors and sides were ornamented with vivid paintings of derricks, oil tanks, and flowing wells from which spouting streams of petroleum spiralled into dollar signs. Drawn by a pair of coal black horses wearing red harness liberally studded with brass knobs, and driven by a coachman clad in red livery and brandishing a gold-mounted whip, this remarkable equipage was one of the sights of Philadelphia as it whirled through the cobbled streets with Coal Oil Johnny and members of his retinue lolling on the silken cushions. It was while thus exhibiting himself to an awed and envious citizenry

that Johnny acquired the nickname which clung to him for the rest of his life. Turning a corner on two wheels, Johnny's gaudy buggy splashed muddy water on a dignified Philadelphian. The victim of Johnny's haste and his coachman's carelessness said wrathfully:

"That must be that damned coal oil crowd!"

"Yep," said a newsboy. "That's Coal Oil Johnny and his gang."

II

When Johnny entered a barroom he proclaimed open house, and paid for all drinks served while he was on the premises. Upon leaving, he usually flung a hundred dollar bill on the bar with the remark, "Drink that up, boys." One enterprising saloon-keeper near the Girard House rang a big dinner bell as soon as Johnny appeared, and thirsty loungers came trooping in from the street in droves, while crowds of men trailed the young spendthrift for blocks in order to follow him into a saloon and guzzle free liquor. When his drunkenness reached a certain stage, it was Coal Oil Johnny's pleasure to smash silk hats with his cane, and then solemnly hand the victims of his pranks ten dollar bills with which to buy new ones. He is said to have

destroyed as many as a hundred toppers in a single day, and buying old silk hats for a few cents each and letting Johnny smash them for ten dollars became a minor but profitable racket.

Johnny also had a great liking for minstrel shows, and when a troupe managed by John W. Gaylord and M. T. Skiff, famous burnt cork performers of the period, became stranded in Philadelphia, Coal Oil Johnny bought a half interest in the business. With the money thus provided, Skiff and Gaylord engaged a company, bought new costumes, and began rehearsals, while Johnny, at his own expense, purchased \$5000 worth of billboard posters to advertise the show. "They were all the way from a one-sheet to a twenty-four-sheet in size," Gaylord said afterward, "and were the largest amount any show had ever owned." Pictures of Slocum and Coal Oil Johnny appeared in the upper right and left hand corners of the largest poster, and in the lower corners were portraits of Skiff and Gaylord. "We went on the road," said Gaylord, "did a monstrous business everywhere, turned people away, and were prosperous. Reaching Utica, New York, Johnny treated to a supper for the company which cost one thousand dollars. He then

conceived the idea of travelling by his own train, and purchased an engine, a sleeper and a baggage car. Dates for two weeks were cancelled and we went junketing, Johnny footing the bills. At Erie we had a \$500 supper, and so it went. Our dates being cancelled, Johnny insisted upon indemnifying us for the loss of time. He paid all salaries, estimated the probable business receipts upon the basis of packed houses, and paid that also to our treasurer. Oh, Johnny was a prince with his money!"

About the time that Coal Oil Johnny became interested in minstrelsy, he bought a cornet and practiced loudly and diligently, with the idea that he could learn to play the instrument well enough to make his concert debut at the opening performance of the show. But other guests of the Girard House complained of the noise, and Johnny was grievously insulted when the management of the hotel asked him to quit tootling on his horn. He decided to transfer himself and his friends to the Continental Hotel, the Girard's principal rival, and one afternoon walked into the lobby of the Continental to arrange accommodations. The clerk refused to announce him.

"I can make it worth your while," said Johnny.

The clerk sniffed disdainfully and turned his back on the young spendthrift, and Johnny tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece to a bell-boy and sent the lad for the owner of the hotel. When that personage appeared, Johnny protested that he had been ill-treated, and demanded the summary dismissal of the clerk. His request was refused, and Johnny angrily offered to buy the hotel. But the landlord couldn't sell because he was not the sole owner. "Then I'll rent it!" cried Johnny.

After considerable discussion, Coal Oil Johnny leased the Continental for one day at \$8000, in addition to which he was to pay all salaries, buy all supplies, and make good any damage that might result from his occupancy. As soon as Johnny had been installed as landlord he chased the offending clerk out of the lobby, threatening to have him arrested if he ever returned. Then Johnny put Seth Slocum behind the desk as clerk, made John Gaylord captain of the bellboys, and notified the guests that for the remainder of the day everything was on the house. A huge placard was posted in front of the hotel:

OPEN HOUSE TODAY!
EVERYTHING FREE!
ALL ARE WELCOME!

It was indeed, as Gaylord said afterward, a merry lark. It was about noon when Coal Oil Johnny took possession of the Continental, and within an hour half the population of Philadelphia seemed to be trying to get into the dining room and bar, while those who couldn't reach the food and drink roamed the lobby and corridors pocketing whatever caught their fancy. By early evening the downstairs floor had been stripped of virtually everything portable, half the dishes in the dining room and kitchen had been smashed, the floor of the bar was littered with empty bottles, and not a bite of food or a drop of liquor remained in the house. When Coal Oil Johnny thought he had had enough fun he turned the hotel back to the owner, who at once reinstated the odious clerk. Johnny was well-nigh frantic with rage; he had thought it part of the bargain that the clerk was not to be rehired. He tried to buy the Girard House so he could run it in opposition to the Continental, and failing in that connived with the management of the Girard to "buck" the other hotel by reducing prices. "The Continental did mighty little business as long as the arrangement lasted," said Gaylord.

This account of the most cele-

brated of all the exploits credited to Coal Oil Johnny is based largely upon the recollections of John W. Gaylord, but in his autobiography Johnny vehemently denied the story in toto. "It never happened," he declared. "I never bought a hotel for a day, minute or second. I never stayed in the Continental Hotel but one night, and no such scene ever occurred during my sojourn in Philadelphia."

III

Coal Oil Johnny's private money box at the Girard House was almost empty by the late spring of 1865, but he seemed little worried by the fact that virtually all of his fortune had been dissipated; he still believed that he would receive more than a million dollars from William H. Wickham early in July, and so he continued his wild spending spree, borrowing wherever he could, pawning his diamonds, and running up huge bills at his hotel and at various stores. But Wickham never paid him another cent. At the expiration of the six months' rental period the New Yorker notified Coal Oil Johnny that the farm had not produced sufficient oil to justify purchase, and refused to complete the deal. He not only turned the property back to

Johnny, but contended that the \$30,000 which he had paid as rent had in reality been a loan, and he entered Johnny's note as a legitimate claim and secured a court judgment for the amount. Then Johnny's troubles began in earnest. Creditors besieged him from all sides, and the human leeches who had lived upon his bounty deserted him one by one, taking with them the jewelry and finery for which Johnny had paid. Seth Slocum, however, was determined to hang on until the last nickel had been spent, but Johnny finally got rid of him by giving him two notes totalling \$5000. "He thought he might get something for them," Johnny wrote, "and he did, for he sold the notes and they were afterward entered against what was left of my property. . . . He died in about two years after I parted from him."

Coal Oil Johnny attempted for a few months to operate his farm, and did his feeble best to stave off bankruptcy and put his affairs in order. But the claims filed against him, and the judgments secured against his property, aggregated more than a hundred thousand dollars. Early in 1866, he finally gave up and turned everything he possessed over to his wife, and with a few hundred dollars in

his pockets left the oil regions. Mrs. Steele sold the farm to a company which agreed to pay her \$20,000 but actually never paid more than a third of that amount. In December, 1866, the property was seized by the Federal government and sold to satisfy a tax claim of \$11,600.

Meanwhile, Coal Oil Johnny was wandering about the country looking for work. But he found that his reputation had preceded him. Everyone wanted to see and talk to him, and even buy him drinks, but no one was willing to give him a job. In the late summer of 1866, he arrived in Kansas City to find the billboards of the town plastered with posters advertising the Skiff & Gaylord minstrel show, the same posters for which he had paid more than a year before in Philadelphia. He called upon his old partners, and they "expressed genuine sympathy, the first I had listened to since the collapse." Skiff said: "Johnny, you've been a good friend to us. Come along and travel with the show."

For more than a year Johnny was a member of the minstrel troupe. He sold tickets, marched in the parade, and was advertised as a principal attraction, for which he received board and lodging. He had left Oil Creek without saying good-

bye to his family, and had no news of his wife and son until the late fall of 1867, when he received a letter from Mrs. Steele. It contained no reproaches. It said, simply, "Johnny, please come home."

So Coal Oil Johnny, because of the loyalty and understanding of his wife, didn't end in the gutter. He went home and for several months lived quietly at the home of his wife's father near Dempseytown. In the spring of 1868, he removed with his family to Franklin, bought a pair of horses and a wagon and "went to teaming." He joined the church, quit drinking, gave up tobacco and profanity, and for the remainder of his life was a good citizen and a frugal and industrious man. He migrated to the middle west in 1873, and for many years worked for the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad at various towns in Nebraska. He died at Fort Crook, Nebraska, on December 31, 1920.

The Widow McClintock farm has passed through many hands since it was made famous by the exploits of young Johnny Steele. Today, eighty-one years after the first well was bored on the tract, it is still producing petroleum. But certainly not in sufficient quantities to finance another Coal Oil Johnny.

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

The Inspiration of the Current Drama

THE test of a play lies in the relative obedience to it of its auditor's cerebrum. If his thoughts, with nary a deviation, remain on the play, it is a good one. If they occasionally veer, however slightly, in another direction, it is at best only a middling one. If they scamper off in all directions, put it down for a weasel. In the presence of the recent drama, they most often have scampered off in all directions.

Many of such aberrant thoughts could, of course, be of little interest to the reader, since they waywardly concern themselves with such wholly extrinsic and possibly trivial things as the contour of the ears of the mavourneen sitting in front of one, the quality of the tournedos Robespierre one had for dinner and the anticipation of the sweetbreads Richelieu one will have for supper, and speculations on the colloquies of the immortal souls of Robert W. Chambers and Paul Elmer More in Heaven. But there are others, of no overpowering value but of some relevance, that perhaps may be publicized at

not too great a loss of critical face. So here goes.

On the occasion of Clifford Odets' antiquated and childishly literal sex triangle play, *Clash By Night*, the rebellious attention wandered afield into reflections on the author's almost comical immaturity. Although he postures as a fellow with a sardonic sense of humor and a cosmic sophistication, particularly when it comes to sex matters, he writes like the kind of man who sentimentally surrenders himself to a soft feminine voice over the telephone, a pretty photograph, or a good letter. He fascinates a discontented wife in sordid surroundings by causing a potential lover, like potential lovers in past showshop wares without end, to give her a present of a pink silk nightgown. It's always a pink one. I am waiting, I thought, for a play in which the lover will come in with a green silk one and the wife will derisively laugh him right out of her life.

In his last act, laid in a movie projection booth the while they are