

"Cutting Up Old Circus Money"

The "Governor" Himself—By HARRY BARNET

NOTE—It so happens that "Governor" John F. Robinson's last activity was the relating of the stories which end with this, his reminiscences of the pioneering circus life of America. The concluding story by Mr. Barnet was in type when word was received that the old circus man had died at his winter home in Miami, Florida.

"We were crossing Lookout Mountain one Sunday morning on our way to Trenton, Georgia," the "Governor" continued. "I was a very small boy. In the menagerie we had an old white bear that had been declining for a long time. Just when we reached the top of the mountain the bear died. Now, we boys with the show had always heard that bear's oil made the best hair oil, and as a white bear cost so much more money than an ordinary bear, we thought that its grease ought to be just that much better than the oil of any other bear. If he had been a common bear we would have paid no attention to him.

"So we skinned him, and got all of the marrow out of his bones, and boiled it with the little fat that he had left on him. I guess we got a little vial of oil for all our trouble. And I remember that we hunted around and got a lot of wintergreen, and perfumed the oil with it.

"Well, we used that oil, and shortly afterward the hair came off my head. I have always thought that the white bear's grease did it, and that there was a curse on it, or something like that. You know, there always was a lot of superstition in me, and I've got a good deal of it left.

"Now, I'm an old man, and so far I've been through the world in a way that I believe no other man ever went through it," he went on without a pause. "But I've never done a good many of the things that most people think a circus owner naturally does, and I've done a good many things that most people think he never naturally does.

"For instance, I never saw a game of faro bank. No man ever saw me in a gambling house. I never gambled for anything more than a cigar. And I never have seen a professional game of baseball, nor have I attended more than two or three horse races. And I never drank liquors, except a little wine when I was a young fellow, although liquors always were before me. Everybody with the show carried whisky, and I was always welcome to a drink of it. Pa often told me that I could take a drink whenever I wanted it. But I never did it. I saw too much of the effects of liquor drinking. Liquor was no new thing to me; and it wasn't forbidden to us boys with the show. So I had no curiosity about it. But if pa had refused it to me, and had aroused my curiosity that way about it, I suppose I would have drunk it, because I would have thought it the manly thing to do.

"And we were very strict about town people drinking, or bringing intoxicants to sell, on the lot. However, they did it whenever they got the chance to do it. And that practice was one of the things that we had to contend with in the old days—men would open regular saloons on the show lot, or near to it, on show days. It caused us a lot of trouble, because too many men got drunk, and started 'hey rubes.' Finally, I issued an order that no liquors could be sold on the lot by any one; and when men started to sell on the streets or any place very close to the lot, except in saloons, I always put a stop to the traffic by sending some of my best fighters there to clean out these places.

"So you can imagine my surprise one day, just after the Civil War, when a man drove a two-horse wagon on the lot in a small Indiana town. He had at least half a dozen barrels—not kegs, but barrels—of beer in the wagon, and he proposed to sell it to the crowds waiting for the big show to open. Well, I saw a whole tent full of trouble if these people drank that beer. They would get drunk, and start a dozen fights that we would have to put a stop to; and maybe somebody would be hurt or killed.

"I went up to this man, and told him that he couldn't sell that beer on my show lot.

"Who says I can't?" he replied. "I got a permit from the owner of this here show grounds to sell beer here, and whisky, too, if I want to, and a state and a town license. I don't reckon I need anything else to sell it."

"He showed me the permits. I was helpless then, but from that day on I had a clause in my contracts for show lots giving me the privilege of ousting every liquor vender who tried to open a shop on my lot.

"Then it was up to me to get rid of this fellow in some other way. One of my men said he would do the job. He went up the street, and got a big vial of croton oil. Then he got some fellow who was in the confidence of this beer seller to talk to him. Finally, this beer man asked the town fellow to watch the beer while he unhitched and unharnessed his horses, and tied them to a wagon wheel. While he was doing that my man went to each barrel, and put enough croton oil in it to give character to the beer.

"When the beer man came back he invited everybody to have a drink with him as a starter for his business. He was a big, jovial sort of fellow anyhow, and a lot of these people did drink with him. A lot of my men went up, but they took the beer and only pretended to drink it. Of course, nobody else knew about the trick, and the country people were ignorant of what had taken place. Well, there was no more beer sold out of that wagon that day."

Despite the fact that "Governor" Robinson occupied

a place in the amusement world that no other man yet has filled, he is without doubt a disappointed man. He would much rather have been an army man than the greatest of circus executives. This ambition has led him to accumulate, and thoroughly to study for many years all the books he could buy that tell the story from cause to effect of each war in which the United States has been engaged, even to insignificant Indian wars. I seriously doubt whether there are many private libraries in the United States that contain such a collection of war books.

This love for the military cropped out in every interview that I've had with him.

"When I joined the navy I was assigned to the command of Admiral Porter," he began one afternoon, "as an ensign. Well, I never had known discipline, and I innocently got myself into a lot of scrapes when I felt awfully cheap. But the cheapest I ever felt while I was in the navy didn't have anything to do with discipline. I was mistaken for a Jew—either that or maliciously taken for one.

"Along in the winter of 1863, we were trying to get in the rear of Vicksburg, and one night we tied our gunboat in front of the plantation of Governor Sharkey, I believe his name was. He had hundreds of bales of cotton piled up a mile or two back from the landing. Next morning we captured several ox and mule teams, and plantation wagons, and went out to get a bunch of this cotton. I had charge of the train of wagons.

"There were several young daughters at the big house, and some other young ladies also there. They were out on the porch as we went by, and a young officer from our boat was

there talking to them. They were very pretty and nice young ladies and, of course, I was inclined to be a little on the flirt, or the mash, or whatever you want to call it. As we went by the house I kissed my hand to them.

"Who is that young man?" one of these girls asked the officer.

"Why, that is Mr. Robinson, from Cincinnati," he replied.

"Well, I declah," she said, "he is the first Jew I evah saw in the service."

"Well, that took all of the conceit out of me, to be mistaken for a Jew. I had little side whiskers then, and a goatee, and a small mustache, and I shaved them off as soon as I got to the boat."

One of the peculiarities of "Governor" John F. Robinson is the fact that he treasures small memories. One of the pleasantest of all of them is the fact that he once was kissed by a President of the United States.

"I guess I am the only circus fellow in the United States that a President kissed," he went on to say, after pausing to light his cigar. "And it impressed itself so thoroughly on my mind that I can remember it as though it happened but yesterday.

"Zachary Taylor was on his way through Pennsylvania to Washington for his inauguration. There were no railroads in that section of the country, and the President-elect was traveling by carriage. He passed through York, Pennsylvania, the day we were showing there, and stopped for dinner at the same hotel where we stopped. Of course, the whole population wanted to see him, and he went out on the front porch of the hotel to make a speech.

"In getting out on the porch he had to go through the room occupied by my father and mother and myself, and in passing through I suppose I attracted his attention by getting in his road. I wasn't very old, and had long, golden, curly hair, and he remarked what a handsome boy I was. Old-manlike, he ended by picking me up and kissing me. I can see that man now, picking me up. And I can see him riding down the street. I had watched him come into town. He came in in a sort of a parade, accompanied by prominent citizens, a band, and the county militia, and went down the whole length of the street. Then he turned and came back to the hotel. When President Taylor left town I watched him until he got out of sight around a bend in the road. There was quite a cortege of carriages filled with prominent and eminent men of the country in the President's party.

"But speaking of Presidents," the "Governor" continued, "I've never smoked a cigar without a holder since General Grant's last illness. You know, the General was a heavy smoker, and I believe that's what killed him. If he had used a holder I believe he would have lived much longer."

The "Governor" paused to rummage through his humidor to get a cigar that exactly suited him. And that was a job requiring some minutes, for he was a bit cranky that day. It is a safe bet that the "Governor" has burned more cigars than any ninety-nine men out of a hundred. At the mention of his name, the first

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Photograph of the last piece in existence of John Robinson circus "paper," printed in Chinese. It had been folded and laid away for nearly thirty years. This paper was used in the Chinese quarters of large cities. Chinamen are great circus goers, but after a drunken boss hostler cut off the cue of a Chinaman in 1892, in San Francisco, Chinamen all over the United States boycotted the "Governor's" Show. The paper is yellow with black lettering.

A VERY dear old lady, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, has written a letter to me. "You can't imagine how much I enjoy your 'Governor' Robinson stories," she states in that letter. "Wasn't he 'some boy'?" she unexpectedly went on to say in slang. "Many, many years ago, we lived near Seventh and College streets, in Cincinnati, and I knew him and his family. The home was on the corner, and the animals were quartered during the winter in a building on College street, right back of the home. That place always seemed like fairyland to me—the pretty wagons, and the wild animals, and especially the appeal that circus things have to wondering small children.

"Then, sixty-six years ago, I went to school in Hyde Park, not a great way from where the Robinsons later established their winter quarters in the 'Little Miami River country,' that you speak of. I think it was a good choice, for that is beautiful country. We have many recollections of its beauties.

"But before you quit writing about him," she concluded, "won't you please tell us something about the kind of man the 'Governor' is?"

And from St. Louis recently came an appreciative letter from another very dear old lady. She, also, is deeply interested in the stories that so far have appeared in THE DEARBORN INDEPENDENT, and she asked me to write a character sketch of the "Governor."

Well, this is the answer to these two letters, and in making this answer I believe that the best plan to follow is to set down here some things about the "Governor" as I have observed them, and a great many other things about his ambitions and ways of thinking in the language in which they were told to me by the man himself.

In many ways, the "Governor" is a contradiction. That is, he is not the sort of man you may think him to be, if you've pictured him to be anything like the impersonations of circus owners that you've seen on the stage, and in motion pictures. Neither is there anything about him that is suggestive of the cartoons you may have seen of circus proprietors. "Governor" Robinson is precisely like any other successful business man, plus a few notions and quirks that are the outgrowth of the things that he has seen and done.

For you must remember that he was not always a master circus mind. At one time he was a human baby, who opened his eyes nearly eighty years ago upon a world that to him was made up of a collection of scraggly wagons; wild beasts engaged in small dens painted precisely alike (for in those days, the "Governor" says, each show adopted one color for its wagons, and no other show used the same tint); and a troupe of what we might name as itinerant entertainers; that made up his father's circus. And that environment surrounded him during his boyhood, and through manhood, until he spent seventy years in it as a circus performer and owner. Of course, since the 1870's it was a very much enlarged and embellished aggregation. The "Governor" then owned it, and for fifty years he "toted" it over and about the country. Then he passed it on to his son, and it was finally sold to strangers, who took the name and good will of the aggregation along with its wagons and paraphernalia. Three generations of the same family owned the same show; the "Governor" was the connecting link between the first and the third, so that he is bound to be somewhat eccentric.

Physically, the "Governor" is a man of medium height, heavy set, and bald. "I've got no hair on my head," he said one day, "because a consumptive old white bear died one Sunday when we boys with the show had a lot of time on our hands to get into mischief."



Noted playhouse erected by the "Governor" for his children at the winter quarters.



JOHN F. ROBINSON, Viewing the parade a few years ago. This is one of the most characteristic pictures of the "Governor" ever taken.