

## CHAPTER XXXII

### A LUCKY TOUR GIVES ME MY FIRST CIRCUS

AFTER my misfortunes in Lincolnshire the luck seemed to turn, and we did very well on the road, managing to get to London for the Easter holidays in excellent fettle and with a little cash in hand. So we went once more to Stepney Fair, of pleasant memories, and erected our booth against the "Maid and Magpie" public-house.

Novelty was what the public had begun to crave for, and no matter how stupid or exaggerated an announcement might be put up on a booth, if it only advertised something new there was sure to be a rush to see it. Of course, in nine cases out of ten the novelty seekers met with a disappointment, but they rarely made a noise about it, for they liked to see others gulled as well as themselves, so the game went merrily on.

Seeing that such a demand for novelty existed I felt it incumbent on me, as a showman counted amongst the smartest in the profession, to do what I could to satisfy the demand. So I set my wits to work and soon found some items to catch the public fancy. The first was, as I grandiloquently called it, my "Shoal of Trained Fish in their Exhibition of a Naval Engagement." That sounds big, doesn't it? Now for the facts as to size and character, for, as I promised at the beginning, I am going to tell you all my little secrets.

Well, then, I bought a glass tank, 2 feet 6 inches wide, 6 inches deep, and 6 feet 9 inches long; a number of goldfish, and some little toy boats such as were sold to children at a penny each. Into the boats I put some fine masts and spars with paper sails, and to each boat attached a fine steel wire, which went through the bottom about 3 inches and ended in a small noose. By just tickling the goldfish with a fine twig or a feather they could easily be made to put their heads into the wire nooses and to push the boats with them as they swam. It was astonishing to see how the fish would swim when their heads were noosed, carrying the boats up and down the tank at a rare rate. A small squib was attached to each mast and lit up, the parks flying as the startled fish darted hither and thither, and the naval engagement, with plenty of smoke and

small detonations, was complete. "Simple," you will say. Quite so, but it was none the less very effective, and the people who came to see it were not only satisfied, but considered it a very clever exhibition.

My big hit, however, was made by my tame oyster. This was quite my own idea, and puzzled and amazed not only the public, but at its start the other showmen, who became quite envious of the novel attraction. It was a daring thing to do, but the result quite justified my audacity, though it was not without some qualms that I prepared a piece of calico, four yards long by a yard wide, and painted on it the legend: "The Only Novelty in the Fair. The Wonderful Performing Fish and a Tame Oyster that sits by the fire and smokes his yard of clay." How they did bite at this! My show was crowded as it had never been before.

Now, having let you into the secret of the performing fish, I'll let you into the secret of the tame oyster that smoked a pipe.

I had prepared a fine big oyster shell, the two halves fitting closely together as though it was a nice fresh bivalve. Inside were fixed two little pieces of piping opening to two holes in the lip of the oyster shell. These pipes were connected with two pieces of black rubber tubing that ran down under my conjuring table on the raised platform.

I had handy two or three nice fresh oysters that in appearance and size closely matched the dummy shell, which, laid on a dark grey cloth, was not visible to the audience. When all was ready I took one of my good oysters, and introducing it as "The Tame Oyster, the only one in the world!" handed it round, so that the company could see there was "no deception." When I got the oyster back I pretended to place it in the grey cloth, but really dropped it at the back of the table, while I pulled forward the prepared shell. This I lifted up on to a black bottle, with the two tubes running down behind well out of sight. Then, calling attention to the fact that everybody could see the oyster, I would get a clay pipe, put some tobacco in it, and then with a request to the oyster, "Now, sir, let the company see that you really are trained and intelligent by showing how you can smoke a pipe!" I would insert the stem of the pipe into the hole made for it in the shell, call a boy from the audience, give him a spill, and ask him to light the tobacco. As he did so, my boy who used to do the "Suspension by Ether," and who was concealed under the table, would draw the smoke down one tube and blew it back through the other, so that it really looked as

though the oyster was puffing away at his pipe.

The trick never failed to amaze as well as amuse, more especially when, as if considering the oyster had smoked enough, I would say, "That will do, sir! You will make your head ache if you smoke too much!" With this I took the pipe away, and threw the corner of the grey cloth over the prepared oyster, at the same moment pulling the latter off the bottle and dropping it, tubes and all, into the drawer at the table back while I deftly substituted a real oyster. Then, throwing the corner of the cloth back, I would say, "There he is, ladies and gentlemen! Looks none the worse for his smoke, I think, but see for yourselves!" And the real oyster was handed round again, all believing it to be the one that had just been smoking. They used to go away quite convinced that they had seen an oyster enjoying a smoke and that there was "no deception."

Well, the "Tame Oyster," the "Performing Fish," the "Suspension by Ether," and several other new tricks, proved such an attraction that we took more money from Stepney Fair than we had ever imagined possible, and I resolved to try my luck with the same show in the West of England at the many fairs and regattas then held there.

This proved another good move. The jade Fortune was evidently now determined to be as kind as she had before been cruel, and money came in so fast that by September there was enough in hand to enable us to start on a venture, long before determined on as likely if we could only get a fair start, to bring us better returns than any other class of show. This was a circus, and a circus we accordingly arranged to have without delay.

Our first purchase to this end was made at Croydon October Fair in the shape of a Welsh pony, for which we gave seven pounds. I soon taught him, with a little variation of the method I have described as used in training the learned pig, to do the talking, fortune-telling, and card-picking business. Then we moved on to Norwich, and there, through the winter, in the grounds of a public-house by the river-side that afforded accommodation for the enterprise, set to work to prepare our show-front, forty-five feet in length and twenty-eight feet in height, that was to adorn the big tent we were having made for us.

I will not say that as a work of art our show-front would have secured a place in the Royal Academy, but it caught the eyes of the country people amazingly, and I was very proud of it, for it was practically my own. I used to spend about six hours of each day in

painting, and the rest, sometimes up to twelve o'clock at night, with my brother John, teaching the circus business to two nieces, one nephew, and four other youngsters I had taken as apprentices. In my time I have taught some twenty youngsters, who have all become not only firstclass and very successful artistes, but most of them managers and proprietors.

With the spring our circus was in a fair way of completion, and I resolved to open at King's Lynn at the great Charter Fair, which always commenced on February 14th, and lasted six days. So down to the grand old town on the east bank of the Ouse we made our way, and put up the new show, with its pictures illustrating the greatest impossibilities it is possible to conceive.

But they served their turn admirably, and when we – that is to say, myself; my nieces, nephew, and apprentices; Watty Hilyard, the famous clown; John Croueste, the noted general performer; and William Kite, who came of a wonderful circus family, and could do almost any ring business you could mention – strutted forth before the public gaze, in tights and trunks, everybody, including even the showmen, was impressed and astonished.

I had bought for eighteen pounds another good horse, which was ridden from London to Norwich by John Croueste, and we had trained it to gallop circus fashion in a proper forty-two feet ring in the public-house yard. All the time the fair lasted we were practising when we were not performing, and we speedily became very proficient.

We made money at King's Lynn, and, what was better, went on making it at the fairs we took in the Lincoln, Cambridge, Norfolk, and Suffolk district, while we were waiting for the great Eastertide Fair at Norwich. At this time, remember, our prices were a penny admission, with threepence for reserved seats.

On our way to Norwich Fair at Long Sutton, a mere village, we did what is known in the profession as "Blank Moulding." On a wide space in the turnpike road we put down a few seats and something in the shape of a ring, made up a few of the old-fashioned grease-pot lights with tallow and rags for wicks, and announced a grand performance. There was no charge to view the latter, as the ring was perfectly open, but we charged a penny each to all who wanted a seat.

We presented a lively little programme of juggling, rope-walking, trick-riding, etc., and when half-way through it, in order to get our expenses, called a rest, during which the following bit of patter was

indulged in: "Now, ladies and gentlemen, you know we are not doing this for our own amusement, but we thought as we were resting here tonight we would give you a little enjoyment. In order to test your appreciation of our efforts, before we go on with the rest of the performance the young men will go round with the hat." This is known in the profession as "nobbing," and not a soul among the spectators, some two or three hundred, escaped being "nobbed," whether they parted or not. Then the second part of the performance was proceeded with.

The last item was my fortune-telling pony, who did very well until I came to the finish. This always was to tell the pony to go round and find out the biggest rogue in the company. The proper response was to walk up to the ringmaster, so pointing him out as the biggest rogue in question. I never knew him do a wrong thing before, but on this occasion, after I had given him his order, and stood with my back to him waiting for him to come and push his head against me, I heard the people laughing.

Turning round, I saw the pony with his head resting on the shoulder of the village constable, who looked very red and unhappy. I at once threw the whip forward, driving the pony round the ring, at the same time saying, "You have made a mistake sir! I told you to find the biggest rogue in the company: try again!" and with this I gave him the usual cue.

But it was of no use. The pony, instead of coming up to me, merely walked some ten paces on, then turned and came back to the unfortunate constable, while the crowd shrieked with laughter. I was now really vexed, so I cracked the whip, and the pony came up to me, while I said, giving him the knee cue, "You have been very rude to that gentleman; down on your knees, sir, to beg pardon for your mistake." But the crowd wouldn't have it. "No, no," they shouted; "pony knows better than you! Pony's all right! He made no mistake, he didn't! Us know pleeceman, and so do pony, it appears!" Here the laughter and the jeering broke out afresh, and we had to leave the matter where it stood.

The constable, however, was a very good fellow, and he came in with the rest afterwards and made a joke of it, for we had quite a gala night in the village, myself and company sitting among our patrons drinking four ale and smoking long pipes. The collection was a very good one, too; in fact, our bit of "blank moulding" quite paid expenses, besides making us some new friends, and giving us an excellent advertisement.

We did so well that at Manchester Whit-Monday Fair we had increased our stud to nine horses and two ponies. I resolved after Manchester to make for Scotland, travelling through the Lake District, and at the little town of Keswick, at the fair held there on August 2nd, we made our first rise of prices, making admission threepence and reserved seats sixpence. The occasion was the spectacle of "Mazeppa," which we had been rehearsing for some time, and nobody grumbled at the increased prices; in fact, everybody seemed to take them as the regular thing, and I saw that the new move was a good one. At Carlisle, which we reached in time for the great fair, held regularly on August 26th, we took with the new prices close upon a hundred pounds. Then I realized that we were fairly on the up-grade at last, that the way to competence, if not to fortune, was open to me.

Going to Scotland I found I had over five hundred pounds in hand, and on the way to Glasgow I bought thirteen more horses, all of them handsome and well coloured, and an extra pony. We then changed the programme, and with it the prices again, making them now sixpence, one shilling, and two shillings. At Glasgow for five weeks we had an enormous run, and then we moved on, doing splendid business, for in Scotland a circus was then quite a novelty. Dundee, Paisley, Kirnham, Greenock, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Inverness, where we were at the time of the Highland Games, fairly rose at us. I wintered in South Shields, where I became a great favourite with the people, and felt that at last things were indeed looking rosy with me.