

WILL ROGERS

WILL ROGERS made a million dollars out of politics and never voted in his life. He always said he wanted to see both sides, sit on the corral fence, he called it, and watch the show.

This is the first joke that Will Rogers ever pulled in public. He was playing at the American Theater in New York, on West Forty-second Street. He was playing a cowboy, and whirling a rope.

Well, one night something happened to one of the actors, and the manager told Will to take as much time as he could. Will kept whirling and whirling his rope and chewing his gum. Then to fill up time he said, "I guess I'll jump through, but I won't be any better off on the other side than I am here!"

The audience laughed, and the manager told him to keep it on that night. And he did. Well, he had found his tongue and kept adding more and more jokes until he became the greatest comedian in the world.

He was playing with the Ziegfeld Follies. This was during the War, and the whole world was "trying to get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas." That was the catch-phrase; everybody talked about it. In fact a peace-ship had gone over just to bring that about. One night he came out on the stage—a stage all filled with girls sashaying up and down, dressed about like you think. Then, swinging his rope and chewing his gum, he said:

"You know, everybody is tryin' to get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas. All kinds of ideas has been proposed. Well, I've got one. It's awful simple, too. Won't need no peace-ship a-tall. It's just like they are, and take 'em over there and parade 'em up and down No Man's Land between the lines—well, that'll get the boys out of the trenches by sundown."

It was a tremendous hit and became the catch-word of the whole country. He once told me that he had made \$10,000, one way and another, on that joke.

Groups of the so-called intelligentsia of the country used to criticize Will Rogers for being ungrammatical. College professors wrote in by the hundreds suggesting that if Rogers was going to comment on the affairs of the country he ought to learn to speak good English. One day a certain ex-college president said to him, "Mr. Rogers, it's a pity you never had a college education."

Will was kind of fussed up, stood there thinkin', then he said, "Well, there's lots of us never had a college education . . . but we're eatin'."

This comes to my mind as I stand here thinkin' about him. It wasn't a joke he told to the public but was one on him. We were making a motion picture—*David Harum*, it was. Will was the bashfullest man about playing love-scenes, and he was always shy about women. Never understood 'em, he always said. The scene called for him to kiss his leading lady, but he wouldn't do it, and kept putting it off and havin' excuses. "We'll play it right after lunch," he'd say. Then when that

time came he'd have another excuse.

Finally the director said to him: "Look, Will, we've simply got to play this scene. It's simple to kiss a woman; especially as pretty a one as this one. Just walk up to her and put your arms around her and give her a kiss. Go ahead, now."

So the lights were turned on. Will stood there waitin'; then we could almost see him stiffen himself, and he walked into the scene and finally kissed his leading lady. Then he came off and stood there lookin' kind of foolish and runnin' his hand through his hair, then he said, "I—I feel as if I'd been untrue to my wife."

Well, it gave us people on the set a big laugh, because it so exactly expressed him, and we told it around the studio for days.

Will Rogers had more friends than anybody I ever knew. And I don't think he ever had an enemy. The day he was killed—well, hardly anybody worked; it was as if our own brother had died. That was the way everybody felt about him.—*Homer Croy, from Radio Digest.*

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