

OUR DEBT TO BARNUM

THE SHOWMAN A MORALIST IN DISGUISE OF THE ÆSOP TYPE.

His Fables Presented Under the Guise of Freaks or In Hair Raising Acts—The Lesson He Meant to Teach by Shooting the Woman Out of a Cannon.

In this age of scramble the public too soon forgets its benefactors, and ever there is need of a class of devouter spirits who, like Walter Scott's Old Mortality, shall go about through the graveyards, with retouching mallet and chisel, seeking to keep green the memory of departed worthies.

Like too many of his forerunners, the late lamented P. T. Barnum, the aboriginal creator of the "greatest show on earth," was in his day and generation a man misunderstood—a man who, as Wordsworth puts it, "wandered lonely as a cloud" even amid the throngs gathered by the more superficial attractions of his circus. Dealing on so vast a scale in wild beasts and human monstrosities, few but a select group of bosom friends knew him for what he really was, a moralist in disguise of the Æsop type—a man who, while he talked beasts, meant men.

In the earlier stages of his career positive reprobation was heaped on his head by thousands who, to use their own coarse language, felt they had been Jeremy diddled in paying a quarter each to revel in the vision of the beautiful "Fiji mermaid" sitting on a rock and combing her golden locks, only to find inside the tent the stuffed skin of a she baboon glued on the tail of a codfish. "Your reprobation is misdirected," retorted Barnum. "True, I have got the quarters, but then in return you have got the experience. Mermaids are æsthetic, anatomical and psychologic impossibilities. The one thing needful was to work in you a drastic, realistic cure. My show is strictly moral, and now it remains with you, as you chew the cud of sweet and bitter reflections, to extract the moral." Thus from the start was manifest the serious, didactic cast of the great man's mind.

That in so obtuse a world as this a moralist of the type of Barnum was at the outset misunderstood is only natural. When, for example, he first loomed up before the American public as the one man on the planet of the hardihood to shoot a full grown live woman out of a cannon and catch her on the fly in a wavy net as big as a porgy seine, who for a moment dreamed that underlying all the pageantry of so sensational a spectacle lurked a pregnant moral lesson? Yet to Barnum the moral was the one serious consideration. To use his favorite natural history figure of speech—for the turn of his mind was highly metaphorical—the moral stood out plain as a jackass' ears. In his eyes the rest of the exhibition, the whole external show, was mere embellishment, mere rhetorical emphasis to excite the sluggish minds of the thoughtless and stimulate them to reflection.

"Here"—he would break out in his more expansive hours of perhaps venial self exultation—"here is my grand parable, my dramatic moral masterpiece. The supreme moral forces of the individual and of society are momentum and control. Momentum by itself is headlong and destructive. Control by itself is tame and even sappy. In harmony they become sublime as the centrifugal and centrifugal forces of the solar system. Preachers in the pulpit essay indeed to expound the same doctrine. Preachers, however, have no such magnificent apparatus of illustration at command as has the proprietor of a circus, and so all remains in the realm of vagueness and abstraction. Their hearers fall asleep, but when bang goes my big cannon and, lo, 150 pounds of glorious womanhood—rose red, lily white, shiningly bespangled—is seen hurtling through the air the dulllest head clears up. Momentum in all its titanic, all its frightfully perilous bearings is grasped in a trice. The emotions pour in a mighty flood. The fate of a woman, of a sister, hangs in agonizing suspense. Momentum hurls her with annihilating fury, and, unless some equal counter force leap to the rescue, a second more and she must lie before the stupendous throng of spectators a brainless, bleeding corpse. Now first reveals itself the latent significance, the profound symbolism, of my interposing net. Action and reaction are equal, and so the net must embody a power of arrest at least as mighty as that of the gunpowder that discharged the woman out of the cannon's mouth. But, a power, must it be yielding, though firm; pliant, though irreflexible; absorbent as a poultice, though reactive as a steel spring. The astonished audience now beholds how it envelops her, sways with her, deflects her on 50 tangents, yet ever holds her safe in diminishing velocity till at last she lies in its embrace, calm as a cradled child in dreamless slumber bound.

"It is at this crisis in the exhibition," would proceed the great moralist, "that I always scan with that smile of sympathetic benevolence for which I am noted the vast amphitheater to see how many fond parents have caught the inner meaning of the dramatic spectacle and are expounding to their little boys and girls the real significance of the parable—making it plain as day what the destructive momentum of their own irascibility and belligerency will inevitably bring them to if they do not learn how to enmesh and absorb it in the firm yet yielding net of patience and sweetness."

Is it any wonder, then, that in hours of such effusion the world famous impresario should proudly have conferred the title of "greatest moral show on earth" upon what ordinary mortals called nothing but "Barnum's circus?"—Boston Herald.

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N. RATTENBURY

Jan 25, '98—cod 4 wt—pat.

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was welcomed in so many intelligent, prudent homes where care is taken to get only the best in so vital a matter. In such families all over that country Paine's Celery Compound is the first, last and only remedy used.

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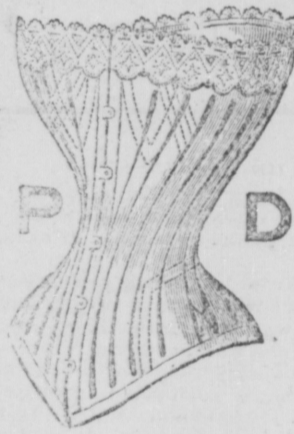
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By W. S. Stewart, their Solicitor.
Charlottetown, Feb 14—