



BIRD MILLMAN & DIXIE WILLSON

A Play by August Mergelman



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CHARACTER

DIXIE WILLSON

A Writer

[DIXIE sits at her typewriter.]
Bird Millman, “Chapter One.”
[She crumples her paper and throws it away.]
Bird Millman, “Act One, Scene One.”
[She crumples her paper and throws it away. She rummages through her papers and finds a letter.]
March 8, 1925. Dear Dixie, When are you going to finish *Little Texas*? I’ve read the first three chapters twelve times over. I know you’re tired of hearing me complain, but do you really have to call that poor girl *Texas*? It’s a hefty name for a little girl. Mull it over, anyway. March has been much too turbulent—can’t wait for April. All My Love, Bird. P.S. There’s a name—April!

Some time later, I finished *Little Texas*. I liked the name Texas, so I kept it, thank you very much. I needed a catchy name for my heroine because the book was intended for young readers. I’ve written many short stories and books over the years, many of them based on circus lore.

Where the World Folds Up at Night is the *piece de resistance* of my circus books. Much to the dismay of my modest, god-fearing Iowa parents, it is the detailed account of my clumsy foray into

“The Greatest Show on Earth.” It first appeared in 1931, as a serial in *Good Housekeeping*, and later as a book. I myself never became one of the stars of the circus—it was all I could manage to climb atop an elephant—but I did rub elbows with some of the shows biggest stars. Only one of those stars became a lifelong friend of mine—Bird Millman. She was the greatest female wire artist who ever lived. I met her at the height of her fame, but her story starts much earlier.

Her people settled in the quirky little Colorado town of Cañon City. Milton Engleman, Bird’s grandfather, came to the region selling dry goods to miners and other travelers. His line of business also brought him to silver camps of the San Juan Mountains. The best adjective I have for Engleman is *litigious*. He liked to keep in touch with the local papers with several mentionings of his ongoing lawsuits. Not inclined toward prejudice, he sued everybody, even his own brother-in-law. Though trade winds often took Engleman into the hills, his wife and children stayed behind in Cañon City. In the late 1880’s, Cañon City was rebuilding its population and its industries. It might have been altogether abandoned if the fruit-growers hadn’t moved in.

John Millman was still John Engleman when he swept the floors in his father's store. An advertisement in the local paper once read, "Come see the poorest stock in town at Engleman's. Don't buy anything; just come and see." Though endowed with a sense of levity, there's no doubt that Engleman did not approve of his teenage son's preoccupation with acrobatics and circus tomfoolery. Sure, all boys were in love with the circus, but John never seemed to grow out of it. Some locals recall that Milton sent his son away to military school in Illinois, to knock some sense into him. Ironically, it may have been at military school that John honed his physical dexterity and acquired some much-needed discipline. So, Grandpa Engleman failed.

If the battle for John's soul wasn't lost at military school, little Genevieve Patton sealed the deal. Lovely and vivacious, Jenny caught the eye of many a local beau. Easily, she could have wed a banker or lived on a prosperous orchard, but as fortune would have it, she was the one Cañon City girl who didn't have the sense to discourage the advances of young John. He had the restlessness of a fire horse in the harness. He might, for instance, climb atop a bicycle and race from Cañon City to Pueblo for the afternoon. Jenny didn't mind John's affinity for novelty, nor did she balk at his outrageous notions about joining the circus. In fact, she conspired right along with him.

With the wedding ceremony out of the way, the young couple was ready to get to work. She sewed the costumes, he scouted a booking, and in the evening, they rehearsed their tricks together. John rented a hall on the second story of the Town Hall and set up the rigging. One particular evening, Jenny swung by her knees, leapt from her bar, flew through the air, grasped her partner's hands... almost. She landed on the floor, continued *through* the floor, and landed on the floor of the *first* floor, where a dance was in progress. The dancers gasped in horror and the sight of the carnage. Dust and spangles settled in the silent shock that follows an accident, but groans turned to grins upon seeing disheveled bundle of gossamer stand up and dust herself off. Mortifying! Jenny wished she was dead, and to think she had come so close to succeeding. Joining the circus and leaving Cañon City was

no longer a dream of Jenny's; it was an urgent necessity. They would gone as soon as they perfected the act, booked a job, and—oh, yes—brought their newborn child into the world. Their only child, they named her Jennadean.

Mr. and Mrs. Engleman needed a new name. John found that, nine times out of ten, a telegraph man would find a new way to misspell Engleman. So he closed his eyes, opened up the dictionary, and let fate do her worst. The word *mill* caught his eye, so Millman it was. Another version of the story suggests that *Millman* is the fusion of the *Mil*— in *Milton*, John's father, and the *-man* in *Engleman*. At least, I think that's the way Grandpa Engleman remembered the story. Either way, Millman and Millman were ready for their new enterprise, so they thought. In the early years, circus did not provide a steady living for the duo. John's broken wrist was likely a departure from the Forepaugh's Circus. At the very turn of the century, the family resided in Denver, where John displayed a clever new gadget called the phonograph in the window of his storefront, where the monumental Equitable Building now stands. Perhaps John and Jennie felt obligated to settle down and provide their daughter with a permanent address. If so, they failed, and the call of the circus prevailed.

In those days, we all dreamt about joining the circus—boys and girls, rich and poor, fanciful and practical. Weeks before the actual arrival, lurid lithographs turned a vacant lot into the Sistine Chapel, tantalizing the children with incredulous claims of man and beast. Children didn't just await the arrival of the circus eagerly; they held vigil. They rehearsed their tricks. They quarreled over billing order. They liberated circus tents from Mama's linen closet and bravely took their beatings. It was a just cause. Why would any circus tent want to squander its splendor as a bed sheet? I played my share of circus games with my two brothers, Meredith and Cedric, but we never quarreled over our respective roles. Cedric was always the ringmaster and manager, I was always the high-flying aerialist, and little Meredith always conducted the band.

Our own dad ditched school to watch the men and the elephants set up the tents. Those men weren't laborers; they were demigods. One of

these awesome Titans spotted Dad behind a tree and walked toward him. Sunlight hit the sweat of his brow and radiated from his crown like a halo. Dad was so blinded by the light that he could barely speak.

“Hey, Kid... You, Kid. I’m talking to you.”

“Y—yesir?”

“How would you like to join the circus?”

“What?”

“You heard me. How would you like to join the circus?”

“I—I’m already gonna get a whoopin’ for playing hookie from school today.”

“I understand. Run on home to Mama, and I’ll find another kid.”

“No! I’ll do it!”

“You sure?”

“Yes! I wasn’t sure before, but now I am!”

“Alright, then. I’ll meet your right here tomorrow.”

“What time?”

“What time you goin’ to school?”

“Seven.”

“Right before seven.”

“What do I need to bring?”

“Funny you should ask—a pair of boots.”

“I don’t have any boots.”

“Does your daddy?”

“Yes, but they’re too big for me.”

“Does your daddy have big feet?”

“Mama thinks so.”

“Would you say they’re about... yea big?”

“I think so.”

“Perfect. Bring *his* boots.”

“Okay. I’ll bring them tomorrow.”

“No. Bring them tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yip. Right before the show, leave by this tree and then go on in to the show.”

“Will you be able to find ‘em?”

“Oh, I’ll find ‘em alright.”

“Why do you need the boots first?”

“I need to make sure they’re sturdy enough for circus work.”

The man’s own boots weren’t very sturdy at all. Dad could tell by lookin’ at ‘em. There was barely anything left of ‘em, in fact. Well, Dad wasn’t about to have his circus career cut short

by inadequate footwear, so he did exactly as the man instructed. After all, you wouldn’t interview at a law firm without wearing a tie; you wouldn’t try out for the ball team without a mitt. No one in the house saw Dad abscond with Grandpa’s boots. Next, morning, right before seven o’clock, Dad went to meet the departing circus caravan, but what happened to it? He couldn’t understand what the mix up had been. The man wasn’t there. The circus wasn’t there. Grandpa’s pair of boots... wasn’t there. Two days later, Grandpa got up early to irrigate the fields. Dad got the whoopin’ of his life. Like most other children who aspire to careers in the circus, Dad had stars in his eyes, but, alas, no sawdust in his blood.

My friend Bird had sawdust in her blood alright, but she wasn’t exactly “born in a circus trunk,” as the saying goes. Like so many other children, she fell in love with the circus as an outsider. When her mother and dad traveled to Colorado, her Grandma Emma reluctantly took her to “Denver City” to see the show. According to Grandma Emma’s own account, it was Grandma Emma who gave Jennadean the name Bird, not for her amazing feats on the wire, but for the funny little sound she made when she cried. Bird remembered nothing about that early circus in Denver, but she remembered spotting her parents in the parade. In those days, many circus parades happened at night, by torchlight. Bird saw her mother and dad on a pair of cream-colored horses—white satin and scarlet spangles glowed magically in the shadows. She struggled in vain to escape Grandma Emma’s arms, longing to join her parents, longing to go home... to the circus.

Well, it was inevitable that Millman and Millman would become the Millman Trio. Bird claims to have been eight... or so. (*with a gesture*) She was yea high, anyway, when she and her folks joined the Great Melbourne Circus. Hoping to broaden their repertoire, they tried a number of acts. Bird would plummet to the ground, and her dad would swing toward her, catching her by her ankles. Her mother tried her hand—her teeth, rather—at the iron jaw act. Bird rode atop Daisy Bell, a “high school” horse, as they were called at the time. Her dad even did a little juggling, but who didn’t? The modest little “mud shows,” as they were known, were understaffed. It seemed that everyone did double duty. Four brothers were the show’s owners and

managers; they were also the ticket-takers and the working crew. Naturally, the performers developed as many talents as they could scrape together. If an act ever wanted to break free of the “dog-and-pony” circuit, with its small-town fairs and country carnivals, it had to specialize.

Now, the idea of specializing had never really occurred to Mr. Millman. Why should it have? Weren't they happy? Didn't they have a steady pay and whirlwind, vagabond existence? No, specialization didn't happen by design; it happened by accident. One lazy afternoon, John had set up the wire rigging in a distant corner of the lot. Just for laughs, he put Bird atop the wire. Dad laughed, Mother fretted, and Bird giggled. Very soon, Dad no longer laughed, and Mother no longer fretted. They suddenly became very serious. Not Bird, though—her tiny feet bounded effortlessly across the wire, and she giggled. The essence of Bird's act was then, and had always been, effortless grace and charm; never did she rely on hair-raising stunts or novel feats of daring.

After several months of rehearsal in Chicago, Bird was ready for an audience. She performed with her dad, but seldom alone. One balmy, Indiana afternoon, Dyke was giving an exhibition performance above the midway. An exhibition act was a giveaway, intended to sell tickets to the real show. From the platform, Bird watched her dad do the routine that she had watched him do a hundred times before, but something was different this time. Mr. Millman lost his footing, a woman screamed below, the crowd gasped, and Dad's pink tights were pointed straight up in the air. Before she could get to her dad, the circus manager got to Bird, pleading with her to do her routine for the show. She didn't know how to say “no,” not to an adult, so on she went. She worried that she wouldn't be able to perform enough tricks to fill a whole act, but she did. With the image of her dad's pink tights pointed straight up in the air, Bird did not pepper this particular performance with her usual carefree giggles. It was serious for now, and things grew more serious in the years to follow.

Bird was a young teenager when Mr. William Morris visited the circus lot in Canada. He didn't laugh either; talent scouts seldom do, especially

the important ones. Mr. Morris had a contract, not for another circus, but for a relatively-new medium altogether—Vaudeville.



You ever been to Vaudeville? Perhaps you've heard of it, but where the heck is it, anyway? Well, it's in a trunk. It's on a train. It's in a run-down boarding house in every major American city. It's everywhere, and it's no where. Mostly, it's in countless theatres across the country, across Atlantic too, where it's called *Variety*.

Alright then, *what* is Vaudeville? Whew,... that's even harder to answer than *where*. Well, Vaudeville is an old man who plays the accordion. What's so remarkable about that? He plays it with his feet; his hands are busy plucking a ukulele. It isn't all novelty, though; some of the acts are “class acts.” Vaudeville is also a portly Italian opera singer who brings Puccini to Portland, Bizet to Bismark. She's sung Italian arias everywhere on two continents, everywhere but Italy. Vaudeville is two brothers in straw bowlers, two sisters in tap shoes. Vaudeville encompassed a great deal, but—mind you—Vaudeville did not encompass everything.

A Vaudeville bill was not a minstrel show. Minstrel shows were old hat by then, and minstrels appeared *only* in black face. Unfortunately, black face hadn't grown unacceptable by the days of Vaudeville; it just wasn't as popular as it once was. Vaudeville wasn't Burlesque either. Burlesque consisted of scantily-clad females and clever comic routines. More distinctly, Burlesque was strictly for gentleman... *and* working men; Vaudeville was for everyone—both genders, all ages. Vaudeville was respectable.

Still, there were performers who looked down their noses at Vaudevillians. New York actors in “legitimate theatre” were quick to point out that Vaudeville was not “legitimate theatre.” Vaudevillians didn’t mind; they knew that Vaudeville was *the* most popular form of entertainment on two continents, and so it remained, for almost half a century. There was, however, class-distinction within. The Orpheum Circuit was “Big Time” Vaudeville. If you were booked in the “Big Time,” everyone else was booked in the “small time.”

The Millman Trio went straight into “Big Time.” No one was more surprised at that fact than were the members of the Millman Trio. Their engagements ran everything from humble theatres in the Midwest to prestigious theatres on the Atlantic seaboard. Perhaps the most prestigious was Hammerstein’s Roof Garden, where New York society wiled away the Sunday afternoons. Acts of refinement and aesthetic simplicity were well received there. After several months on the road, the new act was booked for a week at the Union Square Theatre on Fourteen Street. The transition from circus rings to footlights wasn’t without its bumps, and Mr. Millman was not without his worries. After several days in New York, the booking agent called Mr. Millman into the front office. John knew he was done for. How could he have been so naïve to think that his family was good enough for New York, let alone the Orpheum Circuit? He worried about their next meal and their travel expenses. How could he get work for his family the mud shows at that time of year? His mind raced; his heart pounded.

Mr. Millman’s worst fears slowly unfolded as the agent began to speak. No, the Millman Trio was not going to be booked in any more American Vaudeville houses that season. They were going straight to Europe—the Alhambra in London, the Folies Bergère in Paris, the Wintergarten in Berlin. The booking agent instinctively knew that Bird would be very well received “over there.” Mind you, this was 1904. “Over there” wasn’t yet (*sings*) “over there.”

Bird arrived at London with her dad. They practically went straight from the train station to the dressing room. Beneath the marquis of the Alhambra, London’s premiere Variety house,

Cockney men paced up and down the street in sandwich boards with Bird’s name blazoned on both sides of their torsos. Bird always worked fast, but at her London premiere, she worked especially fast, racing through her tricks with lightening speed. She wasn’t especially nervous; she was eager to see London. When the crowd demanded more, Bird delivered, but she was on pins and needles the whole time. Her encore was encroaching upon her sight-seeing.

In Berlin, Bird and her dad received a right neighborly invite—written on parchment and stamped with gold. It was an invitation to perform before the Royal Court of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Well, they couldn’t very well turn that invite down, but was there any choice about it? It was from the monarch of the German Empire, after all; it was a command performance. The next day, under the famous starry ceiling of the Wintergarten Theatre, members of the regal entourage entered and took their seats. Bird recalled rows of men in stately uniforms and women in the smartest dresses. The Kaiser was just like anyone—had his unique quirks. Folks recall that he liked to be the center of it all. It’s said that he was corpse at every funeral and the bride at every wedding. His wife doted on him with unswerving devotion, but don’t you dare say anything about his lame arm! He happened to be a tiny bit self-conscious about it. He was very solemn about the occasion of Bird’s performance, but he seemed to enjoy it.

Backstage, a kind but overly-appreciative gentleman showered Bird’s head with rose petals. He was probably a little daft; he was also the famous composer, Franz Lehár. The next day, Bird received a certificate of appreciation, signed by the Kaiser himself. What it meant—who knows?—but looked very official to a teenage Colorado girl and her father. Yes, a command performance before the Royal German Court was certainly a long way from a dry goods store in Cañon City.

When Bird returned to the United States, she was no longer a child star; she was a celebrated beauty, and the Millman Trio soon became Bird Millman and Company. She and her troop played all the same “Big Time” venues, with the addition of the Hippodrome and the supreme destination of all Vaudevillians—the Palace. Over the years, the press heaped accolades and

titles on her head by the score: “The Genee of the Wire,” “The Faerie on the Cobweb,” and my personal favorite, “The Eva Tanguay of the Wire.” Now, Eva Tanguay was a voluptuous woman who belted her songs to the back row and reportedly ran three miles worth of laps across the footlights at each performance. How the slight figure of modest Bird resembled the robust figure of boisterous Eva, I’ll never know. I wonder, though, did anyone ever refer to Eva Tanguay as the Bird Millman of the floor?

One of the girls in Bird’s troop was the pretty and clever Fern Andra. When Bird Millman and Co. traveled to Europe, much of their tour was cut short because Bird needed emergency surgery on her kneecap. When it was time for the troop to sail for home, Fern Andra didn’t. A short time later, she turned up again; she had become the “Mary Pickford” of German cinema. Later, she married a real-live baron, which, of course, made her Baroness Andra.

When Bird was a young woman, a mere glance at the papers could tell you exactly where she was each week—New Orleans, San Francisco—but much is still unknown, even to me. There were some topics that Bird never discussed. For one thing, Mr. Millman disappeared, having separated from his wife and daughter to start up a new act. Perhaps he had grown terribly bored with it all. We can’t doubt that he was proud of his daughter, but he was, in the end, a performer himself.

Though Mr. and Mrs. Millman never divorced, evidence suggests that their separation was not an entirely-friendly one. In the days of Vaudeville, *Billboard* and *Variety* listed the bookings of every act in every major city on the “Big Time” circuit. At one point, there were two Millman troops: the troop in New York boasted the genuine Bird Millman; the troop in Chicago, managed by Mr. Millman, boasted the genuine Dot Millman. No, Dot was not a kid sister whom I failed to mention earlier. This very public family feud—played out in the pages of *Variety*—ended after several weeks. It seems that Mr. Millman’s troop in Chicago, despite its lofty aspirations of European tours, never got off the ground, so to speak.

There were other mysteries that Bird never fully explained to me. A young man in act was applauded for his strident leap over a table, which two girls held over the wire; however, this fellow did not see eye to eye with his employer, Miss Bird Millman. (*reading a letter*) June 20, 1910. Editor New York Star: Dear Sir—I wish to inform the profession through your paper that I have severed all relations with the wire act of Bird Millman and Company, owing to disagreeable relations. Yours, very truly, Claude C. Silverton.

The *New York Star* printed his letter and a response. (*reading*) Now, we do not intend to enter into a discussion of the disagreement between Miss Millman and Mr. Silverton, though Miss Millman has certainly made a case for the fairness of her own position. The point is that Mr. Silverton gave notice only hours before the troop’s scheduled performance at the Bronx Theatre. Even Mr. Silverton would have to admit that it would have been impossible to break-in another performer in time for the performance. Should he endeavor to apply for a single booking in the future—though he’s a nice fellow and not at all bad on the wire—he may find that most agents and managers are reluctant to take a chance on one so inconstant. So, good luck to you, Mr. Silverton.

Was nature of the disagreement between Bird and Claude purely professional? I don’t know, but I do know this: Bird, much like myself, didn’t have the best of luck with men. I can’t, in good conscience, make any speculation or judgment regarding her two early marriages. That would not be my place. What I can do is speak for my own early nuptials.

(*reading*) One springtime there had come to Mason City and extremely nice young man named Mr. Harrison Lampert, who had sat on our porch every evening through the summer, smoking cigars with my dad and talking news with my mother. In September, Mr. Lampert asked if I would marry him. We had certainly had a lot of fun together—jaunts in the country, moonlight picnics, long rides in his little car called “the bug,” but there was no particular reason that I should elect to marry him. So... I told him I’d think it over. The next day, I mentioned it to my dad. His unwittingly reply:

“Well, Sister, of course if you do want to be married, you may have everything just as you want it—any wedding dress you want, any kind of wedding you want...”

Any wedding dress? Any kind of wedding! That night, I told Mr. Lampert “Yes,” and the next day I ordered a white chiffon accordion-pleated dancing dress. More importantly, I began adapting my best musical comedy scene for the wedding. After all, what an opportunity! It should be a rainbow wedding. The bridesmaids should be—let me see—Lila in pink, Marguerite in green, Hazel in blue, Patsy in Lavender, palest shades of gowns with real lace caps. For the anthem, I finally chose “Bring Me a Rose” from the *Arcadians*, a musical production by Charles Frohman. I even had the venue all picked out: St. John’s Episcopal Chapel. Neither his people nor mine were Episcopalian, but the churches of our own respective denominations didn’t have ivy clinging to stone walls, like a pastoral scene from an English painting.



It must have been a beautiful wedding, I think. I remember saying, “I do,” and kneeling on a white satin pillow—Episcopalian do that sort of thing, I later learned—and right then, my husband of some forty seconds whispered, “Going swell—isn’t it?” The question rang through my head, “Going swell—isn’t it?” not for the remainder of the service but for the next several months. A bungalow in Oshkosh, a row sparkling red jelly glasses on a kitchen window sill. Ten months later, I wired Dad from Chicago. I had joined the chorus of a musical tabloid.

When Bird was only nineteen, she wed a fellow named Mr. Potter. Later, in her circus days, she married a railroad man by name of John C. Thomas. Both marriages lasted barely long enough to be mentioned in the papers. One ended in annulment, the other in divorce. (*lost in thought*) No children from either marriage. No children... ever. Mrs. Millman always said it was just as well. Show business is no place for children. Considering the toll it took on her own daughter, she was probably right about that. (*coming to*) So, Bird and I were never meant to be married, not young, anyway. She had great things to do, and I had great things to write about. It’s one of the quirky similarities that drew us together as friends in the first place, like a funny way of comparing old circus wounds... Old circus wounds.

The circus! Of course! I’d almost forgotten. As Vaudeville was nearing its zenith, the American circus was entering its “Golden Age.” Sure, Bird Millman and Co. enjoyed favorable placed on the bill, but when it was all said and done, Vaudeville was really the medium of singers, dancers, and comics. In Vaudeville, Bird was always a bit of a novelty; in the circus, she was star. There were two big shows then, *Barnum and Bailey* and *The Ringling Brothers*, and there was the appearance of competition. Yes, there were two shows, but there was only one front office. Bird signed on with *Barnum and Bailey*, but it wasn’t long before the charade was abandoned and the two giants merged, becoming *The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus*. I should mention here that it was also the “Golden Age of Monopolies.” I didn’t care; I just knew I had to be a part of it all.

There I was in my New York hotel room, staring out my window at Madison Square Gardens and opening of the 1920 circus season. It was a torture that I could not endure, literally. I finally worked up enough courage to approach someone in the show. It had to be someone really important looking, but the manager of the ticket office was the best I could do.

“Can I help you?”

“Perhaps.”

“Would you like a ticket for the show?”

“No, thank you. I would like to join it.”

“You’ll have to wait for Mr. Cook.”

I found his quick, adroit response somewhat rude. Here I’d rehearsed a pause for laughter, but

he answered me as quickly and as nonchalantly as if I had just asked him for the time.

“Where can I find this Mr. Cook?”

“He’ll be in this office in about a half an hour.”

Well, that was it then. I would never have to utter that ridiculous sentence, “I’d like to join the circus,” to anyone, ever again, except to Mr. Cook. Joining the circus was one thing, but asking to do it was quite another—excruciating. So there I sat, with my handbag in my lap, waiting for Mr. Cook. I would have waited a week.

After the show let out, an elderly man came into the ticket office, and the ticket-takers left. “I’d like to speak to Mr. Cook” I told new arrival. That was a piece of cake. I could have said that all day.

“Mr. Cook isn’t here yet. Is there something that I can help you with?”

“No, thanks,” I replied, but I really meant, “No way, Mister. You’re not tricking me into spilling my guts again.” So I waited, another half an hour.

“Are you sure I can’t help you?” the kindly man offered once again.

“Thank you, but I’ve been instructed to wait for Mr. Cook.” I waited for a minute longer, eventually realizing the utter futility of it all. With a heavy sigh, I stood up and made a beeline for door. Perhaps I’d try again tomorrow; perhaps not. I avoided eye-contact with the impertinent man in the office, but he, of course, stopped me on my way out.

“Whatever Mr. Cook can help you with, I assure you, I can help you with as well.”

“Can you?” I quipped.

“I’m fairly certain,” he continued. “I’m Mr. Ringling.”

“Mr. Ringling. Mr. Ringling! You’re Mr. Ringling?”

“Mr. Ringling North.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mr. Ringling North. I’m Dixie Willson, two L’s”

We had a good laugh.

“How can I help you, Miss Willson with two L’s?”

“Well, Mr. Ringling, I’d like to run away and join the circus.”

“What’s your background?”

“Musical comedy. I write short works of fiction, and I also play the piano.”

He thought for moment. “I can’t pay you very much.”

“I’d do it for free!”

“Don’t talk like that in the dressing tent. They’ll murder you.”

The dressing tent! From the way he was talking, I could tell I was in. I don’t remember what I said next, but I’m sure it was gibberish *most* banal. I remember what he said though.

“Would like to ride an elephant in the parade?”

“Would I like to ride an elephant in the parade?” Such was my giddy response. My goal was singular: to break into the circus. Maintaining a professional demeanor would have to come later.

I’d also have to wait a bit until the circus was ready for me. In less than a month, I was to catch a train to Pennsylvania, where I would catch up to the show, and the cost of the train ticket was on me. So, I found myself on the phone, long distance, collect, to Mason City, Iowa, uttering the awful sentence, “I would like to join the circus,” to my poor old mother and father. Well, did I get an earful! I heard all about my estranged husband, Mr. Lampert, and I heard all about the tuition they had wasted, sending me to teachers’ college. I got everything except the money. Oh, well. I could hardly blame them, and I’d find the money somehow. But how? Days passed by, and I hadn’t managed to scrape it together. My friends were as broke as I was, and I couldn’t find a quick second job. Could this be it? Could my new career be derailed for lack of train fare?

A week later, I received a check in the mail, not from Mother and Father, but from my little brother, Meredith. Remember all those years ago: Cedric played the ringmaster; I played the aerialist; Meredith played the band leader. Seventy-six dollars and some odd cents was all the money he had in the world. He went down the bank, made it into a check, and sent it to me. Turns out I wasn’t the only dreamer in the family, and any of you who fancy yourselves clever may have figured out that my little brother is the one and only Meredith Willson, the Music Man himself. My other brother, Cedric, turned out to be some highfalutin’ engineer. At least I still overshadow Cedric, but Mother and Father won’t have us quibbling over such things over

Thanksgiving turkeys. They're equally proud of all three of us. There are times that I do miss those boys, though, with their rows of banjos and piles of tangled neckties. Oh, yes—do you remember the circus man who promised my dad a job with the circus? Well, he finally came through, a mere generation late is all.

When I arrived at the circus lot in Pennsylvania, it might as well have been the moon. To my new career, I brought all of the skills and expertise that a newborn baby brings the delivery room. I was lost. I was confused. I was having a ball. In case you ever join the circus, here's a useful tip: the dining tent doesn't close its doors after dinner; it completely disappears—vanishes without a trace. So if you're not hungry at scheduled mealtime intervals, learn to be. I sauntered in late one night. One of the cooks asked me very nicely if I would finish eating my tapioca pudding under a tree. Why not? I'm a sport. In the time it took me to finish my tapioca,.. I couldn't believe it! I didn't have any place to return my dish a spoon. I slept with them at the foot of my bed until breakfast. Also when I was still a neophyte, my comrades openly laughed at my breakfast—half an orange. "That's all I ever eat for breakfast," I told them. A week later, I had upgraded to ham and eggs. In a month, I added buttermilk biscuits and a short stack of pancakes. Half an orange wasn't fit to be the garnish of my new breakfast.

The parade alone was fulltime job. Few performers were ever excused, and the rules about demeanor and appearance were very strict. You must look dead ahead at all times. Every major city in the U.S., and I never saw anything but a vanishing point down Main Street. The circus performance itself had the grandest of all parades, but we called it "the spectacle." Every season, a different theme: one year, it was *The Wizard Prince of Arabia*; another year, it was *Cleopatra*. All of the performers took part. There was also the tableau, or "the living photograph." The pace of the show slowed down. Thrills made way for sighs. Circuses don't have those any more.

If you can't sleep on trains, don't join the circus. I slept like a baby. The rumble of a train is sweeter than any lullaby. And oh, the sights! Silhouetted cityscapes on the horizon, rows of corn, distant lights that dance across the bunk

above you. After a while, I didn't even mind the lack of privacy, at least not so much. Thursday is payday in the circus. As soon as I could manage it, I took my twenty-five dollars to town and bought three yards of fabric. Curtains! Alright, perhaps I minded the lack of privacy just a little bit.

The canvas city was a lot like any small town, composed of simple people doing daily chores. Still, it was not without its caste system. The lowest caste, the untouchables, are the roustabouts. They're the leather-skinned working men who put "her" up and take "her" down. Some are local men, hired for the day; some are lifers. The clowns—the joeys—stick together; you can find them in "clown alley." The Brahmin caste is comprised, not surprisingly, of the show's owners, managers, and highest-paid performers—the stars. When you pass them on the lot, however, they just go about their everyday business: reading, sewing costumes, rehearsing bits. So simple, yet so magnificent. In my day, the stars of the circus rivaled the stars of the stage or the screen. Some were household names. The sexes, however, were not equally recognized. Oh no, the girls ruled the roost. Indisputably, the three queens of the center ring were May, Leitzel, and Bird.

May Wirth was equestrienne from down the land down under. In 1913, she almost lost her life when her horse dragged her around the arena three times. She made a complete recovery, and, as they say, "got right back on." City folks who'd never been on a horse marveled at her feats, but she seemed more concerned with impressing her fellow experts. After all, only a peer could really appreciate the difficulty of a forward somersault on the back of a galloping horse. For this singularity, she has been described as a trick rider's rider.

Not even five feet tall, Lillian Leitzel had enough talent, temper, and tenderness to be twelve feet tall. Audiences would count in unison as she executed her world-famous planges... 47, 48... 73, 74... 98... all the way to 249, the all-time record. Each plange required a temporary dislocation of her shoulder, but she was compensated handsomely for the inconvenience—the first circus performer in history to demand, and receive, her own Pullman car, complete with a baby grand piano. She flew

in rage at any circus hand who committed any blunder, larger or small, in setting up her rigging; but the next day, she might take dictation for that very same man, if he needed a letter written. A lot of the roustabouts could read or write a lick. She could read and write in four languages, and she loved to entertain, whether in her private car or in the center ring. When the Circus Hall of Fame came to be, she was easily its first inductee. There was no contest: Leitzel was the greatest star the circus had ever known.



I myself was contented to be the peculiar girl with a notepad. Heck, I'd have lugged around my typewriter if only I had the room in my trunk. I was wondering through the lot on one of my first days on the job, and I spotted a brown-eyed nymph, knitting carelessly away. I didn't need an introduction. I knew she was Bird Millman—I recognized from the pictures—but I didn't know how amiable she was until I chatted with her. Mrs. Millman was every bit as hospitable, and the two of them really took me under their wing. That night, they invited me into their car for tea and the keenest crumpets I'd ever tasted.

Bird didn't much care for reporters, but I'm grateful that I was the exception. She was really very shy, and she'd duck into the women's dressing tent whenever she needed to dodge a male reporter. Newspapers never got smart enough to send a female report after her. It was in the dressing tent that Mrs. Millman explained the proper arrangement of a circus girl's trunk. The month's itinerary was always pinned to the lid. One dark night, I was having trouble getting from the lot back to the train. Even if you left a trail of bread crumbs, the train might have been moved. Dirty Trick. Bird gave me advice that I've never forgotten: Follow the elephants; there's always a lantern on the last one. No one's ever said such a thing to me, before or since.

Follow the elephants; there's always a lantern on the last one.

The destination to which every circus performer aspires is, of course, Ring No. Two, the center ring. From the beginning, Bird enjoyed center ring, while other wire acts also vied for the attention in Rings One and Three. By the end of her circus days, however, Bird commanded the entire arena. The lights would go dim, a white Rolls Royce would enter the arena, a liveried chauffer in white tails would open the door, and out would step Miss Millman, bathed in the spotlight. A quartet of male singers would accompany her performance, and advertisements for the sheet music, complete with Bird's picture on the cover, would appear in the circus program. These few years were the peak of Bird's career as a performer.



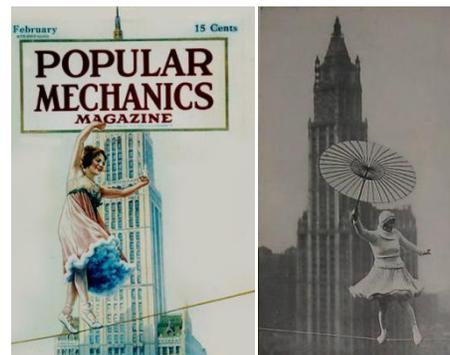
A while back, did I say the circus was ruled by *three* queens?... I did? Well, you must excuse me, then, I miscounted. I carelessly looked over the contributions of the one and only Berta Beeson. "The Whirlwind Madcap of the Wire" wasn't exactly a dead ringer for Bird, as two nearly-identical circus posters might suggest. Their costumes were as similar as their acts, but Berta's Adam's apple and broad shoulders distinguished him considerably from his rival. No, I'm not pulling your leg. The burning question is "why?" Were the men folk really so jealous of the fame, not the mention the salaries, of the female counterparts that they would employ such a desperate gimmick? *Or* was Herbert actually a sincerely-loyal fan with a rather... conspicuous way of expressing his admiration? Perhaps a bit of both.

Herbert was also known as “Slats” Beeson, as well as the “Julian Eltinge of the Wire.” Eltinge, in turn, was known as “Mr. Lillian Russell.” Eltinge was the most celebrated female impersonator in Vaudeville; Beeson was one of the most celebrated female impersonator in the circus. For centuries, in fact, the circus boasted a rich tradition of cross-dressing performers, so few people in the business would have been truly outraged at Beeson’s sensational act, with the possible exception of Bird. How did she feel about her strapping imitator? She never said, either way.



Mind you, these lovely follows were not without their clout. *Billboard* made considerable fuss over Beeson’s costume for the 1925 season. (*reading*) Beeson pursued his speedy way in an orchid-colored costume, the bodice of satin and the skirt of chiffon, with many circular tiers of marabou, a decorative theme repeated in bell-shaped sleeves. The parasol, orchid silk. When asked what became of last season’s costume *and* cape, allegedly trimmed with over a hundred-thousand rhinestones, Beeson simply said, “It’s been consigned to oblivion—too many rhinestones in the circus this year.” (*no longer reading*) We can’t doubt that some Bird’s costumes were similar, though *not* derivative and *not* so widely praised. Ironic double standard. Eltinge himself was widely considered an authority on beauty secrets, which he generously shared with the ladies of America in numerous magazine articles. W. C. Fields noted that women went into ecstasies over Julian Eltinge; men went to the smoking room. So there you have it, would-be acrobats of the male gender in a female-dominated circus: if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

Just when it looked like Americans couldn’t just go on ignoring the tempest in Europe any longer, all the young men went away, some of them never to return. Bird had once performed so graciously before the Kaiser, and now she did what she could to help defeat him. Twenty-five stories over Wall Street, with the Tribune Clock and the Woolworth Tower as a background, Bird gave an exhibition performance, just like her dad used to over the midway. She was operating under the auspices of the War Saving Stamp Committee, and the goal of her exhibition was to sell war bonds. Luckily, her exhibition didn’t end with her pink tights pointed straight in the air as one of her dad’s did. She did, however, lose her parasol to a gust of wind. You may remember that the 1920’s were a heyday for pole-sitters, Lucky Lindies, and other daredevils, so Bird was in good company. Naturally, the next issue of the *New York Tribune* was ablaze with photos. In the course of this and other outdoor exhibitions, she graced the cover of *Popular Mechanics*, and even *Radio World*, whose artists painted in a transistor radio.



Many performers spent the circus’s off-season in repose, in places like Baraboo, Wisconsin, and Sarasota, Florida. In these winter months, however, New York’s theatre season was in full swing, and the 1920’s were particularly prolific years. More productions opened in that decade than in any decade before or since. Not every show was memorable, but most of them were lively—lots of songs, lots of jokes, lots of legs. Head and shoulders above the rest stood Broadway’s most successful, if not notorious, producer. Who was this Sultan of Sequins? Anyone? (*waiting for an answer, perhaps offering the following as a hint*) “The Great Glorifier of the American Girl,” Florenz Ziegfeld.

Ziegfeld's infamous *Follies* had no storylines, but offered instead a galaxy of stars: Lillian Lorraine, W. C. Fields, Fanny Brice, Bert Williams. Some of the stars worked offstage: Joseph Urban designed the stunning sets; composers like Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin threw in some tunes. Every element, down to the smallest feather on the chorine in the back row, was of the highest quality. Call it high fashion; call it *haute couture*—in the twenties, Flo Ziegfeld was its author.

What was the secret of this paragon of pageantry? Well, its two principal ingredients were scantily-clad females and clever comic routines. Yes, I did mention those two phenomena earlier, when I was explaining Burlesque, but don't you dare confuse the *Follies* with Burlesque! For one thing, it wasn't only men in audience; their wives wouldn't have it. They loved the show every bit as much, and weren't about to stay at home. More importantly, Ziegfeld had something Minsky didn't—class, or at least the popular perception of it. Minsky was the Baron of Burlesque; his girls were strip women. Ziegfeld was the Baron of Broadway; his girls, often wearing considerably less than Minsky's, were the very blossoms of American beauty. Rest assured, Bird kept all her feathers on. Throughout much of her career, her characteristic costume was a flouncy skirt with tiers of swansdown trim. Always modest and tasteful. Contrary to some accounts, Bird most often used a Japanese parasol for balance.

Bird appeared in the 1916 edition of the *Follies*, but she was really destined to become a favorite of Ziegfeld's after-hours production, *The Frolics*. Nine o'clock, even midnight. The intimate cabaret venue upstairs was the New Amsterdam Roof, and such a clientele! Folks came, as the Spanish would say, to *ser y ser vista*—"to be and be seen." Patrons of the *Follies* wore their Sunday best; regulars at the *Frolics* had nothing but the best to wear, even when they were at their worst. Small parties sat at tables, but each table had a telephone—no foolin'—in case you wanted to ring up the next table and say, "Pass the salt, please."

Stars of the *Frolics* would sit right in the audience, and the Master of Ceremonies would plead with them to come up for their

"impromptu" performances. (*imitating the experience*) Me? Now? In this? Oh, why not? Bit nauseating, I know, but audiences and performers ate it up. New acts were often tried out in *The Frolics* and then moved downstairs to *The Follies*, so were new stars—Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers. During their numbers, chorus girls would flirt directly with the balding, ruby-nosed rich men in the audience. In one famous number, the girls actually went fishin' in the audience. They couldn't do that downstairs. There was even a runway with a glass floor, running right above the audience.

Bird's wire stretched right out over the house, and the audience was suddenly shareholder in her risk. Wouldn't that be just the moment she chose to come down? Well, one night, she did. She caught herself on the wire, but not before inserting her toe into the chicken à la king of an unsuspecting spectator. Being a chivalrous gentleman, he helped her back up so she could finish her act—unharmful, if not a bit chagrined. Well, Ziegfeld's press agent smelled a story, a bit for the theatrical column, anyway. He left Bird's dressing room and headed for the scene of the accident; he was in search of the names and addresses. When he came back, however, he held a hundred dollar bill instead. It was a gift from the gentleman at the table who, incidentally, did *not* desire to make known the little anecdote in any way whatsoever. It seems the husbands had wives, and the women had husbands, who... were not present during the unscheduled stunt involving Miss Millman's toe and the nice gentleman's chicken à la king.

About that time, the voters of our nation judiciously decided that there should be no more cakes and ale—well, no more ale, anyway. Prohibition effectively killed the New Amsterdam Roof. Ziegfeld built his own theatre uptown and abandoned the New Amsterdam altogether. The masterpiece of art nouveau architecture fell into ruin, destined to go the way of the Roxy and the Casino. Miraculously, some folks had the fortitude to see to the theatre's restoration. Bird's picture, by the way, still hangs in the lobby of the New Amsterdam.

The 1920's were all-around boom years for popular American entertainment. There were new sensations to be had on every corner, but the

newest and most unique medium had neither color nor sound—moving pictures. Several of my stories became motion pictures. Bird appeared in several herself. You might find a word or two about these films in history book, but they're lost to us now. They turned out to be as transient as the live acts they supplanted. Remember Vaudeville? Well, it was curtains for Vaudeville as soon as moving pictures started getting the star billings in Vaudeville theatres. In 1924, Bird played the Hippodrome one last time, but Bird, much like the Hippodrome itself, was well into her twilight years.

(reading) Miss Millman, in view of her repute and known assets, failed to improve her opportunity in this magnificent house, which should be the dream of any silent performer. Pretty and agile as always, she did nothing except walk the wire for a few minutes—her whole act ran about six minutes—and slide down and bow herself out and off.

As Vaudeville lay dying, Bird's nimble joints and spry limbs began to give out. Did you think that she could just prance and pirouette across a steel cable for decades without enduring the slightest physical hardship? Oh, no. I myself have witnessed her disobey a doctor's orders and go on. With my own eyes, I've seen the bruises and scars which she is so careful to conceal with ribbons and bows. She once told me of a performance in which the audience gasped. She didn't know why until she happened to look down and see a spot of blood on her ankle. How silly it seemed to her, for anyone to be shocked at that, but she grinned and kept on like nothing was amiss. What else could she do? It's what she had always done. The time eventually came, however, when years of circus wounds could no longer be denied. Even *B. F. Keith's Theatre News* bore witness to this reality.

(reading) Behind the apparent ease and happiness of her work, at each performance, Miss Millman goes through mental and physical strain which seems almost beyond human endurance. The terrific effort incumbent with each appearance leaves her in a state of complete exhaustion. With magnificent fortitude, she endures the physical torture which follows every performance. Even years of practice cannot harden the muscles in her feet and legs to the point where she will not suffer. Miss Millman is

one of the bravest souls in the circus family; she never complains, but quietly endures physical agony and accepts it as part of the work in which she as chosen to excel.

Such gloom. Pathos really has no business in show business. Seems it was time to retire, for a while, at least. Lucky for Bird that her efforts in the War Savings Stamp Committee had paid off, so it would seem. Military veteran and Harvard graduate, Joseph O'Day, towered over tiny Bird, all six and a half Irish-Catholic feet of him. They were a proportionally-incongruous couple, so, naturally, it was love. Joe had made his fortune in the manufacturing of dyestuffs. Bird even converted to the Catholicism for the sake of Joe; it must have been serious. They married secretly, and they kept their secret for several months. When the time was right, he would move Bird into his Massachusetts cottage and live a life of inconspicuous bliss. His plans were thwarted before they were even made.

When he made his way down to the municipal building to apply for the marriage license, the clerk asked him how many times he had been married. None, naturally. And his bride-to-be—how times had she been married? Well, it seems she was slightly ahead of Joey in sheer number of laps down the ole wedding aisle, but he had his pride to think about. Likewise, he desired to keep his marriage a secret. "None," he uttered, thinking himself quite clever. Joe's little white lie caught the eye of a clerk in another office. This clerk seemed to remember reading of Bird's first two marriage announcements.

Some time later, *The Denver Post* had a glorious wedding announcement for the young couple. The Denver papers had always been so kind to Bird when the circus came back to Colorado; and even back in her Vaudeville days they always rolled out the red carpet for her. This time wasn't *too* much different. The pictures were very flattering, and the layout was impeccable. The headline, however, was a dagger: "Why Bewitching Bird Millman Hushed her Goldspoon Marriage." The spread even included a picture of the falsified Intent of Marriage form. Not only was their secret marriage no longer a secret; it was a scandal. Despite the rocky beginning, or perhaps because of it, Jennadean and Joe in love to stay. So the secret to their happy marriage was simple—scandal. Only

external forces could endanger their bliss, and before too long, one such external force did.

After the Great War, the dark clouds were quick to gather on the horizon once again. Bird hadn't plummeted to the depths of Wall Street during her famous exhibition, but in December of 1929, the stock market did just that. It plummeted to the depths of Wall Street and then kept falling. That was about the time that Lillian Leitzel was performing in Copenhagen. The audience counted her planges... 73... 74... 98... They stopped counting and gasped. The rigging had failed, sending the tiny acrobat to her early death. The greatest star the circus had ever known was gone, just like that. Others fell in less literal terms, but they fell nonetheless. Bird's beloved husband, like so many others, lost everything, everything material. Bird didn't seem to mind the poverty so much, but Joe wasn't up to it. He turned to the bottle. His health declined rapidly, and he died a year later.

It was about this time that I lost my mother. The coincidental timing of our difficult losses galvanized and transformed the nature of our friendship from that point forward. I wanted to solve her problems for her; unfortunately, all I had to offer was moral support. Penniless and heartbroken, Bird returned to Colorado to live with her mother. A modest wood-frame house on the eastern outskirts of Cañon City was their new home. Several authors recall that Bird turned her attention to the husbandry of chickens, or was it turkeys? Either way, it wasn't entirely accurate. The business venture failed, and Mrs. Millman and Bird did not sustain themselves by way of poultry.

Now, Mrs. Millman and Bird didn't exactly become pillars of Cañon City society, but they did manage to find their special niche in the community. A local ballerina by name of Clara Louise, fascinated with Bird's stories, used to come to call. Clara Louise and her fellow ballerinas danced at the inauguration of the Royal Gorge Bridge several years before. Only days before she died of lung cancer, Clara Louise made my promise not to share this with anyone: it was Bird her taught her how to smoke cigarettes. (*grimacing and reaching for the white-out*) Things were different in the thirties. Bird and her mother didn't have a lot of money,

but they didn't let that stop them from living a bit extravagantly. They might, for instance, hire a cab to drive them to the movies and leave the fare running until it was time to go.

I can identify with their devil-may-care attitude toward money. For gypsy folks like us, it comes and goes with the weather. What have I always done when the needle on my bank account points to empty? Why, I sit done and write another book, easy as pulling into a filling station. What's the point of saving it up when a Great Depression or other comes along and gobbles it up? Mrs. Millman and Bird always lived the same way. There's always another contract, another season. Problem was, there wasn't. With my urging, Bird made two unsuccessful attempts to re-enter show business. Her body simply wouldn't allow it.

After a few years of provincial life, Bird noticed a sharp pain in her lower spine, obviously an old circus wound come back to haunt her. (*lost in thought*) Old circus wounds. You'll have to excuse me. It was sort of a code word between Bird and me. Anyway, It was also in this time that a writer by the name of Sverre Braathen asked her to write down her thoughts. Well, Bird was really all the good with names and places and specifics, but Mr. Braathen assured her that specifics did not interest him. He could get those himself. He wanted Bird to share memories that the books and newspapers hadn't yet touched. Bird wasn't sure if she could oblige such a request. She almost dismissed it altogether, but the wheels of her mind were already turning. Be it of her own volition or not, she spent several quiet days collecting her thoughts, and then, one morning, she set down to write. (*scanning a bit of text*) Ah, her first day on the job, when she about eight... six... ten. Don't ever expect a circus girl to tell the truth about her age.

(*reading*) It was a rainy night when we first appeared on the lot. Everything was dingy and water-soaked, but fantastic in the light of one gasoline flare, the only light by which the tent was being taken down and show packed to move. A little uncertain of it all, the three of us found our way across the muddy lot in the chilly, drizzling rain, looking for the manager who had hired us. We found him in mud-splashed overalls, loading tent poles. "Glad you got here,"

he said. “Go on the hotel and turn in. You’ll get a three thirty call in the morning.” So we did. The next morning was a fair sample of every morning thereafter: early morning dreams interrupted by pounding on the door, a raspy hotel clerk uttering that breakfast would be served in ten minutes. Ten minutes later, there I would sit, in a dimly-lit dining room, staring a bowl of oatmeal. (*no longer reading*) Anyone who describes circus life as “glamorous” must be talking about the life of circus spectator.

Fern Andra once contacted me. Remember: she was the “Mary Pickford” of German cinema, and she wanted to tell the story of Bird, no doubt as a byproduct of recounting her own highly-embellished autobiography. I wasn’t crazy about the idea. Fern was a lovely and accomplished woman, but everything she had ever disclosed about herself was pure make-believe. Stars got away with outrageous fibs to the press in those days, and Fern could bear to be from prosaic Illinois. So few of us were truly proud to be Midwesterners. I’ve always been proud to hail from Io-way, and several of my stories are set there.



When my little brothers were still little, the thing to do was to be in a marching band. It gave me an idea for a story: a mountebank rolls into town, and he promises to form a boys’ band, complete with instruments, uniforms, and lessons. Problem is, the crooked fellow doesn’t know an eighth note from ink splotch. I shared the idea with my brother Meredith. He bought it... literally. I was flat broke—as I often am—and “The Silver Triangle” became his property; later it became a hit musical titled *The Music Man*. He never gave me credit, not once. Doubtful of my claim? I don’t blame you. I present no evidence,

save this: The *Music Man* was Meredith’s only successful venture as a playwright; he was really a composer and lyricist at heart. Not only did the show have a good book; it had an excellent book. I myself am no musical virtuoso; I’ve always been the writer of the family. As I mentioned, several of my short stories did quite well on the big screen. Am I resentful? I try not to be. After all, my typing fingers still work, and I have a masterpiece in them yet.



For one thing, I had always planned on sitting down to write the story of Bird—a play, a book, a screenplay. What would work best? What would I include? What would she want me to leave out? I had to think about it long and hard. Everything had to be just right. I even traveled to Colorado to visit her; it goes without saying that we had such a wonderful time. The mood, however, was undeniably somber. One of Bird’s best chums had always been her Uncle Harry. He was a character. One old-timer recalls that Harry Patton could cuss for a solid half an hour without repeating himself. I was unable to verify the claim because Uncle Harry died in an accidental drowning right before I got there. The Pattons were good people, but some of them were known to drink a bit too much. Uncle Harry was, no doubt, intoxicated at the time of his drowning. Likewise, Mrs. Millman had spent of her life battling the same inner demon that defeated her brother. She was a devoted mother, but she could say such hateful things to her daughter. Old circus wounds. Bird never complained though.

The sudden tragedy of Uncle Harry's passing was still haunting Mrs. Millman, but I could sense there was another matter as well. When Bird was taking a nap, Mrs. Millman pulled me into the kitchen. If I were Bird's closest friend, there were some things that I needed to know... Well,... as is often the case, the luxury of time was no longer afforded to me. I was to start writing on behalf of Bird immediately. I had no choice.

Dear Mr... Dot Dot Dot, I won't answer your last letter at length, but before I forget, I would like to thank you for the press clippings; they will mean a lot to her. Please be aware that Bird still thinks she has a broken vertebrae and that she might recover yet. It is imperative that she doesn't know that I have been asking for funds, nor should she know that she is to die soon. Though everyone I contacted has been very gracious, we only received enough money to take care of the nurses and the drugs for a short time. In fact, we ran out last week. I don't know how she's managed without additional painkillers, but she's always been very courageous in the face of terrible pain. Though she's wan and frail, you'd be delighted to know that she still has the little smile. It helps her keep back the tears that she's so determined not to shed. I pray it won't be much longer. Any additional contributions should be sent to the First Nation Bank of Cañon City in care of R. L. Hinman, who will see to their appropriate use. Best wishes to you, Signed... Dot Dot Dot.

No, it wasn't an old circus injury that came back to haunt her. That's the irony of it all. When she was a child bride at nineteen, she didn't just lose her husband; she lost twin boys. At her mother's insistence, Bird had the wedding annulled and the twins aborted. In those days, abortions were clandestine and barbaric, carried out in shame and shadows. The careless operation left Bird in physical discomfort and permanent reproductive dysfunction. Not only was she unable to conceive again, she developed cancer of the uterus.

I scoured notebooks and files, looking her old working acquaintances whom I might be apply to reach before it was too late. I ran across the rough draft of her letter to Mr. Braathen.

(*reading*) My first sweetheart materialized one afternoon when I was seven or eight, a dusty little toe-headed boy came hesitantly around back to ask for me. He didn't live particularly nearby. He lived in the town where our show had played the day before, and he had walked ten miles to bring me a bag of red and white sticky candy. A little self-conscious about it all, we sat in my parlor, which was a gold chariot. He told me about his dog with three feet and his brother who could play the accordion. I told him about Daisy Bell's colt, and I even took him to the pad room to see it. I was so glad to have a little friend, but he could stay long; he had to get home before dark. I kept that last, smudged bit of red and white sticky candy wrapped in tissue in the tray of my little trunk.

With such a long a luminous career, you'd think Bird would some sort of safety net—a pension, a medical fund. She had raised so much money for her Uncle Sam when he was at war; he must have had something to offer her in return. Only his cold shoulder. She died in poverty and pain, August of 1940, not yet fifty years old. There were scant enough friends or family available to conduct a proper funeral. Pallbearers were recruited from town. I gave the eulogy, which I had prepared several weeks before.

In 1957, the Colorado Spring Chapter of Circus Fans of America raised the Bird Millman Tent, Number Eighty-Six, for the first time, in Cañon City. For several years thereafter, the CFA Chapter visited and decorated her grave in the Greenwood Cemetery. In 1961, Bird Millman, along with the five Ringling Brothers, entered the Circus Hall of Fame.

Many years following Bird's passing, I got to work on another circus-inspired book, *Mystery in Spangles*. One of my characters was Gayle, the bookish and impertinent little girl who always tagged along with her sleuthing sisters. Gayle loved elephants. The three of them befriended a high-flying girl in the circus. I called her April. I hope you appreciate that, Bird, where ever you are... (*with a grin*) where ever you are. And don't forget the advice you gave me when I had lost my way: Follow the elephants; there's always a lantern on the last one.