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**My Friend Jack – the Gentle Giant.**

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# My Friend Jack—the Gentle Giant

All he ever wanted  
was to be like  
everybody else

*By Dean Jennings*

**J**ACK EARLE was the kind of man you could look at a long time and not believe your eyes.

He was eight feet six and a half inches tall, dwarfing all ordinary men. When he spread his huge arms they spanned seven feet four inches and looked like outriggers on a fisherman's boat. His bony hands, wider than ping-pong paddles, could easily span two octaves on a piano; the pipe he smoked was so big it looked

like an orchard smudge-pot. There were eight yards of cloth in each of his suits, and his fingers, each the diameter of a 50-cent piece, were so thick he had to use a pencil to spin a telephone dial.

Jack Earle was a real giant in a Lilliputian world, and for 14 years he was a freak in the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus—hating himself and the people who gawked at him. But he was also



*Jack and his agent in circus days*

a giant of high courage and unquenchable will, who wanted to get out of the side show and be like ordinary men. He did, too. It was a prodigious effort, but he beat the odds and cleansed himself of the corroding hate.

I first met Jack some 20 years ago at the San Francisco Press Club, where he caused a memorable stir among reporters who thought they had seen everything. He stepped out of the elevator, ducking his great head from long habit, and ambled into the lounge with the stiff, awkward gait of a giraffe. He had a sharp, craggy face with a nose like a boat hook, and he looked down at you shyly through large shell-rimmed glasses. His handshake was gentle, as though he knew he could easily crack your fingers.

Jack had just arrived from Australia, where, after tormenting weeks of indecision, he had resigned from the circus. Renzo Cesana, of the Roma Wine Co., had offered him a job as salesman, and Jack had accepted it with misgivings. He was almost agonizingly shy, and his deep fear of ridicule and staring eyes made him shrink from people. But he also suffered from a terrible hunger to live a normal life, and he was determined not to go back to the lonely bondage of the side show.

So he went to work, and a spectacular debut it was.

The first day, canvassing small shops in the North Beach district, Jack strolled into a small Italian delicatessen. A tiny woman behind

the counter took one wild-eyed look, and started yelling for help. Her husband, black mustache bristling, ran from the back room and bravely faced the colossus who stood dumbly, business card in hand.

"Awright, awright!" the storekeeper cried. "I take one-a case anyt'ing you got, thenna you saram."

Jack wrote up an order for one case of brandy and backed out in confusion. Later he learned he had mistakenly gone into a store that wasn't on his list at all. "Oh, I was a great salesman," he told me with a chuckle. "People bought cases and cases of stuff out of sheer fright."

Occasionally he would come to my country home, and he was the sensation of the neighborhood. He would arrive in a vintage sedan which had been rebuilt to fit his sprawling frame. The front seat had been removed, and Jack drove from the back seat, gripping a steering wheel that had been lengthened 19 inches. "It's not easy," he said wryly, "but at least I save on theft insurance. Nobody else can drive it."

The car was a stopper, but the real marvel was Jack Earle himself. When word spread that he was coming, every child for a mile around somehow got the news and hid behind bushes and trees near the house. Even the neighborhood dogs sat quietly with their ears back and did not bark as they always did when other strangers came.

Jack had an almost eerie sense about these curious effects. He told me once that no dog ever barked at

him and even vicious ones came up to lick his hand — and he knew there were children hiding nearby, though he could not see them.

“C’mon out, I know you’re there,” he would call softly. “Time for a story from Uncle Jack.”

They would then emerge, like little animals venturing out of the woods at dusk, and would make a ring around him. And he would tell strange and enchanting stories about Uranus, Pecos Bill, Goliath, Paul Bunyan and other giants. Jack’s long arms and weaving fingers fashioned imaginary rivers, mountains and roadways that led into the sky and the castles of the giants, and they were all good giants, who would not harm a child.

Long afterward I learned that Jack often turned up, unasked and unannounced, at orphanages, children’s hospitals and other places, to bewitch sick or lonely children with his happy legends. And when he left them, he was often so ill or tired that he could barely get into his car; but he knew they would never be afraid of a giant again.

Jack Earle, as he once said bitterly, never had a real childhood of his own. He was born in Denver on June 23, 1906, and weighed only four pounds. But when he was seven his arms and legs suddenly began to grow like a wild vine, and within two years he was more than six feet tall. At ten, still growing, he had to have his clothes made to order.

Now, towering over classmates in school, Jack began to suffer wounds.

There was never a day without cruel taunts; the boys called him Giraffe, Old Highpockets, or Icha-bod Crane; they tripped him and played tricks on him. His anguished parents, Isadore and Dora Ehrlich, who had two other sons of average height, went from doctor to doctor in a desperate search for some magic potion to stop his growth.

By the time he was 13 Jack was already seven feet tall. He dreaded each new day when, facing a mirror, he could almost measure the relentless upward stretching of his bones. His enormous shoes were now costing \$25 a pair, and he began buying socks by the gross, because the manufacturer wouldn’t make his odd size for any lesser number.

To earn a living Jack went to work in Hollywood. He made 48 pictures for Century Comedies with popular Baby Peggy and other child stars. He was vacationing at home in El Paso, Texas, where his family had moved, when the circus came to town. He wandered through the midway, where one of the attractions was Jim Tarver, billed as the tallest man in the world. Jack and his friends bought tickets, and inside the tent there took place one of the great embarrassing moments in circus history. The astonished customers needed only one incredulous look to see that this country boy was a foot taller than the professional giant. “I had a guilty feeling about making Jim Tarver look silly,” Jack said. “I backed out and went home.”

The following day a Ringling

agent showed up at the Ehrlich home and offered Jack a permanent job. Two weeks later in New York, he reported to Clyde Ingalls, director of the circus side-show department. Ingalls dressed him up in black-leather knee boots with lifts in the heels, flaring breeches striped with gold braid and a double-breasted coat with gold epaulets and buttons. To exaggerate his height further, they gave him a fur busby that teetered precariously 16 inches above his head. On opening night Jack Earle was a formidable and frightening giant indeed.

But in his heart he was still a boy, unbearably conscious of his long, snaking arms and club-like hands, and painfully aware that people would stare at him as though he were some monster.

As he stood on the platform that first night, nauseated, frightened and hating the people lined up outside, a small voice floated up from below: "Hey, Jack!" He looked down and recognized Harry Doll, the famed midget.

"Welcome, Jack," Doll said. "And take it easy. Remember there are more freaks in the crowd than there are up here."

The midget smiled, and Jack smiled back. Together they turned to face the enemy.

There was no single precipitating event that impelled Jack to quit the circus. But there were hundreds of exasperating little sores—the brats who banged his shins to see if he was on stilts, the kidders repeating

the same silly remark: "Jack, how's the weather up there?" There were the endless shuttlings back and forth across the country in Ringling Car 96 with the other freaks, the smutty questions about his private life from the loafers who hung around the lot. Once, in Tennessee, he forgot himself and aimed a single punch at a tormentor. The blow broke the man's jaw. The circus settled with the victim, but Jack moped about it for weeks, convinced he was losing his protective sense of humor.

There was also an ominous thought he had never mentioned to anyone—the certain knowledge that he would be lucky to live another 10 or 12 years. He was 34 in 1940, and had already used up more years than nature gives most victims of gigantism. "I was in pretty good shape," he told me, "but I was already having some minor troubles and I was pretty sure things would get worse. Frankly, I wasn't afraid of death, but I didn't want to die in a tent. Most of all, I wanted to be on the outside—free—and there wasn't much time."

Jack worked for the Roma company almost 12 years. Starting as a salesman, he was soon named a special representative for the firm, and contributed dozens of ingenious merchandising ideas. In this new world of business he met thousands of people in virtually every state, called on them in their offices and homes, and joined them in new-found laughter and happiness.

"Why, you know, people are glad

to have me around," he grinned. "I can wash windows without having to climb up on a ladder, and I'm handy for dusting moldings most housewives can't reach."

Hidden talents flowered like plants long robbed of sunlight and water, and he shared them with his friends. He learned public speaking and sold thousands of dollars' worth of war bonds. At Christmastime he was the most impressive Santa Claus of all, and many a patient in hospital wards heard him sing carols in a fine, clear voice.

He mastered the art of portrait photography, studied sculpture and wrote poignant little verses, in which he mirrored the mingled sadness and joy of what he called his rebirth. Toward the end, when serious kidney troubles and other physical problems sent him to the Mayo Clinic for the fourth time in a vain

search for relief, Jack took up water-color painting to pass the time. He painted with a sure, delicate touch, quickly, as though there would be no tomorrow. When each picture was done he would get it framed and give it to some grateful friend.

The last time I saw him, not long before his death in July 1952, he presented to me a large water color he had done on a deserted beach near my home. There were three sea gulls high in flight over a still and bleak stretch of sand. There was a beach umbrella and an empty sand bucket nearby, and perhaps this was the parting symbol of his life, as though a child had wearied of the sand play and had been swallowed by the frothing sea. Now and then, when the sun is far down in the sky, I look at the painting. And I say to myself softly and humbly: "Hi, Jack—how's the weather up there?"

