

# COME ON UP

*Ephraim Travers*



AS EPHRAIM watches, the farmer lifts the hood of the old Ford motor truck and steam billows out, rising up into the black Pennsylvania sky. The engine emits a few hiccoughs and burps, noisier than a Tin Lizzie, and dies. The farmer draws thumb and index finger down hollow cheeks and spits a gob into the dirt road. It is the only sound, seemingly, in all the cornfields for miles around.

Ephraim was asleep in the back, lying in a pile of onions, when the man pulled over and shook him awake. He hadn't been dreaming. He didn't dream. Wasn't a dreamer, his older sister, Sophie, sometimes said, because she knew this about him somehow though he'd long since forgotten ever telling her such a thing. The way she said it, looking over at him from the table where she was pounding dough, was one of the hundred reasons why he ran off from her neat little house in Albany, New York. Only to get himself into a pickle here, as Sophie would have said, miles from home and not a wheel to carry him farther.

Well, he doesn't care. He'll find another ride. Right now, though, the man who offered his last lift bends over the hissing engine. A kerosene lamp perched on the fender casts a weak glow across him, showing a threadbare cap and a shirt full of patches, a wiry neck and hands, molasses-dark skin that seems to absorb the night. Ephraim looks off down the deserted road.

"Reckon we be here a while," the man says. Then, to Ephraim, as he rolls up his sleeves, "Fetch me that toolbox in back, boy."

"Yessir," Ephraim says.

Out behind the truck, there is a faint glow to the night sky, like from leftover daylight or far-off rain. In the truck's bed, Ephraim can see the rising mound of onions, the faint shape of the burlap sack he's slept on, but nothing like a toolbox. It must be buried under the onions. He'll have to dig it out. He rubs his hands together, glances off down the road again, and this time sees it.

The glow isn't from rain. It is being cast up into the sky from a field a mile away. As Ephraim strains to see its source, sound touches his ears. Voices, music, thinned and tossed around by the faint breeze but still recognizable. He drops his hands into his pockets and walks toward the glow.

He imagines a big farm, or maybe a mill. But when he gets closer, he can see that the light comes from torches arranged around several tents and an open-air stage down in a sloping field. There are dark shapes of people milling around and a larger crowd seated before the stage, all of them watching something Ephraim can't quite make out. He hears the tinkling of a piano, laughter rising now and again from the audience.

Closer, and he can see on the stage a man playing a banjo and his companion, a stout woman in a glittery dress who dances around him in a funny way that makes her keep bumping into him with her hips or bosoms, drawing laughter from the audience each time. After the woman chases the banjo player off the stage, two men, one big and

one small, stride out in dark suits speckled like they've been splattered with whitewash. The little one climbs onto the shoulders of the big one, starts juggling balls and then appears to start dropping them, but the big man catches them and throws them back into the air, and soon there are so many balls flying between them that Ephraim loses count. Five? Seven? Ten? The little man teeters and falls off, drawing gasps from the audience, but he lands on his feet without losing a single ball.

Ephraim creeps closer and watches a while longer as the singing and dancing and clowning and stunts are taken up by a succession of people, coloreds and whites more mixed up together than he's ever seen. Across the top of the stage is hung a banner with ornate lettering at a jaunty angle that reads DOC BELL'S MIRACLES AND MIRTH MEDICINE SHOW.

After a while, tired and yawning, he turns his attention to the buggies, Tin Lizzies, trucks, wagons, and mule carts lining the roadway. He still needs a ride. If he can guess the right vehicle, he'll be carried on his way by some unsuspecting farmer heading home after the show. He walks along, looking for a truck or wagon to his liking. In the two months since he left Albany, he has stuck with rides that would have put Sophie at ease, Negro farmers, jolly or taciturn or straight-arrow men like the onion farmer he left down the road. All of them gave a twelve-year-old Negro boy a ride and a bite to eat without a thought. Now, though, there is no telling who he'll wind up with, what they'll say if they catch him.

*Don't give any of that white riffraff a chance to get their hands on you,* he can hear his sister saying in his head.

But Sophie isn't here. He finds a big truck with a cloth canopy and a bed full of crates and boxes and climbs in. In a few minutes he's made himself at home and fallen asleep.

WHAT WAKES him up is someone pulling on his foot. Ephraim opens his eyes to full daylight, a vast space yawning where the crates that hid

him rest no longer and a ring of faces now stares at him. Roughnecks, he sees at once. Four or five of them. The kind of white men who huddled on vacant Albany lots early in the morning, waiting for trucks gathering up workers for the docks down along the Hudson, and hung around saloons at night.

“Well looky here,” says one, a bald and grinning man muscular as a horse who sounds angry and amused at the same time. “We got us a stowaway!” He yanks Ephraim by the ankle until he’s dragged him onto the truck gate, where they surround him. “What you doin’ in there, boy? You stealin’ from us?”

“No, sir,” Ephraim says. “I was sleeping.”

Another one, a skinny older man with faded red hair and sun-squinted eyes, says to Ephraim, “You stay put.” Over his shoulder, he says to someone else, “Go get Conger.”

Ephraim knows better than to look into any of their faces. If he keeps his mouth shut, they might let him go. Out past them he sees nothing but cornfields. It dawns on him that he must have picked one of the show’s trucks to sleep in, and his bad choice has left him exactly where he was the night before.

In a few moments another man whom Ephraim guesses is Conger arrives and exchanges a few words with the others. He is short, dressed like a dandy in a plum-colored, high-waisted coat and a matching bowler.

“Anything missing?” he says to the men, though he stares at Ephraim.

One springs into the truck and looks around for a moment before saying no, there isn’t. He jumps out again.

“You think you’re joining the circus?” this Conger says to Ephraim, coming closer and talking fast. “Well this ain’t a circus, boy, it’s a medicine show. And Doc Bell’s med show don’t take on tyros, got it? Last pickaninny I had ran off on me after a week. And good riddance, too! You got anything you can do, boy? What can you do?”

What can he do? Ephraim has no idea what the man is talking about. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’ll just be on my way,” he says.

He slides off the gate, drops to the ground, and walks right through them. Nobody touches him.

“Wait a minute,” says Conger.

Ephraim stops.

“I’ve got a job for you.” Conger waves the others off and then beckons matter-of-factly to Ephraim, as if they’ve already discussed and struck some kind of a deal. “Come on. It’s so easy a monkey could do it, and the pay’s as good as you’ll get.”

Ephraim looks out over the cornfields, which stretch unbroken as far as he can see. Off to his other side stands one of the sagging tents, which by daylight looks more like some bedsheets thrown over a clothesline. It can’t hurt anything to do what the man wants for a while, long enough to get himself some dinner, maybe, and his bearings. His stomach growls. He can always light out later.

“Yessir,” he says, turning and following Mr. Conger into the field.

THEJOB turns out to be pasting labels onto amber bottles of tonic. Mr. Conger sets him up in the back of an emptied truck with a mountain of the bottles, a stack of labels that say DOC BELL’S VIM-TANA HERBAL TONIC and a paste pot and brush. Ephraim carries on with it all morning, until curiosity gets the better of him and he pulls the cork from a bottle. The scent of booze that wafts from inside, familiar to him from his days of accompanying his sister on her charity visits to tenements, wrinkles his nose.

In the afternoon, when he gets bored, his eyes wander back to the stage. Erected in front of another small tent, it stands empty now, but the blue and red bunting draped along its front edge and the white pennants flapping atop its support poles give it a festive air. Flanking the stage are two enormous panels. On the panel to the right of the

stage, a curly-haired mermaid playing a banjo gazes out at him, her long fishtail curved fetchingly behind her. On the left floats a buxom angel in a flowing gown who smilingly drips a sparkling drop from her finger into a bottle labeled DOC BELL'S. Two or three times, Ephraim believes the angel and the mermaid are moving, that the show never stops, but after a while he chalks this up to being light-headed from hunger and a little disconcerted by so many new people around him.

And what people they are. Many of the performers wandering the grounds are in plain shirts, trousers, and dresses now rather than their garish costumes, but he recognizes most of them from the night before just the same. The sad-faced Negro lady who swallowed a sword, still in one piece the morning after, walking around in circles like she lost something. The blonde-haired lady who did the pistol stunts has shed her buckskin dress for a yellow frock, but she walks with the same swagger of the hips. And the acrobats, the tall and lanky one and the little one, travel together by day as by night, though now they argue loudly with one another. While Ephraim's staring at them, something passes close to him that momentarily blots out the sun—a man tall as a man and a half, dressed in a suit assembled from American flags. People flounce around in bright neck scarves or whistle loud tunes or lie in the grass like they just fell out of the sky there. He counts almost twenty of these peculiar folk before he loses track and gives up. None of them pay him any mind. When he gets tired of watching them, he goes back to pasting labels again.

Around dusk, when he is hoping food might be forthcoming soon, Mr. Conger shows up again. "Forget about that," he says, waving Ephraim out of the truck. "Come down here. I got something else for you to do."

Should he go? Ephraim watches Mr. Conger's back recede and wonders. These people seem harmless enough, even silly with their strange airs. But if there is no food in the offing, maybe it is time to be on his way.

Mr. Conger turns around and stares at him for several moments before he says anything. Then he smiles and says, "This ain't like nothing they got back at home, boy. Guaranteed."

Ephraim is sure he's already seen most of what the show has to offer, but he follows anyway. If it isn't like home, it's fine with Ephraim. Back there, oftentimes, they would hear about some child falling down the stairs and breaking its neck, or read about some poor woman forced out of her home and driven insane, and his sister would sit in the parlor chair and rock and weep and moan. If he came near to ask if he could help her, she grabbed him and held him to her, rocking them and sharing her grief over someone neither of them knew, until she sensed he was simply waiting to be let go. Then she pushed him away from her with a snort of disgust. Other days, he might be in the parlor alone and lift the pictures Sophie kept of their dead parents, one by one, from the small table by the window. He might finger the silver frames, trying to remember these people who died only a few years after he was born, when Sophie, much older than he, had been sixteen. But he couldn't recall them. They were only faces to him. *Try, try to remember!* Sophie would implore. *Surely if you try, you can remember your own parents!* Once he heard her tell a member of one of her women's groups about his dismal failure. *I can scarcely believe, she said, my own brother could be so cold-hearted!*

Mr. Conger stops in front of one of the tents, which has a banner strung across the front of it reading SHEBA, QUEEN OF THE NILE. At a ticket stand in front of the entrance, an old woman eyes him sourly. Lightning bugs begin to wink around them, and from somewhere banjo notes sprinkle the air. Off a ways from where Ephraim stands with Mr. Conger, there are already groups of scraggly white people arriving, farmers in overalls, farm wives in cotton dresses and heavy shoes, clutches of children milling around them, all finding seats among the sea of benches that have been set out in front of the stage.

"Now here's what I want you to do," Mr. Conger says.

He is close to Ephraim now, and he seems different in the semi-darkness, friendlier somehow, as if he likes Ephraim. He lights a cigar and smiles.

“Now Gert there will sell some tickets, see, and send the first bunch of rubes in. Only they won’t find anything, and they’ll come out complaining. Gert’s going to send you in to see about it. You go on in and just wait for a minute. Nothing else. Got that? Count to sixty. Then you come running out of there screaming and hollering like you just ran into the Ku Klux Klan. You hear me, boy? *You fly!* And you keep right on running like you ain’t planning to stop till you get to California. You think you can do that?”

“Run out of that tent?” Ephraim says, trying to see what’s inside. The flap is closed, though, and he can see nothing. Even the dim images on the banner are impossible to make out in the dying light.

“That’s it!” Mr. Conger says, grinning. “And make plenty of noise!”

And with no further explanation, Mr. Conger leaves him standing there between Gert and the tent.

Though he’s confused, Ephraim stays put. A small, quiet crowd gathers in front of the ticket stand, waiting to go in. A few people stare at him, but most chatter with their companions, paying little attention to anything else until Gert waves the first in line forward to buy tickets. Three men and two women meander into the tent.

Those waiting continue their murmuring and shushing of children. Music from the stage drifts over and fills the air. A minute passes, then two. The men and women spill back out of the tent.

“Ain’t nobody in there!” says one of the men, angrily waving his ticket. He hitches up his overalls. “This ain’t nothing but a cheat!”

“Yeah,” says another. “Ain’t nothing inside o’ there! Gimme my money back!”



Ephraim wants to run. But Gert turns around and looks at him for the first time, and Mr. Conger's words take him over and he mutters and backs into the tent himself as if he will attend to the problem.

As soon as the flap falls over the entrance, the noise muffles and the air tastes heavy as dirt. He sucks in a breath and then breathes out more easily. It is too dark to see anything in the tent, and he has no intention of poking around inside, looking for this Sheba. Maybe the tent is empty. Maybe this Sheba is some kind of wax dummy Mr. Conger hid somewhere inside the tent. It must be some kind of a hoax. Ephraim feels a vague shame, the singeing heat of Sophie's disdain at him for getting mixed up in something so dishonest, and he resolves right there to carry through with it all just as Mr. Conger told him to. He squares his shoulders, parts the curtain, and rushes out again, screaming at the top of his lungs.

The people outside are too startled to move out of his way. He dashes on, feeling a little foolish, but hollering for all he's worth and bumping and jostling hips and shoulders in his crazy flight away from the tent. Then he clears the edge of the crowd and barrels on across the dark field, giving it a few more squawks and screams before he guesses he's far enough away to quit the whole charade.

He turns around, his chest heaving, his eyes watering a little, and watches the result. Already the crowd has swelled to twice the size it started at. Yells and cries go up as the people push forward, waving hands, some clutching dollar bills, over their heads.

Ephraim's breath eases. He gets it now. He, Ephraim, has just put on a show as good as anything happening on the torchlit stage. But he and Mr. Conger and the old lady are the only ones who know it. He laughs out loud, then claps a hand over his mouth and looks around to see if anyone heard him. There's nobody there, though. He's fooled them all.