



Johnny Hugent  
Showman

1978

OLD  
780

JOHNNY NUGENT, SHOWMAN

as told to

Maurice Rowdon © 1978

BOLT AND WATSON  
LTD

JOHNNY NUGENT is an all-round circus man. He can eat fire, swallow swords, throw knives, do horse-back ropetricks. He clowns and MCs and hypnotises. He has worked with snakes and trained all kinds of animal acts. He can do 'good' and 'cheap' magic, illusion and levitation. He is now sixty-five years of age and lives with the last of his animals in a rambling shack at Colonial Heights near Richmond, Virginia. Two busy highways intersect not half a mile away but he has a clean stream to himself, and the shade of the cedar trees he himself planted. He sleeps in the main cabin next to a tall wood-stove, and around him are platforms, boxes for carving up ladies, scaffolding, sword-racks, 'Larriet' knives, bull-whips and guns and posters and much of the varied paraphernalia of his acts. According to Johnny there are more circuses coming on the road every day.

This book will be drawn entirely from Johnny's talk. It will cover his life as chronologically as possible, given the easy-going and rambling style of his chat, and it will comprise something of a one-man history of the circus this century. Johnny has enough stories for five volumes.

Here are a few typical excerpts:

JOHNNY NUGENT, SHOWMAN

as told to

Maurice Rowdon

I have two booking agents and the rule is they take fifteen percent of the cut and do all the booking for me. I play carnival, rodeos, fairs, I play everything but a medicine show and a dramatic show. But I'm going to tell you where the money is. It's in the nightclubs. Now I've played in many a one: in the Carolines, Georgia, all the western coast of America, down here on the eastern shore too, and maybe once or twice in Richmond (but not too much over there). And my agents book me in, maybe with a juggling act or a belly dancer. You never know what you're going to get. All I know is what I'm going to do. That's the work it works.

Now people come here to Colonial Heights and tell me how to make a lot of money. You see, it's like those gypsy folk---if they know the lucky number for the horses why don't they play it themselves? Do you think I'd sell it for a buck if I knew it? And then

they tell you to put a rabbit's foot in your pocket. It'll give you good luck! But look what happened to the rabbit!

And then the same people turn round and want to borrow a dime for a cup of coffee.

I've got three nieces and two nephews, and not one of them bothers me. I live all alone. My youngest nephew Francis is the only one in the family who fell in my shoes. He's my brother's boy. Francis has my horses right now, seven of them. I've got my two donkeys up at the top of the hill here with some old folks who look after my dog and all that when I'm away on a show. And I have a pony down here with me, round the back.

My brother's retired from the navy and has a gift shop somewhere in Tennessee, he has some big floor space there. He never went much for show business, though he was a pretty good trick roper at one time. But it didn't work. After all, it's what you like.

Sometimes this shack of mine is loaded with equipment. Apart from what I keep here, Forrest Taylor has got it all in Circusville, Ohio---my A-sets and the trundles and driving units and platforms. He's even got a ring curb of mine up there. Now Columbus, Ohio, is your largest stand in the United States. Then comes Dallas. But Columbus, Ohio, has your biggest fair.

My momma and daddy were show people too. It's handed down from father to son, usually. I've seen the little kids cry and their mommas and daddies would throw them up on the teeter board with the swivel belt on and all that stuff for the trapeze or tumbling act. They'd tell them 'Git with it!'

I'm not just a circus man. I'm a sign painter too, an artist. I was born with that. I went to no schools. I like doing letters, circus letters or what they call the Gay Nineties. You see, a showman likes a flash. My mother used to paint flowers on dishes back when times were tight. I used to go out and sell her little saucers with their hand-painted lilies and poinsettias for a dime a piece, and that was good money, in '30 and '31, in the Depression, when the WPA was going on. That was when I got three dollars a week, and I'm not lying. Plus all I could steal but there was nothing to steal---that was what the circus man always told me when he hired me!

I cover just about everything in my work. One of my painted signs says 'Levitation, Forbidden Wisdom'. I've got the gimmick for that, you see. It's a secret! I bring it on big. If I play the levitation I have a girl work with me, her name is Charlotte Stalensky, and she's as stiff as a board when I put her up there and make her rise. I do my announcing, I say, 'Now you gentlemen that's highstrung in math, get your slide rules out because this is going to bug yer! It bugged my mother in law so bad she's in Central State Hospital right now! It serves her right for trying to stick

her nose in my act! Suspended in mid-air, watch it!' I get two guys up on the stage and set her up there on two chairs and a strip of pinewood between, and she'll go up. And after it's all over with they start bugging you, they want to find out your secret.

I work with various girls. Sandra does the levitation sometimes too. I have a girl by the name of Fry for the western stuff. She works bull whips and we do fancy roping and stuff together.

But the nightclubs are where the money is all right. I can sell them my 'garbage'---picture postcards, your souvenirs. It's like the guys at the races saying, 'Programmes, programmes, you can't tell the damned horse without programmes!' The trouble is in the nightclubs a dirty joke goes over bigger than a high-priced act. All they want is jokes! And look at TV! Man, they talk about 'family hour' but, holy cow, if it ain't naughty it ain't good! And then you get the hecklers at the clubs. You've got to shut them up.

There are two kinds of magic, real magic and illusion. I can do a whole lot---legerdemain, flourishes, back palming, hex and voodoo. Doug Henning too---people try to bribe him to get his secret. But you can't bribe him. Glen Campbell once told him, 'I'll teach you how to play the guitar if you show me how you moved that knot on the rope.' Then there's Mark Wilson. He's good too. Now I've got some good magic and I've got cheap magic. What I do in close-up cheap magic is like inside somebody's home or at a club. I keep it clean but I might take something out of a man's pocket that he didn't know he had. I don't use stooges. I ask for a volunteer and I use a little technology. I can tell a couple if they're married or single, or if they're just dating up. I get them up there on the platform. Where the fun comes in is when you hear them say to each other, 'I told you not to come up here, he's going to make a fool outa yer!' I keep talking in the mike, and I might tell a guy, 'It looks like you're holding out on me, what have you got there?' And I pull a knife and fork out of his pocket. Nobody's seen me touch him! They get a big kick out of that. When you put something in somebody's pocket it's called a flourish. If I'm working with kids I take a little boy out of the crowd and give him a water-bucket and he carries it round in front of me while I say 'Half a dollar please!' That's called a 'coin-catcher'. When we get through I count the coins and there's one missing and I say to the boy, 'Hey, hey you! What you done? Snatched one of them coins? Come on now, come on, I gonna pay you but I don't want you taking my half-dollars, I need 'em!'

'Mister, I wouldn't take your money!'

I say, 'Look, just give me that half-dollar!'

And he opens his mouth and I shake his jowls, and it falls right there in the bucket. Or I shake his nose and it falls out of his nostrils.

Now levitation is illusion, not magic. The big

question is, is she really suspended in mid-air? My answer to that is if I could do miracles I'd jack up trucks and let you work on the tyres and take the universal joint out and make all the money I wanted.

\* \* \*

Flame swallowing and sword-acts are dangerous. Now the sword-act is a nut you just can't crack. I'm going to tell you something. This here burns me up because it's happened on every circus I've been on. It's the attitude of certain people. I don't mean owners or managers or the public but just flunkies, you know, the labourers round the show. Every time I work with the sword they come round and stand in front of the platform, and everybody out there knows they're with the show, and they keep seeing it and they keep it seeing it but they still don't believe it, they're trying to catch on to the trick. But there's no trick to it! At the end them flunkies don't know a bit more than at first. One time I told them straight, I said, 'Holy smoke! You go along to the office way, I'm fed up with you! If Hocksey Tucker believes it's true I don't care if anybody else believes it because he's the guy paying me! Where that sword goes is my business!'

The things people say---that we use 'tubular' or 'collapsible' swords and all that! I couldn't fool people in the United States with stuff like that! Some say rubber, some say it went up my sleeve. I even worked with a tee-shirt on once and they said it went down my collar. I always tell them, 'You all come right close!'

Hocksey Tucker is a nice man to work with. Last year I played his show in Maryland, Jersey. He came right here to Colonial Heights two years ago and he said to me, 'I want you because you don't boose, John.' He's got a lot of money, he has eleven elephants of his own.

Twenty-one inches is the longest length of sword I've swallowed. I also swallow Spanish bayonets. I have an antique sword with a brass handle. Now sword-swallowing is a top sideshow act. You don't do it in the circus ring because you're too far from the people. There's but five of us that's known to be doing this in the United States at the present time. We all knew each other once. Alec Linton drank himself to death--- he was a lush. Patsy Smith died. Vivien Donnen from France is now up in Alaska converting Eskimos to some kind of religion. She quit the carnival business altogether.

There's hundreds and hundreds of them circus people tried to do sword and they can't. So people ask me, 'Well, how do you do it then?' Actually the truth is sometimes I wish I never had, because when I eat right

now I have to be careful, a biscuit will slip down my throat and I can't control it, my throat is too big. It's the contour of my throat and the involuntary muscles in there, that's what a doctor once told me.

I've been in the East, all over. They had a tribe over there, they call them dark and they look like niggers or coloured but they're Indians, I swallowed a bayonet, an army bayonet, and stuck it in a cocoanut tree afterwards. Oh man, they were scared of me round there! Now army bayonets are only semi-sharp, they've got a blood gutter on there but they're not bad. They're short, too. What I used to do out there was for the fun of it, when I was in the army. I did fire-eating and stuff like that. You don't eat the fire, you manipulate it. I tell people, 'Don't go home and try this trick because it's not a trick!' I've seen two or three of them go to hospital. I tell them, 'Monkey see, monkey do, monkey get a whipping too!' I was round the Hopi Indians a long time and that's where I learned that fire-eating stuff. Out in Arizona. They have a rain-dance with snakes too. At one time I had a lot of snakes for my snake-show. People say, 'That snake know you, why he no bite you?' That isn't true. A snake shows no sign of distinction between you and me but he do know the sign of how he is handled. There's a lot of tricks in that too. I used to hypnotise them, and I'd put up a big front and stand one of them up on a card table and tell the public, 'Watch! I'm going to turn him round half of his length!' And I'd do it. My nephew Francis has all my snake equipment now. I've worked with all kinds of snake, and I've been bitten quite a few times. I've fixed many snake-skins and fangs, and mounted the heads.

\*

\*

\*

I suppose we're different from other people. That's what Lou Jacobs on the Ringling show says. He's the world's greatest clown. He's been on that show fifty years. He was here once in Colonial Heights, him and his daughter, and he said to me, 'Johnny, you lead a kind of a weird life.' And I said, 'Well, it's just what you like.'

I never married, you see. I tell them on the show, I could have gotten married and made one happy, but I stay single and make 'em all happy!

I'll tell you why I like the circus. There's no gyp-game. If you buy a ticket it entitles you to one comfortable hard board to sit on, then you're through spending money. If you don't want the popcorn or the peanuts you don't have to buy them.

But a carnival has got the gyp joints. They call them the fladdies. They consist of count stores, guns on a cat-rack and buckets and razzledazzle and all them shakedown. And a lot of them is outlawed---they could

pull the awning down on some of them right away. The real estate at Richmind Fair goes for fifteen dollars a foot on the front, so if you've got a good-sized joint you know what it's going to cost you. A carnival stays a week, usually, a circus only stays a day, except for the big outfits like Kingling. But everything at the carnival is a gyp-game---the rides and sideshows and the gambling. They never bother me because I've got a code-sign I use. When they see that they say, 'You're with it!' and I say, 'I may be with it but I ain't for it!'

I like rodeo and circus. I still have the horse I used to trickrope off. His name is Bandito. I spin the rope and then I hit the saddle and bring the loop all the way round under his head and over his hips. I got a certificate for that dated February 2 1953. And I won a plaque with the Western Riders of Petersburg--- 'Presented to John Nugent for his loyal support and showmanship 1966-68.'

You don't find many circus people drinking. Some of them take a pill. I used to be a heavy coffee drinker but I stopped that. The doctor said I had a low blood count and it came from coffee-drinking. Twelve cups a day! And I'd work with an empty stomach. When you work with a horse don't eat and go out there---oh no!

I've got some ruptured muscles on my arm, which means I'm paying for something I used to do. I tell everybody, 'You can be an athlete, and you can show off, but when you get above fifty it's going to tell on you!' Those wrestlers suffer pain when they get a little age on them. They've been fighting mother nature too long. I worked on horizontal bars, where the guy used to holler out, 'Slick tricks on the hickory sticks!' The bar is made of hickory wood, and you use powder resin and a strap. I did hand balancing too. But I'm paying for all that. Today they give me muscle-pain pills.

When I'm away on a show I pay the family up the hill to look after my things. They've got a Chevrolet car, they're very straight, conservative people. He's over eighty now. He's got a nice garden and he raises a lot of stuff, I said to him this year, I said, 'Charlie, I wouldn't plant all them potatoes, you're killing yourself! You'd better take it easy!' Now if I want potatoes I go out to a restaurant and sit down and let them serve me the hash. I never planted a garden in my life. The only thing I ever planted was my cedar trees out front. I like the SHOW. I like to make easy money. Some people say, 'You seem to be a heck of a good guy, how come you never got married?'

'Look', I say, 'I been in one war!'

I was born on Thanksgiving morning, November 25th, but I'm not saying which year. All I'll say is I remember the First World War.

I built this wooden shack where I live with two other showmen, both of them dead now. We used to go out to the dump with a truck and pick up stuff---two by fours and all that. The only thing we paid money for was the

tin on the roof.

There are more circuses coming on the road every day. But they're small ones. You can't get big lots now. Unless it's indoors and you have a stadium, and a lot of towns don't have one. I like the indoor show. You're out of the weather and the mud and rain, and you don't have to tear down or put up anything.

\*

\*

\*

Circus people say we go to the Big Lot when we die. That's a phoby, or rather a theory. Or we call it the Final Curtain, in circy-talk. Circus people believe you go to the Big Lot when you die like Indians believe you go to the Happy Hunting Ground. Or like you say about the cowboy when he died, he 'went west'. Maybe I believe it.

The circus is a rough life. Yes, it's rough. I've slept with the animals many a time. You've got a big wad of money but money ain't everything. You don't have the time to go to town to spend it---that's why you've got it. But it's better than the army. The food's better. The army pulled all my teeth out, I took so much quinine when I had malaria my teeth started falling out. That was in World War Two.

I don't know why, I still have a grudge against the army. Well, you wouldn't call it a grudge: I just hate it. I got drafted in 1941. A man gave me ten days to get in the army. I was in Fleetsport, Louisiana, and he says to me, 'Don't get yourself into Atalanta Federal prison.' I hadn't registered.

I'm a disability veteran and I draw a check from Uncle Sam that's untaxable. I only have but one eye, the other's plastic and waters all the time. A piece of schrapnel from a Jap mortar shell hit me. I was with 77 Division under General Buckman, and he got killed. He was under General Macarthur. When I went in in 1941 I thought I had just a year to pull, I said, 'I'll be home again next year'. But I couldn't get out. I sold three of my horses, a dog act and a bunch of other stuff. Momma kept Mike, a monkey of mine: he was big but she could handle him. I stayed nine months in Miami in hospital, then they sent me to the Walter Reed hospital and that's where they made me three plastic eyes. The doctor said, 'You need three because you blink and they wear out.' But I've never touched the other two. I take the eye out and wash it with boric acid sometimes. I don't miss the real eye but I'd miss that check.

I've got a card in my pocket that will take me into the government hospital in Richmond any time I want. When my mother was still alive I gave them two one-hour benefit shows for nothing. They've got hundreds and hundreds of guys in there. Previously

the American Legion used to book a lady to play the piano and another one to go whoa! whoa!, that was a high opera show. The guys wanted to throw rocks at her. People get tired of that stuff. They want something strange. So the American Legion man said, 'You're the guy that can do it.'

'Look,' I told him, 'I like a one-man show where I've got to do everything.'

So I told my momma and we went over there one day, and I made an appointment with the entertainment officer, a lady. She was tickled to death! She said, 'I don't believe it!'

I said, 'Look, they didn't believe Jesus Christ when he was on earth.'

So we put on a show from eight till nine. You can't keep them up but an hour. They billed it and I went over there all dressed up. I did five acts--- variety and novelty acts and circus acts, and some magic and black trick-roping where you turn the lights off (I've got five ropes painted with slow resin paint, and it certainly looks weird). I couldn't do any fire because it's against the law in a building.

There was some pitiful sights over there. I had them on stretchers and in wheel-chairs. They all wanted to see more than an hour, but no, at nine sharp, out! They had a beautiful stage and three sets of curtains, and a nice PA set. Everything was nice and I had a good prop man who worked for the government. I saw a WAC with a hand off but I didn't ask any personal questions. I went out among the crowd with the mike before the show started: you know, just to meet them and shake hands. I saw a lot of spine trouble, people lying on their bellies, because it hurts all the time.

I told them, 'This act is mind over matter. I don't mind and that don't matter!'

Some of the nurses got in the front row. Now I like to carry on some foolishness with nurses. I said, 'Hey, now look, hey, I know you don't belong here! Beside, you're going to be sorry if you sit so close!'

Well, the first blade I swallowed---I didn't think some of those registered nurses who have been around operating rooms and seen tools rattling like a garage and knives and blood flying could be squeamish, but the first blade I swallowed was a long English bayonet and one of those nurses goes 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' like a dog yelping.

I said, 'I told you before it started---if you're on the weak side just peep, if you're sceptical come up here on the stage where you can get a good look!'

We had a ball that day. I got a letter of appreciation afterwards. I'd like to have done some other stuff like a balancing act but you've got to take props for that and rigging and it's hard work. I play three or four charity shows every year. I don't miss them, and I'll tell you why. I don't mean to be crooked but you've got to stay in with the clique. The Lions Club---

they take care of the eyes, I don't know how much money they didn't donate to the medical college for pupils of the eyes.

But after I've worked with kids one or two hours I'm ready to leave. I'm fed up and wore out! I'm not much on kids. All I know is I like to entertain them. You see, I take my false teeth out and I clown. I put a make-up on and I slick up in some gabardine or western wardrobe or magic outfit or something weird. They love me! I swallow a blade and a little girl pulls it out for me. And then I give her a little souvenir picture postcard. I buy these postcards of mine so cheap you'd think I stole them---fourteen dollars for five thousand is what the printing costs. The kids look forward to me coming again next year.

\*

\*

\*

As for most of the fortune-tellers I ever met, they'd steal anything they could lay their hands on, tent stakes and all. I mean the gypsies. They have what they call mit-camps, these fortune tellers. It means the palm of your hand, they look at the life-line and all that. They go 'mit-camping', and make a bit of money. Some circuses won't let them work. But there's one thing I'll say about the gypsies. They are Christians. They are so religious, this is no joke, I've never known one get a divorce or somebody'd come along and take his wife right away from him or nothing. That don't happen, that don't exist with the gypsies! You're not going to get a date with them! No sir! Round that show they come and talk but there's no trash-talk, they won't talk no trash with you! Good looking? I'll say!

A gypsy boy told me once, 'I'm going to buy me a wife as soon as I save up enough money, then I go give it to the father, and the father let me have the daughter'.

That's the way they work it. I say, 'How much you got to have?'

And he say, 'Well, I don't know, I have to find out from her father first.'

Rosie was a fortune-telling gypsy lady. She used to holler me: 'Johnny! How's the animals?'

I'd say, 'Well, they're still eating!'

The gypsies used to watch my animal show. You could never make them pay. One of the women might go to hug you or love you up a bit and go through your pockets while she's doing it. Now I can't understand that. Still, they don't divorce, they don't separate, they don't cheat or run out on one another. Yet they'll slip a bill from out of your pocket.

As to whether I believe in the fortune-telling I have a story about that. At one time I had a buddy who'd say, 'That bunch of baloney they've got!' He didn't believe the hogwash. Now Rosie say to me one

day, 'Johnny, bring your buddy over there tonight at the mit-camp, I wanna tell his fortune'.

He's a rough guy, and he told her what to do.

'You come over here!' she say. 'You think you're smart?'

He says, 'Woman, I ain't got no money.'

She say, 'You tell a big lie! You got thirty-six cents in your pocket, that's what you got!'

Yes, and that's all he did have! That man, you could have bought him for a nickel, he was about as low as a beggar in the street.

When he heard that he told me, 'Come on, let's get the hell away from here!' And afterwards he said, 'I sure had just thirty-six cents!' He had three dimes, a nickel and a penny.

I told him, 'Now you stay away from them gypsies and don't mouth back at 'em---!'

\*

\*

\*

I worked with a lady once who gave samples of mind-reading to the crowd before they came in the side-shows, out front. I worked on a circuit with her. She would say, 'I'm no gypsy fortune-teller, I'm a mind-reader.'

She would say to the people, 'You, out there, you live on Warren Street and it's number 36! Now if I'm right I want you to acknowledge it and give me credit for it. If it ain't you just tell me I'm a liar and it'll be all right.'

Then she'd tell a guy where he'd been the night before. And once a lady asked her to tell her her phone number and she gave it just like that. She does all this for a sample out front, then you go round the back to see her privately. She had a little curtain behind her platform and if you wanted to find out something special you paid her fifty cents or maybe just a quarter: this was extra, it was free on the sideshows after you done bought your ticket to come in and see all the other attractions.

Now I believe in that kind of thing, and I've seen quite a lot of it. Some people have said to me, 'Johnny, whose side you on, God's or the devil's?' People ask me that! I say, 'That's a terrible accusation! Just because I do something weird, something unusual!' But then I just laugh it off. I say, 'Oh, go home and take a big bite out of the pillow and then go to sleep!'

Yes, there are people who can do some weird ungodly tricks. But I myself won't try to corrupt nobody. In the last ten years I reckon I've introduced twenty-five girls to show business. All of them ended up the same way. If they want a lush, they marry. One of their husbands came told me, 'I don't mind you throwing knives at my wife, just so you don't teach her to throw knives at me!'

But I don't want trouble on my act. Every time a girl does the knife act with me she gets twenty-five dollars. Twice a day makes a lot of money. Some were too young. Some were too old. Up on the wall of my cabin there's written up what I call the German theory, the truth: I GET PAID FOR MY WORK AND THE PEOPLE PAY TO SEE ME WORK. LET ME SEE YOU BEAT THAT ONE.

You can't do the knife-act with volunteers or members of the public. It's got to be a girl who knows you and trusts you and isn't afraid. Those knives go pretty close, and some of them are doubles, I throw two at a time and they reach the target at the same distance from each other as they leave my hand.

Now these girls I worked with had everything. They had beauty, they had youth, they was dolls and everything else. But I don't want rough stuff because when I play a show I may want to go back there one of these days. I don't ever sell indecent pictures but I could sell them easy and get by with it, there's nothing the law can do, they can't get on me as long as I'm out there on the street showing them. Now I may do some naughty saddle acts, like I shoot a girl off the saddle so the crowd will roar. And I do fast cartoons, I use chalk and pencil on the easle-board, and I sell them. But I don't play rough or dirty.

I knew a fellow one time who was possessed by the devil. That's how he made his money. Him and his wife was both ungodly. He used to hypnotise women volunteers from the town and bury them alive. He'd call out, 'Hypnotised and paralysed, sleeping six foot underground in a electro-lighted coffin!' He charged five cents to look in there, and he put a guard on night and day. He'd bury her on Monday night and dig her up Saturday when the carnival moved on. He had a fan for sending air down.

I've seen this man get hold of somebody and hypnotise them before they could say forty. He was evil-looking, he act evil. I've seen him go to a dry towel on the wall and squeeze milk out of it, God knows how! He hypnotised a woman one time, she was so fat he couldn't get her in the box. So he just took her and shook her and snuffed her out of it. Nobody round the show liked him. He had no friends. He was wicked. He looked like a devil when you looked at him.

His wife was a mind-reader, like the other lady I mentioned. I used to say to myself, 'If I could do what she can do I'd go somewhere and dump him!' Then I'd get me a job around colleges or somewhere, I'd make some money!'

She could tell you the day you was born and where, and numbers, and how much money you got in your pocket. Then if you wanted to get nasty with her she hurt your feelings, she'd tell you a thing you were ashamed of. She'd say, 'I'm going to tell you a name and let conscience be your guide.' It might be the name of somebody you'd

done harm to.

About ninety-five percent of the people you can hypnotise, the rest you can't. I know a little about that stuff. It can be used badly, you know. I took a course in hypnosis and studied it. They gave me a certificate at a school in Philadelphia, a hypnosis school of technology where I took a correspondence course and swore an oath I wouldn't abuse it or use it for nothing only for entertainment purposes on a high elevated platform in front of an audience. Not in private.

Now I use hypnosis all the time. You can call it mass hypnosis or sleep or trance. I hypnotised a girl once and then I got a snake out and he crawled all over her arm and dress. She's sitting there with the snake all over her, and everybody's roaring out there. Then I take the snake and put it back in the box and shake the girl. She goes back and everybody say to her, 'You know what you done?'

She say, 'I ain't done nothing!'

So they tell her what happened and she freaks out.

Now I haven't had a college education. I've got too much showman-craft in me. Some of those words people use I can't even pronounce. Like these doctors, they have all these different names for things, these professors. I know what an elephant is, I can tell you how many toes he's got, and about the musk-glands on the side of his face and all that stuff. But these technical names I can't even pronounce. I can't savvy all that. I know something about hypnosis, that's all: I wonder, do they teach that in colleges?

I didn't get my master-sergeant's stripes in the army with my brain. I got them with my mouth. My colonel said to me, 'You got more mouth than elephant got behind.'

A good friend of mine is a dentist and he's always trying to find out something from me. He says, 'I want you to tell me what you done with that block of wood.' I get a solid block of wood and run a rope right through it, and then I get two guys to hold the rope. I walk over and just get hold of that block again and throw it loose, and the guys are standing holding the rope. My friend says, 'I've thought about that for hours. Now how do you do it?'

I tell him, 'You just go home and sit on it, and don't worry.'

He told me he uses a little hypnosis on ladies and kids. But he doesn't have the gift of the gab. I hate to say this, and you may call it bull, but you've got to have the gift of gab. You've got to talk, you've got to persuade people. They've got to believe in what you're doing. Now I work an audience up before I do an act. I say, 'Now I'm ashamed of this but I'm going to do it. You all wanna see it?'

'Yeah!' they all yell.

'Louder!'

'Yeah!'

'Louder!'

'YEAH!'

'Oh shut up!'

That gets them started, see?

I'd write out a whole series of numbers on a board, my social security number, and when I turned the board round it said GO TO HELL.

I had two soldiers one time on a platform (I didn't get a nickle out of this because I was in the army), I sat them down in chairs with their feet flat on the ground and I told one of them he was a monkey in Africa and he had a nut tied to his tail. And he started crying! I told the other one, 'It's getting hot!' and he started taking his clothes off. He got all the way down to his underwear before I snapped him out of it. There were a thousand people there to witness that thing.

People ask me, 'What if you can't snap 'em out of it?'

I say, 'Just throw a bucket of water over them, shock'll take 'em out of it!'

The best performer in this kind of thing in the United States is Mrs Brandon. She's got strictly a one-night stand, and plays all the theatres. Man, she's a good one. She had twenty people in a circle one time looking at a candle. I know what she was up to. She made one of the guys do the hoochy-koochy, the belly dance. You ought to have seen him, his pants stripped down to his ankles, his necktie on and a coat, it looked so funny! Anybody might think he was with the show but he wasn't, he came out of the crowd. He'll never live that down!

I can do a lot of psychic stuff too. I've seen them pick up a table. I have three books---one of them came from Germany, on witchcraft, then there are the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses, and the other is called 'Forbidden Wisdom'. My mother used to say they was ungodly. They're all out of print now.

I have people say to me, 'You can do back-palming and all that corn-stuff, can you go in a dime store and swipe something that nobody can catch you?'

I wouldn't even go in that store and take a toothpick out of there.

The coloured folks are into all that voodoo and spell stuff. I played Green's Racecourse in Petersburg three years ago, in Halloween, and it's owned by a coloured man. I'm not prejudiced. I get along with the Indian, the Chinaman, I get along with any of them as long as they treat me all right---Russians and Polaks and the lot. This here coloured fellow, I gave him five or six acts. And he paid me in twenty-dollar bills before I went to work. I used to kid him, 'I could cut out on you, now I've got my money!'

'Oh, Mr Nugent,' he'd say, 'you wouldn't do that. You're going to have hundreds of people come here to see

you work.'

And it was true. I went in for voodoo and hex and spell. Them niggers' eyes were so big! You call them niggers but round the show we call them jigs or coons. They don't get mad if you call them a jig. I went in for the rope standing up on end, I got a piece of sash cord that came out of a Venetian blind and I'd get to shaking it and making sounds like Teyenenayoninaninayinano!

Some loudmouth said, 'I'd like to handle that rope!'

So I got him up on the stage and told him, 'You hold the rope like this. Take it and see it's soft, it ain't no spring in it and it ain't no lead in it! Say, did you know faith could move mountains? Have you guys no faith?'

He didn't say a word while he was up there with me.

Then I got to shaking the rope---Teyenenayoninaninayinano! And I said, 'Now I'm going to hand it to you!' And it was as stiff as a stick. He was all shook up after that!

I'd tell them, 'Look, there are people in Bombay India and Calcutta in the land of mystery who can do this and we've got 'em right here in Petersburg too! That's what you're going to see here!'

Here's one act I like. I take a handful of sand and I let you look at it. I work it right close to you. I call it voodoo, hex or spell. I say, 'The sands of the Sahara desert! Now you watch this real close!'

I take the sand and put it in a bowl of water, just enough to make a little hamburger out of it, like a kid would make a mud-cake. Then I show it to them. I close my hand and holler real loud---and the dry sand flies all over the stage!

But I don't tell any of my secrets.

I don't have anybody but my one nephew that's on my side. The other nephew isn't cut out for it. You see, it's got to be born in you, like we say, 'You have sawdust in your veins.' It gets in there and it don't get out. I've told my nephew, he may abuse some power and get himself into trouble with it, with some voodoo or hex, but he shouldn't take advantage. You don't want to abuse anything just because you have a privilege. I told him I'd give him my swords, and he's got fifteen trick ropes of mine, and seven bull whips.

A coloured lady asked me once, 'Could you put a voodoo on a neighbour? I want him to move.'

I told her, 'Yes, sure, I'll fix you up. You get a piece of fat meat and tie it on a red ribbon and put some pins in it, straight pins with round heads, you stick 'em in there, and then you put it in a little box and you put this under his porch or under the door, then you won't have no trouble.'

\*

\*

\*

You can get very deep into the animal world. Training animals is something you can't do overnight. And no cruelty's involved. You'll notice that if they jump through the flaming hoop there's no fire on the bottom. What you do to train them for this is to get them young. Say it's tigers: well, you get the little cub and behind closed doors in winter quarters you light a few drops of gasoline and just shove him through there, then you shove him and you shove him, it's an everyday grind. And one day he hits the ring and sits up there on his pedestal while you keep hollering 'Ulla! Ulla!' Now the animals know that sound.

The best animal trainers are the Germans. There was a German woman once---I could never pronounce her name because it sounded Russian---she had some leopards, two or three tigers, lions and a couple of bears. She played shrine-dates---that means indoor stuff. And she had a wonderful act there. Those animals work so hard, there's no such thing as a day lay-off for them! But the crack of that whip doesn't touch them! No trainer wants to cut the wool off their fur because he loves those cats and he lives by them.

Now here's a piece of advice: don't turn your back on animals in a cage, and don't run away. The same with elephants. I saw in the news last week that an elephant in a circus grabbed one of the keepers by the arm and just flogged him on the ground to a mush, with a hundred people looking on. I never played the fool with an elephant. You've got to keep up the bluff with all animals. If you go in the steel ring where the cats are and then you back out, they're going to rush that door on you! But when a guy sticks his head in a lion's mouth he's raised that thing from a little baby. Some people say, 'Oh, that lion's got no claws nor teeth!' Don't tell that to me, I've seen them.

Wolfgang Osmeyer was another famous lion-tamer. He went back to Germany, him and his daughter, because he had played Ringlings so many years they wouldn't book him any more, he got washed up. He had one lion that walked the wire. But the finest lion-tamer of all time was Alfred Kurt, also from Germany. He lived and was buried at Nice, in France. There's a big book out about him. He was the greatest.

Now Clive Beatty had a fighting act, not a performing act. People said, 'You're cruel.' But it's like if you tell that to a cowboy: he can show what the bull did to him! The trainers don't work like that. Clive and his wife called themselves King and Queen of the Circus and they had a railroad show of their own--- beautiful tableau wagons and cages. He was a sarcastic man. He wouldn't talk to you. He walked round with his nose in the air. He didn't have what I call politeness or personality. He'd get bored and then go and sit in the trailer because he didn't want to shake hands with anybody. He wanted no congratulations or compliments after a show. It was all fighting for him, and the

lions did hardly any tricks. It was all growling and clawing and him cracking the whip and shooting a pistol.

All the European acts were quiet acts. The Gunther Williams act had two tigers riding horses, and another tiger on a swing, and one riding an African elephant. Everything Gunther did was kind and quiet. No fighting or thrashing or hitting. The tigers are the most intelligent of the cats. That's why there are more tiger acts. A German girl had a troupe of polar bears, I remember, eleven of them, and they worked real good too. They have to wash bears down every day with the hose. But polar bears are getting scarce today.

Clive Beatty had an elephant-riding tiger too. But his elephant was so scared he had to have another bull-elephant waiting just outside the ring, as long as that elephant with the tiger on his back could see his buddy out there he was OK.

But if that elephant ever got hold of the tiger he'd make hash out of him. He'd gore him to death or else slug him. They call them slugger-bulls. I've seen one of them hit a guy right across the ring. The African elephants are different from the Asian ones. The African is more contemptible, more stubborn, though every once in a while you'll find a good one. Gunther Williams had an elephant act in Ohio, five or six of them. One of them was a big tough animal called Tommy, but he never gave him any trouble.

The elephant is the only animal in the world where the male comes in season. Then you've got to shackle him down or chain him to a tree for three or four days. The Asian elephants are more docile. They take on to the training quicker. Where these elephant-men go wrong, I think, is when they hire cheap help and get some young flunkey that ruffles the elephant up and plays with her. You've got to show elephants respect. Don't tease them. Here is something that happened at the Ringling outfit in Florida. One of the elephant keepers had a little son who used to go round the elephant barn with him. This child had some goodies and went in to feed his favourite, Judy. She had a good reputation. The paper-work on her was OK---where she was from, when born, character, all the history. Now if an elephant drops some food while feeding and you crawl under him to pick it up, just to be nice to him, he thinks you're going to take it away and he'll hurt you. That's what happened to this little boy. She squashed him, she did a headstand on him. The boy's father told Ringling, 'It was the child's fault, I told him a hundred times to don't go inside of that rope.' But that elephant had happened to drop some food and the boy went in there and picked the stuff up out of the straw to hand it to her, but she wasn't going to tolerate that, and she killed him. All you've got to do is holler 'Trunk up!' if you want to feed an elephant. He knows that sound, it's the first thing you train him to do. That and 'Tail up!'

The whole thing in a nutshell was that John Ringling North said, 'We're going to have to kill Judy'. He was one of the Ringling brothers, the other was Henry. Their mother Ida had married a guy called North, which is how the new name came in. They went and lived over in Italy when they sold up, in a castle. They've got money, they must be multi-millionaires. 'I'll tell you how to kill her,' John said. 'You take her out there and I'll have a bulldozer dig a big hole and you stand her by that hole. Then we give her an apple with some cyanide poison in it. If she do it once, killing a child, she'll do it again!'

Now everything in a circus is insured. Even if you scratch yourself on the straw you're insured. They don't want to get insurance companies involved, though, unless it's something really big. So they use what they call a 'patch'. He calls you up to the office to reconcile you if you've had an injury or something, for cash. Say you tear your dress on a tent-stake or fall. Above all, they don't want anybody to get hurt by an animal. They won't take the risk.

The elephant gets closer to you than other animals. He's smart. Though a dog's more faithful.

As for horses, there's no money in them. You play a spot and make a couple of hundred dollars but the way feed is selling now, one bale of hay costs two and a half dollars, the cheapest, that's regular old timothy hay. So the horses eat up all the money you make. But I never made real money with horses even when hay was ten cents a bale. It's 365-day work with horses. I like something that don't eat, like knives and swords. All you have to do at the end of a show is wrap them up and leave. And they don't talk back.

People don't appreciate a good animal act. Sometimes I used to look at my animals at the side of the road and think, 'I'm going to give them to the next guy that comes along.' Then when I got a good booking I didn't want to sell them any more. You get attached to certain ones. I've got four dogs today. The other three are on the road. I used to do a high-diving dog act with them. I broke them in on the scaffolding I still have here in my cabin. They can jump off the roof of a house.

But, you know, the SPCA has got so rough. They've put it on me in about three shopping centres where I was booked. I used to have thirty kids standing round the big tarpaulin, about twenty feet square, waiting to see the jump. Now you don't put any whip on the dog to drive him up there. He works free. But the SPCA say it's cruel. Now the rodeo has been barred in six states already---no curb-chains, spurs, calf-roping, bull-dogging. If the SPCA go around and see a horse where the seat needs trimming they're going to call you down and, buddy, you'd better get him trimmed! Or if the horse looks poor, say. They're up on all that!

But a circus man takes care of his animals. It's

his bread and meat, and he doesn't want anybody bothering him. It's like Gunther Williams told the veterinary inspector who came to see him, he told him under the federal law in Washington that the snakes-law and the animal-law and the birds and all that stuff come under, there's no more importation of animals except of some monkeys that go to the university for experiment. Now we don't experiment on our animals! Yet a dog that'll come out and work free or roll a barrel or jump the hoop, they say it's cruel. But I don't use a whip on my dogs! I pay him when he gets through with a chunk of hamburger.

I had one good high-diving dog at one time. His name was Curly. He used to jump forty-five feet. I had sixteen light cables rigged up, and a ladder and the American flag at the top, and a tarpaulin with springs inside for him to jump on. There was a big sign out front which said CURLY THE HIGH-DIVING DOG WILL JUMP AT TEN O'CLOCK. A big crowd started hanging round to see it. When I turned Curly loose in front of the crowd he just went! And when he hit that tarpaulin he'd get off right away and run all round looking for me. And I had his goodies ready for him. You can't do that any more. It didn't bother the dog. I never had a dog hurt doing that kind of thing.

An SPCA guy watched my show with the dogs and he said, 'You cracked that whip.' Actually the whip was in mid-air, away from the dogs. And it was to change the cue. I never brought that whip down on any of my animals. The sound is used to change the trick, that's all.

Alfred Kurt had three rings going at one time, all in the same show. He had a woman called Josephine with polar bears, great Dane dogs and Shetland ponies. Now these animals are strictly enemies to each other, but there they were inside the same ring. He trained them all as little babies, and he raised them together so they knew each other's smells and all that. Then he had a guy called Hawthorne with African lions. Yes, he had three rings going in the Ringling outfit.

I know some cruelty that happened behind the Iron Curtain when I was a boy: they didn't have the law then. I know what they did to some bears and cats when they broke them, and the public didn't know about it.

It's payoff that trains animals. You be nice to me and I'll be nice to you---that's the basis.

The only dog I have with me now is a tiny mongrel called Bubbu. When I'm working on the platform I tell her, 'Now you just say your prayers if you want to go to heaven!' When she hears that she goes over and puts her feet on the pedestal and her head way down like she was praying. 'You don't pray enough!' I say. And she don't break it up until I holler 'Hey man!' at her.

Or she jumps through the hoop when I hold it up. Then I throw it down on the floor and she goes over there and roots through it. That's a clown gag.

I tell people, 'Bubbu keeps house when I'm gone.'

She's got a hole in the door she can get in and out through. I tell her, 'You be a good dog and look out for the place!' She goes up to the house at the top of the hill if I'm not here and she robs something.

Every time you train an animal you've got to give it a home-seat where they feel safe. Bubu always goes over to her pedestal in a show, she knows it's hers.

Now some dogs in a litter can think and you can train them, and others can't. A lot of people like to go out and buy a high-price dog in a petshop. 'He's a pedigree!' they say. That's why they've got to put a leash on him, they can't let him loose because somebody's going to steal him. Now I can take Bubu down 52nd Street in New York. I couldn't escape her in a crowd even if I wanted to! That's because she's got the brains, not because nobody wants to steal her. She's a half-breed and she's tough. And I take good care of her.

My Bubu won't high-dive. I don't keep her for that. She's a clown-dog. I like a clown-act. I used to rope a calf at the rodeo and put a pair of woman's underwear on him. It was a contract act. I had to buy a new pair for every performance. I went to the store every day and I told the lady I wanted the biggest ones she'd got. One time she looked at me funny and I got huffy, I said, 'Lady, you can be replaced, I can go and see the manager, now just you get them knickers because my wife's real big.' You see, the calf would buck and hit and he'd break the underwear easy.

I was wild as a wind in those days. I was a comedian and nothing could stop me. I like to thrill the crowd. I used to ride my horse right up to the reserved seats and make him buck and throw dirt and mud all over them. That's part of the show. The announcer would give me an announcement and then I'd ride out and say, 'Howdey, folks, and welcome to the international rodeo show from the south west!' Then I'd make my horse slide to a stop and sit down, and I'd just step off.

Then I'd rope a calf from a good horse (the best I ever had is still with me---he's thirty-five years old) and another clown would help me on this act. I'd milk that calf. The clown would put the bucket down and I had a tap inside and some corn starch and water came out that looked like milk. I remember a little boy (this was all of thirty years ago), he stood at the rodeo gates and he called out to me, 'Mister clown, that was the boy-calf that you milked!' I said, 'I'll milk any of 'em!'

Then I used to put the bucket under the clown and milk him.

That kid was smart. But they're smarter today. They make them weaker but wiser.

\*

\*

\*

I've worked with a lot of freaks. Now good freaks are hard to come by today. I worked with the midgets from Holland, they call them the Doll family, and the Pinheads, five of them from London, England. Their heads were shaped like cocoanuts, they belonged to a doctor, and only stayed one season. I used to tell the public, 'They ain't got the brains that God give a monkey! How do they live? Say, after you witnessed this, you go home and git on your knees and thank God you were born perfectly normal!'

I remember one, his hands grew out of his shoulders. He could hold a quart carton of milk and drink it with his own hand if I opened it for him first. He got awful fat because he didn't do any walking. I have a lot of admiration for these people because they're willing to work, they don't get into a handicapped frame of mind and depend on somebody else. There was Latino from Italy, who had three legs. He could sit on one of them like on a stool, and he used to say to the girls, 'You don't believe it? You want to see it?' It grew out of his spine. He was featured in the sideshow and he made good money. And when he moved on his leg went with him, he didn't have to cage it or feed it. Prince Phil the monkey girl was a good friend of mine. She came from Cuba and married Le Bello, the alligator-skin boy. They were married at Pittsburg. He used to say to me, 'I want you to teach me how to swallow a sword.' 'I can't teach you.' And I told his wife, 'You'd better get that out of his head so he don't hurt himself and go to hospital.'

She had long black hair all over her body, and I saw her in the nude once. It didn't bother him at all. They loved each other, and they worked together. They were tops.

Now Al Tomene was a giant. He quit show business and became a fire-chief in Florida. His body was so big for the size of his heart that he died. He married Judy, and she was cut off at the waist. Everybody wondered how she lived.

I knew two little black pygmies, they had a chaperone and a bodyguard, and they were from England, like the Pinheads. I remember one of these pinheads, Rosa, somebody gave her a guitar and she tore it open to see what was in the hole. They came out under the British government, as far as I could tell. The doctor in charge of them packed them all in one trailer.

\*

\*

\*

I like to MC. And I'm hard to beat on the platform. I can tell them all about it. And that's where the money is. This is what I tell the crowd when I'm pulling them in to the sideshows: 'Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, and welcome to the circus! You're now confronting the big circus sideshow where the strange,

odd and unusual people live! All combine and gather together under this one canvas! Now it would take too long and too much of your time to call your attention to each and every one of our attractions, but from way down here to the far end way up there you'll see them just like depicted on the pictorial paintings! Twenty-eight in number and not one alike! But look, when your eyes greets the doorway you're gonna see Cleave the Seal Boy, then look, photographs and pictures sometimes lie but that don't lie, Gerolyn Jerroll the Boy Girl, born to live in that natural and curious condition, then you're going to see the fire-eaters, the glass-blowers, the mind-readers, the sword-swallowers, the Anatomical Wonder, the Lady Bag Puncher, you'll see 'em all! Now one ticket takes you all the way through from cage to cage and from stage to stage, now there's one pay box, two pay boxes, three pay boxes, you're just in time if you care to go! It's continuous performances going on all the time in there, it's never out and it's never over! The big circus sideshow in the Palace of Wonders! Look to the doorway---big show, little money!

---

Pre-publication publicity:

Johnny Nugent has an excellent voice for radio and some of the tapes I've made can be used for radio exposure at the time of publication. I hope too there will be a movie record featuring Johnny's animals and his appearances at the circus and the nightclub, and in training with his nephew. I shall be approaching a big circus-outfit like Kaye Entertainment Enterprises of Hollywood for cooperation here.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

1. A general introduction to Johnny's acts roughly in the form of the above excerpts---sword-swallowing, fire eating, the knife act, horizontal bar work, snakes, horses and ropetricks, the rodeo act, hypnosis, levitation and close-up magic.

2. Johnn's early childhood days when his mother and father had their Libery horse act and played the big circuits. Where and how he lived, the training he was given, with animals and at the horizontal bar. His mother did long-distance tumbling, handsprings and twisters. We hear about the difference between

life with the big outfits like Ringling and Barnum and Bailey, and the smaller outfit of today. These were the years when the circus was mechanised.

3. His father had a weakness for the girls who worked round the show, and Johnny hardly remembers him without a new chick on his arm. His parents separated when he was still a child, and his mother continued with the Liberty horse act. Johnny began to develop his top sideshow act, sword-swallowing, and trained in knife-throwing. These were the lean and difficult years of the Depression.

4. The years before the Second World War, and the heyday of the amalgamated Ringling-Barnum outfit. The first John Ringling North era was 1938-42. The circus magazine The White Tops has recently published a detailed history of this outfit which will supply Johnny with numberless hooks for his anecdotes and memories. By 1939 'the Greatest Show on Earth' was travelling in no fewer than eighty wagons. Its newly styled big top was decorated in blue and gold and was fully air-conditioned for the first time. The train-loading order, when the circus had to move town, say from Chicago to Milwaukee, was as elaborate as the moving order for a brigade of infantry.

5. The war, and Johnny's reluctance to interrupt his show career by enrolling. He sells some of his acts, and his mother continues alone, taking over his Mike the Monkey act. In the army his gifts are fully exploited---to his chagrin, as they don't pay him extra. This causes some arguments. He is finally drafted to the Far East, where he wins his master sergeant's stripes. But he continues learning new tricks, and performs for the soldiers. He is wounded and then drafted back to the US, where he spends six months in a Miami hospital. When the war is over he receives a disabled veteran pension.

6. In the after-war years the mammoth circus began its gradual decline. But Johnny was better off than he'd ever been. The smaller circus, the sideshow, the nightclub took over, and he found bookings came his way easily, apart from his work at the rodeo shows. At this time he began to develop an interest in the 'strange and weird' and to pick up knowhow in the matter of levitation, certain psychic acts and more advanced forms of magic. His mother died at the age of eighty-two, and he found himself on the circuit alone for the first time, but he still refused to marry. Perhaps he didn't like what he'd seen between his mother and father.

7. In the 60s and 70s he receives various awards and plaques, and his booking agents find him regular, varied and farflung work. He looks round his family for some-

one to inherit his equipment and his secrets, as he himself did from his parents, and he finds his nephew Francis. A close and trusting relationship develops between them and they begin working together. Francis takes over his snake equipment and many of his animals and props. Johnny decides to settle in one place and chooses Colonial Heights. Together with two other showmen, also lonely men without family attachments, he builds the large wooden shack where he now spends the winter months between bookings.

Length: 80/90000 words.  
100 photographs, colour and B/W.