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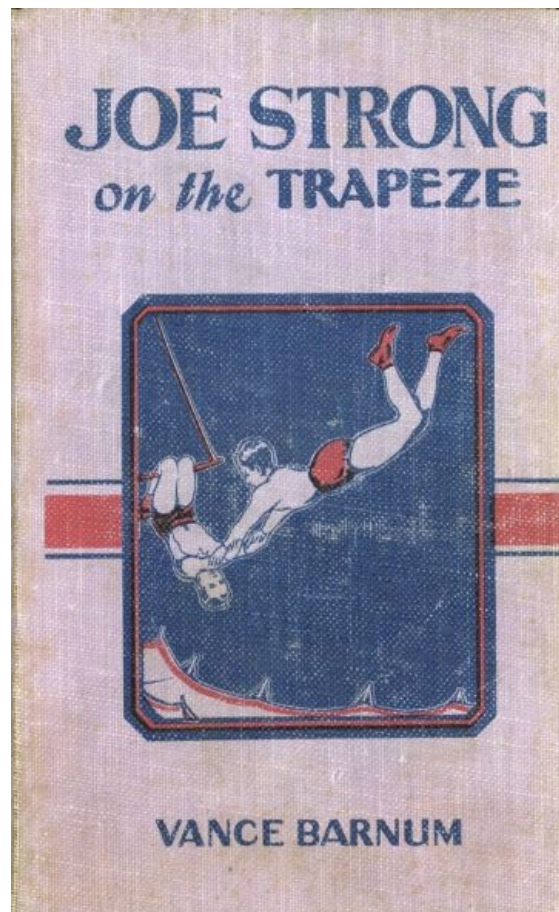
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Cover art

**JOE STRONG
ON THE TRAPEZE**

OR

***THE DARING FEATS OF A YOUNG
CIRCUS PERFORMER***

BY

VANCE BARNUM

Author of "Joe Strong, the Boy Wizard," "Joe Strong, the Boy Fish,"
"Joe Strong on the High Wire," etc.

**WHITMAN PUBLISHING CO.
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**BOOKS FOR BOYS
BY
VANCE BARNUM**

THE JOE STRONG SERIES

JOE STRONG, THE BOY WIZARD *Or, The Mysteries of Magic Exposed*

JOE STRONG ON THE TRAPEZE *Or, The Daring Feats of a Young Circus Performer*

JOE STRONG, THE BOY FISH *Or, Marvelous Doings in a Big Tank*

JOE STRONG ON THE HIGH WIRE *Or, Motor-Cycle Perils of the Air*

JOE STRONG AND HIS WINGS OF STEEL *Or, A Young Acrobat in the Clouds*

JOE STRONG—HIS BOX OF MYSTERY *Or, The Ten Thousand Dollar Prize Trick*

JOE STRONG, THE BOY FIRE EATER *Or, The Most Dangerous Performance on Record*

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JOE STRONG ON THE TRAPEZE

CHAPTER I

THE FIRE TRICK

"Better put on your pigeon-omelet trick now, Joe."

"All right. That ought to go well. And you are getting ready for——"

"The fire trick," interrupted Professor Alonzo Rosello, as he and his young assistant, Joe Strong, stood bowing and smiling in response to the applause of the crowd that had gathered in the theatre to witness the feats of "Black Art, Magic, Illusion, Legerdemain, Prestidigitation and Allied Sciences." That was what the program called it, anyhow.

"The fire trick!" repeated Joe. "Do you think it will work all right now?"

"I think it will. I've had the apparatus overhauled, and you know we can depend on the electric current here. It isn't likely to fail just at the wrong moment."

"No, that's so, still——"

Again Joe had to bow, as did Professor Rosello, for the applause continued. They were both sharing it, for both had taken part in a novel trick, and it had been successfully performed.

Joe had taken his place in a chair on the stage, and, after having been covered by a black cloth by the professor, had, when the cloth was removed a moment later, totally disappeared. Then he was seen walking down the aisle of the theatre, coming in from the lobby.

There was much wonder as to how the trick was it done, especially since the chair had been placed over a sheet of paper on the stage, and, before and after the trick, the professor had exhibited the sheet—the front page of a local paper—apparently unbroken. (This trick is explained in detail in the first volume of this series, entitled, "Joe Strong, the Boy Wizard.")

"The audience seems to be in good humor to-night," observed the professor to Joe, as they bowed again. The two could carry on a low-voiced conversation while "taking" their applause.

"Yes, I'm glad to see them that way," answered the youth. "It's not much fun playing to a frosty house."

"I should say not! Well, Joe, get ready for your pigeon-omelet trick, and I'll prepare the fire apparatus."

The professor, with a final bow, made an exit to one side of the stage, which was fitted up with Oriental splendor. As he went off, and as Joe Strong picked up some apparatus from a table near him, a disturbed look came over the face of the boy wizard.

"I don't like that fire trick," he mused. "It's altogether too uncertain. It's spectacular, and all that, and when it works right it makes a big hit, but I don't like it. Well, I suppose he'll do it, anyhow—or try to. I'll be on the lookout though. If the current fails, as it did last time—" Joe shrugged his shoulders, and went on with his trick.

Since he had become associated with Professor Rosello, Joe had adopted the philosophic frame of mind that characterizes many public performers, especially those who risk bodily injury in thrilling the public. That is, he was willing to take the chance of accident rather than disappoint an audience. "The show must go on," was the motto, no matter how the performer suffered. The public does not often realize its own cruelty in insisting on being amused or thrilled.

"Yes, I'll have to keep my eyes open," thought Joe. "After all, though, maybe nothing will happen. And yet I have a feeling as if something would. It's foolish, I know,, but—"

Again Joe shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing he could do to avoid it, as far as he could see. Joe was beginning to acquire the superstition shared by many theatrical persons.

The theatre, filled with persons who had paid good prices to see Professor Rosello's performance was hushed and still now, as Joe, his preparations complete, advanced to the edge of the stage. He was smiling and confident, for he was about to perform a trick he had done many times, and always with success. For the time being he dismissed from his mind the risk Professor Rosello would run in doing the "fire trick," for which the chief performer was even then preparing.

"Persons in the audience," began Joe, smilingly addressing the house, "often wonder how we actors and professional people eat. It is proverbial, you know, that actors are always hungry. Now I am going to show you that it is easier for us to get food than it is for other folk.

"For instance: If I were to be shipwrecked on a desert island I could reach out into the seemingly empty air, and pick money off invisible tree branches—like this."

Joe stretched up his hand, which seemed to contain nothing, and in an instant there appeared between his thumb and finger a bright gold coin.

"So much for a start!" he exclaimed with laugh. "We'll drop that on this plate, and get more." There was a ringing sound as the coin dropped on the plate, and Joe, reaching up in the air, seemed to gather another gold piece out of space. This, too, fell with a clink on the plate. And then in rapid succession Joe pulled in other coins until he had a plateful.

Probably it has been guessed how that trick was done. Joe held one coin in his hand, palmed so that it was not visible. A movement of his well-trained muscles sent it up between his thumb and finger. Then he seemed to lay it on a plate. But the plate was a trick one, with a false bottom, concealed under which was a store of coins. A pressure on a hidden spring sent one coin at a time out through a slot, and it seemed as if Joe deposited them on the receptacle as he gathered them from the air.

"But we must remember," Joe went on, as he laid the plate of coins down on a table, "that I am on a desert island. Consequently all the money in the world would be of no use. It would not buy a ham sandwich or a fresh egg. Why not, then, gather eggs from the air instead of coins? A good idea. One can eat eggs. So I will gather a few."

Joe stretched his hand up over his head, made a grab at a seemingly floating egg and, capturing it, laid it on the table. In like manner he proceeded until he had three.

This trick was worked in the same way as was the coin one, Joe holding but one egg, cleverly palmed, in his hand, the others popping up from a secret recess in the table. But the audience was mystified.

"Now some persons like their eggs raw, while others prefer them cooked," resumed Joe. "I, myself, prefer mine in omelet form, so I will cook my eggs. I have here a saucepan that will do excellently for holding my omelet. I will break the eggs into it, add a little water, and stir them up."

Joe suited the action to the words. He cracked the three eggs, one after another, holding them high in the air to let the audience see the whites and yolks drip into the shining, nickel pan.

"But a proper omelet must be cooked," Joe said. "Where shall we get fire on a desert island, particularly as all our matches were made wet when we swam ashore? Ah, I have it! I'll just turn this bunch of flowers into flame."

He took up what seemed to be a spray of small roses and laid it under the saucepan. Pointing his wand at the flowers Joe exclaimed:

"Fire!"

Instantly there was a burst of flame, the flowers disappeared, and flickering lights shot up under the saucepan.

"Now the omelet is cooking," said Joe, as he clapped on a cover. "We shall presently dine. You see how easy it is for actors and magicians to eat, even on a desert island. I think my omelet must be cooked now."

He took the cover off the saucepan and, on the instant, out flew two white pigeons, which, after circling about the theatre, returned to perch on Joe's shoulders.

There was loud applause at this trick.

The boy wizard bowed and smiled as he acknowledged the tribute to his powers, and then hurried off the stage with the pigeons on his shoulders. He did not stop to explain how he had chosen to make the omelet change into pigeons, the surprise at the unexpected ending of the illusion being enough for the audience.

Of course, one realizes there must have been some trick about it all, and there was—several in fact. The eggs Joe seemed to pick out of the air were real eggs, and he really broke them into the saucepan. But the saucepan was made with two compartments. Into one went the eggs, while in another, huddled into a small space where there were air holes through which they might breathe, were two trained pigeons, which Joe had taught, not without some difficulty, to fly to his shoulders when released.

After he had put the cover on the saucepan Joe caused the fire to appear. The flowers were artificial ones, made of paper soaked in an inflammable composition, and then allowed to dry. As Joe pointed his wand at them an assistant behind the scenes pressed an electric button, which shot a train of sparks against the prepared paper. It caught fire, the flowers were burned, and ignited the wick of an alcohol lamp that was under the saucepan.

Then, before the pigeons had time to feel the heat, Joe took off the cover, opening the secret chamber and the birds flew out.

Easy, indeed, when you know how!

Joe walked off the stage, to give place to Professor Rosello, who was going next to give his "fire trick." This was an effective illusion, and was worked as follows:

Professor Rosello came out on the stage attired in a flowing silk robe of Japanese design. His helpers wheeled out a long narrow box, which was stood upright.

The professor, after some "patter," or stage talk, announced that he would take his place in the small box, or cabinet, which would then be lifted free from the stage to show that it was not connected with hidden wires. As soon as the cabinet was set down again, the house would be plunged in darkness, and inside the cabinet would be seen a bony skeleton, outlined in fire, the professor having disappeared. This would last for several seconds, and then the illuminated skeleton would disappear and the magician again be seen in the box.

"And in order to show you that I do not actually leave the box while the trick is in progress except in spirit," the professor went on to state, "I will suffer myself to be tied in with ropes, a committee from the audience being invited to make the knots."

He took his place in the upright cabinet, and three men volunteered to tie him in with ropes which were fastened at the back of the box, two ends being left free.

The cabinet containing the professor was lifted up, and set down on the stage again. Then the ropes were tied, Joe supervising this.

"Tie any kind of knot you like, gentlemen," Joe urged, "only make them so you can quickly loosen them again, as the professor is very much exhausted after this illusion." This, of course, was merely stage talk for effect.

Finally the knots were tied, the committee retired, and Joe, taking his place near the imprisoned performer, asked:

"Are you ready?"

He looked keenly at the professor as he asked this.

"It's all right Joe—I guess it's going to work properly," was the low-voiced response. Then aloud Professor Rosello replied:

"I am ready!"

"Light out!" called Joe sharply. This was a signal for the stage electrician to plunge the house into darkness. It was done at once.

Then, to the no small terror of some in the audience, there appeared in the upright cabinet the figure of a grinning skeleton, outlined in flickering flames. It was startling, and there was a moment of silence before thunderous applause broke out at the effectiveness of the trick.

The clapping was at its height when Joe, who always stood near the cabinet when this trick was being done, heard the agonized voice of the professor calling to him:

"Joe! Joe! Something has gone wrong! There must be a short circuit! I'm on fire! Joe, I'm being burned! Help me!"

CHAPTER II

JOE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Joe Strong was in a quandary. He did not quite know what to do. To give an alarm—to let the audience know something had gone wrong with the trick—that the professor was in danger of being burned to death—to even utter the word "Fire!" might cause a terrible panic, even though the heavy asbestos curtain were rung down on the instant.

On the contrary, Joe could not stand idly by without doing something to save his friend, Professor Rosello, from the great danger. The applause kept up, none in the audience suspecting anything wrong.

"Quick, Joe!" whispered the performer. "The current is burning me. I can't stand it any longer."

"I'll save you!" hoarsely answered the young magician; and then, on the darkened stage, he lifted the cabinet, performer and all to one side.

This was not an easy feat to do. The professor was no light weight, and the cabinet itself was heavy. But Joe was a powerful youth, and by raising the cabinet on his back, much as a porter carries a heavy trunk, he shifted it to one side. This took it away from the hidden electrical connections sunk in the floor of the stage, and the flickering, playing, shimmering electric lights went out.

The stage, the whole house, was in dense darkness. There was a sudden silence which might precede a panic of fear. Joe's work was not yet done. What could he do to reassure the audience and, at the same time, to bring the illusion to a satisfactory conclusion?

While he is quickly debating this in his mind, I will take just a moment to tell my new readers something of Joe Strong, and how he came to be following the calling of a stage magician.

In the first volume of this series, entitled "Joe Strong, the Boy Wizard; Or, The Secrets of Magic Exposed," Joe was introduced as a youth of about seventeen years, living in the country town of Bedford. He was talking one day with some of his chums, and explaining to them how this same Professor Rosello had done a trick in the local theatre the night before, when suddenly there came a fire-alarm from a fireworks factory near by.

Some powder exploded and Joe managed to save the professor, whose real name was Peter Crabb, from severe injury, if not from death. In doing this Joe spoiled his suit of clothes, and on returning home his foster-father, Deacon Amos Blackford threatened to punish him.

Joe was an orphan. His mother, Mrs. Jane Strong, had been a famous circus bareback rider, known to the public as Madame Hortense. Joe's father was Alexander Strong, or, to give him his stage name, Professor Morretti. He had been a magician, even better than Professor Rosello. Both Joe's parents had died when he was a small boy.

For a time the boy was cared for by his mother's circus friends, but finally Joe was adopted by the Blackfords. His life with them was not a happy one, and the climax came when the deacon punished Joe for spoiling his suit in rescuing Professor Rosello.

In the night, Joe ran away. He decided to appeal to the magician who had gone on to another town to give a show. Joe had a half-formed plan in mind. The boy was of great strength, and fearless. When a mere child he had attempted circus feats, and now he was an expert on the trapeze and flying rings, while he had also made a study of "magic," and could perform many tricks. Joe was absolutely fearless, and one of his delights was to execute daring acts at great heights in the air. When a boy he climbed up the village church steeple.

Thus, taking matters into his own hands, Joe ran away and joined Professor Rosello, who hired him as an assistant. Joe had a natural aptitude for tricks of magic and was a great help to the professor. He even invented some tricks of his own. So Joe and Professor Rosello toured the country, making a fairly good living.

The night Joe ran away Deacon Blackford was robbed in a strange manner, and, for a time, suspicion was thrown on Joe, a warrant being issued for his arrest. Among the other adventures which Joe had was a meeting with the ring-master of Sampson Brothers' Colossal Circus. Joe had done a favor for Benny Turton, the "human fish," and Benny made it possible for Joe to try some tricks on the circus trapezes. As a result Jim Tracy, the ring-master and one of the owners of the show, made Joe an offer to join the circus. Joe would have liked this, as he had taken quite a fancy for Helen Morton—billed as Mademoiselle Mortonti—a fancy rider on her trick horse, Rosebud. But Joe thought it best to remain with Professor Rosello for a time.

The circus went on its way, and Joe and the professor went on theirs. Joe progressed in his chosen work, and he and Mr. Crabb found themselves becoming well-known performers. On the road Joe met several persons who had seen his father's feats of magic, and the youth learned of the great respect in which his parent had been held by the members of the "profession."

"And I suppose," Professor Rosello had said, "if you could meet some circus folks they would remember your mother, even if Jim Tracy did not know her."

So Joe had become a traveling magician. And it is in that capacity that the readers of this volume first meet him.

But, as Joe stood there on the darkened stage, realizing the great danger to which his friend was subjected, and wondering what he could do to relieve him and not have the trick a failure, he, for an instant, wished he had chosen some other calling. It was a great responsibility for a young fellow, for now the fate of the whole remaining performance was in Joe's hands. There was much yet to be done, and it was not to be thought that, after being burned, as he said he was, the professor could go on.

There was uneasiness now among the stage hands. The electrician from the wings was cautiously whispering to Joe to let him know what to do. As yet the audience had not realized anything was wrong.

"Are you badly hurt?" Joe asked the professor in a whisper, standing near the now dark cabinet.

"I'm burned on my back, yes. I'm glad you shut off the current when you did, or I'd have been killed."

"I didn't shut off the current," Joe answered. "I just pulled the connecting legs of the cabinet out of the sockets in the stage floor."

"That was just as good. The current's off. But something has to be done."

"What went wrong?" asked Joe.

"One of the wire connections in here. I can feel it now with my fingers. A wire has broken. If I could twist it together——"

"I'll do it," volunteered Joe. He had to work the dark, as a glimmer of light would show that the cabinet had been moved, and the audience would suspect that something was wrong. But Joe knew every inch of the cabinet, for he and the professor had worked this trick out between them. In an instant he had twisted the wire ends together, pushing them to one side so they would not come in contact with the professor's body, for the ends were not now insulated.

"It's all right," Joe whispered. "Can you manage to finish the trick if I put the cabinet back the connections?"

"Yes, I think so. Go ahead."

Joe called to the leader of the orchestra:

"Louder!"

The musicians had been softly playing some "shivery" music. At once they struck into a blare of sound. This would cover any noise Joe might make in putting the cabinet back in place, so that the two metal legs would rest in the electric sockets in the stage, which contained the conductors that supplied the electric current needed.

In another moment Joe lifted the cabinet, Professor Rosello and all, back to where it had stood at first. Again there was the grinning, glowing skeleton showing. The applause was renewed, and then the glow died out, and as the house lights flashed up there stood the professor in the cabinet, as at first, in his flowing silk robe.

Close observers might have noticed that he was quite pale, and he had to grit his teeth to keep back a moan of pain from the burns he had received.

"Now, gentlemen," said Joe to the committee, which had stepped down off the stage, "if you will kindly examine the knots, and loosen them, I shall be obliged to you. Quickly, if you please, as this act is very trying on the professor."

Joe wanted to get his friend back of the scenes as soon as he could, to have his burns dressed.

"Are the knots just as you tied them?" asked Joe.

The men admitted they were.

"Proving conclusively," the young wizard went on, "that the professor did not leave the cabinet to produce the effect you have just witnessed."

The professor bowed to the applause as he stepped out of the cabinet, which was at once taken away by assistants. Then Joe walked back of the scenes with his friend, a pantomimist engaging the attention of the audience while the next part of the program was being prepared.

But could the show go on with the professor disabled? That was what Joe wondered. He felt, more than ever, the weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER OFFER

Professor Rosello sank into a chair when he reached his dressing room.

"Quick! Get a doctor!" called Joe to one of the two helpers who traveled with them. "Bring him in through the stage door! Don't let it be known out in front."

One of the stage hands gave the helper the address of the nearest physician, and, fortunately, he was in his office. The doctor came at once and put a soothing ointment on the burns of the professor's back, where the electric sparks had penetrated his clothing.

"That's better," remarked the magician with a sigh of relief. "I guess we'll have to ring down the curtain, Joe. I can't go on."

"I'll finish the show," declared the boy wizard.

"Can you do it?"

"Not as well as you, of course. But I think I can keep them interested, so they will feel they have had their money's worth. I'll carry on the show. I can vary my egg and watch tricks a bit, and I'll do that wine and water one, bringing the live guinea pig out of the bottle."

"All right, Joe, if you think you can. I'm not equal to any more. I think I'd better go to the hotel."

"I think so too, Professor. Now don't worry. I'll carry on the show as best I can."

"And I think you can do it well, Joe. I'm proud of you. If it hadn't been for you stopping the electric current when you did I would be dead now."

"Oh, I hardly think it was as bad as that."

"Yes it was. One of those wires broke. After this I'll examine every connection a minute before I go into the cabinet. You saved my life—this is the second time. Once at the fireworks factory, and again to-night. I'll be so deeply in your debt, Joe, that I can never pay you."

"Oh, don't worry about that," laughed the boy wizard, now much relieved in mind. With the professor safe he could go out on the stage with a light heart and an easy mind. He was used to facing the public, but this meant that he would have to do more tricks than usual, and some that were particularly the professor's own, though Joe knew how they were worked.

When the physician had relieved the sufferer, Joe called a carriage and sent the magician to the hotel where they were staying. Then the pantomimist having finished, Joe prepared to go on with some illusions. And right here, while Joe is making his preparations, a description of the "fire trick" can be given.

The cabinet was, of course, a trick one. That is, it was provided with hidden electric contrivances so that when the professor stepped into it, by merely pressing a button he could have a shower of sparks shot out all around him. As he was insulated, these sparks could not injure him.

On the heavy silk robe he wore there had been painted the grinning skeleton. It was painted with a secret chemical paint, and when subjected to a flow of electricity the bones and skull showed outlined in fire. The professor, keeping well back toward the rear of the cabinet, was invisible.

Tying the ropes about him was not necessary as he did not leave the cabinet anyhow, but it added to the effectiveness of the illusion. But on this evening, after the electric wire broke causing a short circuit, the tying of the ropes was well-nigh fatal, for the professor could not move in order to escape, and had to stay while the current burned him. Luckily, however, Joe acted in time.

As has been intimated, the two front legs of the cabinet were really the positive and negative termini for the wires that were inside the box. These legs stood in two sockets in the floor of the stage, and to them ran the wires from the theatre's circuit. When the helpers lifted the cabinet up, to show, ostensibly, that it had no connection with the floor, they put the legs down in the hidden sockets. Thus the connections were made. As can be seen, Joe had but to lift the cabinet away to break the connection.

In spite of the accident, the trick had ended satisfactorily, thanks to the quick work of Joe Strong. His strength, too, played not a little part in this, for ordinarily the cabinet required two men to shift it. But Joe had a knack of using his powerful muscles to the best advantage, and it was this, with his most marvelous nerve, that enabled him to do so many sensational things, about which this and future volumes concerning our hero will tell.

The professor having been sent to his hotel to rest, and the pantomimist having finished his act, Joe went out on the stage to continue the performance. He made no reference to the non-appearance of the chief performer, letting it be taken for granted that Professor Rosello had finished his part in the entertainment.

"I would now like to borrow a gold gentleman's watch," began Joe; this misplacement of words never failing to bring out a laugh. He then proceeded to perform the trick of apparently smashing a borrowed watch, firing the fragments from a pistol at a potted plant, and causing the reunited watch to appear among the roots of the pulled-up flower.

As this trick has been described in detail in the first volume of this series, exposing just how it is done, the description will not be repeated here. In that book will also be found the details of how Joe made an ordinary egg float or sink in a jar of water, at his pleasure. (This is a trick one can easily do at home without apparatus.) Joe did that trick now, and also the one of lighting a candle, causing it to go out and relight itself again while he stood at one side of the stage, merely pointing his wand at the flickering flame. (See the first volume.)

Joe now essayed another trick. He brought out a bottle, apparently empty, and said that it was a magical flask.

"From this I am able to pour three kinds of drinks," he stated. "Some persons like water, others prefer milk, while nothing but grape juice will satisfy some. Now will you kindly state which drink you like?" and he pointed to a man in the front row.

"I'll have grape juice," was the answer.

"Very good," returned Joe. "Here you are!" He tilted the bottle, and a stream of purple grape juice ran from the flask into a goblet. Joe handed it to the man.

"It's perfectly good grape juice," Joe said, smilingly. "You need not be afraid to sample it." The man did so, after a moment's hesitation.

"Is it all right?" Joe asked. "Just tell the audience."

"It's good," the man testified.

"Take it all. I have other drinks in the bottle," Joe said.

"Save me some!" cried a boy up in the gallery, as the man drained the glass of grape juice.

"Now who'll have milk?" Joe asked.

"I will," called a boy in the second row. Without moving from where he stood Joe picked up a glass, and, from the same bottle, poured out a drink of milk which he passed to the boy, who took it wonderingly.

"Is it the real stuff?" asked Joe, smiling at the lad.

"That's what it is!" was the quick answer.

"Drink it then. And now for water. Here we are!" And from the same bottle, out of which the audience had seen milk and grape juice come, Joe poured sparkling water and passed it to a lady in the audience.

"Hello! What's this? There appears to be something else in the bottle!" exclaimed Joe, apparently surprised, as he held the flask up to his ear.

"Yes, I'll let you out—right away," he said aloud. "There must be some mistake," he went on, "there is an animal in this bottle. I'll have to break it open to get it out."

He went quickly back on the stage with the bottle, took up a hammer, and holding the flask over a table gently cracked the glass. In an instant he held up a little guinea pig.

There was a moment's pause, and then the applause broke out at the effectiveness of the trick.

How was it done?

A trick bottle, you say at once. That is right. The bottle was made with three compartments. One held milk, another grape juice and the third water. Joe could pour them out in any order he wished, there being controlling valves in the bottom of the bottle.

But how did the guinea pig get inside?

It was another bottle. The bottom of this one had been cut off, and, after the guinea pig had been put inside, the bottom was cemented on again. This was done just before the trick was performed. On his way back to the stage, after having given the lady the glass of water, Joe substituted the bottle containing the guinea pig for the empty one that had held the three liquids. This was where his quick sleight-of-hand work came in. When he gently broke the bottle it was easy enough to remove the little animal, which had been used in tricks so often that it was used to them.

Joe brought the show to a satisfactory conclusion, perhaps a little earlier than usual, as he was anxious to get to the hotel and see how the professor was. The audience seemed highly pleased with the illusions the boy wizard gave them, and clapped long and loud as Joe made his final bow.

He left the theatrical people and his helpers to pack up, ready for the trip to the next town, and hastened to the hotel. There he found Professor Rosello much better, though still suffering somewhat.

"Do you think you will be able to go on to-morrow night?" asked Joe.

"I don't know," was the answer. "I can tell better to-morrow."

But when the next day came, after a night journey that was painful for Mr. Crabb, he found that he could not give his portion of the performance.

And as Joe alone was not quite qualified to give a whole evening's entertainment it was decided to cancel the engagement. It was not an important one, though several good "dates" awaited them in other towns on the route.

"I think I need a rest, Joe," the professor said "My nerves are more shattered than I thought by that electrical accident. I need a good rest to straighten them out. I think we'll not give any performances for at least a month—that is I sha'n't."

Joe looked a little disappointed on hearing this. His living depended on working for the professor.

"I say I'll not give any more performances right away, Joe," went on the professor, "but there's no reason why you shouldn't. I have been watching you of late, and I think you are very

well qualified to go on with the show alone. You could get a helper, of course. But you can do most of my tricks, as well as your own. What do you say? I'll make you a liberal offer as regards money. You can consider the show yours while I'm taking a rest. Would you like it?"

"I think——" began Joe, when there came a knock on the door of their hotel room.

"Telegram for Joe Strong!" called the voice of the bellboy.

CHAPTER IV

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Professor Rosello and Joe Strong looked at each other. It was not unusual for the magician to receive telegrams in reference to his professional engagements, but Joe up to now had never received one of the lightning messages which, to the most of us, are unusual occurrences.

"Are you sure it's for me?" Joe asked the boy, as he opened the door.

"It's got your name on it," was the answer. That seemed proof enough for any one.

"Maybe it's from your folks—the deacon," suggested the professor. "Something may have happened."

He really hoped there had not, but, in a way, he wanted to prepare Joe for a possible shock.

"I wonder if it can have anything to do with the deacon's robbery," mused Joe as he took the message from the waiting lad. "But, no, it can't be that. Denton and Harrison are still in jail—or they were at last accounts—and the robbery is cleared up as much as it ever will be. Can't be that."

And then, unwilling and unable to speculate further, and anxious to know just what was in the message Joe tore open the envelope. The message was typewritten, as are most telegrams of late, and the message read:

"If you are at liberty, can use you in a single trapeze act. Forty a week to start. Wire me at Slater Junction. We show there three days. Jim Tracy—Sampson Bros. Circus."

"What is it?" asked the professor as he noted a strange look on Joe's face. In fact, there was a combination of looks. There was surprise, and doubt, and pleased anticipation.

"It's an offer," answered Joe, slowly.

"An offer!"

"Yes, to join a circus."

"A circus!"

The professor did not seem capable of talking in very long sentences.

"Yes, the Sampson Brothers' Show," Joe went on. "You know I went to see them that time they played the same town and date we did. I met the 'human fish' and——"

"Oh, yes, I remember. You did some acts on the trapeze then."

"Yes, and this Jim Tracy—he's ring-master and one of the owners—made me a sort of offer then. But I didn't want to leave you. Now he renews the offer."

The boy wizard handed the message to the professor who read it through carefully. Then after a look at Joe he said:

"Well, my boy, that's a good offer, I'd take it. I sha'n't be able to pay you forty a week for some time, though you might make it if you took my show out on the road alone, or with one assistant. Then, too, there's always a chance to make more in a circus—that is, if you please your public. I might say thrill them enough, for your trapeze act will have to be mostly thrills, I take it."

"Yes," assented Joe. And, somehow, a feeling of exultation came to him. While doing puzzling

tricks before a mystified audience was enticing work, yet Joe had a longing for the circus. He was almost as much at home high in the air, with nothing but a slack wire or a swaying rope to support him, as he was on the ground. Part of this was due to his early attempts to emulate the feats of circus performers, but the larger part of it was born in him. He inherited much of his daring from his mother, and his quickness of eye and hand from his father.

Moreover, mingled with the desire to do some thrilling act high up on a trapeze in a circus tent, while the crowd below held its breath, Joe felt a desire to meet again pretty Helen Morton, whose bright smile and laughing eyes he seemed to see in fancy now.

"It's a good offer," went on the professor, slowly, "and it seems to come at the right time for both of us, Joe. We were talking about your taking out my show. I really don't feel able to keep up with it—at least for a time. Are you ready to give me an answer now, Joe, or would you like to think it over a bit?"

"Perhaps I had better think of it a bit," the youth answered. "Though I have pretty nearly made up my mind."

"Don't be in a hurry," urged Professor Rosello. "There is no great rush, as far as I am concerned. One or two days will make no difference to me. Though if you don't take up my offer I shall probably lease the show to some professional. I want to keep my name before the public, for probably I shall wish to go back into the business again. And besides, it is a pity to let such a good outfit as we now have go into storage. But think it over carefully. I suppose, though, that you will have to let the circus people know soon."

"They seem to be in a hurry—wanting me to telegraph," responded Joe. "I'll give them an answer in a few hours. I think I'll go out and walk around town a bit. I can think better that way."

"Go ahead, Joe, and don't let me influence you. I want to help you, and I'll do all I can for you. You know I owe much to you. Just remember that you have the option on my show, such as it is, and if you don't take my offer I won't feel at all offended. Do as you think right."

"Thank you," said Joe, feelingly.

There was not much of interest to see in the town where they had come, expecting to give a performance, but Joe did not really care for sights just then. He had some hard thinking to do and he wanted to do it carefully. Hardly conscious of where he was walking, he strolled on, and presently found himself near the outskirts of the town, in a section that was more country than town. A little stream flowed through a green meadow, the banks bordered by trees.

"It looks just like Bedford," mused Joe. "I'm going to take a rest there."

He sat down in the shade of a willow tree and in an instant there came back to him the memory of that day, some months ago, when he had come upon his chums sitting under the same sort of tree and discussing one of the professor's tricks which they had witnessed the night before.

"Then there was the fireworks explosion. I rescued the professor—ran away from home—was chased by the constables—hopped into the freight car—the deacon's house was robbed and set on fire and— Say! what a lot has happened in a short time," mused Joe. "And now comes this offer from the circus. I wonder if I'd better take it or keep on with the professor's show. Of course it would be easier to do this, as I'm more familiar with it."

Just then there recurred to Joe something he had often heard Deacon Blackford say.

"The easiest way isn't always the best."

The deacon was not, by any means, the kindest or wisest of men, and certainly he had been cruel at times to Joe. But he was a sturdy character, though often obstinate and mistaken, and he had a fund of homely philosophy.

Joe, working one day in the deacon's feed and grain store, had proposed doing something in a way that would, he thought, save him work. "That's the easiest way," he had argued.

"Well, the easiest way isn't always the best," the deacon had retorted.

Joe remembered that now. It would be easier to keep on with the professor's show, for the work was all planned out for him, and he had but to fulfil certain engagements. Then, too, he was getting to be expert in the tricks.

"But I want to get on in life," reasoned Joe. "Forty dollars a week is more than I'm getting now, nor will I stick at that point in the circus. It will be hard work, but I can stand it."

He had almost made up his mind. He decided he would go back and acquaint the professor with his decision.

As Joe was passing a sort of hotel in a poor section of the town he almost ran into, or, rather, was himself almost run into by a man who emerged from the place quickly but unsteadily.

Joe was about to pass on with a muttered apology, though he did not feel the collision to be his fault, when the man angrily demanded:

"What's the matter with you, anyhow? Why don't you look where you're going?"

"I tried to," said Joe, mildly enough. "Hope I didn't hurt you."

"Well, you banged me hard enough!"

The man seemed a little more mollified now. Joe was at once struck by something familiar in his voice and his looks. He took a second glance and in an instant he recognized the man as one of the circus trapeze performers he had seen the day he went to the big tent, or "main top," of Sampson Brothers' Circus to watch the professionals at their practice. The man was one of the troupe known as the "Lascalla Brothers," though the relationship was assumed, rather than real.

Joe gave a start of astonishment as he sensed the recognition. He was also surprised at the great change in the man. When Joe had first seen him, a few months before, the performer had been a straight, lithe specimen of manhood, intent, at the moment when Joe met him, on seeing that his trapeze ropes were securely fastened.

Now the man looked and acted like a tramp. He was dirty and ragged, and his face bore evidences of dissipation. He leered at Joe, and then something in our hero's face seemed to hold his attention.

"What are you looking at me that way for, young fellow?" he demanded. "Do you know me?"

"No, not exactly," was the answer. "But I've seen you."

"Well, you're not the only one," was the retort. "A good many thousand people have seen me on the circus trapeze. And I'd be there to-day, doing my act, if it hadn't been for that mean Jim Tracy. He fired me, Jim did—said he was going to get some one for the act who could stay sober. Huh? I'm sober enough for anybody, and I took only a little drink because I was sick. Even at that I can beat anybody on the high bar. But he sacked me. Never mind! I'll get even with him, and if he puts anybody in my place—well, that fellow'd better look out, that's all!"

The man seemed turning ugly, and Joe was glad the fellow had not connected him with the youth who had paid a brief visit to the trapeze tent that day, months before.

"I wonder if it's to take his place that Jim Tracy wants me?" mused Joe, as he turned aside. "I guess Jim put up with this fellow as long as he could. Poor chap! He was a good acrobat, too—one of the best in the country." Joe knew the Lascalla Brothers by reputation.

"If I take his place——" Joe was doing some quick thinking. "Oh, well, I've got to take chances," he told himself. "After all, we may never meet."

Joe had fully made up his mind. Before going back to the professor he stopped at the telegraph office and sent this message to Jim Tracy.

"Will join circus in two days."

CHAPTER V

OFF TO THE CIRCUS

"Well?" questioned Professor Rosello, as Joe came back to the hotel. "Is it my show or——"

"The circus," answered Joe, and he did not smile. He was rather serious about it, for in spite of what his friend had said Joe could but feel that the magician might be disappointed over the choice. But Professor Rosello was a broad-minded man, as well as a fair and generous one.

"Joe, I'm sure you did just the right thing!" he exclaimed, as he shook hands with the boy wizard, or rather with the former boy wizard, for the lad was about to give up that life. Yet Joe knew that he would not altogether give it up. He would always retain his knowledge and ability in the art of mystifying.

"Yes, I thought it all over," said Joe, "and I concluded that I could do better on the trapeze than at sleight-of-hand. You see, if I want to be a successful circus performer I have to begin soon. The older I get the less active I'll be, and some tricks take years to polish off so one can do them easily."

"I understand," the professor said. "I think you did the right thing for yourself."

"Of course if I could be any help to you I wouldn't leave you this way," Joe went on earnestly. "I wouldn't desert in a time of trouble."

"Oh, it isn't exactly trouble," replied the magician. "I really need a rest, and you're not taking my offer won't mean any money loss to me, though, personally, I shall feel sorry at losing you. But I want you to do the best possible thing for yourself. Don't consider me at all. In fact you don't have to. I am going to take a rest. I need it. I've been in this business nearly thirty years now, and time is beginning to tell."

"I think there is more of a future for you in the circus than there would be in magic. Not that you have exhausted the possibilities of magic by any means, but changes are taking place in the public. The moving pictures are drawing away from us the audiences we might otherwise attract. Then, too, there has been so much written and exposed concerning our tricks, that it is very hard to get up an effective illusion. Even the children can now guess how many of the tricks are done."

"It may be that I shall give up altogether. At, any rate I will lease my show out for a time. I'm going to take a rest. And now about your plans. What are you going to do?"

"I don't exactly know," was the hesitating answer. "I have telegraphed to Mr. Tracy that I would join his circus in two days. I think I'll need that much time to get ready."

"Yes. We can settle up our business arrangements in that time, Joe. As I said, I'll be very sorry to lose you, but it is all for the best. We may see each other occasionally. Shall you tell the deacon of the change?"

"I think not. He and I don't get along very well, and he hasn't much real interest in me, now that he feels I am following in the footsteps of my father. And if he knew that I was taking up the profession my mother felt called to, he would have even less regard for me. I'll not write to him at all."

"Perhaps that is wise. I wonder, Joe, if in traveling about with Sampson Brothers' Show you will meet any one who knew your mother?"

"I wish that would happen," Joe answered. "I'd like to hear about her. I shall ask for information about her."

Joe related his encounter with one of the Lascalla Brothers—which one he did not know.

"I wonder if he'll try to make trouble?" he asked.

"I hardly think so," answered the professor. "He's probably a bad egg, and talks big. Just go on your own way, do the best you can, keep straight and you'll be all right."

They talked for some little time further, discussing matters that needed to be settled between them, and making arrangements for Joe to leave.

Now that he had come to a decision he was very glad that he was going with the circus.

"I'll be glad to meet Benny Turton, the 'human fish,' again," said Joe to himself. "His act is sure a queer one. I wonder if I could stay under water as long as he does. I'm going to try it some day if I get a chance at his tank. And Helen—I'll be glad to see her again, too."

Joe did not admit, even to himself, just how glad he would be to meet the pretty circus rider again. But he surely anticipated pleasure in renewing the acquaintance.

"That is, if she'll notice me," thought Joe. "I wonder what the social standing is between trick and fancy riders and the various trapeze performers."

The next day was a busy one. Joe had to pack his belongings. Some he arranged to store with the professor's things. He also helped his friend, the magician, to prepare an advertisement for the theatrical papers, announcing that The Rosello Show was for lease, along with the advance bookings. Joe also went over the apparatus with the professor, making a list of some necessary repairs that would have to be made.

"And now, Joe," said the professor, when the time for parting came, "I want you to feel free to use any of my tricks, or those you got up yourself, whenever you want to."

"Use the tricks?" queried Joe.

"Yes. It may be that you'll find a chance to use them in the circus, or to entertain your friends privately. I want you to feel free to do so. There will not be any professional jealousy on my part."

Joe was glad to hear this. The professor was unlike most professional persons who entertain the public.

"Well, good-bye," said Joe, as the professor went with him to the railroad station, the burns having progressed rapidly in their healing. "You'll always be able to write me in care of the circus."

"Yes, I can keep track of your show through the theatrical papers, Joe. Let me hear from you occasionally. Write to the New York address where I buy most of my stuff. They'll always have the name of my forwarding post-office on file. And now, my boy, I wish you all success. You have been a great help to me—not to mention such a little thing as saving my life," and he laughed, to make the occasion less serious.

"Thank you," said Joe. "The same to you. And I hope you will soon feel much better."

"A rest will do me good," responded the professor. Then the train rolled in, and Joe got aboard with his valise. He waved farewell to his very good friend and then settled back in his seat for a long ride.

Joe Strong was on his way at last to join the circus.

As he sat in his comfortable seat, he could not help contrasting his situation now with what it had been some months before, when he was running away from the home of his foster-father in the night and riding in a freight car to join the professor.

Then Joe had very few dollars, and the future looked anything but pleasant. He had to sleep on the hard boards, with some loose hay as a mattress.

Now, while he was far from having a fortune, he had nearly two hundred dollars to his credit, and he was going to an assured position that would pay well. It was quite a contrast.

"I wonder if I'll make good," thought Joe. Involuntarily he felt of his muscles.

"I'm strong enough," he thought with a little smile—"Strong by name and strong by nature," and as he thought this there was no false pride about it. Joe knew his capabilities. His nerves and muscles were his principal assets.

"I guess I'll have to learn some new stunts," Joe thought. "But Jim Tracy will probably coach me, and tell me what they want. I wonder if I'll have to act with the Lascalla bunch? They may not be very friendly toward me for taking the place of one of their number. Well, I can't help it. It isn't my doing. I'm hired to do certain work—for trapeze performing is work, though it may look like fun to the public. Well, I'm on my way, as the fellow said when the powder mill blew up," and Joe smiled whimsically.

It was a long and tiresome trip to the town where the circus was performing, and Joe did not reach the "lot" until the afternoon performance was over.

The sight of the tents, the smell that came from the crushed grass, the sawdust, the jungle odor of wild animals—all this was as perfume to Joe Strong. He breathed in deep of it and his eyes lighted up as he saw the fluttering flags, and noted the activity of the circus men who were getting ready for the night show—filling the portable gasoline lamps, putting on new mantles which would glow later with white incandescence to show off the spectacle in the "main top." As Joe took in all this he said to himself:

"I'm to be a part of it! That's the best ever!"

It was some little time before he could find Jim Tracy, but at length he came upon the ring-master, who was trying to do a dozen things at once, and settle half a dozen other matters on which his opinion was wanted.

"Oh, hello, Joe?" Jim called to the young performer. "Glad you got here. We need you. Want to go on to-night?"

"Just as you say. But I really need a little practice."

"All right. Then just hang around and pick up information. We don't have to travel to-night, so you'll have it easy to start. I'll show you where you'll dress when you get going. I'll have to give you some one else's suit until we can order one your size, but I guess you won't mind."

"No, indeed."

Joe was looking about with eager eyes, hoping for a glimpse of Helen Morton. However, he was not gratified just then.

"Now, Joe," went on the ring-master, coming over after having settled a dispute concerning differences of opinions between a woman with trained dogs and a clown who exhibited an "educated" pig, "if you'll come with me, I'll——"

"Well, what is it now?" asked Jim Tracy, exasperation in his voice. A dark-complexioned, foreign-looking man had approached him, and had said something in a low voice.

"No, I won't take him back, and you needn't ask!" declared Jim. "You can tell Sim Doble, otherwise known as Rafello Lascalla, that he's done his last hanging by his heels in my show. I don't want anything more to do with him. I don't care if he is outside. You tell him to stay there. He doesn't come in unless he buys a ticket, and as for taking him back—nothing doing, take it

from me!"

The foreign-looking man turned aside, muttering, and Joe followed the ring-master.

CHAPTER VI

JOE MAKES A HIT

"Those fellows are always making trouble," murmured the ring-master, as he walked with Joe toward a tent where the young performer could leave his valise.

"What fellows are they?" the lad asked, but he felt that he knew what the answer was going to be.

"The Lascalla Brothers," replied Jim. "There were two brothers in the business, Sid and Tonzo Lascalla. They used to be together and have a wonderful act. But Sid died, and Tonzo got a fellow-countryman to take his place, using the same name. They were good, too. Then about four years ago they added a third man. Why they ever took up with Sim Doble I can't imagine, but they did.

"Whatever else I'll say about Sim, I'll give him credit for being a wonder on a trapeze—that is when he was sober. When he got intoxicated, or partly so, he'd take risks that would make your hair stand up on end. That's why I had to get rid of him. First I knew, he'd have had an accident and he'd be suing the circus. So I let him go. Sim went under the name Rafello Lascalla, and became one of the brothers.

"For a while the three of them worked well together. And it's queer, as I say, how Sid and Tonzo took to Jim. But they did. You'd think he was a regular brother. In fact all three of 'em seemed to be real blood brothers. Sid and Tonzo are Spaniards, but Sim is a plain Yankee. He used to say he learned to do trapeze tricks in his father's barn."

"That's where I practised," said Joe.

"Well, it's as good a place as any, I reckon. Anyhow, I had to get rid of Sim, and now Tonzo comes and asks me to put him back. He says Sim is behaving himself, and will keep straight. He's somewhere on the grounds now, Tonzo told me. But I don't want anything to do with him. I'll stand a whole lot from a man, but when I reach the limit I'm through for good. That's what I am with Sim Doble, otherwise known as Rafello Lascalla. You're to take his place, Joe."

"I am!"

There was no mistaking the surprise in the youth's voice.

"Why, what's the matter? Don't you want to?" asked Jim, in some astonishment.

"Yes, of course. I'll do anything in the show along the line of trapeze work you want me to. But—well, maybe I'd better tell you all about it."

Then Joe related his encounter with the discharged circus employee.

"Hum," mused Jim, when Joe finished. "So that's how the wind sets, is it? He's hanging around here now trying to find out who is going to take his place."

"And when he finds that I have," suggested Joe hesitatingly, "he may cause trouble."

Jim Tracy started.

"I didn't think of that!" he said slowly. "You say he threatened you?"

"Well, not exactly me, for he didn't know who I was," replied Joe. "But he said he'd make it decidedly hot for you, and for the man who took his place."

Jim Tracy snapped his fingers.

"That's how much I care for Sim Doble," he said. "I'm not afraid of him. He talks big, but he acts small. I'm not in the least worried, and if you are——"

"Not for a minute!" exclaimed Joe quickly. "I guess I can look after myself!"

"Good!" exclaimed Jim. "That's the way I like to hear you talk. And don't you let Sim Doble, or either of the Lascalla Brothers, bluff you. I'm running this show, not them! If they make any trouble you come to me."

"I guess I can fight my own battles," observed Joe calmly.

"Good!" said the ring-master again. "I guess you'll do. This is your dressing room," he went on. "Just leave your grip here, and it will be safe. You won't have to do anything to-night but look on. I'll get you a pair of tights by to-morrow and you can go on. Practise up in the morning, and work up a new act with Sid and Tonzo if you like. I'll introduce you to them at supper."

"Do you think they'll perform with me?" Joe wanted to know.

"They'll have to!" exclaimed the ring-master with energy. "This is my circus, not theirs. They'll do as I say, and if there is any funny business— Well, there just won't be," he added significantly.

"Do Tonzo and Sid want Sim to come back and act with them?" asked Joe, as he deposited his valise in a corner of a dressing room that was made by canvas curtains partitioning off a part of a large tent.

"That's what they say. Tonzo told me that Sim would behave himself. But I'm through with Sim, and he might as well understand that first as last. You're going to take his place. Now I'll have to leave you. You'll put up at the hotel with some of the performers. Here's your slip that you can show to the clerk. I'll see you in the morning, if not before, and make arrangements for your act. To-night you just look on. Now I've got to go."

Joe looked about the dressing room. It was evidently shared with others, for there were suits of men's tights scattered around, as well as other belongings. Joe left his valise and went outside. He wanted to see all he could—to get familiar with the life of a circus.

It cannot be said that Joe was exactly easy in his mind. He would much rather have joined the circus without having supplanted a performer of so vindictive a character as Sim Doble. But, as it had to be, the lad decided to make the best of it.

"I'll be on the watch for trouble," he murmured as he went out of the dressing tent.

A busy scene was being enacted on the circus lots. In fact, many scenes. It was feeding time for some of the animals and for most of the performers and helpers. The latter would dine in one of the big tents, under which long tables were already set. And from the distance Joe could catch an odor of the cooking.

"My, but that smells good!" he told himself. He was hungry.

The Sampson Brothers' Show was a fair-sized one. It used a number of railroad cars to transport the wagons, cages and performers from place to place. On the road, of course, the performers and helpers slept in the circus sleeping cars. But when the show remained more than one night in a place some of the performers were occasionally allowed to sleep at the local hotels, getting their meals on the circus grounds, for the cooking for and feeding of a big show is down to an exact science.

As Joe wandered forth he heard a voice calling to him:

"Well, where in the world did you come from?"

"Oh, hello!" cried our hero, as, turning, he saw Benny Turton, the "human fish," walking toward him.

"I'm glad to see you again!" went on Benny, as he shook hands with Joe.

"And I'm glad to see you."

"What are you doing here?" the "human fish" asked.

"Oh, I'm part of the show now," replied Joe, a bit proudly.

"Get out! Are you, really?"

"I sure am!" And Joe told the circumstances.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," said Ben. "Real glad!"

"How's your act going?" asked Joe.

The "human fish" paused a moment before answering.

"Oh, I suppose it goes as well as ever," he said slowly. "Only I— Oh, what's the use of telling my troubles?" he asked, with a smile. "I reckon you have some of your own."

"Not very big ones," confessed Joe. "But is anything the matter?"

"No, oh, no. Never mind me; tell me about yourself."

Joe told something of his experiences since last seeing Ben, and, as he talked, he looked at the youth who performed such thrilling feats under water in the big tank. Joe thought Benny looked paler and thinner than before.

"I guess the water work isn't any too healthy for him," mused Joe. "It must be hard to be under that pressure so long. I feel sorry for him."

"What are you two talking about—going to get up a new act that will make us all take back seats?" asked a merry voice. Joe recognized it at once, and, with a glad smile, he turned to see Helen Morton coming toward him.

"I thought I knew you, even from your back," she told Joe, as she shook hands with him.

"Does Rosebud want any sugar?" he asked, smiling.

"No, thank you! He's had his share to-day. But it was good of you to remember. I must introduce you to my horse."

"I shall be happy to meet him," returned Joe, with his best "stage bow."

Helen laughed merrily, as she walked across the grounds with Joe and Benny.

"It's almost supper time," she said, "and I'm starved. Can't we all eat together?"

"I don't see why not," Ben answered, and they were soon at a table where many other performers sat, all, seemingly, talking at once. Joe was very much interested.

He was more than interested in two dark-complexioned men who regarded him curiously. One was the person who had spoken to Jim Tracy. The other Joe had not seen before.

"They're the Lascalla Brothers," Ben informed him. "That is, there are two of them. The third ___"

"I'm to be the third," Joe broke in.

"You are?" asked Ben, and he regarded his friend curiously. "Well, look out for yourself; that's all I've got to say."

"Why has he to look out for himself?" inquired Helen, who had caught the words. "Are you going to eat all there is on the table, Ben, so there won't be any for Mr. Strong? Is that why he must look out?"

"No, not that," Ben answered. "It—it was something else."

"Oh, secrets!" and Helen pretended to be offended.

"It wasn't anything," Joe assured her. And he tried to forget the warning Ben had so kindly given him.

Joe attended the performance that night as a sort of privileged character. He went behind the scenes, and also sat in the tent. He was most interested in the feats of the two Lascalla Brothers, and he decided that, with a little practice, he could do most of the feats they presented.

That night, at the hotel, Joe was introduced to Sid and Tonzo. They bowed and shook hands, and, as far as Joe could see, they did not resent his joining their troupe. They seemed pleasant, and Joe felt that perhaps the difficulties had been exaggerated. Nothing was said of Sim Doble, and though Joe had been on the watch for the deposed performer that afternoon and evening, he had not seen him.

"You will, perhaps, like to practise with us?" suggested Tonzo, after a while.

"I think it would be wise," agreed Joe.

"Very well, then. We will meet you at the tent in the morning."

Bright and early Joe was on hand. Jim Tracy found him a pair of pink tights that would do very well for a time, and ordered him a new, regular suit.

At the request of Tonzo Lascalla, Joe went through a number of tricks, improvising them as he progressed. Next the two Spaniards did their act, and showed Joe what he was to do, as well as when to do it, so as to make it all harmonize.

Then hard practice began, and was kept up until the time for the afternoon show. Joe did not feel at all nervous as he prepared for his entrance. His work on the stage with Professor Rosello stood him in good stead.

In another moment he was swinging aloft with his two fellow-performers, in "death-defying dives," and other alliterative acts set down on the show bills.

"Can you catch me if I jump from the high-swinging trapeze, and vault toward you, somersaulting?" Joe asked Tonzo, during a pause in their act.

"Of a certainty, yes, I can catch you. But can you jump it?"

"Sure!" declared Joe. "I've done it before."

"It is a big jump, Mr. Strong," Tonzo warned him. "Even your predecessor would have hesitated."

"I'll take the chance," Joe said. "Now this is the way I'll do it. I'll get a good momentum, swinging back and forth. You stand upon the high platform, holding your trapeze and waiting. When I give the word and start on my final swing, you jump off, hang by your knees, hands down. I'll leap toward you, turn over three times, and grab your hands. Do you get me?"

"Of a certainty, yes. But it is not an easy trick."

"I know it—that's why I'm going to do it. Do you get me?"

"If he doesn't 'get you,' as you call it, Mr. Strong," put in Sid, "you will have a bad fall. Of course there is the life net, but if you do not land right——"

"Oh, I'll land all right," said Joe, though not boastingly.

The time for the new trick came. Joe climbed up to a little platform near the top of the tent and swung off, swaying to and fro on a long trapeze. On the other side of the tent Tonzo took his place on a similar platform, fastened to a pole. He was waiting for Joe to give the word.

To and fro, in longer and longer arcs, Joe swung. He hung by his hands. Carefully his eye gauged the distance he must hurl himself across. Finally he had momentum enough.

"Come on!" he cried to Tonzo.

The latter leaped out on his trapeze, swinging by his knees. Right toward Joe he swung.

"Here I come!" Joe shouted, amid breathless silence among the spectators below him. They realized that something unusual was going on.

"Go!" shouted Sid, who was waiting down on the ground for the conclusion of the trick.

Joe let go. He felt himself hurling through the air. Quickly he doubled himself in a ball, and turned the somersaults. Then he straightened out, dropped a few feet, and his hands squarely met those of Tonzo. The latter clasped Joe's in a firm grip, and, holding him, swung to and fro on the long trapeze.

A roar of applause broke out at Joe's daring feat. He had made a hit—a big hit, for the applause kept up after he had dropped to the life net. He stood beside Tonzo and Sid, all three bowing and smiling.

CHAPTER VII

JOE TURNS A TRICK

"That's the idea!" exclaimed Jim Tracy, hurrying over to where the three gymnasts stood. "Give 'em some more of that, Joe!"

"I haven't any more like that—just now," answered the young circus performer, panting slightly, for he was a bit out of breath from his exertion and the anxiety lest his trick should fail.

"Well, do it again at to-night's performance, then," urged the ring-master, and Joe nodded in agreement.

"It was a good trick, my boy," said Tonzo Lascalla, "but don't try it too often."

"Why not?" Joe asked.

"Because it is risky. I might not catch you some day."

"I'd only fall into the life net if you did miss," said Joe coolly, though, for a moment, he thought there might be a hidden meaning in what his fellow-performer said.

"Well, it is not every one who knows how to fall into a life net," put in Sid Lascalla. "If one

lands on his head the neck is likely to be dislocated."

"I know how to fall," Joe declared, and, though he spoke positively, he was not in the least boastful. "Here, I'll show you," he went on.

Their act was not quite finished, but before going on with the next gymnastic feat Joe caught hold of a hoisting rope that ran through a pulley, and, at a nodded signal, one of the ring-men hauled the lad up to the top of the tent to the little platform where Joe had stood when taking his place on the high trapeze.

Joe signaled to the ring-master that he was going to make a jump into the net from that height, and at once the crowd again became aware that something unusual was going on. It was a jump seldom made, at least in The Sampson Brothers' Circus. The platform was fully twenty feet higher than the trapeze from which Joe and his fellow-performer had dropped a few minutes before. And, as Sid Lascalla had said, there was a risk even in jumping into a life net. But Joe Strong seemed to know what he was about.

"Say, he's going to do some jump!" exclaimed Benny Turton, who came into the ring at that moment, dressed in his shimmering, scaly suit, ready to do his "human fish" act.

"That's what!" cried Jim Tracy. "Give him the long roll and the boom!" he called to the leader of the musicians.

As Joe poised for his jump the snare drummer rattled out a "ruffle," and as it started Joe leaned forward and leaped.

Down he went, for a few feet, as straight as an arrow. Then he suddenly doubled up into a sort of ball, and began turning over and over. The crowd held its breath. The drum continued to rattle out its thundering accompaniment. How many somersaults Joe turned none of the spectators reckoned, but the youthful performer kept count of them, for he wanted to "straighten out," to land on his feet in the net.

"He'll never do it!" predicted Tonzo Lascalla.

And it did begin to look as though Joe had miscalculated.

But no. Just before he reached the springy life net he straightened out and came down feet first, bouncing up, and down like a rubber ball. The instant he landed the bass drum gave forth a thundering "boom," and as Joe rose, and came down again, the drummer punctuated each descent with a bang, until the crowd that had applauded madly at the jump was laughing at the queer effect of Joe's bouncing to the accompaniment of the drum.

"He did it!" cried Jim Tracy. "It was a great jump. We'll feature that now."

He looked at Sid and Tonzo Lascalla, as though asking why they had not worked something like this into their acts previously. But the Spaniards only shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows.

"That was great, Joe!" exclaimed Benny Turton, as Joe leaped to the ground over the edge of the life net. "Great!"

Joe smiled happily.

"It was wonderful," added Helen Morton, who was about to put her trick horse, Rosebud, through his paces. "It was wonderful—but I don't like to see anybody take such risks."

"Anybody?" asked Joe in a low voice.

"Well, then—you," she whispered, as she ran off to her ring.

"Well, I did it, you see," observed Joe to his two partners. "I guess I know how to fall into a net."

"You sure do!" averred the ring-master. "Try that at each performance, Joe."

"Only—be careful," added Tonzo Lascalla. "We do not want to have to get another partner."

The act of Joe and the two other "Lascalla Brothers" came to an end with Joe and Sid hanging suspended from the legs of Tonzo, who supported himself on a swinging trapeze. It made an effective close.

Joe was through then, and could watch the rest of the show or go to bed, as he pleased. He elected to stay in the "main top" and watch Helen in her act. He was also much interested in the "human fish."

"Pshaw!" Joe heard Jim Tracy murmur, as he, too, looked at Benny in the tank. "He isn't staying under as long as he used to, not by half a minute. I wonder what's the matter with him. First we know he'll be cutting the time, and we'll hear a howl from the public. That won't do! I'll

have to give him a call-down."

Joe felt sorry for Ben, who did not seem at all well. Joe thought he had better not interfere, but he resolved to speak to the water-performer privately, and see if he could not help him.

Joe repeated his sensational acts at the next day's performances, and that night he and the others in the circus moved on to the next stand. Joe wrote a line to Professor Rosello, telling him of the success.

It was a quite novel experience for Joe, traveling with a circus. But he was used to sleeping cars by this time, on account of the going from town to town with the magician.

However, he had never before had a berth in a train filled with circus performers, and, for a time, he could not sleep because of the strangeness. But he soon grew used to it, and in a few nights he could doze off as soon as he stretched out.

Joe's new suit of pink tights arrived. It matched those of the Lascalla Brothers. In fact, Joe was now billed as one of that trio, though, of course, he went by his own name in private. He was sufficiently dark as to hair and complexion to pass for a Spaniard.

To quote his own words, Joe was "taking to the circus life as a duck does to water." He seemed to fit right in. He made some new friends, but of all the men or youths in the show he liked best Benny Turton and the ring-master. Joe and the Lascalla Brothers got along well, but there was not much intimacy between them, though they worked well in the "team."

Joe was on the lookout for any signs of Sim Doble, but that unfortunate man did not appear, as far as our hero could learn. If Sid or Tonzo made further appeals for his reinstatement they said nothing about it to Joe.

As the show went on, playing from town to town, Joe became more and more used to the life. He liked it very much, and each day he was becoming more proficient on the trapeze.

One day, about two weeks after he had joined the circus, Joe had an idea for a new feat. It involved his jump from a distance, catching Tonzo Lascalla by the legs and hanging there. It was harder than making a leap for the other performer's hands, since, if Joe missed his clutch, Tonzo would have a chance to grab him with his hands. But when Joe leaped for his partner's feet a certain margin of safety was lost.

It was not that a fall would be dangerous if Joe missed, for the life net was below him. But the effect of the trick would be spoiled.

They practised the trick in private—Joe and Tonzo—and for a time it did not seem to work. Joe fell short every time of grasping the other's legs.

"You will never do it," said Sid, and there was a queer look on his face as he glanced at Tonzo. The other seemed to wink, just the mere fraction of a wink, and then, like a flash, it came to Joe.

"He doesn't want me to do it," thought our hero. "Tonzo wants me to fail. He doesn't want me to be successful, for he thinks maybe he can get Sim back. But I'll fool him! I think he has been drawing up his legs the instant I jumped for them, so I would miss. I'll watch next time."

This Joe did, and found his surmise right. Just before he reached with outstretched hands for Tonzo's legs, the man drew them slightly up, and, as a result, Joe missed.

"Here's where I turn a trick on him," mused the young performer, as he failed and landed in the net. In his next attempt Joe leaped unusually high, and though Tonzo drew up his legs he could not pull them beyond Joe's reach.

"That's the time I did it!" cried Joe, as he made the catch and swung to and fro.

Sid, on the ground below, shrugged his shoulders, and said something to Tonzo in Spanish.

CHAPTER VIII

HELEN'S LETTER

"Now I wonder," mused Joe as he leaped out of the net, "what they said to each other. I'm sure it was about me. Well, let it go. I did the trick, and I guess he won't pull his legs away again. If he does he'll have to pull 'em so far that it will be noticed all over, and he can't say it was an accident. I'll take care to make a high jump."

Joe practised the trick again and again, until he felt he was perfect in it. Tonzo seemed to have given up the idea of spoiling it, if that had been his intention, and he and Joe worked at it until they could do it smoothly.

"When are you going to put it on?" Jim Tracy inquired, when told there was a new feature to the Lascalla Brothers' act.

"Oh, in a couple of nights now," Joe answered.

"You sure are making good, all right," the ring-master informed him. "I didn't make any mistake booking you. I didn't know whom to turn to in a hurry when Sim Doble went back on me, and then I happened to think of you. Got your route from one of the magazines, and sent you the wire."

"I was mighty glad to come," confessed Joe.

The new act created more applause than ever for the Lascalla Brothers when it was exhibited, but the louder applause seemed to come to Joe, though he did not try to keep his fellow performers from their share. And, as might be expected, there was not a little professional jealousy on the part of some of the other performers.

If Sid and Tonzo were jealous of him they took pains to hide that fact from Joe, but some of the others were not so careful. A few of the other gymnasts openly declared that the Lascalla Brothers were getting altogether too much public attention.

"They detract from me," declared Madame Bullriva, the "strong woman," whose star feat was to get beneath a board platform on which stood twelve men, and raise it from the saw-horses across which it lay. True, she only raised it a few inches, but the act was "billed big."

"I don't get half the applause I used to," she complained to Jim Tracy. "You let those 'Spanish onions' have too much time in the ring, and give that Joe Strong a ruffle of drums and the big boom every time he makes the long jump."

"But it's worth it," said the ring-master. "It's a big drawing card."

"So's my act, but I don't get a single drum beat. Can't I have some music with my act?"

"I'll see," promised the ring-master, but he had many other things to think of, and the act of Madame Bullriva went unheralded, to her great disgust.

"Talk about footlight favorites," she complained to Helen Morton, as they dressed together for a performance, "that Joe Strong is getting all that's coming to him."

"Oh, I don't think he tries to take away from any of us," Helen answered.

"No, he doesn't personally. He's a nice boy. But Tracy makes too much fuss over him. I like Joe, but he and his partners are 'crabbing' my act, all right."

"Perhaps if you spoke to him——"

"What! Me? Let him know I cared? I guess not! I'll join some other circus first."

"You might put another man on the platform, and lift thirteen," the young trick rider suggested.

"What! Lift thirteen? That would be unlucky, my dear. I did it once when I was on the Western circuit in a Wild West show, and believe me—never again! I strained a shoulder muscle, and I had to lie up in a hospital five weeks. Twelve men are enough to lift at once, take it from me! But Joe is a nice boy, I'll say that. Don't you like him?"

Helen's answer was not very clear, but perhaps that was because she was fixing her hair in readiness for the entrance into the ring with her trained horse, Rosebud.

Joe, Helen and Benny Turton seemed to have formed a little group among themselves. They sat together at the circus table, and when they were not "on," they were much in the company of one another.

They were about the same age, and they enjoyed each other's society greatly, being congenial companions. Joe was "introduced" to Rosebud and, being naturally fond of animals, he made friends with the intelligent horse at once, which pleased Helen.

She and Joe were getting very fond of one another, though perhaps neither of them would have admitted that, if openly taxed with it. But, somehow or other, Joe seemed naturally to drift over near Helen when they were both in the tent, awaiting their turns. And when their acts were over they either took walks together in and about the town where the circus was playing, or they sat in their dressing tent talking. Often Benny Turton would join them, always being made welcome.

But Benny did not have much time. His shimmering, scaly, green suit was quite elaborately made, and it took him some time to get into it. It took equally as long to get out of it, and after his act he was always more or less exhausted and had to rest.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," he said one day to Helen and Joe, as he joined them after having been in the big glass tank. "But I feel so tired after I come out that I want to go to bed."

"Maybe you stay under water too long," Helen said sympathetically.

"I don't stay under as long as I used to," Benny remarked. "In fact Jim Tracy was sort of kicking just now. Said I was billed to stay under water four minutes, and I was cutting it to three. I can't help it. Something seems to hurt me here," and he put his hands to his ears and to the back of his head.

"Maybe you ought to see a doctor," suggested Joe.

"I can't," said Benny shortly. "In this circus business if they find out you're sick the management begins to think of booking some one else for your act. No, I've got to keep on with it. But some days I don't feel much like it."

Joe and Helen felt sorry for Benny, but there was little they could do to aid him. It was not as if they could take some of the burden of work off his shoulders. His act was peculiar, and he alone could do it.

"Though I think," said Joe to himself one day after watching Benny perform, "I think I could stay under water almost as long as he does after I'd practised it a bit. I'm going to try some time. I think deep breathing exercises would help. I'm going to begin on them."

Joe had to have good "wind" for his own acts, but, as he was naturally ambitious, he started in on systematic breathing exercises. These would do him much general good even if he should never enter the water-tank.

Occasionally Joe would do some simple sleight-of-hand tricks for the amusement of Benny and Helen. He did not want to lose the art he had acquired.

"I may want to quit the circus some day and go back in the illusion business," he said.

"Quit the circus! Why?" Helen asked him.

"Oh, I'm not thinking seriously of it, of course," he said quickly. "But I don't want to get rusty on those tricks."

Joe heard occasionally from Professor Rosello, who had leased his show and was taking a much needed rest. He inquired as to Joe's progress, and was glad, he said, to hear our hero was doing well.

One day, when the circus was playing a large manufacturing city on a two days' date, Joe had another glimpse of the man he had supplanted. The young trapeze artist went out of the tent when his share in the afternoon performance was over, and as he paused to look at the crowd in front of the sideshow tent he heard some one addressing him.

"So you're the chap that took my place, are you?" a vindictive voice asked. "I've been wanting to see you!"

Joe turned to, behold Sim Doble, who seemed worse off than when the young performer had first met him.

"Yes, I've been wanting to see you!" and there was a sneer in Sim's words.

Joe decided nothing could be gained by temporizing, or by showing that he was alarmed.

"Well, now you've seen me, what are you going to do about it?" he coolly asked.

"That's all right. You wait and you'll see!" was the threatening response. "Nobody can knock me out of an engagement and get away with it. You'll see!"

"Look here!" exclaimed Joe. "I didn't knock you out of your place. No one did except yourself, and you know it. And I'm not going to stand for any talk like that from you, either."

"That's right, give it to him!" said another voice, and Jim Tracy came up. "Don't let him bluff you, Joe. As for you, Doble, I've told you to keep away from this circus, and I mean it! I heard you'd been following us. Rode on one of the canvas wagons last night, didn't you?"

"Well, what if I did?"

"This! If you do it again I'll have you arrested. I'm through with you and I want you to keep away."

"I guess this is a free country!"

"Yes, the *country* is free, but our *circus* isn't. You keep out in the country and you'll be all right. Keep off our wagons. Moreover, if I catch you making any more threats against our performers I'll— But I guess Joe can look after himself all right," finished the ring-master. "Just you keep away, that's all, Doble." "

The man slunk off in the crowd. Joe really felt sorry for him, but he could do nothing. Doble had thrown away his chances and they had come to Joe, who was entitled to them. Later that day Joe saw Sid and Tonzo in close conversation with their former partner, but our hero said nothing to the ring-master about it, though he was a bit uneasy in his own mind.

The next afternoon when Joe came out of his dressing room after his trapeze act, he met Helen Morton. The fancy rider held an open letter in her hand, and she seemed disturbed at its contents.

"No bad news, I hope," remarked Joe.

"No, not exactly," Helen answered. "On the contrary it may be good news. But I don't exactly understand it. I wish Bill Watson were here, so I could ask his advice."

"Who is Bill Watson?" asked Joe.

"He's one of our clowns, one of the oldest in the business, I guess. He was taken ill just before you joined the show, but he's coming back next week. I often ask his advice, and I'd like to now—about this letter."

"Why don't you ask mine?" suggested Joe, half jokingly.

CHAPTER IX

BILL WATSON'S IDEA

Helen Morton gave Joe a glance and a smile. Then she looked at the open letter in her hand.

"That's so," she said brightly. "I never thought of that. I wonder if you could advise me?"

"Why, I'm one of the best advisers you ever saw," returned Joe, laughingly.

"I know you're good on the trapeze," Helen admitted, "but have you had any business experience?"

"Well, I was in business for myself after I ran away from home and joined the professor," answered Joe. "That is, I had to attend to some of his business. What is it all about?"

"That's just what I want to know," answered the young circus rider. "It's a puzzle to me."

She again referred to the letter, then with a sort of hopeless gesture held it out to Joe. He took it and cried:

"Why, what's this? It's all torn up," and he exhibited a handful of scraps of paper.

"Oh—Joe!" Helen gasped. "How did that happen?"

"Just a mistake," he replied. With a quick motion of his hand he held out the letter whole and unturned.

"Oh—oh!" she stammered. Then, laughing, added: "Is that one of your sleight-of-hand tricks?"

"Yes," Joe nodded. When Helen handed him the letter he happened to be holding the scraps of a circular letter he had just received and torn up. It occurred to him, just for a joke, to make Helen believe her letter had suddenly gone to pieces. It was one of Joe's simplest tricks, and he often did them nowadays in order to keep in practice.

"You certainly gave me a start!" Helen exclaimed. "I had hardly read the letter myself. It's quite puzzling."

"Do you want me to read it—and advise you?" asked Joe.

"If you will—and can—yes."

Joe hastily glanced over the paper. He saw in a moment that it was from a New York firm of

lawyers. The body of the letter read:

"We are writing to you to learn if, by any chance, you are the daughter of Thomas and Ruth Morton who some years ago lived in San Francisco. In case you are, and if your grandfather on your father's side was a Seth Morton, we would be glad to have you notify us of these facts, sending copies of any papers you may have to prove your identity.

"For some years we have been searching for a Helen Morton with the above named relatives, but, so far, have not located her.

"We discovered a number of Helen Mortons, but they were not the right ones. Recently we saw your name in a theatrical magazine, and take this opportunity to inquire of you, sending this letter in care of the circus with which we understand you are connected. Kindly reply as soon as possible. If you are the right person there is a sum of money due you, and we wish, if that is the case, to pay it and close an estate."

Joe read the letter over twice without speaking.

"Well," remarked Helen, after a pause, "I thought you were going to advise me."

"So I am," Joe said. "I want to get this through my head first. But let me ask you: Is this a joke, or are you the Helen Morton referred to?"

"I don't know whether it's a joke or not, Joe. First I thought it was. But my father's name was Thomas, and my grandfather was a Seth Morton, and he lived in San Francisco. Of course that was when I was a little girl, and I don't remember much about it. We lived in the West before papa and mamma died, and it was there I learned to ride a horse.

"When I was left alone except for an elderly aunt, I did not know what to do. My aunt took good care of me, however, but when she died there was no one else, and she left no money. I tried to get work, but the stores and factories wanted experienced girls, and the only thing I had any experience with was a horse.

"I got desperate, and decided to see if I couldn't make a living by what little talent I had. So one day, when a circus was showing in our town, I took my horse, Rosebud, rode out and did some stunts in the lots. The manager saw me and hired me. Oh, how happy I was!

"That wasn't with this show. I only joined here about two years ago. Of course my friends—what few I had—thought it was dreadful for me to become a circus rider, but I've found that there are just as good men and women in circuses as anywhere else in this world," and her cheeks grew red, probably at the memory of something that had been said against circus folk.

"I know," said Joe, quietly. "My mother was a circus rider."

"So you have told me. But now about this letter, Joe. I wish Bill Watson were here—he might know what to do about it."

"Well, I can't say that I do, in spite of my boast," Joe answered. "It may be a joke, and, again, it may be the real thing. You may be an heiress, Miss Morton," and Joe bowed teasingly.

"I thought you were going to call me Helen—if I called you Joe," she said.

"So I am. That was only in fun," for soon after their acquaintance began these two young persons had fallen into the habit of dropping the formal Miss and Mister.

"Well, what would you do, Joe?" Helen asked.

"I think I'd answer this letter seriously," replied the young performer. "If it is a joke you can't lose more than a two cent stamp, and, on the other hand, if it's serious they'll want to hear from you. You may be the very person they want. This letter head doesn't look much like a joke."

The paper on which the letter was written was of excellent quality, and Joe could tell by passing his fingers over the names, addresses and other matter that it was engraved—not printed.

"If it's a joke they went to a lot of work to get it up," he continued. "Have you any papers, to prove your identity?"

"Yes, I have some birth and marriage certificates, and an old bible that was Grandfather Seth's. I wouldn't want to send them off to New York though."

"It won't be necessary—at least not at first. I'll help you make copies of them, and if these lawyers want to see the real things let them send a man on. That's my advice."

"And very good advice it is too, Joe," Helen said. "I don't believe Bill Watson could give any better. He's a real nice elderly man, and he's been almost a father to me. I often go to him when I have my little troubles. I wish he were here now. But you are very good to me, Joe. I'm going to take your advice."

"I'll help you make the copies," Joe offered. "Did you ever have any idea that your grandfather left valuable property?"

"No, and I don't believe papa or mamma did, either. We were not exactly poor, but we weren't rich. Oh, wouldn't it be nice if I were to get some money?"

"You wouldn't stay with the circus then, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered musingly. "I think I like it here."

"I know I do," Joe said. "But if you don't want to take my advice you can wait until Mr. Watson comes back. You say he's expected?"

"Yes. Mr. Tracy said he'd join us at Blairstown in a few days. But, anyhow, I'm going to do as you said, Joe. And if I get a million dollars maybe I'll buy a circus of my own," and she laughed at the whimsical idea.

Taking some spare time, she and Joe made copies of certain certificates Helen had in her trunk, and they also copied the record from the old Bible. Joe got the press agent of the show to typewrite a letter to go with the copies, and they were sent to the New York lawyers.

"Now we'll wait and see what comes of it," Helen said. "But I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. I never inherited a fortune, and I don't expect to."

A few days later, when the show reached Blairstown, Bill Watson, a veteran clown, joined the troupe of fun-makers. He was made royally welcome, for his presence had been missed.

"Bill, I want to introduce to you a new friend of mine," said Helen, when she had the opportunity. "He's one of our newest and best performers, aside from you and me," she joked.

"What's the name?" asked jovial Bill, holding out his hand.

"Joe Strong."

"Been in the business long?"

"Not very. I was with Professor Rosello before I came here."

"Never heard of him," and Bill shook his head.

"He was a conjurer," explained Joe. "My father was, too. He was Professor Morretti, and my mother——"

"Was Madame Hortense. She was Janet Willoughby before her marriage," broke in Bill Watson, speaking calmly.

"What!" cried Joe. "Did you know her—them?"

"I knew both of them," said Bill. "I didn't connect your name with them at first, Strong not being uncommon. But when you mentioned your father, the professor, why, it came to me in a flash. So you're Madame Hortense's son, eh?"

"Did you know my mother well?" asked Joe.

"Know her?" cried the veteran clown. "I should say I did! Why, she and I were great friends, and so were your father and I, but I did not see so much of him, as he was in a different line. But your mother, Joe! Ah, the profession lost a fine performer when she died. I never thought I'd meet her son, and in a circus at that."

"But I'm glad you're with us, and I want to say that if you have Helen, here, on your side, you've got one of the finest little girls in all the world."

"I found that out as soon as I joined," said Joe.

"Trust you young chaps for not losing any chances like that," chuckled the clown. "Well, I'm glad you two are friends. They tell me you're quite an addition to the Lascalla troupe."

"I'm glad I've been able to do so well," Joe said.

"And how have you been, Helen?" the old clown wanted to know.

"First rate. And, oh, Bill. We have *such* a mystery for you—Joe and I!"

"A mystery, Helen?"

"Yes; I'm going to be an heiress. Wait until I show you the letter," which she did, to the no small astonishment of Bill Watson.

"Well, well," he said over and over again, when Helen and Joe told of the answer they had sent the New York lawyers. "Suppose you do get some money, Helen?"

"It's too good to suppose. I can't imagine any one leaving me money."

"I wish I knew a fairy godmother who would leave me some," murmured Joe. "But that wouldn't happen in a blue moon."

Bill Watson turned, and looked rather curiously at the young circus performer.

"Well, now, do you know, Joe Strong," he said, "I have an idea."

"An idea!" cried Helen gaily. "How nice, Bill. Tell us about it!"

"Now just a moment, young lady. Don't get too excited with an old man just off a sick bed. But Joe's speaking that way—I call you Joe, as I knew your folks so well—Joe's speaking that way gave me an idea. I wouldn't be so terribly surprised, my boy, if you did have money left you some day."

"How?" asked Joe in surprise.

"Why, your mother, whom, as I said, I knew very well, came of a very rich and aristocratic family in England. She was disowned by them when she married your father—as if public performers weren't as good as aristocrats, any day! But never mind about that. Your mother certainly was rich when she was a girl, Joe, and it may be she is entitled to money from the English estates now, or, rather, you would be, since she is dead. That's my idea."

CHAPTER X

IN THE TANK

"Are you really serious in that?" asked Joe of the old clown, after a moment's consideration.

"Of course I am, Joe. Why? Would it be strange to have some one leave you money?"

"It certainly would! But it would be a nice sort of strangeness," replied the young performer. "I never dreamed that such a thing might happen."

"Oh, I don't say it *will*," Bill Watson reminded him. "But the fact remains that your mother came from what is sometimes called 'the landed gentry' of England, and the estates there, or property, descend to eldest sons differently than property does in this country. It may be worth looking into, Joe."

"But I don't know much about my mother," Joe said. "I hardly ever meet any one who knew her. My foster-parents would never speak of her—they were ashamed of her calling."

"More shame to them!" exclaimed the clown. "There never was a finer woman than your mother, Joe Strong. And as for riding—well, I wish we had a few of her kind in the show now. I don't mean to say anything against your riding, my dear," he said to Helen. "But Janet Strong did a different sort, for she was a powerful woman, and could handle a horse better than most men."

"I guess I must get my liking for horses from her," Joe remarked.

"Very likely," agreed Bill Watson. "Some day I'll have a long talk with you about your mother, Joe, and I'll give you all the information I can. There may be some of her old acquaintances you can write to, to find out if she was entitled to any property."

"Wouldn't it be fine if we both came into fortunes!" gaily cried Helen, with sparkling eyes. "Wouldn't it be splendid, Joe?"

"Too good to be true, I'm afraid. But you have a better chance than I, Helen."

"Perhaps. Would you leave the circus, Joe, if you got rich?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I'd stay in it while you did—to sort of look after you," and he smiled quizzically.

"Trying to get my job, are you?" chuckled Bill. "Well, we are young only once. But I must say, Helen, that this young man gave you as good advice as I could, and I hope it turns out all right."

Joe liked Bill Watson—every one did in fact—and the young performer was pleased to learn something of his mother, and glad to learn that he would be told more.

The enforced rest Bill Watson had taken on account of a slight illness, seemed to have done the old clown good, for he worked in some new "business" in his acts when he again donned the odd suit he wore. His presence, too, had a good effect on the other clowns, so that the audiences, especially the younger portion, were kept in roars of merriment at each performance.

Joe, also, did his share to provide entertainment for the circus throngs. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that Joe provided the thrills, for some of his feats were thrilling indeed. Not that the other members of the Lascalla troupe did not share in the honors, for they did. Both Sid and Tonzo were accomplished and veteran performers on the flying rings and trapeze bars, but they had been in the business so long that they had become rather hardened to it, and stuck to old tricks and effects instead of getting up new ones.

Joe was especially good at this, and while some of his feats were not really new, he gave a different turn to them that seemed to make for novelty.

"But I don't like to see you take such risks," Helen said to him on more than one occasion. "I'm afraid you'll be hurt."

"You have to take risks in this business," Joe stated. "I don't think about them when I'm away up at the top of the tent, swinging on the bar. I just think of the trick and wonder if Sid or Tonzo will catch me or me one of them when the jump is made. Besides, the life net is always below us.

"Yes, but suppose you miss the net or it breaks?"

"I don't like supposes of that sort," laughed Joe, coolly. Truly he had good nerves, under perfect control. He was adding to his muscular strength, too. Constant and steady practice was making his arms and legs powerful indeed.

For a while Joe had been on the watch for some overt act on the part of Sid or Tonzo that would spoil an act and bring censure down on himself. But following that one attempt neither of the Spaniards did anything that Joe could find fault with. They were enthusiastic over some of the feats he performed, and worked in harmony with him. If they were jealous over Joe's popularity and the applause he often received as his share alone in some trick, they did not show it.

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed Helen one day, when they were in the small tent getting ready for the afternoon performance. "I have a letter from the New York lawyers."

"What do they say?" Joe asked eagerly. "Did they send the money?"

"No. But they thanked me for the copies of the proofs I sent, and they said they believed they were on the right track. They will write again soon. So it wasn't a joke, anyhow."

"It doesn't look so," the youth agreed. "Is everything all right—Rosebud safe, and all that?"

"Yes. He's feeling himself again." The trick horse had been ailing the day before, and Helen was a little worried about her pet.

Joe and Helen wandered into the main tent, which was now set up. Joe wanted to get in a little practice on the trapeze, while Helen went in to watch, as she often did. The men were setting up the big glass tank in which the "human fish" performed, and when Joe came down from his trapeze, rather warm and tired, the water looked very inviting.

"I've a good notion to go in for a swim," he said to Helen.

"Why don't you?" she dared him. "It would do you good. It's such a hot day. I almost wish I could myself."

"I believe I will," Joe said. "I've got a bathing suit in my trunk."

The big tent was almost deserted at this hour, for the parade was in progress. Joe and Helen did not take part in this. Joe came back attired for a swim, and going up the steps by which Benny mounted to the platform on the edge of the tank before he plunged in, Joe poised there.

"Here I go," he called to Helen. "Got a watch?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Time me then. I'm going to see how long I can stay under water."

In he went head first, making a clean dive, for Joe was an adept in the water. He swam about in the limpid depths, Helen watching him admiringly through the glass sides of the tank. Then Joe settled down on the bottom as Benny was in the habit of doing. Helen nervously watched the seconds tick off on her wrist watch.

When two minutes had passed, and Joe was still below the water, the girl became nervous.

"Come on out, Joe!" she called. Joe could not hear her, of course. He waved his hand to her. He could not stay under much longer, he felt sure, but he did not want to give up. It was not until three seconds of the third minute had passed that he found it impossible to hold his breath longer, and up he shot, filling his lungs with air as he reached the surface.

At that moment Benny Turton came into the tent, and saw some one in his tank.

"What happened?" he cried, running forward. "Did some one fall in?"

"It's all right," Helen informed the "human fish."

CHAPTER XI

HELEN'S DISCOVERY

Joe Strong climbed out of the tank. He grinned cheerfully at Benny.

"It was so hot I took a bath in your tub," he explained. "It sure was fine! Hope you don't mind?"

"Not a bit," returned Benny, cheerfully. "Come in any time you like. It isn't exactly a summer resort beach, but it's the best we have."

"And Joe stayed under water over three minutes," Helen said.

"Did I, really?" Joe cried.

"You certainly did."

"I was just giving myself a try-out," Joe explained to Benny.

"That's pretty good," declared the "human fish," as he tested the temperature of the water. "I couldn't do that at first."

"Oh, you see I've lived near the water all my life," Joe explained, "and it comes sort of natural to me. Don't be afraid that I'm going after your act though," he added, with a laugh.

"I almost wish you would," and Benny spoke wearily.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen, with ready sympathy.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't feel just right, somehow or other. It's mostly in my head—back here," and Benny pointed to the region just behind his ears. "I've got a lot of pain there, and going under water and staying so long seems to make it worse."

"Why don't you see a doctor?" asked Joe.

"Well, you know what that would mean. I might have to lay off, and I don't want that. I need the money."

Benny had a widowed mother to support, and it was well known that he sent her most of his wages, keeping only enough to live on.

"Well, I wish I could help you," said Joe, "but I can't do all the stunts you can under water, even if I could hold down both jobs."

"The stunts are easy enough, once you learn how to hold and control your breath," Benny said. "That's the hardest part of it, and you seem to have gotten that down fine. How was the water, cold?"

"No, just about right for me," Joe declared. "I don't like it too warm."

Benny again tested the temperature by putting his hand in the tank.

"I think I'll have 'em put a little hot water in just before I do my act," he said. "I have an idea that the cold water gets in my ears and makes the pain in my head."

"Perhaps it does," Joe agreed.

Preparations for the afternoon performance were now actively under way. The big parade was out, going through the streets of the town, and soon those taking part in the pageant would return to the "lot." Then, at two, the main show would start.

Joe had a new feat for that day's performance. He and the two Spaniards had worked it out together. It was quite an elaborate act, and involved some risk, though at practice it had gone well.

Joe was to take his place on the small, high elevated platform at one side of the tent, and Tonzo would occupy a similar place on the other side. Joe was to swing off, holding to the flying rings, which, for this trick, had been attached to unusually long ropes.

Opposite him Tonzo was to swing from a regulation trapeze, which also was provided with a long rope. After the two had acquired sufficient momentum, they were to let go at a certain signal and pass each other in the air, Joe under Tonzo. Then Joe would catch the trapeze bar, and Tonzo the rings, exchanging places.

Once they had a good grip, Sid was to swing from a third trapeze, and, letting go, grasp Tonzo's hands, that performer, meanwhile, having slipped his legs through the rings, hanging head downward.

When Sid had thus caught bold, he was to signal to Joe, who was to make a second flying leap, and grasp Sid's down-hanging legs.

As said before, the feat went well in practice and the ring-master was depending on it for a "thriller." But whether it would go all right before a crowded tent was another matter. Joe was a little nervous over it—that is as nervous as he ever allowed himself to get, for he had evolved the feat, and Sid and Tonzo had not been over-enthusiastic about it.

However, it must be attempted in public sooner or later, and this was the day set for it. Before the show began Joe, Sid and Tonzo went over every rope, bar and ring. They wanted no falls, even though the life net was below them.

"Is everything all right?" Joe asked his partners.

"Yes," they told him.

The usual announcement was made of the Lascalla Brothers' act, and on this occasion Jim Tracy, who was making the presentation, added something about a "death-defying double exchange and triple suspension act never before attempted in any circus ring or arena throughout the world."

That was Joe's trick.

The three performers went through some of their usual exploits, ordinary enough to them, but rather thrilling for all that. Then came the preparations for the new feat.

Joe and Tonzo took their places on the small platforms, high up on the tent poles. The eyes of all in their vicinity were watching them eagerly. Sid was in his place, ready to swing off when the two had crossed each other in the air and had made the exchange.

"Are you ready?" called Jim Tracy in his loud voice.

"Ready," answered Joe's voice, from high up in the tent.

"Ready," responded Tonzo, after a moment's hesitation, during which he pretended to fix one slipper. This was done for dramatic effect, and to heighten the suspense.

Helen, who had just finished her tricks with Rosebud, paused at the edge of a ring to watch the new act.

"Then go!" shouted the ring-master.

Joe and Tonzo swung off together, and then swayed to and fro like giant pendulums, Joe on the rings and Tonzo on the trapeze.

"Ready?" cried Joe to his swinging partner.

"Yes," answered Tonzo.

"Come on!" Joe said.

It was time to make the exchange. This was one of the critical parts of the trick.

Joe let go the rings and hurled himself forward his eyes on the swinging trapeze bar, his hands out stretched to grasp it. He passed the form of his partner in mid-air, and the next instant he was swinging from the trapeze.

He could not turn to look, but he felt sure, from the burst of applause which came, that Tonzo had successfully done his part.

Again Tonzo and Joe were swinging in long arcs, so manipulating their bodies as to give added momentum to the long ropes.

"Ready down there?" asked Joe of Sid.

"Ready," he answered.

"Then go!"

Sid swung off, as Tonzo hung head downward with outstretched hands. Sid easily caught them, for this was a trick they often did together. Now must come Joe's second leap, and it was not so easy as the first, nor did he have as good a chance of catching Sid's legs as he would have had at Tonzo's hands.

However, it was "all in the day's work," and he did not hesitate at taking chances.

He reached the height of his swing and started downward in a long sweep.

"Here I come!" he called.

He let go the trapeze bar, and made a dive for Sid's dangling legs. For the fraction of a second Joe thought he was going to miss. But he did not. He caught Sid by the ankles and the three hung there, swinging in mid-air, Tonzo, of course, supporting the dragging weight of the bodies of Joe and Sid. But Tonzo was a giant in his strength.

There was a burst of music, a rattle and boom of drums, as the feat came to a successful and startling finish. Then, as Joe dropped lightly into the life net, turning over in a succession of somersaults, the applause broke out in a roar.

Sid and Tonzo dropped down beside Joe, and the three stood with arms over one another's shoulders, bowing and smiling at the furor they had caused.

"A dandy stunt!" cried Jim Tracy, highly pleased, as he went over to another ring to make an announcement. "Couldn't be better!"

This ended the work of Joe and his partners for the afternoon, the new feat being a climax. They ran out of the tent amid continuous applause, and Joe saw Helen waiting for him.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she whispered. "So glad!"

It was about a week after this, the show meanwhile having moved on from town to town, that one of the trapeze performers who did a "lone act," that is all by himself, was taken ill.

"I'll just shift you to his place, Joe," said Jim. "You can easily do what he did, and maybe improve on it."

"But what about my Lascalla act?"

"Oh, I'm not going to take you out of that. You'll do the most sensational things with them, but they can have some one else for the ordinary stunts. I want you to have some individual work."

Joe was glad enough for this chance, for it meant more money for him, and also brought him more prominently before the public. But the Lascalla Brothers were not so well pleased. They did not say anything, but Joe was sure they were more jealous of him than before. He was going above them on the circus ladder of success and popularity. But it was none of Joe's planning. His success was merited.

The mail had been distributed one day, and Helen had a letter from the New York lawyers, stating that a member of the firm was coming on to inspect the old Bible and the other original proofs of her identity.

"I must tell Joe," she said, and on inquiry learned that he was in the main tent, practising. As she walked past the dressing room which Joe and the Lascalla Brothers used, she saw a strange sight.

Sid and Tonzo were doing something to a trapeze. They had pushed up the outer silk covering of the rope—covering put on for ornamental purposes—and Tonzo was pouring something from a bottle on the hempen strands.

"I wonder what he is doing that for," mused Helen. "Can it be that——"

She got no further in her musing, for she heard Sid speaking, and she listened to what he said.

CHAPTER XII

JUST IN TIME

"This ought to do the business," said Sid.

"Yes," agreed Tonzo, "and not so quickly that it will be noticed, either. It will work slowly, but surely."

"That's what we want," commented the other. "We're in no hurry. Any time inside of a week will do. Now we'll put this away to ripen."

"That's queer," thought Helen, and she passed on, for by the movement in the canvas dressing room she thought the men were about to come out, and she did not want them to see her at what they might consider spying on them. "I never heard of ripening a rope before," the girl said. "But it may be they have to for a trapeze. I'll ask Joe about it. He might fix some of his ropes that way."

Helen went on, anxious to find the young performer, and show him her letter from the lawyer.

"I'll tell Bill Watson, too," Helen decided.

As she expected, both Joe and the old clown were much interested in her news.

"It does really begin to look as though you would come into some money, doesn't it?" Joe said.

"I'm beginning to believe it myself," Helen answered, "though I don't really count on it as yet."

"Yes, it's best to go a little slowly," advised Bill. "Not to count your chickens before they're hatched is a good motto. But this looks like business. I'd like to interview that lawyer when he comes."

"I'll turn him over to you," Helen said with a laugh. "To you and Joe, and you can arrange about getting my money for me. I'll make you two my official advisers."

"I accept with pleasure," Joe answered, with a bow.

"And that reminds me," went on Bill. "I'm going to give you the addresses of some people who might know about your mother's folks in England, Joe. As I told you, they disowned her when she married your father, though there wasn't a finer man going. But he was an American, and that was one thing they had against him, and another was that he was a public performer.

"I think, too, that they rather blamed him for your mother's going into the circus business, Joe. Your mother was always a good horsewoman, so I have understood. She took part in many a fox hunt in England, and in cross-country runs, always coming out in front. And when your father met her he, as I understand it, suggested that, just for fun, she try circus work. She took it up seriously, and Madame Hortense became one of the foremost circus riders of her time. But from then on her name was forgotten by her relatives, and her picture was, so to speak, turned to the wall."

"I wish I could get one of those pictures," said Joe thoughtfully. "I have only a very small one that was in my father's watch. I'd like a large one, for I can't remember, very well, how she looked."

"She was a handsome woman," said the clown. "It may be that you can get a picture of her from England—that is, if they saved one. I'll give you the address of some folks you can write to. It might be well to get a firm of lawyers here to take the matter up for you."

"I believe it would be best," agreed Joe.

"Why not let my lawyers—notice that, *my*," laughed Helen. "Why not let my lawyers act for you, Joe? That is, after we see what sort they are. They seem honest."

"Another good idea!" commented the young performer. "I'll do it. You say one of them is coming to see you?"

"So he says in this letter."

"Does he know where to find you?"

"Yes; I have told him the places where the circus will show for the next two weeks. He can find the place easily enough, and inquire for me. Oh, I'm so anxious to know how rich I'm going to be!"

"I don't blame you," chuckled Bill. "Now, Joe, if I had a pencil and paper I'd give you those addresses I spoke of."

Joe supplied what was needed, and obtained the names of some men and women—circus performers who had been associated with his mother. Joe wrote to them, asking the names of his mother's relatives in England, and their addresses.

Helen's attention was so taken up with the affairs of her inheritance that she forgot about the queer actions of Sid and Tonzo until after the performance that night.

Then, as she and Joe were going to the train to take the sleeping cars for the next stop, Helen asked:

"Joe, did you ever hear of ripening trapeze ropes?"

"Ripening trapeze ropes?" he repeated. "No. What do you mean?"

Helen then told what she had seen and heard in the dressing tent.

Joe shook his head.

"It may be some secret process they have of treating ropes to make them tougher, so they'll last longer," Joe said. "They may call it ripening, but I never heard of it. I'll ask them."

"Don't tell them I saw them," Helen cautioned him.

"Of course not," Joe answered. "Perhaps it may be a professional secret with them, and they won't tell me anyhow. But I'll ask."

But when Joe, as casually as he could, inquired of Sid and Tonzo what they knew of ripening trapeze ropes, the two Spaniards shook their heads, though, unseen by Joe, a quick look passed between them.

"I sometimes oil my ropes, to make them pliable," Tonzo admitted. "Olive oil I use. But it does not make them ripe."

"I guess that must have been it," thought Joe. "Helen was probably mistaken. It might have been a word that sounded like ripening."

So he said no more about it then, though when he reported to Helen the result of his questioning, she shook her head.

"I'm sure I heard aright," she declared. "And they were pouring something from a bottle on the trapeze rope from which they had pushed the silk covering."

"It might have been olive oil," Joe said.

"It might," Helen admitted, "but I don't believe it was. They don't handle any of your ropes, do they?"

"I always look after my own. Why?"

"Oh, I just wanted to know," and that was all the answer Helen would give.

As Joe went to his dressing room for that afternoon's performance he passed Señor Bogardi, the lion tamer. Something in the man's manner attracted Joe's attention, and he asked him:

"Aren't you feeling well to-day, Señor?"

"Oh, yes, as well as usual. It is my Princess who is not well."

"Princess, the big lioness?"

"Yes. I do not know what to make of her actions. She is never rough with me, but a little while ago, when I went in her cage, she growled and struck at me. I had to hit her—which I seldom do—and that did not improve her temper. I do not know what to make of her. I have to put her through her paces in the cage this afternoon, and I do not want any accident to happen.

"It is not that I am afraid for myself," went on the tamer, and Joe knew he spoke the truth, for he was absolutely fearless. "But if she comes for me and I have to—to do—something, it may start a panic. No, I do not like it," and he shook his head dubiously.

"Oh, well, maybe it will come out all right," Joe assured him. "But you'd better tell Jim, and have some extra men around. She can't get out of her cage, can she?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Well, we shall see."

It was almost time for the performance to begin. The crowd was already streaming into the animal tent and slowly filtering into the "main top," where the performance took place. Before that, however, there was a sort of "show" in the animal arena, Señor Bogardi's appearance in the cage with the lioness being one of the features.

Joe had gone to his dressing tent and was coming out again, when he heard unusual roars from the animal tent. The lions often let their thunderous voices boom out, sometimes startling the crowd, but, somehow or other, this sounded differently to Joe.

"I wonder if that's Princess cutting up," he reflected. "Guess I'll go in and have a look. I hope nothing happens to the señor."

Though lion tamers, as well as other performers with wild beasts, seem to take matters easily, slipping into the cage with the ferocious creatures as a matter of course, they take their lives in their hands whenever they do it. No one can say when a lion or a tiger may suddenly turn fierce and spring upon its trainer. And there is not much chance of escape. The claws of a lion or a tiger go deep, even in one swift blow of its powerful paws.

Joe started for the animal tent, and then remembered that he needed in his act that day a certain short trapeze, the ends of the ropes being provided with hooks that caught over the bar of another trapeze.

He hurried back to get it, and then, as the unusual roars kept up in the arena, he hastened there. As he had surmised, it was Princess who was roaring, her fellow captives joining in. Señor Bogardi had slipped into the cage, and was waiting until the creature had calmed down a little.

Cages in which trainers perform with wild beasts are built in two parts. In one end is a sort of double door, forming a compartment into which the trainer can slip for safety. The señor had opened the outer door of the cage and slipped in, it being fastened after him.

But he was still separated from Princess by another iron-barred door that worked on spring hinges. And Princess did not seem to want this door opened. She sprang against it with savage roars and thrust her paws through, trying to reach her trainer. He sought to drive her back into a far corner, so that he would have room to enter. Once in, he felt he could subdue her. But Princess would not get back sufficiently, though Señor Bogardi ordered her, and even flicked her through the bars with the heavy whip he carried.

"I guess you'd better cut out the act to-day," advised Jim Tracy, as he saw how matters were going. The women and children were beginning to get nervous, some of them hastening into the other tent. Men, too, were looking about as if for a quick means of escape in case anything happened.

"No, no. I must make her obey me," insisted the performer. "If I give in to her now I will lose power over her. Get back, Princess! Get back! Down!" he ordered.

But the lioness only snarled and struck at the bars with her paws. Then she threw herself against the spring door, roaring. The cage rocked and shook, and several women screamed.

"Cut out the act!" ordered the ring-master. "It isn't safe with this crowd."

"That's right," chimed in a man. "We know it isn't your fault, professor."

"Thank you!" Señor Bogardi bowed. "For the comfort of the audience I will omit my act to-day. But I will subdue Princess later."

There was a breath of relief from the crowd as the trainer prepared to leave the cage. Men who had fastened the door after him raised the iron bar that held it so he could emerge.

The lion-tamer slipped from the cage through the outside door, which was about to be shut when Princess, with all her force, threw herself against the inner spring door.

Whether it was insecurely fastened or whether she broke the fastenings, was not disclosed at the moment, but the door gave way and the enraged beast sprang into the smaller compartment and toward the outer door.

"Quick!" cried the trainer. "Up with that bar! Fasten the door, or she'll be out among us!"

The circus men raised the bar, but the cage was swaying so from the leapings of the lioness that they could not slip the iron in place. It almost dropped from their hands.

Joe Strong saw the danger. He stood near the cage, the crowd having rushed back, men and women yelling with fright. Joe saw the outer door swing open. In another instant the lioness would be out.

At that moment the men dropped the iron bar.

"Quick! Something to fasten the door—to hold it!" cried the lion-tamer.

Joe acted in a flash and not an instant too soon. He forced the strong hickory bar of his small trapeze into the places meant to receive the iron bar, and as the lioness, with a roar of rage, flung herself against the door, it did not give way, but held. Joe had prevented her escape.

CHAPTER XIII

A BAD BLOW

"Quick now! With the iron bar!" cried Señor Bogardi. "That trapeze stick won't hold long!"

But it held long enough. As the lioness, flung back into a corner of her cage by her impact against the steel door, gathered herself for another spring, the men slipped into place the iron bar, Joe pulling out his trapeze.

"It's all right now—no more danger!" called Jim Tracy. "Take it easy, folks, she can't get out now!"

This was true enough. The beast, after a fruitless effort to force a way out of the cage, retreated to a corner and lay down, snarling and growling.

"I don't know what's gotten into Princess," said the trainer as he looked at her. "She never acted this way before."

"It's a good thing she showed her temper before you got in the cage with her, and not afterward," remarked Joe, as he was about to pass on to the performance tent.

"That's right," agreed Señor Bogardi. "And you did the right thing in the nick of time, my boy. Only for your trapeze bar she'd have been out among the crowd," and he looked at the men, women and children, who were now calming down.

The small panic was soon over, and in order to quiet the lioness a big canvas was thrown over her cage, so she would not be annoyed by onlookers.

"I guess she needs a rest," her trainer said. "I'll let her alone for a day or so, and she may get over this."

Joe went on into the tent where he was to do his trapeze acts. It was nearly time for him to appear, and the other two Lascalla Brothers were waiting for him. They would do an act together, and Joe one of his single feats, however, before the three appeared in a triple act.

The young performer was straightening out the ropes attached to his trapeze, when he noticed that the bar of the small one, which he had thrust into the door of the lioness' cage, was cracked.

"Hello!" exclaimed Joe. "This won't do. I can't risk doing tricks up at the top of the tent on a cracked bar. It might hold, and again it might not."

He tried the cracked bar in his hands. It gave a little, but seemed fairly strong.

"I wonder if I could get another," mused Joe. "Guess I'd better try."

He walked over to where the Lascalla Brothers stood near their apparatus.

"What's the matter?" asked Sid, seeing Joe trailing the broken trapeze after him.

"This bar is cracked. It's my short trapeze that I fasten to the big one. I used it just now to hold the door so the lioness wouldn't get out, and the wood is cracked. I was wondering if you had a spare one like this."

"We have!" exclaimed Tonzo quickly. "Get the little short one—the one with the silk coverings on the ropes," he said to Sid. "Joe can use that."

"I'll be back with it in a second," Sid stated, as he hurried off to the dressing tent, for it was nearly time for the performance to begin. Sid returned presently with another trapeze.

At this moment Helen came in with her horse, Rosebud, for she was about to do her act.

"What's the matter, Joe?" asked Helen, for she knew that at this point in the performance he ought to be on the other side of the tent doing his act.

"Oh, I cracked a trapeze bar," Joe replied, as he stepped up beside the girl and patted Rosebud. "Sid is going to get me another. Here he comes now with it."

At the sight of the trapeze the circus man was bringing up, Helen was conscious of a strange feeling. She saw the silk-covered ropes, and the recollection of that scene in the tent came vividly to her.

"I guess this will do you, Joe," remarked Sid, holding out the trapeze. "It's the only one we

have like yours."

"Thanks," responded the young performer. "That will do nicely. I've got to hustle now and ___"

Joe turned away, but became aware that Helen was leaning down from the saddle and whispering to him.

"Joe! Joe!" she exclaimed, making sure the Lascalla Brothers could not hear her, for they were On the other side of Rosebud. "Joe, don't use the trapeze!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm sure that's the one I saw those two men 'ripening,' as they call it. They had pulled back the silk cover, and were pouring something on the rope. Look at it before you use it. Be careful!"

Then she flicked Rosebud with the whip and rode into the ring to do her act amid a blare of trumpets. Joe stood there, holding the trapeze. The two Spaniards were starting their act now, and were high up in the air.

"Whew!" whistled Joe. "I wonder what's up. Can it be that this rope is doctored? I won't let them see me looking at it."

He hurried over to his own particular place in the tent.

"Lively, Joe!" called Jim Tracy. "You're late as it is!"

"I'll be right on the job in a moment," the young performer answered. "I had to get another trapeze—the lioness cracked mine."

"Oh, all right—but hustle."

Under pretense of fastening the short trapeze to the larger one Joe pushed back the loose silk covering the ropes. To his surprise, on one rope was a dark stain. Joe rubbed his fingers over the strands. They were rotten, and crumbled at the touch. Joe smelled of the dark stain.

"Acid!" exclaimed Joe. "Some one spilled acid on this rope. Talk about putting on something to ripen it! This is something to rot it!"

He tested the rope in his hands. It did not part, but some of the strands gave, and he did not doubt but that if he trusted his weight to it it would break and give him a fall.

"Now I wonder if they did that on purpose to queer me," mused Joe. "If they did they waited for a most opportune time to give me the doctored trapeze. They couldn't have known I was going to break mine. I wonder if they did it on purpose.

"Of course I wouldn't have been killed, and probably not even much hurt, if the rope did break," thought Joe. "I'd only fall into the life net, but it sure would spoil my act and make me look like an amateur. Maybe that's their game! If it was—"

Joe paused, and looked over in the direction of the two Spaniards. They were going through their act, but Joe thought he had a glimpse of Tonzo looking over toward him.

"They want to see what happens to me," thought Joe. "Well, they won't see anything, for I sha'n't use this trapeze. I'll change my act."

"Hey, what's the matter over there, Joe?" called Jim Tracy to him. "You ought to be up on the bar."

"I know it, Mr. Tracy. But I've got to make a change at the last minute. I can't use this extra trapeze."

"All right; do anything you like, but do it quick!"

Joe signaled to his helper, who began hoisting him to the top of the tent by means of rope and pulley. Once on his own regular trapeze, which he had tested but a short while before, Joe went through his act.

He had to improvise some acts to take the place of those he did on the short trapeze. But he did these extra exploits so well and so easily that no one in the audience suspected that it was anything but the regular procedure.

Then Joe, amid applause, descended and went over to work with the two Spaniards. He carried the doctored trapeze with him.

"I didn't use this," he said, looking closely at Tonzo. "It seems to have been left out in the rain and one of the ropes has rotted."

"Rotted?" asked Sid, his voice trembling.

"Something like that, yes," answered Joe.

"Ah, that is too bad!" exclaimed Tonzo, and neither by a false note nor by a change in his face did he betray anything. "I am glad you discovered the defect in time."

"So am I," said Joe significantly. "Come on, now."

"Probably they fixed the rope with acid, and kept it ready against the chance that some day I might use it," reflected Joe. "The worst that could happen would be to spoil my tricks—I couldn't get much hurt falling into the net, and they knew that. But it was a mean act, all right, and I sha'n't forget it. I guess they want to discourage me so they can get their former partner back. But I'm going to stick!"

"Did you find out anything, Joe?" asked Helen, when she had a chance to speak to him alone.

"I sure did, thanks to you, little girl. I might have had a ridiculous fall if I'd used their trapeze. You were right in what you suspected."

"Oh, Joe! I'm so glad I saw it in time to warn you."

"So am I, Helen. It was a mean piece of business, and cunning. I never suspected them of it."

"Oh, but you will be careful after this, won't you, Joe?"

"Indeed I will! I want to live long enough to see you get your fortune. By the way, when is that lawyer coming?"

"He is to meet me day after to-morrow."

"I'll be on hand," Joe promised.

It rained the next day, and working in a circus during a rain is not exactly fun. Still the show goes on, "rain or shine," as it says on the posters, and the performers do not get the worst of it. It is the wagon and canvas men who suffer in a storm.

"And this is a bad one," Joe remarked, when he went in the tent that afternoon for his act. "It's getting worse. I hope they have the tent up good and strong."

"Why?" asked Helen.

"Because the wind's increasing. Look at that!" he exclaimed as a gust careened the big, heavy canvas shelter. "If some of the tent pegs pull out there'll be trouble."

Helen looked anxious as she set off to put Rosebud through his tricks, and Joe was not a little apprehensive as he was hoisted to the top of the tent. He saw the big pole to which his trapeze was fastened, swaying as the wind shook the "main top."

CHAPTER XIV

HELEN'S INHERITANCE

Joe Strong had scarcely begun his act when he became aware that indeed the storm was no usual blow and bluster, accompanied by rain. He could feel his trapeze swaying as the whole tent shook, and while this would not have deterred him from going on with his performance, he felt that an accident was likely to occur that would start a panic.

"It surely does feel as if the old 'main top' was going to fall," thought Joe as he swung head downward by his knees, preparatory to doing another act. He could see that many in the audience were getting uneasy, and some were leaving their seats, though the red-capped ushers were going about calling:

"Sit still! Keep your seats! There is no danger. The tent is perfectly safe."

Jim Tracy had ordered this done. As a matter of fact the tent was not perfectly safe, but under the circumstances it was best to tell the people this to quiet them and to avoid having them make a rush to get out, as in that case many would be hurt—especially the women and the children.

"It's a good thing it isn't night," reflected Joe. "Whew! That was a bad one!" he exclaimed as a terrific blast seemed fairly to lift one side of the tent. Men started from their seats and women and children screamed.

"Just keep quiet and it will be all right," urged the ring-master, but the crowd was fast getting beyond control.

Joe saw Jim Tracy sending out a gang of men to drive the tent pegs deeper into the ground. The rain softened the soil, and thus made the pegs so loose that they were likely to pull out. At the same time the rain, wetting the ropes, caused them to shrink, and thus exert a stronger pull on the pegs and poles. So the ropes had to be eased off, while the pegs were pounded farther into the ground with big mauls.

"Lively now, men!" called the ring-master.

The big tent swayed, sometimes the top of it being lifted high up by the wind which blew under it. Again the sides would bulge in, making gaps by which the rain entered.

But the band kept on playing. Jim saw to that, for nothing is more conducive to subduing a panic than to let the crowd hear music. The performers, too, kept on with their acts, and some of the audience began to feel reassured.

But the wind still kept up, blowing stronger if anything, and Joe and others realized that it needed but a little accident to start a rush that might end fatally for some.

Joe was just about to go into the second series of his gymnastic work when he heard a tent pole beneath him snap with a breaking sound. At first he thought it was the big one to which his apparatus was made fast, but a glance showed him this one was standing safe. It was one of the smaller side poles.

That part of the tent sagged down, the wind aiding in the break, and there were cries of fear from scores of women, while men shouted all sorts of directions.

But the circus people had gone through dangers like this before, and they knew what to do. Under the direction of Jim Tracy and his helpers, extra poles were quickly put in place to take the weight of the wet canvas off the broken one. This at once raised the tent up from those on whom it had partly fallen.

And then something else happened.

One of five horses which were being put through a series of tricks by a man trainer, suddenly bolted out of the ring. Joe, high up in the tent, saw him running, and noted that the animal was headed for the ring where Helen Morton was performing with Rosebud.

"He's going to run into her!" thought Joe. "I've got to do something!"

He must think and act quickly. While attendant's were running after the bolting horse Joe, looking down, saw that the animal would pass close to his life net. In an instant Joe had decided what to do.

He poised on the small platform, from which he made his swings, and dropped straight into the big net. Just as he had calculated, he bounced up again, and as he did so he sprang out to one side.

Joe's quick eyes and nerves had enabled him to judge the distance correctly. He leaped from the net just as the horse was opposite him, and landed on his back in a riding position.

It was the work of but a second to reach forward, grasp the little bridle which the animal wore, and pull him to one side.

And it was not a second too soon, either, for the horse was on the edge of the ring in which Helen was performing with Rosebud. If the maddened animal had gone in, there would have been a collision in which the girl performer would, undoubtedly, have been injured.

"Good work, Joe!" cried the ring-master. "But there's plenty more to be done. I guess we'll have to get all the men performers to help hold down the tent. I'm afraid she's going."

"It does look so," Joe admitted as he leaped from the horse and gave him in charge of one of the attendants. "What can we do?"

"Help drive in extra pins and attach more ropes. I'm going to dismiss the audience. We'll stay over here to-morrow, and give an extra performance to make up for it."

"I'll get a crowd together and we'll help the canvasmen," offered Joe.

"And I'll help," said Benny Turton, who had finished his tank act.

"Come on!" cried Joe, as he led the way.

Meanwhile Jim Tracy had requested the audience to file out as quickly and in as orderly a manner as possible. The crowd was not large, as the weather had been threatening in the morning and many had stayed at home. But it was no easy matter to dismiss even a small throng

in such a storm.

However, it was accomplished, the band meanwhile playing its best, and under hard conditions, as part of the tent over them split and let the rain in on them.

But the music served a good turn, and while the people were hurrying out the canvassmen, aided by the performers, Joe among them, drove in extra pegs, tightening those that had become loose, put on additional ropes, so that, by hard work, the big tent was prevented from blowing down.

Once outside, the audience, though most of them were soon drenched, took it good-naturedly. They were given emergency tickets as they passed out, good for another admission.

And then the storm, which seemed to have reached its height, settled down into a heavy rain. The wind died out somewhat, and there was no danger from the collapse of the tent.

"Good work, boys!" said the ring-master, as the performers, all of them wet through, and in their performing suits too, came in. "Good work! If it hadn't been for you I don't know what we would have done. I'll not forget it."

There had been some trouble in the animal tent during the storm; the beasts, especially the elephants, evincing a desire to break loose. But their trainers quieted them, and soon the circus was almost normal again.

Of course the afternoon had been lost, but there was hope of a good attendance at night if the storm were not too bad. And by remaining over another afternoon the deficiency could be made up. Word was telegraphed ahead to the next town announcing a postponement in the date. The broken pole was replaced with another, and then the performers enjoyed an unexpected vacation.

"I want to thank you, Joe, for what you did," said Helen, coming up to him in the dining tent, where an early supper was served. "I saw what you did—stopping that runaway horse."

"Oh, it wasn't anything," Joe said, modestly enough.

"Wasn't it?" asked Helen, with a smile. "Well, I consider myself and Rosebud something worth saving."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," Joe said quickly. "But the runaway might not have gone near you."

"Yes, I'm afraid he would. But you saved me."

"Well, if you feel that way about it," laughed Joe, for he did not want Helen to take the matter too seriously, "why then we're even. You saved me from a bad fall on the trapeze."

The storm subsided somewhat by night, and there was a good attendance. And the receipts the next day were very large in the afternoon, for the story of what the circus men had done was widely spread, and served as a good advertisement. Joe was applauded louder than ever when he did his acts.

The two wily Lascalla Brothers never referred to the incident of the rotted trapeze rope, and Joe did not know whether to believe them guilty or not. At most, he thought, they only wanted to give him a tumble that might make him look ridiculous, and so discourage him from continuing the work. In that case their deposed partner might get a chance. But Joe did not give up, and he kept a sharp lookout. He redoubled his vigilance regarding his ropes, bars and rings, inspecting all of them just before each performance.

On arriving at the next town Helen received a note in her mail asking her to call at the principal hotel in the place. It was signed by one of the members of the law firm.

"You come with me, Joe," she begged. "I don't want to go alone."

"All right," agreed the young performer. "We'll go and get your inheritance."

"If there's any to get," laughed Helen. "Oh, Joe, I'm so nervous!"

"Nervous!" he answered. "I wish I could be afflicted with nervousness like that—money-nervousness, I'd call it!"

They found Mr. Pike, the lawyer, to be an agreeable gentleman. He had requested Helen to bring with her the proofs of her identity, the old Bible and other books, which she did. These the lawyer examined carefully, and asked the girl many questions, comparing her answers with some information in his note-book. Finally he said:

"Well, there is no doubt but you are the Miss Helen Morton we have been looking for so long, and I am happy to inform you that you are entitled to an inheritance from your grandfather's estate."

"Really?" cried Helen, eagerly.

"Really," answered the lawyer, with a smile. "It isn't a very large fortune, but it will yield you a neat little income every year. In fact there is quite an accumulation due you, and I shall be happy to send it on as soon as I get back to New York. I congratulate you!"

CHAPTER XV

A WARNING

Helen could hardly believe the good news. Though she had hoped, since hearing from the law firm, that she might be entitled to some money, Helen had always been careful not to hope too much.

"For I don't want to be badly disappointed," she told Joe.

"Well," he remarked, "I wish my chances were as good as yours."

For the answers he received from the letters he wrote concerning his mother's relatives in England were disappointing. As far as these letters went there was no estate in which Joe might share, though Bill Watson insisted that the late Mrs. Strong came of a wealthy family.

"Anyhow, you've got yours, Helen," said Joe.

"Well, I haven't exactly got it yet," and she looked at Mr. Pike.

"Oh, the money is perfectly safe," the lawyer assured Helen. "I have part of it on deposit in my bank, and the rest is safe in California."

"Just how did it happen to come to me?" Helen inquired.

"Well," answered the lawyer slowly, "it's a long and complicated story. Your grandfather on your father's side was quite a landholder in San Francisco. Some of his property was not worth a great deal, and other plots were very valuable. In time he sold off most of it, but one large tract was considered so worthless that he could not find a buyer for it. When he died he still owned it, and it descended to your father.

"He thought so little of it that he never tried to put it on the market. But during the last few years the city has grown out in the direction of this land, and recently the property was sold.

"An effort was made to find the owner, your father, but as he was dead, and no one knew what had become of his heirs, the land was sold, and the money deposited with the state, to be turned over to the right owner when found. We have a branch office in San Francisco, and we were engaged to try to find any Morton heirs. Finally we found you, and now I am glad to say that my work in this connection is so happily ended.

"As I told you, I have some cash ready for you. The rest of your inheritance is in the form of bonds and mortgages, which will bring you in an income of approximately sixty dollars a month."

"That's fifteen a week!" exclaimed Helen, who was used to calculating that way, as are most circus and theatrical persons.

"Of course you could sell these bonds and mortgages, and get the cash for them," said the lawyer, "but I would not advise you to. You will have about three thousand dollars in cash, as it is, and this ought to be enough for your immediate needs, especially as I understand you have a good position."

"Yes, I am earning a good salary," Helen admitted, "but I have not been able to save much. I am very glad of my little fortune."

"And I am glad for you, my dear young lady. Now, as I said, as soon as I get back to New York I will send one of my clerks on to you with the cash. I may be old fashioned, but I don't like to trust too much to the mails. Besides, I want to get your signature to certain documents, and you will have to make certain affidavits to my clerk. So I will send him on. Let me have a note of where you will be during the next week."

Helen gave the dates when the circus would play certain towns, and Mr. Pike left.

"Well, it's true, little girl, isn't it?" cried Joe as they walked back to the circus together.

"Yes, and I'm very glad. I've always wanted money, but I never thought I'd have it—at least as much as I'm going to get. I wish you would inherit a fortune, Joe."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I don't expect it, and what one never has had can't be missed very much. Maybe I'll get mine—some day."

"I hope so, Joe. And now I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"That if ever you need money you'll come to me."

Joe hesitated a moment before answering. Then he said:

"All right, Helen, I will."

To Joe the novelty of life in a circus was beginning to wear off. To be sure there was something new and different coming up each day, but he had now gotten his act down to a system, and to him and the other performers one day was much like another, except for the weather, perhaps.

They did their acts before crowds every day—different crowds, to be sure; but, after all, men, women and children are much alike the world over. They want to be amused and thrilled, and the circus crowds in one place are no different from those in another.

The Sampson Brothers' Show was not one of the largest, though it was considered first class. Occasionally it played one of the large cities, but, in the main, it made a circuit of places of smaller population.

Joe kept on with his trapeze work, now and then adding new feats, either by himself or with the Lascalla Brothers. On their part they seemed glad to adopt Joe's suggestions. Occasionally they made some themselves, but they were more in the way of spectacular effects—such as waving flags while suspended in the air, or fluttering gaily colored ribbons or strands of artificial flowers. But Joe liked to work out new and difficult feats of strength, skill and daring, and he was generally successful.

He had not relaxed his policy of vigilance, and he never went up on a bar or on the rings without first testing his apparatus. For he never forgot the strangely rotted rope. That it had been eaten by some acid, he was sure.

He did not again get sight of that particular small trapeze, nor did he ask Sid or Tonzo what had become of it. He did not want to know.

"It's best to let sleeping dogs lie," reasoned Joe. "But I'll be on the lookout."

Matters had been going along well, and Joe had been given an increase of salary.

"Well, if I can't get a fortune from some of my mother's rich and aristocratic ancestors," Joe thought with a smile, "I can make it myself by my trapeze work. And, after all, I guess, that's the best way to get rich. Though I'm not sure I'll ever get rich in the circus business."

But the calm of Joe's life—that is if, one can call it calm to act in a circus—was rudely shaken one day when in his mail he found a badly scrawled note. There was no signature to it, but Joe easily guessed from whom it came. The note read:

"You want to look out for yourself. You may think you're smart, but I know some smarter than you. This is a big world, but accidents may happen. You want to be careful."

"Some of Sim Doble's work," mused Joe, as he tore up the note and cast it aside. "He's trying to get my nerve. Well, I won't let that worry me. He won't dare do anything. Queer, though, that he should be following the circus still. He sure does want his place back. I'm sorry for him, but I can't help it."

Joe did not regard the warning seriously, and he said nothing about it to Helen or any one else.

"It would only worry Helen," he reflected.

The show was over for the night. Even while the performers in the big tent had been going through with their acts, men had taken away the animal cages and loaded them on the flat railroad cars. Then the animal tent was taken down and packed into wagons with the poles and pegs.

As each performer finished, he or she went to the dressing tent and packed his trunk for transportation. From the dressing tent the actors went to the sleeping car, and straight to bed.

Joe's acts went very well that night. He was applauded again and again and he was quite

pleased as he ran out of the tent to make ready for the night journey. He saw Benny Turton changing into his ordinary clothes from his wet fish-suit, which had to be packed in a rubber bag for transportation after the night performance, there being no time to dry it.

"Well, how goes it, Ben?" asked Joe.

"Oh, not very well," was the spiritless answer. "I've got lots of pain."

"Too bad," said Joe in a comforting tone. "Maybe a good night's sleep will fix you up."

"I hope so," said the "human fish."

The circus train was rumbling along the rails. It was the middle of the night, and they were almost due at the town where next they would show.

Joe, as well as the others in his sleeping car, was suddenly awakened by a crash. The train swayed from side to side and rolled along unevenly with many a lurch and bump.

"We're off the track!" cried Joe, as he rolled from his berth. And the memory of the scrawled warning came vividly to him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STRIKE

The circus train bumped along for a few hundred feet, the engine meanwhile madly whistling, the wheels rattling over the wooden sleepers, and inside the various cars, where the performers had been suddenly awakened from their sleep, pandemonium reigned.

"What's the matter?" called Benny Turton from his berth near Joe's.

"Off the track—that's all," was the answer, given in a reassuring voice. For Joe had, somehow or other, grasped the fact there was no great danger unless they ran into something, and this, as yet, had not happened.

The train was off the track (or at least some of the coaches were) but it was quickly slowing down, and Joe, by a quick glance at his watch, made a mental calculation of their whereabouts.

For several miles in the vicinity where the accident had occurred was a long, and comparatively straight stretch of track, with no bridges and no gullies on either side. A train running off the track, even if going at fairly fast speed, would hardly topple over.

Before starting out that night Joe had inquired of one of the men about the journey, and, learning that they were approaching his former home, the town of Bedford, he had looked up the route and the time of arrival at their next stopping place. He had a quick mind, and he remembered about where they should be at the time the accident occurred. In that way he was able to determine that, unless they struck something, they were in comparatively little danger.

"Off the track—that's all!" repeated Benny Turton as he looked down from his berth at Joe. "Isn't that enough? Wow! What's going on now?"

The train had stopped with a jolt. The air brakes, which the engineer had flung on at the first intimation of danger, had taken hold of the wheels with a sudden grip.

"This is the last stop," said Joe, and he smiled up at Benny. He could do so now, for he felt that their coach, at least, was safe. But he was anxious as to what had happened to the others. Helen, with many of the other women performers, was in the coach ahead.

Benny crawled down from his berth, and stood looking at Joe.

"It doesn't seem to worry you much," he remarked.

"Not as long as there's nothing worse than this," Joe answered. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"Only my feelings."

"Well, you'll get over that. Let's see what's up."

By this time the aisle of the car was filled with excited men performers. They all wanted to know what had happened, their location and various other bits of information.

"The train jumped the track," said Joe, who appeared the coolest of the lot. "We don't seem to

have hit anything, though at first I thought we had. We're right side up, if not exactly with care."

"Where are we?" demanded Tonzo Lascalla.

"We ought to be near Far Hills, according to the time table," Joe answered. "If I could get a look out I could tell."

He went to the end of the car and peered out. It was a bright moonlight night, and Joe was able to recognize the locality. As a boy he had tramped all around the country within twenty-five miles of Bedford, in the vicinity of which they now were, and he had no difficulty in placing himself. He found that he had guessed correctly.

By this time there was an excited crowd of trainmen and circus employees outside the coaches which had left the rails. Joe and some of the others slipped on their clothes and went out to see what had happened.

Joe's first glance was toward the coach in which he knew Helen rode. He was relieved to see that though it had also left the rails it was standing upright. In fact, none of the cars had tilted more than was to be expected from the accident.

"Well, this is a nice pickle!" exclaimed Jim Tracy, bustling up. "This means no parade, and maybe no afternoon show. How long will it take you to get us back on the rails?" he asked one of the brakemen.

"Hard to say," was the answer. "We'll have to send for the wrecking crew. Lucky it's no worse than a delay."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed the ring-master. It was only one train of the several that made up the circus which had left the rails. The animal cars were on ahead, safe, and the sections following the derailed coaches had, by a fortunate chance, not left the rails.

"What caused us to jump?" asked Benny.

"There was a fish plate jammed in a switch," answered one of the brakemen. "We found it beside the track where we knocked it out, and that saved the other trains from doing as we did."

"A fish plate in the switch?" repeated Joe. "Did it get there by accident?"

"Ask me something easier," quoted the brakeman. "It might have, and again it might not. I understand you discharged a lot of men at your last stop, and it may be some of them tried to get even with you."

It was true that a number of canvasmen had been allowed to go because they were found useless, but none of the circus men believed that these individuals would do so desperate a deed as to try to wreck the train.

Joe thought of the threatening letter he had received—Sim Doble was the writer, he was sure—but even Sim would hardly try anything like this. He might feel vindictive against Joe, and try to do him some harm or bring about Joe's discharge.

But to wreck a train——

"I don't believe he'd do that," reasoned Joe. "I won't mention the letter—it would hardly be fair. I don't want to get him into trouble, and I have no evidence against him."

So Joe kept quiet.

The circus trains ahead of the derailed one could keep on to their destination. After some delay those in the rear were switched to another track, and so passed around the stalled cars.

Then the wrecking crew arrived, and just as the first gray streaks of dawn showed the last of the cars was put back on the track.

"Well, we're off again," remarked Joe, as, with Benny and some of their friends, they got back in their berths.

"Not much more chance for sleep, though," the "human fish" remarked, dolefully enough.

"Oh, I think I can manage to get some," said, Joe, as he covered up, for the morning was a bit chilly.

"I hope my glass tank didn't get cracked in the mix-up," remarked Benny. "It wouldn't take much to make that leak, and I've had troubles enough of late without that."

"Oh, I guess it's perfectly safe," remarked Joe, sleepily.

The excitement caused by the derailing was soon forgotten. Circus men are used to strenuous happenings. They live in the midst of excitement, and a little, more or less, does not bother them. Most of them slept even through the work of getting the train back on the rails.

Of course the circus was late in getting in—that is the derailed train with its quota of performers was. Early in the morning, when they should have been on the siding near the grounds, the train was still puffing onward.

Joe arose, got a cup of coffee in the buffet car, and went on ahead to inquire about Helen and some of his friends in the other coach.

"Oh, I didn't mind it much," Helen said, when Joe asked her about it. "I felt a few bumps, and I thought we had just struck a poor spot in the roadbed."

"She hasn't any more nerves than you have, Joe Strong," declared Mrs. Talfo, "the fat lady."

"Did you mind it much?" Joe asked.

"Did I? Say, young man, it's a good thing I had a lower berth. I rolled out, and if I had fallen on anybody—well, there might have been a worse wreck! Fortunately no one was under me when I tumbled," and Mrs. Talfo chuckled.

"And you weren't hurt?" asked Joe.

The fat lady laughed. Her sides shook "like a bowlful of jelly," as the nursery rhyme used to state.

"It takes more than a fall to hurt me," said Mrs. Talfo. "I'm too well padded. But we're going to get in very late," she went on with a look at her watch. "The performers should be at breakfast at this time, to be ready for the street parade."

"We may have to omit the parade," said Joe.

"I wouldn't care," declared the fat lady with a sigh. "It does jolt me something terrible to ride over cobble streets, and they never will let me stay out."

"You're quite an attraction," said Joe, with a smile.

"Oh, yes, it's all right to talk about it," sighed Mrs. Talfo, "but I guess there aren't many of you who would want to tip the scales at five hundred and eighty pounds—advertised weight, of course," she added, with a smile. "It's no joke—especially in hot weather."

The performers made merry over the accident now, and speculated as to what might happen to the show. Their train carried a goodly number of the "artists," as they were called on the bills, and without them a successful and complete show could not be given.

"We may even have to omit the afternoon session," Joe stated.

"Who said so?" Helen demanded.

"Mr. Tracy."

"Well, it's better to lose that than to have the whole show wrecked," said the snake charmer. "I remember being in a circus wreck once, and I never want to see another."

"Did any of the animals get loose?" asked Joe.

"I should say they did! We lost a lion and a tiger, and for weeks afterward we had to keep men out hunting for the creatures, which the excited farmers said were taking calves and lambs. No indeed! I don't want any more circus wrecks. This one was near enough."

This brought up a fund of recollected circus stories, and from then on, until the train stopped on the siding near the grounds, the performers took turns in telling what they had known of wrecks and other accidents to the shows with which they had been connected. Joe listened eagerly. It was all new to him.

"I only hope my glass tank isn't cracked," said Benny again. He seemed quite worried about this.

"Well, if it's broken they'll have to get you another," Joe told him. The tank was carried in one of the cars of the derailed train.

"They might, and they might not," said Benny. "My act hasn't been going any too well of late, and maybe they'd be glad of a chance to drop it from the list. I only hope they don't, though, for I need the money."

Benny spoke wistfully. He seemed greatly changed from the boy Joe had known at first. Benny had grown thinner, and he often put his hand to his head, as though suffering constant pain. Joe and Helen felt sorry for him.

Still there was little they could do, except to cheer him up. Benny had to do his own act—which was a unique one that he had evolved after years of practice. It was not alone the staying

under water that made it popular, it was the tricks that the lad did.

"Well, we're here at last," said Joe, as he and his friends alighted from their sleeping car. "Better late than never, I suppose."

Men were busy on the circus grounds, putting up tents, arranging the horses and other animals, putting the wagons in their proper places and doing the hundred and one things that need to be done.

"I wonder what's going on over there," said Helen, as she pointed to a group of men about the place where the canvas for the main tent had been spread out in readiness for erection. "It looks like trouble."

"It does," agreed Joe, as he saw Jim Tracy excitedly talking to the canvasmen. "I'm going to see what it is."

He approached the ring-master, who was also one of the owners of the show.

"Anything wrong?" Joe asked.

"Wrong? I should say so! As if I didn't already have troubles enough here, the tent-men go on a strike for more money. I never saw such luck!"

CHAPTER XVII

IN BEDFORD

Joe Strong looked from the group of sullen, lowering canvasmen to Jim Tracy. On the ring-master's face were signs of anxiety.

"Is it really a strike?" Joe asked.

"That's what they call it," replied the circus owner. "I didn't know they belonged to a union, and I don't believe they do. They just want to make trouble, and they take advantage of me at a time when I'm tied up because we're late with the show."

"What is it they want?" asked Helen.

"More money," Jim Tracy replied. "I wouldn't mind giving it to them if I could afford it, or if they weren't getting the same wages that are paid other canvasmen in other circuses. But they are. As a matter of fact, they get more, and they have better grub. I can't understand such tactics!"

"It looks as if some of them were coming over to speak to you," remarked Joe, as he observed one of the strikers detach himself from the group, and approach the ring-master.

"Let him come," snapped Jim. "He'll get no satisfaction from me."

The man seemed a bit embarrassed as he approached, chewing a straw nervously. He ignored several of the circus performers, Joe and Helen among them, who were grouped about Jim Tracy, and, addressing the owner, asked:

"Well, have you made up your mind? Is it to be more money for us or no show for you?"

"It's going to be 'no' to your unreasonable demand, and I want to tell you, here and now, that the show's going on. You can go back to your cowardly crowd, that tries to hit a man when he's down, and tell 'em Jim Tracy said that!" cried the ring-master with vigor. "You'll get no more money from me. I'm paying you wages enough as it is!"

"All right, no money—no show!" said the fellow, impudently. "We gave you half an hour to make up your mind, and if that's your answer you can take the consequences."

He started to walk away, and Tracy called after him:

"If you try to interfere or make trouble, and if you try to stop the show, I'll have you all arrested if I have to send for special detectives."

"Oh, we won't make any trouble except what you make for yourself," declared the striker. "We just won't do anything—that'll be the trouble. There's your 'main top,' and there she'll stay. We won't pull a rope or drive a peg!"

He pointed to the pile of canvas with its mass of ropes, poles and pegs that lay on the ground

ready for erection. It should have been up by this time, and the parade ought to have been under way. But with the railroad accident, the delay and the strike, the big tent in which Joe, Helen and the others were to perform was not yet raised.

"The cowards!" exclaimed Jim in a low voice; looking at Joe. "I wonder if I'd better give in to 'em?"

"Can you get others to take their places?" the young trapeze acrobat wanted to know.

"Not here. I could if I were nearer New York. But as it is——" He threw up his hands with a gesture of despair. "I guess I'll have to give in," he said. "I can't afford not to give a show. Here, you——"

He called to the departing striker.

"Wait a minute!" Joe quickly exclaimed to the ring-master. "I think we can find a way out of this."

"How?"

"Have you any men who know something about putting up the tent?"

"I know all there is to be known about it myself. But it takes more than one man to raise the 'main top.' There are a lot of the animal men and wagon drivers who used to be canvas hands. They haven't struck. But there aren't enough of them. It's no use."

"Yes, it is!" cried Joe. "We men performers will turn canvasmen for the time being. Give us some hands who know how to lay out the canvas, how to lace up the different sections, which ropes to pull on; men to show us how to drive stakes and to haul up the poles—do that and we'll have the tent up in time for the show!"

"Can you do it?" cried the ring-master, in an eager tone.

"Sure we can!" exclaimed Joe. "There are enough of us, and we're willing to turn in. You get the men who know how, and we'll be their assistants."

"It might work," said Tracy, reflectively. "I'm much obliged to you, Joe. It's worth trying. But do you think the performers will do it?"

"I'll talk to 'em," said the trapeze artist. "They'll be glad to raise the tent, rather than see a performance given up. Go get your men and I'll talk to the others."

"All right—I will."

"Did you call me?" asked the striker who had been appointed to wait on the ring-master and learn his decision.

"I did *not*!" cried Jim Tracy. "I'm through with you. We don't need your services."

"Ha!" laughed the man. "Let's see you get up the 'main top' without us."

"Stick around long enough and you'll see it," said Joe Strong.

Joe found a group of the men performers gathered in the dressing tent, discussing the situation. And while the ring-master hastened to gather up such forces as he could muster, Joe made his little talk.

"You're just the very one we want," he said to Tom Jefferson, "the strong man." "You ought to be able to put up the tent alone. Come on now, gentlemen, we must all work together," and rapidly he explained the situation to some who did not understand it.

"Will you help raise the tent?" Joe asked.

"We will!" cried the performers in a chorus.

Soon there was a busy scene in the circus "lots." Not that there is not always a busy time when the show is being made ready, but this was somewhat different. Led by Joe, the performers placed themselves under the direction of some veteran canvasmen who had been working in other departments of the circus.

Jim Tracy, who had in his day been a helper, took the part of the striking foreman of the canvas-workers, and the "main top" soon began to look as it always did. The big center poles were put in place and guyed up. The sections of canvas were laced together in the regular manner, so that they could be taken apart quickly simply by pulling on a rope. Knots tied in erecting a circus tent must be made so they are easily loosed, even in wet weather.

For a while the striking canvasmen stood and laughed at the efforts of those who were taking their places. But they soon ceased to jeer. For the tent was slowly but correctly going up.

"We'll give the show after all!" cried Joe, as he labored at lifting heavy sections of canvas, pulling on ropes or driving stakes.

"I believe we will," agreed the ring-master. "I don't know how to thank you, Joe."

"Oh, pshaw! I didn't do anything! I'm only helping the same as the rest."

"Yes, but it was your idea, and you persuaded the men to pitch in."

And, in a sense, this was true. For Joe was a general favorite with the circus performers, though he had been with them only a comparatively short time. But he had his mother's reputation back of him, as well as his father's, and Bill Watson had spoken many a good word for the young fellow. Circus folk are always loyal to their own kind, and there were many, as Joe learned later, who knew his mother by reputation, and some personally. So they were all glad to help when Joe put the case to them vividly, as he did.

Joe's popularity stood him in good stead, even though there were some who were jealous of the reputation he was making. But jealousies were cast aside on this occasion.

Even the Lascalla Brothers did their share, working side by side with Joe at putting up the tent, as they worked with him on the trapeze. The strong man was a great help, doing twice the work that the others did.

The performers wore their ordinary clothes, laying aside coats and vests as they labored. And the men who knew how circus tents must go up, saw to it that the amateurs did their work well, so there would be no danger of collapse.

While the big tent was being put up the other preparations for the show were proceeded with. Mr. Boyd and Mr. Sampson, who were part owners with Jim Tracy, arranged for a small parade, since it had been advertised. On the back of one of the elephants rode the fat lady, with a banner which explained that because of a strike of the canvasmen the usual street exhibition could not be given. The assurance was made, though, that the show itself would be the same as advertised.

"That will prevent the public from being too sympathetic with the strikers," said Jim Tracy. "The public, as a rule, doesn't care much for a strike that interferes with its pleasure."

At last the big tent was up, and all was in readiness for the afternoon performance, though it would be a little late.

"It won't be much fun taking down the tent after the show to-night," said Joe.

"Perhaps you won't have to," stated the ring-master. "I may be able to hire men to take the strikers' places before then."

"But if you can't, we'll help out," declared the young trapeze performer, though he knew it would be anything but pleasant for himself and the others, after high-tension work before a big audience, to handle heavy canvas and ropes in the dark.

The public seemed to take good-naturedly to the circus, not being over-critical of the lack of the usual big street parade. And men, women and children came in throngs to the afternoon performance.

The circus people fairly outdid themselves to give a good show, and Joe worked up a little novelty in one of his "lone" acts.

He gave an exhibition of rope-climbing, Jim Tracy introducing the act with a few remarks about the value of every one's knowing how to ascend or descend a rope when, thereby, one's life might some time be saved.

"Professor Strong will now entertain you," announced the ring-master, "and tell you something about rope-work."

Joe had hardly bargained for this, but his work as a magician, when he often had the stage to himself and had to address a crowded theatre, stood him in good stead. He was very self-confident, and he illustrated the way a beginner should learn to climb a rope.

"Don't try to go up hand over hand at first," Joe said. "And don't climb away up to the top unless you're sure you know how to come down. You may get so exhausted that you'll slip, and burn your hands severely, for the friction of rapidly sliding down a rope will cause bad burns."

Joe showed how to begin by holding the rope between the soles of the feet, letting them take the weight instead of the hands and arms. He went up and down this way, and then went up by lifting himself by his hands alone, coming down the same way—which is much harder than it looks.

Joe also illustrated the "stirrup hold," which may be used in ascending or descending a rope, to get a rest. The rope is held between the thighs, the hands grasping it lightly, and while a turn

of the rope passes under the sole of the left foot and over the toes of the same, the right foot is placed on top, pressing down the rope which passes over the left foot. In this way the rope is held from slipping, and the entire weight of the body can rest on the side of the left leg, which is in a sort of rope loop. Thus the arms are relieved.

Joe showed other holds, and also how to sit on a rope that dangled from the top of the tent. Half way up he held the rope between his thighs, and made a loop, which he threw over his left shoulder. Then, by pressing his chin down on the rope, it was held between chin and shoulder so that it could not slip. Grasping the rope with both hands above his head, Joe was thus suspended in a sitting position, almost as easily as in a chair. The crowd applauded this.

Then Joe went on with his regular trapeze work—doing some back flyaway jumps that thrilled the audience. This trick is done by grasping the trapeze bar firmly at arm's length, swinging backward and downward until the required momentum is reached. When Joe was ready he suddenly let go and turned a backward somersault to the life net.

The trick looked simple, but Joe had practised it many times before getting it perfectly. And he often had bad falls. One tendency he found was to turn over too far before letting go the bar. This was likely to cause his feet to strike the swinging bar, resulting in an ugly tumble.

The evening performance was even better attended than that of the afternoon. Jim Tracy succeeded in hiring a few men to assist with the tents, but he had not enough, and it began to look as though the performers would have to do double work again.

But there occurred one of those incidents with which circus life is replete. The place they were showing in was a large factory town, and at night crowds of men and boys—not the gentlest in the community—attended.

At something or other, a crowd of roughs felt themselves aggrieved, and under the guidance of a "gang-leader" began to make trouble. They threatened to cut the tent ropes in retaliation.

"That won't do," decided Jim Tracy. "I've got to tackle that gang, and I don't like to, for it means a fight. Still I can't have the tent collapse."

He hurriedly gathered a crowd of his own men, armed them with stakes, and charged the gang of roughs that was creating a small riot, to the terror of women and children.

The rowdies finding themselves getting the worst of it, called for help from among the factory workers, who liked nothing better than to "beat-up" a circus crowd. Jim Tracy and his men were being severely handled when a new force took a hand in the mêlée.

"Come on, boys. We can't stand for this!" shouted Jake Bantry, the leader of the striking canvasmen. "They sha'n't bust up the show, even if the boss won't give us more money."

The canvasmen were used to trouble of this kind. Seizing tent pegs, and with cries of "Hey Rube!"—the time-honored signal for a battle of this kind—the striking canvasmen rushed into the fracas.

In a short time the roughs had been dispersed, and there was no more danger of the tents being cut and made to collapse.

"I'm much obliged to you boys," said Jim Tracy to the strikers, when the affray was over. "You helped us out finely."

"It was fun for us," answered Jake Bantry. "And say, Mr. Tracy, we've been talking it over among ourselves, and seeing as how you've always treated us white, we've decided, if you'll take us back, that we'll come—and at the same wages."

"Of course I'll take you back!" exclaimed the owner heartily. "And glad to have you."

"Good! Come on, boys! Strike's broken!" cried Bantry.

So Joe and his fellow-artists did not have to turn to tent work that night.

In looking over the advance booking list one day, Joe saw Bedford marked down.

"Hello!" he cried. "I wonder if that's my town." It was, as he learned by consulting the press agent.

"Are you glad?" asked Helen.

"Well, rather, I guess!" Joe said.

And one morning Joe awakened in his berth, and looked out to see the familiar scenes of the town where he had lived so long.

"Bedford!" exclaimed Joe. "Well, I'm coming back in a very different way from the one I left it," and he chuckled as he thought of the "side-door Pullman," and the pursuing constables.

CHAPTER XVIII

HELEN'S MONEY

After breakfast Joe, who did not take part in the parade, set out to see the sights of his "home town," or, rather, he hoped to meet some of his former friends, for there were not many sights to see.

"The place hasn't changed much," Joe reflected as he passed along the familiar streets. "It seems only like yesterday that I went away. Well, Timothy Donnelly has painted his house at last, I see, and they have a new front on the drug store. Otherwise things are about the same. I wonder if I'd better go to call on the deacon. I guess I will—I don't have any hard feelings toward him. Yes, I'll go to see him and——"

Joe's thoughts were interrupted by a voice that exclaimed:

"Say! Look! There goes Joe Strong who used to live here!"

The young circus performer turned and saw Willie Norman, a small boy who lived on the street where Joe formerly dwelt.

"Hello, Willie," called Joe in greeting.

"Hello," was the answer. "Say, is it true you're with the circus? Harry Martin said you were."

"That's right—I am," Joe admitted. He had kept up a fitful correspondence with Harry and some of the other chums, and in one of his letters Joe had spoken of his change of work.

"In a circus!" exclaimed Willie admiringly. "Do they let you feed the elephant?" he asked with awe.

"No, I haven't gotten quite that far," laughed Joe. "I'm only a trapeze performer."

"Say, I'd like to see you act," Willie went on, "but I ain't got a quarter."

"Here's a free ticket," Joe said, giving his little admirer one. In anticipation of meeting some of his friends in Bedford that day, Joe had gotten a number of free admission tickets from the press agent, who was always well supplied with them. Willie's eyes glistened as he took the slip of pasteboard.

"Geewillikens!" he exclaimed. "Say, you're all right, Joe! I'm going to the circus! I wish I could run away and join one."

"Don't you dare try it!" Joe warned him. "You're too small."

He went on, meeting many former acquaintances, who turned to stare at the boy whose story had created such a stir in the town. Joe was looked upon by some as a hero, and by others as a "lost sheep." It is needless to say that Deacon Blackford was one who held the latter opinion.

Joe called on his former foster-father, but did not find him at the house. Mrs. Blackford was in, however, and was greatly surprised to see Joe. She welcomed and kissed him, and there were traces of tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed. "I am so sorry you left us, but perhaps it was all for the best, for you must live your own life, I suppose. I never really believed you took the money," she added, referring to an incident which was related in the book previous to this.

"I'm glad to hear that," Joe said. "I want to thank you for all your care of me. I didn't like to run away, but it seemed the only thing to do. And, as you say, I think it has turned out for the best. The circus life appeals to me, and I'm getting on in the business."

Mrs. Blackford was really glad to see Joe. She had a real liking for him, in spite of the fact that she had a poor opinion of circus folk and magicians, and she did not believe all the deacon believed of Joe. She could not forget the days when, while he was a little lad, she had often sung him to sleep. But these days were over now.

Joe found the deacon at the feed store. The lad's former foster-father was not very cordial in his greeting, and, in fact, seemed rather embarrassed than otherwise. Perhaps he regretted his accusation against our hero.

"Would you like to see the circus?" Joe inquired, as he was leaving the office. "I have some free tickets and——"

"What! Me go to a circus?" cried the deacon, with upraised hands. "Never! Never! Circuses and theatres are the invention of the Evil One. I am surprised at your asking me!"

Joe did it for a joke, more than for anything else, as he knew the deacon would not take a ticket. Bidding him good-bye, Joe went out to find his former chums.

They, as may well be supposed, were very glad to see him. And that they envied Joe's position goes without saying.

"Well, well! You certainly put one over on us!" exclaimed Charlie Ford admiringly. "How did you do it, Joe?"

"Oh, it just happened, I guess. More luck than anything else."

"When you got Professor Rosello out of the fire you did a good thing," commented Tom Simpson.

"Yes, I guess I did—in more ways than one," admitted Joe.

"And are you really doing trapeze acts?" inquired Henry Blake.

"Come and watch me," was Joe's invitation. "Here is a reserved seat ticket for each of you."

"Whew!" whistled Harry Martin. "Talk about the return of the prodigal! You'll make the folks here open their eyes, Joe. It isn't everybody who runs away from home who comes back as you do."

Joe told his chums some of his experiences, and they went with him out to the circus grounds, where he took them about, as only a privileged character can, showing them how the show was "put together."

"It sure is *great!*" exclaimed Charlie, ruffling up his red hair.

Joe fairly outdid himself in the performances that day. He went through his best feats, alone and with the Lascalla Brothers, with a snap and a swing that made the veteran performers look well to their own laurels. Joe did some wonderful leaping and turning of somersaults in the air, one difficult backward triple turn evoking a thundering round of applause.

And none applauded any more fervently than little Willie Norman.

"I know him!" the little lad confided to a group about him. "That's Joe Strong. He gave me a ticket to the show for nothing, mind you! I know him all right!"

"Oh, you do not!" chaffed another boy.

"I do so, and I'm going to speak to him after the show!"

This Willie proudly did, thereby refuting the skepticism of his neighbor. For the word soon passed among the town-folk that Joe Strong, who used to live with Deacon Blackford, was with the circus, and after the show he held an informal little reception in the dressing tent which a number of men and boys, and not a few women, attended.

All were curious to see behind the scenes, and Joe showed them some interesting sights. He invited his four chums to have supper with him, and the delight of Harry, Charlie, Henry and Tom may be imagined as they sat in the tent with the other circus folk, listening to the strange jargon of talk, and seeing just how the performers behaved in private.

Altogether Joe's appearance in Bedford made quite a sensation, and he was glad of the chance it afforded him to see his former friends and acquaintances, and also to let them see for themselves that circus people and actors are not all as black as they are painted. Joe was glad he could do this for the sake of his father and mother, as he realized that the wrong views held by Deacon and Mrs. Blackford were shared by many.

Joe bade good-bye to his chums and traveled on with the show, leaving, probably, many rather envious hearts behind. For there is a glamour about a circus and the theatre that blinds the youthful to the hard knocks and trouble that invariably accompany those who perform in public.

Even with Joe's superb health there were times when he would have been glad of a day's rest. But he had it only on Sundays, and whether he felt like it or not he had to perform twice a day. Of course usually he liked it, for he was enthusiastic about his work. But all is not joy and happiness in a circus. As a matter of fact Joe worked harder than most boys, and though it seemed all pleasure, there was much of it that was real labor. New tricks are not learned in an hour, and many a long day Joe and his partners spent in perfecting what afterward looked to be a simple turn.

But, all in all, Joe liked it immensely and he would not have changed for the world—at least just then.

The circus reached the town of Portland, where they expected to do a good business as it was a large manufacturing place. Here Helen found awaiting her a letter from the law firm.

"Oh, Joe!" the girl exclaimed. "I'm going to get my money here—at least that part of my fortune which isn't tied up in bonds and mortgages. We must celebrate! I think I'll give a little dinner at the hotel for you, Bill Watson and some of my friends."

"All right, Helen. Count me in."

The letter stated that a representative of the firm would call upon Helen that day in Portland, and turn over to her the cash due from her grandfather's estate.

That afternoon Helen sent word to Joe that she wanted to see him, and in her dressing room he found a young man, toward whom Joe at once felt an instinctive dislike. The man had shifty eyes, and Joe always distrusted men who could not look him straight in the face.

"This is Mr. Sanford, from the law firm, Joe," said Helen. "He has brought me my money."

"Is he your lawyer?" asked Mr. Sanford, looking toward Joe.

"No, just a friend," Helen answered.

"Is he going to look after your money for you?"

"I think Miss Morton is capable of looking after it herself," Joe put in, a bit sharply.

"Oh, of course. I didn't mean anything. Now if you'll give me your attention, Miss Morton, I'll go over the details with you."

"You needn't wait, Joe, unless you want to," Helen said. "I'd like to have you arrange about the little supper at the hotel, if you will, though."

"Sure I will!" Joe exclaimed.

The circus was to remain over night, and this would give Helen a chance for her feast, which she thought had better take place at the Portland hotel, as it would be more private than the circus tent. Joe went off to arrange for it, leaving Helen with the lawyer's clerk.

CHAPTER XIX

JOE IS SUSPICIOUS

Joe's day was already a full one, though he did not tell Helen so. He gladly undertook to arrange the little supper for her at the hotel, and it was only a coincidence that it happened on the night of a day when he had decided to work in a new trick on his trapeze, when he performed alone. It was not exactly a new trick, in the sense that it had never been done before. In fact there is very little new in trapeze work nowadays, but Joe had decided to give a little different turn to an old act. It required some preparation, and he needed to do this during the day. He was going to "put on" the trick at night, and not at the matinee.

But for the time being he gave up his hours to arranging for Helen the supper which would take place after the night performance.

Joe saw the hotel proprietor and arranged for a private room with a supper to be served for twenty-five. Helen had many more friends than that among the circus folk, but she had to limit her hospitality, though she would have liked to have them all at her little celebration. She chose, however, after Joe and Bill Watson and Benny Turton, the women performers who were more intimately associated with her in her acts, and some of the men whose acquaintance she had made since joining the Sampson show.

Joe hurried to the hotel, did what was necessary there, and then went back to the tent. He intended, when the afternoon show was over, to do some practice on his new act.

As he passed into the big tent, which was now deserted, he met Jim Tracy, who, of course, was invited to Helen's supper.

"What's all this I hear about our little lady?" asked the ring-master.

"Well, I guess it's all true," Joe answered. "She has come into a little money."

"Glad to hear it! I'll be with you to-night. Oh, by the way, Joe, I had a letter from the railroad people about our wreck, or, rather, derailment."

"Did you? What did they say?"

"They couldn't find any evidence that the fish plate was put in the switch purposely. It might have dropped there. Of course some tramp might have put it there to get revenge for being put off a train, but it would be hard to prove. And as for getting evidence against Sim Doble—why, it's out of the question. But you want to keep on looking out for yourself."

"I will," Joe promised.

After thinking the matter over Joe had decided it would be best to speak to the ring-master about the threatening letter, which had been received so close to the time when the derailment occurred. Jim Tracy had at once agreed with Joe that the discharged acrobat might possibly have been mad and rash enough to try to wreck the train, and the railroad detectives had been communicated with. But nothing had come of the investigation, and the accident had been set down as one of the many unexplained happenings that occur on railroads.

A search had been made for Doble, but he seemed to have disappeared for the time being, and Joe was glad of it.

"Ready for the new stunt?" asked Tracy, as he passed on.

"Yes; I'll pull it off to-night if nothing happens," Joe said.

He was glad there were few people in the big tent when he entered it after the afternoon performance, to put in some hard practice. Joe's own trapeze was in place, but he lowered it to the ground, and went carefully over every inch of the ropes, canvas straps, snaps, and the various fastenings to make sure nothing was wrong. He found everything all right.

It was not exactly that he was suspicious of the Lascalla Brothers, but he was taking no chances.

Joe's act worked well in practice. When he had performed his trick for the last time he saw Benny Turton, the "human fish," coming into the tent to look after his tank, about which the young performer was very particular.

"How do you like that, Ben?" asked Joe, as he finished the new trick.

"First rate. That's a thriller all right, Joe! That'll make 'em sit up and take notice. I'll have to work in something new myself if you keep on piling up the stuff."

"Oh, I guess you could do that, Ben."

The "human fish" shook his head.

"No," he said slowly, "I don't know what's the matter with me lately, Joe, but I don't seem to have ambition for anything. I go through my regular stunts, but that's all I want to do. I don't even stay under water as long as I used to, and Jim Tracy was kicking again to-day. He said I'd have to do better, but I don't see how I can. Of course he was nice about it, as he always is, but I know he's disappointed in me."

"Oh, I guess not, Ben. Maybe you'll do better to-night."

"I hope so. Anyhow you'll have a thriller for them."

"You're coming to Helen's party, aren't you?"

"Oh, sure, Joe. I wouldn't miss that. I'm glad she's got some money," and Ben spoke rather despondently.

Joe made arrangements with his helper to look after the special appliances needed for the new trick, and went to supper. He did not see Helen, and guessed that she was still busy with the law clerk.

"I hope she doesn't trust too much to that chap," mused Joe. "I don't just like his looks."

The big tent was crowded when Joe began his performance that night. He received his usual applause, and then gave the signal that he was about to put on his new act. He was hoisted up to the top trapeze, which was a short one, and to this Joe had fastened a longer one.

He sat upon the bar of this, swinging to and fro, working himself into position until he was resting on the "hocks," as performers call that portion of the leg just above the knee.

Suddenly Joe seemed to fall over backward, and there was a cry of alarm from the crowd. But he remained in position, swinging by his insteps.

In the trapeze world this is known as "drop back to instep hang." Joe had done it most effectively, but that was not all of the trick.

Quickly he grasped the ropes of the lower trapeze. He twined his legs about these, and then,

with a thrilling yell, he let himself slide, head down along the ropes, holding only by his intertwined legs and insteps, which he had padded with asbestos to take up the heat of friction.

Down the long ropes he slid until he came to a sudden stop as his outstretched hands grasped the lower bar. There he hung suspended a moment, while the audience sat thrilled, thinking it had been an accidental fall and a most miraculous escape. But Joe had planned it all out in advance, and knew it was safe, especially as the life net was under him.

He suspended himself on the bar a moment, and then made a back somersault, and amid the booming of the drum he dropped into the net and made his bows in response to the applause.

The new feat was appreciated at once, but it was some time before the crowd realized that the fall backward was not accidental.

Joe was congratulated by his fellow performers, though, as might be expected, there was some little jealousy. But Joe was used to that by this time.

It was a merry little party that gathered later in the hotel room for Helen's supper. She sat at the head of the table, with Joe on one side and Bill Watson, the veteran clown, on the other.

"Well, did you make out all right with your lawyer friend?" Joe asked.

"Oh, yes, Joe, I never had so much money at one time in my life before."

"What did you do with it?"

"I kept out enough to pay for this supper, and the rest I put in the circus ticket wagon safe."

"What, all your cash?"

"Oh, I didn't take it all, Joe."

"You didn't take it all?"

"No. Mr. Sanford—he's the law clerk, you know—said I ought not to have so much money with me, so he offered to take care for me all I didn't want to use right away."

"He's going to take care of it for you?" Joe repeated.

"Yes. He says he can invest it for me. But eat your supper, Joe."

Somehow or other Joe Strong did not feel much like eating. He had a sudden and undefinable suspicion of that law clerk.

CHAPTER XX

A FALL

There were merry hearts at the little celebration given by Helen Morton—"Mademoiselle Mortonti"—in recognition of coming into her inheritance. That is, the hearts were all merry save that of Joe Strong.

For a few seconds after Helen had made the statement about having left her money with the law clerk for investment, Joe could only stare at her. On her part the young circus rider seemed to think there was nothing unusual in what she had done.

"Congratulations, Miss Morton!" called Bill Watson, as he waved his napkin in the air. "Congratulations!"

"Why don't you call me Helen as you used to?" asked the girl.

"Oh, you're quite a rich young lady now, and I didn't think you would want me to be so familiar," he replied with a laugh.

"Goodness! I hope every one isn't going to get so formal all at once," she remarked, with a look at Joe.

"I won't—not unless you want me to," he answered.

"But why don't you eat?" she asked him. "You sit there as if you had no appetite. I'm as hungry as a bear—one of our own circus bears, too. Come, why don't you eat and be happy?"

"I—I'm thinking," Joe remarked.

"This isn't the time to think!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so glad I have a little money. I won't have to worry now if I shouldn't be able to go on with my circus act. I could take a vacation if I wanted to, couldn't I?"

"Are you going to?" asked Joe. Somehow he felt a sudden sinking sensation in the region of his heart. At least he judged it was his heart that was affected.

"No, not right away," Helen answered. "I'm going to stay with the show until it goes into winter quarters, anyhow."

"And after that?"

"Oh, I don't know."

The little celebration went merrily on. Helen's health was proposed many times, being pledged in lemonade, grape juice and ginger ale. She blushed with pleasure as she sat between Joe and the veteran clown, for many nice things were said about her, as one after another of her guests congratulated her on her good fortune.

"Speech! Speech!" some one called out.

"What do they mean?" asked Helen of Bill Watson.

"They want you to say something," the clown said.

"Oh, I never could—never in the world!" and Helen blushed more vividly than before.

"Try it," urged Joe. "Just thank them. You can do that."

Much confused, Helen arose at her place.

"I'd rather ride in a circus ring ten times over than make a speech," she confessed in an aside to Joe.

"Go on," he urged.

"My dear friends," she began tremblingly, "I want to thank you for all the nice things you have said about me, and I want to say that I'm glad—glad——" She paused and blushed again.

"Glad to be here," prompted Joe.

"Yes, that's it—glad to be here, and I—er—I— Oh, you finish for me, Joe!" she begged, as she sat down amid laughter.

Then the supper went on, more merrily than before. But it had to come to an end at last, for the show people needed their rest if they were to perform well the next day. And most of them, especially those like Joe and the acrobats, who depended on their nerve as well as their strength, needed unbroken slumber.

As Joe walked back to the railroad, where their sleeping cars were standing on a siding, the young trapeze performer asked Helen about her business transaction with the law clerk. He had not had a chance to do this at the supper.

"Well," began the girl, "as you know, he brought me the cash, Joe. Oh, how nice those new bills did look. He had it all in new bills for me. Mr. Pike told him to do that, he said, as they didn't know whether I could use a check, traveling about as I am. Anyhow he had the bills for me—about three thousand dollars it was. The rest of my little fortune, you know, is in stocks and bonds. I only get the interest, but this cash was from the sale of some of grandfather's property."

"Then you didn't keep the cash yourself?" Joe asked.

"No. Mr. Sanford said it wouldn't be safe for me to carry so much money around with me. Do you think it would?"

"Of course not," Joe agreed. "But you could have let our treasurer keep it for you. He could have banked it."

"Yes; Mr. Sanford thought of that, he said. But he also said if my money was in the bank I wouldn't get more than three per cent. on it. I don't know exactly what he means—I never was any good at fractions, and I know nothing about business. But, anyhow, Mr. Sanford kindly explained that I would get more interest on my money if it was invested than if it was in a bank. And he offered to invest for me all I didn't need at once. Wasn't he kind?"

"Perhaps," admitted Joe, rather dubiously. "How is he going to invest it?"

"Oh, he knows lots of ways, he said, being in the law office. But he said he thought it would be best to buy oil stock with it. Oil stock was sure to go up in price, he said; and I would make

money on that as well as interest, or dividends—or something like that. Wasn't he good?"

"To himself maybe, yes," answered Joe.

"What do you mean?" inquired Helen.

"Oh, well, maybe it's all right," Joe said. He did not want to alarm the girl unnecessarily, but he had a deeper suspicion than before of Sanford.

"I think it's just fine," Helen went on. "I have quite some cash with me—I'm going to let our treasurer keep that, and give me some when I need it. Then, from time to time, I'll get dividends on my oil stock."

"Maybe," said Joe, in a low voice.

"What?" asked Helen, quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind," proceeded Joe. "Anyhow we had a good time to-night."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I certainly did, Helen."

They parted near the train, Joe to go to his car and Helen to hers.

"Oh, by the way," Joe called after her. "Did Mr. Sanford say what oil company it was he was going to invest your money in?"

"Yes, he told me. It's the Circle City Oil Syndicate. He has some stock in it, he told me, and it's a fine concern. Oh, Joe, I'm so glad I have inherited a little fortune."

"So am I," Joe returned, wondering at the same time if he would ever hear anything encouraging of his mother's relatives in England.

"The Circle City Oil Syndicate," Joe murmured as he entered his car. "I must look them up. This fellow, Sanford, may be all right, but he struck me as being a pretty slick individual, who would look out for himself first, and the firm's clients afterward. He'll bear investigating."

However, nothing could be done that night. The clerk had gone back with the larger part of Helen's money, and Joe did not want to cause her worry by speaking of his suspicions.

The circus did a good business the next day, drawing even larger throngs than to the previous performances. The story of Helen's good fortune was printed in the local paper, with an account of the celebration supper she gave, and when she rode into the ring on Rosebud the applause that greeted her was very pronounced.

Joe repeated his "drop back to instep hang" that afternoon. It was rather a perilous feat and he was not so sure of it as he was of his other exercises. But it was a "thriller" and that was what the public seemed to want—something that made them gasp, sit up, and hold their breath while they waited to see if "anything would happen" to the reckless performer.

Joe climbed up to his small trapeze, swung on it and then fell backward for his first instep hang. He accomplished this successfully, and then came the thrilling slide down the longer ropes.

Down Joe shot, depending on stopping himself with his outstretched and down-hanging hands when he reached the second bar.

But the inevitable "something" happened. Joe's hands slipped from the bar, his head struck it a glancing blow, and the next instant he felt himself falling head first down toward the life net.

CHAPTER XXI

JOE HEARS SOMETHING

Women and children screamed, and there were hoarse shouts from the men who witnessed Joe's fall. At first some thought it was only part of the acrobatic trick, but a single glance at the desperate struggles of the young trapeze performer dispelled this idea.

For Joe was struggling desperately in the air to prevent himself from falling head first into the life net.

It might be thought that one could fall into a loose, sagging net in any position and not be

hurt. But this is not so. A fall into a net from a great height is often as dangerous as landing on the ground. Circus folk must know how to fall properly.

If the person falling lands on his head he is likely to dislocate, if not to break, his neck, and falling on one's face may sometimes be dangerous. The best way, of course, is to land on one's feet, and this was what Joe was trying to bring about.

When he realized that he had missed grasping the bar of the second trapeze (though he could not understand his failure) he knew he must turn over, and that quickly, or he would strike on his head in the net. He tried to turn a somersault, but he was at a disadvantage, not having prepared for that in advance.

"I've got to turn! I've got to turn!" he thought desperately, as he fell through space.

He did manage to get partly over and when he landed in the net he took the force of the blow partly on his head and partly on his shoulder. Everything seemed to get black around him, and there was a roaring in his ears. Then Joe Strong knew nothing. He had been knocked unconscious by the fall.

The circus audience—or that part of it immediately near Joe's trapezes—was at once aware that something unusual had occurred.

Some women arose, as though to rush out. Others screamed and one or two children began to cry. A slight panic was imminent, and Jim Tracy realized this.

From where she was putting her horse, Rosebud, through his paces Helen saw what happened to Joe. In an instant she jumped from the saddle, and ran across the ring toward the net in which he lay, an inert form.

Other circus performers and attendants rushed to aid Joe, and this added to the confusion and excitement. Many in the audience were standing up, trying to see what had happened, and those behind, whose view was obstructed, cried:

"Sit down! Down in front!"

"Give us some music!" ordered Jim Tracy of the band, which had stopped playing when Joe performed his trick in order that it might be more impressive. A lively tune was started, and though it may seem heartless, in view of the fact that a performer possibly was killed, it was the best thing to do under the circumstances, for it calmed the audience.

Tender hands lifted Joe out of the net, and carried him toward the dressing room.

"Go on with the show!" the ring-master ordered the performers who had left their stations. "Go on with the show. We'll look after him. There are plenty of us to do it."

And the show went on. It had to.

"Is he—is he badly hurt?" faltered Helen, as she walked beside the four men who were carrying Joe on a stretcher which had been brought from the first aid tent. The circus was always ready to look after those hurt in accidents.

"I don't think so—he took the fall pretty well—only partly on his head," said Bill Watson, who had stopped his laughable antics to rush over to Joe. "He may be only stunned."

"I hope so," breathed Helen.

"You'd better get back to your ring," suggested Bill. "Finish your act."

"It was almost over," Helen objected. "I can't go back—now. Not until I see how he is."

"All right—come along then," said the old clown, sympathetically. He guessed how matters were between Helen and Joe. "I don't believe the boss will mind much. There's enough of the show left for 'em to look at."

He glanced down at Joe, who lay unconscious on the stretcher. They were now in the canvas screened passage between the dressing tent and the larger one, where the performance had been resumed. Helen put out her hand and touched Joe's forehead. He seemed to stir slightly.

"Have they sent for a doctor?" she asked.

"They'll get one from the crowd," replied Bill. "There's always one or more in a circus audience."

And he was right. As they placed Joe on a cot that had been quickly made ready for him, a physician, summoned from the audience by the ring-master, came to see what he could do. Silently Helen, Bill and the others stood about while the medical man made his examination.

"Will he die?" Helen asked in a whisper.

"Not at once—in fact not for some years to come, I think," replied the physician with a smile. "He has had a bad fall, and he will be laid up for a time. But it is not serious."

Helen's face showed the relief she felt.

"He'll have to go to a hospital, though," continued the medical man. "His neck is badly strained, and so are the muscles of his shoulder. He won't be able to swing on a trapeze for a week or so."

Bill Watson whistled a low note. He knew what it meant for a circus performer to be laid up.

"Please take him to a hospital," cried Helen impulsively, "and see that he has a good physician and a nurse—I mean, you look after him yourself," she added quickly, as she saw the doctor smiling at her.

"And have a trained nurse for him. I'll pay the bill," she went on. "I'm so glad that money came to me. I'll use some of it for Joe."

"She just inherited a little fortune," explained Bill in a whispered aside to the medical man. "They're quite fond of each other—those two."

"So it seems. Well, he'll need a nurse and medical treatment for a while to come. I'll go and arrange to have him taken to the hospital. Has he any friends that ought to be notified—not that he is going to die, but they might like to know."

"I guess he hasn't any friends but us here in the circus. His father and mother are dead, and he ran away from his foster-father—a good thing, too, I guess. Well, the show will have to go on and leave him here, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, certainly. He can't travel with you."

The ambulance came and took Joe away. Jim Tracy communicated with the hospital authorities, ordering them to give the young trapeze performer the best possible care in a private room, adding that the management would pay the bill.

"That has already been taken care of," the superintendent of the hospital informed the ring-master. "A Miss Morton has left funds for Mr. Strong's case."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Jim Tracy. Then he smiled.

The circus neared its close. The animal tent came down, the lions, tigers, horses and elephants were taken to their cars. The performers donned their street clothes and went to their sleeping cars.

Helen, Benny Turton and Bill Watson paid a visit to the hospital just before it was time for the circus train to leave. Joe had not recovered consciousness, but he was resting easily, the nurse said.

"Tell him to join the show whenever he is able," was the message Jim Tracy had left for Joe, "and not to worry. Everything will be all right."

"Good-bye," whispered Helen close to Joe's ear, but he did not hear her.

And the circus moved on, leaving stricken Joe behind.

It was nearly morning when he came out of his unconsciousness with a start that shook the bed.

"Quiet now," said the soothing voice of the nurse.

Joe looked at her, wonder showing in his eyes. Then his gaze roved around the hospital room. He looked down at the white coverings on his enameled bed and then, realizing where he was, he asked:

"What happened?"

"You had a fall from your trapeze, they tell me," the nurse said.

"Oh, yes, I remember now. Am I badly hurt?"

"The doctor does not think so. But you must be quiet now. You are to take this."

She held a glass of medicine to his lips.

"But I must know about it," Joe insisted. "I've got to go on with the show. Has the circus left?"

"Hours ago, yes. It's all right. You are to stay here with us until you are better. A Mr. Tracy told me to tell you."

"Oh, yes, Jim—the ring-master. Well I—I guess I'll have to stay whether I want to or not."

Joe had tried to raise his head from the pillow, but a severe pain, shooting through his neck and shoulders, warned him that he had better lie quietly. He also became aware that his head was bandaged.

"I must be in pretty bad shape," he said.

"No, not so very," replied the trained nurse cheerfully. "But you must keep quiet if you are to get well quickly. The doctor will be in to see you soon."

Joe sunk into a sort of doze, and when he awakened again the doctor was in his room.

"Well, how about me?" asked the young performer.

"You might be a whole lot worse," replied the medical man with a smile. "It's just a bad wrench and sprain. You'll be lame and sore for maybe two weeks, but eventually you'll be able to go back, risking your neck again."

"Oh, there's not such an awful lot of risks," Joe said. "This was just an accident—my first of any account. I can't understand how my hands slipped off the bar. Guess I didn't put enough resin on them. How long will I be here?"

"Oh, perhaps a week—maybe less."

"Did they bring my pocketbook—I mean my money?"

"You don't have to worry about that," said the doctor. "It has all been attended to. A Miss Morton made all the arrangements."

"Oh," was all Joe said, but he did a lot of thinking.

Joe's injury was more painful than serious. His sore muscles had to be treated with liniment and electricity, and often massaged. This took time, but in less than a week he was able to be out of bed and could sit in an easy chair, out on one of the verandas.

Of course Joe wrote to Helen as soon as he could, thanking her and his other friends for what they had done for him. In return he received a letter from Helen, telling him how she—and all of the circus folk—missed him.

There was also a card from Benny Turton, and a note from Jim Tracy, telling Joe that his place was ready for him whenever he could come back. But he was not to hurry himself. They had put no one in his place on the bill, simply cutting his act out. The Lascalla Brothers worked with another trapeze performer, who gave up his own act temporarily to take Joe's position.

"Well, I guess everything will be all right," reflected our hero. "But I'll join the show again as soon as I can."

Joe was sitting on the sunny veranda one afternoon in a sort of doze. Other convalescent patients were near him, and he had been listening, rather idly, to their talk. He was startled to hear one man say:

"Well, I'd have been all right, and I could have my own automobile now, if I hadn't been foolish enough to speculate in oil stocks."

"What kind did you buy?" another patient asked.

"Oh, one of those advertised so much—they made all sorts of claims for it, and I was simple enough to believe them. I put every cent I had saved up in the Circle City Oil Syndicate, and now I can whistle for my cash—just when I need it too, with hospital and doctor bills to pay."

"Can't you get any of it back?"

"I don't think so. In fact I'd sell my stock now for a dollar a share and be glad to get it. I paid twenty-five. Well, it can't be helped."

Joe looked up and looked over at the speaker. He was a middle-aged man, and he recognized him as a patient who had come in for treatment for rheumatism.

Joe wondered whether he had heard aright.

"The Circle City Oil Syndicate," mused Joe. "That's the one Helen has her money in—or, rather, the one that San ford put her money in for her. I wonder if it can be the same company. I must find out, and if it is—"

Joe did not know just what he would do. What he had overheard caused him to be vaguely uneasy. His old suspicions came back to him.

CHAPTER XXII

BAD NEWS

Joe Strong waited until he had a chance to speak privately to the man who had admitted losing money in oil stocks. This hospital patient was a Mr. Anton Buchard, and his room was not far from Joe's.

"Excuse me," began the young trapeze performer in opening the talk. "But a short time ago I happened to overhear what you were telling your friend about some oil stocks—the Circle City Syndicate. I didn't mean to listen, but I couldn't help hearing what you were saying."

"Oh, don't let that part worry you," said Mr. Buchard. "It's no secret that I lost my money in that wild-cat speculation. But are you interested in it?"

"To a certain extent I am," Joe answered.

"I hope you didn't buy any of the worthless stock."

"No, but a friend of mine was induced to. That is—er—she—she has some stock of the Circle City Oil Syndicate. It may not be the same as that you were speaking of."

"No, that is true. There are many oil concerns in the market, and lots of them are legitimate, and are making money. But there are plenty of others which are frauds. And the one I invested in is that kind.

"Of course, as you say, it may not be the same as that in which your friend holds stock, even if it has the same name. Would you know any of the officers or directors of the concern in which your friend holds stock?"

"I'm afraid not," Joe replied. "I did not see her stock certificates. She bought them through a law clerk named Sanford."

Mr. Buchard shook his head.

"I don't recognize that name," he said. "But of course anybody could sell the stock. How did your friend ever come to be interested in this concern?"

Thereupon Joe told of Helen's inheritance, mentioning the fact that he and she both were in the circus.

"The circus, eh!" exclaimed the man. "Well, now that's interesting! I remember, when I was a boy, it was my great ambition to run away and join a circus. But I dare say it isn't such a life of roses as I imagined."

"There's plenty of hard work," Joe told him, "and then something like this is likely to happen to you at any time—especially if you are on the trapeze," and he motioned to the bandages still around his neck and shoulders.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Mr. Buchard, when Joe had finished telling of Helen's fortune. "I'm going out of here in a couple of days. I'm getting much better—that is until the next attack. I'll get out my worthless certificates of stock in the Circle City Oil Syndicate, and bring you one. You can then see the names of the officers and directors, and can compare them with the names on Miss Morton's stock. If they are the same it's pretty sure to be the same company."

"And if it is," asked Joe, "would you advise her to sell out?"

"Sell out! My dear boy, I only hope she will be able to. I wish I had known in time—I'd have sold out quickly enough. I never should have bought the stuff. But it's too late to worry about that now. The money is lost.

"Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll bring you a stock certificate and you can compare it with Miss Morton's when you see her. Are you going out soon?"

"In a few days, I hope. I want to get back to the circus."

"I don't blame you. It isn't very cheerful here, though they do the best they can for you."

Mr. Buchard was as good as his word. The day after he left the hospital he came back to call on Joe.

"Here's a certificate," he said, handing over an elaborately engraved yellow-backed sheet of paper. "Take it with you, and show it to Miss Morton."

"Thank you," the young trapeze performer responded. "I'll mail yours back to you as soon as I've compared the names."

"Oh, you don't need to do that," said Mr. Buchard with a rueful laugh. "It isn't worth the price of a good cigar."

Joe wrote to Helen, telling her he would soon be with the circus again, but he did not mention the stock certificate.

"There'll be time enough to tell her when I find out if it's the same concern," he reasoned. "It may not be. After all, the stock Sanford sold her may be valuable."

But Joe's hope was a faint one.

The day came when he was able to leave the hospital. He found that not only had all bills been paid, but that there was an allowance to his credit. Helen had thought he would need money to travel with, and had left him a sum.

"Of course I'll pay her back when I get the chance," Joe reflected. "The circus will pay the hospital and doctor's bills—they always do. And I've got money enough saved up to pay Helen back."

Joe was really making a good salary, and he was careful of his money, not wasting it as some of the more reckless performers did.

He said good-bye to his nurse, to the orderlies and to the physician who had attended him.

"Now don't try to rush things," the doctor warned Joe. "You must favor your neck and shoulder muscles for a couple of weeks yet. They will be lame and sore if you don't. Take it easy, and gradually work up to your former exploits. If you do that you'll be all right."

Joe promised to be careful, and then, with the stock certificate safely in his pocket—though it was of no value, he reflected—he set out to rejoin the circus, which had moved on several hundred miles since his accident.

"I wonder if she'll lose her money," mused Joe, as he rode on in the train. "It would be too bad if she did. Of course it isn't all in this oil syndicate, but enough of it is to make a big hole in her little fortune. Hang it all, if this oil stock turns out bad I'll take that Sanford up to the top of the tent and drop him off."

He smiled grimly at this novel form of revenge. But really he was very much in earnest.

"Something will have to be done," Joe decided. But he did not know just what.

In due time he reached the town where the circus was showing. As Joe's train pulled in he saw, on a siding, the big yellow cars, with the name Sampson Brothers painted on their sides. There were the flat vehicles on which the big animal cages stood, box cars for the horses and elephants and the sleeping cars in which the company traveled.

"Oh, but it's good to get back!" exclaimed Joe.

The parade was in progress as he walked along the main street. He did not stop to watch it, having seen it often enough. Besides he was anxious to talk to Helen, and he knew he would find her at the tent at this hour, since she was not in the parade.

As Joe turned in at the circus lots he saw several of the attendants and canvasmen.

"Hello!" they called cheerily. "Glad to see you with us again!"

"And I'm glad to be back!" Joe exclaimed heartily. "How's everything?"

"Oh, fine."

"Had any trouble?"

"Not much since you had yours. Had to shoot Princess a couple of towns back."

"You mean the lioness?"

"Yes. She went on a rampage and there was nearly a bad accident, so we had to kill her."

"Too bad," remarked Joe, for he knew what a loss it meant to a show when a fine animal, such as Princess was, must be disposed of. "Still it was better than to have her kill her trainer or some one," he added.

"That's right," agreed a canvasman.

Joe passed on to the dressing tent. Helen saw him coming and ran to meet him.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad to see you! Are you all right again?"

"Quite, thank you. I'm a little lame and stiff yet, but I'll soon get limbered up when I get in my tights and feel myself swinging from a trapeze."

"Oh, but you must be careful, Joe."

"I will. I don't want to have another accident. And now about yourself. How have you been?"

"Fine."

"And Rosebud?"

"The same as ever. I've taught him a new trick. I must show you. I haven't put it on in public yet."

"I shall like to see him. Well, you haven't had any more fortunes left to you, have you?"

"No, indeed. I wish I had. But I can increase what I have."

"How?"

"Just buy more oil stock. I had a letter from Mr. Sanford, saying he could get me some more. It's going up in price; so he advised me to buy at once."

"Are you going to?"

"Would you?" Helen asked.

"I'll tell you later," Joe answered. "Have you one of the stock certificates you did buy?"

"Yes. In my trunk. Do you want to see it?"

Joe did and said so. Helen got it for him and Joe compared it with the one the man in the hospital had given him. His heart sank as he saw that the names of the officers and directors were the same. The Circle City Oil Syndicate was a failure.

Joe's face must have reflected his emotions, for Helen asked him:

"What's the matter? Is anything wrong?"

"I am afraid I have bad news for you," Joe replied.

"In what way? You're not going to——"

"It's about your stock. I'm sorry to tell you that your oil stock is worthless—part of your fortune is gone, Helen!"

CHAPTER XXIII

HELEN GOES

Helen looked dazed for a few seconds. She stared at Joe as though she did not understand what he had said. She looked at the oil stock certificates in his hand. Joe continued to regard them dubiously.

"Worthless—my investment worthless?" Helen asked, after a bit.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Joe replied. "Of course I don't know much about stocks, bonds and so on, but a man said this stock certificate wasn't worth the price of a good cigar," and he held up the one the hospital patient had given him. "Yours is the same kind, Helen, I'm sorry to say."

"How do you know, Joe? Let me see them."

Joe gave her the two papers—elaborately printed, and lavishly enough engraved to be government money, but aside from that worthless.

Then Joe told of the incident in the hospital—how he had accidentally heard the man speak of the Circle City Oil Syndicate, and the conversation that followed.

"If what he says is true, Helen, your money is gone," Joe finished.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." she said slowly. "Oh, dear, isn't it too bad? And I was just thinking how

nice it would be if I could increase my fortune. Now I am likely to lose it. I wish I had known more about business. I'd never have let this man fool me."

"I wish I had, too," remarked Joe. "Then I'd have advised you not to risk your money in oil. But perhaps it isn't too late yet."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we may be able to sell back this stock. Of course it would hardly be right to sell it to an innocent person, who did not know of its worthlessness, for then they would lose also. But I mean the Syndicate might buy it back, rather than have it become known that the concern was worthless. I don't know much about such things."

"Neither do I," agreed Helen. "I'll tell you what let's do, Joe. Let's ask Bill Watson. He used to be in business before he became a clown, and he might tell us what to do."

"A good idea," commented Joe. "We'll do it."

The old clown was in the dressing room, but he came out when Helen and Joe summoned him, half his face "made up," with streaks of red, white and blue grease paint.

"Oh, Bill, we're in such trouble!" cried Helen,

"Trouble!" exclaimed Bill. The word seemed hardly to fit in with his grotesque character. "What trouble?"

"It's about my money," Helen went on. "I'm going to lose it all, Joe thinks."

"Oh, not all!" exclaimed the young trapeze performer quickly. "Only what you invested in oil stock. Here's the story, Bill," and Joe related his part of it, Helen supplying the information needed from her end.

"Now," went on Joe, as he concluded, "what we want to know is—can Helen save any of this oil money?"

Bill Watson was silent a moment. Then he slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he answered. "Money invested in wild-cat oil wells is seldom recovered. Of course you could bring a lawsuit against this Sanford, but the chances are he's skipped out by this time."

"Oh, no, he hasn't," Helen exclaimed. "I had a letter from him only the other day. He asked me if I didn't want to buy some more stock. I know where to find him."

Once more the veteran clown shook his head.

"He might allow you to find him if he thought you were bringing him more cash for his worthless schemes," he said, "but if he found out you wanted to serve papers on him in a suit, or to get hold of him to make him give back the money he took from you, Helen, that would be a different story. I'm afraid you wouldn't see much of Mr. Sanford then. He'd be mighty scarce."

"Could we sell back the stock to the oil company?" Joe wanted to know.

"Hardly," answered the clown. "They make that stock to sell to the public, and they never buy it back unless there's a chance for them to make money. And, according to Joe's tale, there isn't in this case."

"Not by what that man said," affirmed the young trapeze performer.

"I suppose the only thing to do," went on the old clown, "would be to give the case into the hands of a good lawyer, and let him see what he could do with it. Turn over the stock to him, give him power to act for you, Helen, and wait for what comes. You'll be traveling on with the show, and you can't do much, nor Joe either, though I know he would help you if he could, and so would I."

"That's what!" exclaimed Joe heartily.

"I'll do just as you say," agreed Helen. "But it does seem too bad to lose my money, and I counted on doing so much with it. But it can't be helped."

She was more cheerful over it than Joe thought she would be. He suspected that she had not altogether lost hope, but as for himself Joe counted the money gone, and it was not a small sum to lose.

"Come on, Helen," he said. "I noticed a lawyer's office on the main street as I was looking at the parade. We'll go there and get him to take the case. We'll be out of here to-night and we can leave matters in his hands, with instructions to send us word when he has the money back."

"And I'm afraid you'll never get that word," said the old clown.

There was time enough before the afternoon performance for Joe and Helen to pay a visit to the law office. Joe also reported to Jim Tracy, who was glad to see him.

"I don't want you to get on the trapeze to-day," said the ring-master. "Take a little light practice first for a few days. And do all you can for her," he added in a low voice, motioning to Helen.

"I sure will!" Joe exclaimed fervently.

The lawyer listened to the story as Joe and Helen told it to him, and agreed to take the case against Sanford and the Circle City Oil Syndicate for a small fee.

"I'll do the best I can," he said, "but I'm afraid I can't promise you much in results. Let me have the papers and your future address."

Joe put on his suit of tights for that afternoon, though he did not take part in the trapeze work. He fancied that the Lascalla Brothers were not very glad to see him, but this may have been fancy, for they were cordial enough as far as words went.

"Maybe they thought I would be laid up permanently," reasoned Joe. "Then they could have their former partner back. I wonder if he's been around lately?"

He made some inquiries, but no one had noticed Sim Doble hanging about the lots as he had done shortly after his discharge. Nor had there been, as Joe had a faint suspicion there might be, any connection between the train wreck and the discharged employee.

"I don't believe Sim would be so desperate as to wreck a train just to get even with me," decided Joe. "I guess it was just a coincidence. He only wrote that threatening letter as a bluff."

Helen Morton did not allow her distress over the prospective loss of her money to interfere with her circus act. She put Rosebud through his paces in the ring, and received her share of applause at the antics of the clever horse. Helen did a new little trick—the one she had told Joe about.

She tossed flags of different nations to different parts of the ring, and then told Rosebud to fetch them to her, one after the other, calling for them by name.

The intelligent horse made no mistakes, bringing the right flag each time.

"And now," said Helen at the conclusion of her act, "show me what all good little children do when they go to bed at night."

Rosebud bent his forelegs and bowed his head between them as if he were saying his prayers.

"That's a good horse!" ejaculated Helen. "Now come and get your sugar and give me a kiss," and the animal daintily picked up a lump of the sweet stuff from Helen's hand, and then lightly touched her cheek with his velvety muzzle.

Then with a leap the pretty young rider vaulted into the saddle and rode out of the ring amid applause.

"You're doing beautifully, Helen!" was Joe's compliment, as Helen rode out.

"I may be all right on a horse," she answered, "but I don't know much about money and business."

The show moved on that night, and the next day, when the tent was set up, Joe indulged in light practice. He found the soreness almost gone, and as he worked alone, and with the Lascalla Brothers, his stiffness also disappeared.

"I think I'll go on to-night," he told the ring-master.

"All right, Joe. We'll be glad to have you, of course. But don't take any chances."

Mail was distributed among the circus folk that day following the afternoon performance. Joe had letters from some people to whom he had written in regard to his mother's relatives in England. One gave him the address of a London solicitor, as lawyers are designated over there, and Joe determined to write to him.

"Though I guess my chances of getting an inheritance are pretty slim," he told Helen. "I'm not lucky, like you."

"I hope you don't call me lucky!" she exclaimed. "Having money doesn't do me any good. I lose it as fast as I get it."

She had a letter from her lawyer, stating that he had looked further into the case since she had left the papers with him, and that he had less hope than ever of ever being able to get back the cash paid for the oil stock.

Joe did not intend to work in any new tricks the first evening of his reappearance after the accident. But when he got started he felt so well after his rest and his light practice, that he made up his mind he would put on a couple of novelties. Not exactly novelties, either, for they are known to most gymnasts though not often done in a circus.

Joe went up to the top of the tent. Near the small platform, from which he jumped in the long swing, to catch Tonzo Lascalla in the trapeze, Joe had fastened a long cotton rope about two inches in diameter.

He caught hold of the rope in both hands and passed it between his thighs, letting it rest on the calf of his left leg. He then brought the rope around over the instep of his left foot, holding it in position with pressure by the right foot, which was pressed against the left.

"Here I come!" Joe cried, and then, letting go with his hands, Joe stretched out his arms, and came down the rope in that fashion, the pressure of his feet on the rope that passed between them regulating his speed.

It was a more difficult feat than it appeared, this descending a rope without using one's hands, but it seemed to thrill the crowd sufficiently.

But Joe had not finished. He knew another spectacular act in rope work, which looked difficult and dangerous, and yet was easier to perform than the one he had just done. Often in trapeze work this is the case.

The spectator may be thrilled by some seemingly dangerous and risky act, when, as a matter of fact, it is easy for the performer, who thinks little of it. On the other hand that which often seems from the circus seats to be very easy may be so hard on the muscles and nerves as to be actually dreaded by the performer.

Having himself hauled up to the top of the tent again, Joe once more took hold of the rope. He held himself in position, the rope between his legs, which he thrust out at right angles to his body, his toes pointing straight out. Suddenly he "circled back" to an inverted hang, his head now pointing to the ground many feet below. Then he quickly passed the rope about his waist, under his right armpit, crossed his feet with the rope between them, the toes of the right foot pressing the cotton strands against the arch of his left foot.

"Ready!" cried Joe.

There was a boom of the big drum, a ruffle of the snare, and Joe slid down the rope head first with outstretched arms, coming to a sudden stop with his head hardly an inch from the hard ground. But Joe knew just what he was doing and he could regulate his descent to the fraction of an inch by the pressure of his legs and feet on the rope.

There was a yell of delight from the audience at this feat, and Joe, turning right side up, acknowledged the ovation tendered him. Then he ran from the tent—his part in the show being over.

For a week the circus showed, moving from town to city. It was approaching the end of the season. The show would soon go into winter quarters, and the performers disperse until summer came again.

Helen had heard nothing favorable from the lawyer, and she and Joe had about given up hope of getting back the money.

The circus had reached a good-sized city in the course of its travels, and was to play there two days. On the afternoon of the first day, just before the opening of the performance, Joe went to Helen's tent to speak to her about something.

"She isn't here," Mrs. Talfo, the fat lady, told him. "She's gone."

"Gone!" echoed Joe. "Isn't she going to play this afternoon?"

"I believe not—no."

"But where did she go?"

"You'll have to ask Jim Tracy. I saw her talking to him. She seemed quite excited about something."

"I wonder if anything could have happened," mused Joe. "They couldn't have discharged her. That act's too good. But it looks funny. She wouldn't have left of her own accord without saying good-bye. I wonder what happened."

CHAPTER XXIV

JOE FOLLOWS

Some little time elapsed before Joe found a chance to speak to Jim Tracy. There had been a slight accident to one of the circus wagons in unloading from the train for that day's show, and the ring-master was kept very busy. One of the elephants was slightly hurt also.

But finally the confusion was straightened out, and our hero had a chance to ask the question that was troubling him.

"What had become of Helen?"

"Why, I don't know where she went," Jim Tracy said. "She came to me almost as soon as we got in this morning, and wanted to know if she could have the afternoon off."

"Cut out her act?" Joe asked.

"That's it. Of course I didn't want to lose her out of the show, but as long as we're going to be here two days, and considering the fact that she hadn't had a day off since the show started out this season, I said she might go. And so she went—at least I suppose she did."

"Yes, she's gone," Joe replied. "But where?"

Jim Tracy did not know and said so. He was too busy to talk much more about it.

"She'll be back in time for the evening performance—that's all I know," he told Joe.

The young trapeze performer sought out the old clown and told him what had taken place.

"Helen gone!" exclaimed Bill. "That's queer!"

"I thought maybe you'd know about it, Bill."

"Me? No, not a thing. She never said a word to me. Are you sure you and she didn't have any—er—little tiff?"

"Of course not!" and Joe blushed under his tan. "She didn't tell me she was going."

"Oh, well, she'll be back to-night, Jim says. I guess she's all right. Now I've got to get busy."

But Joe was not satisfied. It was not like Helen to go off in this way, and he felt there was something strange about it.

"I do hope she isn't going to try to make any more investments with her money—that is with what she has left," he mused. "Maybe she heard of some other kind of stock she can buy, and she thinks from the profits of that she can make up for what she is sure to lose in the oil investment. Poor Helen! It certainly is hard luck!"

Joe thought so much of his new theory that he visited the circus treasurer with whom Helen had left some of her money.

"No, it's here in the safe—what she left with me," the treasurer said. "Too bad about her losing that nice sum, wasn't it? It will take her quite a while to save that much."

"I wish I had hold of the law clerk who tricked her into buying the oil stock," said Joe with energy. "I'd make him eat the certificates, and then I'd—well, I don't know what I would do."

"But you haven't got him," said the treasurer, "and I guess their kind take good care to keep out of the way of those they've swindled."

"I guess so," Joe agreed.

There was nothing he could do at present, and he had soon to go on with his act. But Joe Strong made up his mind if Helen were not back early to make a thorough search for her.

"That is if I can get any trace of her," he went on. "She may run into danger without knowing it, for she hasn't had much experience in life, even if she is a circus rider."

Joe was himself again now. His muscles seemed to have benefited by the rest, and the young trapeze performer went through all his old acts, alone and with the Lascalla Brothers, and Joe also put on one or two new things, or, rather, variations of old ones.

In one part of his performance he balanced himself upon his neck and shoulders on a trapeze high up in the top of the tent. He was almost standing upon his head. While this is not difficult for a performer to do when the trapeze is stationary it is not easy when the apparatus is swinging.

Joe was going to try that.

A ring hand pulled on a light rope attached to the trapeze on which Joe was thus balanced on his neck and set the bar and ropes in motion. They moved slowly, and through only a short arc at first. But in a little while Joe, in his perilous position, was executing a long swing.

His feet were pressed against the ropes and his hands were on his hips. He balanced his body instinctively in this posture. But this was not all of the trick.

When the trapeze was swinging as high as he wanted it, Joe suddenly brought his legs together. For an instant he poised there on the bar, supporting himself on his neck and shoulders, as straight as an arrow.

Then, with a shout to warn those below, he fell over in a graceful curve, and began a series of rapid somersaults in the air.

Down he fell, the hushed attention of the big crowd being drawn to him. Just before reaching the life net, Joe straightened out and fell into the meshes feet first, bouncing out on a mat and from there bowing his thanks for the applause.

Thus Joe brought his act to a close for that afternoon, and he was glad of it for he wanted to go out and see if Helen had returned. As soon as he had changed to his street clothes he sought her tent.

The women of the circus dressed together, each one in a sort of canvas screened apartment, and in the Sampson Brothers' Show they also had a sort of ante-room to the dressing tent, where they could receive their friends.

There was no one in this room when Joe entered, save some of the maids which the higher-salaried circus women kept to help them dress, "make up" and so on.

"Is Miss Morton in?" asked Joe of a maid who knew him.

"No, Mr. Strong. I don't believe she has returned yet. I'll go and look in her room, though." The maid came back shaking her head.

"She isn't there," she told Joe.

"I wonder where she can be," he mused. "Why didn't she leave some word? Are you sure there wasn't a letter or anything on her trunk?" he inquired of the maid.

"Well, I didn't look. You may go in if you like. I guess it will be all right."

None of the performers were in the dressing tent then, being out in the big one doing their acts. Joe knew his way to Helen's room, having been there many times, for there would often be little impromptu gatherings in it to talk over circus matters between the acts.

He looked about for a letter, thinking she might have left one for him before going away. He saw nothing addressed to himself, but on the ground, where it had evidently dropped, was an open note. Joe could not help reading it at a glance. To his surprise it was signed by Sanford, the tricky law clerk.

"I shall be glad to see you if you will call on me when you reach Lyledale," the letter read. "I am glad you think of buying more stock. I have some to sell. I will be at the Globe Hotel."

"Whew!" whistled Joe. "It's just as I feared. She's been doing business with Sanford again—trying to make good her loss on the oil stock. He has an appointment with her here in Lyledale. That's where she's gone—to meet him. She must have sold some of her other securities to get money to buy more stock. I must stop this. I've got to follow her. Poor Helen!"

Joe had found out what he wanted to know by accident. Helen, he reasoned, must have received the letter that day, or perhaps the day before, and had planned to meet Sanford on reaching Lyledale where the circus was then playing. In order to do this she had to be excused from the afternoon performance.

"But I'll put a stop to that deal if I can," Joe declared. "I'll tell her how foolish and risky it is to invest any more money with Sanford. I only hope she'll believe me."

Joe's time was his own until the night performance. He decided he would at once follow Helen to the hotel and there remonstrate with her, if it were not too late.

"Queer that she kept it a secret from all of us," remarked Joe as he started for town. "I guess she knew we'd try to stop her from throwing good money after bad, as they say. Well, now to see what luck I'll have."

The Globe Hotel was the best and largest in town. Joe had no difficulty in finding it, and on inquiring at the desk was told that Mr. Sanford was a guest at the place.

"He has two rooms," the clerk told Joe. "One he uses as an office, where he does business."

"Oh, then he's been here before?" Joe asked.

"Oh, yes, often. I don't know what his business is, but I think, he is a sort of stock and bond dealer."

"More like a stock and bond swindler," thought Joe.

"Mr. Sanford will see you in a few minutes," the bellboy reported to Joe, having come back from taking up our hero's card. "There's a lady in the office with him now."

"A young lady?" Joe asked.

"Yes," nodded the bellboy.

"I'll go up now!" decided Joe. "I think he might just as well see me now as later."

"Maybe he won't like it," the clerk warned him.

"I don't care whether he likes it or not!" cried Joe. "It may be too late if I don't go up now. You needn't bother to announce me," he said to the bell-boy who offered to accompany Joe to show the way. "I guess I can find the room all right."

Joe rode up in the elevator, and turned down the corridor leading to the two rooms occupied by Sanford. Pausing at the door of the outer room, Joe heard voices. He recognized one as Helen's.

"She's there all right," mused Joe. "I hope I'm not too late!"

He was about to enter when he heard Helen say: "Please give it back to me. It isn't fair to take advantage of me this way."

"You went into this with your eyes open," Sanford replied. "It was a straight business deal, and I'm not to blame for the way it turned out. Now this stock——"

Joe waited no longer. He fairly burst into the room, crying:

"Helen, don't waste any more money on his worthless investments!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST PERFORMANCE

It would have been difficult to say who was the more surprised by the sudden entrance of Joe Strong—Helen or the law clerk. Both seemed startled.

Once more Joe cried:

"Helen, don't throw away any more of your money on his stocks!"

"How dare you come in here?" demanded Sanford.

"Never mind about that," answered Joe coolly. "I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to see you get any more of her money."

"Oh, Joe. How did you know I was here?" asked Helen. "I didn't want any one to know I came."

"I found out. I feared this was what you'd do."

"Do what, Joe?"

"Buy more stock in the hope of making good your losses on the Circle City investment."

"But, Joe, I'm not doing that. I don't want to buy any more stock. I've had too much as it is."

"Then what in the world did you come here for?" cried Sanford. "You intimated that you wanted more stock. That's why I met you here—to sell it to you."

"Yes, I thought that's what you'd think," replied Helen, and she seemed less excited now than Joe Strong. "But what I came for was to sell you back these worthless oil certificates. I want my money back."

"Well, you won't get it!" sneered the law clerk. "You bought that stock and now——"

"Now she's going to sell it again," put in Joe. He seemed to understand the situation now.

"Helen," he went on, "I think it would be well if you left this matter in my hands. If you'll just go downstairs and to the nearest police station and ask an officer to step around here, I think we can find something for him to do."

"Police!" faltered Sanford.

"Oh, well, perhaps we won't need one," said Joe coolly, "but it's always best, in matters of this kind, to have one on hand. It doesn't cost anything. Just get an officer, Helen, and wait downstairs with him. I'll have a little talk with Sanford."

"Oh, Joe! I—I——!"

"Now, Helen, you just leave this to me. Run along."

Joe Strong seemed to dominate the situation. He displayed splendid nerve.

Helen went slowly from the room.

"The clerk will tell you where to find a policeman," Joe called to her. "You needn't tell him why one is needed. It may be that we shall get along without one, and there's no need of causing any excitement unless we have to."

"Joe—Joe," faltered Helen. "You will be careful—won't you?"

"Well," and Joe smiled quizzically, "I'll be as careful as he'll let me," and he nodded toward the law clerk.

"What do you mean?" demanded Sanford, uneasily.

"You'll see in a few minutes," said Joe calmly.

When Helen went out Joe, with a quick movement, closed and locked the hall door.

"What's that for?" cried Sanford.

"So you won't get out before I'm through with you."

The law clerk made a rush for Joe, endeavoring to push him to one side. But muscles trained on a typewriter or with a pen are no match for those used on the flying rings and trapeze.

With a single motion of his hand Joe thrust the clerk aside, fairly forcing him into a chair.

"Now then," said Joe calmly, "you and I will have a little talk. You needn't try to yell. If you do I'll stuff a bedspread in your mouth. And if you want to try conclusions with me physically—well, here you are!"

With a quick motion Joe caught the fellow up, and raised him high in the air, over his head.

"Oh—oh! Put me down! Put me down!" Sanford begged. "I—I'll fall!"

"You won't fall as long as I have hold of you," chuckled Joe. "But there's no telling when I might let go. Now let's talk business."

Trembling, Sanford found himself in the chair again.

"Did you sell Miss Morton any more stock?" demanded Joe.

"No—I—she—came here to buy, I thought, but——"

"Well, as long as she didn't it's all right. Now then about that oil stock you got her to invest her money in—is that stock good?"

"Why, of course it——"

"Isn't!" interrupted Joe, "and you knew it wasn't when you sold it to her. Now then I want you to take that stock back and return her money. And I don't want you to sell that stock to some other person, either. You just tear it up. It's worthless, and you know it. I want Miss Morton's money back for her."

"I haven't it!" whined the clerk.

"Then you know where to get it. I fancy if I tell Mr. Pike, of your law firm, what you've been up to——"

"Oh, don't tell him! Don't tell him!" whined the clerk. "He doesn't know anything about it. I—I

just did this as a side line. If you tell him I'll lose my position and——"

"Well, I'll tell him all right, if you don't give back Miss Morton's money!" said Joe grimly.

"I tell you I haven't the cash."

"Then you must get it. You've been doing business here before, the hotel clerk tells me. Come now—hand over the cash—get it—and I'll let you go, though perhaps I shouldn't. If you don't pay up—well, the officer ought to be downstairs waiting for you now. Come!" cried Joe sharply. "Which is it to be—the money or jail?"

Sanford looked around like a cornered rat seeking a means of escape. There was none. Joe, big and powerful, stood between him and the door.

"Well?" asked Joe significantly.

"I—I'll pay her back the money," faltered Sanford. "But I'll have to go out to get it."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Joe cheerfully. "If you went out you might forget to come back. Here's a telephone—just use that."

Sanford sighed. His last chance was gone.

Just what or to whom he telephoned does not concern us. But in the course of an hour or so a messenger called with money enough to make good all Helen had risked in oil stock. The cash was handed to her.

"Here, you keep it for me, Joe," she said. "I don't seem to know how to manage my fortune."

"What about those stock certificates?" asked Sanford. "I want them back."

"They are worthless, by your own confession," replied Joe, "and you're not going to fool some one else on them. "We'll just keep them for souvenirs, eh, Helen?"

"Just as you say, Joe," she answered with a blush.

Sanford blustered, but to no purpose. He was beaten at his own game, and the fear of exposure and arrest brought him to terms.

"But you shouldn't have gone to him alone, Helen," remonstrated Joe, when they were on their way back to the circus with the recovered cash.

"Well, I'd been so foolish as to lose my money, that I wanted to see if I couldn't get it back again," she said. "I didn't want any of you to help me, as I'd already given trouble enough."

"Trouble!" cried Joe. "We would have been only too glad to help you."

"Well, you did it in spite of me," Helen said, with a smile. "I did not intend you should know where I had gone. How did you find out?"

"I saw a letter you dropped in the tent, and I followed. But how did you happen to locate Sanford?"

"By adopting just what Bill Watson said was the only plan. I made believe I wanted to buy more stock. Bill said that was the only way to catch Sanford. If I had tried to find him to get my money back he would have kept out of my way. But when he thought I might have more cash for him, he wrote and told me where I could find him. So I just waited until our show came here and then I called on Mr. Sanford.

"I was just begging him to give me back the money for the oil stock when you came in on us, Joe."

"Well, I'm glad I did."

"So am I. I hardly think he'd have paid me if it had not been for you. How did you make him settle?"

"Oh, I just sort of 'held him up' for it," but Joe did not explain the way he had actually "held up" the swindler.

"I'm so glad to get my money back!" Helen sighed as they reached the circus grounds, over which dusk was settling, for it was now early fall.

"And I'm glad, too," added Joe. "Then next time you buy oil stock——"

"There'll not be any next time," laughed Helen, as she went to give Rosebud his customary lumps of sugar.

And that night, in the Sampson Brother's Show, there was an impromptu little celebration

over the recovery of Helen's money.

Later Joe learned that Sanford gave up his place in the law office. Perhaps the swindler was afraid Mr. Pike would find out about his underhand transactions. Sanford, it seemed, had done some law business for the oil company, and they let him sell some of the worthless stock for himself, allowing him to keep the money—that is what Joe did not make him pay back.

It was the night of the final performance. The performers went through their acts with new snap and daring, for it was the last time some of them would face the public until the following season. A few would secure engagements for the winter in theatres, but most of them would winter with the circus.

When the tents came down this time they would be shipped to Bridgeport, where many shows go into winter quarters.

"Well, Joe," remarked Helen, as she came out of the ring just as Joe finished his last thrilling feat, "what are you going to do? Will you be with us next season?"

"I don't know. I've had several offers to go with hippodrome exhibitions, and on a theatrical circuit."

"Oh, then you are going to leave us?"

Joe looked at Helen. There seemed to be a new light in her eyes. And though she was smiling, there was something of disappointment showing on her face. With parted lips she gazed at Joe.

"I thought perhaps you would stay," she murmured, her eyes downcast.

"I—I guess I will!" said Joe in a low voice. "This is a pretty good circus after all."

And so Joe stayed. And what he did in the show will be related in the next volume of this series, to be called: "Joe Strong, the Boy Fish; Or, Marvelous Doings in a Big Tank."

The chariots rattled their final dusty way around the big tent. The "barkers" came in to sell tickets for the "grand concert." The animal tent was already down for the last time that season. With the ending of the concert the bugler blew "taps." The torches went out.

"Good night, Joe," said Helen.

"Good night, Helen," he answered, and as they clasped hands in the darkness we will say good-bye to Joe Strong.

The End

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOE STRONG ON THE TRAPEZE; OR, THE DARING FEATS OF A YOUNG CIRCUS PERFORMER ***

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