

FREAKS THAT GLITTER

Ever since he was five, when his dad took him to see Harry Houdini, Floyd Chapwick was obsessed with becoming a great magician. Now sixteen, he took one step closer to his dream by landing a job with a traveling carnival. Though Floyd's new position as a freak show attendant wasn't exactly the big time, he had no doubt this break into show business would give him the connections he needed to launch a career in magic. Thus, Floyd embraced his new job with fervor, convinced it would propel him toward becoming the best magician the world had ever seen.

On his first day, Floyd showed up two hours before the carnival would open and wandered through the dismal grounds, searching for the freak section. The carnival in its dormant state resembled a third world shantytown. Haphazardly erected and randomly spaced tents sagged like slumping giants. Trash lay strewn along the perimeters. Bony, flea-ridden dogs, having salvaged all they could from the trash, wallowed in the dust, licking their scabs. Lethargic clowns, if they acknowledged Floyd at all, returned his greetings with bored grunts. Floyd's steadfast idealism, however, blinded him to the squalor, and he beheld the carnival as a pristine fantasyland of glamour and opportunity.

He stopped before a lopsided tent and gawked at the overhead sign: "The Great Galahad. The World's Greatest Magician." As if on cue, a gaunt man of about forty, clad in a frayed top hat and threadbare tuxedo, stumbled out and thumped into Floyd, nearly knocking him over. With eyes glazed by years of drink, Galahad glanced at Floyd and mumbled an incoherent apology before hobbling off. Floyd gazed in admiration as the magician shuffled away, and envisioned

himself in that classy role. He swore he'd find the courage to introduce himself to this exquisite man on their next encounter.

Returning to his senses, Floyd resumed his exploration and eventually came across a tattered tent bearing a faded, hand-painted sign that read: "Come in and see the freaks! You will be horrified!" Floyd lifted the door flap and cringed at the humid stench of rancid food, moldy clothes, and human odors seeping from within. He forced himself to step inside and, covering his nose with one hand, peered around at the putrid environment. Nearly hidden amidst the clutter, an obese, half-dressed man lay sprawled on a filthy mattress, snoring in a guttural moan.

As Floyd stared down, reluctant to wake the man he assumed was his boss, he heard a raspy whisper from the back of the tent:

"Pssst. We need water."

Floyd jerked and spun toward the voice. Protruding from a window opening, a gigantic, deformed head stared at him. The creature's face looked like it had been scrunched in a vice, then wrenched apart nearly to the point of rupture. Both eyes were huge, one bulging upwards while the other stared vacantly to one side. His skin bore the consistency of shredded leather, and his twisted mouth featured teeth so huge as to prevent him from fully closing his jaws. Though Floyd's first instinct was to flee, his show business aspirations compelled him to stay put and face this disturbing sight.

"Shhh," whispered the monstrous man, and pointed toward the sleeping figure on the floor.

"Don't disturb Skidmore."

Floyd averted his eyes from the hideous face, but the dreadful man again spoke, the words resonating from deep in his throat. "Well, what did you expect? This is a freak show." He eyed Floyd. "Are you Skidmore's new helper?"

The creature's paradoxically calm voice tempered his appalling exterior, enabling Floyd to finally respond. "Y-yes. I'm the new assistant."

The freak contorted his face into what Floyd discerned to be a smile and said, "I'm Charles. Better known as the Ogre. I supposedly emerged from a cave in Mongolia," he chuckled. The Ogre pointed toward a grimy basin behind Floyd and said, "Please bring some water." When Floyd hesitated, the Ogre sighed. "Don't be afraid. I'm harmless. We all are."

Though still repulsed by the horrific face, the reassuring voice enticed Floyd to the basin and, after glancing at his still snoring boss, he picked up a battered pan and scooped it full of water. He turned and crept over to the Ogre, maintaining enough distance to avoid physical contact. The freakish man grasped the pan and, after gulping down half its contents, lifted the window flap wide open, revealing a darkened back room. With a sarcastic bow, he swept one hand toward the darkness. "Welcome to our world."

Knowing he had no choice but to eventually encounter these oddities, Floyd swallowed hard and slinked forward. He peered inside to witness an array of meandering silhouettes. Intensifying the scene's surrealism, a flickering candle flame animated their shadowy faces with spasmodic fingers of light.

Gradually, the group gathered near the window and, one by one, introduced themselves, speaking low so as to not wake Skidmore. A heavily whiskered woman nodded toward Floyd then, as if addressing royalty, bowed her head. "I'm Geraldine," she said. "As you may have guessed, I'm the Bearded Lady."

A solemn man emerged from the back of the crowd, appearing quite normal until a keener view revealed an extra pair of legs protruding from his hips. He quietly cleared his throat. "Hello, sir. I'm Lloyd, the Human Horse."

Another woman stepped forward, so morbidly emaciated as to resemble a skeleton dipped into a thin solution of latex and left to dry. She attempted a smile, prompting her sharp facial bones to jut out until Floyd feared they might stab through her skin. "I'm Agatha. They call me the Walking Skeleton."

A burlap-clad female microcephalic (in those days called "pinheads" or "missing links") stood apart from the others, giggling and rubbing her tiny head with her meaty hands.

The Ogre bent down and stood back up, holding in his arms a hair-covered boy. The child, out of innate curiosity, reached out and touched Floyd's face. Floyd gasped and instinctively shoved the hairy hand back, provoking the boy into a subdued whimper.

The Ogre frowned at Floyd and patted the boy's back. "They call him the Hyena Boy of Borneo," he said. "The carnival shipped him in about a month ago. He can barely talk and he's terrified of everything."

An abrupt silence descended and, with every face staring at Floyd, he sensed it was his turn to speak. He strained for words. "Uh, my name's Floyd." He spoke as if defending himself before a court of law. "I took this job because I want to be a magician someday and--"

"A magician?" The Ogre rubbed his huge, misshapen chin "An interesting, though dubious, profession. Have you met Galahad?"

With the subject of Floyd's deepest ambitions broached, he raised his eyebrows. "Briefly."

The Ogre looked at him sideways. "You want to be like him?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

The Ogre grunted and slowly shook his head. After a moment of silence, he said, "Myself, I plan to become a lawyer." When Floyd squinted his eyes at this unlikely avowal, the Ogre elaborated. "I once found two law books and snuck them back in my coat. I must've read them cover to cover a hundred times."

Noting Floyd's visible skepticism, the Ogre smiled more broadly than before, exposing a cavern of rotted teeth. "Freaks have brains too, you know," he said. "And we have dreams no less than you." He gestured around the group. "Geraldine would make a great history teacher. Agatha here can speak four languages. Lloyd is a whiz at math and wants to be an engineer." He looked back at Floyd. "If we could only get out of this dungeon."

Floyd darted his eyes around the group. "Well, why can't you just leave if you want to?"

They all snickered and the Ogre said, "Believe me, some of us have tried." He pointed toward his face. "But if they put this mug on a wanted poster, how long do you think I'd last?" He nodded toward the others. "How long would a four-legged man last? Or a walking skeleton? Or a hair-covered boy?"

With this new information settling in, Floyd said, "I see your point."

"We're livestock," the Ogre continued. "If we jump the fence, they easily find us, whoop us good, and run us back into this hellhole. And if anyone dares to defy Skidmore, he'll lock us up for days." At these words, the freaks split apart, revealing behind them an iron cage scarcely large enough for a human being. The Ogre grinned. "We call it Skidmore's Hotel."

Before Floyd could respond, the entire group backpedaled and the Ogre flung the window flap closed. Floyd heard a snarling voice behind him: "First rule around here, boy..."

Floyd spun around to see Skidmore glaring at him.

"...is don't talk to the freaks."

Skidmore grabbed Floyd's arm, yanked him back from the opening, and digging his rotted fingernails into the young man's skin, leaned toward him. "What were you doin' boy?"

Though Skidmore's putrid breath, saturated with a lifetime of smoke, beer, and vomit, sickened Floyd, he managed to sputter, "They needed water."

"Who said they needed water?" The beastly man gouged his fingernails deeper into Floyd's arm.

"The one called the Ogre."

Skidmore scowled and glanced toward the back. "He's the worst of the mob." He finally released his grip and, stabbing his index finger toward Floyd's face, said, "Your job is to herd 'em around, and discipline 'em when they get outta line. And that's it."

"B-but if they need water--"

"Don't spoil 'em!" The unshakable blast of Skidmore's retort solidified his authority. "They get watered every night!" The vile brute hovered over Floyd, his seething glare sucking any notions of resistance from his young assistant's spirit. Apparently satisfied he'd broken Floyd into complete servitude, Skidmore huffed and sat down at a cluttered card table. He jerked his hand toward a wobbly chair opposite him, where Floyd sat and stared at the floor.

Skidmore picked up a half-smoked cigar, lit it, and sat back, eyeing Floyd like a butcher inspecting a side of beef. "Listen, boy," he finally said, "I been workin' freaks fer twenty years. Don't let 'em fool ya. They ain't real people. They ain't got human souls. And if ya try to be nice to 'em, they stab ya in the back."

Floyd nodded, his eyes still fixed downward.

"Them creatures is lucky to be here. You think them things would last one minute on the outside?"

Floyd glanced up. "No sir."

Skidmore blew a puff of cheap smoke toward Floyd. "I got yer first assignment, boy." From a box on the table, the surly boss grabbed a set of keys and a well-worn cudgel. He held up the keys. "Go back there and lock the Ogre in the cage 'til openin' time." After Floyd sprang to his feet and accepted the keys, Skidmore shoved the cudgel toward him. "And if the thing don't obey, smack it with this." Noting Floyd's hesitation, Skidmore stood and lowered his voice. "I'd hate to fire ya on yer first day, kid."

With his fear of Skidmore eclipsing his pity for the freaks, Floyd took the cudgel and, determined to score points with his ruthless boss, strode toward the back of the tent. After locating the door flap, he pushed into the back room, with Skidmore following close behind. Once his eyes adjusted to the dark, Floyd observed the freaks huddling in a corner, with the exception of the Ogre, who stood in the center of the room, arms folded.

Incited by the sound of Skidmore's heavy breathing behind him, Floyd marched up to the Ogre and sneered. "Get in the cage!" The fury of his own voice alarmed him.

When the Ogre refused to budge, Floyd paused until he heard a loud, impatient grunt from Skidmore. Floyd took a deep breath, raised the cudgel, and yelled, "Get in there!"

With the Ogre holding his ground, Skidmore roared, "Show 'im who's boss! Smack 'im!"

Now cowed into blind obedience, Floyd swung the cudgel full strength, striking the Ogre square on the elbow. The freak yelped and lumbered toward the small cage. Before squeezing into it, he glanced back at Floyd, who met this tacit challenge with a hardened glare. The cudgel felt good in his hands. The power felt good. By establishing control over this resistant commodity, Floyd felt initiated into the dynamic side of show business. He approached the cage

door, locked the Ogre in, and followed Skidmore to the tent's front room, teeming with self-assurance.

Skidmore collected the cudgel and keys, saying, "Not bad fer a beginner. But aim fer the head next time."

Floyd spent the next three hours learning his duties from Skidmore. While his boss would be handling the customers out front, Floyd was to round up the freaks, lock them into their assigned display booths, and coerce them to act accordingly, thus ensuring optimum viewing pleasure for the passing spectators. The microcephalic and Hyena Boy were to be strapped into their chairs to keep them from straying, the Ogre was ordered to growl at each passing patron, and the Walking Skeleton was to regularly stand and turn full circle before sitting back down. Failure of any freak to comply with their directives was to elicit from Floyd a sharp cudgel jab to the ribs.

Once satisfied Floyd was ready, Skidmore changed into his carnival garb, transforming from a bum into a second-rate theatrical persona. Though Skidmore's raggedy red shirt, tattered vest, and faded derby hat were scarcely less filthy than his off-duty garb, Floyd saw in this tawdry spectacle a flash of genuine showmanship. He increasingly longed to emulate Skidmore and, ultimately, reach the pinnacle of fortune and fame as a magician rivaling the Great Galahad.

Ten minutes before the opening, Floyd, brandishing his cudgel, began corralling the freaks into place. "Geraldine!" he called out, and gestured the bearded lady toward her booth.

Skidmore, reinforcing his rule decreeing social distance from the freaks, yelled, "No first names! Call 'em by their freak names."

Floyd nodded. "Bearded Lady, get in place! Horse Man! Walking Skeleton!" With each command, Floyd grew more imposing and deemed the freaks more pliable. When he shouted for

the last attraction, the hair-covered Hyena Boy, to assume its position, the child remained on the tent floor, whimpering in a fetal position. Floyd walked to the squirming boy and gazed down.

"Just drag the thing in," growled Skidmore.

Floyd hesitated. "I think he might be sick."

Skidmore cursed. "Dammit, it's just a cold." He grumbled and disappeared into the back tent, returning with a foul-looking syringe. He handed it to Floyd. "Give him a shot of this. He'll perk right up in a few minutes." Skidmore watched as Floyd, hands trembling, managed to pierce the Hyena Boy's arm with the filthy needle and inject him with the mystery drug. Skidmore grabbed the syringe back. "Now drag that little beast into its place. That thing's my biggest money maker."

Floyd cringed at the Hyena Boy's hair-covered hands and jagged nails. He finally reached down, grabbed one ankle, and dragged the writhing child to his booth. Floyd struggled to lift him, desperately dodging the boy's flailing arms, and finally wrestled him into the chair and strapped him into place. Shortly thereafter, the boy, as Skidmore promised, livened noticeably, his enhanced vigor accompanied by gasping breaths and bouts of shivering.

When the attraction opened, Skidmore stood out front, robotically babbling his well-rehearsed spiel: "Come right in! You'll be shocked and amazed by these freaks! Only 25 cents will give you a glimpse of the dark side of humanity..."

As Skidmore droned on, the first patrons filed into the tent. Surprisingly well-dressed, these lords and ladies of society ambled down the line of booths, gazing at the oddities before them with a mixture of amusement, disgust, and horror. The women gasped and occasionally shrieked. With varying success, the men attempted to camouflage their shock with derisive laughter.

Ultimately, by measuring themselves against the least fortunate end of the human spectrum, these respectable citizens verified their own comparative beauty and worth.

While the customers paraded through, Floyd lurked behind the booths, defying any freak to test his authority. As the day wore on, he wielded the cudgel with increasing audacity, administering each jab with more intensity than the last. He prodded any slouching freak to sit up straight, and whenever the Ogre slacked off in his growling duties, Floyd smacked his shoulder and snarled, "Growl, you wretched freak, growl."

That evening, at closing time, Floyd felt legitimized and embedded into the life he felt would propel him into the captivating world of magic. Armed with his new vitality, Floyd set out to quickly finish the day's tasks and seek out the Great Galahad.

Skidmore shuffled back to address Floyd. Though still donning his gaudy attire, Skidmore's shriveled face and droopy posture betrayed his true, boorish nature. He grunted at Floyd and, in a reluctant tone, said, "I guess ya done OK, boy. I'll keep ya. Now get them freaks back and feed 'em." Leaving Floyd to clean up, Skidmore wandered back to wallow in the abyss of his filthy mattress, stale beer, and cheap cigars.

Inspired by Skidmore's ardent show of approval, Floyd, eager to catch up with Galahad, hastily set out to complete his chores in the freaks' quarters. He slopped beans and stale bread into seven pans and fetched a bucket of water. After plopping these rations onto their table, he unlocked the booths and the famished freaks scrambled back to their abode to eat.

With the Hyena Boy's miracle drug worn off, Floyd dragged him toward the others, and deposited him near the table. The child's chest heaved and rattling sounds gurgled from his lungs. Behind Floyd, in a quiet but stern voice, the Ogre said, "You better do something."

With a frown, Floyd shrugged and glanced back at the Ogre. "It's just a cold. He'll get over it."

With his chores completed, Floyd wiped his hands and sped out of the tent, scrambling into the night in search of the Great Galahad. Despite the late hour, the adrenalin of the day's success, combined with his eagerness to meet his idol, propelled Floyd in a frenzy through the carnival grounds. He scrambled through the squalor, once again seeing only glamour. He finally reached the Great Galahad's tent and, drawing a deep breath, lifted the door flap a few inches and called in:

"Mr. Galahad, sir? Are you there?" He heard a weary groan from within, followed by inaudible murmuring. Floyd hesitated, then again beckoned to the magician. "Can I come in?" He heard a louder groan and, optimistically deeming it an expression of welcome, slipped into the tent.

Inside, amidst a clutter rivaling that of Skidmore's quarters, Floyd beheld the Great Galahad sitting on a lumpy cot, his head sunk deep into his hands. The magician's equipment from the day's performances lay scattered on the floor near an open trunk. Galahad, too weary to lift his head, mumbled, "Whaddya want?"

Struggling to keep his voice from trembling, Floyd responded, "Mr. Galahad, I hope you don't mind me coming over. My name's Floyd and I'm the new freak show assistant. I've always wanted to be a magician." He paused but, inducing no reaction, continued. "I can do a few tricks, but not a whole lot. So I was wondering if, from time to time, you could maybe teach me some magic?" Floyd wrung his hands, waiting for a response.

With great effort, Galahad lifted his head and, through cloudy eyes, merely glowered at his young intruder. Floyd nervously averted his gaze and searched for words. He spotted the

magician's gear littering the floor and said, "Let me help you put your things away." Without waiting for permission, Floyd dropped to the floor like a groveling servant and set about situating the various gadgets into the trunk. As he did, he paused to admire each item--large magic rings, a wand, a trick sword, a top hat, playing cards. Handling these sacred treasures inspired Floyd to resume his plea. "Like I said, Mr. Galahad, I dream of being a carnival magician just like you and--"

A foot crashed into the trunk, sending Floyd sprawling, and launching the trunk's contents back to the floor. Galahad, now standing, glared over at Floyd, his eyes blazing with palpable disgust. The magician's daunting appearance, augmented by the suddenness of his assault, left Floyd gasping for breath. Galahad seethed through clenched teeth. "You wanna be like me?"

Floyd, cringing on the floor, managed to mumble, "Yes sir."

"You got bright eyes. Do I got bright eyes?"

Too shaken to address this perplexing query, Floyd could only stare at his transformed idol.

Galahad didn't let up. "You got a hop in your step. Do I got a hop in my step? You got an upbeat voice. Do I?"

Befuddled by the magician's cryptic questions, Floyd groped for words, but found none. Finally, during a pause in Galahad's diatribe, Floyd wriggled back to a kneeling position, recovering enough to speak. "Mr. Galahad. I'll do anything. I'll give you my whole paycheck and live on bread and water if you'll only teach me..." Overpowered by Galahad's scowl, Floyd's voice trailed off.

The magician stepped forward until he hovered directly over Floyd. "How old are you, boy?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen!" The magician bent down and slapped Floyd in the head, propelling the young man back to the floor.

Now fearing serious injury--and mystified at the crazed man's behavior--Floyd abandoned his quest, springing to his feet to flee the onslaught. But Galahad wasn't finished. He grabbed Floyd by the shirt and dragged him several feet further into the tent, shoving him yet again to the floor.

"You want some magic?" Galahad said. "I'll show you some magic." He gathered up the heavy metal rings and slammed them onto Floyd's head with full force. "Abracadabra." He bombarded Floyd with the rings until the young man, with a fierce howl, finally broke away from his frenzied assailant. As Floyd fled the tent, Galahad inexplicably yelled after him, "Fresh air of freedom! Fresh air of freedom!"

Floyd dashed through the carnival grounds, aching emotionally as much as physically, and agonized over his hero's bizarre behavior. As he raced on, he saw, for the first time, the pervasive garbage. He now smelled the stench. The lopsided tents were no longer magic temples, but dismal shacks in a dying slum; the clowns no longer court jesters, but drunken hobos.

Out of breath when he burst into the freak tent, Floyd beheld Skidmore, predictably collapsed on his filthy mattress, stone cold drunk, snoring and drooling. Once he caught his breath, Floyd's brain whirled to make sense of the ongoing spectacle. He paced back and forth, agonizing over why the carnival had met his aspirations with indifference, his dedication with scorn, and his overtures with violence.

Hearing a cough from the back of the tent, Floyd stopped pacing and looked up. As in their first encounter, the giant, deformed face of the Ogre stared at him from the tent's back opening. Unlike in that first meeting, however, the Ogre studied Floyd in silence.

Floyd swallowed hard and, as if preparing to face a tribunal, made his way to the back room. Once there, he saw the freaks kneeling on the floor, clustered in a solemn circle. He stepped forward and gazed down to see, encompassed within this nurturing sphere, the Hyena Boy in his tattered blanket, twitching in convulsions. The boy's eyes had washed out to a pale yellow, and his face had swollen until it appeared his cheeks might burst. The circle of freaks gazed up at Floyd with beseeching eyes, but with no signs of contempt. Floyd knelt down, gathered the Hyena Boy into his arms, and adjusted the blanket around the sick boy's body.

Floyd faced the group of freaks and opened his mouth to speak, but the composed Ogre held up his hand. "Don't say it," he said with a sad smile. The Ogre gestured toward the Hyena Boy. "There's your atonement right there."

Floyd nodded and, after casting an apologetic glance toward the others, tucked the Hyena Boy more snugly into his arms and scurried into the tent's front room. Passing by Skidmore, he paused. The Ogre's head again poked through from the back opening, soon to be joined by the others. To the freaks' nervous amusement, Floyd kicked Skidmore hard in the gut and said, "Growl, you wretched freak, growl," prompting the repulsive man to roll over and moan. The freaks waved Floyd a subdued farewell as he hastened out of the tent for the last time.

Floyd's route through the wretched carnival grounds led him past Galahad's tent where, to his wonder, the magician stood outside, smiling and nodding at him. As he approached the gate, Floyd glanced back at Galahad and, suddenly smiling, patted the Hyena Boy's head. "I think I'll name you after an honorable man," he said. Floyd and little Galahad surged through the gate and into the fresh air of freedom.