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WITH THE WUFF WUFF SHOW

Certain Matters of Fact, Which Include Lions and Men and Women.

By Eddie Corbett

Sketches by Lawrence Semon.

I DISCOVERED on my first night at Bostock's—a 60-mile-an-hour gale caroming in from the Atlantic and thirty-seven untamed lions joining in the chorus of the playful refrain:

"Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!" and I hadn't been asleep in my little trundle bed in the staff dormitory but some part of an hour when Nero got loose.

Nero? Oh, he was only one of the lions, a little Calcutta pilgrim of about seven hundred pounds weight and a roar that made the gale in the eaves of the Sea Beach Palace sound that night like the tinkle of a baby alarm clock.

SCARED? Oh, no, not at all. No one was scared. Ikey Brown—his real, honest-to-goodness name—the squat, fat Dutchman whose business it was to cut up horse meat for the eat-'em-alives, was cleaning out the seal pool when Nero announced his emergence and proceeded at once, or sooner, to fall, drop or dive into and under the 40,000 gallons of real sea water of the tank.

Folk familiar with Sea Beach Palace, the original Bostock place at Coney, will remember its layout—a good, long block running parallel with Surf avenue and another long block running back from the avenue at the east end, forming an L, with about thirty lion cages side by side, on both sides of the Surf avenue section, and cages of tigers, leopards, snakes, jackals, zebras, llamas and other denizens of the forest and jungle along the shorter arm of the L, backed at its far end by a kraal of elephants.

THE staff dormitory consisted of a tier of rooms leading off the balcony that backed toward Surf avenue. My room was at the junction of the L. From my doorway I could survey at a glance all the floor space of the Palace—could see anything going or coming, mostly going.

After the final night show at Bostock's, which finished at about 11 o'clock, all lights had to go out. A single small incandescent shed a faint glow about the entrance. Another small peep of light informed the observer where the far end of the L section was. Wild animals in captivity, be it known, need darkness and quiet for sleep.

I was surprised at the stillness of the place when I retired at about midnight. I had expected a ragout of intermittent roars. But only an occasional squawk from the cockatoos or the neighing of the spotted donkeys broke the silence. I am a light sleeper and had turned in with some misgivings of disturbance and mayhap an impossible night—my first with an animal show.

I CAME to from slumber all in a heap.

The gale was playing with the rafters, the wind and clatter had started the lions, and the reverberations of the thirty-seven had started into noisy action much of everything else in the way of small animal life on the premises.

No, I didn't think I was dreaming when I came to. I knew precisely where I was. I was through my door and hanging spellbound over the balcony in a second. In another I was at the window of my room, wondering whether lions and tigers ever climbed up slant shingled roofs. But there was no way out through the window, save by a drop of some thirty feet to a concrete court below. Another second and I was back again hanging over the rail. I didn't know what had happened; didn't know, indeed, whether anything irregular had occurred. But the howl of the sea and the roars of the jungle weren't my customary lullabies.

"GET back, Nero is oudt!"

Ikey Brown shouted that to me through the gloom from his precarious shelter behind the slender pickets that hemmed in the seal pool. Then he dived, or flopped, or slipped. The are lights along West Eighth street, the side of the Palace running parallel with the shorter stem of the L, let in enough light through a running wall of glass transoms to lift objects out of the darkness. From my station on the balcony I saw Ikey wave his arms toward me warningly, saw him crumple beside the pool, heard the splash and the words he said, but understood nothing.

I didn't "get" what was doing. That is, I didn't get it right away. But I got it soon enough, and got it amply, for presently I heard the heavy padding of hurried feet coming from the lions' quarters, saw two small balls of sulphurous fire bearing down toward my end of the Palace, heard a noise that sounded like a locomotive coughing wildly in a tunnel, and——

NO, I didn't beat it right back into the room and close the door. The wind had closed the door for me, and it was a snap lock, and it was dark, and I didn't know the layout of the tier, being new to everything; and I couldn't get into any of the other rooms, and I couldn't get out into the night or the ocean because I'd have to pass through a part of the L, and I didn't have any firearms or other weapons, and I didn't want any.

E-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!

When I found my door closed I didn't know where I was going, but I was instantly on my way. When I arrived I was sitting astride one of the upper triangle crossbeams that supported the peaked roof of the Palace, thirty-five or forty feet above the level of the thing of opalescent eyes and cylinder lung power.

CAPT. JOHN BONAVITA who, three times each day handled Nero and twenty-six other lions in an exhibition in the arena in the center of the big amphitheatre, shot out of his quarters at the height of the tumult in his robe de nuit, gave one look, turned right around and shot right back again. Pete Barlow, who used to sass a lot of elephants through stunts in the arena performances, stumbled out of his room sleepily, got one good look and then heard a quick curfew somewhere. Weedon, the trainer of the mixed group, who used to pull the whiskers of the eat-'em-raw tiger Goldie, was also among those present. But it was only for a second. Then he, too, decided just to leave his card and go. Tudor, the truly British general manager for Bostock, also got a tiny peep from his observation tower on the dormitory tier, murmured something that sounded like Godsavothequeen and melted into space—just like that.

Some vanishing done that night.

Madame Morelli, the plucky little Frenchwoman who used to dominate a group of savage jaguars, and go into the arena most of the time with bites and scratches hidden under her smiles and satins, was the star vanishing lady of Nero's cast. She threw her door open a little, uttered an exclamation like "Ouf, Mon-Dieu!" and was no more.

BUT what happened?

Nothing, and everything.

And how did they get Nero back? They didn't get him back. He just went back. "Jess nachully" found his way to his own cage and stayed there quite content, devouring a sheep he had commandeered during his truancy. Bonavita and Weedon would in all probability have got the beast back eventually. I saw enough of these trainers during my Bostock experience to know they are brave men. Though they ducked at the first flash of Nero, footloose, they were back again with their pistols, whips, staves and shields to give the runaway battle. I don't know how long Ikey Brown stayed under water in the seal pool. I saw him, drenched and chattering, in the huddle of people and things during the counting up of damages effected by Nero, after the lion was safely caged—a huddle that included snake cages wrecked, cockatoos free, donkeys running wild, arena chairs smashed and in heaps, slot machines prostrate, popcorn and candy booths down and the corn and candy carpeting the floor, llamas running up and down in their cages and expectorating at every one and everything, simians chattering, elephants trumpeting, lions roaring, cobras hissing!

Fine!

And Bostock, fortunately for the help, slept through it all. No one dared to tell him until next morning that some one had been careless in leaving the sliding door of Nero's cage unfastened.

I HAD joined out with Bostock late of a Monday afternoon, and wasn't adjusted to things when the gale and Nero broke loose. It was arranged that I was to get seriously onto my job Tuesday afternoon—watch the arena performances of the different trainers and their different wild groups, and, as Bostock put it, "get ideas." I decided I'd get about the right perspective of the exhibitions from a seat in the balcony which was directly over the main entrance to the Palace. Several children, a few women, and the six members of the Dago band that furnished the entr'acte symphonies for the show were in the balcony when I settled down to watch my first wild animal training exhibition. I had never seen a woman handle wild cats before, and the matter-of-fact way in which the little French woman went at her task of making her captives walk tight ropes, balance see saws and climb poles fascinated me. Every once in a while some member of her group would rebel, snarl and aim a blow at the little woman with the whip. It was all very exciting, even after my experience of the night before.

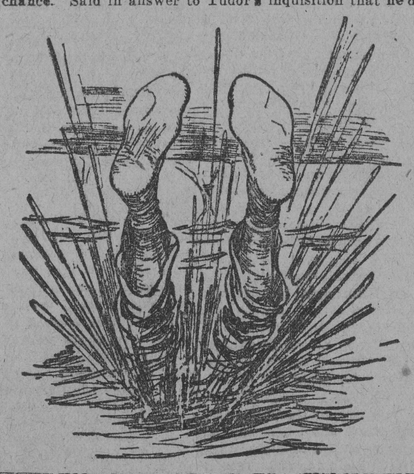
NEXT on the bill came Bonavita. Bonavita in his uniform was a striking figure—tall, shapely, graceful, masculine. I had reached some conclusions about him, his daring and his caution, from what I'd seen the night before, and I settled back in my seat in the balcony with thrills fairly bursting for something to fasten to. The thrills didn't go long a-begging. Bonavita was scarcely in the ring, with the wooden doors of his entrance closed and bolted behind him, following the Bostock rule, when something happened, and in a moment Bonavita's twenty-seven lions were playing football with each other, clawing, scratching, biting, snarling, roaring and catapulting members here and there high in the air, the fights being among pairs, trios, quartettes and just bunches, some of the beasts using the bulk of the bodies that were down as mounds for leaps designed to carry them to freedom beyond the sharp prong palings that ran about the top of the steel stockade. Lions' blood ran in rivulets. Attendants ran toward the arena from every direction. I saw a white-faced attendant named Stevenson, lame of a leg from a blow of a lion, open the doors at the back of the ring a few inches, then quickly shut them. I saw Ikey Brown with a long steel rod working valiantly from a safe place outside the cage, trying to stop the scrimmages. Blank cartridge pistols were fired and fired, trainers and helpers shouted commands and curses, but the scraps went on, and the hair flew and the gore ran, with Bonavita fairly hemmed in, now at one side, now at another, pale as a sheet, but as alert as a weasel, seeking to do, as he explained afterward, three things—keep his feet, keep out of range, and, if possible, get out of the arena.

BONAVITA got out of the mess finally unscathed. But he was in that mill for ten minutes, which seemed at least a year to the new boy in the press department. Everybody in the balcony and in the main auditorium below was transfixed during the excitement. Men, women and children stood still as graven images when the danger to the trainer was made clear by the excitement of the keepers. A woman beside me gasped: "I want to get out!" "So do I," I remember I answered in a scared whisper. But neither of us moved. Indeed, no one moved much until Bonavita succeeded in sidestepping his way back to the entrance gates of the cage, and later through the opening. I got a look at the members of the Dago band at the height of the drama—every face bloodless, every eye popping.

One would think the things that happened to Bonavita at Bostock's would cure him forever of handling wild animals, but I heard yesterday that he is back at the game again, this time for Carl Laemmle's jungle movies.

MY first afternoon as chronicler for a jungle show was a nice one for fleas. One of those I got took the shape of a boat ticket back to Broadway, where a tame cat daren't whisk its tail in the open nor a puppy snarl at your boots. But goodnatured Tudor, the business manager, talked at me, saying everybody went loco the first days with a wild beast show, that the things I'd seen weren't real parts of the play, and that I could sleep at a hotel if I wished, and do most of my work outside if I chose, and I stayed.

THEY hired an Irishman my second morning at the Palace. He'd come unrecommended—just took a chance. Said in answer to Tudor's inquisition that he'd been "handling animals all his life," and got the job he asked for—"helping" at anything." Hired on the spot, he was put to work at once, cleaning out the cages. It developed later that the man meant "working around horses all his life," when he verbally qualified for his post. Reardon—his name—energetically grabbed the broom that was handed him, swung into the long alley that ran at the back of the cages, swung open the door of a cage containing Baltimore and Boston, two Bengals, swept the bones and other refuse of the cages nicely in a heap, discovered other flotsam near the bodies of the reclining lions, who were looking at him in astonishment—cages never being professionally cleaned until the beasts are first turned out—discovered that the lions would have to move if the new white wings was to make a good job of his first assignment, swung the straw end of the broom aloft and the handle end down, pursed his lips, clucked a commanding gid-dap, as he'd cluck to a horse, prodded the brutes sharply several times, and said "Gwan!"



YOU'LL find a record among the files of the Coney Island Fire Department in their engine house on West Eighth street, summoning them to Bostock's that morning. It was on account of Reardon. Before the lions could turn the new broom boy into scrapple, before the firemen came, Ikey Brown had managed to shove into the cage one of the board shields, shaped after the manner of a small door. The lions had backed Reardon into a corner and resisted everybody's efforts to free him until someone thought of the firehouse near by. The fireman literally had to chop Reardon to liberty. When I left Bostock's toward the end of the Summer Reardon's hat and coat were still awaiting their owner. Unhurt, once he struck Surf avenue after his escape, he kept going. Some one predicted he would come back.

"He vouldn't come back if you gif him the Atlantic Ocean an' all the ships on it," said Ikey Brown.

BOSTOCK, who had a frank blue eye and an ingenuous mien, tossed me a letter my third morning with the show. It was from a firm of opticians in Murray street, Manhattan, saying two men would be at the Palace next morning with many sizes of glass eyes, one of which would probably serve the animal man's purpose. Answering my look of inquiry, Bostock supplemented that if I'd take a glance at Major, a lion in one of the cages of the L, I'd notice he was minus an eye. The men were coming down to insert a glass one. The thing struck me as fantastic, unnecessary, absurd, even cruel. I carefully voiced some of my impressions to the boss. "Women don't like unsightly things," he said. The talk about the operation, with me was wholly ethical. A conclusion reached, I walked away, thinking what a curious thing such a proceeding would be. How would the lion act? What would he think? What would the other animals think?

"Think any of the newspaper men would care to see the thing done?"

Bostock's question caught me off my guard. My senses had been affected by the glass-eye proposal solely as a weird proposition. The publicity or business side of it hadn't occurred to me. I swung a quick look at Bostock. His expression was as bland and as innocent of guile as a baby's.

THE newspaper men—writers, artists, photographers, —and the opticians were promptly on the job next morning. I took a preliminary look at Major. He was stretched out serenely, semi-dozing and yawning occasionally, a habit I noticed among his kind after a meal. The opticians proved to be two Germans, who spoke English brokenly. Bostock called Ikey Brown, who originally hailed from Hamburg, into the breach as interpreter. The two oculists listened intently to Ikey's explanations and cautions. Ikey and Bonavita would first rope Major, he explained, and then with Major's head securely roped so that it would be close to the front bars of the cage, the artificial eye men standing close to the stage on the outside could go to work.

The Germans seemed scared. Apologizing to Ikey, they asked to be excused for a few moments for a private conference. Ikey reported later that they were counting their chances of mishap during this communion. But eventually they declared themselves ready for business, the reporters and others stepped back out of the way, and, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, the two eye men started in.

WHEN the beast was thrown and securely roped, one, holding the false eye in his right hand, stole it quietly into the cage through the bars, and gradually lowered the hand until it was within a few inches of the eyeless socket, Major's good orb being on the under side. The other optician, obviously following a prearranged plan, slowly stole his right hand through the bars and suspended it just beneath his companion's hand. The plan appeared to be that at a signal from the man holding the eye, his comrade would open the lids of the empty socket, hold them open and, while thus open, the man with the eye would do the dirty work. Gradually the hand making for the socket neared its goal, gradually the hand holding the glass eye descended. It was a critical moment. What would Major do? I took a look about me.

TRAINERS, newspaper men, every one, even Bostock, seemed fascinated. I held my breath. Suddenly there was a roar you could hear over at Brighton; about four reporters went down, bowled over by the two opticians, who also fell, in the recoil from the surprise of what Major did, which was to roar, snarl, snap, kick and struggle until it seemed he must break his thongs and wreck the cage. The men were untouched by Major—but such a skedaddle. It required all the finesse of Bostock—and he had a lot, as I discovered in time—and the importunities of the newspaper men, who didn't wish their errand from Park Row to Coney to be fruitless, to lure the two Germans inside the building again, they having fled to Surf avenue as fast as they could leg it after they had picked themselves up from their tumble when Major started to do things. The comedy lasted a good hour, the men trying again and again, and failing, and Major setting up a din every time the lids were touched. But they got the eye in at last.

IT is to be noted that when I went from Broadway to Bostock at Coney I was a seasoned theatrical press agent, skilled in device, trained in devious ways, experienced in making unreal things look actual and, in publicity, suspicious of all things that appeared frank.

I remained in front of Major's cage after every one else had left. Hardly more than two days out of New York, where most of my work concerned theatres, where exciting things rarely if ever happened, and here I was tingling with my fourth thrill. The whole business of the glass eye thing began to come back at me, from its beginning. I thought of a lot of things besides. Slowly it began to get me that maybe Bostock's eye wasn't blue, after all. Was the whole thing a scheme for advertising? Did they work as finely as this with an animal show? Did Major really need an eye? Did women really object to his empty socket? I looked at Major while I ruminated. He was striding easily up and down his cage, staring indifferently enough after the vanishing opticians and newspaper men. I remarked as I gazed at him that the artificial eye was surely an improvement in his appearance. The eye didn't seem to hurt him. I'd expected it would. The beast paid no attention whatever to me. His interest seemed to be wholly upon the departing crowd. I was watching him, fascinated.

THE last of the visitors finally disappeared around the joint of the L, and then Major paused and looked full at me. I've read the Seton Thompson and other nature fake stuff, and have no great sympathy with it. Major didn't talk to me, and I don't believe he inspired telepathically the thoughts that crystallized into unspoken soliloquies in my mind as I continued to watch him. But the thought tissue as I gazed was actual.

"Are they gone?" I heard Major ask, looking me squarely in the eye with his one good and one false lamp.

"Who?" I asked.

"The reporters," he answered.

"Yes," I replied.

"Good," he exclaimed, and promptly screwed up the side of his face harboring the glass eye, and out it dropped.

I HURRIED to Bostock to tell him what had happened. I wanted him to tell the newspaper men. I got his ear unnoticed and whispered the tidings. He patted me on the back paternally, and sent me down to Sea Gate—the very end of the Sea Gate strip—to see if I could hire a boat at once. When I returned the reporters had all gone. No one had thought of taking a final look at Major. Next day's papers carried columns and pictures of the operation. None of them had a hint of the climax—the dislodged eye. There were no boats to be hired at the end of Sea Gate. Bostock, upon my return, thanked me for going, just the same.

During my routine work of the afternoon, I couldn't shake off the obsession of Major's operation. Was it all a plant? Was my dispatch to Sea Gate's end a trick to get me away lest I unwittingly reveal something to the reporters? In the midst of these cogigations, I turned to Sanger, an attendant who, I'd been told, had been with Bostock many seasons.

"That glass eye thing ever done before?" I asked.

"In every city where we've showed since I've been with Bostock," he answered.

Oi! oi!

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