

June
1953

Reader's Digest



25¢

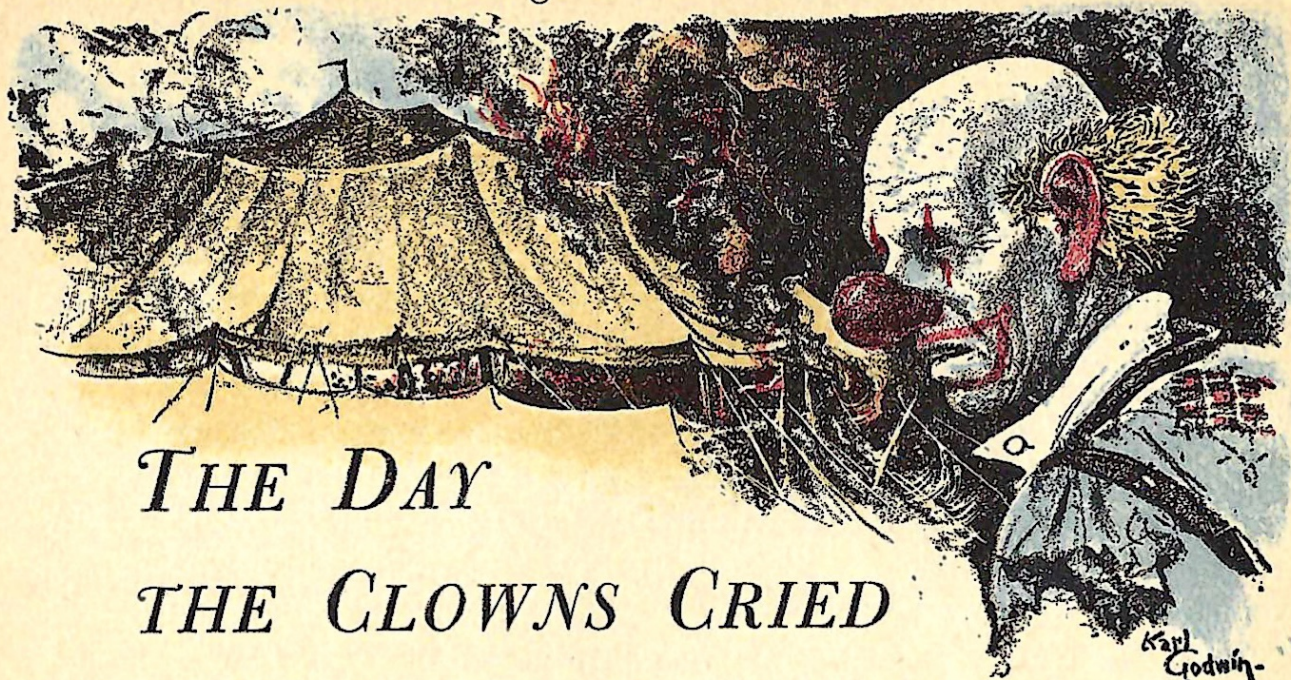
ARTICLES OF LASTING INTEREST	32nd YEAR OF PUBLICATION
A Little Piece of Light	<i>Christian Herald</i> 1
Are You Overdosing with Antibiotics?	<i>Today's Woman</i> 5
"Your Guns Go with You"	<i>Life</i> 8
Marriage Has Improved	<i>Redbook</i> 13
A Labor Editor Says—	<i>Union</i> 16
Man Closest to the President	<i>Stanley High</i> 17
Suckers in Paradise	<i>Saturday Evening Post</i> 21
What Is the Limit of Your Mind?	<i>Your Life</i> 25
Skyrocketing Cost of Air Power	<i>Wolfgang Langewiesche</i> 29
McEvoy in Commencement-Land	<i>J. P. McEvoy</i> 35
Come into My Garden	" <i>My Summer in a Garden</i> " 37
He Borrowed Time to Help People	<i>Christian Herald</i> 41
Life in These United States	44
Inside Nowhere: The Sahara	<i>John Gunther</i> 47
Rosemary and Her Records	<i>Time</i> 52
Negro Soldiers on the First Team	<i>Freeman</i> 55
The Day the Clowns Cried	<i>T. E. Murphy</i> 59
"Free Trade Is Inevitable"	<i>Fortune</i> 63
Common Sense on Summer Sun	<i>James Monahan</i> 67
They Made a Living Dike	<i>Trouw</i> 70
What the Doctor Can Do About Alcoholism	<i>Lois Mattox Miller</i> 73
TV—A Minority Report	<i>Harper's Magazine</i> 78
Buckingham: Palace of the Queen	<i>New Liberty</i> 85
The Real Voice of the People	<i>Lion</i> 92
The Obstreperous Owls of Hammel	<i>Fickjournalen</i> 100
He Carried Hope in His Saddlebags	<i>Christian Advocate</i> 103
Eat a Bigger Breakfast—and Be Thin	<i>Collier's</i> 107
Goggle's Adventures with Words	<i>Bentz Plagemann</i> 109
Mighty Mouse: It Guards America	<i>Newsweek</i> 112
Rocky Mountain Roving	<i>Donald Culross Peattie</i> 114
No Charity Frauds in Los Angeles	<i>Frauds and Answers</i> 119
New Roads to Mineral Abundance "The Road to Abundance"	121
Expense-Account Aristocrats	<i>Life</i> 127
Something Cooking in New Haven!	<i>Everywoman's Magazine</i> 132
Malenkov: The Machine That Walks Like a Man	<i>Andre Visson</i> 137

Book Section } Bright with Silver . . . *Kathrene Pinkerton* 145

Personal Glimpses, 40—Picturesque Speech, 72—Real Life Drama, 81
 Observe Science in Action!, 90—What's New in Rubber?, 97
 First Patrol, 125—Word Power, 135—Index, 163



A man and his small son go to the circus on —



THE DAY THE CLOWNS CRIED

By T. E. Murphy

ON JULY 6, 1944, in Hartford, Conn., the sun rose angry, glowering; the weather prediction called for a scorcher. I did not want to go to the circus, for I knew the big top would be an enormous baking oven. In the sun the temperature was more than 100 degrees. But who can resist the pleadings of a five-year-old son?

We went inside the main tent at 2:10. To get to our seats we had to clamber over steel chutes that sliced through the stands at either end of the reserved-seat sections. These semicircular bands of steel, each nearly four feet high, served as runways for the lions and other wild animals. Crude steps had been erected across each chute. Those who sat in the area between the chutes were flanked by two steel fences. The northern one, farthest

from the entrance, was to become, a few minutes later, the wall against which human waves were to beat themselves to death.

There were very young persons in the crowd, and very old, but only a few in between. There were scarcely any men under 40. (Young fathers and big brothers were fighting in Normandy and Saipan.) Everywhere you looked there were children, brought to the circus by their grandparents or their mothers. They bought soda pop, fans, peanuts. Nearly everyone was laughing.

The circus band played those absurdly loud and stereotyped tunes that we all know but can never identify. Then came the national anthem, and people rose, suddenly somber as they were jerked back to the realities of war.

The serious moment over, the

crowd settled back with a collective sigh of anticipation, to surrender to the mad, improbable doings of the clowns and the wonders of the circus. The latch of merriment was out for anyone to lift. First came an acrobat dressed as a lion; he turned somersaults, cracked his whip and chased 12 girls dressed in scanty yellow dresses. As they disappeared through the exit, the real snarling lions were prodded through the runways. A bear lumbered in from the wings, drinking a bottle of milk and simulating drunkenness. The crowd roared.

The lions were put through their routine and herded back into the steel runways. It was now slightly after 2:30 p.m. The Flying Wallendas climbed up the ladder to their perches overhead. Men were coming out now to move the steel chutes, for soon the big parade of elephants and horses and performers would be pirouetting around the ring.

At that precise moment a brisk wind blew in from the southwest, and the man who had been assigned to watch for fires at the southwest end of the canvas left his water buckets and went over to the other side of the tent — he was afraid the men taking down the steel runways would jar the jacks holding up the seat sections. He felt that the new man assigned as fire watcher on the other side wasn't competent to guard against possible seat collapse.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the canvas top that had been,

according to tradition, impregnated with paraffin to waterproof it. The circus authorities had sought to get their top flameproofed, but military priorities had absorbed all the necessary chemicals.

The pieces of the tragedy were fitting into place — the hot, paraffin-filled tent top, the unwatched post, the strengthening breeze.

The men worked fast to break down the steel chutes. A minute later there would have been free passage from one end to the other.

My son, sitting on my lap, was getting warm and I said, "Don't you want to stand up?" I glanced at my watch again; it was 2:40 p.m.

Just then a woman behind me gasped, "Fire!"

It was a tiny flicker of flame a few feet to the left of the main entrance. A man with a shrill voice said, "Take it easy. Take it easy," and people subsided into their seats.

The gray-haired woman in front of me said, "They'll have it out in no time at all," and her husband nodded. But all eyes were riveted on that flicker as it fought for survival. It was tiny — harmless. The untreated side walls of the tent did not burn easily; the flame faltered and a man's hand could have snuffed it out.

Then an incredible thing happened. Lifted aloft by a sudden gust from the southwest, the feeble flame reached the paraffin-treated canvas and burst with lightning rapidity into a wild thing, rampaging across the big top. It leaped and

hissed and roared and showered fiery particles of canvas and rope on a crowd too startled to move.

The human mind does not quickly accept the never-before-seen, the never-before-experienced. As the wall of fire advanced, people filed into the narrow aisles and moved toward the exits. They walked fast but they were not in panic. Even the children were not running. My son, fastened to me monkey-style with arms and legs, said nothing.

We met panic at the steel runway. The old were scrambling heedless of dignity or modesty; a child whimpered as the old bodies slowed the flow of younger ones. Panic grew and I felt a sudden anger at the woman in front of me. Not pity but anger. She was wheezing and clambering. I shifted my son to one side, placed my left shoulder under her ample rump and gave a herculean push. She got over and kept going. From the corner of my eye I saw a woman in a lemon-colored dress in a faint; the man holding her, terror leaping from his eyes, tried to fend off the tide of human flesh. He kept saying, "Give her air." Give her life, I thought.

Death was shouting our names now and we knew it. The pressure of bodies forced my left knee through the steel hoops and I wrenched it free and thought that even losing a leg wouldn't be too bad. I did not notice the gash in my knee for more than two hours.

As fiery fragments fell from above, women screamed and tore at their

hair or flimsy summer dresses. Somebody yelled, "The big pole will crash down! Let's get out! We'll all smother!"

When you expect to die perspective fails. As I raced against this fiery enemy I felt merely a curious violent anger that it should be happening to me. "What a foolish, useless way to die," I thought. "At a circus I didn't really want to go to."

At the tent's edge I stopped and looked back. I was safe and my child was safe. Then I was conscious of a loud rasping sound — like the labored breathing of an animal at bay. It was my own breathing as I convulsively sucked in great gobs of air. I had reached down into the deepest layers of my being for the strength and speed to escape.

People were piling up before the runway, reaching and struggling not unlike a horrible travesty of a bargain counter. The clutching hands were reaching pitifully for life that was now beyond reach.

Of the 7000 young and old who walked into the circus that day, 169 died. Another 225 would bear visible scars of disaster and thousands of others invisible scars for life.

Outside, people walked around aimlessly, their faces masked with shock. Many were shoeless, bawling tonelessly the names of children. One woman, her hands raw and bleeding from rope burns, kept saying, "Oh, Christ, where is he? Oh, Christ, where is he?"

It was only 2:45 p.m. then — five minutes since the woman had gasped,

"Fire!" In the distance a siren could be heard. The rest of the world, I thought, has at last heard about us and is coming; we are at the kernel of a tragedy. It is a strange feeling.

I went into a deserted house and used the telephone to call my newspaper and my home. As I came out the big top fell. The big sticks went down like giant trees, to the accompaniment of the sobs and screams of the burned and the bereft. Some, stony-eyed, gazed impassively and unbelievably, but the weeping women sobbed louder, involuntarily.

Now rescue workers, poised at the edge of the smoking debris, concentrated their watery barrage on the small area where the bodies were piled.

The clowns, gravely carrying their futile water buckets, looked tragically silly. One near me was crying quietly; his tears and his sweat had washed away part of his make-up.

The rescue crews began fighting their way through the smoking embers to the screaming half-dead and the silent dead. Beside the cruel metal barriers, warped and overturned, were pitiful mounds of the charred and smoking remnants of those who had been laughing 15 minutes before.

The clown sobbed aloud. For him the circus had died, too.

BUT THE CIRCUS did not die; it came back to play to packed houses and to laughing children. For seven

long years it played to pay its debts of honor: not a single one of the 676 claims against it went to court. In one of the most civilized arbitration agreements in modern history, damages were assessed by three impartial judges and paid down to the last penny: a grand total of \$3,946,355.70.

Ironically, the flameproofing material, jealously allocated on priorities by the Government, was released for use by all circuses just 24 hours after the Hartford fire. It is now used by all circuses as standard procedure. Substantial steel seats have replaced the old rickety stands. And never again will steel runways slice through the middle of the seat sections.

Six years later, in July 1950, Robert Dale Segee, a husky young circus roustabout known to other circusmen as "Little Bob," was arrested for arson by Ohio police. He confessed to three murders and ten arson cases: among them was the Hartford circus fire. On November 4, 1950, he was given two sentences of from two to 20 years each.

"All my life for any little thing I done I was beaten," Segee said. "If you had a bunch of brothers who called you 'dopey' all the time maybe you'd understand. I never had a happy day in my life."

Only infrequently are such bitter penalties paid by society for cruelty; the Hartford fire emphasizes again the truth that no man is an island unto himself.