

## INTRODUCTION by Matthew Crampton

DANCING off the page like real-life Dickens, this legendary autobiography of Victorian circus pioneer ‘Lord’ George Sanger is dark, fun and irresistible. As befits a man who lived by his wits, he tells a great story. When he produced this book in 1910, then in his eighties, Sanger had spent decades honing tales from a life of rare breadth and bravery.

Most people today know of the American showman P. T. Barnum, but few, even in Britain, have heard of ‘Lord’ George Sanger. That’s odd, for Sanger was then as famous in Europe. He was also the American’s equal in skill, pluck and cheek. But while Barnum’s story is often sanitised, this book is not. It’s as rooted in the darkness as the spectacle of both men’s lives.

First we meet Sanger’s father James as a teenage farmer from Wiltshire, visiting London to see pals. Crossing London Bridge, he is waylaid by a press gang, which bludgeons him into service on a government ship. He ends up aboard the flagship *Victory* during the Battle of Trafalgar, survives boarding an enemy ship, and watches Nelson fall. James returns home, maimed and poor, but is badly received by his family. So he sets out on the road, to live by means of a peep-show and patter. All this, and we’re barely four pages into the book.

Such paternal setback steers the life of our hero. After Trafalgar, his father was given a piece of paper – a royal prescription – letting him carry on any honest trade, travel freely and be exempted from some laws. Rejected by his family, he now had both incentive and licence to go and do as he wished. Young George was born in 1827 and grew up in a caravan. Every few nights the family slept somewhere new. By the age of six, he was already declaiming recent murders to spellbound audiences.

The family had to fend for itself. When George’s younger sister caught smallpox in Newbury, father fashioned a vaccination for the other children. *His instrument was a long darning-needle. This he passed through the upper part of the muscle of each child’s right arm. Then into the tiny wound on each side he rubbed a little of the serum taken from the pustules of the sufferer.* Amazingly, it worked. Later, when young

George's leg was ripped apart on stage, and two doctors said it must be amputated, his father operated himself with a needle and silk thread. *I did my best not to whimper, though I was very glad when I saw him put that big curved needle down.* The leg healed.

Like his father, George felt licensed to go and do as he pleased. He soon set up his own show, along with brothers William and John. In time, this entrepreneurial urge saw him pioneer spectacular circus decades before Barnum & Bailey arrived in Britain, launch the first Lord Mayor's Parade in London and tour Europe with a huge cast of performers and animals.

After opening his first circus in the 1854, Sanger's rise was relentless. By 1871 he'd bought Britain's largest permanent circus, Astley's in London, while also running shows in Islington, Manchester, Birmingham and eight other cities. One spectacle alone gathered on stage 300 women, 200 men, 200 children, 13 elephants, 9 camels, and 52 horses, in addition to ostriches, emus, pelicans, deer, kangaroos, buffaloes, bulls and – at the centre of it all – two African lions.

There's a delicious danger to circus life, which this book lets you taste fully. When a fight breaks out between rival shows on the road, *Even the freaks took part. The fat man made for the living skeleton with a door-hook; the living skeleton battered at the fat man with a peg mallet.* One typically picaresque scene finds performers uniting to tackle a factory fire near Stepney Fair. *Amid the flying sparks ... could be seen clowns, knights in armour, Indian chiefs, jugglers in tights and spangles, rope-walkers in fleshings.* The tight-rope walkers prove useful in clambering along high beams to contain the fire's advance through the roof.

Circus folk are a breed apart. In a wonderful commentary on this book by *Wind in the Willows* author Kenneth Grahame (included at the back of this edition), we read: *Show-people are a contented folk ... because they rarely want to be anything but what they are. They are a quiet and reserved people, subdued in manner, clannish, living a life apart; scrupulously clean and tidy, as indeed anyone must be who lives in a caravan; self-reliant, asking little from anyone except some tolerance from officials and freedom to come and go.*

Sanger repeatedly rose from setbacks which might sink others. For Christmas 1850 he risked all on pantomimes in central London, but the theatre he rented was found to be built over a hundred barrels of human remains – it was a makeshift graveyard – so he had to beat a costly retreat. Two years later in Northwich, just as

the family were preparing to perform, their carriage was destroyed by a gas explosion, injuring him and his pregnant wife Nellie. Then, while being treated, their savings were stolen from the wreckage. They were offered compensation, which Sanger proudly refused, quoting his father: *Never eat the bread of charity if you can avoid it.* Adapted to their injuries, the show went on, Sanger conjuring, while his wife *took on the second-sight business.* They played to capacity audiences, earning twelve pounds a house.

Life was always hard. Shortly after the explosion, Nellie gave birth, George's mother came north to see the grandchild, but died suddenly in Durham. There was barely time to bury her before they had to travel on – they needed the money – and misfortunes escalated until they reached Lincolnshire, in mid-winter, where their new baby died. To pay for the funeral, they kept playing. *In the bitter grey weather, our hearts as heavy as lead, we had to mount jests and smile to win the people to our show.*

Forgive a second titanic namedrop, but Sanger is near Shakespearean in his voyage through the classes and geographies of his time. One minute he's bare-knuckle fighting in an East End pub, the next entertaining toffs on the Isle of Wight. He claimed to have performed to every community in Britain of more than 100 inhabitants. And whether he was recruiting a fake tribe of red Indians from Liverpool slums, dodging the fury of a Chartist riot or chatting with Queen Victoria about elephants, Sanger remained resolutely the same man.

And what a man that was. Clad in glossy top hat, frock coat and boots, he was a spritely showman who prized action over paperwork. While he was able to read, it's likely he could not write, and this book was probably ghosted by the journalist George R. Sims. Sanger grew up in a world where the law offered little security against local citizens or authorities, both of which took pleasure in attacking travelling showfolk. So Sanger trusted few outside his world. *Within* his world, however, he exerted control by force of personality and by promoting a near-cult of circus 'family', of which he, naturally, was head.

Sanger's grandson – also called George, also a showman – wrote much about the grandfather in his own 1950s autobiography. This book *The Sanger Story* provides useful counterpoint to the mythology of *Seventy Years a Showman*. While 'Lord' George presents himself as a benign, loving leader, grandson George portrays a fault-finding grump, never satisfied, for example, with how his bacon was

cooked. More insight comes from great-great-grandson, also George Sanger, who appeared on BBC radio's *Desert Island Discs* in 1962. Asked about the original 'Lord' George, he says, "I was frightened to death of him."

No-one builds an empire without knocking a few heads along the way. In Sanger's case, literally. Though light in tone, the early chapters reveal a world of constant violence. The showfolk are often ambushed by aggressive townsfolk. Toddler George nearly dies when their caravan is overturned by a mob. Chapters Nine and Ten are a glorious account of the dangers of performing near Bath, whose riotous roughs are led by *a red-headed virago, a dreadful giantess of a woman, known as "Carroty Kate"*; Sanger relishes the revenge taken by the circus workers. *A brutal sight, you may say; but, oh, the excitement of it!* Later, at the Stalybridge Wakes, he sees a gang of Lancastrians kick a stallholder to death with their iron-tipped clogs.

This was a business built upon deception. At its heart was the skill of 'hanky-panky' – a term now smutty, but then referring to the arts of conjuring, juggling and patter. As with magic, audiences were happy to be deceived. And 'Lord' George gleefully shares his secrets. For his *Shoal of Trained Fish in their Exhibition of a Naval Engagement*, he got goldfish to steer model boats armed with small explosives. He presented an oyster who appeared to enjoy smoking a pipe. There were fortune-telling ponies. *The Pig-faced Lady* was actually a bear. All good fun.

But around them at the fairs were less noble deceptions, which Sanger is just as happy to recount. Chapter 24 gives fascinating insight into 'tog-tables' – false gambling tables which paid out big to 'bonnets' (planted audience members), but never let the real public win. Sanger does admit to some guilty feelings. Describing his fake red Indians – publicised as having to be housed in an iron-barred carriage to contain their savagery – he says *My! It was a swindle, and now and again my conscience troubled me fearfully about it.*

Of the many skills of the circus performer, training and working with animals was crucial. *Never lose your temper with an animal*, explains 'Lord' George. *You can without any unkind treatment teach him to do anything you want him to do.* His wife Nellie had been known as the Lion Queen at rival Wombwell's Menagerie (no doubt useful knowledge for coping with her husband's temperament); soon after she joined Sanger, her cousin Miss Bright was mauled to death by a tiger with whom she had often performed. *I have never known a wild beast kill a keeper or trainer unless the animal has been previously*

*ill-used or tormented*, says Sanger. Here, Miss Bright had foolishly flicked her whip around the tiger's eyes. 'Lord' George adored his beasts. When a favourite old lion caught pneumonia, he spent all night beside it in the den, rubbing mustard through the fur onto its chest.

Sanger's love of animals was matched by his love of royalty. He would do anything to please Queen Victoria, even rushing the entire circus to Balmoral when Her Majesty expressed interest. Such royal attachments were, of course, good for business, and widely publicised, but Sanger did bow to Saxe-Coburgs in ways he could not for other humans. He even found himself unable to lie to them. When the Prince of Wales asked whether *The only White Elephant ever seen in the Western World* was the real thing, he said *I could never deceive my future king* and admitted it was an ordinary elephant given a twice-daily coat of whitewash. *My goodness, how the Prince did laugh!*

Before letting you loose on this marvellous book, two more matters need explanation. First, Sanger was a 'Lord' of his own promotion. When Buffalo Bill Cody brought his Wild West show across the Atlantic in 1887, he wasn't happy to find Sanger already touring his own 'Scenes from Buffalo Bill', and took him to court. Hearing his rival titled the 'Honourable William Cody', Sanger angrily declared that he would forthwith be known as 'Lord' George. The name stuck. It's said, indeed, that Sanger thrice turned down offers of knighthood from Queen Victoria, for this would mean giving up being a 'Lord'.

Finally, there is the matter of his death. Unsurprisingly absent from his autobiography, the story is so strange and violent, it's fitting to mention. In November 1911, Sanger was attacked at his Finchley home by disgruntled employee Herbert Cooper, first with a hatchet, then with a brass vase. He died of his injuries. Cooper jumped under a train at Crouch End. The murder caused headlines around the world. It was a departure as sensational as his life.

Now, sit back, start reading – and get ready to be amazed.