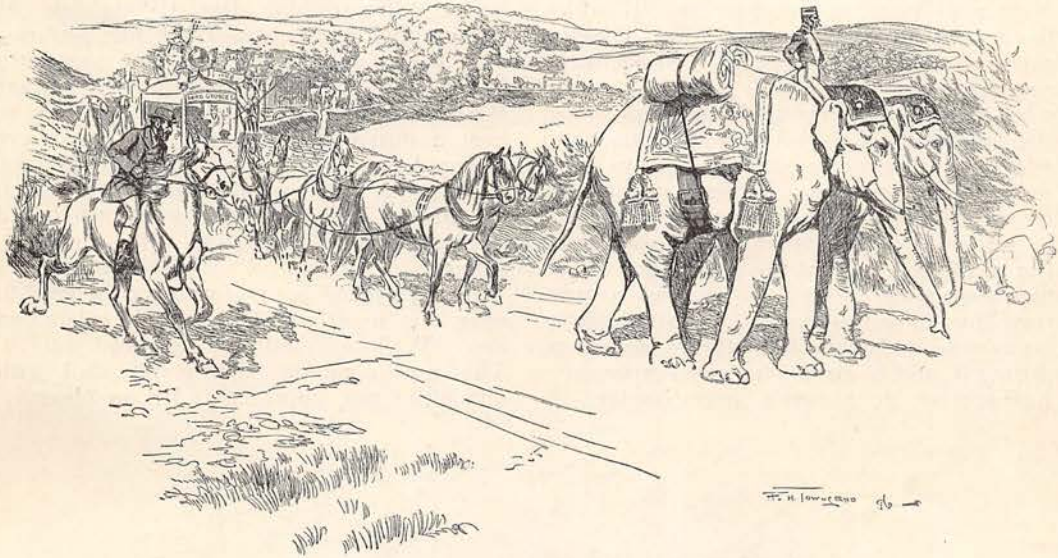


LORD GEORGE SANGER'S CIRCUS.

BY ONE WHO HAS TRAVELLED WITH IT.



SANGER'S CIRCUS ON THE MARCH.



THE name of Sanger suggests circus as readily as knife suggests fork, or lock key. This is due to their long and close association. Yet that association is still maintained by the original circus Sanger—to wit, George, commonly spoken of as "Lord George Sanger." Now aged sixty-six years, of which fifty-six have been devoted to show business, the founder of the great Sanger's Circus is still alive, and still travels from February to November with his unrivalled display.

These remarks are rendered necessary on account of the widespread misunderstanding that the present Lord George is not himself but his father. Repeatedly he is told by middle-aged men that as boys they remember visiting his circus when it was conducted by his father. True, his father, who served under Nelson at Trafalgar, was a showman; but his establishment never exceeded the dignity of a peep-show that travelled the country fairs.

Curiously enough Mrs. George Sanger, who is her husband's right hand, and goes wherever he goes, is also descended from a peep-show man. Members of the older generation amongst us may easily remember

her as Miss Ellen Chapman *alias* Madame Pauline de Vere, the Lady of the Lions. She was George Wombwell's most celebrated performer with wild animals, and created quite a stir in 1847 when she had the honour of giving her entertainment in the courtyard at Windsor Castle before Her Majesty, Prince Consort, and the Royal Household. The Queen witnessed the performance, which was given by lamplight, from a window of the Castle corridor, and at its conclusion sent for Miss Chapman.

Now let us turn to Lord George Sanger's circus, named here in full to distinguish it from his nephew's—Lord John Sanger's—circus. In the season it comprises 250 people—40 performers, 50 grooms, 50 tent-men, 24 bandsmen, shoeblacks, harness-makers and harness-cleaners, blacksmiths, carriage-washers, tent-makers, mess-caterers, carpenters, wheelwrights, wardrobe-keepers, elephant- and camel-keepers, menagerie-keepers, and a veterinary surgeon.

The salaries of these different grades range from 2s. 6d. to £30 a week. Then there are 200 horses, a varying number of elephants, camels, lions, tigers, and other rare animals—maintained at an average cost of £26 a day. The daily outlay upon the entire show averages £130 a day. When packed up and on the road, the whole is moved in 62

vehicles, and from front to rear extends at least a mile.

"They told me I would see you coming," said a farmer mounted on a bay cob on which he had ridden five miles to the main road between Leceister and Hinckley to see the circus arrive. "But I never expected to see miles of you." The farmer's remarks were addressed to the writer, who was travelling with the show in the pleasant days of last autumn, and who was also mounted on a lively mare, so lively, indeed, that conversation with the farmer was impossible. However, it was not to interview farmers that I had abandoned the comforts of settled life and turned showman for a week; it was to see how a great travelling show was worked, to participate as far as possible in the life of the nomads comprising it, and to glean what rare experiences I could from Mr. Sanger's interesting life.

I joined the show at Leicester, "just in time for a cup of tea," as Mr. Sanger said, shaking me by the hand, and leading me to his living-carriage. Over this cup of tea the conversation happened to turn on Mrs. Sanger's lion-training days, through an old lithographic representation of her performance before the Queen that had come into her hands the previous day, at Market Harboro. Mrs. Sanger, whom I had met at least a dozen times before, had never yet favoured me with any account of these days. Now, however, the picture seemed to awaken her interest in the past, and incident followed incident of her encounters with dangerous animals.

In one part of her performance she used to open the mouth of Wombwell's celebrated lion "Wallace," and put her head into it. This now common trick is attended with difficulties not appreciated by an observer,



DRESSING UP FOR THE CIRCUS PERFORMANCE.

however close. In the first place, the lion's jaws are so slippery with saliva that if any impatient force were used in helping him to open his mouth, up would fly the lifting hand—possibly to be seized by the rapacious brute as an instrument threatening him with a blow. The thrilling part, however, is the insertion of the head—it is thrilling, too, in a way the spectators know nothing of. The temples of the performer pass between the lion's fangs, and in Mrs. Sanger's case the fit was so tight that each temple was grooved by its continual insertion and withdrawal between these dreadful points. This was decidedly creepy.

"Still, I was very fond of Wallace," went on Mrs. Sanger, reassuringly, "and so was he of me. I was never afraid of him." There was one lion in the group, however, that Mrs. Sanger had her suspicions about. In jumping with the others through the hoops and on the pillars it always lurked behind, with head down and eyes turned up at her. One day it seized her by the thighs with both paws, and as she strove to beat it off its savage claws were dug into her head. In a moment she was down, and, happily, unconscious. The keepers rushed in, and beat the brute off with iron bars. Next day the Lady of the Lions went through her performance with her head bandaged! Double prices were, of course, charged, and more people had to be turned away than were accommodated in the house.

These were nice stories over a domestic cup of tea! Mrs. Sanger, however, is still fond of lions, and until recently had one in her caravan. It used to sleep with the cat and the pug dog; and follow her about the show grounds to the consternation of the crowd, who looked on wonderingly—at a respectful distance.

"I was so fond of that lion," she proceeded. "Whenever it saw me put my bonnet on, it knew I was going out, and would look up at me so pleadingly, just like a dog when it wants its master to take it out. There, I regularly cried when it died."

"Now, I'll tell you what you shall do," broke in Mr. Sanger, "to-morrow, if you like—at any rate, before you leave us. We've got four lions and a tiger in the den here. My niece performs the serpentine dance amongst them. You shall go in amongst them and walk once round, touching them up with your stick."

It was bad enough to listen to Mrs. Sanger's stories. To expect me to fall in with proposals of this kind on the top of them was like expecting a child, after you have made him shudder with tales of ghosts,

to go down into a dark cellar without a light. However, three days later I did go in, and walked once round.

"Round again! Once more!" cried Mr. Sanger, who was standing outside.



LORD GEORGE SANGER.
(PRESENT DAY.)

(From a photograph by Messrs. A. & G. Taylor.)

"No!" I said most distinctly and emphatically; "let me out!" and out I popped very quickly, as soon as the trap-door in the bottom of the cage was raised.

During my walk round, the lions leapt nimbly enough out of my way; but there was a reluctance about the Bengal tiger that I didn't like. It kept its head low, with its eyes turned up at me and hanging about me in a way that recalled the conduct of the lion that attacked Mrs. Sanger. This was enough for me, and when I got outside I could hear my heart beat.

My first appearance as a circus-performer was in the perhaps very natural part of clown. At least, while I was being made up, I heard the remark—

"That chap was cut out for a clown."

It was the day after I joined the show. At twelve a bell was rung—the signal for getting ready for parade—and I proceeded to the dressing-tent, which is divided into three compartments—one for the grooms and black men, one for the clowns and other performers, and one for the ladies. Good-humoured chaff is indulged in while we are transforming

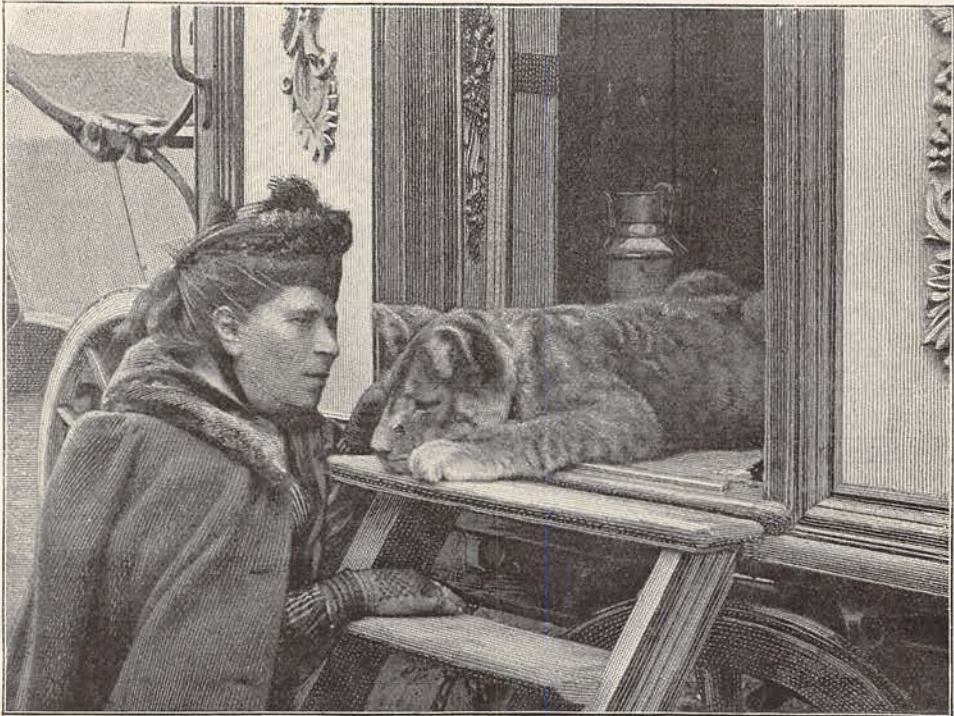
ourselves from ordinary mortals into gay butterflies whose pathway in popular esteem never a care has crossed, or into heroes whose only business it is to prance through life on fiery steeds. Inquisitive boys peep cautiously round the tent hangings to gratify their insatiable longing to see more and ever more of circus matters. They are easily dispersed, however, and rush terrified away whenever a black man, making a rapid stride or two towards them, emits some inarticulate bellow.

Sometimes boys make a closer acquaintance with this tent than they relish. It is impossible to subdue a boy's desire to see a circus performance, as every mother knows and every man who has been a boy. Often, however, the want of a few coppers prevents him from entering by the ordinary portals; so he takes a walk round the tent, and when he thinks no one is looking creeps under the canvas. Circus people know the ways of boys very well though: no class has had so much experience of them. The consequence is these little boyish methods are well provided against, and when a lumpish lad is captured, an example is made of him. He is taken to the dressing-tent, his face is whitened and his nose painted red; dark and lugubrious lines are drawn down from the

corners of his mouth. His jacket is then put on the wrong way so that being buttoned up behind he can't take it off, and so long as it is on in this fashion he can't lift his hands to his face. Then he is turned loose into an unfeeling world. Everybody, except perhaps his mother, laughs at him. His companions enjoy the fun so much that they call other companions to share in it, and so heighten it. There is nothing for him but to go home as he is, and as he goes the jeering crowd about him accumulates. Mud is thrown at him. His comical appearance becomes more and more comical. Reaching home he is unrecognisable; and when recognised, after making the baby cry and his sisters shriek, his father takes him in hand—and a cane as well.

Meanwhile, to return to my preparations for parade, the chief clown, whose place I am to fill, has whitened my face with whiting, and reddened my nose with vermilion, adding other marks to my face in keeping with the character I am to play. He has bedecked me in a cut-away coat of a pronounced pattern, exaggerated stand-up collar and bow, an enormous hat, etc., and I am ready.

"What have I to do?" I ask, somewhat apprehensive that I might break down.



MRS. GEORGE SANGER WITH HER FAVOURITE LION CUB.
(From a photograph by A. M. Bliss & Co., Lewes.)



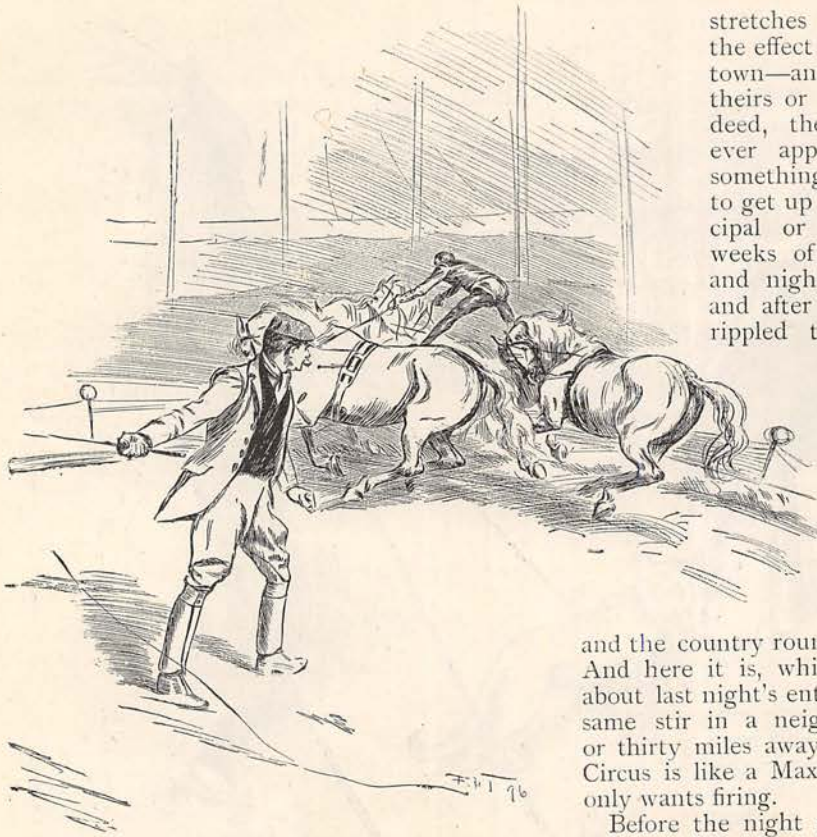
MRS. SANGER TAKES HER PET LION FOR A STROLL.

"You," he replied (with emphasis on the "you"), "will have to do nothing. Just carry this brush in your hand, and be as you are. You make the best clown ever I saw."

Immediately behind us in the procession came the elephants, and round them a crowd of boys. It is rare, indeed, that something amusing does not happen with them. In the present case a boy's cap dropped off, and an elephant made no more to do than simply extend his trunk, pick it up, and pass it into his mouth. The boy looked aghast at his disappearing cap, and then at the keeper as though he expected that functionary to go after it and recover it. As is well known, men working on the road usually lay their coats down just where they are working. This is a dangerous practice when a circus is in the town, and often has an elephant made a hasty meal of such stray garments. In another procession I was in later on, an elephant deliberately walked to the side-path and knocked over a box of carrots, helped itself to three or four, and then rushed back to its place in the roadway again.

Attached to the circus are thirty very small ponies. Their only duty is to run loose through the streets behind the procession. All the rest of the day they roam

about the circus grounds, and, as in the case with idle people, having nothing to do they have acquired extraordinary cunning. Ladies and children frequently bring dainties in baskets "for the dear little ponies." One lady, who had brought a basketful of cakes, after feeding them was walking away, when one deliberately planted his fore-foot on her skirt to stop her. He did stop her, for he pulled the skirt right off. Another trick of theirs is to haunt the different messes of the men at meal-times. These messes are held in the open air. Quite silently up will come a pony, thrust his head over some absorbed diner's shoulder, and help himself from the tin platter. At the back and underneath Mr. Sanger's living-carriage is the cupboard; it is fastened when shut by a wire loop put



A CIRCUS REHEARSAL.

on a staple and kept in position by a piece of wood. One morning, after the sausages and bacon had been cooked for breakfast, the servant-girl went to fetch the bread. There was no bread there, though three loaves had been put in the previous evening. The ponies had actually lifted the piece of wood out of the staple, opened the cupboard door, and devoured the bread!

An impressive feature of a great circus is the rapidity of its movements. Townsfolk waken up, and lo! a hitherto deserted waste is covered with canvas, figures are actively bustling about, smoke is curling up from camp-fires and from the chimneys of caravans, gaily-painted and grotesquely-shaped vehicles stud the ground—a spot, in short, noted for nothing but its desolate appearance has suddenly become transformed into a pleasing scene of animation and the most attractive place in the town.

Next morning chaos has come again. The old field has resumed its wonted deserted aspect—the circus has gone. This has given rise to the common notion that circus people never sleep. The townsfolk see the great

stretches of canvas, and they feel the effect of the display upon the town—an effect that no effort of theirs or their neighbours, or, indeed, the combined town, has ever approached. They know something of what it costs them to get up a *fête*, or to rouse municipal or political enthusiasm—weeks of preparation, and days and nights of worry and work, and after all they have not even riddled the ordinary course of events. Here, however, as if dropped from the clouds, a great show appears; men knock off their work early to go to it, country folk drive in from a distance of twelve miles for the same purpose—in short, the whole town

and the country round have paused to look. And here it is, while they are still talking about last night's entertainment, creating the same stir in a neighbouring town twenty or thirty miles away. The fact is, Sanger's Circus is like a Maxim gun, so made that it only wants firing.

Before the night performance is over the labourers have already taken down the front and packed it up; and, while the people are still pouring out, the seats are being taken down, piled up, and loaded. An attack is then made on the tent itself, it is lowered, its thousands of square yards of canvas rolled up and packed into the waggons within an hour of the closing of the show. The day's work is now done, and the night-watchman comes on duty. With a lever of the pump-handle pattern he pulls the 500 tent-stakes out of the ground during his lonely vigil, and for this receives twopence a week from each labourer—an addition, of course, to his ordinary pay as watchman. Meanwhile, the grooms, stretched on "kips" of straw and wrapped in blankets, are asleep, along each side of the stable-tent and within a foot or two of their horses' heels.

The time of starting in the morning may be three and it may be as late as seven, according to the distance to be travelled. An hour's work is sufficient to put everything in readiness for the road. Mr. Sanger's own carriage leads the way and regulates the pace. All the others follow in fixed order—those required early in the operation of erecting the show in the front, while the trusted agent brings up the

rear. The vet., with a swift pony, drives along the line from time to time to see how the horses are going. If a shoe be cast, the farrier is summoned, and it is immediately put on. If a horse show symptoms of lameness, he is immediately taken out and led and a fresh one put in his place. Nothing stops the progress of the cavalcade. Let a heavy carriage, when roads are bad, sink in a rut to the axle so that the horses cannot move it; no matter, the elephants are brought to bear, and then it *must* move.

Yet no bribe will induce Mr. Sanger to retire. "No, sir," he has told me; "I like it, and we all like it. I can't sit down in a house for half an hour; and I am never so well in winter quarters as when travelling. As you know, we travel from February to November, often in mud, and snow, and bitter winds; yet not one of us will have so much as a cough. The moment we go into winter quarters, however, then we begin. First this one has a cold; then that one has pain somewhere; and so on it goes, right

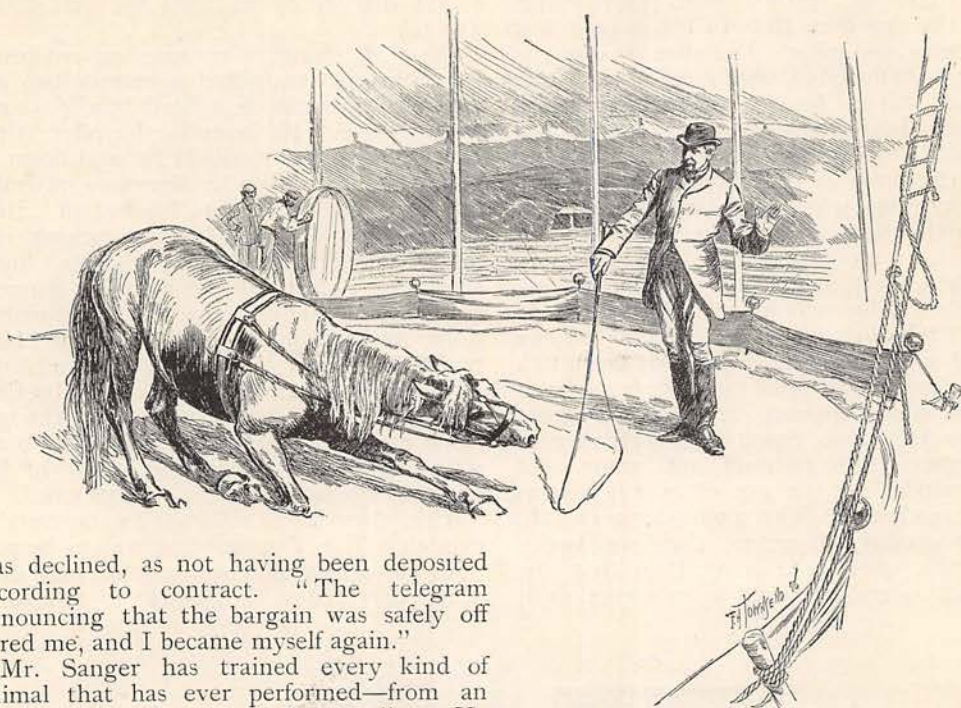
round the lot of us until we get started again."

That Mr. Sanger's remarks are confirmed by truth was exemplified a year or two ago when a City syndicate offered him £150,000 for his circus. He accepted the offer, stipulating that £50,000 should be paid down on a certain date. Then he became a miserable man, and had to take to his bed ill. Here was the work of his lifetime passing into other hands. "I declare to you, sir," and I fancy I have detected a tear in Mr. Sanger's eye when telling this story, "I almost wished to die rather than see that show that I have travelled scores of times all over these islands with, and over the greater part of the Continent, go off without me. The thought made me fairly desperate; so I wrote to my solicitors, Messrs. Lewis and Lewis, of Ely Place, to get me out of the engagement."

This they were able to do honourably enough. The £50,000 that was to be paid down on a fixed date, was not so paid until a few days later, and when it arrived it



"I TOOK THE HARES IN, AND AMUSED THE PARTY FOR ABOUT HALF AN HOUR" (p. 650).



A CIRCUS HORSE TRAINED BY "LORD GEORGE."

was declined, as not having been deposited according to contract. "The telegram announcing that the bargain was safely off cured me, and I became myself again."

Mr. Sanger has trained every kind of animal that has ever performed—from an oyster and a hare, to a seal and a lion. He designs and cuts out with his own hand the costumes required for his companies. He designs, too, and has made by his own workmen the circus carriages and caravans. He has even painted the show-front.

Nor is there anything that showmen suffer that Mr. Sanger hasn't suffered. In his early days, when each day's wants consumed each day's takings, he has had his children die in his caravan: yet he has had to strut all the more in front of the booth and "cackle" all the louder so that he might induce the people to "walk up" and so procure the means of burying his offspring. In his early travels he has come to a toll-gate and found himself unable to pay the toll necessary for the passage of his waggon, and has gone back to perform to any group of rustics he might be able to gather on the wayside, and then "nob" them—the show term for passing round the hat.

On one such occasion he offered the toll-keeper a Chinese gong worth £3 for the paltry sum of fifteen pence. The toll-keeper, however, knowing nothing of the instrument, naturally declined it. Mr. Sanger turned his horse round, and let it go as it pleased. He himself didn't know where to go or what to do. He was in despair, for business had been bad.

"On the way," to tell the story in his own words, "we met a clergyman with his lady

and four children. The clergyman, accosting me, said—

"What have you got to exhibit in the caravan?"

"I mentioned the performing hares, but was afraid to say anything about my being a conjurer. So he asked me if I could show them to the children.

"Yes, sir," I said eagerly.

"Come in here," said the clergyman, meaning a public-house close by.

"So I took the hares in, and amused the party for about half an hour upon the tap-room table. At the conclusion of the entertainment, this best of all good parsons put his hand into his pocket and gave me ten shillings.

"Made again!" said I, as I jumped into the caravan; and turning my horse round, went back in triumph to the toll-gate."

Such were the humble beginnings of Lord George Sanger. Yet in the year when Sir David Evans was Lord Mayor of London, a school-boy, on being asked what a peer was, answered—

"A lord, sir."

"Name one or two."

"Lord George Sanger and the Lord Mayor of London!"

W. B. ROBERTSON.