

Saturday, in the sorghum patch, with the last of the syrup bubbling and thickening in the evaporator, its sweet odor and the blue smoke of glowing logs floating far in the frosty air, old Washington Todson fell into a slumber. He heard abstractedly such fragments as: 'Thirty camels!' Or, 'A hittamuspot-tamus big ez Sam's barn!' Or, 'Yes, sirree; kin eat glass an' swaller snakes same's ye chew terbacker!'

And broke in: 'How're ye boys goin' to this yere Aggravation?'

'Jim Pyot's waggon. Before sun-up, Monday.'

'Guess I'll go with ye. Ain't been to a show sence before the war. Maw'd think it plumb foolish; but she needn't to 'spicion it 'tell after. She'll allow I'm a-goin' halfway with ye up to the cattle range.' A grin passed about, but it was a grin of sympathy.

By lamp-light on Monday morning Mrs. Todson was stirring, and quickly and quietly preparing breakfast pone and coffee, and watching her husband's departure. 'Keep thet comforter round yer neck, Paw. Thar's a heavy frost. Don't let him forgit his dinner-pail, boys, when he leaves ye at the cross-roads.' She took her own breakfast, cleared up, and went out to the spring for more water in the cold and solemn day-break silence. Various waggons creaked past in the semi-darkness of the road below; and now and again a shrill, childish voice came up to her in unwonted holiday note. She sighed and wrinkled her patient brow as she began, amid crow and twitter of awakening bird-life, to sweep her porch.

Then there rattled and grumbled up to her door a waggon drawn by a big mule and having chairs inside, and she made out in the dimness the miller, his wife, and their three rosy boys.

'We're a-goin' to the show,' said the wife. 'We want ye to go with us. We got a extry ticket along o' havin' so many bills pasted on the mill.'

'Me! Me!' cried Mandy Todson. Then the great, immemorial reaches of mountain to front and rear smote her with a sense of solitariness, new and strangely depressing. 'Paw'll be away all day,' she faltered. 'I ain't never allowed to do sech a thing—'

'Twon't cost ye a cent,' urged the miller, 'I been a-hearin' ye ain't never seen a show.'

'Wait for me, then.' She was gone but a few moments and returned in clean calico, carrying a bag of apples. 'The sweet kind,' she explained, as she settled into her chair and the mule jogged on. 'The boys 'll like 'em.' She sighed again, unconsciously, when the chubby youngsters gave shy thanks.

The miller, after a look toward his wife, essayed with the instinctive tact of these folk, to drive away his guest's painful thought of another son absent and silent these many years. 'Thet thar Mounseer Alcide!—it was Alcide on the bills!—ye think he kin reelly fly?'

'Tain't accordin' to natur'!—cautiously—but I ain't a-sayin' he kain't. Puts yer head a-whirlin' like a mill-wheel—all them meracles Jim Pyot's been a-tellin'.'

'We'll soon see,' said the miller; which reflection heartened all to such visible enjoyment as the self-contained mountaineer permits himself. They jolted over stony stretch, or strained uphill, or splashed through ford in the wake of a motley string of rusty waggons, reinforced in number at each cross-road; and, finally, at the town's approach, by similar processions from the country-side everywhere. Stolidity itself was not proof against such posters as these on the Court House walls; such sounds as joyous braying of brass bands; such sights as an elephant drinking from the creek like any common farm-horse—a kangaroo stretching his neck unconcernedly above a humble plank fence! One of the miller's boys fell out of the waggon, and was rescued from under the feet of a camel of the desert. The lion in a gilded chariot roared and a leopard answered. The children were dazed and mute with joy; the parents fustiously self-conscious; with the quiet little old woman with them was noticeable anywhere, so erect her small figure, so keenly comprehensive her observation of wonders undreamed of, so carefully hidden under decent reserve her amazement and excitement.

'Seems like a sin to be here 'thout Paw,' she said to the miller's wife; then she turned to watch some restless jaguars, and near the cage there stood her husband, and in dumb surprise they gazed each at the other.

'Please my gracious Lordie's earth!' ejaculated Jim Pyot, who was a church member; and again a grin passed around his company, this time one appreciative of a situation.

Washington Todson was the first to regain the readiness which had distinguished him as a soldier long ago. 'Let's hurry in,' said he to his wife.

The miller pushed a ticket into his hand. 'We kain't git seats together. You take keer o' Mis' Todson.'

So the old couple climbed the wooden tiers by themselves, and found a place in the heterogeneous crowd that filled the great tent from canvas to canvas.

'I'd a-brung ye ef I'd a-thought ye'd a-come,' muttered Paw presently.

Most likely she imagined that he had only yielded to temptation at the cross-roads, for she answered simply: 'I'm powerful glad to find ye. I was worryin' for ye. I ain't never been to sech a place before.'

The clamorous blare of herald trumpets drew her notice, and in shimmer of tinsel and waving of silken banners and prancing of long-tailed horses came trooping in a brilliant procession. More than half a century of years slipped from her spirit and she straightway entered the children's Country of Delight, as unsophisticated as one of them. Her small, work-hardened hand touched his, massive and bony, and he was included in her enjoyment. These wondrous, glittering knights and ladies, and dazzling fairies, and graceful steeds which had never seen a plough, emerged for her thrilling from some shining world afar, from which she had ignorantly dwelt. She was a good rider herself, going often even now on bareback horse across the lonely mountain ranges, to salt the cattle. But to fly over twelve or more racing coursers, leap through hoops and over scarves and perch again infallibly—that was riding to make one gasp! The elegant gentleman in tall silk hat, cracking his whip, she considered to be rather hard on the grotesquely-painted clowns, though these she privately pronounced 'plumb fools,' and only through sympathy smiled when her husband twinkled and chuckled over their jokes.

'Shucks! they ain't a-goin' to git hurt,' he reassured her, when she shut her eyes at some trapeze performance, and again as the lion-tamer handled his uncertain pets. But equestrians, acrobats, trained animals, orchestral music, made such panoramic joy as furnished retiring place for her spirit in all the years that remained.

'No, we don't want no chewin' gum,' Paw would say to the peddler during intermission, 'but send thet thar feller with the lemonade,' or 'peanuts,' as it might be. For this was an occasion for doing things royally, and Maw recognised it too.

'Ef we ain't got no teeth, others hez,' she remarked placidly, sipping her rosy drink, 'git some gum for the miller's boys.'

Pleasures being like poppies spread, cannot in their nature endure forever, and there must be an end to even a 'Mammoth Aggregation,' though it be 'the Greatest in the World.' With dismissing clash and bang and roar and clang of cymbal, drum, bassoon, and triangle, the giant tent gave forth its thousands, jostling, chattering, dispersing. Escaping dismemberment from side-shows, the mountain couple found themselves rumbled and blinking in the outer air.

'Biggest Giant on Earth,' she read wistfully on a sign.

'I ain't got a cent left,' he answered regretfully.

Then there was sudden wild shouting and stampeding, and in terrorised rush the crowd drove them with it. 'Screams here' and there reached them: 'Look out! He's loose! The bear—the bear!'

'Well,' said old Washington Todson calmly, 'what they skeered of ef he is? Ain't we seen him dancin' to the man's fiddle?'

'It's a wild one, you woodenhead!' cried a flying drummer in a plaid suit.

'I'd like to hit thet feller,' said Paw quietly, but his careful gaze overlooking the intervening throng sought the centre of disturbance.

There where the great grizzly had actually escaped by reaching and lifting the iron bars of his cage, he was now hurling himself through the canvas into a crowd of farmers' families flying for their lives to shelter. Through the grounds he came, growling savagely and rushing at various scattering groups. Almost in his path was a gentleman, president of a hunting and social club, known to the neighborhood as 'The Bear Killers.'

Two of the showmen and three keepers in pursuit yelled wildly to this gentleman, 'Stop him! Stop him!'

'I haven't lost any bear,' he answered without pause, and took instant refuge in a tall windmill tower.

Hither and thither went the furious animal chasing the people into buildings and up on trees and fences. It was very probable that at any moment the ludicrous would change into tragedy. Accident had brought his farm helpers in their flight near Washington Todson, and Jim Pyot had picked up a rifle somewhere.