

THE CIRCUS MENAGERIE

EDWIN P. NORWOOD

CHAPTER X

THE MIRACLE OF BIG BILL

I HAVEN'T seen the armored rhinoceros cage anywhere," John said, as he and Ben left Martha to her bath.

"And you won't," Ben replied. "Big Bill died the season after you were with us. Not likely that you would have read of his demise though there were stories about his passing in the Texas papers at the time. Considering his importance, Bill deserved a lot wider notice. But when Bill never did know how to sell himself to the public. Had he been a movie lion or a knife and fork chimp of the kind that you see touring in vaudeville he'd have been copy everywhere. But Bill wasn't spectacular, his only claim to fame being that for more than twenty years he was the only one of his kind in America, certainly the finest specimen of one-horned rhino anywhere in captivity and one of the very few of his genius existing either in or outside of a cage. Perch yourself on that bucket top there and I'll tell you about him."

Ben seated himself on another upturned pail and filled his pipe.

"Big Bill," he began, "was the best head that ever traveled with this or any other menagerie. In fact until he got the asthma the winter before he died he never through his whole life ever gave trouble to anybody. Not that Bill had the kindly eye. On the contrary he had as wicked a pair as were ever mis-set in a cranium. I put it that way because it always seemed to me that a rhino's eyes were screwed in a good half foot off center—'way too far toward the nose. Besides that, as in most of his kinfolks, the eyes were small for his bulk and usually bloodshot, as though marking Bill for being far from what he actually was, namely, a temperate animal of good and regular habits.

"I know what I am talking about because Bill and I were acquainted for twenty years—or from when he first joined out. That was with the Ringling show in the days when, as I've mentioned before, it was a separate concern. I can't say that Bill and I were pals from the start, or for that matter that the friendship was ever anything more than a one-sided affair. For your rhino isn't what you'd call demonstrative. Still I always liked to think that Bill wasn't exactly bored when I'd pay him a visit or maybe bring him an extra apple or an onion. Indeed, I'm sure he never was. He had too much hard

sense for that. In fact, if you can say there are such among animals. Bill was a philosopher. I base that assertion on the observation that right from the start he apparently made up his mind that he was to be a trouper for the rest of his life. He didn't fret, and as one of our two-legged philosophers has said in speaking of himself, 'he ate what was sot before him.' Bill took his meals deliberately, munched well and enjoyed good digestion. Nor did he ever rant around the cage while other animals were being fed or get impatient because he wasn't given the top slice.

"His scoff? Oh, hay, bran, chopped vegetables—Big Bill salad, as we used to call it—alfalfa, of which he was especially fond, and meal. Washed down with plenty of water. It was nothing for Bill to put away twenty-five gallons in a day.

"Bill always had an entire den to himself. Sort of bachelor's hall as you might say, for nobody ever went inside except the boys who swept out the cage. Now in the thickets the average rhino is a tough customer. In fact it may be said that Pickett's stuff at Gettysburg never had anything on a rhino's charge. He can outrun a man. Not, of course, in the short length of a den because it takes a certain distance to shift into high. But you can guess how easy it would have been for Bill to have jammed a man against the wall; especially when he took on his

full weight, which ran close to three tons. But as I've remarked, Bill must have been a philosopher and so probably couldn't see any reason for mussing up his housekeeper. The nudge from a broom was always enough to send him to one end of his quarters while the other end was being swept out. The same was true when now and then his horn got ragged from hitting against the bars and so had to be trimmed down, same as you'd trim the hoof of a horse. Bill always stood for the manicuring.

"Still he wasn't sluggish. At times and even in his old age he was as frisky as a calf. On occasions he would cavort up and down and whisk his short tail and wiggle his hair-fringed ears. At such moments he was a comical sight to see—like a scarecrow suddenly coming to life and deciding to dance. Or, to get nearer to it, like an old retired show horse hearing a band and shaking the bone bag. And Bill wasn't any more light footed. When he pulled one of his hoe-downs he put that big cage of his through a perfect imitation of a veteran passenger coach on a bend when the engineer is late and trying to make up a little time. It used to sway and creak exactly like that. Then Bill would stop as suddenly as he had begun, settle down in one corner, and look no more animated than a bale of hay.

"Lad," Ben continued, "do you know I used to figure that sometimes when Bill danced when the

crowd was here it was because he had been egged on by the fact that folks practically ignored him? Down by the monkey cage you'd see people gathered like folks around a kid show ballyhoo. Looking at what? Looking at monks not worth more than an average of thirty dollars apiece. And there would be Bill, whose owners had turned down an offer of thirty thousand, playing to less than a half-dozen visitors. And maybe one of them saying, 'Oh, look at the hippopotamus!' No wonder that Bill once in a while got the advertising idea through that thickest of all animal skulls of his. Needless to tell you that what Bill thought—if he ever thought at all—is merely to be put down as the ravings of the old duffer who's just now relating his story. Just the same I never heard a man telling a little boy that Bill was a hippo without getting mad clear through. More than once I've contrived to speak out of turn and so managed to set some youngster right and give Big Bill his due.

"Anyhow, such was Bill's fare and fate leading up to the latter part of his life. As he grew older he became subject to colds. But plenty of onions, fed raw, always brought him around. And I'll add in case you think I'm inclined to give Bill too human a twist that he probably didn't eat the onions because he thought they were good for what ailed

him. No, he ate them because he was simply dotty over them at all times. For Bill never had any company manners when it came to onions. He'd sink all you'd feed him—cold or no cold, party or no party.

"I was saying that he always got over his colds. Which is true up until the show was stowed away at Bridgeport in the fall of '26. Then Bill developed one that wouldn't be red-lighted. It hung on and finally turned into what sounded like a switch engine suffering from double asthma. Bill wintered in an apartment a little larger than his traveling den and which was built into one corner of Old Andrew's room. We called the room that at the quarters because besides Bill it was occupied by the spotted girls and Andrew and all of Andrew's personal menagerie. Andrew was supposed to sleep there and since his bed was tucked over in one corner, he no doubt did. But how he managed it, only he can tell you. Because you could hear Bill's breathing pretty near over to the quarters office.

" 'He not so bad last night,' Andrew would say. 'Oh, yah, I get used to noise. I t'ink he better soon.'

"So with Andrew as day and night nurse and the cat barn veterinary as the consulting doc they worked on Bill through the winter. Besides the onions, they gave him hot mashies and cooked meal. I can tell you it was nip and tuck at times. But Bill

was a good patient. He was seldom fussy and always easy to feed. Still the philosopher; and so he pulled through.

"Come spring again and once under canvas with plenty of fresh air, the old boy looked as good as new. I won't say that he was as lively on those occasions when he did show friskiness. Personally I never saw him do the hoe-down again though Andrew has told me that he put on the dance one afternoon just after we got into Texas. He looked well enough when we played Dallas. I recall seeing and talking to him that day—Monday, the twenty-seventh of September. Which was the last time I ever saw the old scout alive.

"That night Bill was bedded as usual, side doors buttoned on and the den tarpaulined. The run was a short one—thirty miles to Fort Worth—so we were in early and the cages in the menagerie a bit sooner than in the average stand. But getting opened up an hour or so earlier than usual didn't mean anything to Bill. Because when the shutters were taken down the boys found him dead.

"I wasn't present," Ben went on after he had thumbed the tobacco into his brier, "but they say it looked as though he had passed out only a little while before. He was stretched on his side in the hay and while he had bled from the nose there was nothing to indicate a struggle. At the age of

twenty-two years, which is a prime one for a rhino, and after having trouped upward of a half-million miles, Bill had died as he had lived—without giving trouble to anybody.”

“Did you bury him there?” John asked.

“On the contrary he was never buried at all. To tell the truth after his death a sort of miracle happened to Bill: meaning that he turned into two rhinos where there’d been only one before.”

Ben paused and from his bucket top eyed John in solemn silence.

“The truth, so help me. But before I get on with that part of the story we’ve got to go back a few years. You’ve been in the Field Museum here in Chicago?”

“Three times,” John said.

“And like as not heard of the Museum of Natural History in New York. Now you know that we open at Madison Square Garden every spring and during the weeks we’re in town there’s always sure to be callers from the American Museum. Some of its staff and our bosses are mighty close friends. Especially around the animal department for of course it’s that part of the trick that interests them most. To see our boys and a couple of profs hobnobbing in front of a cage and discussing this and that about some particular animal, you’d never guess unless somebody told you which was the duck with

a ten-car show of D. Z.'s hooked to his name and which with nothing but an M. S.—meaning 'Mud Showman'—coupled to his.

"A cracking fine lot of men, those docs," Ben declared, "and though maybe you wouldn't think it, every bit as fond of a live animal as they are of a dead one that's ready to stuff. Still they always have an eye peeled for the main chance and so there had for a long time been an understanding that if anything ever happened to Big Bill they were to have him.

"So to get back to Fort Worth, it wasn't an hour until a telegram was on its way to the American Museum. In less than another an answer came back and I can tell you it was a regretful one. For of course a man would have to be sent to handle the body and as it turned out they had no field men available.

"Well, for a time it looked—just as you've suggested—as though Bill would be buried right there in Fort Worth. Then Carl Hathaway got the hunch that maybe Peabody Institute might want Bill—you know, the big museum located at Yale. Off went another wire and before noon there came a reply from New Haven that read something like this:

" 'Want Bill by all means. Can you ice body? If so will send man by first train.'

"Ice him!" Ben repeated. "A large order for a carcass the size of Bill's. But Carl Hathaway always was friends with emergencies. So the first thing he did was to find out from where the show was getting the cold stuff that day and in a couple of cat winks it had been fixed for the Texas Ice Company to take charge of the remains. A truck did the rest and by midafternoon Bill was stretched out over a half-dozen blocks of ice with a lot of the loose stuff packed in around him, and an answer shot to Peabody reading:

" 'Bill in cold storage at Texas Ice Company plant, Fort Worth.'

"Back comes the reply, 'Many thanks. T. A. James leaving for Fort Worth this evening.'

" 'Why, that's Tom James,' Carl said, and of course most of us who'd ever been around the Bridgeport quarters knew Tom James. For Bridgeport and New Haven being but a few miles apart he'd often been a visitor and skinned more than one animal that had passed on to the happy feeding grounds.

" 'Tom will make a good job of it,' everybody said. And he did. I wasn't there to see him at work. Don't believe I'd have cared to be. And anyhow, Fort Worth being a one-day stand we were up in Oklahoma by the time Tom got to Texas. Months afterward he told me about those three days and

the most part of that many nights spent in the ice house. For he had to work right where Bill lay.

“ ‘It wasn’t exactly like being at the pole,’ Tom said, ‘yet on the other hand you wouldn’t have called it a balmy atmosphere. Further than that the difficulty was increased by the fact that the hide and flesh had frozen inward to a depth of four inches. On top of this I experienced much trouble in getting anyone to help me. I’d hire first one and then another man until I’d tried out three or four; but after an hour or so they would one by one drop out. Finally along came a colored boy. I recall that I contracted to pay Sam five dollars a day and to make sure of him I promised him a bonus if he would see me through. He stuck like a soldier and with him for a helper I removed the hide, dismembered the skeleton, and cleaned the bones. I never handled an animal that gave such an impression of dead weight. The packing was no small chore in itself for when we weighed the cases for shipment to New Haven the weight was found to be exactly one thousand and seventy-eight pounds. But through the whole job Sam proved a trump. I’ll always remember what he said when I paid him off.

“ ‘ “If you-all ever got another one of them rhinohipposus to skin I’ll be right here, Mister James.”

“““Sam,” I answered, “there just isn’t any other.””

“And Tom James was right,” ended Ben, “for there never will be another Bill. He had a spirit and a personality all his own.”

“But about making two rhinos out of him,” John reminded. “You said that——”

“I did,” Ben assented, “and I meant it. Go to Peabody Institute to-day and you’ll see Bill there, standing just as I’ve often seen him in his den. Only what you’ll find won’t be all Bill but just his shell. Inside—though naturally enough you can’t see it—he’s chock-a-block with stuffing. Not a bone left. Then shift your gaze a bit to the right and you’ll see Bill’s skeleton. And both are rightly enough labeled, ‘Big Bill.’”