

The Free Press' Short Story

UNCLE TIMOTHY'S CIRCUS

RAYV STANNARD BAKER

REMEMBER just how my Uncle Timothy Lucas looked when he came hobbling down the hill with the great news flashing in his faded blue eyes.

"We're goin' to have a circus," he said.

His shoulders were thrown back, his chin was puffed out as if he had just taken a deep breath of joy, and the brush of scant gray whiskers on his chin bobbed excitedly as he talked. Even his shrill voice rang with a note of commanding importance.

Of course we all followed Uncle Tim back up the road, greedily devouring every word he had to say. He ushered us around the corner of his old red barn.

"That!" he exclaimed, waving his hand like Balboa discovering the Pacific in the old geography.

The whole side of the barn was covered with colored posters still moist with paste. A huge centrepiece represented fifteen great elephants standing in a half-circle with a diminutive man in top boots flourishing a whip in their faces. Around this impressive picture there were other and smaller posters—trapes performers, clowns, trained horses, lions and tigers, and all of the other wonders that go to make up the charm of a travelling show.

"It's a great thing for Doleville," said Uncle Tim proudly; "I'll bring business to Doleville. I tell you it's a great thing."

Never before had a real circus deemed it worth while to stop at Doleville, although we sometimes caught a glimpse of a dusty caravan on its way from Coocoola through to West Ely.

After the glory of the posters had impressed itself firmly on our minds Uncle Tim was ready with another piece of news. He declared that he was going to entertain the officers of the company, and that he had made a contract with them to supply the entire circus with hay and oats.

"It's goin' to take a mighty sight of stuff to feed fifteen elephants," he said, drawing himself up with a little shake of importance.

Uncle Timothy was the proprietor—he and Aunt Nancy Lucas—of the only hotel in town. They called it the "Lucas House," and the wide, sticky red barn with the battered tin rooster on the cupola was the "Lucas Livery, Feed and Sale Stable."

Ordinarily Uncle Tim was as mild and apologetic as any little man with a vehemently energetic wife could be. But the circus acted on him like a tonic. He was a new man. He had talked with the circus managers face to face, and he spoke with a direct and telling authority which gave him new importance in our eyes. Aunt Nancy looked on Uncle Tim's enthusiasm with some skepticism, and when he decided to stock his barn with a new supply of hay and oats she shook her head dubiously.

"Can't no good come of circuses," she said solemnly.

But Uncle Timothy only laughed with easy superiority and revelled in circus reminiscences. Indeed, he often grew oppressive in his new importance, and had Doleville been less anxious to enjoy every possible glimpse of the circus, it might have smothered out Uncle Tim's eloquence, as Aunt Nancy sometimes did.

There were those, especially among the knowing young men, who expressed a lack of confidence in the posters.

"If they advertise fifteen elephants, like as not they haven't got more'n two," said Joe Hanley, "an' probably the snakes are all stuffed."

Uncle Tim happened to be near when this suspicion was voiced, and he came shouldering through the crowd, his eyes blazing with indignation. He held his old knotty cane aloft, and for a moment we expected to see Joe suffer.

"What are you tellin' such things for?" he demanded angrily. "Do you s'pose they'd dare print pictures of things they ain't got? Do you s'pose? What are they orderin' tons an' tons of hay an' oats for if they ain't got fifteen elephants an' hundreds of horses to eat 'em?"

This was a clincher, and we all sided unhesitatingly with Uncle Tim. We even speculated as to the many wonders which might be included in the unfamiliar "hippodrome" and the "galaxy of wonders" of which the posters made so much.

On the day on which the circus was to arrive Uncle Tim appeared in his black Sunday suit with a rusty old top hat which he wore only at funerals or other state occasions. He stood near the corner of his barn, one hand on his cane and the other thrust into his coat in front. It was an impressive sight. Some of us who were younger went miles on the dusty road and thronged in with the procession. As the head of it reached the village Joe Hanley darted toward Uncle Tim.

"What did I tell you, Uncle Tim?" he shouted, triumphantly. "There's only one elephant, and not a single tiger, nor giraffe, nor ostrich. I ain't seen the snakes, but I'll bet they're stuffed."

Uncle Tim's hands dropped limply at his sides, and his face paled. He watched until the elephant had swung past him and he was sure there was not another one in the procession. Then he said weakly, as if still trying to convince himself of the greatness of the circus:

never-to-be-forgotten importance, and at a respectful distance behind came Uncle Tim and a wide semi-circle of citizens, big and little.

It had been arranged that the elephant should be left in Doleville until the circus reached the next town, where the manager said he was sure of getting enough money to satisfy all claims against him.

Back of Uncle Tim's livery stable was a rickety old wagon shed, one side of which gaped open. It had a slant roof which sagged with age, and back of it stood Aunt Nancy's chicken coop, where she kept her favorite trapezes. Just in front of this shed Gypsy's keeper directed the driving of a stout post, to which he fastened the elephant's chain, afterward backing her under the low roof.

"All you've got to do," he said to George Anderson, who was the legal custodian of the great animal, "is to give her all she wants to eat and drink. She's as gentle as a kitten, and you needn't be afraid of her. To-morrow night or the next day, perhaps, the boss will send me over for her."

With this the keeper set out after the circus, and Doleville was left with a real live elephant in its possession. We boys had to pinch ourselves to realize that such a wonder had come to pass. We camped all about Uncle Tim's barn and on the side hill opposite, and we watched the great elephant swaying at the end of her chain and curling and uncurling her trunk. George Anderson laid down the order that no one was to go nearer than twenty feet except Uncle Tim and himself. To enforce this command he marched up and down in front of the shed like a sentry. As for Uncle Tim, he lived again, hurrying busily about making preparations for accommodating the biggest guest he ever had entertained. Even Aunt Nancy was warned by the general interest and by her success in capturing the elephant, although she still shook her head and mourned the untrustworthiness of circuses in general.

In the evening Uncle Tim brought out several great armfuls of hay and cast them into the shed. He also supplied a bushel basket of meal and two loaves of stale bread by way of dessert—which the elephant ate first. For drink Gypsy swallowed a half-barrel of water.

This seemed to us to be an enormous meal even for an elephant, and we watched her eating until it was so dark that she was only a moving shadow.

It was a hot July night, and we didn't sleep well after the excitement of the day. Sometime toward morning we heard a great commotion in the road outside.

"The elephant's loose! The elephant's loose!" some one was shouting excitedly. When I reached Uncle Tim's barn it was just sunrise. The dew sparkled on the grass, and a soft mist hung over the river. Voices echoed everywhere through the town. Men and boys were running and calling, windows were opening and dishevelled heads popped out questioning. At the Lucas House everything was in the wildest confusion. On the common in front of the hotel stood Gypsy, blinking her little red eyes and flapping her great ears. When I first saw her she didn't seem to be doing anything particularly aggressive, but the evidences of her mighty strength were to be seen at the old wagon-shed. She had backed through it, pulling up the post by which she was fastened as if it had been a turnip. The building was old and rickety, and when the rear wall went down the roof fell on her back. At that, as nearly as I could learn, she grew desperate and in her anxiety to get away from the ruins she bumped into Aunt Nancy's precious chicken coop. Over it she went with a crash and she smashed the chickens, cackling and squawking about her head. At this appalling disaster Gyp snorted vigorously, tore a way through the boards and trotted up the hill. She was dragging her heavy tie post as a boy would drag a ball bat.

On the hotel veranda stood a motley gathering of half-dressed guests, all shouting and explaining. From their midst crept Uncle Tim, very pale, but with a determined look on his face. Evidently he felt that the safety of Doleville rested upon his little shoulders, for he threw them back boldly.

"Needn't be skered," he said in his high, quavery voice; "that's a tame elephant. Wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Oh, get it away," called a terrified feminine voice.

This appeal seemed to stir Uncle Tim's spirit to its depths. He faced about, and we saw him advance upon the elephant. We felt that he was going to certain death. His face was ghastly pale, and his legs shook. Every voice was hushed.

"Here, Gypsy; here, Gyp," said Uncle Tim, soothingly; "good Gyp, come back." The elephant turned her great head, and her trunk ran about like a snake in the grass. For a moment Uncle Tim wavered, and then he advanced again, raising his cane.

"Good Gypsy, nice Gyp," he flattered faintly.

But the words died on his lips. Good Gyp raised her trunk, and her great mouth, with its red lining, opened, like a gunny sack. She advanced a step toward Uncle Tim—probably to see if he had a peanut.

"Help! help!" he cried.

His cane flew in one direction; his hat rolled away in the other, and he ran ingloriously regardless of rheumatism and dignity.

Gypsy ambled along behind with her trunk stretched straight. Uncle Tim shot through the doorway of the little store next to the hotel and a moment later plunged full length among the barrels and boxes in the back yard. For a moment Gypsy seemed vastly surprised by this sudden disappearance. Her trunk swept along the store platform as if in search of the peanut which she felt sure

that Uncle Tim must have had. Here she spied the grocer's window covered only by a thickness of faded blue netting. On a narrow shelf above the upper cash was a row of jars containing horehound drops and striped candy. Gypsy knew quite well what this was, and she crossed the sidewalk, breaking through the rotten planks at every step. Her trunk easily nipped the netting, and down came the candy. The jars were smashed on the doorsill like so many coconuts, and enough candy went down Gypsy's wide throat to make a whole school sick for many days.

Then, after she had finished with the candy for the time being, we all noticed that her trunk kept noising around the empty shelves as if she were looking for something.

By this time Uncle Tim had summoned enough courage to reappear—but at a prudent distance from the scene of action. He peeked round the corner of the hotel, well concealed by the crowd, and then hastily withdrew his head. One of the town wits, who had no respect for age, seeing how Gypsy appeared to be looking for something, and how scared Uncle Tim still was after his terrible experience, crept up behind Uncle Tim, who was now behind the house, out of sight and sound of the elephant, and yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Here she comes! Look out!"

Uncle Tim didn't stop to look out. He didn't even turn round to see if the elephant was coming. He just ran as hard as he could away from the sound.

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Did You Ever Stop to Think?

By Edson R. Waite, Shawnee, Oklahoma

Clyde P. Steen, Editor of The Fremont (Ohio) Messenger, says:

"Newspaper advertising is the very barometer of trade. Without it, there is no trade!

"Although it should not be true, newspaper readers know when business is bad. They know when little buying is being done. They know by the lack of advertising in their newspaper. The merchant, feeling the pinch of a distinct falling off in business, fails to advertise. The newspaper reader, as a result fails to make purchases. Then they both begin to lament about how bad business is!

"It has always been that way. The merchant has never advertised when business was bad—at least has not advertised as comprehensively as he did when business was good. The psychology of this has never been definitely figured out. The recent depression would never have continued as long as it did if the merchant would have advertised in the newspapers. It was proven that every time this same merchant had something special and used extra space in the newspaper, he was soon sold out on that special. Dollar Days and similar events attracted larger crowds this year than ever before. The real reason was because they were advertised to a greater degree than was ever done previously.

"The average merchant has learned his lesson, it is believed. Consistent advertising, he has found, is the only kind that will keep the channels of trade alive and cause the crowds to throng his store. Every day he is missing from the columns of the local newspaper means the loss of a definite amount of business. Mr. and Mrs. Public, and even the little Publics, read the newspapers now more than they ever did. They were all reading them during the depression, but now they find articles advertised which are much needed, and which would have been purchased before had they been brought to their attention.

"Newspaper advertising is slowly, but surely returning to normal. National advertisers — manufacturers of the nation's leading products — are increasing their advertising space and this causes the dealer who sells these products to increase the use of local space. Mr. and Mrs. Public will know that business is good when they see the advertising boom and they will want to satisfy that desire to be in the buying throng!

Watch Your Newspaper. Keep tab of the advertising and You will know just what is doing in the Volume of Business at Your Favorite Store.