

The Preacher's Son

BY BRAND WHITLOCK

A MARVELLOUS circus was coming to town. All the boys were going; they had planned for weeks, disputing about the many acts on the show-bills. The preacher's son had joined in as much as he could, yet deep in his heart he knew that he would not be allowed to go. Sometimes he felt that he was wrong in letting the fellows think he was going. Sometimes he wished that the circus wouldn't come to Greenfield at all, but just spread its splendid bills all over town; that would have been enough for a preacher's son, who couldn't go. Now, on this last evening, he sat on the stoop of the parsonage, his chin in his hands, his bare toes curling over the edge of the bottom step. The circus would be there in the morning. He had asked his father again, for the last time, at the supper table. His father, of course, had said no. The preacher's son didn't know what he was going to do. Some of the fellows had whistled for him back in the alley, but he wouldn't answer. Besides everything else, it was prayer-meeting night, and that by itself was enough to make him sad.

The first bell had just rung, and it yammered away long after it should have left at peace a world that was trying to be happy; that is, as happy as it could be under the circumstances, considering that its centre had to be a preacher's son and live next door to a church, and be marked out as different from all the other boys in the world. Old Griffin, the sexton, had opened the church door—or half of the church door, knowing that a half-opened door would admit all who would come to prayer-meeting,—and now was lighting up the basement. The people, a very few of them, were coming to church. On entering they took seats far apart, so as to avoid each other. They sighed now and then, and sometimes groaned, as they had to do if they wished to be truly

good. The preacher's son had realized long ago that he never could be truly good. He had a certainty of conviction that he had been conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity, though he did not put it in those terms. There seemed to be some legend of ill omen, like those about certain families in books he had read, which had come down to him as the last of a tragic line of victims—all preachers' sons. Everybody had a way of saying, when he was around,

"Preacher's son, you know—always turn out bad."

The evening had grown quite dark, and the bill-boards across the street were lost in shadows. The second bell rang; there it was again, scolding the world for wishing to go to circuses, or to the Opera House, or trying to have any fun. The father of the preacher's son came out of the house with his Oxford Bible under his arm, shaking out his handkerchief so as to have it all ready. He would not budge an inch for his father to get down the steps; he felt just that way toward him that night.

"Coming in?" his father said to his mother.

"No, not to-night," his mother said; "I'm very tired."

He marvelled at times at his mother's independence of the church.

His father stepped off the side of the stoop and hurried across the lawn. The bell had ceased to toll—he would not have to hear it again until Sunday morning, and that was something; or would have been were it not for the circus. His mother came out and sat down beside him. In the church they were getting ready to pray; he could hear his father's voice, and he knew he was saying,

"Brother Doane, will you lead us?"

The preacher's son would not edge up to his mother's side the least bit.

"What is my little boy thinking of?" asked the mother presently.

"Nothin'."

"Hadn't he better run up to bed?"

He made no reply. They need not think that he was going to be pleasant and agreeable, and laugh and talk, just as if nothing had happened.

"You'll want to be up early in the morning, you know," she went on.

His heart gave a little leap.

"What for?"

"To see the parade."

This was too much; this was what is called adding insult to injury. To deprive him of the circus, and then to expect him to be tamely satisfied with the parade, which anybody could look at for nothing! He would show them; he would run away with the circus; the circus would be glad to have any boy who was abused at home; then some day he would come back and forgive them, and send them free tickets so they could see him perform in his pink tights and spangles. He thought of this for a few moments,

but felt that he ought to give them another chance.

"Mamma, why can't I go?" he asked.

"Because, dear, papa does not think it best."

He stamped his bare feet and cried: "Well, I don't see why. All the other fellows can. I could get in for a quarter. I'm not *much* more'n twelve."

The mother had no reply. After waiting an instant he whined:

"Aw, please let me go. I'll never ask again."

"Don't tease mamma, dear," she said. "Run on now and wash your feet. It's bedtime."

This was another of their cruel impositions; they did it on purpose, just to be mean. His feet would get every bit as dirty to-morrow.

"Run along," urged the mother.

The preacher's son slowly rose and limped painfully around the house, walking, as to his left foot, on his toes, to spare his stone-bruise. He went to the cistern and pumped water on his feet, and then stole into the house by the back way. But he heard a call:

"Did you wash your feet?"

"Yes, 'm."

"And aren't you going to say good night?"

"Good night," he said, reluctantly.

"But, my dear—" He heard his mother coming. She took him up-stairs. She got water and towels and soap, and kneeling before him as he sat on the edge of his bed, she bathed his feet herself and made him say his prayers, then tucked him in, kissed him, and left him in the dark.

Lying there, thinking of the circus, after a long while he heard the sounds that told him prayer-meeting was over. He heard his father bid someone good night at the gate. Then he heard his



'PREACHER'S SON, YOU KNOW--ALWAYS TURN OUT BAD'

father and mother talking. He knew that they were talking of him. He strained his ears to hear. He heard his father say, "Poor little chap."

And then his father began again: "Sometimes I—" But he stopped there.

After a while the minister went up to the room where his boy lay, and placed his hand on the child's brow.

"Good night, my little son," he said, gently.

The preacher's son felt the lump suddenly come into his throat, but he didn't answer.

Greenfield awoke early for circus day. Before the preacher's son could snatch his breakfast the country people were coming to town; their horses were hitched to the racks along Main Street, and Klaus's feed and sale barn was full, the muddy buggies standing in the yard, lifting their shafts into the air, with the holdbacks dangling from them. But the preacher's son was full of business; he was hurrying along toward Cannon's lot, where the show-grounds were. The big wagons, covered with mysterious canvases, were being hauled from the railroad; as they jolted along their heavy little wheels clucked in a way that no wagon other than a circus wagon ever could. The preacher's son tried to decide which were the chariots, which the band-wagon; when he saw the cages, he had a sense of breathless mystery in thinking of the wild beasts that cowered within. The men who sat far up on the boxes of these monstrous wagons swayed and jolted with them; from their fists radiated bewildering masses of reins. They did not see him, of course.

The preacher's son broke into a little trot; his sore heel was forgotten; he went nimbly. Cannon's lot was all alive when he got there; everywhere stood



EIGHT TIMES HE MADE THAT TRIP

those big wagons, some still hooded with their tarpaulins, others uncovered and discharging seats and poles painted that delicious blue. And everywhere men were rushing about under the direction of a large and burly man. This man, it was understood, was the boss canvas-man, and he swore. The preacher's son regretted this; it seemed somehow to go against his theory that circuses were highly moral. The bills said so; the pink pamphlet that mysteriously showed itself all over town a month before the circus came laid great stress on this point of morality; to judge from the pamphlet, the circus must be some superior sort of travelling evangelist. The preacher's son was disappointed by this flaw in the boss canvas-man. It would be just as well not to tell about him at home. So the preacher's son edged away. He had hoped to see the centre pole raised; all of the boys had intended getting up early to find out how it was done. But now the

centre pole was up; there it stood, tall, immense, and blue, guyed with innumerable ropes, a flag already drooping at its peak. He wished he could see them make the ring. The boys had often discussed this; the wonder was how they got it so round. At times they had come across a ring in Cannon's lot, and were glad as scientists who have found the bones of some extinct animal. As scientists they built up in their imaginations the whole circus; they stood here and there within the ring, saying to themselves, "Here the clown, here the ring-master stood," testing the sensation; and there fell upon them a kind of awe, full of the regret of things irrevocable and past.

But now he was afraid to go too close. He could only stand afar off and watch the whirling disk the men made with their mauls as they drove the stakes into the ground. Down at the farther end of the lot he could see the long rows of low tents out of which the tails of the horses were switching in the sun. He wanted to study the Shetland ponies, but there was much to do, and he had to watch out for the camels and elephants. Then they ought to be getting ready for the parade; this would be at ten o'clock, and there was not much time, though the circus men did not seem to be bothered about it. He wondered how they could take it so coolly.

While he was trying to make up his mind, he stopped to look at eight big horses, perfectly white, that stood munching their feed just like the common horses of Greenfield. The man in charge of them leaned against one of the tent-poles, wrapping a rag about his hand; the hand was bruised and bloody. Doubtless the man had been bitten by one of the animals. In his fascination the preacher's son drew nearer. Suddenly the man turned.

"Say, kid," he said, "want a job?"

The preacher's son was overwhelmed. The man came out from the tent.

"I've hurt my hand. You water my horses for me and I'll take you in."

It was to be, then, after all! He would get to see the show! His conscience checked him; and then he got mad at his conscience: he just had to go now, after this, sin or no sin. He took the man up

right there, and in the beating sun he toiled back and forth from the well of the Irish woman who lived on the edge of the lot. Eight times he made that trip, the blue bucket bumping against his legs as he strained to prevent any of the water spilling. He saw the great tents slowly rise and swell in the little wind; he saw the flags of all nations flutter to their white pinnacles; he even saw far off the elephants, ponderous and sedate, marched here and there by their keepers,—he could not see them as closely as he had planned, but it didn't matter now. The parade was forming, but that didn't matter either. All the people, the farmers' sons and everybody, would think he belonged to the circus. He acted as if it were nothing to him to be watering those horses.

He stood by while the man threw the white leather harnesses on the horses; the bridles had red blinds. The man let him lead two of the horses out to the chariot; the man led, somehow, the other six himself. When they stepped into their places, he did as the man told him, and fastened a buckle here and there. Three or four of the kids appeared from somewhere. He didn't even look at them; and of course they didn't dare to speak. They knew now that he was going to run away with the circus! The common belief about preachers' sons strengthened the notion.

The man got out his uniform and put it on; and he stuck the plumes in the horses' bridles. Then he told the preacher's son to come around at one o'clock, mounted to his seat, and gathered up his bewildering white reins. Far off a cornet trilled. The chariot moved; the procession was about to start.

The preacher's son flew across the lot and down the street, far ahead of the procession. Then he took his post in the gutter and waited. The parade came by, its banners shaking, its chariots jolting with that strange cluck of the wheels.

He watched it carefully, the bands, the ladies and gentlemen riding their piebald horses, the clown in his cart, the elephant and camels, all gayly caparisoned; at last, bringing up the rear, the calliope. Then he flew ahead to Main Street, and reviewed it all once more. He kept his eye out for his friend of the chariot.

There he was, driving the eight white horses! The preacher's son had his hand ready to wave; the man looked once his way, but—no, he did not see him. Of course it was hardly to be expected. He had intended to go back and see the grand free entertainment which would be given on the show-grounds immediately after the parade, but the Court-house clock was striking twelve, and it was dinner-time. He thought maybe he had better not go home; he might not be able to get away again; it would be just the luck of a preacher's son. But it was bad enough to go to the circus. He would let his guilt concentrate itself, as it were, on this one necessary deed.

They were just sitting down to dinner when he got there. He felt like a guilty wretch, but it *must* be done. He could not stop to count the cost; though, looking ahead, he knew how he would suffer when it was all over. He would have to go about with this wicked secret in his heart all the days of his life, for ever and ever!

He could scarcely eat; food choked him—though there was cherry pie that day. He hurried through his dinner, and made ready to bolt before they could think up anything for him to do. And then—his mother told him to come into his bedroom. He knew it would turn out just that way.

"My dear," she said, "do you wish to go to the circus so very badly?"

He looked up, and he had to wonder why his mother stopped and kissed him so suddenly.

"You know, dear, that your father does not approve of circuses."

He nodded hurriedly. There was no use to talk about that now; especially as his father had seen at last that he was wrong about circuses.

"But he has decided," his mother went on, "that you may go this once."

And she gave him a silver half-dollar.

"You can now see for yourself, dear," his mother said, with a twinkle in her eyes, "what a very wicked thing a circus is."

He could hardly stop for her kiss.



"YOU MAY GO THIS ONCE"

The preacher's son ran all the way to the show-grounds. The great tents were still there; the crowd, spread all over the lot, gathered in a knot around the ticket-wagon, and then flowed on into the menagerie tent. The side-shows, with their pictures, tempted him; the men in front assured the crowd that the big show would not begin for an hour. Had his faith in men been stronger, he might have gone into the side-shows, but he had his doubts about his friend of the chariot.

Whenever he looked at the ticket-wagon he could squeeze his half-dollar

and feel safe. He could buy a ticket; if the man doubted his age, he could buy a full-priced ticket. More than all, his father and mother had said he could go; at times, in order to retain the joy of this, he almost wished that his doubts of his friend of the chariot would come true, so that he would have to pay his way in. But he had a scheme of finance, and it had, somewhere, a taint of dishonesty. His conscience told him that, after all, he was plotting the same deceit he had intended to practise from the beginning; but he couldn't stop for his conscience now.

The eight white horses turned from their canvas troughs to look at him out of their pink eyes. The man lay asleep on a truss of hay in the shadow of the tent. The preacher's son was afraid to wake so great a man, but he drew nearer and nearer, his bare feet rustling in the straw. His friend of the chariot was a man whose slumbers were necessarily light, and too often broken, no doubt, to say nothing of having his hand bitten, and so it was that he started up quick-

ly. The preacher's son grinned, and shook with dread. The man scrambled to his feet.

"Come on," he said.

The preacher's son felt that he had done the man an injustice, and he longed to make amends. He stole to the man's side, and somehow found his hand in the great horny one that could hold so many reins.

"Now, does your other hand hurt you much?" the preacher's son asked.

"Well, enough," the man said.

"Did, now, the zebra bite you?"

The man looked down into the face of the preacher's son, a smile in his eyes.

"It wasn't the zebra," the man said; "it was the hippopotamus."

The boy's eyes widened.

"Behold now behemoth," the man said; "he eateth grass as an ox."

The man chuckled. There must have been in the words, for him, something droll, comic, for he repeated them, giving each syllable its full measure:

"Behold now behemoth; he eateth grass as an ox."



"IT WASN'T THE ZEBRA," THE MAN SAID



HE SAT MUNCHING HIS PEANUTS AND HIS POP-CORN

Could it be that the man knew his father was a preacher? It seemed as if he never could get away from that. They made for the blank wall of the tent; they went under the guy-ropes. The preacher's son, watching out for the man with the club who keeps boys from sneaking in under the tent, kept close to his friend's side, and his friend pressed right on. He lifted the drop of the tent; the preacher's son glanced about him; at last he was there! It was hot and sultry in the tent, yet the shade made it cool to him. There was the strange circus smell, compounded of the smell of trampled grass, of peanuts, the overpowering smell of wild beasts; the people were strolling about, he could hear their voices, but they seemed away off; he could hear the chattering of the monkeys, the shrill caw of parrots, the soft tread of animals, the clang of iron bars as they lunged against the sides of their cages; and right beside him, there were the elephants, and chief among them the mighty Bolivar, shackled to four stakes. The preacher's son was secretly glad that Bolivar was shackled; he was rocking uneasily from side to side, his trunk in

constant nervous motion, thrusting here and there, rummaging in the hay at his feet. Now and then he tossed earth and straw upon his back.

The preacher's son was studying how he should spend his money. It would be wise, he thought, to save at least a quarter in case they should put him out. He bought a bag of peanuts, and pressed up to the rope before Bolivar. The elephant recognized a friend and strained on his chains. The preacher's son shrank from Bolivar's trunk; there was something appalling about it; it was like a snake. He shrank even more as its cold wet end touched his hand, but as it slowly curved and carried the peanut up to the little red triangular mouth the preacher's son grew more confident, and gave Bolivar another peanut and another, until he had fed them all to the trunk, and the trunk had fed them all into the elephant.

The preacher's son laid out a dime in peanuts for himself, and then, feeling thirsty, he bought a glass of the red lemonade that came so highly recommended, holding the tall glass in both hands to drink it. Then he bought some more peanuts for the monkeys, and made

a tour of the cages, examining each animal carefully. There were signs that the performance was about to begin. He followed the crowd down the long tent and entered the circus. He was tempted to take a reserved seat, but he still felt that he had better keep a quarter for an emergency. He could not yet be quite certain; he was sure that something must happen to spoil his afternoon. Some superstition, some inherited instinct of the impermanence of happiness, of the calamity that lurks in every joy, made him careful. He risked another nickel on pop-corn, and passed thoughtfully to his seat.

With the grand entry he settled down to a long afternoon of delight. His little face, red with the heat, and rimmed by his straw hat, looked out from the other faces, older than his and mostly vapid, that were massed along that side of the tent. He sat munching his peanuts and his pop-corn, and his little world faded away as he lost himself in the splendors that were unrolled before him. Each new act came as a surprise, but when he remembered the act as one he had seen on the bills, the joy of surprise gave way to the subtler joy of recognition. He had almost forgotten the Siegrist Family, though the fellows had been half crazy over them for two weeks, and when the little boys in their pink tights, with their hair smartly combed, capered into the ring and kissed their hands right and left, and then began their surprising tumbling, his joy mounted to an ecstasy of bliss, mingled with an ecstasy of regret that he could not have been one of those highly favored brothers. For him these hours would quickly pass, Greenfield would sink back into her normal slumber, the boys would resume their common life, but for the boys of the Siegrist Family there would be an unending circus. He felt a pang of jealousy because of the Siegrist Family; it pained him to think of them in the midst of other multitudes, out of his presence forever, yet smiling in pink tights, with their hair smartly combed, and tumbling, though he could not be there to see.

Romeo Sebastian, the pad-rider, and Ferdinand Sigrino, who was announced by the ringmaster as about to present an act of changes representing Pickwick

characters, were satisfactory, but they could not come up to the Siegrist Family. When a vender announced the old clown's song-book, containing all the latest and most popular songs and ballads of the day, the preacher's son bought one, intending it for a gift to his mother. He meant, however, before giving it to her, to learn all the songs by heart, and to surprise both her and his father by singing them. He felt just then capable of high and perfect deeds; nothing seemed beyond his powers, and he had no doubt that he could sing those songs as imitatively as the old clown himself, such is the inspiring effect of art.

The acts passed in a succession all too rapid, the tumbling, the riding, the trapeze-performing, the leap for life from the apex, or dome, of the large tent, until a man with a handkerchief tied about his neck stepped into the ring, and standing near the centre pole, began:

"Ladies and gentlemen, at this stage of our entertainment it is customary to announce the grand concert, which occurs immediately after this performance in the large tent."

The preacher's son awoke with a start. He had a sickening conviction that this meant the end, and nothing could shake this conviction, not even the man himself when he said:

"We do not make this announcement at this time to indicate that the performance is concluded, for it is not one-half begun, but merely to enable you all to obtain tickets from the polite and gentlemanly ushers who will now wait upon you."

The band struck up briskly, the ringmaster cracked his whip, the calico horses jingled their sleigh-bells, the performers began again with a new enthusiasm, but the illusion was gone; the preacher's son could see through their hypocrisy. He was not afraid now of being put out, and he had ten cents left to buy a ticket from one of the polite and gentlemanly ushers, who were already swarming over the tiers of seats. He tried to believe that the concert would be as good as the circus itself, but he hated to see the people climb down from their seats; it seemed that they should have sat still until the last act was performed. His consolation was in

thinking of how the fellows would look up to him the next day; none of them had ever got in under the tent, or stayed to the concert.

The concert was not all it might have been; the dancers that clattered their clogs on the hollow stage, the burnt-cork minstrels, the painted women who sang in cracked voices, were all in a hurry to get through, and meanwhile the circus men were shamelessly getting things ready for the evening performance. There was a little spasm of interest when the attendants ran into the ring with a tank, and Lulu the Water Queen tilted in after them on her toes. She ducked herself in the tank and pretended to knit under the water, but she was soon out again, bowing and throwing kisses. The boys were not impressed by her. They could stay under water themselves, and if they couldn't knit, it wasn't because they couldn't stay under long enough. The water in Mad River wasn't clear enough to let you be seen anyway. Some of them, indeed, declared that Lulu didn't sit in the tank, but behind it, so you could see through the water and the glass; others had private information that she wore a rubber suit, though they couldn't have told how she got her breath even if it had occurred to any of them to ask.

The act of Lulu the Water Queen ended the concert, and the circus was over. The preacher's son would have liked to linger in the menagerie tent, but the animals were all sleepy, and their attendants had a manner that made him hasten on. He wished then that he had waited until night. Perhaps if he had saved his money he might have gone again; maybe his father and mother would have let him. He remembered to have heard that the animals were wilder at night; that was when they hunted their prey. He wished he could see them

with their fiery eyes and alert ears; it would be more dangerous. But now he must go, and in another moment he was blinking his eyes once more in the sunlight of Greenfield.

All the way home he began to have morbid doubts about his honesty, and the first thing he did was to tell his mother. She only smiled, and his father seemed to see something funny in it. He was surprised but glad. In the evening they all sat out on the stoop. The preacher's son told over and over again the jokes of the old clown, or such of them as he could recall; the points of most of them seemed somehow to have got away from him. Now and then, on the grass, he tried to give them some realization of what they had missed in the way of the tumbling of the Siegrist Family; he could do it better when he got some snake oil to make him limber.

Far away he could hear the strains of the circus band, and at last the clatter of the seats as they were being taken down. Then the town was silent, save for the jolting of the loaded wagons as they rumbled back to the railroad. The preacher's son had grown sleepy and had to go to bed. His mother was tucking him in, when suddenly his father called: "Look out the window!"

In the soft dust of the street below, the elephants were shuffling by, great, ghostly, and silent. Their forms swayed as they paced swiftly along; their keepers walked sleepily at their heads; now and then one of the men spoke some little command. Bolivar led,—the preacher's son could tell him anywhere; behind him came the others, down to the little baby elephant, which, in the morning, he had felt he would like to own. He watched them in silence until they had disappeared. And then he crawled back to bed, and in the middle of his mother's good night he fell asleep.

Editor's Easy Chair.

THERE is a danger in recurring to a theme of the past which every writer is aware of, and which the periodical writer has peculiarly to guard himself against, if he would appeal to his readers with the freshness which he would like to have, or seem to have, for them. It is then quite with the understanding that we now approach from a new quarter that we take up the question, somewhat debated here a year ago and more, whether poetry was as much read now as it once was. At that time we remember expressing a mild surprise, and perhaps a touch of rash regret, that our inquiry for a general opinion on the point, had met so little response. Out of some fifty States of the Union we noted that only some eight had made any sign of interest in so vital a matter, and that the balance against the prevalent indifference was imperfectly dressed by the fact that certain of the States which spoke at all, had spoken twice. What did it avail that two voices rose from New Jersey, if none were heard from the broad commonwealths bordering on the Great Lakes, and but one from those on the Mexican Gulf, with none again from those stretching their vast levels from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains, or sloping down from their snowy tops to the surges of the Pacific? The September number of last year's Magazine had hardly had time, however, to reach its innumerable readers in every part of the country, when others of the dormant republics roused themselves, and began to pour out and to pour in a volume of conviction and conjecture, which had dwindled only the other day to a final rill from Indiana, contributing the belief that poetry was read by a great many more men than would own it, because they were generously, or ungenerously, ashamed of indulging a fondness unbecoming their years and sex. In the chorus that arose, the varying accents of New York, Ohio, Colorado, Minnesota, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Michigan, West Virginia, Kansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, and Iowa, dis-

tinguished themselves, for the first or second time, and from several of these States the response was duplicated and triplicated. But even this much larger return left the great majority of the States to be heard from, and the South was as solid in the silence which it preserved, on the question of the present reading and liking of poetry, as in its opposition to the spread of the favorite political principles of the North. We do not mean that there is a moral or psychical relation between the two solidities, or that any sociological inquiries or conclusions should be based upon the fact observed; and we were already convinced that a whole region like that lying below Mason and Dixon's line could not be cold to the claims of verse. But we are not going to reopen the question in its former phase at all; we wish rather to invite our readers to the study of some intellectual conditions among us as they have revealed themselves in several of the later letters we have received; and in permitting ourselves to quote frankly from one of the letters we hope we shall be able to keep ourselves at least as clear from offence against the confidence reposed in us as when we dealt with their like before.

I

One of the most interesting, and at the same time dismaying, facts concerning such culture as we have seems to be the fact that the study of literature in our schools kills the pleasure which might be otherwise taken in it out of school. Some of our correspondents testify that they now "cannot bear" the poets whom they "had" in school; and it seems as if, after all the well-meant endeavor of late years to supply "literary" text-books for the use of students, they had been so mistakenly used as to give a lasting distaste for that which ought to have been lifelong a sweet morsel under the tongue. Apparently the pieces of literature employed as a means of drilling the mind become so inextricably associated with the tiresomeness of the process that their real nature and office are lost upon the mind