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**SWAIN**



## Chicago, Illinois

*September 5, 1922*

I'm in the wings, watching Jonson and his boy. Mostly I'm watching the boy. Father and son are done up in rags, dancing atop wooden barrels. It's something everyone's seen before and no one minds seeing again. But then a calcium light spots the boy. He shuffles faster, windmilling his arms, gathering speed before he thrusts his feet out from under him. He spins through a backflip, lands flatfooted on his barrel, still singing, still windmilling.

The audience applauds, but the boy's barely started. He lifts himself into a handstand, taps his feet on the air above him, singing out from between his arms, upside down, sounding as good as he did right side up. People rise, whistle. Nobody can look away. The boy is a hytone note on a bill of hokum. Jonson is in the shadows now, clapping—sober, because this is a morning show.

The curtain falls and I walk along the edge of the stage, take my place on the olio. The audience is still standing for the boy. I wave my hook at them, open my valise, start both the striped and unstriped balls turning in the air. I use the curved side of my hook like the palm of a hand, get two, then three, then four balls circling in front of me. An old man in the front row stands to leave. More follow.

**Jonah Man**

The pianist starts vamping in the pit. I balance a ball on the flat of my hook, keep the others going with my good hand. One by one I bring the balls to rest, one atop the other on top of my hook. I bow my head, the column holding steady at the end of my hacked arm.

Jonson greets me offstage with a Dutch-uncle sneer that says I'm a fool to keep trying. In the weeks since he joined the bill, it's always his face watching from the wings.

Top-notch chasing, he says. Even cleared the gallery.

I set down my valise, stand so the toes of our shoes are touching. Jonson folds his arms over his dished chest.

Where would you be without your boy? I ask.

Retired, he says. He holds his laughter for a beat, then erupts in burlesque peals.

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It's what's right, I say.

It's what can't happen, the manager says. The order's the order. I bump you up, someone else is unhappy.

Since when does a fresh act get top billing?

You've seen the kid?

Yes.

All right, then.

But I've done my time. I have a good act, but it's not a finale.

Doesn't have to be. An audience needs something to wind them back down.

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Backstage, property men pace the set with pots of glue and gilt paint, touching up the plywood throne, the receding archways and corridors stenciled on the drop. One of them peers through a part in the curtain. I walk into the wings, see Jonson's boy

rehearsing on the olio. Jonson sits stage left in the front row, smoking a Hermosa and drinking from a tin flask. The boy stub-toe walks along the edge of the stage, then launches into a series of heel scuffs and buck breaks, turning the lip of the boards into a ledge, lurching as though he might topple forward. Each time it seems he's gone too far, he reels himself back, pantomimes relief. It's a balance act, designed to take control of the audience's breathing, to make them gasp and laugh in quick succession. I glance at Jonson. He's watching me watch his son. He smiles, nods toward the stage, raises his flask. I shift my eyes back to the boy. He's near the center of the olio now, standing with one leg locked, ad-libbing with his active foot. There's technique and sweat, but nothing an audience would take for effort. The manager is right. Runt letters won't hold the boy's name much longer.

I pick up my valise, head to my dressing room. The contortionist is seated on a wood stool, stripped to his underclothes, rubbing down his legs with a rank-smelling poultice. Twenty years of double splits and slides have left his spine scuted like a reptile's. We're bookends on the bill, opening and shut, something for people to look at while they walk the aisles. In the days of nickel theaters, Roy took the stage at six feet tall and ended his act coiled inside a shallow water bucket. Now he works with a trunk the size of a child's coffin.

Kill 'em? he asks.

They ran off, I say.

He grimaces, leans back on his stool, waits for a spasm to pass. Our patter is just noise where the questions should be. How many jumps before we're struck from the rolls? Is it all just luck and pull, or is there something we should have understood years ago? I flip through the back pages of a dated *Variety* while he wrangles into an aqua body suit. It isn't long before the house

boy rings his bell and Roy stands.

*Merde*, I say.

He nods. As he shuts the door behind him, I see he's left the middle buttons of his suit undone.

I have time until it's my turn again. I angle Roy's stool under the door knob, open my day bag, lift out a spare hook and balance it on my knee. From the socket, I pull down an eye-dropper, a glass vial, a doctor's needle. I thumb the top from the dropper, work the needle through the nipple. I transfer two beads of silver-blue liquid from vial to dropper, then put the cap back on with the syringe in place. I insert the needle beneath a nub of bone in my stump. Eyes shut, I feel a warmth spread through my body, another person's skin enveloping my own.

Roy returns, sweating through his suit.

How's the house? I ask.

Handcuffed.

He looks me over.

You might want to lay off, he says.

Off what?

All right, he says. Not my affair.

I wait in the wings with my back to the stage while the audience applauds the boy.

On the olio, I stare into the spot, unblinking.

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My hotel room is just a bed and window with floors and walls that don't stop the smallest sound. I shut the curtain, jostle my stub from the hook, peel off the stump sock. The flesh beneath retains an impression of the gauze. I blow the sweat dry, chafe away flecks of dead skin.

I swallow a soporific, then fall backwards onto the bed. I can't push the boy's act from my mind. Anyone who's spent

time on the boards can see him inventing, testing, searching for something his body won't do. The audience is just so many faces sloping upward. Subtract them and he'd still perform.

My pulse starts to stutter, my muscles spasm. I get up, drag the copper bed frame so it's blocking the door, unlock my largest valise. There are trails of boric acid leading from where the bedposts used to be. The valise is packed with prosthetics—seven in all—different colors, different shaped hooks. I pick one up, slide out a glass vial. The blue is still dark, still swirling around the silver. I pull a rag from a second socket, turn it over until I find a spot that isn't stained. I flick off the stopper, touch the vial to the rag. With my finger on the back side of the fresh stain, I rub the rag over my gums, the roof of my mouth, the underside of my tongue. I stand the vial on the floor, take up my canteen, spill a drop of vinegar into the silver-blue liquid and replace the stopper.

I lie on the bed and wait, my lips burning. Soon, there's a burgeoning in my right wrist—a sprouting. I feel flesh and bone brushing aside soil, joints flexing and stretching their way through dirt.

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In the morning, I head out with a package of six vials, one in each pants pocket, one in each sock. I'm wearing my street prosthetic—a hook with little curve, straight enough to cut like a knife. I take the money I was told to spend on a taxi, buy a half-pot of coffee, four eggs over easy, a small stack of pancakes. The girl behind the counter eyes my hook. I use it to slice through the buttered and syruped batter, then lick the metal clean. She stops staring.

I find the street number written in white along the side of a forest-green porte-cochere. The concierge looks up from

whatever he's reading. There's a cicatrized gash circling his neck above the collar. I stroke the palm-sized fronds of a potted tree while he places the call.

The buyer is waiting in the hall, smoking a cigarillo and wearing a bathrobe with no sash. He takes a wallet from his pocket, thumbs through the bill fold. His hands look as if they've been pumped full of water and rubbed raw. His chest is spotted with white stubble. I glance up the hall. There's a peephole drilled above each knocker.

Inside, I say.

He leads me into a narrow vestibule, then turns and holds up his hand. Behind him a living space sprawls out in all directions. I hear a woman who's maybe humming—or it may be two women, one of them or someone else playing ragtime on a piano. A painting of an oblong figure with skin the color of Ray's body suit hangs on the far wall.

Nice place, I say.

The vials, he says, pushing the bills at me. Bits of ash flake down onto his chest.

I count his money, dig the vials from my pockets and socks. I make him tell me to leave.

Halfway back, I spot Jonson's boy staring in a shop window. There's no sign of Jonson. I hide my hook in my coat pocket, lower the brim of my hat, move closer. The boy's watching a brindled cat weave its way around the potted plants in a flower shop display case. He's all bone beneath the coat—his hair unwashed, slept on, his shoelaces untied. He looks like a true-life version of the hobo he plays on stage. It occurs to me that I might just tap him on the shoulder, say hello. But what I want to know he can't tell me. Not yet. Maybe when he's my age, looking back.

He starts walking. I keep a few strides behind. He won't

recognize me, not with my hood out of sight and my scalp covered. He stops again, this time at a bookseller's. There's an old hardback book spread open on a pedestal in the window, the pages scrawled over with foreign writing. The kid studies the text like he can read whatever language it might be written in, then steps inside. I watch him through the glass storefront. No one seems to notice him, not the bookseller standing behind the counter, not the few customers he slides by in one of the store's narrow aisles. He keeps his coat buttoned, walks slow, reading down the spines.

In the aisle closest to the door, he lifts a fat tome from its shelf, sits on a footstool, opens to a random chapter and begins reading. He reads until he's the store's only customer, then carries the book up front. Before the clerk can quote a price, the boy lifts a small paper bag from his coat pocket and sets it on the counter. The clerk weighs the bag in his palm, nods, opens his register and passes the boy an envelope. The boy exits the store, leaving his book behind.

We work our way towards the hotel, the brownstones turning to cinderblocks, the trees dropping off street-by-street until they're all but gone. He leads me to a dime museum. It's a converted storefront, the windows covered with posters of bearded women and tattooed strongmen. A sidewalk placard reads, *Oddities of All Nations*. The boy reaches into his pocket, pulls out a fistful of coins, plucks one off his palm. I tell myself to keep walking, but for a while I just stand there, thinking, seeing myself from someplace distant—a grown man following a boy through a city I barely know. But then the distance closes, and I step to the booth with my dime in hand.

Fifteen cents, the man says.

A joke?

Just trying to pass the day.

We wait in a cordoned-off area while the earlier house clears. There's a small gathering—college kids and day laborers on break—the kind of crowd that sits in the galleries and stomps their feet, shouting louder than the actors. I stand so the boy's back is to me. He raises up on his toes, straining to see over the partition. The soles of his shoes are worn to nothing. I keep my good hand in my pocket, fingers wrapped around the bills.

A man in a plug-opera hat unhooks the cord, waves us in.

Ladies and gentlemen, he says, I apologize for the delay. But I assure you that once inside, you won't want to leave.

We follow him into the curio hall—a narrow room with exhibits lined against one wall, separated by opaque scrims. The professor holds up his hand, stops us at the first cubicle. There's a glass jar filled with clear liquid sitting on a pedestal. There's an object suspended near the center of the jar. The wall behind is plastered with newsprint.

What have we here? he asks.

You tell us, says a kid in a lettered sweater.

Fair enough.

He taps the jar with his pointer, thumbs his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

Here, he says, we have the brain of a mass murderer, the purest incarnation of evil ever to walk among us. A man of indeterminate race. His skin more sheen than pigment. They say light deflected off of him, wanted no part of him. He slaughtered country folk, city folk, women and children, old and young. He slit the throat of any woman who resembled his mother, and yes he slit hers too. This lump of matter soaking in formaldehyde is the engine that kept him killing. It's been photographed and microscoped in every civilized city on this globe. The findings? Identical to yours and mine in all respects. Why, then, do we exhibit it? A reminder, ladies and gentlemen. There are things

ordained by God that science cannot explain away.

Looks like a cow's brain, someone says.

People laugh, but the boy just stares ahead.

Son, the professor answers, this establishment employs the finest scientific minds. Surely they are capable of distinguishing between organs belonging to livestock and those belonging to human beings.

He leads us to the next exhibit. The lights dim, then rise again on a moss-haired girl with painted hands. The men all cluck their tongues. She's sitting cross-legged, smoking a water pipe, wearing a tight corset and a garter with beaded fringe. Drumming plays on a phonograph behind the backcloth. The cloth itself features palm trees and eastern-looking facades, the kind with doorways cut like keyholes.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is our own Circassian Serpent Queen. A woman of the world's purest Caucasian stock, stolen during a Turkish raid and sold in the white slave markets of Constantinople. After five long years in the seraglio of a Persian sultan, one of our agents, at great peril to his own life, was able to liberate her from her depraved servitude. Aboard ship it was discovered that she had a peculiar talent, which she shall demonstrate for you now.

The Queen rocks her hips and ripples her arms, her bracelets clanking like cymbals at the base of her wrists. A speckled snake sticks its head out of her hair, surveys the audience as though it's counting the house. People in front step back. Only the boy holds his ground.

A king cobra, the lecturer says. The most temperamental of all venomous serpents.

He prods the snake's head with the tip of his pointer. Its hood flares out, its jaws snap open. A sound like growling breaks from its throat.

Note the ribs in the neck, the professor says. The saliva gathering at the fangs. The cobra's poison saps the nervous system, causes blindness, dizziness, death. Watch how our Beauty tames it.

The snake rises vertically from her hair, angles back, then lunges forward, striking at the space between us. The Queen begins cooing—a low hum in time to the drums. The snake relaxes its hood, starts to sway. The Queen lifts a hand to its chin. Slowly, the cobra rests its head on her wrist, winds its body down her bare arm. The professor leads the audience in applause.

A succession of snakes part her hair, the professor naming them as they appear—puff adder, black racer, spotted rock python. By the time the Queen stands to take her bow, her arms and legs are braided in snakes. There's a constrictor wound around her belly, a crossbanded viper covering her neck like a scarf. Men whistle as the lights dim.

The Queen is followed by Siamese twins joined at the buttocks; a man with a third arm jutting out of his chest; a seven-foot Chinaman; a woman so fat she occupies two exhibit spaces.

Now, the professor says, for our star oddity.

We're standing in front of what looks like a large box draped in baize. The surrounding scrims are covered with happy farm scenes—morning sun shining on barn, silo, corn and farmer. A staccato snorting comes from under the cloth. The professor tugs the fabric free, revealing a four-hoofed creature stalled in a makeshift sty, its face human, its body a pig's. The sty is enclosed in a metal cage, the animal chained by the neck to a pole, its back legs trussed together.

This horror of crossbreeding, the professor says, is the pride of our hall. Notice the shoat-like nose, the lack of jointure where the elbows and knees should be. We found him wallowing in a Florida swamp, half starved to death. Part human, part pig.

Which part birthed and abandoned him, we'd rather not speculate. We call him our Porcine Child. If he's part human, you might ask, then why not favor that part? Well ladies and gentlemen, we tried it that way, but the creature would not cooperate. Metal is the only substance it won't chew through. No amount of training could convince it that a toilet was for anything but drinking. What's more, linguists from seven of our nation's top universities found no way to communicate with it. No, the poor beast—the only one of its kind—is as ill-suited for society as it is for the wild. Here, at least, the price of admission keeps it fed and cared for.

The professor stands back, gestures for us to surround the cage. The pig-creature moves as close to the bars as the chain will allow, its purple tongue flicking out from between human lips, its nostrils flaring. I stick with the boy as he circles the sty. The creature's hoofs are sutured to its skin, the stub-tail some kind of spinal deformity. His pink body is shaved smooth, bloated—a dwarf rather than a boy. Impossible to know if this was his design or someone else's—if he hired the man who hacked off his hands and feet, or was tied down as a child. A college kid bangs on top of the cage with his fists. His friend dips a piece of licorice between the bars, jerks it away when the dwarf lunges. The professor grins.

We finish our tour and wait. The boy slides a penny into a mechanized trough, feeds the creature crumbled hardtack from his cupped palms. There's nothing on the boy's face to say if he's feeding it out of pity or if he wants to see what it looks like when it eats. Either way, he should know better. This is the wrong kind of spectacle, its only purpose to keep a crowd going. No different than my days on the medicine trail, when I played the cigar-store Indian who came to life, juggling tomahawks and hollering war chants. Once enough people had gathered Con-

nor would sell them his medicine—homemade prune and sugar water, 80 proof. He claimed there was nothing it couldn't cure.

The professor is barking us on to the wax works collection, but I turn around, exit the way we came. I wait for a while under the museum's awning, squinting the light from my eyes. There's a man on the opposite sidewalk, standing with his hands in his coat pockets, stretching his neck from side to side. I see him watching me, then notice that I'm standing with my hand and hook in my coat pockets, stretching my neck from side to side. I can't make out his face, but I recognize the slumping shoulders, the hunched spine. It's Jonson, dressed in a duster and a tan slicker, smiling at me through gaps in the traffic. I step to the curb, wait for the cars to clear. But before I can cross he's turned the corner and is gone.

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In the hotel, I open my valise, press on a bump in the fabric that releases the false backing. The bottom row of hooks rises, exposing two envelopes, a pencil, an eraser, a small pad of paper. I put the money that isn't mine in one envelope, the money that is in the other. Sitting with my back to the bed, I empty the second envelope across my lap, count the bills, subtract their total from the tailor's price. The numbers are close—a few more towns, a few more cities, and they will be the same.

I take up the pad, flip through the pages. Each page is drawn over with the outline of a man's suit. I've filled the torsos with circles, stars, squares—the circles standing in for sapphires, the stars for rhinestones, the squares for rubies. On one suit I've drawn circle-studded stripes down each sleeve, on another I've dotted the arms with squares and stars. I've penciled in rhinestone collars, ruby collars, mixed collars. Some of the torsos I've covered with distinct shapes—the bulb and stem of a rose over

each breast pocket; stick-figure fish swimming vertically, horizontally; small birds in various stages of flight. Others I've filled with patterns—checkered rhinestones, wavy lines of sapphires, ruby pinstripes.

I turn through the pages, pencil in hand, erase a half-circle of squares from one torso, add a line of stars to another. With each addition or deletion I imagine the changing pattern of light. I close my eyes, place myself in the audience, squint at the reflection from the front row, the back row.

I snap the false backing shut, empty the insides of my prosthetics onto the bed. I divide the contents into two rows, one for vials with a single notch carved into the stopper, the other for vials with two notches. Each notch stands for a time I've skimmed. It's early in the run, but already the double-notched vials outnumber the single-notched vials. I've never sold a triple-notched vial.

I tell myself I'll conserve. I'll take smaller and smaller tastes, until I'm cutting half-notches in the stoppers, until I'm able to go several days without carving any notches at all.

I pack away the prosthetics, leave one single-notched vial on the bed.