

Arthur H. Dorland

The Libation Bearers

They had to move again. It was the third time in the last twenty minutes. The rain, which had been only a slight drizzle when they entered the place, was coming down harder now and people were rearranging themselves everywhere they could in the elevated seating. But these folks, young and old, who had paid tickets and seldom got to see extravagant entertainments willing to travel to out-of-the-way country places like this, were not to be discouraged by a little water. It was summer after all, and nobody would end up sick in the hospital.

Arden looked up at the canvas roof above him and admired that such a ragged and ill used covering could keep out any water at all. How many shows had this wretched tent enclosed in its lifetime? How many times had the labor staff erected the supports, stretched the agonized fabric over and among them, and then pulled the whole thing down when the two-day gig was over? How did these poor people live a life in those untethered and gaudy trucks that moved this whole shebang from one small town to the next?

The costumes of the performers were as shoddy and decrepit as the tent itself. This was no Barnum and Bailey operation, this was an entertainment equivalent of sandlot baseball, only the staff had to rely on a combination of their own wits and the inexperience of country audiences to keep the game going. This was their life.

Arden himself had once seen a real Barnum and Bailey production. He was originally a city boy and his parents had taken him to one. That was in the 1950s when television had not yet infested every American household and circus shows were much more popular. And sitting in his damp seat he remembered what that show was like and could not help comparing it with the one he was now seated in front of. Magnificent animals, roaring lions, trapeze artists high above the three-ring circular floor, six or eight thousand transfixed faces viewing all the splendor, and the whole thing housed in a gigantic public hall. The only thing he didn't like then was a concession that sold live chameleons. He felt so sorry for the little creatures, tied spread eagle on a small piece of cardboard, hung up on a wire like serving numbers at the bakery. Arden made his father buy one for fifty cents, which he took home a week or two prior to its death. He dreamed for a long time of one day sneaking back into that circus and liberating the chameleons when no one was looking.

Years later, even living on a farm as he did now, he still had a soft spot for animals.

Arden had come to this new circus, all those years afterward, accompanied by two youngsters whose parents were good friends of Arden and had asked him to take them. Not everybody had a car where he lived. The two boys, who had not had the advantages he took for granted as a child, seemed to be having a grand time, mouths agape at the wonders before them. Arden tried to wash away the memories.

The rain came down harder now and the three of them moved over a couple of seats.

The ringmaster, dressed out in a none-too-tidy tuxedo outfit, pointed at a new attraction. A pair of camels, double humped, entered the scene followed by a duo of young—more or less—women in tights who surprisingly leaped upon the camels' backs and performed acrobatic tricks like standing on their hands while the sluggish animals walked around the ring. Well, that was sort of impressive. Arden admitted he could never do that, nor could anyone he ever knew. Even these boys might not accomplish it, should they ever own a camel. The admittance ticket was four dollars and one of those four was justifiably spent on this act, he figured.

The camels were taken away and the emcee approached a child in the first row and did a quick trick with coins seemingly dropping from the boy's ear, but it was too far away and Arden couldn't really see enough to judge this performance. The little boy laughed, so at least he himself was entertained.

Next thing that happened, two rhinestone gentlemen in black suits and top hats entered the ring. They stood a moment then walked away from each other in stiff, exaggerated dignity to opposite sides of the circle, each carrying a shiny glass jar, fairly small and containing a bright red liquid, like wine. Maybe it was wine. They took up positions facing one another across the ring and removed the lids from the jars. Here each raised his jar so that all the audience could see it and proceeded to slowly empty the liquid onto the dirt floor in a hieratic, ceremonial way. Lowering their arms ever so slowly, the gentlemen hereupon walked solemnly about the circle a second time and exchanged places. They once again raised the vials so that everyone could see they were empty. They tipped them, and behold, another stream of red wine-like liquid flowed onto the floor.

This one had Arden stumped. How the hell did they do that? He'd seen some pretty sophisticated stuff at the city circus he remembered, but that was a big-time production and the tricks were accomplished by highly paid people at a much greater distance from the spectators, twice at least what he was seeing now.

The audience today, however, seemed not to react at all. No applause. As though they had come here and paid honest money to see unfathomable tricks and had now got what they paid for, nothing more.

Arden, however, for some curious reason, was transfixed by the trick and wished to see it again.

The rhinestone fellows walked out of the ring unconcerned by this apparent failure. They must be used to it in the little places they performed at.

But the inexplicable allure lingering about this jar of wine poured into the circus earth had captured Arden's interest, and he couldn't shake it. The peculiar ceremony, he imagined, was before his eyes slaking a mystical thirst, as if a sacred longed-for refreshment was being supplied to doomed insubstantial beings gathered beneath the performers' feet. An appeasement to ancient angry gods.

A mismatched pair of show horses then came before the audience, each mounted by one of the female acrobats in tights who were formerly seen upon camels. Their black leotards, most likely patched up late the night before, were splitting open in places, but still serviceable for this one evening. There would be no scandal here in a country town. They paraded around the ring one behind the other, then drew side by side. One of the acrobats dismounted with a grand gesture, while the other took the reins of both beasts and rode about standing with one foot on each of the animals. She increased her speed and finally leapt to the ground in a backward flip that truly and finally impressed the viewers.

There was applause. Arden looked at the two boys who were decidedly engaged at this point. They were staring intently at the performer with their mouths open. They must have been figuring if they themselves could do something similar on a pair of plow horses. Wouldn't that impress their friends.

Next came a white pony out onto the stage looking like it hadn't been groomed for a week, but decked out in garish finery like Mata Hari on a bender. It dropped some balled up elements of digestive memory on the way out, but nobody bothered to sweep it up. The ringmaster approached the pony and held up for everyone to see what looked like oversize playing cards with prominent numbers in the corners. He flashed the cards in front of the pony's face, and the animal thumped an unimpressive and irregular front hoof beat to count each card's number. There was a slight rustle of applause as the mathematical pony was led out. It was still raining.

Arden was getting a little hungry, so he left his seat and bought a bag of popcorn. He offered some to the two boys when he came back, but they didn't want any.

And now the rhinestone libationers reappeared. They performed the same routine as before, in exactly the same sequence with the same steps. One of the two was pretty close to Arden, not more than thirty or forty feet away, and Arden peered with redoubled

attention as the magical red liquid was poured out upon the earth and reappeared the same as last time. *No, this just can't be. It's not like the lady sawed in half, there just isn't room in that glass jar for all that liquid. The contained wine exceeds the container. No, it can't be.* The boys beside him were bored and asked for some popcorn.

But it was the next act paraded before the spectators that Arden would never forget, and it would trouble him the rest of his life. He had a weak place in his heart for animals and didn't even butcher his own chickens. He looked at the boys beside him. They didn't have that problem.

A baby elephant was led out into the ring. Apart from the camels this circus did not feature mammalian exotica, no tigers, no lions, nothing remotely dangerous. Just as well, considering the miserable conditions and the proximity of the viewers to the animals. It was quickly apparent to Arden there was something seriously wrong with this poor little elephant. It was driven from behind by a relentless whip and stumbled its way around the circumference of the ring for the enjoyment of all. No one seemed to mind. The ringmaster made it go through a routine, lifting its trunk and one foot, or trying to, then the other, like a kind of dance, and this sorry performance struck Arden hard in the gut. That poor elephant was sick. It wobbled on its feet, showed some dried diarrhea on its hindquarters, and its eyes were running badly. Cattle sometimes get like this in transport, and it's called shipping fever. Arden knew this, and he also knew no antibiotics would fix it this time. The poor little elephant was being shipped in a miserable truck every couple of days, kept in the dark on a bed of dirty straw, from one place to the next to the next to the next. Arden was no vet, and did not know a great deal about elephants, but it was pretty clear to him this young creature was going to die, maybe that night. He was being run through his last routine to pay off some expenses before he would be dumped somewhere in the country, probably at a shady, for-profit landfill that didn't ask questions. Arden hoped the boys next to him wouldn't be as down about it as he was, but of course they were raised on farms and animal death is normal. It would never be normal for Arden.

The rain had stopped, and the rhinestone performers with their magic liquid made a last attempt to impress their audience. Why would they do this, Arden thought, and who was it for? It seemed like some compulsory, contrived and unchanging ritual, dragged forward in time over a hundred generations and repeated now by these sorry performers under this soggy tent. It meant something to somebody, it must have.

The liquid this time was a deep purple, like burgundy, but it didn't make any difference. Arden seemed to be the only spectator interested in this act. He felt sorry for these people, all of them, in their

ill-used, overused outfits, trapped by some perverse luck in this shabby circus, trying to survive, trying to find a way out. Neighbors had told him these folks came from abroad, somewhere in eastern Europe, Bulgaria maybe, wherever that was. That's why they traveled a third-class circuit, visiting podunk towns like this one.

The show was over, and people were vacating the seats. Arden and the two boys left the tent and began walking to his car. It was now dark and the rain had quit. They all seemed a little depressed, for different reasons. A soft drink concession was still open outside, and Arden stopped to buy a Coke for each of them. The boys downed theirs pretty fast, but Arden didn't. He looked pensively at that dark liquid in the glass bottle.

He poured the Coca-Cola slowly out upon the sodden ground. It was, in his tired eyes, an offering, a sacrifice to the gods, as it were, on behalf of all those ragged figures getting ready to pull the tent down and move on to the next small, unimportant town. It was for all the unspoken, barely endured lucklessness and misfortune of the earth. He heard hammers already pounding and prizing up some of the stakes.

Arden stopped just before the bottle was empty. He stood there a moment and took a deep breath. The last tiny bit then trickled out on behalf of a helpless small elephant, a fellow sufferer with us all, in a way, who would die in the night, Arden was sure of it. *This is for you, my poor abused friend.*

The boys looked up at him curiously, and they went on.

