

You Get Pains at the Circus

SOME parents are born circus-goers, others have circus-going thrust upon them. I accepted the inevitable with impressive reluctance, finding myself almost the only one of my acquaintance who had not yet taken the kids. I was thus able to benefit from others' previous experience.

"Whatever you do," said my neighbour, "take cushions. And rugs. Such a cold draught at the back."

Written for "The Listener"
by M.B.

"Get up high," said my sister-in-law. "Otherwise the children won't be able to see past the people on the canvas who will kneel up when they're supposed to sit down."

"Get there early," said the butcher.

"It's a much better show in the evening, lidy," said the man who was feeding the elephants on one of our frequent preparatory visits to the grounds. "More for your money, like."

"Get the 8/- seats," said my husband's offside at the office. "In the six bobs all you can see is the backsides of the elephants." * * *

WE did as we were told. We got there early, our two eight-and-tennies and two halves safely pocketed. But we had reckoned without the elephants and the menagerie, lurking, like Scylla and Charybdis, on either side of the entrance to the Big Top. It was almost eight when we presented our tickets to the uniformed guardsman at the head of the lane, and, dripping rugs and wrapped toffees at every step, followed the attendant. Only the lowest rung of eight and tennies was empty. "Higher up," I said firmly. We swept on, to end up on the canvas in front of the six and eight-pennies.

"It could have been worse," I said brightly, swaying my neck from side to side to see beyond the mast in front. We were almost next to the band, who was even now tentatively spinning his

cymbals and dusting off his drum, waiting his cue from the loudspeaker van drawn up beside him. The air was rich with expectancy. All eyes were fixed on the Ring, fenced 12 feet with stout steel bars. Alarum Without. Enter Madame Kovar, booted, but not spurred. And from their cage debouch the Lions, five of them, all positively bouncing with *joie de vivre* and animal spirits. She cracks

her whip, makes threatening gestures with the rod. The lions pad happily round the ring, leap to their appointed

stools, snarl obediently when tapped on the nose.

"Exactly like the M.G.M. one!" cooed the Woman in Front ecstatically.

It's a very good act. The lions form pyramids, line up, paws on a bar, to be jumped over, scarcely batting an eyelid when the jumper lands heavy-pawed on a colleague's shoulder by mistake. One lion refuses to lift his paws at the word of command, and a slanging match ensues between animal and trainer.

"She doesn't dare take her eyes off them," says the Man Behind. The four carnivores sitting neatly on stools behind the trainer fail to seize their strategic advantage and the act moves without mishap to its successful conclusion. Safely caged, the lions are borne away, and Madame Kovar, lioness now herself, takes a tremendous ovation.

"Mummy, where have the lions gone?" asks the little girl beside me.

"Outside," says her mother. "But look, dear, see the pretty lady on the ladder."

"To have their dinner?" asks the child.

"Yes, dear. Look, she's hanging by one foot."

"Could I do that, Mummy?"

"No, dear, you've just had it." * * *

I AM impressed by the smooth staff-work of the performance. The pretty ladies have filled the audience's eye long enough for the unobtrusive men in blue (with red trimmings) to remove the iron railings, the stools and steps, and to set up a simple domestic scene (gramophone couchant surmounted by vase with geranium rampant) for the comic interlude. The clown is wigged, busted and hustled, and this is slapstick and custard pie at its most literal. The children (of all ages, to quote the Ringmaster's prologue), love it. * * *

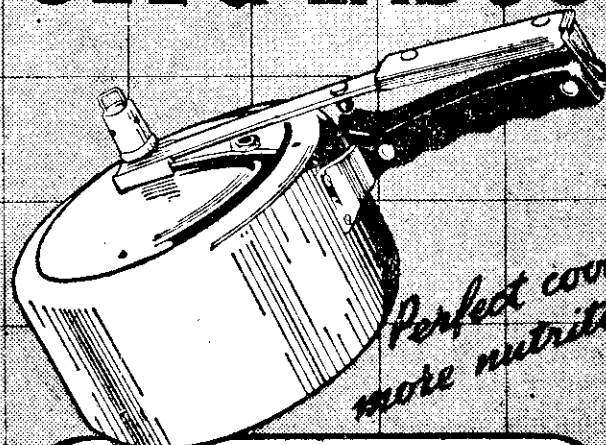
MY husband's colleague was quite right about the elephants, but it is something to have seen even the rear view of three elephants forming a triumphal arch for the fourth to crawl through, and the profile of an elephant walking a "tightrope," to say

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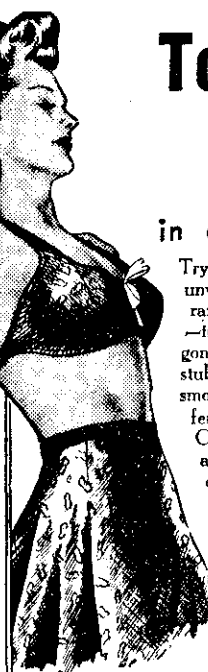
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