

FAMOUS
NOVELS OF TO-DAY

FAMOUS NOVELS OF TO-DAY

CONTAINING

<i>RED WAGON</i>	
by LADY ELEANOR SMITH	p. 5
<i>ST. CHRISTOPHER'S DAY</i>	
by MARTIN ARMSTRONG	369
<i>DEWER RIDES</i>	
by L. A. G. STRONG	657
<i>FROLIC WIND</i>	
by RICHARD OKE	1009

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
14 Henrietta Street Covent Garden

CONTENTS

Page

Prologue

THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

23

Part I. Joe

171

Part II. Ross

249

Part III. Sheba

315

Epilogue

FAMOUS NOVELS OF TO-DAY
was first published in August 1930

RED WAGON
was first published February 1930
Second impression February 1930
Third impression March 1930
Fourth impression May 1930

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S DAY
was first published September 1928
Second impression November 1928

DEWER RIDES
was first published June 1929
Second impression June 1929
Third impression August 1929

FROLIC WIND
was first published July 1929
Second impression July 1929
Third impression July 1929
Fourth impression September 1929
Fifth impression September 1929

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., London and Southampton
on paper supplied by Spalding & Hodge Ltd.
and bound by The Leighton-Straker Bookbinding Co. Ltd.

CONTENTS

Page

Prologue

THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

23

Part I

171

Part II

249

Part III

315

Epilogue

ELEANOR SMITH

RED
WAGON

A STORY OF THE TOBER

“The Ring so truly cut upon the green by the hoofs
of the horses will remain throughout the year
. . . to the boys as hallowed ground, as though the
summer fairies had danced the circle into being.”

CONTENTS

Page

Prologue

THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

23

Part I. Joe

171

Part II. Ross

249

Part III. Sheba

315

Epilogue

ELEANOR SMITH

RED

TO THE MEMORY OF

B. L. L.

The King is truly on the green by the moor
of the horse will remain throughout the year
to the boys as hollowed ground as the old
summer fairs had danced the king to be

CONTENTS

Page

Prologue

THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

23

Part I. Joe

171

Part II. Ross

249

Part III. Sheba

315

Epilogue

PROLOGUE

CONTENTS

Page

Prologue

THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

23

Part I. Joe

171

Part II. Ross

249

Part III. Sheba

315

Epilogue

CHAPTER I

The day had scarcely begun, yet it gave promise of being a fair one. Dim floating banks of white mist still clung like smoke to the green rounded summits of the distant hills; below the hills a great rolling stretch of emerald turf was broken, here and there, by scattered gimcrack bungalows, tawdry sentinels of the sprawling town beyond the point; the steep cliffs gleamed white, flinging long shadows on to the sands, which seemed dark and wet by contrast; the sky, tinted with all the soft hues of a wood-pigeon's breast, curved languidly to melt itself into the vastness of the pearl-grey sea. They united, but so remotely that one might only guess at their union. A handful of gulls screamed and fluttered on the cliffs. The sails of half a dozen fishing-boats, drifting on the dead calm of the ocean, resembled nothing so much as the tranquil wings of these birds.

It was early, but there were signs of life on the downs above. True, the shoddy bungalows still slept, but beyond them a clump of curious habitations showed that saltinbanques, mountebanks, or what were once known as strolling players, had there taken up their camp for the night. Impossible to guess, from gazing at their stronghold, that these were the days of aeroplanes and wireless-sets. The circus changes little.

A big, dome-like grey tent, weather-beaten and stained, a bevy of little bright flags streaming bravely from its pinnacle. Behind the giant a cluster of smaller tents, like tiny mushrooms encircling a big one; grouped in a bright jumble about this display of shabby canvas, a train of scarlet, gold-encrusted caravans and living-wagons, arranged somewhat after the manner of a redskin's primitive

village. Rather apart from these mountebanks' tepees, occupying a little knoll or ridge of its own, a superb living-wagon, painted vivid scarlet, with gaudy window-boxes of red geraniums. All the wagons bore the words, painted in blue, with flourishes of gold, "Prince's Circus."

Some of the showfolk were already astir. A coil of smoke arose from a small tent, where a sizzling savoury smell hinted at the preparation of eggs and bacon. In the menagerie section a lad whistled, rattling carelessly at steel bars as he cleaned the lions' cage. From the stables emerged a man wearing breeches and leggings. He led a string of cream-coloured ponies, reminiscent of those evoked from mice to draw Cinderella's coach. They had been excitable in the ring the day before, and he was to exercise them for an hour that morning. He vanished over the downs, apparently wrapped in reverie. One of the ponies bucked and squealed and tried to shy away from its fellows. He took no notice, only plodded on indifferently. A baby wailed in an adjacent apple-green van; the sound of a smart maternal slap was heard; the shrieks became shriller, then died away. One surmised a dummy-teat thrust impatiently between the child's lips. In any case, the manoeuvre was pleasingly successful. Beyond the green van they were watering the Arab liberty horses; a tent made this performance invisible, but the clanking of pails, the soft greedy whinnies of the thirsty animals, and the laconic abrupt commands of the stable-boys were all plainly audible. From a canary-yellow wagon, behind the stables a husky voice warbled a few bars from *Cavalleria Rusticana*. The singing was accompanied by hearty splashing. Bimbo, the clown, was musical, having once been a pierrot on the shores of Clacton. He was also fastidious, and fond of cold water showers. His wife, the wardrobe-woman, swore at him softly from her bunk, then turned on her side to slumber once again. Why the hell must Bert make such a row early in the morning? If the old man would only raise their screw they might be able to afford decent lodgings in the town, and renounce for ever

this common gypsy habit of living in wagons. But what was the use? He'd never do it, the dirty old tyke . . . might as well ask a brick wall. . . . She slept.

Two minutes later a deep rumbling ominous sound told the denizens of this little community that old Roy, the jungle-bred lion, was "turning off nasty" again. His trainer, Captain Conrad, slept in a grimy bell-tent adjoining the cages. The long menacing growl aroused him, and his heart beat fast. So Roy was on the rampage again, was he, damn his guts! The lion-tamer was a stout bulbous man with magnificent curling black dyed moustachios. He was past his prime, and afraid of the "cats," but he had not saved money and could not afford to retire. The voice of Roy haunted him day and night, breaking into his dreams, making him sweat and shiver in his sleep. When he heard it now he stretched out a shaking hand to prepare his breakfast. His breakfast consisted of a whiskey-and-soda and two aspirins. He shook his head lugubriously at the glass before he drank, for he knew that the old man's eye had been upon him lately. Roy's voice rang out again. "That stinking cat'll get me yet," muttered the lion-tamer to himself with early-morning pessimism. He drank, and felt better. He looked up from his breakfast.

Hurrying across the ground between the wagons came a stunted and comical little figure, not more than three foot high, vaguely clerical in the sober black of its attire, pinched and wizened and simian of countenance, bowed and distorted of limb. This was Bantam, the dwarf clown, and the old man's special pet and mascot. The lion-tamer quickly shoved the whiskey-bottle out of sight.

"Morning, Bantam," he said genially. It was as well to keep in with the power behind the throne.

"How's yourself?" answered the dwarf vaguely.

"You're in a hell of a hurry, aren't you?"

"Got to see the Boss."

Conrad said no more. He returned to his own tent, permitting himself one reflection: "Telling tales again, the lousy little freak." Then, once more, the sullen voice of Roy.

The Big Top, or marquee of the circus, was dim and deserted in the early morning. The red plush benches were piled crookedly, preparatory to dusting, and the sand-layer of the arena, unswept since the night before, was trampled with the print of many feet. The trapezes and other apparatus of the acrobats were strung drunkenly aloft near the dome-like roof of the marquee, which was decorated with sashes of bunting, red, white, and blue, arranged like the spokes of a great many-coloured wheel. The little precarious-looking box which contained the band, or "wind-jammers," as they were called in the *argot* of the circus, now resembled nothing so much as a forlorn mouse-trap, thick with dust, the low stools scattered, the dull brass of the deserted and half-covered instruments catching no light or reflection from the empty gloom of the arena. Yet the heavy indefinable smell of the circus hung over everything ; a little stale to-day, but none the less potent ; that smell compounded partly of horses and stables, yet mixed with something less easily to be distinguished, the essence, perhaps, of resin and greasepaint and sweating bodies and tan ; like confetti, the circus atmosphere floated in the empty arena and gave to the desolate tent something of the spirit of carnival. The Big Top was supported by poles that were painted bright sealing-wax red. The main pole stood in the middle of the ring, and was as thick as the mast of a ship. The circus-hands, known as tent-men, called this great prop of their world "Big Bill," and revered it. On Sunday nights, when they had consumed a certain amount of drink, they sometimes became quite sentimental about it, for Big Bill was a monster to be reckoned with ; without him the circus could not be.

Against the giant pole this early summer morning there leaned a young man in an attitude of careless impatience. He was tall and slight and youthful, with a frank, ingenuous, and indeterminate countenance, a fresh, girlish complexion, hair as yellow as gold, and greenish, humorous-looking eyes. He wore a loose shirt of magenta silk, with a gay scarf twisted about his throat ; a leather cartridge-belt clasped

his hips, his boots were of carved leather, with elaborate spurs, and from his fingers swung a big fawn-coloured sombrero hat with a lasso coiled neatly about the curled brim. He wore, in fact, the uniform of the cowboy film-star, and contrived to look in these picturesque garments only nice and clean and honest and rather colourless. He was not in the least the wild man of the great open spaces, but it was quite possible to imagine him taking a maiden aunt out to tea and being extremely thoughtful and considerate of her comfort during the meal.

Tommy Mason had actually been born and bred on a ranch in Nevada. He had wandered to a big city, where he worked as a clerk for some months, disliking the work intensely; then, led by chance, he had visited the annual rodeo of the town, and had become, as one might say, broncho-struck during the course of that one afternoon. He had worked with circus cowboys ever since, and, visiting England with a small travelling rodeo, had been snapped-up, at the conclusion of this season, by Prince's Circus, with which he had remained for over a year as bronk rider and fancy roper. He drew a fair salary and was a modest and unassuming youth. Unlike many of his ex-comrades, he did not drink, and was both steady and reliable. The Boss, it was reported, liked him immensely. His history, in fact, was as simple as his face was candid.

He waited now with ill-concealed impatience in the dusk of the deserted arena. From time to time he glanced anxiously at his wrist-watch. How late it was! Soon some of the more earnest artistes would come to practise in the ring, since there was no parade, and with their noisy, clattering entrance all privacy and mystery would be gone for ever. He lit a cigarette, striking his match against the scarlet girth of Big Bill.

Then the sound of a footstep made him turn his head quickly.

"Hell, you're late!" he said indignantly. "Think I've got nothing better to do than cool my heels fifteen minutes in this old Top?"

His voice was pleasant, spoilt only by the nasal and pronounced accent of his remote home-town. The person he addressed hesitated for a moment on the sunny threshold of the tent, then came slowly forward. She was a young girl of about eighteen years old, dressed in a brief pink cotton dress. She had the slim erect body and the square shoulders of a well-drilled boy, and her bare arms were tanned soft deep apricot with four months' exposure to wind and sunshine. Her face was sharply defined and well-modelled, with dark-grey eyes beneath fine black brows, a short upper-lip, a straight nose, and rather high cheek-bones. Her bobbed hair was dark, and rippled in loose waves. She carried herself well, and would have been charming but for a hint of something insolent or sulky in her bearing, which repelled when her charming youthfulness should only have beckoned.

She came across to the cowboy, eating cherries from a paper-bag and spitting the stones with absorbed precision upon the sand of the arena.

"I couldn't help it," she said at length, her eyes upon the zigzag trail of her own making. "I was hungry, and stopped to buy cherries in the town. Have one?"

He struggled, then accepted. He too was hungry.

"Aw, well, it don't matter," he grumbled. "Only it's always some excuse with you, Cora."

"You don't seem over glad to see me now I am here."

"Maybe not," he grinned, and held out both his hands.

They kissed with a complete lack of self-consciousness, which told, plainly enough, that this was by no means the first time that they had so experimented. She coolly disengaged herself from his embrace, and went to perch herself upon the low ring-kerb with her bag of cherries. He was swift to follow her, and they sat together like two poor children upon the edge of a London pavement.

"It's getting awful late," he said at length. "A whole lot of the guys'll be coming in for a practice if we don't watch out."

"Well, who cares? They won't hurt us."

"No," he admitted, "but they might tell your dad."