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STORIES

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ZIFF DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder
Editorial and Executive Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

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NOVEMBER 1956

Volume 30 Number 11

CONTENTS

THE MONSTER DIED AT DAWN By Clyde Mitchell.....	6
PUZZLE IN YELLOW By Randall Garrett.....	45
CONCERTO FOR A PINK ELEPHANT By B. B. Livingston.....	50
SERVICE ELEVATOR By Sam Merwin, Jr.....	64
THE IDIOT By Paul V. Dallas.....	86
THE RIVALS By Robert Silverberg.....	92
SLEEP IT OFF By Henry Slesar.....	104
THE NURSERY COMMANDOS By Adam Chase.....	116

DEPARTMENTS

THE OBSERVATORY By The Editor.....	5
THE REVOLVING FAN By Roger De Soto.....	83
THE SPACE CLUB	88
... OR SO YOU SAY By The Readers.....	126



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The music was an all-encompassing cloud—hypnotizing—enchanted.

Manhattan's Greenwich Village is a reputed haven for odd-balls, geniuses pseudo and otherwise, phonies and frantic talents, sad children and happy octogenarians. Strange creative nightmares result, and probably the strangest of all was the—

Concerto For a Pink Elephant

By B. B. LIVINGSTON

THE bartender at Freddie's phoned me just before I left on my assignment. His plea to "Come get Reilly out of the joint" fell on deaf ears. The circus was opening at the Garden and I was to interview Waite Hunt, the famous leader of the circus band.

Reilly would have to wait till I was done with the interview.

I said, "All right, George. All *right*. If I know Reilly he's pretty much hung over by now. And if he's at his

usual back table let him stay there till I pick him up. He can't do too much harm."

"No-o . . . ?" groaned the voice on the phone. "He's talking about those pink elephants of his and wants to play for them . . ."

I cut him off. "I haven't got time to talk, George. Give him another bottle of vino, and I'll square the tab when I get there. In a couple of hours," I added.

At the Garden I learned my interview had been sandwich-

ed between those of someone from *Life* magazine and somebody else from *Reader's Digest*. I thought of going back to talk to Barna, the master of ceremonies, while waiting for Hunt, when I spotted Ted Karakas of the *News* and Johnny Evvans of the *Mirror*.

Ted saw me at the same instant, and called me over. "Living it up, huh?"

"Isn't every day I get an interview with Hunt," I said.

Evvans smiled. "Big deal. Say, Ed, what's this talk about you being on the wagon?"

"Right up there with the driver."

Ted said, "Johnny and I got what we came for. We were just going across to Halloran's for a short one. If you think one won't do any harm we'll stick around till you're through?"

It sounded like what I needed. It had been weeks since I had a drink. I thought, Hell! there isn't anything Hunt could tell me I didn't know. It'd be easy enough to fake an interview. Besides, I had no idea how long that *Life* man would be there. There would be pictures taken . . . I suggested that maybe it would be a good

idea to go now instead of waiting.

Halloran's is a long, narrow, high-ceilinged bar close to Madison Square Garden. The gambling and fight crowd hang out there, and the talk is always fights, horses or women. At that time of the morning, however, there wasn't much doing. We found three stools together, and Ted called the bartender. He was a Swede named Olson that everyone called Murphy.

Ted said, "Murphy, I'd like you to meet Ed Loring, that *real gone* music critic from the most famous sheet . . ."

"Yeah," Murphy said. "That's what I hear all day. What'll it be?" he asked, not at all impressed.

Ted's deep brown eyes went wide. He lifted his thin narrow shoulders till they were almost touching his ears. He turned, gave me a quick wink. "That's what comes of working in a place like this, Ed. Your view becomes as narrow and constricted as the confines of this bar. Do horse players and fighters know of the finer, more noble pursuits? Hah! Now my friend, Johnny Evvans, can talk by the hour on the merits of Ivy League football as opposed to Big Ten kind. The word of an old

Boola-Boola football hero, Johnny will tell you."

Evvans had been a Yale gridiron star ten years ago. But he still liked to wear his hair crew-cut, bought his clothes at Brooks Brothers, and went for workouts at the Yale Club three times a week. He was a big man but he wore his bigness with an easy grace and it took a long time of ribbing to get him angry.

"The trouble with you," Johnny said easily, "is that you do so much talking we're always six drinks up on you before you're aware of it. You know what happens then?"

I said: "Let me remind him. He'll want those six drinks lined up on the bar all at once. Then he'll go down the line, one after the other, until there *ain't* no mo'. And we'll wind up lugging his supine and stinking body to his hotel again."

"So now everybody's had their little say," Murphy broke in, "what'll it be?"

We agreed that "Gibsons all around" would suit us fine. A half dozen Gibsons and two hours later I remembered Reilly, and that he was still down at Freddie's waiting for me.

It had been a long time since I had so much to drink.

Or maybe the Gibsons were extra powerful. But I had to grip the bar for balance for a second or two before starting to the door.

"Hey!" Ted Karakas became aware I was leaving. "Where the heck do you think *you're* going?"

"Got to meet someone in the Village."

"Woman . . . ?"

"No . . . Just a friend."

"You mean that crazy fiddle player Reilly?"

I waved a hand at them. "I'll see you guys."

Karakas laughed. I didn't like the sound of it. He said: "Something mighty strange about you two . . ."

I turned, drew back my right hand and started to let go. Evvans grabbed me and swung me away, holding me close in an effective bear hug. "Easy, Ed. *Easy* does it." He turned his head to Karakas. "Why the hell do you have to get nasty?"

"I wasn't getting anything. I just think it's funny, him and that fiddler. Like him and that great concerto he's always *going* to write. That's what I think's funny."

"Lemme at him," I begged, trying to break Evvans' hold on me.

Evvans wrestled me to the door. "I'll take care of your

tab," he said, as he shoved me into the street. "Go on, now. And forget about Ted. He'll be sorry as hell in a little while."

"Sure," I said. "He always is . . . afterward."

The two wooden tubs flanking the basement stairs to Freddie's hold a pair of withered planks sunk in cracked and crumbling earth. I flipped my cigarette into the right-hand tub as I went down. George spotted me and jerked a thumb in the direction of the rear of the bar.

Reilly had waited for me.

"Did he give any trouble?" I asked.

"No. Just went to sleep after he finished the bottle. But I wish you'd get him out of here. I don't like for him to sleep here. This ain't no Bowery dive. I just don't want him sleeping here."

My eyes, accustomed now to the change of light, noticed the man at the table had his head on his folded arms. I walked over and sat across from him. A strong odor of wine came from him. I hunched forward over the table. "Reilly," I said softly.

His head lifted slowly. For an instant, as always, I was startled by the first sight of that face. It was long, bony,

narrow, with a thin-lipped cruel mouth, eyes dark and piercing in their look, with something wild and animal-like in their depths. His uncombed black hair hung in an uneven line across the narrow stark forehead.

His smile was a sidewise twist of his lips. He never showed his teeth in a smile. "You took your own sweet time coming here, didn't you?" he asked.

I shook my head.

He sniffed with thin hairy nostrils. "Hey! You smell ripe. Gin. My boy fell off the wagon."

I said, "I want you to play for me today."

"Nah. I don't want to play. I want to get drunk."

"Afterward."

"Okay. Let's both get drunk. That last bottle of vino sobered me up. Ed, tell me how good I am, hunh? Use the ginny talk. Ed . . ."

"No!"

"I don't like it when you get drunk, Ed. You get mean."

I said, "I heard you gave George trouble, told him you were seeing pink elephants."

"He's nuts. I said if I didn't get another drink I'd start seeing them."

I took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. I

had a sudden desire to hit him, and I closed my eyes, fighting off the pressure of blood pounding at my temples. After a little while I felt better. I opened my eyes and saw he was staring at me, a look of pleading in his eyes.

"Tell me how good I am, Ed. You know . . ."

"You're not good," I said in a low voice. "You're *great!* The greatest. You do things Paganini would have had pride in doing. When you play *accelerando* it's nerve shattering. In *dolce*, in *andante*, when it's *comodo* there is never a question as to mood. A passage *giovale* brings laughter, when its *fuoco* I burn with anger, when it's *pianissimo* I think of children playing. And all on a fiddle that if you paid twenty bucks for you got robbed."

I used to think you were giving me a rib the first times you told me how good I was. Like the rest of 'em. But you always come back to the twenty-buck fiddle. That's how I know it's for real. The *twenty-buck fiddle!*

"Plays better than the thousand-dollar one you had, hunh, Ed?"

Suddenly I felt the need of a drink. Tessie, the day wait-

ress, was sitting at the bar, putting platinum-colored nail polish on the nails of her left hand. I called to her. She waved her hand in the air as she came to us.

"Yeah?"

"I'll take what he's drinking," Reilly said.

"Two ryes," I said.

She continued to wave her hand gently as she went to get our orders. She put the glasses of whiskey before us and the water chasers besides the whiskey. Then she returned to her seat at the bar blowing softly on her nails, trying to dry the polish.

I said, "You stink! Water doesn't cost anything. You could at least bathe once in a while. And get a haircut, and a clean shirt. There are nights you make twenty bucks out of those Third Avenue joints you play. There's no reason you can't be clean."

"Would that make me play better on the twenty-buck fiddle?"

"Shut up! Shut up about the fiddle!"

"Sure, Ed. Sure. You got that paper with you today? You know, the lined kind that you make the pot-hooks on?"

"Yes."

"That means we're going to get drunk. I like that. May-

be I'll see my pink babies after all?"

After the smoothness of the Gibsons the rye had a harsh burning rawness. But it cleared the fog that had been gathering in my brain. I knew that all I needed was one more. Just one more and I could think with crystal clearness. Reilly could say what he wanted, tell me anything, but I would be ready for the pink elephants when they came.

The second drink put a vacant grin on Reilly's lips.

He said, "I been drinkin' all night, Ed. You said you'd see me this morning. Where you been?"

"To the circus. It's opening this afternoon. I had to see someone."

"The circus? . . . Did you see the elephants?"

"Yes," I lied. "And they're not pink, nor small. They're big and gray. And they stink. But not like you. No, not like you. Nothing does. When you get a lot of them together, like they have over at the Garden, it's like being in the jungle. It's not like being at the zoo where they have *one* caged behind thick bars and you're brave and prove it by throwing peanuts at him. And when they come out in the

center ring, twenty, twenty-five of them, maybe, and they start that weaving chuffling motion, you forget it's a circus. You're in a jungle clearing. A blazing sun is trying to fry your brains to a crisp. You can't stop from sweating. And the bugs and flies are swarming over you thick as the grass covering your feet to your knees.

"Then a whistle blows. A man in a red coat and white pants and shiny patent-leather boots cracks a whip. And you're back at the circus again, laughing at a circle of large and small elephants doing a dance."

"They really dance? Like mine do? I never been to a circus, Ed . . ." His eyes were staring into space. "One time I went to the Bronx Zoo. Only thing I knew about elephants was from pictures. I made up my mind I was gonna see one. Like you say, he was behind big bars. He was gray, too . . . yeah. You know, I think he liked me. There was a big crowd, but I stood over by myself to one side. And he came over and stood in front of me. I had my fiddle with me. I think, maybe he'd like to hear me play. So I took out the fiddle and I make up a tune. And you know, he starts to dance. I swear! He

starts to dance! The crowd's eatin' it up. But it don't last long. A cop comes over and breaks it up, tells me he'll throw me in the can, tells me to beat it . . ."

There were tears in his eyes.

Everything was crystal-clear now. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I said: "For a year now you've been telling me about these pink elephants of yours. I must have bought you a couple of barrels of whiskey, spent a hundred nights listening to your crazy talk, dragged you away from dozens of fights, and from I don't know how many of those fat floozy blondes you manage to get hanging around when you get hold of a couple of bucks. You talk about those pink elephants as if they were real. But they're not. They're just the crazy imaginings of that drink-soaked brain . . ."

"No! Don't say that. I see 'em. I see 'em all right. But I never did till I got this fiddle."

"You told me. A long time ago. About the pawnshop, about the crazy old man who died the day after he sold you the fiddle. You've got me crazy with those elephants of yours. I've been writing this concerto for a year and it's

not done. It's not done because the last of it is the *dance of the pink elephants!* What pink elephants? I bring you home and put toothpicks between my eyelids to keep them open so I won't fall asleep. I wait for you to have your dt's. And all you do is *howl, seream, laugh*, with your fiddle on your lap. Never *once* have you played a single note. Never *once*."

His face lowered into sullen lines. "I can't help it if they won't come out while you're there. They do when I'm alone, that's for sure."

"All right. I wasn't going to let you get drunk tonight. I was going to go the rounds with you and keep you sober. But maybe it's better that you do get drunk. Yes, maybe it will be better. Then when you're falling down drunk I'm going to take you home and make you play. Not just wait for you to start seeing them. It will only be like it always is. This time you'll make them come out by playing for them. I want to hear this tune you talk about. I want to hear the dance you play for them!"

"Maybe they won't come out?"

"They'd better. Because if they don't you and I are all

through. No more whiskey for Reilly, not from me, anyway. You won't like that. And who's going to tell you how great you are? Who will even *dream* of your greatness? I'm the only one who knows, but I've got to know it all. Understand, Reilly?"

He gave me that sidewise knowing grin. "I get it, Ed. Let's go out and drink up the town."

I don't know how many taverns we went to. Surely all between Eighth Street and Twenty-third on Third Avenue. It was like a hundred other nights. Reilly went through his repertoire of Irish jigs, of cornball hill-billy tunes, his improvisations on one and two strings. I'd heard them all. Had taken from them what I wanted.

I couldn't get him drunk.

Perhaps he'd drunk himself sober the night before? I knew only that he had reached the morose quarreling stage where a wrong word meant a fight. We were in a place on the corner of Third Avenue and Eleventh Street. The time was a few minutes past eight. The place was noisy and crowded, the TV set blasting in competition to the human voices. Someone had asked him for a

tune and he had refused with a sullen voice.

We were in a booth toward the rear. The aproned waiter came over and stood beside the table picking at his teeth with a paper match. I reached for money and learned I had only a handful of change left.

Reilly glanced at the change in my palm and said: "Let's get some wine and blow this joint. I'm fed up with it."

They sold wine by the quart and half-gallon. The thought of drinking wine made me shiver in disgust, but I told the waiter to bring a quart of muscatel.

"Let's take it over to my place," Reilly said.

He lived in a cold-water flat in a four-story walk-up on Tenth Street just off Greenwich. It was an eyesore of a building, with scabrous red paint peeling in flakes and chunks from the raw brick. His home was a single room on the fourth floor at the rear of the building. I stood in the open doorway feeling waves of nausea at the foul odor that struck me when Reilly opened the door. It was always like that.

He tossed the fiddle case on the bed, and went to the small sink that stood in the corner. The bed was an iron

cot that stood below the single window of the room. A stripped dirty mattress covered the bed. There was a backless stool close to the bed. I slumped into it, put my elbows on my knees and brought my hands up to my face. I didn't want to look at the room, at the filth that lay in the sink, at the strained splattered walls.

I never wanted to.

"Open the bottle," Reilly said. "I'll bring the glasses."

"Wash them first," I said.

"What for? They'll only get dirty."

"Wash them."

"Okay! Okay. Here . . ."

He gave me one of the tumblers and held out the other for me to pour the wine. The bottle was half empty when I put it down beside me. He flopped on the bed, facing me, and put the glass to his lips. When he put the glass down it was empty. I didn't touch my drink, only sat and stared at him.

And suddenly he was drunk.

"What if they don't come?" he asked.

"I told you what I'd do."

"No, you wouldn't do that. Not to Reilly." He shook his head. It moved loosely on the thin sinewy neck. "Nah! You

just talk. I know you, you *phony!* Think I haven't watched you putting those little pot hooks down on the paper. Who you kiddin', your music? It's mine. *Mine!*" He banged his chest with his fist. "How come you didn't tell me how great you're going to make me? Gonna see to it I play at, uh, Carnegie Hall. That's the joint, ain't it? Why 'cause *you* never made it, hunh? Even with the thousand-buck fiddle. You never made it because you ain't got this much music in you." He put his thumb against the tip of his index finger to show me how much. "You're not even a good music reporter. But I'm your friend. I won't tell . . ." he fell backward on the bed, his head slamming the wall with a dull thud.

He knew. He had always known. But I didn't care. Once the last of the concerto, the dance of the pink elephants had been written, I would be through with Reilly. If only he had the dt's and saw them. I turned, blinking in the light of the hundred-watt bulb shining nakedly above the sink. It hurt my eyes. I remembered seeing some thick candles on the shelf above the sink. They were still there.

I placed one each in the

mouths of a couple of empty wine bottles, lit them, and turned off the light above the sink. Then I brought them back with me to the chair beside the bed and placed them to either side of me as I flopped into the chair.

And suddenly it was as if there were weights attached to my eyelids. I couldn't keep them open, try as I might.

I couldn't stay awake.

The sound of movement wakened me. For some reason I looked at my watch. Thirteen minutes past nine. A streak of purple light brightened the room. Seconds later, the rumble of thunder in the distance warned of a storm about to break. But this was in the background of awareness. My attention was rivetted to the bed and the man sitting erect. Reilly was sitting up staring blankly before him with the look of a somnambulist. His eyes were wide open but I could swear they saw nothing. He began a low murmur of words and I leaned forward to catch their meaning.

"There's something quite wrong," he whispered. "My babies are scared . . ." His right hand, limp on the filthy mattress, groped for and found the fiddle case. He pull-

ed it up to the bed and opened it. He continued to look blindly into a world of his own. "Easy babies, easy. Reilly'll play for you . . ."

And now I knew! He saw his elephants in a dream world. Not the demented and mad world of the dt's, but in a place exclusively his, to which only he had entree. I got my pen out, laid the ruled paper on my knees, and waited.

He slid off the bed and stood erect beside me. His face was still blank, his eyes still staring. He brought the fiddle up and began to play, a simultaneous *pizzicato* and bow passage that ended as abruptly as it had begun. The opening of the dance? . . . No! It was as if, rather, he was demanding attention.

"Don't be scared," he whispered again. "Reilly'll play for you and maybe you'll dance, huh? . . ."

I wrote as he played, music such as I'd never heard, music such as I never believed existed. And suddenly my fingers stiffened so I couldn't move them. And the room was filled with the heavy odor of animal musk and the air was thick and damp and fetid as if in a jungle. I looked up into the staring eyes of Reilly, then away into that

distance so real to him. And saw what he saw. A herd of elephants in a sawdust clearing. They were milling about as if in panic. Beyond them, though dimly, I somehow felt rather than saw row on row of seats filled with people.

But it was the herd of elephants took my attention.

For as Reilly continued his gentle coaxing chords their panic stilled. And slowly, cumbersomely, yet with an odd grace of movement, they began a shuffling rhythmic dance. I don't know how long they danced, only that the music faded to a *pianissimo* ending.

And with its end the vision faded.

There was only the splattered paint-peeled wall of the room.

But now I knew. It wasn't Reilly! It was the fiddle! The twenty-buck fiddle that he had gotten from that old man who had died the day after he sold it. A Devil's fiddle, but one I had to have. It wasn't right that a wine-soaked rummy like Reilly should be able to coax such music from it. No! *I had to have that fiddle!*

I said, "Reilly! Reilly!"

He shook his head a couple of times.

I reached out, shook him.

He pulled away, looked down with sudden recognition.

"You! What the hell are you doing here? . . ." He noticed the pad on my knees. "Been waitin' for me to fall asleep, hunh?"

He was still drunk, it seemed. I liked that. I had to get him a bit more so. I knew my credit was good at a liquor store down the street. All I had to do was talk Reilly into letting me get him a bottle of wine . . . "Yeah," I made it sound casual. "Hey! How about another bottle of wine?"

He staggered a little, recovered. "Sure. 'Nother bottle wine."

I put the pad and pen away, got up, went to the door. I tried not to act concerned. "Be back in a little while. Don't go away." I laughed. He didn't think it was funny. He only scowled a little deeper.

"Get the wine, will ya?"

I saw the flames a half block away. As I came at a run I kept looking up, counting the windows. It was Reilly's room. A man and woman, the man in pajama bottoms, the woman in a nightgown, staggered down the stairs as I started up. Already the stair well was fill-

ing with smoke and the dull crackling sound of fire, and now and then the shouts of people. A man on the third floor was running down the hall shouting warnings. There was a small group of people on the landing all staring upward. Someone tried to hold me. I shook the hand off, lowered my head and continued.

The smoke was thick and oily above. Reilly's door was open. The room was lit by an orange glare. I stopped short at the door. Reilly was backed into a corner furthest from the fire, but also furthest from me. The bed was a flaming mass. I could visualize what happened. The candles I had placed beside the bed . . . Reilly had tumbled into the bed after I left, upsetting the bottles. Somehow, they had ignited the mattress, the chair. He had managed to get out of bed, but drunkenly staggered to the wall instead of toward the door. His escape was cut off.

He had the fiddle in his hand. We looked at each other across the flames. Above the sound of the fire there came the siren sounds of fire engines. "Reilly!" I tried to gain his attention. He shook his head, gave me a lopsided grin. "Along the

wall," I directed. "You got a chance, man!"

I started in, but had to stagger back as the flames and smoke billowed toward me, driven by the draft of open window and door. I could still see Reilly. Suddenly he brought the fiddle up to his chin, put the bow into position. And began to play a dirge. And now the flames reached a curtained alcove, set the curtain ablaze, and behind it I saw the open cans of paint, the half-gallon of alcohol he kept as insurance for a night of drinking should he not have money. If the flames reached them . . .

I ducked my head, went into the room, sliding close to the wall.

But instead of coming to meet me he moved back toward a corner. He had stopped playing. We looked at each other for the last time. His eyes were somber, no longer wild.

"No! It's too late. Get out. Get out quick. You got what you wanted, that concerto . . ."

He knew.

I backed away, back to the door, back to safety. As I reached the door the inflammables in the alcove exploded. Streamers of fire shot into the blazing room, adding to

the fury. I staggered back into the hall, coughing. As I made my way down the stairs the first of the firemen passed me on their way up.

Reilly was dead when they brought him down. His right hand was tightly closed around the throat of the fiddle, all that was left of it. . . .

Tom Garrison, a reporter on general news assignment, passed me on the way into the office.

"Where you been?" he asked.

"Why?" I asked with indifference.

"You missed it. I just got back. From the Garden. What a story! That storm we just had. Well, the elephants got scared and started out of control. Imagine! Twenty-five of them charging like crazy in the Garden. It could have caused a panic. And all of a sudden they started to dance. I swear. To dance. Greatest thing I ever saw. . . ."

Tom was a good reporter. Looking at his watch would

have been a natural reflex.

"What time was this, Tom?"

"Fifteen minutes after nine."

I could only shake my head.

"Hey!" he said. "You look like you've been covering a fire."

"The most tragic fire I've ever seen," I said. I pushed past him and went into my office. I pulled out the ruled sheets and went to work. It was morning by the time the last note was down on paper. I read it over carefully, then laid it aside and turned to my typewriter. But after a moment I knew it was no use. No one would believe the story of Reilly and the fiddle, the story of a man who in his sleep calmed the panic of a herd of elephants in Madison Square Garden.

I turned again to the music I had written. I scratched out what had been on the credit corner and wrote instead:

"Concerto for a Pink Elephant," by William Patrick Reilly.

THE END