

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2*

### **THE CIRCUS TENSE**

It happened for me some sixty odd years ago, and I daresay it doesn't and can't happen any more for boys of my then age. I worked my way into see the circus—specifically The Clyde Beatty Circus, and the time was just post World War Two. Fun once again was on the American agenda. What more fun than a circus?

Circuses nowadays that travel in closed semi trailer trucks to indoor arenas and convention centers are never accessible to the general public beyond the arena confines. And the circus animals are not offensive—horses and elephants are diapered and drop no surprises. The animals and acts enter the back security doors and the paying customers enter up front. Circuses today are very impersonal--and insured. No spectator gets close enough to get into harm's way of the animals; event security sees to that.

That was not always the case. A circus train was almost as grand an attraction as the circus itself. Its arrival time in town was posted in advance in handbills and newspapers, and dozens to hundreds of the local population turned out at the depot to witness the train come in, but it did not stop. The Big Top was seldom was erected at the railroad yard. The show had to be set up on flat grounds of sufficient size to accommodate the tent, the circus village, the concessions and the animal enclosures, and it had to have rails nearby.

I don't recall just what information I had or what Eureka moment led me to analyze the obvious. To see the circus as more than a colorful but passing train, stay away from the crowd of depot onlookers and station yourself where the train eventually stops. Our town had an event location for carnivals, fairs and the circus, with a stub of rails that tied to

---

the main lines. A friend and I were there, waiting for the train, not looking for a job, but just to witness the arrival of the exotic train, animals and people.

“Hey Boys. You want to work? For admission to the show?” The stranger didn’t have to say it twice. We jumped at the offer. I had vision s of carrying hay and water for the elephants, or maybe scrubbing them down with a long pole-handled brush. That was the sort of chore I had read about when boys worked their way into a circus. But that was not the case.

All of the gilt and red circus wagons had to be towed off the flatbed railcars. Those wagons were fitted with heavy iron rings at both ends, and elephants were the motive power. Our job was to follow along behind the elephant that was in a harness, carrying a heavy iron hook attached to the elephant’s harness by links of chain. On either side of the wagons we inserted the hook into the ring, and the elephant, under control of a handler, pulled the wagons down ramps and to whatever part of the grounds that particular wagon was to be placed. Once in place we disconnected the hook and went back for another wagon.

As I noted, the iron hooks themselves were heavy enough but the weight of the harness chain made them even more unwieldy and heavy. We struggled with the dead weight of the hook and chain, and were loudly chewed out by the elephant handler if we allowed the chain to drag the ground. Once back at the train though, and hooked up to the next wagon, we rested as we walked along behind the elephants; it was the empty-hook return trip where we earned our pay.

Once the train was off loaded, and the boss gave us the precious passes to the show, no one shooed us off. We wandered about watching the circus come to life. Raising the big top was fascinating. Roustabouts—every nationality and color of strong men shouting to one another in as many languages, gather five or six around an iron stake to be

---

driven into the ground. The synchronicity was something to behold. Each man swung and hit the head of the stake in an unbroken symphony of metal ringing on metal, and no one ever missed his turn and no one of the crew was ever struck by another's hammer. It was a ballet of overhead arcing hammers and the efficiency was incredible. Seldom was a repeat cycle of hammers required to sink the stake. Each man had and hit his turn, and the job was done, and they moved on to the next stake to be placed.

Then there were the riggers inside the tent, setting up the aerialist perches and nets. All those men could have been the performing acrobats as well, and much to my surprise, once their part of the show came on, I did recognize the same faces on the costumed acrobats as I had observed earlier on the workman installing the rigs. The clowns may have and probably did take part in their setup, but once their faces were painted in clown colors and in clown costume, they were not recognizable as the workers in coveralls.

And someone did feed and muck the elephants and other animals, but not us casual participants in setting up the show. The animal handlers were very particular about the welfare of their charges, and when we offered to help, were told that the animals and especially the elephants bonded with their trainers and accepted food and attention only from them. The reason we could do the job we did, hooking the beasts to the wagons, was that we were behind the elephants and unseen by them, and the handler who was riding kept the animal soothed by talking with it all the while.

I watched the show with enthusiasm and pride that afternoon, wanting to, but not telling those patrons around me that I helped put the show together. I've been to bigger circuses in finer arenas since that memorable event in small-town Kentucky but none better than the Clyde Beatty show of the 1940s where I was an insider to the greatest show on earth.