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The Big Tent

Mary Graham Bonner

Peter Gnome had decided to put on a circus.

"This way to the Big Tent! This way to the Big Tent!" he called, over and over, until he had gathered enough small creatures to fill the largest tent you can imagine. It was made of birch bark and moss, with seats cut from old tree stumps and reserved seats cushioned with soft moss. Most of the fairies naturally chose the reserved seats.

The tent poles were tall and interesting, and the spiders and caterpillars immediately climbed them, reasoning they'd see everything much better from the top.

The circus itself was magnificent. The gnomes had clearly been practising. Their somersaults and tricks left the brownies and elves and fairies speechless with delight.

When the last trick was done and everyone prepared to leave, Peter Gnome climbed onto a toadstool in the centre of the ring.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said — for he had heard that was what real circus ringmasters said — "I must take just a few minutes of your time."

"It's not any more our time than anyone else's," interrupted a snail who had arrived late.

Peter Gnome continued unruffled. "After the circus, there will be a concert — one of the finest ever heard. And following that, a Side Show featuring the Bearded Lady and the Tallest Man Alive. Please keep your seats, and a gnome will be around to collect the small admission of two grass stems each."

The fairies laughed, because they knew perfectly well Peter wanted no payment — he just thought it would be much more fun if someone pretended to collect it.

The Tallest Man turned out to be old Mr. Giant, who had agreed to appear just this once and enjoyed being made a tremendous fuss of — though he wasn't entirely pleased when the spiders began climbing his legs and tickling him. When he mentioned he'd rather they didn't, they stopped at once and started weaving webs up there instead.



"All right," said Mr. Giant generously. "Build your homes wherever you like. I'll carry you to my cave when I go."

The spiders were delighted.

And the Bearded Lady turned out to be Peter Gnome himself, dressed in a gown of oak leaves and wearing over his face a mask made from the roots of trees.

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