

CIRCUS OF HORRORS

by Paul Watson

"Now, see," the severed clown's head explains rather boredly from behind its glass screen, its drooping mouth not matching the painted-on grin on its white face. An improbably tiny top hat rests askew on the centre of his bald white dome, tufts of cherry-red hair fluffing over his ears. "the thing is, well, I suppose what goes around comes around..."

"You deserve it, you utter bastard!" a female head screams from the next case, her face glamorously made up, a sparkly top hat over her tied back black hair.

"Yeah, yeah, so you say, all the bleedin' time. Anyway, as I was sayin', it all started with a simple worker's dispute..."

Years earlier, in a cramped RV, filled to the brim with clowns, fortunately out of regalia and make up, or the riot of colour and makeup would be dazzling. As it is, the fog of smoke from numerous cigars and cigarettes makes the air nearly a solid mass. "It ain't right, I tell you. You've got to have a troupe of clowns. Can't have a circus without clowns."

Encouraging cheers are heard.

"And yet, we're being told we can't afford clowns."

"Boo!!"

"Not what peoples want, she says."

"Boo!!!"

"People think you're scary, she says!"

"Shame!!"

"Not what the circus needs, she says!!"

"Outrageous!!!"

"So, I say, we do something about it!"

"Hear, hear!!! Bravo!!!"

"Uhm, Joe..." a hand rises into the smoke, waving for attention.

"Yes, Dave, what do you want?"

"When you say 'do something', like, what do you mean?"

The cheering dies down into a hush as everyone awaits the answer.

Joe nods around his comically thick cigar, "Good question, Dave, good question. Well, we've tried being reasonable, calmly stating our unhappiness with the proposal. And we've tried negotiating in good faith, like, and been rebuffed."

The clowns nod in agreement, muttering 'rebuffed'.

"So, we need to step it up."

"You mean strike?"

"Strike?! What do you think we are, Dave? Communists?"

"Sorry, Joe."

"Strike, the very idea, no, we do this properly..."

The next day, shortly after the final show of the day closes, "Here she comes, boys. You know what to do."

The ringmistress walks carefully through the grass, past the cages with pent up beasts of varying sizes towards her caravan. She's loosened her tight-fitting red tailcoat, cross-hatch stockings clinging indecently tightly to her legs, her heels in her hand, totally unsuitable for the uneven soft ground.

"Now!" Clowns boil out from behind the cages, throwing a burlap sack smelling heavily of fodder over her, jerking ropes tightly around her pinned body. With a whoop, the clowns lift her up, carrying her off like a troupe of cartoon gangsters rescuing the damsel in distress, her protests muffled, attempted kicks halted by the overabundance of ropes and evidence of some particularly attentive Boy Scouts amongst the troupe.

The troupe dump her onto a patch of bare earth, a bonfire crackling a few feet away, at which point wrapping all the ropes over the top of the sack proves to be a less-efficient approach than it first appeared. Several arguments about how to untie a particularly tricky knot later, the sack is removed, revealing the clowns by firelight. A dozen clowns in full whiteface, it turns out, can be quite intimidating in a scene of flickering shadows. “What are you doing?!” she shrieks as the clowns begin the laborious process of retying the knots.

“Well, we talked about it, see, and we don't agree with your plans for the circus...”

“Are you still on about that? I told you, we can't afford...”

“Tony?”

“Stop, what, no, stop...” her protests stop as Tony pushes a giant red nose into her mouth.

“Where did you get that from?”

“Don't worry, Dave, not one of yours, got it from the spares box.”

“Right, right.”

“Now, Lucinda, you say we have to make cuts, and, you know, I can see that. So we're going to help you.”

She looks up skeptically, being bound and gagged not seeming all that helpful.

“Although maybe not the kind you had in mind.” Joe gestures and clowns scramble to pull away a white cloth, revealing the tall wooden struts of a guillotine. The blade shines in the firelight as it completely fills the lunette. Lucinda's eyes go wide, her struggles getting more urgent, “Now, I'm sure Marvo won't mind us putting this to better use.”

The clowns lift the struggling ringmistress off the ground, carrying her towards the guillotine as others haul on the ropes to raise the sparkling blade. Joe lifts up the lunette as they place her gently down, smoothing out her tails and hair, an absurd courtesy in the circumstances. She looks up with wide eyes, alternating between panicked hyperventilation and cold fury.

“A little off the top, madam?”

Her inarticulate reply brings a smile to Joe's face that almost matches his whiteface grin as he releases the rope. The tumbrels shake as the blade plunges down. You can almost hear the air slicing in its passage before it lands with a sickening thunk into the lunettes. Lucinda screams into the impromptu gag as her head tumbles into the basket in a spurting shower of crimson.

Joe reaches into the blood-stained basket, lifting her slightly confused, but defiantly still cursing his family back several generations, head up, a trickle of blood dribbling from her neck. He lights his cigar, blowing smoke into her face. “Welcome to the new era, Lucinda.” he tosses the head into the troupe, “Dave, go put her head in the Curiosity Cabinet. George, Tony, untie her body and let's put it to work.”

Now, “Ah, those were good days. Couldn't last, of course. The animal trainers rebelled in a month an' I got put to the chop. Then they got overthrown, and so on and so on until there were enough bodies wandering around without heads to get the rest of the heads off an' we became the famous Headless Circus an', ironically, that seems to have saved our fortunes. But not enough to spring for a decent smoke for the bloke who started it all, it seems.” he grouses as the spangly-leotarded and utterly headless body ushers the visitors along the corridor of heads and towards the exit.