



# THE LIFE OF THE CIRCUS MAN

By MARTIN J. DOWNS.

A Canadian who is Manager of a Great American Circus



THE strenuous life of a showman—and in this instance showman is spoken of as one who has cast his lot among the “white tents” or “tented city,” as the circus press-agent designates the circus—is so vastly different from that of any other chosen vocation as to excite questions that are as absurd as they are impertinent. The public is no respecter of privacy when the circus, or the circus owner's private life, comes to be discussed; and the searchlight it uses to penetrate either of them would result in the complete annihilation of the searcher, if turned upon other business institutions or the men at their heads.

While all circus men willingly admit that their exhibition was created solely to be looked at and criticised, they do very emphatically object to be stared at as freaks because they happen to be showmen. They hate to be compelled to hear ejaculations of surprise at the kindness of nature for forming them like other men who are not in the show business. To the man who has but recently embarked in the business, it is painfully disagreeable to become one of the exhibits, but he becomes accustomed to it as the years roll by and the funny side of the impertinent remarks appeal to him.

When the new showman awakes and realises that the men, women and children who visit the show grounds regard him the same as an unopened animal cage, whose contents is always a source of considerable speculation, he is seized with a feeling not unlike that experienced by an actor on his first appearance before the audience. He will duck inside the tent to some secluded spot to await the opening of the menagerie doors, in order that those who found him so interesting may find things more interesting than he. He regards their stare as impertinent as I suppose I did at first, but over a quarter of a century has hardened me, I guess. Only last season, while in Arkansas, I was dining in my private tent, which was wide open in front to let the breeze sweep through, when a richly-dressed woman, accompanied by two younger ones, probably her daughters, deliberately walked up to my table and for fully half a minute stood watching me eat. I said nothing, having determined to see just how far they would go, and while I was waiting, the oldest one turned to the two younger ones, and with all honesty, in a stage whisper of surprise said, “Why, just see—they have plates, knives, forks and really as good a dinner as we have.” That was too much for me, and as I laughingly added, “True, lady, and we don't eat pie with our knives,” they were insulted and hurried away, I presume to tell their neighbours what loafers showmen were. Had I found myself in her dining-room I probably would have been treated quite as politely. This is but one instance of many, but then it is best not to judge the majority by the minority. Unsophistication can cover a whole lot of what, were it not for the generous use of the word, would be unbearable impertinence.

I have been all around the world with Cole Bros.' “World-Toured Shows,” but I cannot recall ever coming in contact with a purer unsophisticated couple than right in New York State in the town of Little Falls.

They were undoubtedly sweethearts, and unquestionably, from the country surrounding Little

Falls. Early in the day, long before the doors to the show were opened, I noticed them on the grounds, always hand in hand and eating peanuts or candy. He was a tall, lean, sun-burnt chap, with feet encased in heavy rawhide boots that never knew blacking. His anatomy was encased in a pair of brown overalls, hickory shirt and a striped seer-sucker coat, while on his head was balanced a derby hat that was probably in style before I had begun wearing hats. His meek and comely partner wore a frock of blue calico with white polka dots, and her features were nearly all concealed within a bright red sunbonnet. I am not describing them to ridicule them, but simply to show why my attention was drawn to them, before the show. When the doors to the show opened I saw them disappear inside, and had forgotten them as I stood alongside of one of the exits.

I was thinking about something that had occurred during the day when I was aroused by a gentle tug at my coat-sleeve, and turned to be confronted by my rural friends. There they stood—he with his hat in his hand bowing, and she with a stick of mint candy in her mouth sucking.

“Darn good show yer got, mister,” he stammered. “Tilly and I 'joyed it powerful well.”

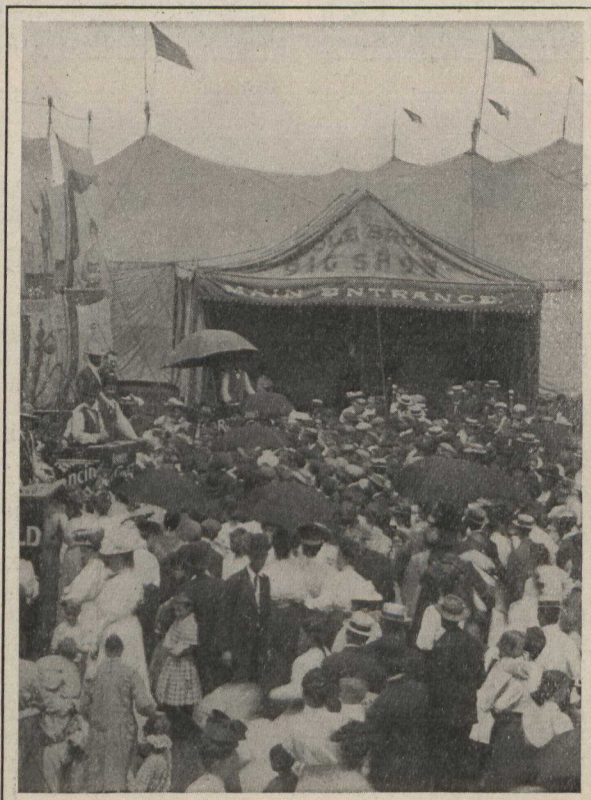
Tilly acquiesced to what he was saying by continually nodding that red sunbonnet. I knew that the show had not started and in fact the band had not begun the afternoon concert. It took me but a second to grasp the situation. They had seen the menagerie, passed along the long circle of cages and finding themselves back to the doors, had concluded that they had seen it all. It was difficult to refrain from laughing at their innocence as I explained to them, but I did, and taking hold of Tilly's disengaged hand I threaded our way through the crowds and placed them in the reserved seat section. Several times I strolled around to see how they

were enjoying it, but did not get near enough for them to see me. Long after the crowd had left the grounds I was again standing at the front door when I espied the little derby hat and the red sunbonnet headed my way. When they reached me the derby hat was doffed and the owner with true rustic politeness said, as he extended his hand, “Come to bid yer good-day; dangest things I ever did see, in yer show. Thought the elephants were great shucks but the way them ther people did cut up and caper around, beat all I ever did see, and Tilly she says so too.” I shook hands with them, thanked them and bid them good-day, but had to admit the honesty of unsophistication.

This unsophistication is not confined to Tilly and her honest admirer, but is general among the majority of those who have formed any opinion of the circus or its people. While it may not be as pronounced or as evident as it was with the rural swains cited previously, it is there nevertheless. They seem to regard everything as framed up to deceive and fail to see anything genuine in either the circus or those who follow it for a livelihood. I have stood in our menagerie and heard one man tell another that the animals were always kept under the influence of drugs to make them docile. The contrary is the truth. The animal man with the menagerie does all in his power to keep his charges from falling asleep during the daytime, so that they may get their natural rest and sleep at night. Others will speculate as to what the result would be should a lion or tiger break loose. They even conclude that not one of the thousands of people in the menagerie would escape, and yet I cannot recall an instance where an animal escaped that he was not more frightened than the people, and tickled to death when he was back in his cage.

Some years ago we were in a railroad wreck while in Georgia, and a number of the animals became loose. It was at night and without any exception I think the darkest night I ever saw. When we got straightened out a little we organised an animal hunt, and in a few hours we had all of the escaped animals back in their cages except “Leo,” a huge lion. All the animals that escaped, and among them was a lioness, two tigers, and a leopard, were captured but a short distance from the train and with but a little show of resistance. We had built huge bonfires alongside of the wrecked train, and the coloured population from the neighbouring plantations flocked around to render what assistance they could, but when they learned that some of the animals were loose, the best they could do was sit by the fires and shiver. Occasionally some imaginative negro would point into the inky darkness and shout, “Dar he am!” and such a scattering and shouting would follow among those negro folks as never before, and I venture to say, never since.

There was one little darky who was right with our men all the time as they sought the escaped beasts, and he did not seem to fear anything. I don't think that he realised the danger, for he was the only coloured person who would venture away from the bonfire. When he learned that old Leo was still at large he got busy with the other searchers. They all returned but the coloured man, having concluded to wait until it got light before continuing the search. We concluded that the coloured man had either gone home or got lost. It was just at daybreak when we heard some one shouting in a little piece of woods a short distance from the wreck, and a sound not unlike a cruel ox-driver



The Main Entrance to the Big Tent.