



THE Move-A-Long Greater Circus had no more than shot into Elbow Falls—the same being on the Illinois Central and off the map—when I got wind of the doings of “Gyp” Cooper, manager of the Guy-Bunk-Blinker Shows.

I was showing some canvasmen how to stick up a center pole without increasing a doctor’s income, when Emerson Dreem, ace of press agents, ambled up with a face as long as a six-day race. A cigar end hung from the left corner of his mouth; his hat shaded his right eye.

“Lo, Doc!” he chirped. “It might interest you to know that the stand at Bazoon is gonna be a repetition of the Battle of Dandywine. Just got a letter from our boss bill poster stating that Gyp Cooper ordered his crew to cover every sheet of paper we slapped up in Bazoon. Old Boy Day and Date is with us again.”

“Dirty competition, hey?” I said. “I thought Ziddleberger had an agreement with the Guy-Bunk-Blinker trick to lay off Bazoon?”

“Right, Doc; but Gyp must’ve tossed the agreement into the basket.”

“What does Ziddleberger think about it?”

“Don’t think—he raves! Swears that he’ll get even with Gyp so hard that all his ancestors will feel it. S’long, Mr. Ramble!”

I saw that something was in the wind besides the air. If Gyp’s trick tried to show in Bazoon day and date with our outfit, it meant that there would be one show too many in said Bazoon. I flopped on

the ground and thought it over, under, and in between. It looked as tough as a beanery steak.

However, I soon decided to let the Old Man worry about such things as dirty competition and pay attention to my own troubles. As manager of the side show I had enough of the same to satisfy Congress for life.

When we shot the first ballyhoo there were enough natives on the lot to make it look like a real burg. I had a new opener, or talker, and he proved to be a wonder. He “turned” most of his push, and the old dimes walked up to the box offices hard and heavy. I nearly fainted from the shock. It was the first town where we had hit anything besides hard luck and a sheriff’s nose. At last it seemed that J. Twiddle Hemm, our general agent, had booked a burg that wasn’t twin to Sleepy Hollow. All of this made me feel so happy with the world that I forgot everything about Gyp Cooper and his day-and-date stuff.

Then things took a sudden turn, as the bird said when the trolley hopped the track. That night, after we sloughed, I was sitting on the bally stand at peace with everybody but the wife, when I received a shock that Edison would have investigated.

Stronguyus, successor to Atlas, and known to his pop as Manus McHulihan, sidled up to me with trouble written all over his face. “Mr. Ramble,” he began, fingering a sheet of paper, “I stand before you as the chairman of the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, just organized.”

I nearly fell off the bally. “The—who?” I

stuttered.

"I guess you didn't hear me," he went on, with a face as serious as a picture-play comedy. "You see before you the chairman of the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, which same has woke up and herewith demands recognition of the union, and more pay, at once and immediate. As the—"

"Halt!" I commanded. "I see right now that you have somehow managed to ignore the safety-thirst amendment to the Constitution of E Pluribus Unum; and as the chairman of this here side show I wish to be let in on the secret." I thought he was kidding and wasn't going to let that beezark outkid Doc Ramble.

He came closer and clapped that weight-lifting paw of his upon my shoulder, and glared as if I had stolen his watch. "Listen!" he cried. "This is horribly serious. See? Horribly serious! I have come to you, as the manager of this side show, to demand that all attractions get more pay and shorter hours." He slanted a paper he held in his hand, and went on: "This, now, ultimatum is to become effectious within twenty-four hours or we strike!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" I shouted. "If this stuff is on the level, say so. If not, the comedy is getting tearful!"

"What ain't on the level?" he snapped. "I'll prove it!" He put his fingers to his lips and let out a blast that must have disturbed Mars. A second later the whole collection of freaks came parading from around the tent, looking as peeved as snowflakes in July.

Flesho, the Fat Girl, wobbled in the lead, followed by Skeletino, the Human Toothpick. Next came Princess Mahulogoo, the past-present-and-kid 'em dame, arm in arm with Queen Babess, the Albino Beauty. The six other mysteries that composed the show brought up the rear.

"Are you with us, Doc?" asked Flesho, panting. "Or are you gonna go against us poor downtrodden troupers what ain't getting enough to eat?"

Right away I saw the thing was as serious as carbolic. "Who's not getting enough to eat?" I cried. "Who?"

"Eats—beans!" cried Skeletino, waving his hairpin arms. "We want our rights! The price of food has went up. The price of—"

"Shut up!" put in Stronguyus, clapping his hand over Skeletino's mouth. "What we want is more cherries—more coin. See?"

"And shorter hours!" chimed in Mahulogoo, nee

Theda Blimpgay. "I work so hard that I don't get me a chance to cop a sweetheart. Me for the four-hour working day!"

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I asked. "Get Mr. Morgan to divide up with you, or something?"

"We herewith demand that you serve notice on the Old Man that we, the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, want a ten percent raise in wages and a twenty percent cut in hours at once and immediate. Or else—"

"What?" I shivered.

"Or else they ain't gonna be no more show!" Skeletino vociferated.

Well, to argue with that bunch of beezarks would be like trying to swim the Atlantic in January. "All right," I said; "I'll slip the glad news to Ziddleberger first thing in the morning. Now run along to bed."

They marched off like Napoleon retreating from Panama, or wherever the place was, and I rolled over on the bally and slanted the stars. The old bean began to do enough thinking to take a complete course in algebra in a second. I could imagine Almarah D. Ziddleberger—the same being his name, not a novelette—taking a double-jointed fit soon as he heard half of the story.

It sure was tough. Elbow Falls was the first burg we had hit all season that wasn't competing with the cemeteries, and the works had to pull a strike. And on top of that, as the fellow says who got hit with the second brick, Gyp Cooper had to spring some day-and-date stuff. It's a cruel whirl, son. You know it.

II.

THE following morning, as they say in the novels, I dusted off my reserve supply of nerve and breezed up to the treasury wagon to pass Almarah D. the glad tidings of great gloom. I found him counting up last week's losses at Mount Balaam, looking as contented as a mackerel shanghai'd in a sand dune. He was surrounded with all kinds of pencils and had enough paper to figure out the cost of a real meal.

"Say it quick!" he grunted, not noticing who stood before him. "I know it ain't gonna be good news, anyway!"

"You're graduated, Mr. Ziddleberger," I said. "If what I've got to slip you is joyful stuff, you'll

prefer a poison-ivy sundae in exchange.”

“Ah, it’s Doc!” he cried, facing me. “Just the man I want to see! I suppose you’ve heard that we got a little trouble on board with Gyp Cooper at Bazoon, and—”

“Which same,” I interrupted, “is a mere zero compared to what I’m about to mumble.”

“Can it be possible?” he asked, his eyes rolling like the Pacific in a typhoon.

“I know that it sounds like a nightmare running in high,” I went on, “but, since I have not woke up, it looks like the truth.”

“What’s the startling news? Has the wife refused to buy a new hat?”

“Just as strange,” I hurled at him. “I’ve been ordered—get that ‘ordered’ part—by Mr. Manus McHulihan to serve notice on you that he, as the chairman of the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, gives you exactly twenty-four hours’ time to slip his constituency shorter hours of labor and more pay for the same.” Then I told him the actual demands.

I grabbed the owner just as he was sliding to the floor. His head wobbled like a rundown top, while his eyes reflected the whole solar system. It was not that Almarah D. Ziddleberger cared anything for nickels, understand. He lived on soup merely to save dentists’ bills, that’s all.

“Strike, hey?” he roared, soon as his brains got on the track again. “I’ll strike ‘em! Whoever heard of such a thing? Who? I ask you.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Ziddleberger,” I crashed in; “considering that this is the only town where we’re copping the kale, I think it would be a good idea to arbitrate this thing.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I would advise you to settle matters fairly for all sides. Have a talk with your employees, and slip them a little something. If you don’t, they’ll quit frozen, which means that we won’t spear a nickel.”

He paced around the floor for a few minutes, thinking it over and under. He chewed at his cigar as if it was McHulihan’s chin and looked as pleasant as a road full of glass to a flivver driver.

“I guess you’re right, Doc,” he said at last. “I’m gonna appoint you my especial ambassador to those burglars, and you tell them that I’ll grant them a five percent raise this week and think about the rest later. You might hint that the show is almost broke, and that they’re getting more out of it than I am. Think you can settle it?”

“I’ll take a chance,” I replied. “But if you hear any noise send down some assistance—I’ll need it.”

Picking up a five-foot stake en route to the battle, I headed directly for the dressing tent. As I neared the entrance, I heard enough commotion to make the Fourth of July sound like the day when the Pilgrims landed. I could hear Skeletino with his high-C voice trying to outshout McHulihan, while the ladies seemed to be running a school of oratory. As I breezed in, I felt like Daniel in the lions’ flat.

“Here’s Doc!” shouted Stronguyus, as soon as I entered. “Did you see the Old Man?”

With considerable effort I managed to get my face looking as stern as a traffic cop’s, gave the bunch one of those ‘We’ll-fight-it-out-on-this-line-if-it-takes-all-January’ looks, and then held up my hand for silence. They crowded around me as if I was passing out sample gold pieces, or something, and gave me three hearty cheers. However, when I slipped them Ziddleberger’s proposition they yanked two and a half cheers back.

“What!” exclaimed Skeletino. “Only a five percent raise and no shorter working day? Huh?”

“What do you want?” I asked. “The gold supply? Besides, you don’t do a bit of work, anyway! You ought to thank nature for giving you a soft job. If you looked like a regular guy, you would have to do some real work for a living. Forget it!”

Well, after Stronguyus debated things with the rest of the beezarks, they at last decided to take what they could get—for the time. I heaved a yard of sighs and dashed back to the Old Man with the good news. He received me with a face as sour as lemonade during a sugar famine, and rewarded me for my diplomacy with—one cigar!

III.

DURING the next couple of days things slid along smoothly—like a sleigh in August. Although business was good the show was bad. The bunch just sat on their platforms and did as they pleased; now and then they would go visiting one another and it made no difference whether the lecturer was talking about them at the time.

Those freaks certainly weren’t satisfied at all with their increase. If Skeletino decided to hop off the stand and parade around, he would let Mr. Lecturer worry about the rest. I was afraid to say

anything, since I was only the manager, because they would be likely to demand a cut of Rockefeller's income, or declare another strike. Their heads were just that shape. You know it!

On Wednesday I made a discovery, as Columbus told the Queen of Sheba. I was standing about ten yards in front of the show, admiring the banners, when I noticed a funny-looking bird gabbing with the ticket taker. After buzzing in one another's ears for a moment the chap walked in—free.

Right away my mind began to work on all twelve cylinders. If I was not mistaken, he was the same bird who had been flying in and out for the past three days. I could not forget him, because he had a set of whiskers that made Santa Claus look like an ad for baby food.

I breezed up to the ticket taker and demanded which was what. "Who's that fellow?" I asked. "I didn't notice him shooting any dime into the ticket box—unless you're collecting all such."

He got as red as a week's worth of sunsets and looked altogether embarrassed. "Sh-h!" he began. "Don't you know who that chap is? That's the Mayor of Elbow Falls! Yeah; he told me hisself!"

"Then I'm the Shah of Borneo!" I fired back. "Where do you get that stuff, hey? Believe me, there's something going on in these works that yours truly is going to discover in the fast-approaching future. Better watch your step—and your head!"

Something told me to keep my eye on Mr. Whiskers. Of course, I might have been all wrong; but if that gazabo with the bird's-nest face didn't have something to do with the strike threat, then I figured that the cost of living was the lowest in the country's history.

On Thursday, it looked as if the whole trick was going loco in high C. I was discussing the situation with Emerson Dreem when "Blink" Gliddleby, the boss canvasman, slouched up with danger written all over him. He had a slip of paper in his hand, while his undecided Panama was trying to glide off his head.

"Evenin', gents," he mumbled. "Maybe you could do a feller a li'l favor. I got something to tell the Old Man that I don't care to do."

"Shoot, Blink!" I said. "I'm now used to everything but peace."

"Well, Doc, I've been appointed spokesman for the Association of Circus Canvasmen of the

United—"

"Never mind the second chapter!" snapped Dreem. "Tell us how you got that way."

"This is an undelicate thing, Mr. Dreem," he countered. "The boys have declared war for more wages and less hours. And if they don't see the color of their demands, then the white tops stay up! We've been given a rough deal, gents, and we have come to life to show our strength in the glorious days—"

"Never mind looking at the papers," I interrupted. "I can guess the rest, But as for me slipping the sad news to Ziddleberger— Well, once was enough!"

"Then I'll attend to it m'self!" he cried, with much zest and blew down the midway.

Twenty minutes later Blink came rambling back, whistling "The Last Snows of Summer," or whatever that opera is.

"I got it, Doc!" he yelled. "Not everything, but he gave us a five percent lift in dough, and said that he would do more later."

Then Friday came. The midway was jammed with enough natives to raise an army. Dreem had made arrangements with the Ancient Order of Hay Shakers, or something, to see the whole works at half price. And from the looks of things, nobody stayed home but the furniture. Before the side show opened they hung around the front slanting the banners as if the same had been painted by Rembrandt & Co. I saw at once that it was due to be the biggest day we had all season.

But something happened. Just as I was congratulating myself on breaking all records for the side show, Dreem came jazzing along with a mile of gloom surrounding his face.

"Hear the latest, Doc?" he asked, face and tone indicating gloom. "If not, allow me to state that there ain't gonna be no show at the big top, crowd or no crowd."

Oh, boy, I could imagine Ziddleberger doing somersaults all around the lot from rage! "What hit them?" I asked.

"Dunno; Doc! All I know is that every act in the works has gone on strike for more dough. It's sure tough. I see where I'll have to duck this little picnic that I invited down for a pleasant day, or else my health is liable to decrease considerably. S'long, Doc."

I got a bright idea at once and immediately. Ha, thought I, if the big top lays off, then the side show

ought to grab all the coin on the grounds! I got a sudden vision of my percentage going up to one hundred in the shade.

The next minute it went down to zero in the sun! I had no more than figured the possible net profits for yours truly when Stronguyus eased up to me and purred:

“Mornin”, Mr. Ramble. Looks like a real push on the lot, hey? We should do some business—but we ain’t!”

“Ha, ha, that’s a good joke!” I said, hoping he was kidding.

“Yeah—but not on us. As the chairman of the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, I herewith serve noticed that we demand the balance of that ten percent raise, and the rest. We figured that there ain’t no better time than now to remind you of the same.”

“What!” I howled. “Are you gonna lay down with a mob like this?”

“Sure! Why not?” he came back calm as a sunset.

“You’re plumb crazy! Didn’t the Old Man give you a raise only a couple of days ago? What do you think he is, the Bank of England? Forget it, and go back to work!”

“Not a chance, Doc! Not a chance! As the chairman of the Amalgamated Side Show Freaks, I’ll give you ten minutes to see Ziddleberger and dash back with good news. Good mornin’, Mr. Ramble!”

IV.

IRACED up to the treasury wagon and found Judd Fanduzzell, the treasurer, with his feet upon the desk doing six kinds of nothing.

“Where’s Ziddleberger?” I inquired. “Went up to Bazoon an hour ago to see about something,” he said, with a yawn. “Some of the Guy-Bunk-Blinker people are there, getting ready for next week.”

“Quick!” I shouted. “Send him a telegram to rush back! We’ve got a barrel of trouble—the whole works have struck!”

“Can’t; don’t know where to send it.”

“Send it, anyway!” I howled. “Address it care telegraph office at Bazoon—he’s liable to ramble in there. Quick—time’s money from now on!” After this I dashed out and back to the side show.

There was no answer in an hour, during which time the mob began to act peevish and ask foolish

questions. I tried to reason with Stronguyus, promising him everything but the mint and the north pole; but with no results.

Then came the showdown! It was about half past seven when a taxicab came dashing on to the lot as if it was driven by Mr. Di Palma. Before it came to a stop, the door shot open and out hopped Ziddleberger.

“Just came from Bazoon!” he exclaimed, panting. “Got your message, but was coming, anyhow. The Cooper outfit framed us all around! The—”

“Listen!” I interrupted. “Do you hear anything?”

“Yeah—yeah! Sounds like somebody making a speech at the dressing tent. Let’s go!”

We sneaked up and listened at the flap. And what we heard would have made Job declare war! I peeked in, and there upon a trunk stood Mr. Whiskers waving his arms as if he was trying to flag the midnight express, and spouting an oration that would have made the Honorable Cicero look like an infant crying for mamma!

“Lemme see him!” hissed Ziddleberger, shoving me aside.

One slant was enough. “The cur!” he snarled, biting his lip.

“Listen!” I said. “I think that fellow is saying stuff about you that ain’t helping you to gain any votes. Just listen!”

“And believe me, ladies and gents,” Mr. Whiskers was telling the bunch, “I can prove that Almarah D. Ziddleberger is a multimillionaire! He’s got enough coin to keep a yacht anchored in the Hudson River and a couple of autos that’s worth ten thousand per piece. And what, I ask you, ladies and gents, have you got? Nothing—that’s what you got. Nothing!”

“Oh, the faker!” hissed the Old Man. “Oh, the—”

“Sh-h! Get another earful!” I advised.

“I tell you, ladies and gents,” went on Whiskers, “it makes my heart ache when I think of how you poor folks have been swindled by that boss of yourn.”

“Gimme a stake, Doc!” raved Ziddleberger. “Gimme a stake!”

“Why, ladies and gents,” orated Whiskers at the top of his voice, “that guy could afford to pay each one of you at least one hundred per week! How long, I ask you, are you gonna be sheared like sheep by that burglar?”

“Did you hear that, Doc?” moaned

Ziddleberger, shivering from rage. "I don't even own a flivver, Doc! Oh, the impostor!"

"And lemme tell you another thing," howled Whiskers; "I even heard that he once robbed an orphan asylum!"

That was plenty for Ziddleberger. With the growl of a half-dozen lions, he pushed aside the flap and dashed in. Bowling freaks to the right, canvassmen to the left, and roughnecks to the middle, he made one grandstand leap at Mr. Whiskers.

Bam! Down went Whiskers, doing a corking back-flip on to his bean in the sawdust. Flesho screamed, Skeletino croaked, while the rest made wild efforts to crash through the side walls. From the top of the trunk, the Old Man jumped onto Whiskers and let him have it.

"Gimme a stake, Doc!" he raved. "I'm going to show this tramp"—pow!—"what a fair and square"—wham!—"trouper does to birds who"—zam!—"pull this kinda stuff!"

The next thing I knew Ziddleberger grabbed that complete set of whiskers by the handle and yanked the same off in one jerk.

"And now, Gyp, old boy," went on Ziddleberger, "the next time you frame one of those tricks on Almarah D., you wanna disguise yourself with a suit of armor!"

As soon as Cooper had been disposed of, Ziddleberger got together his employees, who declared themselves willing to go on with the shows at once. The Old Man promised to consider in the next few days any real grievances they might have.

Late that night, after one of the most lucrative evenings the Move-A-Long Greater Circus ever had, I sat in the grease joint, or show beanery, with Almarah D. Ziddleberger. The Old Man was in high spirits; he was pleased over his showing up of the impostor, Cooper, and the receipts which had come so generously from the members of the Ancient Order of Hay Shakers and other residents of Elbow Falls and vicinity. Another cause of his joy was the boss' reasoning—which in a few days was proved to be correct—that the people of Bazoon, disgusted with Gyp Cooper's methods, would patronize the Move-A-Long in preference to the Guy-Bunk-Blinker shows.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Ziddleberger," I said at last, "but I'd like to ask you something."

"What?"

"Did you know that it was Gyp who was doing the agitating?"

"Well, Doc," the Old Man replied, "I didn't spend two hours in Bazoon for nothing!"