SANGER AND HIS TIMES

Introduction to George Sanger's Seventy Years a Showman

Retirement and reminiscence are apt to trot in harness together, and so, when Mr. George Sanger, the great showman, so familiar, by name at least, to the youth of the last generation, retired from the circus business in 1905, he proceeded to set down the simple yet moving annals of his past career, with the same calm courage with which he would draw the aching tooth of a favourite elephant. Published in book form in 1910, under the title of *Seventy Years a Showman*, these memoirs hardly attracted at the time all the notice they really merited. It is to be hoped that this reissue – the book has been many years out of print – may receive fuller attention, for his story is not only excellently and graphically written, and packed with yarns of the most vivid character set forth in a perfectly natural and unexaggerated manner, but it provides a reel, so to speak, of moving-pictures illustrative of a certain period – that extending from the early thirties to the end of the last century – during which the rural and provincial life of England underwent a transformation as complete as perhaps any previous period of seventy years could show. It covers, too, the whole period of Dickens's work, and that of many another of lesser fame, all busy depicting the early Victorian world in its every phase; and once more, as we read, many of their characters seem to start into life again, each in his habit as he lived, in the faithful jottings of this simple and unlettered showman.

George Sanger's parents were Wiltshire people; his father, "press-ganged" at eighteen, served ten years afloat, and fought (and was severely wounded) in the *Victory* at Trafalgar; from which event, and his consequent retirement on a pension of £10 per annum, we date his entry into the show business, with a self-made peep-show he could carry on his back. As described by his son, he seems to have been a man of fine character, and his adventures, intertwined as they are with the writer's early years, form as good reading as any part of the book. But the father, though reaching out at times in this direction and that, remained faithful in the main to the peep-show with which he had first challenged fortune. It was young George who was always the climber, the aspirant, the seeker after new things. While still a boy, he must needs start his own little show, which, composed of performing canaries, redpolls and white mice, strengthened later by two tame hares, bore in it the seed of the mighty circuses and menageries that were to follow. At eighteen he was on the road with a travelling van of his own; when about twenty-six he entered the great circus-world, and passed from success to success, their culmination being the purchase of the famous Astley's Theatre in 1871. Followed his continental tours and triumphs, during which, as he used to boast, his circuses travelled the roads of every country in Europe except Russia; and thereafter he was not so much a man as an institution – and a British institution too.

Mr. Sanger, like a good showman, married in the profession, choosing for his bride the popular Lion Queen of a rival establishment, somewhat to the disgust of the rival establishment, who evidently held, not unnaturally, that showmen ought to marry their own Lion Queens, instead of poaching on those of other people. She made as good a wife as she had made a Lion Queen – who dares to say that an early training is ever entirely wasted? – and when, after forty-eight years of happy married life, he lost her, his book pays touching tribute to all that she had been to him, both in solid worth and in affection. "Lovers to the last," he says – and that is saying not a little.

In 1905 Mr. Sanger, finding himself approaching his eightieth year, sold up all his circuses and animals, and finally retired from active business, settling down on his farm at East Finchley; and there it might have been expected he would end his days peacefully, looking back, in his well-earned repose, on many golden memories of past struggles and successes. Fate ordered otherwise. Many will remember the tragedy. In 1911 a manservant in his employ, of a sullen and revengeful disposition, fired by some real or fancied grievance over which he had probably brooded long, suddenly ran amok, as it were, attacked two fellow-menservants, wounding one of them severely, and battered the life out of poor old Mr. Sanger with a hatchet.

In so piteous a fashion passed away the famous old showman, the gallant and kindly of spirit, the friend and benefactor of all poor travelling show people, the founder of the

Showman's Guild, the author of an autobiography which contains not an unkind word of anybody.

As to shows themselves, the townsman does not quite realise all the signs and tokens by which the country-dweller knows that the year has really turned, that spring has thrown out its advancing pickets, and that the main forces of summer are well on their way. He knows, indeed, that we hail, each in their turn, the thrust of the snowdrop and then the crocus, the first green thrill that passes over the quickset hedgerows, the tender wash of faint water-colour that tells of the winter wheat now thrusting through, the touch of rosiness in the black elm tree-tops; but perhaps he does not know that one of the truest signs of approaching summer to us is when a sort of frozen Neva in his own suburbs thaws and breaks up, and the flood of caravans that have been winter-bound there is let loose at last – caravans that are to make the little village fairs of the countryside; simple little fairs that nevertheless mean so very much to us.

In a hedgeless country of high downland, on a road that came flowing down, a long white ribbon, straight as it were out of the eastern sky, we would watch, each succeeding spring, for the first appearance of these fairy cruisers of the road. Of course, the earliest comers were not for us humble villagers. These would "open" at the larger provincial towns, and then start on the circuit they had each planned out for themselves, and we should have to wait our turn, having a couple of nights thrown to us, or perhaps three, if the dates in *Old Moore's Almanac* allowed of it. ("Old Moore" is the *locus classicus*[1] for the dates of country fairs, so most farmers keep it on their mantelpiece.) But when at last we caught sight of a certain small yellow caravan, with pretty Mrs. S. and the latest baby sitting in front, her husband (who had charge of the dart-throwing department) walking at the horse's head, then we knew that our turn had come at last! "Enter Autolycus singing!" For close on the yellow caravan would surely come the larger one, with father and mother and the cooking utensils; and then that other which held Mrs. S.'s three comely young sisters, whom we knew as the Princesses, each, though so young, already a specialist of some sort, and who all slept in one broad bed placed across the rear of their caravan, looking, I should imagine, like three little St. Ursulas by Carpaccio. Later the swing-boats and the wooden horses would straggle in, and all the paraphernalia of the stalls and booths, and the horses (not the wooden ones, of course) would be led away and picketed. Then perhaps, beside a late camp fire, time would be found to renew acquaintance and hear all the news of the past winter; for the winters, to the women at least, were by no means a period of suspended animation.

One does not, it seems, when autumn is over, desert one's caravan for humdrum bricks and mortar. One camps, by arrangement with someone or other, on some piece of waste land or only partly used builder's yard or undeveloped building site on the outskirts of London itself, or of the big new towns, but lately villages themselves, that have sprung up as dormitories to the great city; and there, through all weathers, through rain and frost and snow, one sticks it out in one's little wooden caravan. This may sound very poor fun; but the actual fact was far otherwise. These girls were at first quite strangely reluctant to enlarge upon the joys of a leisured winter life in the neighbourhood of a large city. The reason for this only transpired later, and showed a quite charming delicacy of feeling on their part. "We thought," they explained in effect, "that it would make you dissatisfied with your hard lot as compared with ours, and perhaps you would be feeling jealous and discontented. For you live in this poky remote little village all the year round, and see nothing and know nothing, and never even guess at all the glamour and excitement that more fortunately placed classes such as ours are free to enjoy." We meekly admitted our social disadvantages, but pressed to be allowed a peep at urban life and its glories; and by degrees heard all about the jolly excursions to town, after the train with the black-coated city men had departed, the visits to Parks, Piccadillies, Regent Streets; the studies of shop-windows, and all the ladies' frocks; then bun-shops, matinées, more bun-shops, and a first-class performance at some West End theatre; finally the rush for the last train back, the sleepy journey down, the tramp along a muddy lane and across a field or two to the little caravan at last, making a blacker spot against the dull winter sky; and then the cheerful dazzle of the reflector-lamp on the wall, the cup of cocoa and snack of supper, and laughter and sense of snugness; and so to bed at last, St. Ursula-wise, in the little cabin that was all their very own.

Indeed, the show-people are a contented folk, chiefly, I think, because they rarely want

to be anything but what they are. They like the life for itself, not for its gains and profits. They generally seem to have enough money, if not a great superfluity. Some people seem have a vague idea of travelling show-folk as living in Rembrandt interiors on a Salvator Rosa background, in a scene of perpetual high lights and fuliginous shadows full of flashing eyes, tangled gipsy locks, dirt, confusion, clamour, and picturesqueness. They are instead a quiet and reserved people, subdued in manner, clannish, living a life apart; scrupulously clean and tidy, as indeed any one must be who lives in a caravan; self-reliant, asking little from any one except some tolerance from officials and freedom to come and go and offer their simple wares; and you rarely find a gipsy among them. They inter-marry among themselves, and are very proud of their descent from some bygone Champion Sword-swallower or Queen of the Tight-rope; success, if it comes to them, is but modest, reckoned in terms of money; failure means that they are down and out, and there will be no one waiting to help them, except perhaps their own folk.

I have said they are a contented people, and so they are, especially the elders. But among the younger ones, as is natural enough, a little breeze blowing from the land of What-might-have-been will sometimes stir and rustle the leaves of contemplative thought. The Princesses told us they had another married sister, and that she lived in a house with a real doorstep, which she could whiten, twice a day if she liked! "But," we protested, "look at the beautiful steps of your own caravan! Real mahogany, with brass finishings, and hook off and on with a touch!" "Yes, but you can't *whiten* them," sighed the Princesses wistfully. "And, besides," they added, "*she* has a permanent address!" They went on to confess that when the time came for them to think of marriage too, they intended to aim high – to aim even at a permanent address and a doorstep that could be whitened! Such are the rash dreams of youth! But it is good to carry an ideal about with you, however unattainable it be; and, as R. L. Stevenson has it, to travel hopefully (and in a caravan too!) is better than to arrive (even at a whiteable doorstep).

These girls, by the way, wore the long, tight-waisted corsets in which the fisher-girls, and factory-girls too, of Boulogne so delight the eye. And within the last few weeks I have encountered young gipsy women on the road in just the same type of corset. It was a real pleasure to see it again, with its touch of old-worldliness and even of dignity. If a Paris dressmaker can be imagined visiting a Berkshire common, she might be tempted to try a revision of next season's fashions, and give us an outline once more – if it was only, like Mr. Mantalini's dowager's, a demd outline.

Talking of caravan steps, which are really short ladders, almost perpendicular and without handrail, these have a special influence on the development of the caravan child. For the caravan-born infant, as soon as it can notice anything at all, is swift to detect the contrast between his own cabin'd, cribb'd, confined surroundings and the wonderful great world he catches a glimpse of through the little door – a world consisting of a mighty green common, dotted with white geese plucking at the grass of it, and horses and donkeys tethered here and there, and daddy and other gods passing freely to and fro. But alas! between you and it stretches a mighty cliff, down which a dizzy ladder crawls! Well, what of it? Such things have got to be tackled sooner or later. So as soon as it can roll or wriggle, and certainly before it can walk, the caravan-infant is down that ladder, somehow, and in due course up it again, and no one knows how it does it, because they are too busy to notice, and they wouldn't interfere if they did in any case, and it never falls, and wouldn't in the least mind if it did.

Few things, I think, are more permanent than the amusements that go to make up a country fair. Changes of course, come along in time, but they are slow, and more in the nature of adaptations and improvements than revolutions. I suppose the most eternal feature of a fair is the roundabout. As the highest expression of the emotion of joy, we would all of us naturally choose to spring upon a charger and ride forth at top speed into the boundless prairie. As we can hardly do that and yet be back in time for tea, we go round and round and shut our eyes at intervals, trying to imagine that we are travelling as straight as a cannon-ball. And if the horse must needs be of wood, at least it is steady and demands small skill from its rider. I will here ask connoisseurs of this form of *haute école*[2] to note that in the best circles such horses have their names painted on their necks, and that these names are never invented; they are all the names of very real horses of old time, taken from some official studbook or other. This ought to add an interest to every ride, in a real sportsman. Once I had the fortune to bestride the mighty

Eclipse himself, in wooden effigy; and what gave that ride its special touch of romance was, that it was in a small provincial town but a few miles from the very place where that peerless horse was foaled. Only a day or two before I had walked over the now desolate spot on the edge of the downs. Wheeled over by plover and played upon by rabbits, only some slight irregularities of the turf that now covered the site told where once a great house stood.

The English public is faithful in the main to horses, and does not greatly care to ride a bear or an ostrich. Pink pigs with blue ribbons round their necks, so popular in France, where the whole roundabout will consist of placid pink pigs, I have never met in England, though there are few more pleasing sights than M. le Maire, M. le Notaire, and the rest of the principal inhabitants of a small French town, clad in straw hats, long black frock-coats, and yellow boots well turned up at the toes, gravely circling round, each on the back of the pinkest and shiniest of pigs. The great farmyard cock, again, crested and open-beaked, with wings outstretched and one brawny, scaly leg flung far behind him, is not so usual as in France – which perhaps is natural. It is the old English instinct to bestride a horse and not a griffin.

But horses must give way, in shows as elsewhere, to the march of time, and dummy motor cars have long challenged the supremacy of Eclipse and his mates. Children, I think, prefer them, because they can grasp the dummy steering-wheel and pretend they are driving. And pretend they do, most earnestly. And now to the cars has succeeded a new thing, the chairoplane, which assuredly has come to stay. This fairy thing, with its bird-like undulations, its rushes, and its tarryings, is as attractive to look upon as (I should imagine) to form a part of. It is a pretty sight, on some ancient village green, while the upper sky still holds the waning daylight, and the flares are lighting up over the ground below, to see a dozen village maidens, with the silk stockings, scanty skirts and shingled heads that were denied their less emancipated mothers of my own youth, flying with the motion of doves far above one's head. As the poet has it:

Although I enter not,

Yet round about the spot

Oft-times I hover!

As one stands at gaze the daylight slowly wanes, the yellower flares begin to take charge of the atmosphere, the organ brays and the speed increases, and the fluttering riders swing out horizontally in the most bewitching of poses; then sink languidly, droopingly, to rest and earth, and the spell is broken.

Next to the roundabouts must surely be ranked the swing-boats, that tear the insides out of you at the top of every ascent; beloved of the younger and more daring sort, because there seems always just a ghost of a chance that by an extra hard pull one may succeed in completing the revolution and looping the loop. And then we come to another class of sport altogether, the coco-nut-throwing, ring-throwing, dart-throwing, all for some very small chance of winning a prize. (Coco-nuts, be it noted, were too expensive to be given away in the young Sanger's days.) Some joy in one's skill as a Discobolus may enter into these sports, but the real inspiring motive is the gambler's. Indeed these poor little wooings of fortune may be said to have atrophied down from the full-blooded days when fairs, and especially racecourses, had their gambling-booths open to all and free of interference, each with its tempting piles of gold and silver displayed on its long table. To sum up, then, it may be roughly said that the joys of a fair range themselves under two heads – the delight of exhilarating motion; the excitement of an element of gamble, however trumpery the possible reward.

Perhaps the greatest change that has taken place in show-life in our generation is the disappearance of freaks and monstrosities; and this, it will surely be agreed by all, is a change entirely for good. Of old, freaks were the mainstay of every show. The first fair of importance that I ever attended – I was ten years old at the time – was that of St. Giles's, at Oxford, and I seem to recollect that giants, dwarfs, fat ladies, tattooed ladies,

mermaids, six-legged calves, and distorted nature of every variety formed the backbone of the show. These have now passed away, and the public taste no longer demands to be disgusted. It must be twenty years since I saw even so much as a fat lady, and that was far down in the West Country, where traditions linger and preferences die hard. Although a printed notice informed you that this mountain of flesh was so genuine throughout that any lady in the audience was permitted, nay invited, to test by pinching, though gentlemen, in the interest of good manners, were kindly requested to refrain; and though a biographical pamphlet related, *inter alia*, that Madame Aurelia's bulk entirely forbade her travelling by train, and a special two-horse van had therefore to be kept at her disposal, yet one could not help feeling uneasily, as one gazed in awe, that there was something wanting. A day or two later, having taken my place in a third-class compartment of a local train, I was greatly pleased when Madame Aurelia – in mufti, of course – hopped in as lightly as a bird. We were already five a side, but Madame Aurelia's arrival did not seem to affect our density particularly. She was an amusing woman, and was the life and soul (if hardly the body) of the company, who could not know of course – for there was really nothing to tell them – that they were entertaining such an angel unawares. Illusion, as the showman knows, is nearly everything.

But I have sometimes reflected since, that my cheerful acquaintance of the railway carriage had possibly been understudying the real Madame Aurelia, and that on that occasion we had all been "spoofed." Verily the showman hath need of "spoof" as well as illusion. As in the famous picture of Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy, the showman walks between Spoof and Illusion, hand in hand with both.

Yet freaks may still linger on, here and there; but I have not seen a real freak-collection since the days of Barnum, who rather specialised in freaks and always put them in the forefront of his shows. But Barnum, though a great showman, was a bit behind the times, on this side of the water at least. Freaks were already becoming *démodé*[3] when he brought his lot over here, though his freaks were good freaks. I can still remember his Fat Lady, who was not only quite reasonably fat but both young and pretty, which of course is not in the bond. I have called her reasonably fat, for I do not think I have ever seen in any show what I would call a *really* fat lady. Elsewhere, perhaps, but not in a show.

The travelling freak-van of old had its contents concealed behind a painted canvas, covering the whole front and depicting the object within under conditions: and in surroundings hardly quite realizable, one was tempted to think, within the limitations of a caravan. There mermaids combed their hair on rocks, or swam lazily about in warm tropic seas; there boa constrictors wound themselves round the bodies of paralysed Indian maidens, in the depth of Amazonian jungles. Were it a giant who lurked within, a troop of Lifeguardsmen, helmeted and plumed, rode far below his outstretched arm; while elsewhere the mighty African lion strewed the sand with the dismembered fragments of a hundred savages. All this I absorbed somewhat disconsolately, at my first St. Giles's Fair, wandering sadly down the row of painted booths; for my private means would not allow of a closer acquaintance with the interiors, and so I was obliged in imagination to swim in golden lagoons and wander through parrot-haunted jungles which I was not fated to reach in the flesh. Perhaps after all I had the best of the bargain; for even I could not help noticing, after a while, that the audiences remained within for a remarkably short time, considering all the glories that awaited them there, and that when they came out there was on all their faces what the Brer Rabbit book calls "a spell ob de dry grins," showing that they had been well "spoofed" and knew it. And in fact the whole thing was unabashed "spoofery" – clumsy fakes, dried fish, abortions in bottles, mangy and sickly animals cooped in packing-cases, and so on.

There is, however, a class of spoof which is really ingenious and witty and amusing as well, and would divert an initiate just as much as those who were deceived. Sanger was a master at that sort of joyous fake, two good examples of which will be found in the tale of Madame Stevens, the Pig-faced Lady, in Chapter XV, and that of the Pipe-smoking Oyster in Chapter XXXII. The pack of ferocious wolves, too, that broke loose and tore a horse to pieces in the very heart of London was a most creditable and agreeable stunt, and Sanger was justifiably proud of it.

It is to the cinema that much of this wholesome change in the public taste is due. Few fairs of any size are now without an excellent cinema, where we country-folk get the stuff

we really like – that is, something as far removed as possible from the quiet and somewhat eventless life we lead. Nature studies and the like may appeal to a jaded London audience; we would fain be, for the fleeting moment, something rather slightly different from our daily selves – say a New York millionaire in love with an Indian half-breed; or a lovely heroine, one moment dancing a two-step in a vast and glittering hall thronged with rank and fashion, the next, without even an audible click, being swept down foaming rapids, raising an appealing, be-diamonded hand to heaven, and wearing, strangely enough, three times as much clothing as she ever appears in on dry land. We like – indeed we prefer – when we call on our stockbroker to buy a hundred Rubbers, to find him stretched out on the floor with a bowie-knife through his chest and to be ourselves arrested for the murder. We like it because it is not exactly the sort of life we daily lead; and as we stroll homeward across the starlit common towards our farm-house, vicarage, or simple thatched cottage, we think, "I wish – oh, *how* I wish – I had married an Indian half-breed!"

If in these random recollections of mine there is found more than a touch of the idyllic, little of the sort is seen in this book of Mr. Sanger's, recording as it does the facts of a strenuous life in the hardest of dry lights. Sanger was born in 1827, and was actively helping his showman-father as early as 1833, when these memoirs begin; and rural England then was as far removed from the England of to-day as from the Sicily of Theocritus. Though it was also the country of *Cranford* and *Our Village*, it was still the country of Fielding, where the police were a small and a feeble folk, and people continued to settle their feuds with fist and cudgel; where, too, unfortunately for the poor showman, the three orders of squire, parson, and "tough" seemed to join forces against him. The squire "lagged" or "jugged" him without much inquiry into right or wrong; the parson "barred" him, and incited his congregation to do the same; while the rough element, after a fair or a race-meeting, considered it a fitting ending to a happy day to smash up the defenceless showman and all his belongings. Of course it is just those scenes of crimes and violence that would make the most vivid impression on the mind of a little boy, and doubtless there were also, in due course, idylls and spells of tranquillity; but the fact remains that the first half of the book consists of a string of animated scenes both of actual and appalling crime and of most terrifying misadventure.

But the period was also the one in which Dickens was busy collecting his first impressions of that side of life, and in the early chapters his show-people leap to life again and show themselves justified in every detail. Here is a passage, for instance, from the record of 1833 (Dickens would then be twenty-one) in which the little George, aged six, was shrilly proclaiming the attractions of his father's peep-show:

" 'Walk up!' I would pipe, 'walk up and see the only correct views of the terrible murder of Maria Martin. They are historically accurate and true to life, depicting the death of Maria at the hands of the villain Corder in the famous Red Barn. You will see how the ghost of Maria appeared to her mother on three successive nights at the bedside, leading to the discovery of the body and the arrest of Corder at Eveley Grove House, Brentford, seven miles from London. . . . The arrest of the murderer Corder as he was at breakfast with the two Miss Singletons. Lee, the officer, is seen entering the door and telling Corder of the serious charge against him. Observe the horrified faces of the ladies, and note, also, so true to life are these pictures, that even the saucepan is shown upon the fire and the minute-glass upon the table timing the boiling of the eggs!' "

There you find the authentic note: all that wealth of small detail so beloved of Mrs. Jarley and her audiences and told in just the same language. In Chapter XXVIII, again, is a corroboration of the exposure by Dickens in *Bleak House* of the grisly details of London burying-places.

Nothing that Dickens did in this line was truer to life than Mrs. Grudden, who is still to be found attached to many circuses, contentedly doing all the odd jobs that seem to be nobody's business in particular, and a solid line or two of her own as well. Such a one we came across once in a little seaside town. When the weary caravans drew into their pitch late one afternoon, it was Mrs. Grudden who unharnessed the horses and led them off to water, helped everybody and directed everybody without fuss or ostentation, started the fire, washed the greens, prepared supper, and at odd moments sat at caravan

steps and mended costumes. Next morning she was early in the High Street, in bonnet and shawl, with a capacious basket, doing all the marketing for the troupe. When the afternoon performance began, it was she who took our money at the box-office, and when the principal item in the programme was reached at last, to wit, the Grand International Fantastic Bareback Ballata[4], and the band played in the tall spotted old circus-horse, with easy amble and gentle inclination ringwards, there on his pad, to our great delight, stood Mrs. Grudden, erect, sylph-like, if a trifle bunchy in the upper quarters. As they swung round the arena, the horse and she, we were given the nations, each in turn, with the appropriate costume, dance, and pantomime. The costumes she seemed to shake out of herself as a sailor shakes a reef out of a sail; in turn they were swiftly discarded and flung to earth, while such things as caps, shillelaghs, and the flag of the moment were deftly tossed up to her by the clown. As France, erect in Columbine skirt of red, white, and blue and a cap of Liberty, she danced the *Carmagnole*[5] to the music of the *Marseillaise*[6]; anon a Spanish matador, with flowing cloak and little round cap with button on top, she thrust with an imaginary rapier at a fire-breathing bull, who, fortunately for us all, was not present, though even if he had been I should have felt quite safe under the ægis of Mrs. Grudden. As a sailor-boy in loose blue slacks she danced an English hornpipe and heaved at the said slacks with a will; an Irishman, pipe in hatband and breeches unbuttoned at the knees, she jigged it heel and toe; and in a twinkling was Rob Roy MacGregor, in kilt, plaid, and bonnet, footing a reel, with the appropriate twirls and howls, never quitting the broad pad of her imperturbable steed. When we tore ourselves away at last, glancing towards the caravans we espied Mrs. Grudden, back in her bonnet and shawl and rusty black gown, seated on an upturned bucket, contentedly peeling spuds.

Sanger's father, the proprietor – and constructor, apparently – of the primitive peep-show of the early chapters, may fairly be considered one of the ancestors of the present cinema in direct line. "It had twenty-six glasses, so that twenty-six persons could see the views at the same time, the pictures being pulled up and down by strings. At night it was illuminated by a row of tallow candles set between the pictures and the observer, and requiring very regular snuffing." The pictures themselves, which measured about four feet by two and a half, were painted by a (usually) intoxicated Irishman who lived in Leather Lane, his prices being for ordinary crimes (but with plenty of strong colour), three-and-sixpence; battle-pieces, where corpses were more plentiful, seven-and-six. From this to Hollywood and Los Angeles may seem a long road, but at least it is a straight one. In 1852 we find the ever-up-to-date Sanger replacing his father's faithful old peep-show by one of those new-fangled magic-lanterns. The rest is modern history.

George Sanger, the genesis of whose self-bestowed title must be sought in his own entertaining pages, was quite the most famous showman of his day or perhaps of any day. He was Napoleonic in his courage, swift decisions, and power to recognise and seize opportunities; most of all, perhaps, in his evident conviction that there was no limit except actual population to the possible extension of the show-world, so that if the happy time ever arrived when we were all at last, men and beasts together, grouped under various shows and eternally displaying ourselves and our tricks to one another, he would not be more than satisfied. He brought circuses to the very doors of thousands who, but for him, might never have seen them; and possibly this very insistence of his, that you should see a circus whether you would or not, is the cause of the somewhat dulled public appetite for this form of entertainment that seems to be noticeable now. That, and perhaps the growth of the passion for games. Fifty years ago the serried masses of the football fans would to some extent have streamed into Sanger's shows. Sanger would have seen to it; he would have made them.

It is interesting to note that Sanger, who, beginning as a conjurer, had handled every possible line of show-stuff, in his time, from the moment that he first took over a circus seems to have recognised the one and only profession for his powers, and never looked back, but went on from triumph to triumph till his circuses formed a planetary system all over the Continent, and in England were almost a Milky Way. He made enormous sums of money, and his elephants and camels were as the flocks and herds of the Old Testament patriarchs. Those were the palmy days of circuses. All right-minded persons went to circuses – their children took good care they did. The glaring posters covered every hoarding, on every road one met their great mysterious closed vans. Where are they all now, and – what is more interesting – what change in the public taste is causing

their shrinkage in number, if not their disappearance? Possibly the dwindling employment of the horse has led to an abatement of the interest taken in him as an animal. Children nowadays much prefer a shiny motor car to a cream-coloured Arab or a piebald pony, though no motor that I know of can stand on its hind-legs and do enchanting tricks, or lie down and pretend to be dead. Or perhaps it simply means that there is no longer a "Lord" George Sanger.

Well, if our circus-revels now are ended, which I devoutly hope is not really the case, at least their record will remain, writ by their own Prospero. For a magician George Sanger really was, sending out his Ariels along all the roads of the world, and with masques and solemn processions entertaining kings and queens – yea, even her who gives its title to that bygone period, Queen Victoria herself. Therefore some will prefer the later chapters of this simple but high-spirited book, records of triumph upon triumph in this strange world of barbaric display and trumpeting processions wherein he moved like an emperor. For myself I like best the early struggles, the simple joys and sorrows, the wanderings of little George and his indomitable father upon the open road with its ale-houses and toll-gates, over commons, or with their pitch on a wayside strip of grass, with their peep-show and its accompanying patter. And I like to think that in one of their little roadside audiences might have been seen, lingering and listening and noting, a handsome young man, a bit of a dandy in his dress, already known to his friends as a lad of some promise – one Charles Dickens.

Kenneth Grahame