

Stars of the Summer Night

HIS NAME was John Charles Olsen but as he had the theater in his blood and favored the unique, somewhere in the lower grades he began lettering Jay See on quiz papers.

I met him first one rainy day in the basement of the wooden school on Wheeler Avenue, Valley Stream. It was a shabby place to begin a friendship. The lavatories, which had been installed years after the school was built, had been located on a concrete ramp in half the cellar. In the other half at a lower level we played during recess on stormy days, or ate our lunches from paper bags at noon. No one seemed to think it an unsanitary arrangement. If they did, nothing at least was said in front of us.

One lunch hour, after I had eaten my sandwich and apple, a tall boy with sad eyes and that handsome yet skeletal face of the Swede sat down beside me. We were both, I suppose, in the second or third grade, and I must have known him from the classroom, although it seems to me I hadn't noticed him before.

"Do you know the song 'Doodle-do-do'?" he asked. I laughed. "Who doesn't?" I said. "Well, my father wrote it," he stated. I laughed again, somewhat embarrassed by this stranger's attempt to pull my leg.

Alonzo Gibbs

That night at supper I repeated the story to my sister Ruth, three years older than I. "He's telling the truth," she said. "His father has an act in vaudeville — Olsen and Johnson."

Vaudevillians were a commonplace around Freeport, Baldwin, and Malverne in the 1920's and 30's. The Lights Club celebrated Christmas on the 4th of July in Freeport, because their members were "on the road" during the Christmas season. Even Valley Stream had the Collette Sisters who travelled with their mother on the circuit and whose father owned a garage called "Jack's" on the corner of Cottage Street and Merrick Road. My sister knew them well. They were grand, spirited girls, probably about sixteen when they came to our house on Grove Street one evening to show us what they did on the stage. I can still see them moving in grass skirts to a hula rhythm, while they played ukeleles and sang in harmony.

So Jay See and his only sister, Moya, a pretty and talented girl (now the wife of the famous inventor and industrialist, Lear), went through school with me. They were not consistent in attendance. Sometimes they would be gone for a year or two, off to Australia for instance

when Olsen and Johnson had a contract to tour there. Another time they were in California while their father was making the movie "Sailor Beware." For this reason I never came to know Jay See well until my Junior year of high school.

During this period Olsen and Johnson had a show on radio called "Monkey Business." As a gimmick to introduce the program, Olsen sent out a live monkey to each of the leading radio columnists around the country. A few were promptly returned and Jay See brought to school one of them, decked out in a tiny green jacket and cap. My friend then went on to edit and publish a renegade school newspaper called *The Green Monkey*.

Soon the school year (1933) was coming to an end and it was Junior Prom time. Moya, who was one year ahead of us and a Senior, had been promised by her father something very special for her graduation. The two events, our prom and her graduation, happened to coincide. Word got out that Olsen and Johnson were coming with their whole troop to entertain at our prom. This was before the days of *Hellzapoppin*, but they were a well-known pair from vaudeville, radio, and the movies; so excitement ran high and all of us Juniors felt superior indeed.

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The evening started with my going to Jay See's home in Malverne where all the vaudevillians Olsen had gathered for the show were wandering about. I was introduced to one of them, a tall, good-looking young man of about twenty-five, who at the time was an understudy in the Broadway show "Roberta," and who also had a small orchestra called the "California Collegians." His name was Fred MacMurray.

Later, in Jay See's Chevy coupe, we drove over to the high school where the lit clock faces glowed like moons in the Romanesque tower and the lake glimmered behind the trees edging the athletic field. Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson with performers milling around them were gathered under a streetlight before the gymnasium door.

Olsen was a serious-faced man, short in stature; Johnson was robust in figure and manner. They had started out as musicians in a Washington, D.C. orchestra. As public men they were reluctant to let the world see behind the personalities they had been at such pains to invent for the stage. Who could guess what they were really like? Perhaps they themselves had forgotten.

Soon we were bustling through the doorway which opened that night like a curtain on a most unusual, star-studded, high school Junior prom. Fred MacMurray's orchestra played, wearing straw hats and blazers. Lita Grey Chaplin, Charlie Chaplin's former wife, sang. Then Olsen and Johnson with their entire troop put on the act that was usually given the honored spot on the bill of

theaters in the Keith-Orpheum circuit, which stretched from New York to the Middle West. It was as much as the *Palace*, that great old house, could have provided on any given night.

Afterwards Olsen invited all the entertainers to *Enoch Light's Showplace* on Merrick Road, just west of Lynbrook. We kids tagged along and were permitted to stay for a while.

Although I sat that night at a table with Fred MacMurray, I never thought to ask for his autograph. In the early 30's he had only one foot up on the ladder of fame. So all I have to remember him by is a trick I watched him perform and which I still use to entertain children: how to become an elephant by putting one's head into the shoulder of one's jacket and swinging the trunk-like sleeve back and forth.