

Clarence Aaron “Tod” ROBBINS (1888-1949), *Spurs* (1923), ch. III.

A year had rolled by since the marriage of Mlle Jeanne Marie and M. Jacques Courbé. Copo’s Circus had once more taken up its quarters in the town of Roubaix. For more than a week the country people for miles around had flocked to the side-show to get a peep at Griffio, the giraffe boy; M. Hercule Hippo, the giant; Mlle Lupa, the wolf lady; Mme. Samson, with her baby boa constrictors; and M. Jejongle, the famous juggler. Each was still firmly convinced that he or she alone was responsible for the popularity of the circus.

Simon Lafleur sat in his lodgings at the Sign of the Wild Boar. He wore nothing but red tights. His powerful torso, stripped to the waist, glistened with oil. He was kneading his biceps tenderly with some strong-smelling fluid.

Suddenly there came the sound of heavy, laborious footsteps on the stairs. Simon Lafleur looked up. His rather gloomy expression lifted, giving place to the brilliant smile that had won for him the hearts of so many lady acrobats.

“Ah, this is Marcelle!” he told himself. “Or perhaps it is Rose, the English girl; or, yet again, little Francesca, although she walks more lightly. Well no matter—whoever it is, I will welcome her!”

By now, the lagging, heavy footfalls were in the hall; and, a moment later, they came to a halt outside the door. There was a timid knock.

Simon Lafleur’s brilliant smile broadened. “Perhaps some new admirer that needs encouragement,” he told himself. But aloud he said, “Enter, mademoiselle!”

The door swung slowly open and revealed the visitor. She was a tall, gaunt woman dressed like a peasant. The wind had blown her hair into her eyes. Now she raised a large, toil-worn hand, brushed it back across her forehead and looked long and attentively at the bareback rider.

“Do you not remember me?” she said at length.

Two lines of perplexity appeared above Simon Lafleur’s Roman nose; he slowly shook his head. He, who had known so many women in his time, and now at a loss. Was it a fair question to ask a man who was no longer a boy and who had lived? Women change so in a brief time! Now this bag of bones might at one time have appeared desirable to him.

Parbleu! Fate was a conjurer! She waved her wand; and beautiful women were transformed into hogs, jewels into pebbles, silks and laces into hempen cords. The brave fellow, who danced to-night at the prince’s ball, might to-morrow dance more lightly on the gallows tree. The thing was to live and die with a full belly. To digest all that one could—that was life!

“You do not remember me?” she said again.

Simon Lafleur once more shook his sleek, black head. “I have a poor memory for faces, madame,” he said politely. “It is my misfortune, when there are such beautiful faces.”

“Ah, but you should have remembered, Simon!” the woman cried, a sob rising in her throat. “We were very close together, you and I. Do you not remember Jeanne Marie?”

“Jeanne Marie!” the bareback rider cried. “Jeanne Marie, who married a marmoset and a country estate? Don’t tell me. Madame, that you—”

He broke off and stared at her, open-mouthed. His sharp black eyes wandered from the wisps of wet, straggling hair down her gaunt person till they rested at last on her thick cowhide boots incrustated with layer on layer of mud from the countryside.

"It is impossible!" he said at last.

45 "It is indeed Jeanne Marie," the woman answered, "or what is left of her. Ah, Simon, what a life he has led me! I have been merely a beast of burden! There are no ignominities which he has not made me suffer!"

"To whom do you refer?" Simon Lafleur demanded. "Surely you cannot mean that pocket edition husband of yours—that dwarf, Jacques Courbé?"

50 "Ah, but I do, Simon! Alas, he has broken me!"

"He—that toothpick of a man?" the bareback rider cried, with one of his silent laughs. "Why, it is impossible! As you once said yourself, Jeanne, you could crack his skull between finger and thumb like a hickory nut!"

55 "So I thought once. Ah, but I did not know him then, Simon! Because he was small, I thought I could do with him as I liked. It seemed to me that I was marrying a manikin. 'I will play Punch and Judy with this little fellow,' I said to myself. Simon, you imagine my surprise when he began playing Punch and Judy with me!"

"But I do not understand, Jeanne. Surely at any time you could have slapped him into obedience!"

60 "Perhaps," she assented wearily, "had it not been for St. Eustache. From the first that wolf dog of his hated me. If I so much as answered his master back, he would show his teeth. Once, at the beginning when I raised my hand to cuff Jacques Courbé, he sprang at my throat and would have torn me limb from limb, had the dwarf not called him off. I was a strong woman, but even then I was no match for a wolf!"

65 "There was poison, was there not?" Simon Lafleur suggested.

"Ah, yes, I, too, thought of poison; but it was of no avail. St. Eustache would eat nothing that I gave him; and the dwarf forced me to taste first of all food that was placed before him and his dog. Unless I myself wished to die, there was no way of poisoning either of them."

70 "My poor girl!" the bareback rider said, pityingly. "I begin to understand; but sit down and tell me everything. This is a revelation to me, after seeing you stalking homeward so triumphantly with your bridegroom on your shoulder. You must begin at the beginning."

75 "It was just because I carried him thus on my shoulder that I have had to suffer so cruelly," she said, seating herself on the only other chair the room afforded. "He has never forgiven me the insult which he says I put upon him. Do you remember how I boasted that I could carry him from one end of France to the other?"

"I remember. Well, Jeanne?"

80 "Well, Simon, the little demon has figured out the exact distance in leagues. Each morning, rain or shine, we sully out of the house—he on my back, and the wolf dog at my heels—and I tramp along the dusty roads till my knees tremble beneath me from fatigue. If I so much as slacken my pace, if I falter, he goads me with cruel little golden spurs; while, at the same time, St. Eustache nips my ankles. When we return home, he strikes so many leagues of a score which he says is the number of leagues from one end of France to the other. Not half that distance has been covered, and I am no longer a strong woman, Simon. Look at these shoes!"

85 She held up one of her feet for his inspection. The sole of the cowhide boot had been worn through; Simon Lafleur caught a glimpse of bruised flesh caked with the mire of the highway.

"This is the third pair that I have had," she continued hoarsely. "Now he tells me that the price of shoe leather is too high, that I shall have to finish my pilgrimage barefooted."

Henry FORD (1863-1947), in collaboration with Samuel CROWTHER
My Life and Work (1922)

5 Repetitive labour—the doing of one thing over and over again and always in the same
way—is a terrifying prospect to a certain kind of mind. It is terrifying to me. I could not
possibly do the same thing day in and day out, but to other minds, perhaps I might say to the
majority of minds, repetitive operations hold no terrors. In fact, to some types of mind thought
is absolutely appalling. To them the ideal job is one where the creative instinct need not be
expressed. The jobs where it is necessary to put in mind as well as muscle have very few
takers—we always need men who like a job because it is difficult. The average worker, I am
sorry to say, wants a job in which he does not have to put forth much physical exertion—
above all, he wants a job in which he does not have to think. Those who have what might be
10 called the creative type of mind and who thoroughly abhor monotony are apt to imagine that
all other minds are similarly restless and therefore to extend quite unwanted sympathy to the
labouring man who day in and day out performs almost exactly the same operation.

15 When you come right down to it, most jobs are repetitive. A business man has a routine
that he follows with great exactness; the work of a bank president is nearly all routine; the
work of under officers and clerks in a bank is purely routine. Indeed, for most purposes and
most people, it is necessary to establish something in the way of a routine and to make most
motions purely repetitive—otherwise the individual will not get enough done to be able to
live off his own exertions. There is no reason why any one with a creative mind should be at a
monotonous job, for everywhere the need for creative men is pressing. There will never be a
dearth of places for skilled people, but we have to recognize that the will to be skilled is not
20 general. And even if the will be present, then the courage to go through with the training is
absent. One cannot become skilled by mere wishing.

25 There are far too many assumptions about what human nature ought to be and not
enough research into what it is. Take the assumption that creative work can be undertaken
only in the realm of vision. We speak of creative "artists" in music, painting, and the other
arts. We seemingly limit the creative functions to productions that may be hung on gallery
walls, or played in concert halls, or otherwise displayed where idle and fastidious people
gather to admire each other's culture. But if a man wants a field for vital creative work, let
him come where he is dealing with higher laws than those of sound, or line, or colour; let him
come where he may deal with the laws of personality. We want artists in industrial
30 relationship. We want masters in industrial method—both from the standpoint of the producer
and the product. We want those who can mould the political, social, industrial, and moral
mass into a sound and shapely whole. We have limited the creative faculty too much and have
used it for too trivial ends. We want men who can create the working design for all that is
35 right and good and desirable in our life. Good intentions plus well-thought-out working

designs can be put into practice and can be made to succeed. It is possible to increase the well-being of the workingman—not by having him do less work, but by aiding him to do more. If the world will give its attention and interest and energy to the making of plans that will profit the other fellow as he is, then such plans can be established on a practical working
40 basis. Such plans will endure—and they will be far the most profitable both in human and financial values. What this generation needs is a deep faith, a profound conviction in the practicability of righteousness, justice, and humanity in industry. If we cannot have these qualities, then we were better off without industry. Indeed, if we cannot get those qualities, the days of industry are numbered. But we can get them. We are getting them.

45 If a man cannot earn his keep without the aid of machinery, is it benefiting him to withhold that machinery because attendance upon it may be monotonous? And let him starve? Or is it better to put him in the way of a good living? Is a man the happier for starving? If he is the happier for using a machine to less than its capacity, is he happier for producing less than he might and consequently getting less than his share of the world's goods in exchange?

50 I have not been able to discover that repetitive labour injures a man in any way. I have been told by parlour experts that repetitive labour is soul—as well as body—destroying, but that has not been the result of our investigations. There was one case of a man who all day long did little but step on a treadle release. He thought that the motion was making him one-sided; the medical examination did not show that he had been affected but, of course, he was
55 changed to another job that used a different set of muscles. In a few weeks he asked for his old job again. It would seem reasonable to imagine that going through the same set of motions daily for eight hours would produce an abnormal body, but we have never had a case of it. We shift men whenever they ask to be shifted and we should like regularly to change them—that would be entirely feasible if only the men would have it that way. They do not like changes
60 which they do not themselves suggest. Some of the operations are undoubtedly monotonous—so monotonous that it seems scarcely possible that any man would care to continue long at the same job. Probably the most monotonous task in the whole factory is one in which a man picks up a gear with a steel hook, shakes it in a vat of oil, then turns it into a basket. The motion never varies. The gears come to him always in exactly the same place, he
65 gives each one the same number of shakes, and he drops it into a basket which is always in the same place. No muscular energy is required, no intelligence is required. He does little more than wave his hands gently to and fro—the steel rod is so light. Yet the man on that job has been doing it for eight solid years. He has saved and invested his money until now he has about forty thousand dollars—and he stubbornly resists every attempt to force him into a
70 better job!

Irving PENN (1917-2009)

Lady Acrobat, New York, 1951 (42,2 cm x 33,3 cm), Private Collection.

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