

EXTRACT FROM STAR TURNS BY KOBER A.H.
TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN ORIGINAL
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THE LORCH TROUPE

A STUDY IN MOVEMENT

THE steamer *Cap Polonio* had arrived in Hamburg from South America. First the three apprentices walked down, then, both deeply veiled and dressed in black, the sisters Jeannette and Hedwig, and finally the three brothers, Rudi, Eugene and Arthur. They all stood along the gangway and helped their white-haired mother who appeared last of all, leaning on Julius, the head of the troupe, and on his son Egan. She was carrying a small leather dispatch case, which contained an urn with the ashes of her husband, the ancestor of all the Lorchs, who had died in Buenos Aires at the age of seventy-eight.

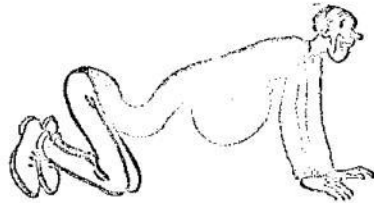
When the Lorch troupe returns from abroad it always starts with a run at the Hansa Theatre in Hamburg. On this occasion, they had made a contract by cable from Madeira. As they drove to the hotel, and noticed their names on the hoardings, they also saw that next to them were posted the Barraires. This was not kind of the managers. Of course, there would be no open hostility. There is a stage in stardom where vulgar brawling finds no place. There might

be friction again, of course, as there had been in Paris in 1921, in Stockholm in 1920, and in London in 1914; for there was really no room for Lorchs and for Barraires on the same bill!

Both Lorchs and Barraires are "Icarians," but there can be no doubt that of the two the Lorchs are the more famous. They make their entrance, all eleven of them in order of size, dressed in Spanish bull-fighters' costume, and start by executing a whirlwind of jumps, tumbles and somersaults. Then the three "throwers" lie down on the red velvet cushions with their legs in the air, and throw the three smallest members of the company from foot to foot, passing them across to one another and catching them again. They execute what they call "Risley somersaults," after the famous English troupe which invented this particular turn. One has to throw a human being up in the air from one's feet, in such a way that he makes a complete somersault in the air and drops back on the soles of one's feet. This somersault may even be double or treble, and Julius Lorch is called the King of Icarians because he is able to throw his son three times into the air and make him execute a double somersault each time.

Lorch, Barraire, Bonhair, Grix-Gregori, Sylvester Kremo—those are the big Icarian stars of the present day. Sometime, somewhere, somehow, all these people have worked together. Nowadays they are

rivals. The Bonhairs specialise in brilliant "twists," which are side-way somersaults. Grix-Gregori used to run away every night across the fence behind his father's garden to the "Black Eagle" in his native town of Schöneberg so that he could watch an old artist practising. He beats all his rivals by the incredible elasticity of his body. Sylvester Kremo has a troupe of amazingly agile and fascinating young girls,



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one of whom belongs to a famous family of artists, the Schäffers. The present head of the Schäffer family, Sylvester Schäffer, is famous as a universal artist and unites in a very exceptional way strength, beauty and agility. There is, however, one way in which the Lorchs undoubtedly beat all other acrobats; they are the only troupe composed of eleven male performers.

The Lorchs are very well off. In an idyllic town in the South of Germany, they own a large estate where every member of the troupe, even the dwarf, has his

own apartment and his own bit of garden. Old Father Lorch never stayed at home when the troupe went on tour. They were all his pupils, and in their journeys up and down the globe he travelled with them until he died under the palm-trees of Palermo, the garden city near Buenos-Aires. And now the troupe carries his ashes with it wherever it goes.

The Lorchs are an old family of "banquists," universal artists who originally performed all kinds of turns and tricks to the gaping crowds at the annual fairs. Their common ancestor, Henry Lorch, was born in 1817, and wandered along the Rhine as director of a travelling show. In 1861, his son Louis, who was then fourteen years old, ran away from him. He had great ambitions and went straight to Paris, where Baucher, honorary Master of the Stables to Napoleon III., was harvesting the admiration of the smart world with his *haute école* performances. In 1863 Louis Lorch was present at a sporting event which caused a sensation at Court and in high society. James Fillis, the son of a London barrister, who had become a well-known rider, publicly declared himself a convert to the method of Baucher and made himself one of the artist's pupils. It was at this second *début* of Fillis, one of the most brilliant social events of Imperial Paris, that the young rider Lorch received the kick from a horse's hoof which put an end to his career, but at the same time proved to be the beginning of his luck.

With two poodles and 100 francs, which were all his savings, he left Paris for Germany. With him went a sixteen-year-old girl rider, who became his wife. Such were the humble beginnings of the Lorch Circus.

A circus man of the old school was able to do anything, all the more so when he had two trained poodles and a pretty wife. Louis Lorch took his show all over Western Germany, and at the country fairs he performed a whole programme for the benefit of his peasant spectators. He played the clown, the acrobat, the high jumper, the strong man, the juggler, and the tight-rope walker, and produced his trained poodles. Soon he was able to buy a horse for his wife, and meanwhile he was holding tight to the farthings which he garnered by sending round the plate. The result was that after five years he bought a real tent, so that he could request the honoured public to pay before it was allowed to see the show. Another five years and he was at the head of a respectable circus. In the 'seventies the Lorch Circus was one of the most important travelling shows, with 100 horses and a crowd of excellent artists, who were particularly popular in the South of Germany and in Switzerland.

For those who are familiar with circus history, this rise as a result of careful management is not surprising. Neither will the subsequent fall appear unusual. Almost every circus director comes to grief when his business manager or his partner is beginning to be

prosperous. These confidential advisers are in the habit of getting their percentage from every workman and every tradesman who deals with their chief. Is there any need to point out that in the end all these percentages come out of the director's pocket? An exaggeratedly expensive building may make the fortune of one of these fellows while it spells ruin to his chief. The other enemy of every travelling show is bad weather. If rain spoils the fair, the showman is powerless, and Louis Lorch, like others, was a victim of these two foes of circus life. But he had taken his precautions; his insurance policy was a lusty quiverful.

There was first of all the eldest son, Monsieur Jules, who performed a brilliant high tight-rope turn together with his sister. One day, however, love cut the rope; Mademoiselle became the wife of an Althoff, who belonged to the real nobility of the showman's world. She went to America, where her children have become world-famous variety musicians. Monsieur Jules, meanwhile, was training his younger brothers, and started by initiating them into the mysteries of the jump and of the art of handwalking. To stand on one's hands is the Alpha and the Omega of all stage gymnastics. The rest comes easily, once this has been learnt. Jumps and somersaults follow of their own accord. The youngster is put on his hands: "Hup! Shoulders square! Put your head up! Hands wide apart!" The teacher helps with his right hand, and

if he is kind on occasions, he is more usually a little on the rough side. Every morning, every noon, every night, it is the same thing—practising! Whatever corner of the globe is chosen as the resting-place of the moment, the soil is quickly trodden down and practising starts. By this method, Arthur, Eugene and Rudi gradually became excellent acrobats, always certain of engagements on the circus or the variety stage—and they assisted in earning the livelihood of the family.

So far, however, we have not reached the stage at which the Lorchs had become a famous troupe of "Icarians." How does one become an Icarian? In the engagement book of the Renz circus in Berlin, which is its history, there is mention about the middle of the nineteenth century of Italian, Danish and English Icarians. There were the five Cotrelly Brothers from England, one of whom broke his neck, while another founded a circus in South America which went down with all hands during a journey to Lisbon. There was August Nagels, who threw his son into the air from his feet until the spectators were giddy, while the youngster played the "Carnaval de Venise" on his violin. Hirsch-Jackley, who taught hundreds of artists, worked at Renz's about the same period. But Jules Lorch never saw any of these turns and knew nothing about them. He told me in a tavern, hewn in the rocks near Montevideo, that the idea of an Icarian turn came to him one day as he saw a Chinese or a

Japanese perform what are known as antipodean tricks. They consist in balancing an object on one's feet, usually a barrel, throwing it into the air and catching it again. "Why," thought Monsieur Jules, "should not one do the same thing with a little human object?" So straightway he put the smallest of his brothers on his soles. Life and rhythm soon came into the business. Jules placed himself on a thick cushion and the little fellow sat down on his big brother's feet, and was subjected to a course of energetic "treading," while he endeavoured to make himself springy and elastic. Soon he was able to somersault and fall back on the soles of his brother's feet, and, finally, they got so far that the child made a treble somersault. Eugene, who was the first brother to reach perfection in this art, felt himself a candidate for the title of "attraction," and strutted about with a glow of pride on his round, red countenance.

The Lorchs now started their triumphal progress as Icarians. It culminated when they were allowed to perform in the central ring at Barnum and Bailey's, which was the supreme ambition of every artist. There they remained for four years—four brothers, two sisters, a son of the leader Jules, two salaried artists and two apprentices. They made a pyramid of seven men, a really brilliant closing turn. Jules lay down, his brother Arthur stood on his feet, a pupil on Arthur's shoulders, another man on his shoulders,

while two men were hanging partly from the third, partly from the fourth. Then the dwarf of the troupe clambered up the mountain, placed himself on the topmost man, and amidst a flourish of trumpets and the beating of cymbals he drew out the national flag, while two ponies on each side of the pyramid stood to attention. Then, as the group crumbled, Jules threw the dwarf, banner and all, twelve times into the air.

Jules, who is fifty years old and who for the last six-and-twenty years has thrown up the youngsters for half an hour every night of the week, with an additional three times for *matinées*, ending up each performance by carrying an immensely heavy weight with those same feet, was looking very disgruntled when I met him one day in our tent in the sweltering heat of a Brazilian summer.

"Here's somebody who'd rather give up his job to-day than to-morrow," I remarked.

"Just the other way round. What is wrong here is that a fellow has no opportunity for practising."

It was the same with all these Lorchs, they could never work sufficiently. As soon as they had finished their turn and removed the paint from their faces, they rushed down among the spectators to work as stewards and ticket collectors. When the vans were loaded or emptied, when the tents were set up or taken down, one could always see them, active and useful, with their strong acrobats' legs, so muscular that they

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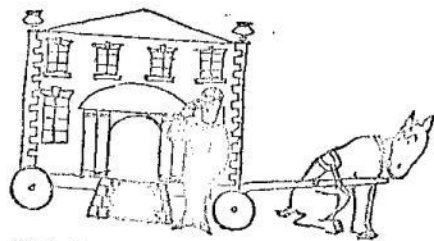
seemed out of shape; their long arms and their powerful necks that were always bent in readiness for a burden. They are the embodiment of active strength. The patriarch, Papa Lorch, was always among them, stumbling about with his stick. He never missed a performance, and on the very evening of his death he went for his usual inspection of the caravans and the stables, and sat in the circus during the turn of his sons, carefully observing how the spectators appreciated it.

Their muscles seem to ache when they are not used. Every Lorch has a thirst for adventure—perhaps it is the blood of gypsy ancestors that calls. Take the fifth brother, Adolph. There was a time when one might have thought him a degenerate. He was unable to study the higher kinds of acrobatics with his brothers. He did not become an Icarian. He was not even good at gymnastics. So he learnt science and went to the commercial university. Unable to go, like his brothers, through the world *les jambes en l'air*, he entered a bank, where he made very quick progress in the profession he had chosen. During his holidays he always visited his family and lived with them in their caravans. Finally he put the finishing touch to his bourgeois existence by marrying a charming girl, the daughter of a Dutch merchant. Then, suddenly, we meet him again as business manager of a German travelling circus. Naturally this did not last long.

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Soon the newly-married pair returned to their former commercial surroundings; the wife had not taken kindly to tent life; was not at ease in the company of the gossiping show-women. Yet a year later they were once more with a circus. Thus it went on, year after year, a few months at a bank and then a few months with a circus, and each time the change of profession was accompanied with loss of prospects and all manner



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of complications. At last the situation became really alarming, and old Father Lorch informed the prodigal son that if he ever tried to enter circus life again he would give him a good hiding. The Lorchs are a patriarchal family and Adolphe did not dream of disobeying his father. He decided never to enter circus life again, but to remain in it for good, and since then he has continued as business manager of the big circus where he happened to be working at the time.

Last time I met the Lorch troupe they were with

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Sarrasini in South America. Their caravans were exhibits in themselves. No journalist, no photographer could afford to miss them. Jules' caravan was like a first-class hotel. The living-room was full of carved oak furniture, glass showcases with curios, blue leather arm-chairs. There was a white lacquer bedroom with an exquisite four-poster, valuable bevelled mirrors, and toilet tables of queer shapes and with the most clever lighting arrangements. The sisters' caravan was a little museum. On the walls hung trophies gathered in all countries: ornaments, statues, embroideries, leatherwork, woodwork, and also the famous ciderdown on which every distinguished visitor was asked to embroider his name. It was a record of journeys, meetings, and adventures. Less artistic, but equally original, was the caravan of Eugene Lorch. He is a photographic maniac, has cameras of every known make, with every gadget that was ever devised to help the photographer's work, and he has a collection of photographs taken in every place where he has performed. He only feels happy when these photographs look down upon him in their hundreds from all the walls of his dwelling.

A throng of interesting visitors haunt these caravans, which echo with the hum of conversation, rich in wit and spiced with anecdotes as varied as the scenes through which they move. The inhabitants themselves are a perpetually changing kaleidoscope.

They have an array of watch chains made of Indians' hair from which hang lion's claws ; their tiepins are scarabs ; their cuff-links are made of crocodile scales. They possess scores of strange rings and thousands of small objects rich in associations. The multi-coloured clothing of these people is a living image of themselves, with their jumps, their somersaults and all their movements. They have lain down some ten thousand times on the red velvet cushions, their legs in the air, while the glaring lights of the arc lamps shone on their painted faces. While they worked they have had around them, always, that queer fantastic sight, a whole circus with shouting and howling spectators, frantic with enthusiasm . . . and, as it would seem, standing on their heads. *Les jambes en l'air* to-day, to-morrow and for all their lives !

