Winter 1959

The Ladder

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol5/iss1/12
THE LADDER

Bob Ford

I

Sammy left the crowded chow tent and walked in the bright warm sunshine toward the rear of the circus lot. The sounds and smells of the circus set up a friendly barrage on his senses. The warm colors of red, orange, and yellow were intensified by the strong morning sunlight and people spoke to him as he made his way through the litter of sideshow tents and concession stands. As he passed the popcorn stand, the wizened figure of Joseph appeared from below the counter.

"Cot mornin' to ya, Meester Sammy, Cot mornin'."

Sammy turned and leaned over the counter. No one ever passed the popcorn stand without stopping to talk to Joseph. Joseph was as much a part of the circus as the poles in the big tent. He had been there as long as anyone could remember and his smiling leathery face had set the character of the circus for decades. His brown eyes had watched many of the younger men come and go. Joseph was very old.

"Mornin', Joseph." Sammy tried to brighten.

"What'sa da matta, Meester Sammy, you don' looka so good to Joe dis mornin'? Wheresa da beeg happy face?"

"That damn kid who thinks he's a manager wants to see me. It's the third time this week. He thinks I'm too old for the act. He says old clowns are a liability to the show. Damn fool never saw my act. He never saw the kids' faces. All he can think about is dollars and cents and how much it will cost if I get hurt."

"Datsa right, you gotta da top billing, Meester Sammy. Watsa he think who he is? Don' he reada da poster? Don' you worry, you come maka popada com with Joe. Datsa cot job."

Sammy turned again and started away from the stand. He was a star. Certainly he was a star, not even Joe denied that. Who was that smart young kid to order him to the office like a trained puppy? Anger rose in Sammy and he purposely kicked at a pile of neatly coiled rope sending the coils into a tangled mass. Let that damn manager sort out that mess. Stinking rooustabout work was no more than the snot-nosed kid deserved. Keep him out of important peoples' hair. The morning sun had become angry and the heat was hot and unfriendly on Sammy's neck and shoulders. That's what that damn kid deserved. He ought to be a stinking rooustabout and coil rope and drive stakes all day. Garbage duty would be too good for him. Let him go up and down the roads putting up Sammy's posters. Putting up Sammy's posters—yes, that would be the perfect job for him. Then he'd know what greatness meant.

There were gold scrolls on the frosted windows of the manager's office and gold lettering. The truck stood importantly at the back of the lot and the water on the roof steamed in the early morning sun. There was no activity around the office, only the water steaming up into the bright sunshine.
Sammy entered and stood looking at the long littered room. Papers and letters covered the battered desk and filled the waste basket standing at its side. The dark room smelled stuffy and close. There was the odor of old paper and spilled ink. The room looked tired.

The manager glanced up with a weary grimace. He was a small youngish man who looked underfed. Sammy felt repulsed as he looked at the man. There was nothing of the artist about him, no life. He was just as dead as the spilled ink and the old rotting paper. He was like an ink pen dressed up to represent a man in a store window; all he could produce was lines on a piece of paper. Sammy controlled his voice. "What do you want to see me about this time, worm."

"Sammy, I'm going to try to be nice about this. I wish you'd let me."

"Oh, you're going to try to be nice to me? Well, tha's nice. I'm so very glad to hear that. I was really quite worried that you wouldn't be nice to me this morning."

"All right, I tried. After the show tonight you'll have to hand in your resignation. You're not producing. Our attendance is the lowest it has been in years . . . Is that how you wanted me to say it?"

Sammy looked at him blankly for a moment. His mind froze into a tight hard ball from which no thought would come. Slowly the truth of the preceding week began to seep into his understanding.

"Wha . . . What about my contract?"

"Sammy, that contract is going to be worth nothing unless we can get people into the show who can produce. We're almost bankrupt."

"No more posters . . . what . . ."

"I'm not asking you to leave, Sammy, we'll always be able to find work for you on the lot, you know that. We take care of our people."

"Yeah, worm, you take care of your people. You always take care of your . . ." Sammy felt for the door with the frosted glass window and the gold lettering. The tears in his eyes blurred his vision. Big man . . .

II

Sammy reached for the bottom rung of the rope ladder and looked out into the vast emptiness of the tent. The cavernous darkness varied in shades from the blackness of the upper reaches to the grey formlessness of the center ring. Ropes and guy wires strung their spider-like webs at him, making long fingers pointing into the upper blackness. The bleachers formed solid rows of ebony arranged into squares and cubicles like a Picasso painting. The rope ladder reached up into the blackness and out of sight with each of its rungs a station on the way to oblivion. A rat scurried its way across a corner of the tent taking with it all forms of life and human activity. Human emotions too, and frailties, and hurt, and joy—these left with the rat. Its furtive scratchings finally receded into the night leaving the tent a huge dim nothing merged within by shadows of grey oblivion.

The ladder swayed in the silence and music came stealthily in under the entrance-way and seeped through the heavy canvas. The
harsh breath of a calliope ruptured the silence with its eerie meaninglessness. The tired machine was playing a waltz in a hectic three-quarter time. Strained through the heavy tent its music became not a waltz but the caricature of a waltz with figures attached to strings doing erratic dances in a side-show. There was a Barker with a cane shouting to pay a dime and be herded in with the rest of the people. Later, when the figures had gone through their motions, the people would come out dazed and disillusioned, wondering why they had paid their dimes. Why had they? Why had he? Oh, he'd paid his all right, anyone could see that. Right up to the manager, straight to the big man, with the dime in his grubby, sweating fist. Straight to the man, the great big man... That was twenty years ago, now the dime was tarnished. It was old and all used up. It was no good to anyone now, so take down the posters, move on, make way for the next herd if you can't produce. Grab a tent stake. Produce! Produce what? Produce nothing...? Sammy paused in his climb and listened. The ladder swung back and forth with the creaking from above keeping loose time with the waltz.

Sammy wondered if anyone had ever looked at him during his ludicrous gambolings and seen the strings. Maybe the ruffles had hidden them. Now they were getting in the way. The paint covered his face. The big mouth was always happy and the eyes had stars in the corners. They'd been real once—now they were only cheap, smelly paint. Maybe the strings were tied to the stars? They had corners on them, sharp corners, and the strings could tie right around them and make his head jerk like the puppet's. Just like a puppet, first this way and then that, following nothing, now impatient, now lax, but always controlling and forcing, always pushing. Pushing, pushing, pushing... those were stars for you. God, he hated them. God? Why had he said that? How could there be a God up here in this blackness? What kept bringing up God? Was there a string attached to his mind too? Was it jerking the word God up and down in his mind and then yanking on another string attached to bring up the argument that there was no God? Somehow all of the strings had gotten tangled and just these two kept working over and over.

The darkness grew around him as he climbed higher. It oppressed him and tried to force hot air into his laboring lungs. Now the main ring was clear. It was perfectly round and empty, both inside and outside. There was nothing near it but the dangling ladder that led up to Sammy. He watched it while the two strings played their tune and the large ruffles tried to hide them. The roundness of the ring fascinated him. No holes, no breaks, only the continual emptiness of a curve going around and around and around with nothing on the outside, nothing on the inside. The chips in the paint were not even visible from here.

A night watchman entered the tent from the actor's entrance. Sammy watched him from the darkness. The watchman was whistling off-key like most watchmen whistle. His light thrust here and there searching and probing. Maybe it looked into things and maybe a watchman could practice looking along the beam until he could see
thing's that others couldn't see? The smell of sawdust rose to Sammy and the beam of light began to climb the ropes and poles of the tent. Up it would rise, twenty, thirty, forty feet and with each foot it would grow dimmer until at last it gave up, overwhelmed and confused by the darkness. Maybe the watchman didn't know how to help it? . . . Maybe there was nothing for it to see, Yes, that was it, maybe there was nothing up there for it to see.

The music from the calliope had stopped now and only the watchman's footsteps and whistle rose to Sammy's ears. The whistling walked along beside the watchman like a guard. But it wasn't a good guard because the watchman kept forgetting all about it and it kept getting lost in a sort of wheeze or moan that went on and on without any tune. Maybe the watchman was afraid too? Maybe there was a string attached to him that made the whistle even when he was tired of the whistle, when he hated the whistle? A bird flew from one of the ropes past Sammy and the watchman finished his circuit. His string was pulling him to the entrance. The light searched and searched but it was unable to find the string. The light had grown weaker.

Sammy looked for the bird, but the blackness of the upper tent only allowed him to see the next three rungs of the ladder. Just the next three, then it would be two, and finally only one. After that he'd have to feel for the ladder and follow the rope upward until he found the next rung. Somehow it didn't seem as though there would be an end though, just a going on and on, upward into the darkness with the strings jerking this way and that.

When the end of the rope ladder finally came it was a surprise. The splintered cross-member of the tent was an arm thrusting out into the darkness at right angles. Sammy reached above and gasped when his searching hands found nothing. His heart froze and expanded until the terror threatened to burst and dislodge him from the ladder. All was blackness now and the ring seemed small and unreal in the dim greyness below. The watchman was going his rounds again but now his light was a speck which fluttered here and there. His whistle sounded weak and only came in fits through the blackness up to Sammy.

It was harder going now, the splinters of the cross-member caught at his hands and without the ladder it was harder to keep his balance. Each time he looked downward toward the ring he became dizzy and felt that he wanted to be sick. Now it was necessary to hitch himself along with his hands and stop after each movement to regain his balance. Each time the sickness grew a little worse. The idea of falling began to captivate him. What was it like falling down, down, down, through the blackness into the greyness and finally the hard-packed sawdust? The sawdust would be soft from three feet and it might bounce from six feet but how would it feel after sixty feet? Or a hundred? Old timers said it was just like a rock. They should know, they'd watched themselves on posters, they'd climbed from the strings and now were left with only the tent stakes and memories of the beautiful posters.

The dizziness was very bad now and it wouldn't take long. Just rock back and forth a little and then from side to side. Soon the
splinters would draw away from the cross-member and there would be a frenzied clutching and then a drifting down and down. Past the rope ladder, away from the bird, past the guy wires, away from the strings, out of the blackness into the dimness, down, down. The strings would jerk but it would be too late. They would break, . . . yes, break! But then again, it would be too late.

(VISTA)

a typical hereanow slob
in dung arees sweatshirt sneakers and unruly hair
knows he is a slob (vista altobrow)
(but unbeknownst is the black bassbrow veil)
and a success at being a failure
as the adjusting amoeba
is being pushoved
is striking back quietly
yet is a failure because he succeeds
becoming a slob (that plays the role) ish
comfortable in a stiff tidus environment
(belonging because it does not belong)

but can also be the gentleman
in black formal (tosuitheothers) rags
whom incestuous bitc (decadent) hes esteemire
because he is suchanice boy
(a role ing horseassiduously speaking)

Max Steele