

The Ballad Of Sideshow Sam & The Heckler

by sean m. poole

A BRIEF PROLOGUE

(In which the author explains the source of the rhyme, placing blame for the creation of such drivel firmly upon the shoulders of someone else.)

I worked the Renaissance Festival circuit for years. One August in the late 1980's I was traveling to Cape Cod, Massachusetts from Ft. Worth, Texas.

At a truck stop in Indiana I met an old guy wearing jogging shorts and a sweatshirt. He wore a pair of black running shoes and carried a small canvas backpack. He looked to be about my Dad's age, 65, strong, tanned and leathery but healthy, sporting all his own teeth.

He materialized outside my window as I was checking my logbook. I thought he was the attendant although I had pulled into the self-serve lane. As I got out of the van, the elfish old fellow whom I now realized was not there to pump my gas, asked if I was headed east.

"Yeah, Pops! But I'm not traveling alone because no one wants to ride with me. I don't particularly enjoy company on the road."

The old guy blinked then looked me in the eyes.

"Listen, kid!" he said. "I'm damn near 80 years old. My truck blew up. I've got it and my trailer parked at a campground where I owe three months rent, so I can't get my rig 'til I come up with the cash. I've got a daughter and a girlfriend in New York City. If I can get there I'm all right. I can borrow some money to get back on my feet. But I gotta get to New York."

I was impressed. His patter was like a silk shirt - cool and smooth. This old timer had style. But I really do prefer to ride alone.

"Come on in the cafe with me, buddy", I said,

" I'm gonna do the all-you-can-eat buffet. You hungry? Dinner's on me. If by the end of the meal you haven't bored me to tears or pissed me off then I guess maybe I could give you a lift."

He didn't want dinner. He drank coffee and ate half a cherry pie. After dinner, using his own money, he bought a sack of Bugler tobacco.

By that time I'd decided to give him a ride. I was two weeks away from opening day of the Massachusetts show. I'd been planning to visit cousins in Brooklyn, and the old guy was as entertaining as hell. He said he was 79 years old. If only half of the stories he told me on that ride were true he was one world-wise old traveler who had racked up millions of hours of real life road time.

He spun some fine yarns, that's for sure. He'd been a barnstormer, a rodeo clown, and a singing cowboy. He lived in Ireland in the 30's and 40's and among other things had performed Shakespeare, Synge and O'Casey at the Abbey Theatre. He waited out the war in Dublin sharpening his chops and his taste for a perfectly pulled pint of stout.

Back home in the States he worked as a carnie Bobo, a song and dance man, and a whip-crackin', knife throwin', lariat twirlin' old time cowboy variety performer from border to border and coast to coast.

His name was Thaddeus 'Doc' Cooper and of all the wild tales he told me, I only remember two things he said verbatim. One is the ribald limerick "Sideshow Sam and the Heckler". The other is more like an axiom, a piece of true American road lore which Doc told me right after he said that he'd been a hobo most of his grown-up life.

"You know what a hobo is, my young friend? Or a tramp? Or a bum? Well, I'll tell ya, 'cuz you'll meet all of 'em in yer life and it's a good thing to know since they are each one of 'em different and the difference is this. Bums sit around and loaf. They don't work. Tramps, they wander around and loaf, don't work either. But hobos, they work, they travel AND they're clean."

I dropped Doc Cooper off at a rectory next door to a Presbyterian church in the Bronx. He told me his girlfriend, a retired show-woman (a young babe of only 58!) who was a friend of his daughter, worked as a housekeeper at the rectory and was planning a special dinner for him. He'd called her from a rest area in New Jersey.

I declined the invitation and dropped him at the curb. I waited until I saw the front door of the place open and he disappeared inside. Though I'd given him my card, I never heard of or from Doc Cooper again. He told me a long limerick called 'Sideshow Sam and the Heckler' somewhere in Pennsylvania. I laughed so hard I made him repeat it several times for a hundred miles or more until I had memorized the entire twisted tale. It's funny. It's rude. It might even be true.

THE BALLAD OF SIDESHOW SAM & THE HECKLER

A sideshow performer named Sam
Made a show out of slamming his ham.
He constructed a pallet
Bought a shiny brass mallet
And proclaimed, "What a showman I am!"

Sam set up his act in the street.
It was a stupendous feat.
He'd babble and yammer then
Bring out that hammer and
The crowds they lined up toot sweet.

Sam pranced around on his stage
Spouting words like a biblical sage
He'd gesture, he'd shout and he'd cry:
"To beat on your meat is a heavenly treat
But if you beat your fish it will die!"

Not only accomplished in rhyming
Old Sam had impeccable timing.
He shamelessly whored.

If he sensed his crowd bored
He'd sing songs, do magic or miming.

From some folks came laughter.
From others came stares.
But as weird as Sam was
He put butts in the chairs.

Sideshow Sam packed them in!
Every seat would be full.
The old showman was funny and
Folks that's no bull!

While striking a ludicrous pose
Sam threaded an eel up his nose.
When he cleared out his throat
The eel it would float
From his mouth like
A slimy green hose!

One day while Sam did his show
I was standing behind the back row.
All through his patter I'd giggle and chatter
With a cute little blond girl I know.

This girl thought that Sam's act was rude
Extremely offensive and crude!
So in order to please her
I heckled the geezer and
Brother I really got screwed!

Old Sam he had trod
On the boards all his life
He was married to showbiz
His act was his wife

A heckler to Sam
Was like marital strife.

They say on the cop shows and
The experts agree
That domestic violence is
The worst kind to see
But it don't hold a candle
To what Sam did to me
When I heckled his show.

The old bastard went mad!
He asked me what sort of parents I had.
Did they know that they'd raised up a son
With no class? He brandished his hammer and
Threatened my ass with a beating
The likes of which I'd never known.

"Take that hammer", says I,
"And go pound your bone!"
I looked at the blonde
To get her approval
But Sam called for backup
To effect her removal.

He looked at his goons
He flashed them a sign.
Then they sneaked up on me and
The girl from behind.
They hustled her out and
I've not seen her since.

Then Sam says to the crowd
Like he's some kind of Prince:
"My Lords and my Ladies, and everyone here

Lets have a hand for our brave volunteer!
That's right cheer him on!
There's nothing to fear!"

I struggled and kicked
I put up a fight
But those midget strongmen
Held onto me tight.
They were stronger than me.
They were short but not light.

Although I was angry and fought back
With rage Sam's security gnomes
Dragged me up on the stage.

In front of the crowd!
In the glare of the lights!
Right next to Sam
In his pink spangled tights!

I thought to myself:
"I sure need a friend."
Then Sam slammed his breakfast
Right up my rear-end!

He hammered with style
And with great savoir-faire,
In Sam's mighty hands the mallet
Flew through the air and
Nailed a bran muffin
To my derriere!

That's the end of my tale and
I mean no bad pun
To this day it fills me with fear

When I think of that muffin with
Blueberry stuffin' and
How it got stuffed up my rear.

If you see Sideshow Sam
My warning is plain:
"Don't heckle his act
Unless you like pain."

