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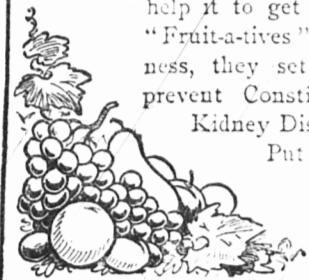
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THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

In the Grip of Environment

By HENRY WINTHROP

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Jim Blakely, the clown, came dashing out of the ring into the dressing tent and stopped short. Nellie Cosgrove was sitting on top of the leaping pad, her usually merry eyes streaming with tears. Beside her stood a man looking exceedingly awkward and uncomfortable.

Circus folk are always resentful of the intrusion of the outside world into their domain, and the fact that this stranger wore a frock coat and an exceedingly shiny hat was all that was needed to convince Jim that he was the cause of Nellie's tearful eyes. He strode up wrathfully, his painted face in ludicrous contrast to the intense tones of his voice.

"See here," he said fiercely, "this isn't any place for an outsider, least of all for a bloomin' dude what comes in and insults one of our girls. If you don't get out of here quick you'll be sorry for it, and I won't have to call any 'Hey, Rubel' to do it."

Spangles, the Great Dane, that did a pad riding act as well as leading a

troupe of trained dogs, pricked up her ears knowingly and rose to her feet. "Hey, Rubel!" the circus war cry from time immemorial, was no new sound to her, and she looked affectionately at the left leg of the stranger's carefully greased trousers, deciding that a spot about four inches below the knee would be the strategic point for a grip.

Nellie raised a hand. "Don't, Jim!" she said plaintively. "He hasn't said anything to me. It's just that they want to take me away."

"Take you away!" he cried incredulously. "Why, you've been with the old show ever since you were a little kiddie, ever since your ma died of yellow fever in Rio, and we picked you up the next season. That was way back in 1892, and you were a little shrimp of twelve. Take you away! I'd like to see the man who'd try it!"

"It's the money," she explained despairingly. "I'm an heiress, and this gentleman is the lawyer. He wants me to go back to New York with him tonight."

For a single moment Blakely's frame grew rigid. The lawyer, a keen observer of men, followed clearly the mental strain the circus man was undergoing. He could see what the girl had never seen, that this man with the uncouth mask of zinc and carmine loved the little rider, and in the brief struggle he read the fight of an honest man with his own desires. In that short space Blakely made his fight. When he spoke his voice was cold and commonplace.

"We always said," he commented, "that your mother's people must be of the right sort. I'm glad of it. Work with the tents isn't for such as you." Then he turned, but more than the makeup came off the towel as he hurriedly changed his face for the dog act.

As one in a daze he put his pets through their paces, and after the show was over and the concert audience was slowly filing into the show lot he still went about his work as though in a dream.

He had loved and watched over Nellie ever since that time in Rio Janeiro when, "way back in 1892," they had picked up the little slip of a girl, the sole survivor of a circus troupe which had played through South America the season before.

He had known Frank Cosgrove well, a fine, gentlemanly fellow, who had run off with an English girl when her parents had objected to her marrying the "riding master" of an English caravan.

They had come to America to escape memories, and she had taken up with circus life as willingly as though she had not been reared in luxury. It was Blakely who had persuaded Delmore to take the girl into the troupe, and it was he who had completed her education as a rider. Before a broken leg compelled him to take to clowning he had been a wonderful bare-back somersaulter himself.

He had hoped some day to make her his wife when the nest egg in a city savings bank had grown large enough to warrant the purchase of a country place and assure a competence when they should have retired. Until then he had spoken no word of love, but rather had encouraged her to look upon him as her foster father.

Now he was to lose her and all that he had planned and worked and saved for. But it was best for her—that was enough for him.

He took no part in the ring bank chat after supper. He had no heart to sit there about the bank and hear the comment that would be made about

the good fortune, and he went out back of the dressing tent, and, lighting the short stub of a pipe he carried, blew great clouds of smoke into the soft evening air, as he tried to think what the circus would be on the morrow, with no little Nell to make every one merry.

There in the soft light that came through the tent she found him. Out from all was life and movement. Here they were practically alone. She slipped down beside him on the overturned manger and slipped her hand into his. His horny palm closed over her tiny fingers, and he put away the pipe, but gave no other sign. It was she who opened the conversation.

"I feel like a dream girl tonight," she began confidingly. "Don't you remember how we used to plan that if we ever got money we would start a show of our own, and only have in the company people we really liked and make them do only one act apiece?"

He laughed shortly. "It's funny what rot we think. Now you've got the money, you've got to go and live up to it. It would never do for an heiress to ride in the ring."

"I don't want to go a bit," she protested. "This is the life I know and love. I want to stay here and be myself, not another girl all dressed up, with servants and all that sort of thing."

He turned on her sharply. "See here, Nell," he commanded. "Don't talk like that. It's hard work doing two acts twice a day. It's not for you, my girl. Make up your mind to that."



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