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WHAT? AND GIVE UP SHOW BUSINESS?

BY JODY LYNN NYE

"Hey, kids, come on in!" Ben Barber called out the oversized door of his sideshow booth. He waved a friendly arm to the passersby. The children and adults shyly sidled in past the sign that said "World's Fattest Man" and stood looking around at the room, their eyes wide.

All the furnishings looked gigantic, but it was really an optical illusion for the paying public. The stuff nearest the door was oversized, but if any of them got close enough to Ben to notice, the chair where he sat enthroned, wearing his bright red suit and yellow necktie, was built to an exaggeratedly small scale to display him as much bigger than he really was. He stood six foot three, but barely tipped the scales at 450.

A couple of teenage girls glanced up at him, and he winked. They giggled and blushed.

"Nice to see you ladies," he said. "Are you enjoying the show?"

"Oh, yes," one of them gasped out. Still tittering, the pair made their way around his "apartment" tableau, gawking at the oversized television, a pair of enormous boxer shorts big enough for Ben and a sumo wrestler to share, and the giant layer cake under a dome on the table. It wasn't edible, of course, being made of a kind of shiny plastic that looked like buttercream. They picked up the huge fork and spoon that lay on either side of the pizza-pan-sized plate set in front of the single, heavily reinforced chair. Ben glanced around at his other guests.

Maybe being a sideshow attraction wasn't the most glamorous job in show business, Ben admitted to himself as he dug a hand into the garbage-can-sized container of peanuts at the side of his chair and pulled up a fistful of nuts, but it *was* show business. One of the little boys stared at Ben's peanut canister. Ben offered him a

nut, but the child turned his gaze at the fat man's stomach and shook his head.

"You're so big!" the boy said.

"One peanut never did all this, kid," Ben said, cracking the shell in his teeth. "Hey, thank you all for stopping by," he called to the people who'd finished their look around. "Come again soon."

They smiled back at him. In the next booth, Fatima the snake charmer, real name Ellen Miller, played with six soporific pythons and a boa constrictor. Act One naturally gave way to Act Two, but Ben hated to see his audience go. He waved as they left.

Ben Barber couldn't remember a time when he didn't want to be on the stage. He loved the attention and the applause. Ever since he was a little boy, he had dreamed of fame and fortune, of seeing his name above the title on a marquee: "Ben Barber, starring in The Great American Movie." Or below the title. Or even somewhere in the credit crawl at the end of any picture whatsoever. He didn't care. He wanted to be someone that people gawked at in admiration, and went away wishing they were him.

The circus had seemed like a good starting place for a career. Ben had taken the spot in the freak show of a ten-man fleabag circus that came through his upstate New York town one summer day. It'd do for him until he got his big break. And then reality landed on him like the guy for whom the boxer shorts had originally been made. There *weren't* any leading roles for a twenty-something man who weighed threehundred-something, no matter how good-looking he was.

Undaunted, he continued to go to every audition for plays advertised by community groups in the towns where the circus stopped. He wanted a role—any role—so badly he could taste the lines in his mouth. They tasted sweet.

The local directors turned him down, with varying excuses. His strong jaw, fine, thick, black hair, and blue eyes with long eyelashes would have been honest-to-God box office under other circumstances, but more, in this case, was not better. Ben didn't stop auditioning, but he began to lose hope.

Once in a while, the Ringman Circus rolled into a town where a film was shooting on location. In between setups, the crews came in to see the show. Ben was thrilled

beyond words when the first live movie cast and crew visited him. He made a lot of friends in the industry, most of whom were sympathetic to his dream. But though he tried desperately to interest them in hiring him, even as an extra, so far no one had given him a shot.

"If you want the truth," one location manager told him privately over a drink after the sideshow had closed for the night, "no one will ever cast from a carnival. Everything looks too shopworn. People in the film biz like everything brand-new—fresh coat of paint, something they've never seen before. Blame Hollywood. They have the idea nothing's good that wasn't thought up just yesterday, if not today, especially if it was their own idea. A circus that's been traveling for fifty years—that's too *old*, too *tired*. Sure, big guys have made it in the industry, but you're *here*, in the show, so you're associated with it. It's too bad."

After the man left, Ben felt depressed, and polished off most of a half-gallon of ice cream. The circus was his means of transportation, as well as his home. If he left, he'd have to start all over again. He'd never run into film people—but he was invisible as long as he traveled with the show. Ben couldn't solve the dilemma, and it nibbled away at his hopes.

As time went by his ambition shrank more and more, until he was almost satisfied working in the sideshow. Almost, but not quite. It wasn't the big time, but it brought in audiences and enough to live on. Still, he wasn't happy.

As his depression grew, so did his waistline. It made him a more effective exhibit, but interfered mightily with his love life. His steady girl, Cara Mia Feldstein, was the show's contortionist, but after he put on over a hundred extra pounds even she called it quits. Now they were just "good friends." Ah, well. His big chair was comfortable, and he had plenty of friends. The crowds still oohed and aahed when they passed through the freak show. He was good-looking, he knew, with strong, broad features. Extra poundage only added to his appeal. Ben had never looked or felt right thin, and he was as strong as the strongman, who had to wear a kidney belt when he performed his feats, after once having ruptured himself trying to pick up five extra pounds. Ben cherished that secret knowledge.

Though this June day was fine, the crowd would remain thin until the schoolkids got out at three. Ben heaved himself up out of his big chair and headed over to gab with Ricky, the head keeper of the menagerie and probably his best friend in the show.

The sky was clear and blue outside the sideshow pavilion. Ben stopped and drew in a couple of bushels of air, enjoying the scent of the circus. Aromas of roasting

peanuts and fresh popcorn wafted by. The ancient canvas and paint smelled sharp and dusty at the same time. The mixed tang of food, makeup, mud, dung, motor oil, and massed humanity was unmistakable. He'd know a circus a thousand years and a million miles away.

"Hey, Ben!" the tattooed man called from his canvas sling chair as he sat under an awning. "Pretty day, huh?"

"You bet. Chuck," Ben said cheerfully. He waved, and headed into the crowd of young adults at the midway, just enjoying the presence of lots of *people*.

He liked the life. There was never quite enough money, but the people stuck together. Ben particularly loved being around the wild animals. Activists picketed the circus in the big cities, but they couldn't see what good care the keepers gave. Everyone in the show saw to that. Apart from natural interest in their well-being, every single performer and roustabout knew that the animals were the circus's bread and butter. Whoever was available when the local anticruelty authority came by gave visitors the grand tour—no hesitation, no questions asked. The cages always gleamed. The male lion, who had been hand-raised, had his rag doll right next to his metal feeding dish.

The camels, bad-tempered sons of bitches, were nevertheless given royal treatment. The tigers had been adopted from another small circus that shut down when the owner died, and had never suffered harsh treatment in their lives. The elephants were gentle, having never experienced anything worse than being stared and poked at for thirty years by rubes all over the continent. They had an exotic history printed on a card hanging near them, but that was hogwash for the rubes.

Only the horses were a little tricky. So delicate. Ben had never ridden one, even in his slimmer days, and regarded them as a kind of curiosity. Their pretty, dappled-white coats and brown eyes enchanted him, and he liked to come and watch them in their pen between shows.

Today, the horses were whinnying uneasily and racing around in circles. Ben didn't think too much about it at first, because they reacted this way to thunderstorms, passing trucks, and the smell of certain fertilizers. Then he heard a rustling sound.

"Hey, Ricky, you in here?" Ben called. The lion, familiar with Ben's voice, stirred only a little. The camels raised their heads. Ben glimpsed something moving and squinted at the shadows.

"Hey there," he said. "Come out of there, huh? No one's supposed to be in here."

Two juvenile voices, probably surprised into acting by his arrival, shouted out.

"Bet you don't do it!" one of them cried.

"You watch—look out!" the other yelled shrilly.

Ben swung around just in time to see the silhouettes of two boys, about ten or twelve years old, riding the top of the corral gate as it swung down on him. One of them was waving an air pistol like Wild Bill Hickok. His finger was on the trigger.

"Wait, don't do that!" he'd started to say when the gun went off.

The horses, startled white-eyed by the report, wheeled and galloped around. In a terrified mass, they broke for the open gate. Ben grabbed one end of it and tried to swing it to, but the weight of the children slowed him down. The boys jumped off and stood to one side, gaping, as the horses dashed for freedom on the midway. Daringly, Ben leaped into the herd's path, waving his arms and shouting. The horses shied off and ran back through the animal enclosure. The camels yanked backward at their tethers, honking their indignation.

Ben rounded on the children.

"You two better not move from that spot, you hear me?" he bellowed.

The boys took off as soon as he shouted, but he had had a good look at them. If they were still on the grounds when the crisis was over, he'd see to it that they got hell for carrying a gun into the carnival. He ran out into the sunlight and put his hands to the sides of his mouth.

"Hey, Rube!" he shouted.

The traditional carnival-man's cry for help echoed down the main avenue. The horses had broken out of the back of the menagerie and were heading up the long field toward the parking lot and the highway. Men and women came running from the tents, the games, and the rides. Chuck jumped on his motorbike and roared out to try and head them off. Ben ran back into the menagerie to help calm the jungle animals down. A couple of the horses had become trapped in between the camels and the elephants. They screamed and tossed their heads. Ben started to sidle into

the midst of them, to pull them out before all hell broke loose.

Ricky, his smart tunic unbuttoned and askew, hurtled into the dim roomful of thrashing, snarling animals.

"What in hell happened?" he demanded.

In a loud but calm voice, Ben described catching the kids behind the corral, all the time moving as close as he dared to the horses. Ricky and two roustabouts started angling toward the horses from other directions. The elephants caught the horses' panic and began rearing, pulling at their ankle chains. The lions, who never left their cages except during the show, roared at the unaccustomed noise.

"Watch it!" Ricky yelled. Ben ducked just as one of the camels darted his head and tried to bite him.

Fatima came in at a jiggling trot, panting under the weight of her prize cobra. The snake had been devenomed ten years ago, but the camels didn't know that. Fatima slithered as neatly as one of her pets next to Ben and shook the snake at the camels. It hissed fiercely and spread its hood, and they backed away, eyes slitted with hatred. Ricky's assistant grabbed first one, then the other camel, and tied their tethers more tightly. They calmed down all at once, as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened.

The two trapped horses were easier to get back into their pen after that. They stood, panting, as the menagerie keepers talked to them gently and offered carrots, sugar, anything to ease them. The roar of an engine outside the tent that made everyone jump heralded the return of the herd, bulldogged by Chuck and Betty, one of the trick riders, who rode astride the lead horse.

The only remaining problem was the female elephant, Sonia. She reared away from anyone who tried to catch her, finally breaking the chain that tethered her right forefoot. The strongman leaped up and held on to Sonia's collar, yanking it and her ear toward the floor. Ben jumped in to grab the chain just as it whipped past his cheek, and held on.

He put all his great strength and weight into it, pulling down, down, down. The elephant jerked several times, trying to throw him, but she lacked the leverage. At last her huge front feet crashed down and she dropped to her knees, almost on top of him. He felt a white-hot pain in his shoulder. He twisted his head around as best he could, and saw Sonia tossing her head as the keepers all descended upon her at once. The ball protecting the end of her tusk had broken off in the confusion, and

he'd been stabbed.

"Bitten by an elephant," Ricky joked as someone ran for the first aid kit. He helped Ben tear off his shirt, which was ripped and soaked with blood.

"Yeah, well, it's the most action I've had from a lady for six months," Ben said good-humoredly. The animal workers got the chain resecured and one of them offered fruit to the elephant, now rolling her eyes in agitation but not panicking anymore.

"We'll keep the menagerie closed tonight," Williams, the ringmaster, declared once Sonia's chain was back in place. "They're already riled up enough. The crowd will only set them off again. Zip it, and put a couple of people on each end."

"Okay, sir," Ricky said with a half-salute. "Well, damn," he told Ben. "I had the place all nice. I was looking forward to having people coming in."

"It happens," Ben told him, slapping him on the back. "Ouch."

"Hey, you take care of that shoulder, okay? Don't over-stress it. Let it heal."

"No problem," Ben said. "I'm going to take a walk around and see if I can't find the brats who did it. That'll make me feel better."

The children were nowhere within the carnival grounds, and Ben figured they must have run all the way to Borneo after he yelled at them. Served the brats right, he thought, easing his sore shoulder in gentle circles.

The rest of the day was good. After dinnertime, the crowds increased until Williams was almost satisfied with the box office takings. Ben had plenty of visitors in his oversized booth, and got to tell a few stories on himself that always got laughs. The attention made his aches feel better.

Ben left the communal mess hall just about twilight. A doctor had told him once that he needed to keep his metabolism up if he wanted to avoid dropping dead of heart failure. Since in his line of work dieting was out of the question, Ben tried to get at least half an hour of exercise every day.

He went at an easy pace to avoid joggling his shoulder. As the sun sank over the

highway behind him, Ben cut across the empty field, heading for the trees. For a place so close to a town, the carnival grounds were remarkably quiet. Ben heard a trill of evening birdsong and the rustle of animals in the brush. There was a small path into the patch of woods, probably carved out by deer. His eyes quickly accustomed themselves to the dark, so that when the moon rose before him, big and gold, the light was almost shockingly bright.

The path petered out into rabbit trails that were far too narrow for him to follow. He turned around. With the help of the moon he retraced his steps and started back across the field to the camp.

The shadow he cast by moonlight was massive. It seemed wider and longer and more rounded than his daylight silhouette, as if the moon were playing a joke on him.

"All right, all right," he said. "I'll try and take off a few pounds. Boy, everyone's a critic."

Suddenly, his limbs felt heavy and weak, and he put his hand to his chest. Was this the heart attack the doc had warned him about? His arms and head became leaden, and he fell forward onto his hands and knees. He had to get back to the trailers. Somebody there could help him. They could call an ambulance, take him to the local emergency room. There was a drug they could give him to prevent damage to the heart muscle. He'd read about it in a newspaper somewhere.

Oh, God, don't let me die out here, he thought desperately, crawling along the ground. Everything looked small and far away. Up ahead, he saw a man in a chair with his feet up on a stump, the smoke from his cigarette rising white above his head. It looked like Glen Nash, the chief clown, who went by the name Pesty.

"Hey, man, can you give me a hand?" Ben whispered. He crawled a few more yards. "I need help. I can't seem to get up." But his voice came out in a kind of shriek. He cleared his throat to try again, and felt a kind of constriction in his chest. He spoke again. The resultant trumpeting sound surprised him, and so did the expression on Nash's face. The black man sprang to his feet and went running for the caravans.

"Elephant's out again!" he shouted. "Hey, Rube! Ricky! Hey!"

Voices started shouting from all over the place, and lights went on in every trailer and every tent.

Elephant? Ben thought, incensed at the remark. He had thought Nash was a friend.

Couldn't he see that Ben was in trouble?

He kept up his slow pace, heading toward the ringmaster's trailer. Williams had a cellular phone. They could have a doctor there in no time.

The moon was playing more tricks, or maybe it was his eyes. Everything seemed so small in the pale silver light. There was a string waving in front of his nose. Maybe it was a weed caught in his hair. He swatted at it weakly with a hand, and was surprised when the blow hurt like hell. The rope was his own nose. His hand fell to the ground and made a noise like thunder. For the first time, he looked down at his hands. His fingers were gone, hidden somewhere underneath nails the size of saucers. His skin had gone leathery, and was an unmistakable shade of gray. He concentrated on making his nose hold still for a moment, and pushed it with one of those treelike hands into his line of vision. He was an elephant? No! It was impossible! Something swatted Ben in the back of his knees. He kept turning around and around, until he was forced to acknowledge that it felt a lot like a switching tail. He *had* to see for himself. Potential heart attack forgotten, Ben lumbered off to the midway to find the house of mirrors. By God, it was true, he thought, staring at his reflection in one glass after another. Talk about "the Elephant Man"—he *was* the Elephant Man. But how?

"Which way'd he go?" Ricky's voice echoed among the empty booths of the midway.

"There he is!" Nash shouted.

Suddenly, Ben was surrounded by oddly miniaturized humans, all grabbing at him, one with a gaff hook and several with ropes. "Come on, guys," he protested. "Don't you know me?"

"My God, how'd she get out?" asked the ringmaster, holding on to Ben's left ear.

"I don't know," Nash said. "I was having a smoke, and all of a sudden she was there, looking down at me."

"Hey," Ricky said, going around behind him, "this isn't Sonia. This is Eddie. Look."

Ben tried to tell Ricky to get away from his backside, but the keeper lifted up his tail, wrenching the end of his spine something fierce, and pointed to his private parts. Ben felt ashamed. In all his years of show business, he'd never been humiliated like this before. The keepers started to maneuver him into the menagerie

tent. Ben fought them, still trying to talk.

"Wait a minute," Williams said as someone nicked on the lights.

The other animals looked up sleepily. "Eddie's here. So who's this?"

"It's me!" Ben said, raising his trunk—his trunk!—and shouting as loud as he could. Eddie and Sonia looked at him speculatively. Eddie, recognizing a larger male, turned away and picked up a bunch of straw to scratch his back with.

Sonia, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by Ben. She stared as Ricky and the others penned him up and attached a long chain to his right wrist. Ben kicked out at them, continuing to protest.

"Whoa, pal. Hey, look at that," Ricky said, tossing a thumb toward his female. "Sonia thinks this fella's cute."

"Well, keep them apart," Williams said. "I'll phone the police and see if the zoo is missing an elephant. See the rest of you in the morning. We've got a show to do!"

In spite of Ben's protests, they left him locked up for the night. He paced up and back, to the end of his chain, trying to figure out just what had happened to him, and what he could do about it.

When he paced past Sonia and her calf, the female stretched out her trunk and ran it softly down his side. Startled, Ben swiveled to look at her. She flirted with her eyelashes and ears at him, and touched him again, in a clearly seductive manner. Ben backed away from her. Undeterred, she *oodled* at him. What worried him most was that he was starting to understand what she was saying: "You're so handsome, and I'm very attracted to you. I'm yours, you virile male."

"Stop!" Ben shouted. One loud trumpet of protest was enough to drive Sonia back into her comer. The calf protested, and Sonia wrapped a protective trunk around it.

"This is all your fault," Ben told the female peevishly, and wondered if she'd understand. "You and your big tusk."

Puzzled, she kept her distance and settled down on her hunkers at one end of the tent, and he did the same at his end. He went to sleep with her curious eye upon him.

He woke up around dawn, and brushed at the weight of chains on his right arm. The straw under him itched like hell. He opened his eyes.

The female elephant was awake, suckling her calf. Both they and Eddie, at the opposite end of the pen, gave him a strange look, and Ben realized he was back to his normal shape again. He was buck naked in the middle of the menagerie tent, but at least he was a human being. Thank heavens, the chain slid right off his wrist.

He glanced out the tent flap. No one was around yet. Though he felt exhausted, Ben ran across the fairway to his trailer, grateful that for once the carnival was devoid of humanity. He put some clothes on and went looking for Ricky. The keeper was asleep in his caravan.

"Hey, Ben, where've you been?" Ricky asked, coming instantly awake. He sat up. "There was this strange elephant came in last night—" "Do you know of anything weird in Sonia's history?" Ben asked, interrupting his friend. "Only the B.S. we feed the punters," Ricky said. "Why?" Ben sighed and sat down. "I've got a strange story to tell you, but only if you can keep it to yourself." He explained his night's adventures. By the time he told about waving his trunk to try and attract Nash's attention, Ricky was laughing like a loon. "You don't believe me," Ben said, crestfallen. "Come on," Ricky said, grinning. "If you've got any of that booze left, I'd sure like some later on." He studied Ben's face, and his expression changed. "No. You believe what you're telling me. Okay. You show me, and I'll believe, too." Ben heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Tonight." "Okay," Ricky said again, thinking hard. "But we gotta clear this with Williams."

"No! Nobody else!" "We *gotta* tell Williams," Ricky said. He swung his pajamaed legs out of bed. "I mean, what if it happened in front of him sometime and you didn't tell him? He'd be pissed enough to make you take a hike."

Ben weighed the pros and cons of revealing his secret to any more people than he absolutely had to, but Ricky was probably right. The ringmaster could be damned arbitrary. Ben had seen him send away a good act because they tried to do some independent advertising. Ben didn't want to think what he'd do to a... a were-elephant.

"All right," Ben said reluctantly. "But you tell him."

"Okay," Ricky said cheerfully. "See you later. Ringman's own unique attraction, a man-elephant! Think of the headlines!" That night it all happened again.

To keep anyone outside the show from seeing the transformation, Ben and half a dozen carefully picked witnesses went into the menagerie tent that evening and secured the flap that faced the highway. Ben stood at the other entrance and waited for moonrise. His palms were sweating and his pulse raced as the moon made its first appearance over the tops of the trees behind the field.

As soon as the pure white light hit him, Ben felt the heaviness coming on again. His lungs expanded mightily, and he fell forward onto his palms, which had thickened and hardened enough to support his new weight.

"See?" he said to his gasping audience, but his voice came out a shrill whinny. Williams, ever imperturbable, turned to Ricky. "So when he got bit by Sonia, it did something to him, eh?"

"That's what it looks like," the keeper said, grinning foolishly. "Very strange," Nash said. "*Very* strange. I've been in this business man and boy, and I never seen anything like it."

"Look out, Ben, she's coming toward you!" Ricky said as Sonia strained mightily at her ankle chain. Ricky grinned wider. "She's in love. You've got a girlfriend." Ben retreated, horrified.

"Look at him!" Fatima said. "Wow! I'd never believe it if I hadn't seen it. The whole world will love it." Williams shook his head firmly. "We can't tell anyone about this." Then he spun on his heel and walked out.

"Why the hell not?" Ricky asked. "He's right, you know," Nash said. "They'd bum us out. Smacks of sorcery." "Real magic," said the Great Rudolfo, the show's conjuror, who had watched the transformation with an expert eye. "He's under some kind of curse. We couldn't explain it."

With difficulty, Ben nodded his great head up and down in agreement. It was happening to him, and *he* couldn't explain it. "Okay," Ricky said reluctantly, "but I still think you guys are missing a bet."

In the morning, Ben awoke on the straw, as tired as he had been the day before. Ricky, who had been sleeping on a chair by the pen, snapped awake and came over to hand Ben a robe.

"My God, that's a special talent you've got there, friend," he said. "You ought to put it to some good use. Does it work only under the full moon?"

"I don't know," Ben said petulantly. "It's only happened two nights."

"It's amazing!"

"I'm a freak." Ben shook his head sadly. "I'll have to go away where no one ever sees me again. Or maybe I should just shoot myself."

"No way, man. Everyone's talking about it. They all want to see it."

Now that Ben knew what was happening, the third night's transformation wasn't so traumatic, and he was able to watch other people's reactions. At first they were scared, frightened, even sickened; then they became fascinated. Circus folk routinely saw the absurd and the terrifying, but this was truly new. They loved it.

Ben found he was enjoying himself. He knew he had a wide streak of exhibitionism; why else was he in the circus to begin with? He nourished his trunk, and everyone gasped. Piece of cake.

"It's wonderful," the ringmaster said, "but we certainly can't tell anyone that he's really a man."

"Maybe not," Ricky said thoughtfully. "But it might do for a few nights a month, if we could feature an elephant as *smart* as a man."

"Elephants supposed to be smarter than humans anyway," Nash said with a wide smirk.

"All right," Williams said, persuaded at last. "We'll try it out."

Ben practiced living in his new body for a few months' worth of full moons, learning how to balance his redistributed weight so he could do simple tricks at first, like headstands, then more complicated ones, such as dancing on his back legs and comedy stunts. Finally he gave Williams the word that he was ready.

On the first night of the full moon in September, Ben tried out his act in the ring with Sonia and Eddie. He had to get past the first moments of being naked in front

of all those people, but then he was fine. He had never heard such applause. He left the ring floating high on the sweet thunderous sound.

The act got good press, but as Williams had predicted, subsequent audiences wanted to see the smart elephant every night, and days, too.

"Impossible," said the ringmaster after he'd sent the sixteenth reporter away disappointed. "I told you so. It's hurting the show. I won't have that happen. It's cut, and it stays cut."

The kids who came to see the elephant were told that he had gone back to Africa to be released into the wild, and that satisfied most of them. Today's kids were savvy, and supported humane treatment of animals. But the newspaper reporters didn't see it that way. They'd been drawn by a possible feature story on the world's smartest elephant, and now gave the show bad reviews out of spite. Bad publicity meant bad box office.

Ben saw the numbers through the turnstile decline, and heard snide remarks from people walking through the sideshow, from both punters and showfolk. He felt responsible. He wished he were dead, that the thing had never happened to him. It had seemed like a wonder that would make him and Ringman's unique. He'd never dreamed that it could hurt the circus.

For a while Ben worried they'd tell him to leave. The way people were avoiding him on the midway and in the mess tent, Ben thought he might quit anyhow, but then he started to think about what would happen to him if he did go. He'd miss the attention, the audiences, the rapport. Just become some unhappy fat guy in an apartment, with people making remarks whenever he got into a subway car. Find a real job, somehow, and spend three to five days of the month *moonlighting* as an elephant. The very possibility threw him into despair.

No! He couldn't just give up show business. So he took the guff the ringmaster handed out, and weathered the snubs with his usual good temper. The sour mood didn't last too long, but everyone remained sensitive on the subject of elephants. To make things worse, Sonia eyed him with longing every time he visited the menagerie to talk to Ricky.

"Stay away from me, honey," Ben advised the female, shaking a finger at her. "You're why I'm in this fix in the first place."

Ringman's set up for a week in a little town in upstate New York. For the first time since Ben's transformation, a movie crew was in the same area. The location manager came in to chat with Ricky in the menagerie, and Ricky sent for Williams. Pretty soon the word was all over the show.

"He wants to borrow an elephant," Chuck, the tattooed man, said, visiting Ben to tell him the news. "He needs one for the movie." "He's *paying*," Fatima said, winding a python around her arm. "For five days. He's taking both Eddie and Sonia, which means the baby, too. Sonia can't leave him."

"Well, what about us?" Ben said. "Kiddies expect to see an elephant when they come." "It's only for five days," Fatima said. "Isn't that great? One of our own, in a *movie*." "Yeah," Ben said with feeling. "Wish it were me."

Two days later, Ricky poked his head into Ben's booth, and beckoned. "Hey, man," he said. "Come on.

Williams sent me. We need you. Redemption. And remember, half for the show, okay?" Puzzled, Ben closed down his exhibit and followed his friend back to the menagerie. He was surprised to see Sonia and Eddie tethered in their places.

"What are they doing back here?" Ben asked Ricky.

The keeper made a shushing gesture and brought him over to Williams, who introduced him to the film's director. "Mr. Warden brought our elephants back," he told Ben. "Yeah," said the man. He was bright-eyed, very thin, and quick-moving, like one of Fatima's snakes. "No offense, Mr. Williams. They needed to perform complicated tasks on command, and they've got minds of their own. Neither one would co-operate. This is a comedy. I need split-second timing for the stunts, and they just can't hack it."

Williams and Ricky both turned to stare meaningfully at Ben. He cleared his throat. "How much did you say you're willing to pay for an elephant who can follow directions?" "Who the hell are you?" Warden demanded, looking him up and down. "Ben Barber. Fat man. How much?"

"Five hundred a day," the man said. "Why?"

Ben put an arm around Warden's shoulders, and started to walk him outside. "I know where you can get the world's smartest elephant," he said. "But the animal only works nights." "What?" Warden asked, his eyebrows rising into his hairline. "It's a nocturnal elephant," Ben explained. "But he can do anything you tell him to, with split-second timing."

Warden's face lit up. "Yeah! Sure! We can rewrite those scenes for night. But he

won't freak out in front of the cameras?" "*Loves* them," Ben assured him. "Great! When's he available?" "The next full moon," Ben said. "Sign me up, and I'll guarantee his appearance." "You're not putting me on, are you?" Wardon said, pulling loose to give Ben a suspicious eye. "My schedule's too tight to screw around with another temperamental pachyderm."

"No problem," Ben said, ushering the filmmaker toward his caravan, with Williams and Ricky close behind. "The, uh, the elephant gets full screen credit, right?" "Oh, sure," the filmmaker said with a wry grin. "What's his name?" "Ben." "Just like you, huh?" "Oh, you can say we have a lot in common," Ben said happily, gesturing to the man to precede him up the steps. "Just make sure you spell the name right, and everything's going to be just fine."