

"The Bashful Mongonoose"
An Original Short Story for Mary Fritscher
written and illustrated by
Jack Fritscher, 31 October 1959

N^o 10 Mary Claire
with love,
Jack

October 31, 1959

THE
BASHFUL
MONGONOOSE

an
Original Story
by

JOHN FRITSCHER





The blare of circus music drifted from under the flapping awnings of the big canvas tent. Mickey the Monkey sat on a box listening to the music and drawing lines in the sawdust with his toe. Suddenly a great shadow fell across him. He looked up and saw Ellen standing there. He took a peanut from his pocket and popped it in her trunk. Ellen was an elephant.



"Hi, Ellen."

"Hi, Mickey," Ellen said, "Are you waiting for your cue?"

"Uh huh." Mickey was the only monkey lion tamer in the world. He really wasn't too good. It was just that Leo the Lion was a second cousin on his mother's side twice removed. They had an understanding. This made Mr. Pringle very happy and also very rich. You see, the name of the show was PRINGLE'S PRODUCTION OF PRIMITIVE PRIMATES. This didn't mean much to any of the customers and it was just as well because it didn't mean much to Mr. Pringle either--but it sounded well.

"Sit down and keep me company," Mickey said.

"All right," Ellen replied as she thudded down into the sawdust. As she did so she knocked over a big brown wooden barrel. "Oh, oh. I guess I'd better pick that up. You know what Mr. Pringle thinks about neatness."

"Never mind," Mickey said, "I'll get it. It's too hard for you to get up and down."



"I know," Ellen laughed, "It's too many peanuts. Oh well, elephants are supposed to be big."

Mickey reached for the barrel, but it moved away. It began to roll faster and faster. He chased it, tripped on a rope, but finally caught it. He looked in.

"Ellen, come here," he called excitedly.

"What is it?" she asked as she lumbered over.

"You tell me! Look!"

Ellen looked, her trunk flew up into the air and bellowed a mighty blast as she ran away.

"Ellen, come back!" Mickey called. But Ellen was standing high up on a table with both of her big, flappy ears covering her pink little eyes.

Mickey laughed when he saw her, but his expression changed to one of worry when he heard the music for his act crash from the tent. What'll I do with this thing in the barrel, he thought. I can't let it get away till we know what it is. He found a lid for the barrel, put it on top, and ran into the tent. Leo would be waiting in the cage for him.



Chapter Two

Leo the Lion sat on a tall red stool and opened his mouth. All of his teeth glistened in the silvery spotlight. The crowd gasped in terror at the ferocious beast. Their gasp was louder than his roar--which was as fake as his teeth. Mickey entered the cage. Leo lunged playfully at him. To the crowd he looked monstrous.



When the act was over, Leo said to Mickey, "What's the matter? You look worried."

"I am, Leo, I am." Mickey said thoughtfully.

"Well, out with it. Maybe I can help," growled Leo.

"I won't tell you, but I'll show you. Follow me."

They made a strange sight. The monkey and the lion padding through the sawdust. It was dark now and the lights in the tent made people-shadows on the canvas walls.

"Look in this barrel, Leo." Mickey removed the cover and Leo looked into the inky blackness.



"I don't see anything," Leo said,

"Wait a minute," Mickey replied as he tilted the barrel to allow a ray of light from the tent to filter into the darkness of the barrel. "Now look."

"Holy people," Leo roared, "what is it?"

"Sh, be quiet. We don't want anyone here."

Mickey put the lid on the barrel. Leo began to pace back and forth. Pad, pad, pad, pad. "This is more serious than we think. What is that animal?"

"I'm not sure." Mickey hesitated.

"I'm not either," came a voice from the darkness.

"Who's that?" Leo questioned.

"It's Ellen the Elephant," Mickey replied.

"Does she know about this?"

"Yes." Mickey stated flatly.

Ellen's voice came again from the darkness, "Is it safe?"

"Yes, there's no one around," Mickey said.

"No, I mean it "It" in the barrel?"

"Yes, come on out."

A huge black shape emerged from the shadows and gingerly skirted the vicinity of the barrel.

"Do you know what it is yet?" Ellen asked.

"No..." Mickey started to say, but Leo interrupted him.

"Tony the Tiger will. He knows all about all kinds of animals."

"Yes, yes. Let's ask Tony!" Mickey and Ellen chorused.

"Cheep, cheep" came out of the darkness between the small tents where the animals lived. "Cheep, cheep." It moved closer. "Cheep, cheep."

"What's that noise?" Ellen cowered.

It came closer still.

Mickey smiled, "It's only Charmaine the Chimpanzee out for a walk."

"Well, don't let her see "It"." Ellen said. Mickey could tell even in the darkness she was green with envy from tail to trunk because of the slim, trim Charmaine. Elephants are supposed to be big, Mickey thought, but Ellen is an exception; she's enormous.

"Good evening, Charmaine." Mickey said.



"Hello everyone and you too, cheep, Ellen." Charmaine answered. There must have been professional jealousy between the two girls.

"Mickey interrupted their coy conversation. "Charmaine, the show will be over in a few minutes. Go tell Tony the Tiger to come here as soon as he can. We need him."

"Is it an emergency?" asked Charmaine.

"Yes," Mickey said.

"Tell me, tell me, tell me," cheeped Charmaine as she jumped up and down excitedly on all fours.

"First get Tony--and hurry."

Mickey, Leo, and Ellen looked after her as she loped down the deserted midway.

Chapter Three



he last car had left the circus parking lot and the people workers had gone to bed for the night when Tony the Tiger came to the barrel. All of the other circus animals followed him. Charmaine had talked. The news was around that something strange was happening and no one wanted to be left out.

The moon was full and white and glimmered down on the dark circle of animals surrounding the dark barrel. It was a strange sight to see, the dusky forms swaying and moving with curiosity in the silver moonlight.

Mickey explained the situation. The circle moved in closer.

Sammy the Seal said, "Tony, you know all kinds of animals. You tell us."

"Yes, yes. You tell us, Tony."

Tony was wary. He hesitated. Then quickly he uncovered the barrel and peered into the dark, gloomy, blackness. "It's a...it's a...." He looked at all the eyes turned towards him. They were questioning. They were waiting. They looked up to him. "It's a...a...." He couldn't let them down. He started again then blurted it out. "It's a mongonoose!"



There was a moment of silence. Then a parade of animals began to file past the dark barrel.

"Yes, I definitely agree. It's a mongonoose." one said.

"Quite." agreed a striped zebra.

"What else?" asked Alvin the Chipmunk as he hazarded a look.

All of the animals were quite compalcent. It was as if they were saying, "Yes, of course, we knew it all along. We

just wanted to see if you knew." They all laughed merrily.

"Well, well," grunted Harold the Hippo, "I guess we're a clever crowd of animal crackers, all right."

"Yes, yes," they all agreed.

The circle began to grow smaller as the animals slipped away to their tents. That night in each individual tent, in each individual animal's individual head, there was one common thought: what is a mongonoose?

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Chapter Four



he moon had sunk low in the sky, but suddenly there was a bright flash, brighter than moonlight, more orange, more red, warmer, licking, jumping. Fire! Fire! Fire! The animals rushed from their tents. The arena canvas tent was now nothing more than a huge bonfire. Ellen's wild trumpeting could be heard amid the roar. People were coming from the town to fight the fire. Buckets of water. Pour! Pour! Pour! It's too late. Too late. Late.

It was late the next morning when the animals discovered the fat and usually jolly Mr. Pringle sitting dejectedly on a soot-covered box. He wrung his hands together between his knees. "Ruined, ruined," he repeated. "Everything's lost." He did not notice the group of sad animals standing around him. He did not notice them as they trudged quietly away.

It was later that afternoon before Mickey remembered the barrel and the mongonoose. He began to run frantically down the empty midway through the puddles of standing water. There at the end he saw the barrel lying on its side. The lid was off. He looked inside and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the mongonoose still there.

"Ellen, come here. Help me carry this barrel to Mister Pringle." Ellen obliged and picked up the barrel with her trunk. "Easy now, Ellen, easy."

Ellen placed the barrel down before Mr. Pringle who was still sitting on his same dirty box.

"Go away. Go away," he sighed. "Leave me alone."

"But Mr. Pringle..." Mickey started.

"No, no. Go away. I'm a broken man. A sick man. I'm sick, sick, sick."

"Mr. Pringle," Mickey said. Ellen looked worried and began to back away.

She was afraid of Mr. Pringle.

But then Ellen was afraid of everything. Mickey motioned her away. "Mr. Pringle," he began again, "listen to me. You've got to. We can save the circus. We've got a mongonoose."

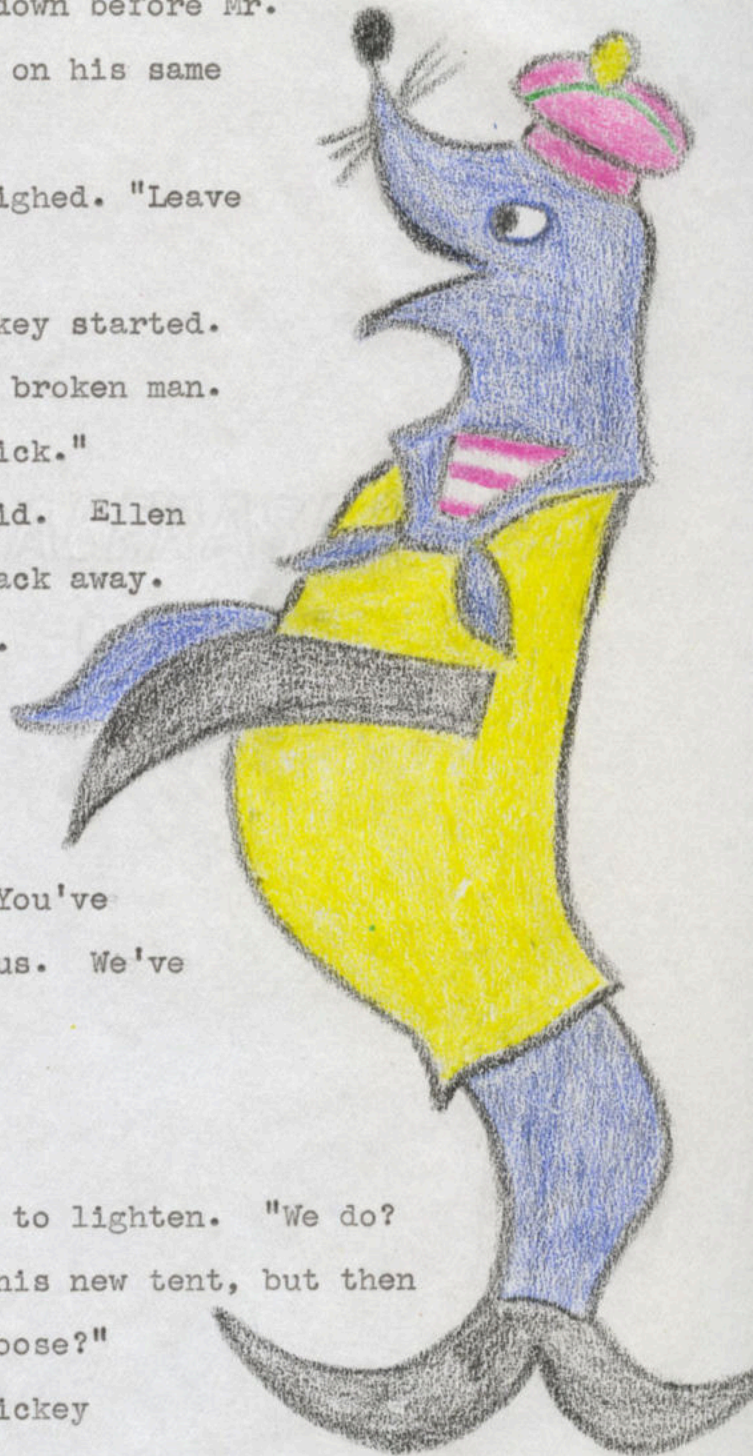
"A what?"

"A mongonoose."

Mr. Pringle's eyes began to lighten. "We do? Where?" He could almost see his new tent, but then he stopped. "What is a mongonoose?"

"It's a...well, look." Mickey uncovered the barrel.

When Mr. Pringle looked in, the first thing he saw was blackness, then the mongonoose, then his new tent. By this time the tent was red and yellow.



The thought, what in the world is a mongonoose, slipped across his mind, but so did a thought about a curious public wanting to know the same thing. By this time the tent had blue flags on top. And it would be the tallest tent in the world. And...and.... "It's too much," he shouted. "It's wonderful! We're saved!"

By now all the animals knew. Ellen had told Charmaine and Charmaine--well, you know. They were all dancing and singing for joy around the barrel:

"A gaggle of geese
A clowder of cats
A raft of birds
We'll eat our hats!"

Mr. Pringle was already on the telephone.



Chapter Five

The months passed. The crowds grew. The new tent went up and Mr. Pringle became richer and richer. The animals were all very happy. Mr. Pringle was good to them. ~~then~~. The crowds walked by the barrel, curious to see the mongonoose. The barrel was painted red and gold now, but the bashful mongonoose still would not come out. Poor, poor bashful mongonoose. Everyone else was happy except him and he was the one who made everyone else happy. It was unfair. But he was, after all, only a bashful mongonoose.



One night the performance was rained out. Lightning and wind and thunder swept the sky and beat the earth. All the animals were huddled in their tents. It was cold. Fall was drawing near and the circus season was almost over.

The next morning when Charmaine brought the bashful mongonoose his breakfast, she let out a sharp cry of dismay. She dropped the dishes and went loping down the midway to the tent where all the other animals were eating breakfast.

"He's gone. Our mongonoose is gone. Cheep. Gone."

There was a groan of dismay from the animals. "What'll we do? Our mongonoose is gone!"

Mickey stood up on a table and looked at the wailing, despairing animals. They were saying, "Maybe someone stole him. Took him away. He was kidnapped."

Mickey stopped them. "Stop it. Stop it. All of you, stop it! The mongonoose is not stolen, kidnapped or anything else. Leo and I took him away last night and hid him."

"You what?" the animals demanded.

"We took him away."

"But why?"

"He wasn't happy. He wanted to be left alone at the bottom of his dark barrel. He didn't like thousands of people staring at him every day."

"But Mr. Pringle...."

"He'll understand. He'll have to." Leo said.

Mickey continued, "The mongonoose had done his job of saving the circus. The rest of us can carry on as before."

The animals stared silently at each other.

"Come to think of it, we weren't very friendly to him," Charmaine began to cry. "Poor mongonoose."

"Poor, poor bashful mongonoose," Ellen said as she and Charmaine walked paw in trunk from the tent. "Poor, poor bashful mongonoose."

Years have gone by since the mongonoose disappeared,
but many say he is still hiding. So someday if you should
happen to look into a faded red and gold barrel and see
something in the darkness at the bottom, know it's the
bashful mongonoose and steal quietly away.

