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Joe Strong the Boy Fire-Eater

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Joe Strong the Boy Fire-Eater

THE VANISHING LADY

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you will kindly give me your attention for a few moments I will be happy to introduce to your favorable notice an entertainer of world-wide fame who will, I am sure, not only mystify you but, at the same time, interest you. You have witnessed the death-defying dives of the Demon Discobolus; you have laughed with the comical clowns; you have thrilled with the hurrying horses; and you have gasped at the ponderous pachyderms. Now you are to be shown a trick which has baffled the most profound minds of this or any other city---aye, I may say, of the world!"

Jim Tracy, ringmaster and, in this instance, stage manager of Sampson Brothers' Circus, paused in his announcement and with a wave of his hand indicated a youth attired in a spotless, tight-fitting suit of white silk. The youth, who stood in the center of a stage erected in the big tent, bowed as the manager waited to allow time for the applause to die away.

"You have all seen ordinary magicians at work making eggs disappear up their sleeves," went on the stage manager. "You have, I doubt not, witnessed some of them producing live rabbits from silk hats. But Professor Joe Strong, who will shortly have the pleasure of entertaining you, not only makes eggs disappear, but what is far more difficult, he causes a lady to vanish into thin air.

"You will see a beautiful lady seated in full view of you. A moment later, by the practice of his magical art, Professor Strong will cause the same lady to disappear utterly, and he will defy any of you to tell how it is done. Now, Professor, if you are ready---" and with a nod and a wave of his hand toward the youth in the white silk tights, Jim Tracy stepped off the elevated stage and hurried to the other end of the circus tent where he had to see to it that another feature of the entertainment was in readiness.

"Oh, Joe, I'm actually nervous! Do you think I can do it all right?" asked a pretty girl, attired in a dress of black silk, which was in striking contrast to Joe Strong's white, sheeny costume.

"Do it, Helen? Of course you can!" exclaimed the "magician," as he had been termed by the ringmaster. "Do just as you did in the rehearsals and you'll be all right."

"But suppose something should go wrong?" she asked in a low voice.

"Don't be in the least excited. I'll get you out of any predicament you may get into. Tricks do, sometimes, go wrong, but I'm used to that. I'll cover it up, somehow. However, I don't anticipate anything going wrong. Now take your place while I give them a little patter."

This talk had taken place in low voices and with a rapidity which did not keep the expectant audience waiting. Joe Strong, while he was reassuring Helen Morton, his partner in the trick and also the girl to whom he was engaged to be married, was rapidly getting the stage ready for the illusion.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Joe, as he advanced to the edge of the stage, "I am afraid our genial manager has rather overstated my powers. What I am about to do, to be perfectly frank with you, is a trick. I lay no claim to supernatural powers. But if I can do a trick and you can't tell how it is done, then you must admit that, for the moment, I am smarter than you. In other words, I am going to deceive you. But the point is---how do I do it? With this introduction, I will now state what I am about to do.

"Mademoiselle Mortonti will seat herself on a stage in a chair in full view of you all. I will cover her, for a moment only, with a silken veil. This, if I were a real necromancer, I should say was to prevent your seeing her dissolve into a spirit as she disappears. But to tell you the truth, it is to conceal the manner in which I do the trick. You'd guess that, anyhow, if I didn't tell you," he added.

There was a good-natured laugh at this admission.

"As soon as I remove the silken veil," went on Joe, "you will see that the lady will have disappeared before your very eyes. What's that? Through a hole in the stage did some one say?" questioned Joe, appearing to catch a protesting voice.

"Well, that's what I hear everywhere I go," he went on with easy calmness. "Every time I do the vanishing lady trick some one thinks she disappears through a hole in the stage. Now, in order to convince you to the contrary, I am going to put a newspaper over that part of the stage where the chair is placed. I will show you the paper before and after the trick. And if there is not a hole or a tear in the paper, either before or after the lady has disappeared, I think you will admit that the lady did not go through a hole in the stage floor. Won't you?" asked Joe Strong. "Yes, I thought you would," he added, as he pretended to hear a "yes" from somewhere in the audience.

"All ready now, Helen," he said in a low voice to the girl, and an attendant brought forward an ordinary looking chair and a newspaper.

Joe, who had done the trick many times before, but not often with Helen, was perfectly at ease. Helen was very frankly nervous. She had not done the trick for some time, and Joe had introduced into it some novel features since last presenting it. Helen was afraid she would cause some hitch in the performance.

"You'll be all right," Joe said to her in a low voice. "Just act as though you had done this every day for a year."

Placing the chair in the center of the stage and handing Joe the newspaper, the attendant stepped back. Joe addressed the audience.

"You here see the paper," said the "magician," as he held it up. "You see that there is no hole in it. I'll now spread it down on the stage. If the lady disappears down through the stage she will have to tear the paper. You shall see if she does."

Joe next placed the chair directly over the square of paper and motioned to Helen. Her plain black dress, of soft, clinging silk, swayed about her as she took her place.

"I might add," said Joe, pausing a moment after Helen had taken her seat, "that in order to prevent any shock to Mademoiselle Mortonti I am going to mesmerize her. She will then be unconscious. I do this for two reasons. In totally disappearing there is sometimes a shock to a person's mentality that is unpleasant. To avoid indicting that on Mademoiselle Mortonti I will hypnotize her.

"The other reason I do that is that she may not know how or when she disappears. Thus she will not be able to see how I do the trick, and so cannot give away my secret."

Of course this was all "bunk" or "patter," to use names given to it by the performers. It kept the attention of the audience and so enabled Joe to do certain things without attracting too much attention to them. As a matter of fact he did not mesmerize Helen, and she knew perfectly well how the trick was done. Those who have read previous books of this series are also in the secret.

Joe waved his hands in front of Helen's face. She swayed slightly in her chair. Then her eyes closed as though against her will, and she seemed to sleep.

"She is now in the proper condition for the trick," said Joe. "I must beg of you not to make any sudden or unnecessary noise. You might suddenly awaken her from the mesmeric slumber, and this might be very serious."

As Joe said this with every indication of meaning it, there was a quick hush among the audience. Even though many knew it was only a trick, they could not help being impressed by the solemn note in Joe's voice. Such is the psychology of an audience, and the power over it of a single person.

"She now sleeps!" said Joe in a low voice. As a matter of fact, Helen was wide awake, and as Joe stood between her and the circus crowd she slowly opened one eye and winked at him. He was glad to see this, as it showed her nervousness had left her.

"Now for the mystic veil!" cried Joe, as he took from his helper a thin clinging piece of black silk gauze. He tossed this over Helen and the chair, completely covering both from sight. He brought the veil around behind Helen's head, fastening it there with a pin.

"To make sure that Mademoiselle Mortonti sleeps, I will now make the few remaining mesmeric passes," said Joe. "I must be positive that she slumbers."

He waved his hands slowly over the black robed figure. A great hush had fallen over the big crowd. Every eye was on the black figure in the center of the raised stage in the middle of the big circus tent. All the other acts had temporarily stopped, to make that of Joe Strong, the boy magician, more spectacular.

As Joe continued to wave one hand with an undulating motion over the silent black-covered figure in the chair, he touched, here and there, the drapery over Helen. He seemed very solicitous that it should hang perfectly right, covering the figure of the girl and the chair completely from sight in every direction all around the stage.

The music, which had been playing softly, suddenly stopped at a wave of Joe's hand. He stood for a moment motionless before the veiled figure.

"Her spirit is dissolving into thin air!" he said in a low voice, which, nevertheless, carried to every one in the crowd.

Suddenly Joe took hold of the veil in the center and directly over the outlined head of the figure in the chair. Quickly the young magician raised the soft, black silk gauze, whisking it quickly to one side.

The audience gasped.

The chair, in which but a moment before Helen Morton had been seated, was empty! The girl had disappeared---vanished! Joe stooped and raised from the stage the newspaper. It showed not a sign of break or tear.

Then, before the applause could begin, the girl appeared, walking out from one of the improvised wings of the circus stage. She smiled and bowed. The act had been a great success. Now the silent admiration of the throng gave place to a wave of hand clapping and feet stamping.

"Was it all right, Joe?" asked Helen, as he held her hand and they both bowed their appreciation of the applause.

"Couldn't have been better!" he said. "We'll do this trick regularly now. It takes even better than my ten thousand dollar box mystery. You were great!"

"I'm so glad!"

The two performers were bowing themselves off the stage when suddenly there came the unmistakable roar of a wild beast from the direction of the animal tent. It seemed to shake the very ground. At the same time a voice cried:

"A tiger is loose! One of the tigers is out of his cage!"

CHAPTER II

A DANGEROUS SWING

There is no cry which so startles the average circus audience as that which is raised when one of the wild animals is said to be at large. Not even the alarm that the big tent is falling or is about to be blown over will cause such a panic as the shout:

"A tiger is loose!"

There is something instinctive, and perfectly natural, in the fear of the wild jungle beasts. Let it be said that a tiger or a lion is loose, and it causes greater fear, even, than when it is stated that an elephant is on a rampage. An elephant seems a big, but good-natured, creature; though often they turn ugly. But a lion or a tiger is always feared when loose.

But the chances are not one in a hundred that a circus lion or a tiger, getting out of its cage, would attack any one. The creature is so surprised at getting loose, and so frightened at the hue and cry at once raised, that all it wants to do is to slink off and hide, and the only harm it might do would be to some one who tried to stop it from running away.

Joe Strong, Jim Tracy, and the other circus executives and employees knew this as soon as they heard the cry: "A tiger is loose." Who raised the cry and which of the several tigers in the Sampson show was out of its cage, neither Joe nor any of those in the big tent near him knew. But they realized the emergency, and knew what to do.

"Keep your seats! Don't rush!" cried Joe, as he released Helen's hand and hurried to the front of the platform. "There is no danger! The animal men will catch the tiger, if one is really loose. Stay where you are! Keep your seats! Don't rush!"

It is the panic and rush that circus men are afraid of---the pushing and "milling" of the crowd and the trampling under foot of helpless women and children.

There was some commotion near the junction of the animal tent and that in which the main performance took place. What it was, Joe did not concern himself about just then. He felt it to be his task to prevent a panic. And to this he lent himself, aided by Helen, Jim Tracy, and others who realized the danger.

And while this is going on and while the expert animal men are preparing to get back into its cage the tiger which, it was learned afterward, had got out through an imperfectly fastened door, time will be taken to tell new readers something about Joe Strong and the series of books in which he is the central character.

Joe Strong seemed destined for a circus life and for entertaining audiences with sleight-of-hand and other mystery matters. His father, Alexander Strong, known professionally as Professor Morretti, was a stage magician of talents, and Joe's mother, who was born in England, had been a rider of trick horses.

His parents died when Joe was young. He did not have a very happy boyhood, and one day he ran away from the man with whom he was living and joined a traveling magician, who called himself Professor Rosello. With him Joe, who had a natural aptitude for the business, learned to become a sleight-of-hand performer.

In the first book of the series, entitled "Joe Strong, the Boy Wizard; Or, the Mysteries of Magic Exposed," is told how Joe got on in life after his first start. Joe was not only a stage magician, but he had inherited strength, skill and daring, and he liked nothing better than climbing to great heights or walking in lofty and dizzy places where the footing was perilous. So it was perhaps natural that he should join the Sampson Brothers' Show. And in the second book is related, under the title, "Joe Strong on the Trapeze; Or, the Daring Feats of a Young Circus Performer," what happened to our hero under canvas.

Joe loved the circus life, even though he made some enemies. But he had many friends. There was Helen Morton. Then there was Benny Turton, who did a "tank act," and was billed as a "human fish." Jim Tracy, the ringmaster, Bill Watson, the veteran clown, and his wife, the circus "mother," Tom Layton, the elephant man who taught the big creatures many tricks, were only a few of Joe's friends.

Among others might be mentioned Senor Bogardi, the lion tamer, Mrs. Talfo, the professional "fat lady," Seniorita Tanzalo, the pretty snake charmer, and Tom Jefferson, the "strong man." Joe loved them all. The circus was like one big family, with, as might be expected, a "black sheep" here and there.

Joe became an expert on the trapeze, and, later, when Benny Turton was temporarily in a hospital, Joe "took on" the tank trick. In the third volume some of his under-water feats are related, while in the fourth book Joe's acts on a motor cycle on the high wire are dealt with.

With his "Wings of Steel," Joe caused a sensation, and after an absence from the circus for a time he joined it again, bringing this act to it.

Eventually Joe was made one of the circus owners, and now controlled a majority of the stock. He had also inherited considerable money from his mother's relatives in England, so that now the youth was financially well off for one who had started so humbly.

The book immediately preceding this one is called "Joe Strong and His Box of Mystery; Or, the Ten Thousand Dollar Prize Trick." In that volume is related how Joe constructed a trick box, out of which he made his way after it was locked and corded about with ropes. Helen Morton helped him in this trick, which was very successful.

The circus management offered a prize of ten thousand dollars to whomsoever could fathom how the trick was done. Bill Carfax, an enemy of Joe's and a former circus employee, tried to solve the problem but failed.

The box trick was a great attraction for the circus, and Joe was in higher favor than before.

He had been on the road with the show for some time when the events detailed in the first chapter of this book took place.

By dint of much shouting and urging the people to retain their seats and not rush into danger, Joe Strong and the others succeeded in calming the circus crowd. Meanwhile there was much suppressed excitement.

"Is the tiger caught? Is he back in his cage?" was asked on every side.

While Joe and his fellow showmen were calming the crowd, the animal men were having their own troubles. Burma, one of the largest of the tigers, had got loose, having taken advantage of the open door of his cage. He rushed out with a snarl of delight at his freedom. His jungle cry was echoed by the roar of a lion in the next cage, and this was followed by the cries and snarls of all the wild jungle beasts in the tent.

Fortunately the animal tent was deserted by all save the keepers, the audience having filed into the tent where the main show was going on.

"Head him off now! Head him off!" cried Tom Layton, the elephant man, as he saw the tiger dart out of its cage---a flash of yellow and black. "Head him off! Don't let him get in the main top!"

"That's right! Head him off!" cried Senor Bogardi, the lion tamer. "He won't hurt any one---he's too scared!"

This was true, but it was difficult to believe, and some of the people seated in the "main top," or big tent, who were nearest the animal tent, hearing the cries and learning what had occurred, spread the alarm.

Burma, the tiger, slunk around in behind the cages of the other animals. All about him were men with clubs and pointed goads, with whips and pistols. The circus men had had to cope with situations like this before. They surrounded the tiger, advancing on him in an ever-narrowing circle, and in a short time they drove him into an emergency cage which was pushed forward with the open door toward him. Burma had no choice but to enter, to get away from the cracking whips and the prodding goads. And, after all, he was glad to be barred in again.

So, without causing any harm except for badly frightening a number of people in the audience, the tiger was caged again, and the circus performance went on.

Joe Strong did his Box of Mystery trick. The usual announcement of a reward of ten thousand dollars to whomsoever could solve it was made, and there was great applause when Joe managed to get out of the big box without disturbing the six padlocks or the binding ropes.

"I'm glad Bill Carfax isn't here to make trouble, trying to show how much he knows about this trick," said Joe to the ringmaster, as he stepped off the stage at the conclusion of the trick.

"Yes, you put several spokes in Bill's wheels when you turned the laugh on him that time," said Jim Tracy. "I don't believe he'll ever show up around our circus again."

But they little knew Bill Carfax. Those who have read the book just before this will recall him and remember how unscrupulous he was. But his plans came to naught then. Any one who wishes to learn how the wonderful box trick was worked will find a full explanation in the previous volume.

Helen Morton received much applause at the conclusion of her act with her trick horse, Rosebud. Joe Strong's promised wife was an accomplished bareback rider, as well as one of her fiance's helpers in his mystery tricks.

"Well, I'm glad to-day is over," said Helen to Joe that night, as they went to the train that was to take them to the next city where the circus performance would be given. "What with doing the vanishing lady act for the first time in a long while and the tiger getting loose, we have had quite a bit of excitement."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "But everything came out all right. I'm going to put on a new stunt next week."

"What's that?" asked Helen. "Something in the mystery line?"

"No. I'm going back to some of my high trapeze work. You know, since we lost Wogand there hasn't been any of the big swing work done."

"That's so," agreed Helen. "But I've been so busy practicing the vanishing lady act with you on top of my other work that I hadn't given it a thought. But you aren't going to do that dangerous trick, are you?"

"I think I am," Joe answered. "It's sensational, and we need sensational acts now to draw the crowds. I used to do it, and I can again, I think, with a little practice. I'm going to start in and train to-morrow."

"I wish you wouldn't," said Helen, in a low voice, but Joe did not seem to hear her.

The big swing was a trapeze act performed on the highest of the circus apparatus. Part of this apparatus consisted of two platforms fastened to two of the opposite main poles, and up under the very roof of the big top.

Midway between the platforms, which were just large enough for a man to stand on, was a trapeze with long ropes, capable of being swung from one resting place to the other. It was, in reality, a "big swing."

Joe's act, which he had often done, but which of late had been performed by a man billed as "Wogand," was to stand on one platform, have the long trapeze started in a long, pendulumlike swing by an attendant, and then to leap down, catch hold of the bar with his hands, and swing up to the other platform. If he missed catching the bar it meant a dangerous fall; a fall into a net, it is true, but dangerous none the less. Its danger can be judged when it is said that Wogand had died as an indirect result of a fall into the net. He missed the trapeze, toppled into the net, and, by some chance, did not land properly. His back was injured, his spine became affected, and he died.

When circus performers on the high trapezes fall or jump into the safety nets, they do not usually do it haphazardly. If they did many would be killed. There is a certain knack and trick of landing in a net.

Joe Strong, ever having the interest of the circus at heart, had decided to do this dangerous swing. He was an acrobat, as well as a stage magician, and he had decided to take up some of his earlier acts which had been so successful.

"But I wish he wouldn't," said Helen to herself. "I have a premonition that something will happen." Helen was very superstitious in certain ways.

But to all she said, Joe only laughed.

"I'm going to do the big swing," he replied simply.

CHAPTER III

TOO MANY PEOPLE

Hundreds of men toiling and sweating over stiff canvas and stiffer ropes. The thud of big wooden sledge hammers driving in the tent stakes. The rumble of heavy wagons, and a cloud of dust where they were being shoved into place by the busy elephants.

On one edge of the big, vacant lot were wisps of smoke from the fires in the stove wagons, and from these same wagons came appetizing odors.

Here and there men and women darted, carrying portions of their costumes in their hands. Clowns, partly made up, looked from their dressing tents to smile or shout at some acquaintance who chanced to be passing by.

All this was the Sampson Brothers' Circus in preparation for a day's performance.

Joe Strong, having had a good breakfast, without which no circus man or woman starts the day, strolled over to where Helen Morton was just finishing her morning meal.

"Feeling all right?" he asked her.

"Well, yes, pretty well," she answered.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe quickly, as he detected an under note of anxiety in the girl's voice. "Is your star horse, Rosebud, lame or off his feed?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "It's just---Oh, here comes Mother Watson, and I promised to help her mend a skirt," said Helen quickly, as she turned to greet the veteran clown's wife. "See you later, Joe!" she called to him over her shoulder as she started away.

The young magician moved away toward his own private quarters.

"I wonder what's the matter with Helen," he said. "She doesn't act naturally. If that Bill Carfax has been around again, annoying her, I'll put him out of business for all time. But if he had been around I'd have heard of it. I don't believe it can be that."

Nor was it. Helen's anxiety had to do with something other than Bill Carfax, the unprincipled circus man who had so annoyed her before Joe discharged him. And, as Joe had said, the man had not been seen publicly since the fiasco of his attempt to expose Joe's mystery box trick.

"Well, I suppose she won't tell me what it is until she gets good and ready," mused Joe. "Now I'll go in and have a little practice at the big swing before the parade."

Joe did not take part in the street pageant, though Helen did, riding her beautiful horse to the admiration, not only of the small boys and their sisters, but the grown-up throng in the highways as well. Helen made a striking picture on her spirited, but gentle, steed.

It was not that Joe Strong felt above appearing in the parade. That was not his reason for not taking part. He had done so on more than one occasion, and with his Wings of Steel had created more than one sensation.

But now that he did a trapeze act, as well as working the sleight-of-hand mysteries, his time was pretty well occupied. He had not, as yet, done the big swing in public since that act was abandoned on the death of the man who had been

injured while doing it. But Joe had been perfecting himself in it. He had had a new set of trapezes made, and had ornamented them and the two platforms in a very striking manner. In other words, the trick had a new "dress," and Joe, as one of the circus proprietors, hoped it would go well and attract attention.

This was from a business standpoint, and not only because Joe was himself the performer. Of course it was natural that he should like applause---all do, more or less. But Joe was one of the owners of the circus---the chief owner, in fact---and he wanted to make a financial success of it. Nor was this a purely selfish reason. Many persons owned stock in the enterprise, and Joe felt it was only fair to them to see that they received a good return for their investment. Any trick he could do to draw crowds he was willing to attempt.

So, while the parade was being gotten ready, Joe went inside the main top, which by this time was erected, to see about having his platforms and trapeze put in place. In this he was always very careful, as is every aerial performer. The least slip of a rope may cause disaster, and no matter how careful the attendants are, the performers themselves always give at least a casual look to their apparatus.

"All right, Harry?" asked Joe of one of the riggers who had charge of putting up the platforms and the big swing.

"Sure, it's all right, Mr. Strong!" was the answer. "I should say so! I don't make no mistakes when I'm putting up trapezes. You'll find everything shipshape and proper. Going to have a big crowd to-day, I guess."

Joe looked at Harry Loper closely. The young man had never talked so much before, being, on the whole, rather close-mouthed. As the man passed Joe, after giving a pull on the last rope, the young magician became aware that Harry had been drinking---and something stronger than pink lemonade.

"I'm sorry about that!" mused Joe, as the rope rigger passed on. "If there's any place a man ought not to drink it's in a circus, and especially when he has to rig up high flying apparatus for others. It was drink that put Bill Carfax out of business. I didn't know Harry was that kind, I never noticed it before. I'm sorry. And I'll take extra precautions that my ropes won't slip. You can't trust a man who drinks."

Joe shook his head a bit sadly. He was thinking of Bill Carfax, and of the fact that he had had to discharge the man because, while under the influence of liquor, he had insulted Helen. Then Bill had tried to get revenge on Joe.

"I hope it doesn't turn out this way with Harry Loper," mused Joe, as he began climbing up a rope ladder that led to one of the high platforms. And as Harry had to do with the placing of this ladder, Joe tested it carefully before ascending.

"I don't want to fall and be laid up in the middle of the circus season," mused the young circus man, with a frown.

However, the ladder appeared to be perfectly secure, and as Joe went up, finally reaching the high platform, he felt a sense of exhilaration. Heights always affected him this way. He liked, more than anything else, to soar aloft on his Wings of Steel. And he liked the sensation when he leaped from one platform toward the swinging trapeze bar, aiming to grasp it in his hands and swing in a great arc to the other little elevated place, close under the top of the tent.

There was a thrill about it---a thrill not only to the performer but to the audience as well---and Joe could hear the gasps that went up from thousands of throats as he made his big swing.

But, for the time being, he gave his whole attention to the platform and its fastenings. The platforms were not very likely to slip, being caught on to the main tent poles, which themselves were well braced.

The real danger was in the long trapeze. Not only must the thin wire ropes of this be strong enough to hold Joe's weight, but an added pressure, caused by the momentum of his jump. And not only must the cables be strong, but there must be no defect in the wooden bar and in the place where the upper ends of the ropes were fastened to the top of the tent.

"Well, this platform is all right," remarked Joe, as he looked it over. "Now for the other and the trapeze."

He went down the rope ladder and climbed up another to the second platform. The show would not start for several hours yet, and the tent was filled with men putting in place the stage for Joe's magic tricks and other apparatus for various performers. The parade was just forming to proceed down town.

Joe found that Harry Loper had done his work well, at least as far as the platforms were concerned. They were firmly fastened. The one to which Joe leaped after his swing needed to be considerably stronger than the one from which he "took off."

The next act of the young circus performer was to climb up to the very top of the tent, and there to examine the fastenings of the trapeze ropes. He spent some time at this, having reached his high perch by a third rope ladder.

"I guess everything is all right," mused Joe. "Perhaps I did Harry an injustice. He might have taken some stimulant for a cold---they all got wet through the other night. But still he ought to be careful. He was a little too talkative for a man to give his whole attention to fastening a trapeze. But this seems to be all right. I'll do the big swing this afternoon and to-night, in addition to the box trick and the vanishing lady. Helen works exceedingly well in that."

Having seen that his aerial apparatus was all right, Joe next went to his tent where his magical appliances were kept. Many stage tricks depend for their success on special pieces of apparatus, and Joe's acts were no exception.

Joe saw that everything was in readiness for his sleight-of-hand work, and then examined his Box of Mystery. As this was a very special piece of apparatus, he was very careful about it. His ability to get out of it, once he was locked and roped in, depended on a delicate bit of mechanism, and the least hitch in this meant failure.

But a test showed that it was all right, and as by this time it was nearly the hour for the parade to come back and the preliminaries to begin, Joe went over to the circus office to see if any matters there needed his attention.

As he crossed the lot to where the "office" was set up in a small tent, the first horses of the returning parade came back on the circus grounds. Following was a mob of delighted small boys and not a few men.

"Looks as if we'd have a big crowd," said Joe to himself. "And it's a fine day for the show. We'll make money!"

He attended to some routine matters, and then the first of the afternoon audience began to arrive. As Joe had predicted, the crowd was a big one.

The young performer was in his dressing room, getting ready for the big swing, which he would perform before his mystery tricks, when Mr. Moyne, the circus treasurer, entered. There was a queer look on Mr. Moyne's face, and Joe could not help but notice it.

"What's worrying you?" asked Joe. "Doesn't this weather suit you, or isn't there a big enough crowd?"

"That's just it, Joe," was the unexpected answer. "There's too big a crowd. We have too many people at this show, and that's what is worrying me a whole lot!"

Joe Strong looked in surprise at the treasurer. What could Mr. Moyne mean?

CHAPTER IV

THE RUSTED WIRE

"Yes," went on the circus treasurer, as he rubbed his chin reflectively, "it's a curious state of affairs, and as you're so vitally interested I came to you at once. There's going to be trouble!"

"Trouble!" cried Joe with a laugh. "I can't see that, Mr. Moyne. You say there's a big crowd of people at our circus---too much of a crowd, in fact. I can't see anything wrong in that. It's just what we're always wanting---a big audience. Let 'em fill the tent, I say, and put out the 'Straw Seats Only' sign. Trouble! Why, I should say this was good luck!" and Joe hastened his preparations, for he wanted to go on with the big swing.

"Ordinarily," said Mr. Moyne, in the slow, precise way he had of speaking, brought about, perhaps, by his need of being exact in money matters, "a big crowd would be the very thing we should want. But this time we don't---not this kind of a crowd."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe, beginning to feel that it was more than a mere notion on the part of the treasurer that something was wrong. "Is it a rough crowd? Will there be a 'hey rube!' cry raised---a fight between our men and the mill hands?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that!" the treasurer hastened to assure Joe. "The whole thing is just this. There are a great many more people in the main top now than there are admission prices in the treasurer's cash box. The books don't balance, as it were."

"More people in the tent than have paid their way?" asked Joe. "Well, that always happens at a circus. Small boys will crawl in under the canvas in spite of clubs."

"Oh, it isn't a question of the small boys---I never worry about them," returned Mr. Moyne. "But there are about a thousand more persons at the performance which will soon begin than we have admission prices for. In other words there are a thousand persons occupying fifty cent seats that haven't paid their half dollar. It isn't the reserve chairs that are affected. We're all right there. But fully a thousand persons have come into the show, and we're short five hundred dollars in our cash."

"You don't tell me!" cried Joe. He saw that Mr. Moyne was very much in earnest. "Have the ticket men and the entrance attendants been working a flim-flam game on us?"

"Oh, no, it isn't that," said the treasurer. "I could understand that. But the men are perfectly willing to have their accounts gone over and their tickets checked up. They're straight!"

"Then what is it?" asked Joe.

"That's what we've got to find out," went on Mr. Moyne. "In some way the thousand people have come in without paying the circus anything. And they didn't sneak in, either. A few might do that, but a thousand couldn't. They've come in by the regular entrance."

"Did they force themselves past without tickets?"

"No, each one had the proper coupon."

"Has there been a theft of our tickets?" demanded the young magician and acrobat.

"No, our ticket account is all right, except there are a thousand extra entrance coupons in the box---coupons taken in by the entrance attendants. It's a puzzle to me," confessed the treasurer. "There is some game being played on us, and we're out to the tune of five hundred dollars by it already."

"Is there any way of finding out who these persons are who have come in without paying us and having them ejected?" asked Joe.

"I don't see how," admitted Mr. Moyne. "If they were in reserved seats it could be done, but not in the ordinary un-numbered fifty cent section. The whole situation is that we have a thousand persons too many at the show."

"Well, we'll have a meeting of the executive body and take it up after the performance," said Joe, as he quickly prepared to get into his aerial costume. "We'll have to go on with the performance now; it's getting late. If we're swamped by people coming along who hold our regular tickets we'll have to sit 'em anywhere we can. If we lose five hundred dollars we'll make it up by having a smashing crowd, which is always a good advertisement. I'll see you directly after the show, Mr. Moyne."

"I wish you would," said the harassed treasurer. "Something must be done about it. If this happens very often we'll be in a financial hole at the end of the season."

He departed, looking at some figures he had jotted down on the back of an envelope.

Joe Strong was puzzled. Nothing like this had ever come up before. True, there had been swindlers who tried to mulct the circus of money, and there were always small boys, and grown men, too, who tried to crawl in under the tent. But such a wholesale game as this Joe had never before known.

"Well, five hundred dollars, for once, won't break us," he said grimly, as he fastened on a brightly spangled belt, "but I wouldn't want it to happen very often. Now I wonder what luck I'll have in my big swing. I haven't done it in public for some time, but it went all right in practice."

Joe looked from his dressing room. He was all ready for his act now, but the time had not yet come for him to go on. He saw Helen hastening past on her way to enter the ring with her horse, Rosebud, which a groom held at the entrance for her.

"Good luck!" called Joe, waving his hand and smiling.

"The same to you," answered Helen. "You'll need it more than I. Oh, Joe," she went on earnestly, "won't you give up this big swing? Stick to your box trick, and let me act with you in the disappearing lady stunt. Don't go on with this high trapeze act!" she pleaded.

"Why, Helen! anybody would think you'd been bitten by the jinx bug!" laughed Joe. "I thought you were all over that."

"Perhaps I am foolish," she said. "But it's because---"

She blushed and looked away.

"I suppose I should take it as a compliment that you are so interested in my welfare," said Joe, with a smile. "And, believe me, I am. But, Helen, I can't back out of this act now. It's been advertised big. I've got to go on!"

"Then do be careful, won't you?" she begged. "Oh, do be careful! Somehow, I have a feeling that---Oh, well, I won't set you to worrying by telling you," she said quickly, with a laugh, in which, however, there was no mirth. She smiled again, trying to make it a bright one; but Joe saw that she was under a strain.

"I'll be careful," he promised. "Really, there's no danger. I've done the stunt a score of times, and I can judge my distance perfectly. Besides there's the safety net."

"Yes, I know, but there was poor---Oh, well, I won't talk about it! Good luck!" and she hurried on, for it was time for her act---the whistle of the ringmaster having blown.

Joe looked after the girl he loved. He smiled, and then a rather serious look settled over his face. Like a flash there had come to him the memory of the too loquacious Harry Loper, who had fitted up his aerial apparatus.

"There can be nothing wrong with that," mused Joe. "I went over every inch of it. I guess Helen is just nervous. Well, there goes my cue!"

He hurried toward the entrance, and then he began to ponder over the curious fact of there being a thousand persons too many at the performance.

"We'll have to straighten out that ticket tangle after the show," mused Joe. "It's likely to get serious. I wonder---" he went on, struck by a new thought. "I wonder if---Oh, no! It couldn't be! He hasn't been around in a long while."

Out into the tent, filled with a record-breaking crowd, went Joe to the place where his high trapeze was waiting for him. The band was playing lively airs, on one platform some trained seals were juggling big balls of colored rubber, and on another a bear was going about on roller skates. In one end ring Helen was performing with Rosebud, while in another a troupe of Japanese acrobats were doing wonderful things with their supple bodies.

Joe waved his hand to Helen in passing, and then he began to ascend to his high platform. When he reached it and stood poised ready for his act, there came a shrill whistle from Jim Tracy, the ringmaster, who wore his usual immaculate shirt front and black evening clothes---rather incongruous in the daytime.

The whistle was the signal for the other acts to cease, that the attention of all might be centered on Joe. This is always done in a circus in the case of "stars," and Joe was certainly a star of the first magnitude.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" cried Jim Tracy, with the accented drawl that carried his voice to the very ends of the big tent. "Calling your attention to one of the most marvelous high trapeze acts ever performed in any circus!"

He pointed dramatically to Joe, who stood up straight, ready to do his act.

"Are you ready?" asked the man who was to release the trapeze, which was caught up at one side of the platform opposite Joe.

"Ready," answered the young acrobat.

The man pulled a rope which released a catch, letting the trapeze start on its long swaying swing. The man pulled it by means of a long, thin cord, until it was making big arcs, like some gigantic pendulum.

Joe watched it carefully, judging it to the fraction of an inch. He stood poised and tense on the gayly decorated platform, himself a fine picture of physical young manhood. The band was blaring out the latest Jazz melody.

Suddenly, from his perch, the young acrobat gave a cry, and Jim Tracy, on the ground below, hearing it, held up his white-gloved hand as a signal for the music to cease.

Then Joe leaped. Full and fair he leaped out toward the swinging bar of the big trapeze, the snare drum throbbing out as he jumped. He was dimly conscious of thousands of eyes watching him---eyes that looked curiously and apprehensively up. And he realized that Helen was also watching him.

As true as a die, Joe's hands caught and gripped the bar of the swinging trapeze. So far he was safe. The momentum of his jump carried him in a long swing, and he at once began to undulate himself to increase his swing. He must do this in order to get to the second platform.

As the young performer began to do this, he looked up at the wire ropes of his trapeze.

It was a look given instinctively and for no particular purpose, as Joe's eyes must rest, most of all, on the second platform where he needed to land, to save himself from a bad fall.

As his eyes glanced along the steel cables on which his life depended, he saw, to his horror, a spot of rust on one. And at the spot of rust several of the thin strands of twisted wire were loose and frayed.

The cable seemed about to give way!

CHAPTER V

A FIRE SENSATION

Joe Strong had to think quickly. Every acrobat, every person who does "stunts" in a circus, must; for something is always happening, or on the verge of taking place. And when Joe looked up and saw the rusted wire and noted the fraying strands, several thoughts shot through his mind at once.

"That rust spot wasn't there this morning when, I looked at the trapeze," he mused. "And it hasn't rained since. How did it get there?"

He thought of the too talkative Harry Loper, and an ugly suspicion associated itself with him. But Joe had no time for such thoughts then. What was vital for him to know was whether or not the thin wire cable would remain unbroken long enough for him to reach the maximum of his swing, and land on the platform. Or would he fall, spoiling the act and also endangering himself?

True he might land in the net in such a way as to come to no harm, as he had done many times, and as many performers before him had done. But the danger was that in a sudden and unexpected drop downward he might not be able to get his limbs in the proper landing position.

Joe Strong had nerve. If he had lacked it he would never have been so successful. And at once he decided on a courageous proceeding.

"I'll bring all my weight suddenly on that left hand cable," he mused, as he swung to and fro, from side to side of the big tent. "If it's going to break it will do so then. And I'll be ready for it. I'll then keep hold of the trapeze bar, which will be straight up and down instead of crosswise, and swing by that. The other cable seems all right." This was a fact which Joe ascertained by a quick inspection.

There was no time for further thought. As he swung, Joe suddenly shifted his weight, bringing it all on the frayed and strangely rusted cable. As he half expected, it gave way, and he dropped in an instant, but not far.

The watching crowd gasped. It looked like an accident. And it was, in a way, but Joe had purposely caused it. As the wire broke Joe held tightly to the wooden bar, which was now upright in his hands instead of being horizontal. And though it slipped through his fingers, perhaps for the width of his palm, at last he gripped it in a firm hold and kept on with his swing.

And then the applause broke forth, for the audience thought it all a part of the trick---they thought that Joe had purposely caused the cable to break to make the act more effective.

To and fro swung Joe, nearer and nearer to the second platform, and then, reaching the height of the long arc, he turned his body and stepped full and fair on the little square of velvet-covered boards.

With a lithe contortion, Joe squirmed to an upright position, recovering his balance with a great effort, for he had been put out in his calculations of distance, and then, turning, he bowed to the crowds, revolving on the platform to take in every one.

Again the applause broke forth, to be drowned in the boom and ruffle of the drums as the band began to play. There is little time in a circus, where act follows act so quickly, for long acknowledgments.

The other performers came into the rings or on to the raised platforms, and Joe descended by means of the rope ladder. Helen met him, and they walked toward the dressing rooms.

"That was a wonderful trick, Joe," she said. "But I didn't see you practice that drop."

"I didn't practice it," he remarked dryly. "I did it on the spur of the moment."

"Joe Strong! wasn't it dangerous?"

"Well, a little."

"What made you do it?"

"I couldn't help it."

"You couldn't help it? Joe---do you mean--?" She sensed that something was wrong, but walking around the circus arena, with performers coming and going, was not the place to speak of it. Joe saw that she understood.

"I'll tell you later," he said. "We have to get ready for the trick box and the vanishing lady stunt now."

"Oh, Joe! were you in much danger?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, not much," he answered, and he tried to speak lightly. Yet he did not like to think of that one moment when he saw the rusted and broken wire.

While Joe and Helen are preparing for the box act, which has been treated fully in the previous volume, the explanation of how the vanishing lady trick was accomplished will be given, though that, too, has been explained in an earlier volume.

A large newspaper is put on the stage and the chair set on the paper, thus, seemingly, precluding the possibility of a trap door being cut in the stage through which the lady in the chair might slip. The word "seemingly" is used with a due sense of what it means. The newspaper was not a perfect one. On one of its sides which was not exhibited to the audience, there was cut an opening, or trap, that exactly corresponded in size with a trap door on the stage. The paper, as explained in the previous book, is strengthened with cardboard, and the trap is a double one, being cut in the center, the flaps being easily moved either way.

The audience thinks it sees a perfect newspaper. But there is a square hole in it, but concealed as is a secret trap door.

When Joe laid the paper on the stage he placed it so that the square, double flap in it was exactly over the trap in the stage floor. He then drew the page of the paper that he had held out to the audience toward himself, exposing the trap for use, but because it was so carefully made, and the cut was so fine, it was not visible from the front.

Helen took her place in the chair, which, of course, was a trick one. It was fitted with a concealed rod and a cap, and it was over this cap, brought out at the proper moment, that Joe carefully placed the black veil, when he was pretending to mesmerize Helen. There was a cross rod, also concealed in the chair, and on either end of this, something like the epaulettes of a soldier, so that when these ends were under the veil and the cap was in place it looked as though some one sat in the chair, when, really, no one did.

Helen was in the chair at the start. But as soon as she was covered by the veil she began to get out. The seat of the chair was hinged within its frame. As Helen sat on it, and after she had been covered with the veil, she rested her weight on her hands, which were placed on the extreme outer edges of this seat frame. She pulled a catch which caused the seat to drop, and at the same time the trap beneath her, including the prepared newspaper, was opened by an attendant. The black veil all about the chair prevented the audience seeing this.

Helen lowered herself down through the dropped seat of the chair, through the trap, and under the stage. And while she was doing this it still looked as if she were in the chair, for the false cap and the extended cross rod made outlines as if of a human form beneath the black veil.

As soon as Helen was out of the chair and beneath the stage an attendant closed the newspaper and wooden floor traps. Joe then suddenly raised the veil, taking in its folds the false cap and the cross piece which had represented Helen's shoulders. They were thin and light---these pieces of trick apparatus---and no one suspected they were in the veil. The hinged seat of the chair snapped back in place by means of a spring, and when Joe stepped aside, holding the veil, there was the empty chair; and the newspaper, which he picked up, seemed to preclude the possibility of there having been a trap in the stage. But Joe was careful how he exhibited this paper to his audience.

And so it was that the lady "vanished."

"And now, Joe, tell me all about it!" demanded Helen, when the circus was over for the afternoon, and the box and vanishing tricks had been successfully performed. "What happened to your trapeze?"

"Some one spilled acid on one of the wire ropes, and it ate into the metal, corroding it and separating a number of the strands so that a little extra weight broke them," said Joe.

"Acid on the cable?" cried Helen. "How did you find out?"

"I just examined the wire. I knew it couldn't have rusted naturally in such a short time. There was a peculiar smell about the wire, and I know enough of chemistry to make a simple acid test! What kind of acid was used I don't know, but it was strong enough to eat the steel."

"Who could have put it on?"

"That I've got to find out!"

"Was it Harry Loper?"

"I taxed him with it, but he swears he knew nothing of it," said Joe. "I'm inclined to believe him, too. I charged him with drinking, and he could not deny that. But he said he met some old friends and they induced him to have a little convivial time with them. No, I don't believe he'd do it. He's weak and foolish, but he had no reason to try to injure me."

"Who would, Joe? Of course there's Bill Carfax, but he hasn't been seen near the circus of late."

"No, I don't believe it could have been Bill. I'll have to be on my guard."

"Do, Joe!" urged Helen. "Oh, I can't bear to think of it!"

"Don't then!" laughed Joe, trying to make light of it. "Let's go down town and I'll buy you some ice cream."

"But you're not going to give up trying to find out who put acid on the trapeze, are you?"

"No, indeed!" declared the young performer. "I have two problems on my hands now---that and trying to learn how too many persons came to the circus this afternoon," and he told Helen about the extra tickets.

"That's queer!" she exclaimed. "Some jinx bug must be after us!"

"Don't get superstitious!" warned Joe. "Now we'll forget our troubles. They may not amount to anything after all."

But, though he spoke lightly, Joe was worried, and he was not going to let Helen know that. They went into an ice-cream parlor and "relaxed," as Helen called it.

The two were on their way back to the circus lot, intending to go to supper and prepare for the evening entertainment, when there was a sudden alarm down the street, and, in an instant, the fire engines and other apparatus dashed past.

"A fire!" cried Joe. "Come on, Helen! It's just down the street!"

They could see smoke pouring from a small building and a crowd rushing toward it. Thither, also, the fire apparatus was dashing. Joe and Helen were among the early arrivals.

"What is it?" asked Joe of an officer. "I mean what sort of place is that?" and he pointed to the building, which was now obscured by smoke.

"Dime museum," was the answer. "Lot of fakes. I sent in the alarm. A fire-eater was trying some new stunt and he set the place ablaze, so the boss yelled to me. Come now, youse all have to git back!" and he motioned to the crowd, which was constantly increasing, to get beyond the fire lines.

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING NEW

What with the clanging of the gongs on the engines and on the red runabouts that brought two battalion chiefs to the fire; the pall of smoke, with, here and there, the suggestion of a red blaze; the swaying excitement of the crowd; the yells of harassed policemen; the scene at the blaze of the dime museum was one long to be remembered by Joe Strong and Helen Morton--particularly in the light of what happened afterward.

"Joe, did you hear what he said?" asked Helen, as she moved back with the young acrobat in conformity with the officer's order.

"You mean that we've got to slide?"

"No, that a fire-eater started the blaze. Does he mean a professional 'fire bug,' as I have heard them called?"

"Oh, not at all!" exclaimed Joe. "A fire-eater is a chap who does such stunts in a museum, theater, or even in a circus. Sampson Brothers used to have one, I understand, from looking over the old books. But it wasn't much of an act. Golly, this is going to be some blaze!"

That was very evident from the increased smoke that rolled out and the crackle of fire that now could be heard above the puffing of the engines and the shouts of the mob.

"A regular tinder box!" muttered the officer who had told Joe the origin of the blaze. "Place ought to have been pulled down long ago. Git back there youse!" he yelled to some venturesome lads. "Want to git mushed up?"

The blaze was a big one, considerable damage was done, and several persons were injured. But quick work by an efficient department prevented the flames from spreading to the buildings on either side of the one where it had started.

Joe and Helen stayed long enough to see the menace gotten under control, and then they departed just as the ambulance rolled away with the last of the victims.

"That's the fire-eater they're taking to the hospital now," said the policeman who had first spoken to the young circus performers. "They took him into a drug store to wrap him in oil and cotton batting."

"Will he live?" asked Helen.

"Just a chance," was the answer. "Say, if I had to get my living eating fire I'd starve," confided the policeman. "It must be some stunt! I always thought it was a fake, but this fire burned real enough."

"Oh, it isn't all fake," said Joe, "though of course there's a trick about it."

"You seem to know," said the policeman, and he smiled at Joe and Helen. His chief troubles were about over with the departure of the ambulance and the knowledge that filtered through the crowd that the most of the excitement was over.

"Oh, I'm in the circus business," confessed Joe. "I never ate fire," he went on, "but--"

"Oh, I know you now!" cried the officer. "I was on duty out at the circus grounds this afternoon, and I went into the tent when you did that box act. Say, that's some stunt! Do they really pay ten thousand dollars to the fellow who tells how it's done?"

"Well, we've never paid out the money yet," said Joe, with a smile. "But it's there, waiting for some one to claim it."

"Then I'm coming to-night to watch you," said the officer, who appeared delighted that he had recognized one of the "profesh."

"Come along," replied Joe. "Here, wait a minute! There are a couple of passes. Come and bring a friend. If you tell how I do the trick you'll get the ten thousand. Only you'll have to post a hundred dollars as a forfeit to the Red Cross in case you don't guess right. That's included in the offer."

"Oh!" The officer did not seem quite so pleased. "Well, I'll come anyhow," he went on, accepting the passes Joe handed him. The policeman had allowed Joe and Helen to stay in an advantageous place where they could watch the fire.

"Where are they taking the man who did the dangerous trick that caused all the trouble?" asked Helen, as she prepared to walk on with Joe.

"To the City Hospital, Miss. He's a bad case, I understand."

"Poor fellow," murmured Helen. "Do you think we could go to see him, and do something for him, Joe?" she asked solicitously. "He's in almost the same line of business as ourselves."

"Well, I don't know," was the slow answer.

"I can fix it up if you want to see him--that is, if the doctors and nurses will let you," said the policeman. "I know the hospital superintendent. You just tell him that Casey sent you and it will be all right."

"Thanks; perhaps we will," said Joe.

There was a little time after supper before the performers had to go on with their acts, and Helen prevailed on Joe to take her to the hospital whither the injured fire-eater had been removed. They found him swathed in bandages, no objection being made to their seeing him after the magic name of "Casey" had been mentioned to the superintendent.

"We came in to see if you needed any help," said Joe to the pathetic figure in the bed. "We're in the same line of business, in a way."

"Are you a fire-eater?" slowly asked the man.

"No," Joe told him. "But I'm in the circus---Sampson Brothers'."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about it. A partner of mine was with 'em for years. Gascoyne was his name."

"That was before my time," said Joe. "But how are you getting on? Can we be of any help to you? We professionals must help one another."

"That's right. We get knocked often enough," was the reply. "Well, I'm doing as well as can be expected, the doctor says. And I'm not really in need of anything. The museum folks were pretty good to me. Thank you, just the same."

"How did it happen?" asked Helen.

"Oh, just my carelessness," said the man. "We get careless after playing with fire a bit. I put too much alcohol on the tow, and there was a draft from an open door, some draperies caught, and it was all going before I knew it. I tried to put it out---that's how I got burned."

"Then you really didn't eat fire?" asked Helen.

Joe and the man swathed in bandages looked at one another and a semblance of a wink passed between them.

"Nobody can eat fire, lady," said the museum performer. "It's all a trick, same as some your husband does in the circus."

Joe blushed almost as much as did Helen.

"We're not married yet, but we're going to be," explained Joe, smiling.

"Lucky guy!" murmured the man. "Well, as I was saying, it's all a trick," he went on. "Strong alum solution in your mouth, just a dash of alcohol to make a blaze that flares up but goes out quickly if you smother it right. You know the game," and he looked at Joe.

"Well, not exactly," was the reply. "I've read something of it. But, somehow, it never appealed to me."

"Oh, it makes a good act, friend!" said the man earnestly. "I've done a lot of museum and circus stunts, and this always goes big. There's no danger if you handle it right. I'll be more careful next time."

"You don't mean to say you'll go back to it, do you?" asked Helen.

"Sure, lady! I've got to earn my living! And this is the best thing I know. I'll be out in a week. I didn't swallow any, thank goodness! Oh, sure I'll go at it again."

Joe and Helen cheered the sufferer up as much as they could, and then departed. Joe privately left a bill of substantial denomination with the superintendent to be used for anything extra the patient might need.

On the way back to the circus, where they were soon to give their evening performance, Joe was unusually quiet.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen. "Are you thinking of that accident on the trapeze?"

"No," was the answer. "It's something different. I've got to get up a new act for the show. That trapeze act, even the way I had to do it this afternoon, isn't sensational enough. I've got to have something new, and I've about decided on it."

"What?" asked Helen.

"I'm going to become a fire-eater!" was the unexpected, reply.

CHAPTER VII

THE PAPER EXPERT

For a moment Helen Morton stared at Joe Strong as though not quite sure whether or not he was in his proper mind. Then, seeing plainly that he was in earnest, she seemed to shrink away from him, as he had noticed her shrink away, for a moment, from the burned man suffering there in the hospital.

"What's the matter, Helen?" asked Joe, trying to speak lightly. "Don't you want to see some more sensational acts in the show?"

"Yes, but not that kind," she answered with a shudder she could not conceal. "Oh, Joe, if you were to---" She could not go on. Her breast heaved painfully.

"Now look here, Helen!" he exclaimed with good-natured roughness, "that isn't any way to look at matters; especially when we both depend on sensations for making our living.

"You know, as well as I do, that in this business we have to take risks. That's what makes our acts go. You take a risk every time you perform with Rosebud. You might slip, the horse might slip, and you'd be hurt. Now is this new act I am thinking of perfor---"

"Yes, I may take risks, Joe!" interrupted Helen. "But they are perfectly natural risks, and I have more than an even chance. You might just as well say you take a risk walking along the street, and so you do. An elevated train might fall on you or an auto run up on the sidewalk. The risks I take in the act with Rosebud are only natural ones, and really shouldn't be counted. But if you start to become a fire-eater---Oh, Joe, think of that poor fellow in the hospital!"

"He didn't get that way from eating fire---or pretending to eat it---for the amusement of the public. He might just as easily have been burned the way he is by lighting the kitchen stove for his wife to get breakfast. His accident was entirely outside of his act, you might say. Why, I use lighted candles in some of my tricks. Now, if some one knocked over a candle, and it caused a fire on the stage and I was burned, would you want me to give up being a magician?"

"Oh, no, I suppose not," said Helen slowly. "But fire is so dangerous. And to think of putting it in your mouth! How can you do it, Joe? Oh, it can't be done!"

"Oh, there's a trick about it. I haven't mastered all the details yet, so as to give a smooth performance, but I can make an attempt at it."

"Joe Strong! do you mean to say you know how to eat fire?" demanded Helen, and now her eyes showed her astonishment.

"Well, not exactly eat it, though that is the term used. But I do know how to do it. I learned, in a rudimentary way, when I was with Professor Rosello---the first man who taught me sleight-of-hand. He had one fire-eating act, but it didn't amount to much. He told me the secret of it, such as it was.

"But if I put on that stunt I'm going to make it different. I'm going to dress it up, make it sensational so that it will be the talk of the country where circuses are exhibited."

"And won't you run any danger?" questioned the girl quickly.

"Oh, I suppose so; just as I do when I work on the high trapeze or ride my motor cycle along the high wire. But it's all in the day's work. And now let's talk about something pleasant---I mean let's get off the shop."

Helen sighed. She was plainly disturbed, but she did not want to burden Joe with her worries. She knew he must have calm nerves and an untroubled mind to do his various acts in the circus that night.

After supper and before the evening performance Joe made a careful examination of his trapeze apparatus. Beyond the place where the acid had eaten into the wire strands, causing them to become weakened so that they parted, the appliances did not appear to have been tampered with. Nor were there any clues which might show who had done the deed. That it could have happened by accident was out of the question. The acid could have gotten on the wire rope in one way only. Some one must have climbed up the rope ladder to the platform and applied the stuff.

"But who did it?" asked Jim Tracy, when Joe had told him of the discovery of the acid-eaten cable.

"Some enemy. Perhaps the same one who was responsible for our loss in tickets this afternoon," answered the young magician.

"Carfax?" asked the ringmaster.

"It might be, and yet he isn't the only man who's been discharged or who has a grudge against me. There was Gianni with whom I had a fight."

"You mean the Italian? Yes, he was an ugly customer. But I haven't heard of him for years. I don't believe he's even in this part of the country."

"And we haven't any reason to suppose that Carfax is, either, after his fiasco in trying to expose my Box of Mystery trick. But we've got to be on our guard."

"I should say so!" exclaimed the ringmaster. "And now about your trapeze act, Joe! Are you going to put it on again to-night?"

"Of course. It's billed."

"Then you'll have to hustle to rig up a new rope."

"I'm not going to put on a new rope," declared Joe. "The act went so well when I seemed about to fall, that I'm going to keep that feature in. I'll rig up a catch on the severed cable. At the proper time I'll snap it loose, seem to fall, swing by the dangling bar as I did before, and land on the platform that way. It will be more effective than if I did it in the regular way."

"But won't it be risky?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders.

"No more so than any trapeze act. Now that I'm ready for the sudden drop I'll be on my guard. No, I can work it all right. And now about these extra admissions? What are we going to do about them?"

"Well," said the ringmaster, "maybe we'd better talk to Moyne about them. If they ring an extra thousand persons in on us again to-night the thing will be getting serious."

The treasurer was called in consultation with Joe and Tracy and other circus officials, and it was decided to keep a special watch on the ticket wagon and the ticket takers that night.

Joe quickly made the change in his trapeze and tested it, finding that he could work it perfectly. Then he began to think of his new fire-eating act. He was determined to make that as great a success as was his now well advertised ten thousand dollar mystery box act.

The evening performance had not long been under way, and Joe had done his big swing successfully, when he was sought out by Mr. Moyne.

"The same thing has happened again," said the treasurer.

"You mean more people coming in than we have sold tickets for?"

"That's it."

"Well, where do the extra admissions come from? I mean where do the people get their admission slips from---the extra people?"

"That's what we can't find out," the treasurer aid. "As far as the ticket takers can tell only one kind of admission slip for the fifty cent seats is being handed them. But the number, as tallied by the automatic gates, does not jibe with the number of ordinary admissions sold at the ticket office. To-night there is a difference of about eight hundred and seventy-five."

"Do you mean," asked Joe, "that that number of persons came in on tickets that were never sold at the ticket wagon?"

"That's just what I mean. There is an extra source from which the ordinary admission tickets come. As I told you this afternoon, we are having no trouble with our reserved seats. There have been no duplicates there. But there is a duplication in the fifty cent seats, where one may take his pick as to where he wants to sit."

"Don't we have tickets on sale in some of the downtown stores?" Joe asked.

"Oh, yes, several of the stores sell tickets up to a certain hour. Then they send the balance up here for us to dispose of."

"How about their accounts? Have you had them gone over carefully?"

"They tally to a penny."

"How about the unsold tickets these agents send back to us? Isn't there a chance on the way up for some one to slip out some of the pasteboards, Mr. Moyne?"

"There is a chance, yes, but it hasn't been done. I have checked up the accounts of the stores, and there is the cash or the unsold tickets to balance every time. But somehow, and from some place, an extra number of the ordinary admission tickets are being sold, and we are not getting the money for them."

"It is queer," said Joe. "I have an idea that I want to try out the first chance I get. Save me a bunch of these ordinary admission tickets. Take them from the boxes at random and let me have them."

"I will," promised the treasurer. "There is nothing we can do to-night to stop the fraud, is there?" he asked. Mr. Moyne was a very conscientious treasurer. It disturbed him greatly to see the circus lose money.

"I don't see what we can do," said Joe. "If we start an inquiry it may cause a fight. Let it go. We'll have to charge it to profit and loss. And don't forget to let me have some of those tickets. I want to examine them."

Mr. Moyne promised to attend to the matter. Joe then had to go on in his Box of Mystery trick, and when this was finished, amid much applause, he caused Helen to "vanish" in the manner already described.

The circus made considerable money in this town, even with the bogus admissions, and as the weather was fine and as the show would exhibit the next day in a big city for a two days' stand, every one was in good humor. Staying over night in the same city where they exhibited during the day was always a rest for the performers. They got more sleep and were in better trim for work.

The last act was finished, the chariot races had taken place, and the audience was surging out. The animal tent had already been taken down and the animals themselves were being loaded on the railroad train.

As Joe, Helen, and the other performers started for their berths, to begin the trip to the next town, the "main top" began coming down. The circus was on the move.

Soon after breakfast the next morning, having seen that all his apparatus had safely arrived, Joe visited Mr. Moyne in the latter's office.

"Have you a bunch of tickets for me?" asked the young magician.

"Yes, here they are---several hundred picked at random from the boxes at the entrance. I can't see anything wrong. If you're looking for counterfeit tickets I don't believe you'll find them," added Mr. Moyne.

"I don't know that I am looking for counterfeits," said Joe. "That may be the explanation, or it may be there is a leak somewhere in the ticket wagon."

"I'm almost sure there isn't," declared the treasurer. "But of course no one is infallible. I hope you get to the bottom of the mystery."

"I hope so myself," replied Joe, with a smile, as he put the tickets in a valise.

A little later he was on his way downtown. He had several hours before he would have to go "on," as he did not take part in the parade, and he had several matters to attend to.

Joe made his way toward a large office building, carrying the valise with the circus tickets. A little later he might have been seen entering an office, the door of which bore the name of "Herbert Waldon, Consulting Chemist."

"Mr. Strong," said Joe to the boy who came forward to inquire his errand. "Mr. Waldon is expecting me, I believe."

"Oh, yes," said the boy. "You're to come right in."

Joe was ushered into a room which was filled with strange appliances, from test tubes and retorts to electrical furnaces and X-ray apparatus. A little man in a rather soiled linen coat came forward, smiling.

"I won't shake hands with you, Mr. Strong," he said, "for I've been dabbling in some vile-smelling stuff. But if you wait until I wash I'll be right with you."

"All right," assented Joe. And then, as he caught sight of what seemed to be a number of canceled bank checks on a table, he smilingly asked: "Have you been paying your income tax?"

"Oh, no," answered the chemist with a laugh. "Those are just some samples of paper sent in for me to test. An inventor is trying to get up an acid-proof ink. I'm a sort of paper expert, among my other chemical activities, and I'm putting these samples through a series of tests. But you'll not be interested in them."

"I don't know but what I shall be," returned Joe, with sudden energy. "Since you are a paper expert I may be able to set you another task besides that of showing me the latest thing in fire-resisting liquids. Yes, I may want your services in both lines."

"Well, I'm here to do business," said Mr. Waldon, smiling.

CHAPTER VIII

JOE EATS FIRE

The chemist led the way into a little office. This opened off from the room in which was the apparatus, and where, as Joe had become more and more keenly aware, there was a most unpleasant odor.

"I'll open the window, close the laboratory door, and you won't notice it in a little while," said Mr. Waldon, as he observed Joe's nose twitching. "I'm so used to it I don't mind, but you, coming in from the fresh air---"

"It isn't exactly perfume," interrupted Joe, with a laugh. "But don't be uneasy on my account. I can stand it."

However, he was glad when the fresh air came in through the window. The chemist washed his hands and then sat down at a desk, inviting Joe to draw up his chair.

"Now, what can I do for you?" asked Mr. Waldon. "Is it fire or paper?"

"Well, since I know pretty well what I want to ask you in the matter of fire," replied Joe, "and since I've got a puzzling paper problem here, suppose we tackle the hardest first, and come to the known, and easier, trick later."

"Just as you say," assented Mr. Waldon. "What's your paper problem?"

Joe's answer was to take from the valise several hundreds of the circus tickets. They were the kind sold for fifty cents, or perhaps more in these days of the war tax. They entitle the holder to a seat on what, at a baseball game, would be called the "bleachers." In other words they were not reserved-seat coupons.

However, these tickets were not the one-time blue or red pieces of stiff pasteboard, bearing the name of the circus and the words "*Admit one*," which were formerly sold at the gilded wagon. These were handed in at the main entrance, and the tickets were used over and over again. Sometimes the blue ones sold for fifty cents, and a kind selling for seventy-five cents entitled the purchaser to a seat with a folding back to it, though it was not reserved.

But Joe had instituted some changes when he became one of the circus proprietors, and one was in the matter of the general admission tickets. He had them printed on a thin but tough quality of paper, and each ticket was numbered. In this way it needed but a glance at the last ticket in the rack and a look at the memorandum of the last number previously sold at the former performance, to tell exactly how many general admissions had been disposed of.

These numbered tickets were not used over again, but were destroyed after the day's accounts had been made up. At first Joe and some others of the officials had had an idea that the man who was charged with the work of destroying the tickets, instead of doing so, had kept some out and sold them at a reduced price. But an investigation proved that this was not the case.

"Some one is ringing in extra tickets on us," stated Joe to the chemist. "We want to find out who it is and how the trick is worked. So far, we haven't been able to find this out. As a matter of fact, we don't know whether there are bogus tickets in our boxes or not. We haven't been able to detect two kinds. They all seem the same."

"Some numbers must be duplicated," said Mr. Waldon, as he picked up a handful of the slips Joe had brought. "That's very obvious. The numbers must be duplicated in some instances."

"Yes, we have discovered that," returned Joe. "But the queer part is, taking even two tickets with the same number, we don't know which was sold at our ticket wagon and which is the bogus one. Here's a case in point."

He picked up two of the coupons. As far as eye or touch could tell they were identical, and they bore the same red number, one up in the hundred thousands.

"Now," continued Joe, "can you tell which of these two is the official circus ticket and which is the bogus one?"

The chemist thought for a moment.

"Have you a ticket---say one issued some time ago---which you are positive is genuine?" he asked.

"I'm ready for you there," answered Joe. "Here's a coupon that happened to escape destruction. It was one sold several weeks ago at our ticket wagon, before we noticed this trouble. I bought the ticket myself, so I know. I happened to be passing the wagon, and a boy was trying to reach up to buy a fifty cent seat. He wasn't quite tall enough, so I reached for him.

"Then, when I looked at him, I saw that fifty cents meant a lot to him. I gave him back his half dollar out of my own pocket, and passed him in to a reserved seat. But I forgot to turn the ticket in to the wagon, and it's been in my pocket ever since. Now I'm glad I saved it, for it will serve as a tester."

"Yes," admitted the chemist, "it will. It's a good thing you have this. But, Mr. Strong, this is going to take some time. I'll have to compare all these tickets with the admittedly genuine one, and I'll have to make some intricate tests."

"Well, I hoped you might be able to tell me right off the reel which of these coupons were good and which bad," said Joe. "But I can appreciate that it isn't easy. We certainly have been puzzled. So I'll leave them with you, and you can write to me when you have any results. I'll leave you a list of the towns where we'll be showing for the next two weeks. And now suppose we get at the fire-eating business."

"All right," was the reply of the chemist. "But with the understanding that you do all the eating. I haven't any appetite that way myself."

They both laughed, and then, for some hours, Joe Strong was closeted with the chemist.

When Joe emerged from the office of Mr. Waldon there was a look of satisfaction on the face of the young magician.

"I think I can make quite an act, after what you've told me," he said. "As soon as I get it perfected I'll send you word and you can come to see me."

"I will, if you aren't too far away," promised the chemist.

That night, following the closing of the performance, Joe invited Helen, Jim Tracy, and a few of his more intimate friends and associates into his private dressing tent.

"I have the nucleus of a new act," he said, when they were seated in chairs before a small table, on which were several pieces of apparatus. "Just give me your opinion of this."

Joe lighted a candle, picked up on a fork what seemed to be a piece of bread, and touched it to the candle flame. In an instant the object that was on the fork burst into a blaze, and, before the eyes of his friends, Joe calmly put the flaming portion into his mouth.

He closed his lips, seemed to be chewing something, opened his mouth, and showed it empty.

"A little light lunch!" he remarked, but his smile faded as Helen screamed in horror.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHEMIST'S LETTER

"Oh, Joe, you'll surely burn yourself!" exclaimed the startled bareback rider.

"Did you get burned?" questioned Mrs. Watson.

"Some trick!" declared the snake charmer.

For the moment there was some excitement, for this was a new act for the circus people.

Helen soon recovered her customary composure, and then she explained the cause of her excitement and the startled cry she had given. She had, of course, expected some trick with fire when Joe had summoned her and the others to his own

private part of the dressing tents. But she had not expected to see him actually put the blazing material in his mouth.

"I thought there was some sleight-of-hand performance about it," she said. "I had an idea that you only pretended to put the blazing stuff in your mouth, Joe. And when I saw it I was afraid you'd breathe in the flames and---and---"

She did not need to go on, they all understood what she meant, for every one in the circus knew that Helen and Joe were engaged.

"I once saw a little boy burned at a bonfire at which he was playing," went on Helen. "He died. Since then the sight of fire near a human being has always a bad effect on me. But I suppose I can get over it, if I know there is no danger," she said with a slight smile at Joe.

"Well, I can assure you there isn't the slightest danger," he declared. "If there was, I should be the first to give it up. I am as fond of living as any one."

"You don't show it, young man, in some of the tricks you do," commented Mrs. Watson, with the freedom befitting a "circus mother," and the privilege of an old friend. "You must remember that you don't live only for yourself," and she looked significantly at Helen.

"Oh, I'll be careful!" promised Joe. "And now I'll do the trick again for you, and let you see that it's absolutely harmless. Any of you could do it---if you knew how."

"Excuse me!" exclaimed Jim Tracy. "Not for mine!"

However they all watched Joe eagerly and interestedly, even Helen. He did not seem to make any unusual preparations. He merely took a drink of what seemed to be water. Then he ignited something in the flame of the candle and placed the burning stuff in his mouth, seeming to chew it with gusto.

"Oh!" exclaimed Helen. But beyond that and a momentary placing of one hand over her heart, she did not give way to emotion. Then, as Joe did the fire-eating trick again, Helen forced herself to watch him closely. As he had said, he took no harm from the act.

"Tell us how you do it," begged Bill Watson. "When I get over being funny---or getting audiences to think I am---I may want to live on something hot. How do you work it?"

"Well," said Joe, "if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not tell. It isn't that I'm afraid of any of my friends giving the trick away, and so spoiling the mystery of it for the crowds. It's just as it was in my box act. If any of you are asked how I do this fire trick you can truly say you don't know, for none of you will know by my telling, not even Helen, though she is in on the box secret. I'll only say that I protect my face and mouth, as well as hands, in a certain way, and that I do, actually, put the blazing material into my mouth. I am not burned. So if any one asks you about the act you may tell them that much with absolute truth. Now the question is---how is it going to go with the audiences? We need something---or, at least, I do---to create a sensation. Will this answer?"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Jim Tracy. "That ought to go big when it's dressed up."

"Oh, this is only the ground work," said Joe. "I'm going to elaborate this fire act and make it the sensation of the season. I've only begun on it. I got from a chemist the materials I want with which to protect myself, and I have shown, to my own and your satisfaction, that I can eat fire without getting harmed. So far all is well. Now I'm going to work the act

up into something really worth while."

"But you'll still be careful, won't you, Joe?" asked Helen.

"Indeed I will," he assured her.

"Do the trick once more, Joe," suggested Bill Watson. "I'm coming as close as you'll let me, and I want to criticize it from the standpoint of a man in the audience."

"That's what I'm after," said Joe. "If there are any flaws in the act, now is the time to find it out."

Once more he set the material ablaze and put it into his mouth. Bill Watson watched closely, and, at the end, the old clown shook his head.

"I saw you actually put the fire in your mouth," he testified. "No one can do more than that. It takes nerve!"

Of course, no one can actually swallow fire and live. The slightest breath of flame on the lungs or on the mucous membrane of the throat and passages is fatal. So when the terms "fire-eating" or "fire-eater" are used it will be in the sense of its being a theatrical act. There is a trick about it, and the trick is this:

In the first place, the flame itself is produced by blazing alcohol. This produces a blaze, and a hot one, too, but there is no smoke. In other words, the combustion is almost perfect, there being no residue of carbon to remain hot after the actual flame is extinguished.

And now as to the actual putting into one's mouth something that is blazing hot: It all depends on a very simple principle.

If the hand be thoroughly wet in water it may be safely thrust for a fraction of a second into a flaming gas jet. But mark this--for the *fraction of a second only*. The water forms a protecting film for the skin, and before it is evaporated the hand must be taken out of danger. In other words, there is needed an appreciable time for the fire to beat the skin to the burning point.

This immunity from burns, to which the professional fire-eaters owe their success, comes from this film of moisture on their skin. They do not always use water---in fact, this is only serviceable for a momentary contact with flame, and, at that, on the hands or face. In case a longer contact is desired, a fire-resisting chemical liquid is used.

It is about the contact of flame with the tender mucous membrane surfaces of the mouth and throat that Joe, as a fire-eater, was most concerned.

In the first place, there is a constant film of the secretion called saliva always flowing in the mouth. It comes from glands in the throat and mouth, and is very necessary to good digestion.

Now, for a very brief period this saliva, which is just the same as a film of water on the hand, resists the fire. But professional fire-eaters do not depend on saliva alone. They use a chemical solution, and this is what Joe did when he drank something from a glass.

What that chemical solution was, Joe kept as a closely guarded professional secret. He feared, too, that some boy might make it, rinse his mouth out with it, and then, getting an audience of his chums together, might try to eat some blazing

coals. He might, and very likely would, be severely burned, and his parents or those in charge of him would blame Joe for allowing such dangerous information to leak out.

So, though he guarded all his secrets of magic, he was particularly careful to keep this one to himself.

But Joe protected his mouth and throat with a fire-resisting liquid, the formula for which was given him by the chemist to whom he submitted the circus tickets.

The success of Joe and others of his kind depends also in this on a well known natural law. It is that there can be no combustion in the ordinary sense where there is no oxygen. As a candle will surely go out if enclosed in an air-tight receptacle---that is, it will go out as soon as it has burned up all the oxygen---just so surely will flame of any kind go out when a person closes his mouth on it. And as there is scarcely any air in the closed mouth---all of it going down the bronchial tubes into the lungs---it follows that the flame dies out almost instantly. That fact being considered, and the mouth and throat having been previously treated with the secret chemical, there is really not so much danger as appears.

As a matter of fact, a person inadvertently swallowing hot tea or coffee will burn or scald his mouth or tongue much more painfully than will a professional fire-eater. Most people know how painful a burned tongue is.

Joe told something of the history of fire-eating "champions" to his audience of friends, for it appeared that he had been reading up on the subject and was well informed. Then he announced that the private rehearsal was over.

"But I'm going to work this fire-eating up into something that will cause a sensation," he said. And he made good his promise.

It was about a week after this, and the circus had been traveling about, playing to good business, when Joe received a letter. In the upper left-hand corner was the imprint of Herbert Waldon, Chemist.

"I hope he has some news about the circus tickets!" exclaimed Joe. For the show had been losing money steadily by means of the bogus coupons; not as much as at first, but enough to make it necessary to discover the fraud. And, so far, Mr. Moyne had not been successful.

"Perhaps this explains the mystery," mused Joe as he opened the letter.

CHAPTER X

THE PET CAT

The typewritten sheet of the letter from Mr. Waldon enclosed two of the engraved circus coupons. They fluttered to the floor of Joe's private tent as he tore open the envelope.

"Well, either he has discovered something, or he has sent them back and given up," mused the young magician. "Let's see what he says."

Joe quickly took in the contents of the letter. In effect it stated that Mr. Waldon had discovered which were the bogus and which were the real circus tickets. He first gave an explanation of the chemical tests he used. Joe read this hastily, but carefully, then passed to the conclusions arrived at by the expert, who was an authority on various kinds of paper, as well as chemicals.

"The ticket I have marked No. 1 is a genuine coupon, issued by your circus corporation," said Mr. Waldon in his letter. "The slip marked by me as No. 2 is a counterfeit. You will observe that they both bear the red ink serial number 356,891.

"If you were a paper expert you would observe that the paper used in the two tickets is different. There is not a very great difference, and I am inclined to think that both the genuine and the counterfeit tickets were made on paper from the same mill, but of a different 'run.' That is, it was made at a different time.

"The printer who manufactured your tickets bought his paper from a certain mill making a specialty of this particular kind. Then some one, who must know something of your financial and business interests, had the bogus tickets made, and on the same kind of paper. But there is a slight difference, which I was able to detect by means of chemical reactions. The coloring matter used varied slightly, though the texture of the two kinds of paper is almost exactly similar.

"Now, having settled that point, the solution of the remaining equations of the problem rests with you. I can not tell who had the bogus tickets printed. You will have to go to the mill making the paper and find out to whom they sold this kind. In that way you will learn the names of all printers, using it, and by a process of elimination you will get at the one who printed the counterfeits.

"This printer may be an innocent party, or he may be guilty. That is for you and the detectives to determine. I hope I have started you on the right track. I shall be interested to hear, my dear Mr. Strong, how you make out in your fire-eating act."

"I'll tell him as soon as I try it on a real audience," said Joe, with a smile, as he folded the letter. "And so counterfeit tickets have been rung in on us! Well, I suspected that, since our own men were thoroughly to be trusted. Now to get at the guilty ones. And I shouldn't be surprised if I could name one of the men involved. But I'll call a meeting, and lay this before the directors."

The Sampson Brothers' Show was incorporated and was run strictly on business lines. There was a board of directors who looked after all business matters, and Joe was soon in consultation with them, laying before them Mr. Waldon's letter and the two marked tickets.

"It would take an expert to tell them apart," said Mr. Moynes, as he examined the coupons closely. "Well, what are we to do?"

"In the first place," declared Joe, "we must change our form of general admission tickets at once. That will stop the fraud, graft, or whatever you want to call it. Then we must do as Mr. Waldon says---look for the guilty parties. We'll have to hire some detectives, I think."

This plan was voted a good one, and steps were at once taken to change the form and style of the general admission tickets. Joe also wired for a man from a well known detective agency to meet the show at the next town. Then the printing shop which made the circus tickets was communicated with.

That was all that could be done at present, and Joe gave his attention to perfecting his new fire-eating act.

He did not give up his mystery box trick, and he still presented the vanishing lady illusion, Helen assisting in both of these. Joe also did the big swing, which always caused a thrill on account of the danger involved. Careful watch was kept over the trapeze and other apparatus so that no more dangerous tampering could be attempted, and Joe always looked over everything with sharp eyes before trusting himself high in the air.

"Some one evidently has a grudge against me as well as against the circus in general," he said to Jim Tracy.

"Maybe it's the same person," suggested the ringmaster.

"Perhaps. Well, as soon as we get some word from the detectives we can start on the trail."

The circus had arrived at a large city, where it was to show three days and nights, and preparations were made for big crowds, as the city was the center of a large number of industries, where many thousands of men were employed at good wages.

"We'll play to 'Straw Room Only' at every performance," said Mr. Moyne, rubbing his hands with glee as he thought of the dollars that would be taken in. "And I'm glad we discovered the bogus tickets in time. We'd be out a lot of money if the counterfeits were to be used here."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "But we aren't out of the woods yet. The same man who imitated the light green tickets may have the bright blue ones which we now use for general admission duplicated and sell them."

"We'll have to take that chance," said the treasurer. "But I'll instruct the ticket takers to be unusually careful."

That was all that could be done. The detective had reported that he was making an examination, starting at the paper mill, and was endeavoring to learn where the bogus tickets had been made.

The circus parade had been held and witnessed by enthusiastic crowds lining the streets. Then was every prospect of big business, and it was borne out.

Joe wished he had prepared his fire act earlier but it could not be helped.

"I'll have it ready for to-morrow, though," he said to Jim Tracy, at the conclusion of the first afternoon in the big city where they were to stay three days.

"Then I'm going to have it advertised," said the ringmaster, who also sometimes acted as assistant general manager. "We'll bill it big. You're sure of yourself, are you?"

"Oh, yes," answered Joe with a laugh. "I'll give 'em their money's worth all right, but it won't be the big sensation I'm planning for later on. That will take time."

"Well, as long as it's a fire act it will be new and novel, and it will draw," declared Jim Tracy.

It was later in the afternoon, when the circus performance was over, that Joe and Helen strolled downtown, as was their custom. Some convention was being held in the city, and across one of the principal streets was stretched a big banner of the kind used in political campaigns.

It was hung from a heavy, slack wire from the brick walls of two opposite buildings, and the banner attracted considerable attention because of a novel picture on it.

Joe and Helen were standing in the street, looking up at the swaying creation of canvas and netting, when a woman's cry came to their ears.

"Look! Look! The cat! The cat is walking the wire!" she exclaimed.

Joe and Helen turned first to see who it was that had cried out. It was a woman in the street, and with her parasol she pointed upward.

There, surely enough, half way out on the thick, slack wire, and high above the middle of the street was a large white cat. It was walking the wire as one's pet might walk the back fence. But this cat seemed to have lost its nerve. It had got half way across, but was afraid to go farther and could not turn around and go back.

As Joe and Helen looked, a woman appeared at the window of one of the buildings from the front walls of which the banner was suspended, and, pointing at the cat, cried:

"A hundred dollars to whoever saves my cat! A hundred dollars reward!"

CHAPTER XI

THE RESCUE

The tumult which had arisen in the street beneath the banner when the crowd caught sight of the cat was hushed for a moment after the woman's frantic cry. Before that there had been some laughter, and not a few cat-calls and exaggerated "miaows" from boys in the street. But now every one, even the mischievous urchins, seemed to sense that something unusual was about to take place.

"Come back, Peter! Come back!" cried the woman, stretching out her arms to the cat from the window out of which she leaned. "Come back to me!"

The white cat on the wire heard the voice of the woman and seemed to want to return to its mistress. But either the cat was not an adept at turning on such a narrow support, or it was afraid to try.

And, likewise, it was afraid to go forward. There it stood, about in the middle of the wire, high above the street, and it clung to its perch by its claws.

The banner was hung from the cross wire by means of several loops of rope, and it was in some of these loops that the cat had stuck its claws, and so hung on.

As the cat remained there, suspended, the crowd in the street below increased in size. But from the time the woman had so frantically called there had been no more of the cries from the crowd that might be expected to frighten the animal.

"Will some one get my cat?" cried the woman in a shrill voice, which could easily be heard by Joe, Helen, and nearly every one else. "I'll give one hundred dollars in cash to whoever saves him!" she went on. "Come back, Peter! Come back!" she appealed.

There was a thoughtless laugh from some one at the woman's anxiety, and some one cried:

"There's lots of cats! Let Peter go!"

"The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ought to get after whoever that was," said Helen indignantly, and there was an approving murmur from some of those near her.

"Does any one know that lady?" asked Joe, pointing at the figure in the window. A pathetic figure it was, too, of an old woman clad in black, as though she had lost all her friends.

"Yes, she's a queer character," said some one who seemed to know. "Lives up there all alone in the old house that, except for the upper part where she is now, has been turned into offices.

"She's rich, they say. Owns that building and a lot of others on this street. But she lives all alone in a few rooms, and has a lot of pet cats. I guess that's one which got away."

"It got away all right," said another man. "And I don't believe she'll ever get it back. The cat's scared to death."

"Why doesn't it jump?" asked some one. "I heard that cats always land on their feet, no matter how far they fall."

"A fall from there would kill any cat," said Joe, as he handed Helen a small package he had been carrying--a purchase he had made at one of the stores.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, sensing that Joe Strong had some object in mind.

"I'm going to get that cat," he said in a low voice. "I can't bear to see it harmed, and it can't cling there much longer. Night's coming on, too, and if it isn't rescued soon it won't be until morning. I know what it is to have a pet suffer. I'm going to get that cat!"

"Oh, mister, you can't!" cried a small girl who was standing near by and overheard this remark.

"I should say not!" exclaimed the man who had given a little personal sketch of the woman in black. "The longest ladder in the fire department won't reach up to that wire, and they can't use extension ones, or scaling ones as they could on a building. You can't get that cat, sir, though I wish some one could. I don't like to see dumb brutes suffer. But you can't get it!"

"Perhaps I can!" said Joe modestly.

He started toward the street entrance of the old building, from the upper window of which leaned the pathetic figure of the woman calling to her cat out on the swaying wire.

"Oh, Joe," Helen began, "are you really going to---" and then she stopped.

"I am!" he answered, for he knew she understood. "Wait here for me. I won't be long."

Only a few in the crowd had heard what Joe said, or understood his intentions as he made his way through the press of people. The woman at the window was unaware of the fact that some one had heard her and was about to heed her appeal.

"A hundred dollars to whoever saves my cat!" she cried again.

This time no one laughed.

Joe Strong, acrobat, athlete, magician, and possessed of many other muscular accomplishments started up the stairs. The lower part of the office building was deserted at this hour, but he made his way to the place where he judged the woman

lived alone. He was confirmed in this belief by hearing from behind a closed door the barking and whining of dogs.

"She must keep a regular menagerie," mused Joe. "Probably these are all the friends she has, poor old lady!"

He knocked on a door that seemed to be the entrance to the living apartments. There was a cessation of the barking and whining, and a moment later a querulous voice asked:

"Who is there? What do you want?"

"Is that your cat out on the wire?" asked Joe.

"Yes! Oh, yes! That's Peter! My favorite cat! Oh, have you saved him? Have you got him down? No, you can't have! He's out on that wire yet!" she cried. And then she opened the door.

Joe was confronted by the same woman he had observed leaning from the window. Her face was pale, and she was quite elderly. But there was a kind and pathetic look about her eyes. Once, she must have been beautiful.

Joe had no time to speculate on what might have been the romantic history of the woman. She looked eagerly at him.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "I never see any one. I live here alone. I must beg you to excuse me. I have to see if some one will not, save my cat."

"That is just what I came up for," said Joe, smiling. "I am a lover of animals myself. I'd like to save your pet."

"Oh, if you will, I'll pay you the hundred dollars!" cried the woman. "I have it!" she went on eagerly. "It's in here," and she motioned to the rooms. They were tastefully, but not lavishly, furnished.

"We'll talk about that later," said Joe, with a smile. "The point is let me get the cat first."

"But you can't get him from here---from these rooms!" the woman in black exclaimed. "He's out on the wire! You'll have to climb up in some way! Oh, I don't know how you can do it!" There were tears in her eyes and she clasped her hands imploringly.

"I can't get your cat from the street," said Joe. "That's why I came up here. I must walk out on the wire from your window. Have you a pair of slippers? The older and softer the better---slippers with thin, worn soles."

"Why, yes, I have. But you---you can't walk out on the wire! It is too small, almost, for my cat! You can't do it! It is impossible!"

"Oh, no," answered Joe gently, "it isn't impossible. I have done it before. If you'll let me get to a window near which the wire is stretched, and if you will let me take a pair of old slippers."

"Come in!" interrupted the eccentric old woman, opening wide the door. "I don't in the least know what you intend to do, but something seems to tell me I can trust you. And if only you can save Peter---"

"I'll try," said Joe simply.

The woman began to search frantically in a closet, throwing out shoes, dresses, and other feminine wearing apparel. As she delved among the things, a shout arose from the street, the noise of the voices floating in through the open window. Joe looked out.

"Oh, has Peter fallen?" cried the woman.

That, too, had been Joe's thought.

"No," he answered, as he took an observation. "Your cat has only changed his position a little. I suppose the crowd thought it was going to fall, but it's all right. I'll soon have it back to you. Is it a vicious cat?"

"Oh, no indeed. He's as gentle as can be. But perhaps he might be so scared now that he wouldn't know what he was doing. I see what you mean. Here, I'll give you an old pair of gloves for your hands."

"That's what I want," said Joe. "I can't afford to have my hands scratched, as I do some legerdemain tricks. But I need some soft-soled slippers more than I need gloves."

"Here is a pair," said the woman. "They're mine. I wear large ones, for I like to be comfortable."

"They'll fit me," decided Joe, after an inspection. "Just what I want, too!"

He began to take off his shoes.

"Do you really mean you are going to walk out on that wire and get my cat?" asked the woman, comprehending his intention as she saw Joe putting on the slippers and drawing on the old gloves she had given him. They were a man's size, and he judged she must have used them in rough work about the house.

"I'm going out on the wire to get your cat," he said.

"Oh, but I ought not to let you! You may fall and be killed! When I said I'd give a hundred dollars to whoever would save Peter, I did not mean that any one should risk his life. Much as I love my cat, I couldn't allow that."

"I'll be all right," said Joe easily. "Walking wires is part of my business. Now don't worry. And please don't scream if you are going to watch me."

She looked at him curiously.

"I am not in the habit of screaming," she said quietly.

"Well, I thought it best to mention it," said Joe.

He was now ready for his most novel form of walking the wire. He moved toward the window from which the woman had leaned. It was the same casement whence the cat had started on its perilous journey. Joe felt sure of himself. The slippers were just what he needed, with soft, pliable soles, worn thin. They were the best substitute he could have found for his circus shoes.

The wire from which the banner was suspended was fast to an eye-bolt set in the brick wall of the building a little below the sill of the window. It had been easy for the cat to step out and get on the cable.

Joe appeared at the window. He had taken off his coat and, in his white shirt, blue tie, and black trousers, he made a striking figure in the brilliant sunset light.

Instantly the crowd in the street saw him and divined his intention. Joe doubted not that Helen was looking up at him.

It was an easy step for him from the window sill to the wire from which was suspended the banner. He knew it would support his weight in addition to the big net affair. The size of the cable and the manner in which it was fastened told him that. Still he cautiously tried it with one foot before trusting all his weight to it. The spring of the wire told him all he needed to know.

Pausing a moment to make sure of himself, Joe Strong started to walk across the wire toward the clinging cat. The crowd gave one roar of welcome and approval, and then became hushed. This was what Joe wanted.

Now it was just as if he were doing the act in the circus. Only there was this difference---there was no safety net below him. But it was not the first time Joe had taken this risk. True, beneath him were the hard stones of the street, but a fall from the height at which he now was would be fatal, no matter what the character of ground under him. He dismissed all such thoughts from his mind.

Slowly, and with the caution he always used, Joe started on his journey across the wire. The cat felt his coming, and turned its head, as it crouched down, and looked at him. But it did not move. The creature was literally "scared stiff."

Foot by foot Joe progressed. Below him the crowd watched breathlessly. Joe knew Helen was there, praying for him, though he could not see her. In the window stood the figure in black, a silent, hopeful but much worried woman. She kept her promise not to scream, but Joe realized that the crucial moment was yet to come.

On and on he went nearer and nearer to the crouching cat. If only the animal would have sense enough to lie still and not make a fuss when he picked it up, Joe felt that all would be well.

But would Peter behave? That was the question.

Joe was now almost over the middle of the street. Far below him was the crowd---a sea of upturned faces, reddened by the reflected rays of the setting sun. The throng was silent. Joe was glad of that.

"Keep still now, Peter, I'm coming for you!" said Joe in a low voice.

"That's right, Peter!" added the woman. "Be a good cat now. You are going to be saved! Keep still and don't scratch!"

Whether the cat heard and understood it is hard to say. But it uttered a pitiful:

"Mew!"

Inch by inch, foot by foot Joe advanced. He was quite sure of himself now. He felt that he could easily have walked across the wire from building to building, with the street chasm below him, and even could have made the return trip. But picking up the cat and carrying it back was another thing. It would have been easier for Joe to have carried a man across on his back. He could direct the motions of the man. Could he those of the cat?

Still he was going to try.

On and on he went. The woman in black was leaning from the window, holding out her arms as though to catch Joe should he fall.

But he did not think of falling.

In another few seconds he was standing right over the cat. He could see the animal's claws tensely clinging to the rope strands that held the banner. Now came ticklish work.

"Easy, Peter! Go easy now!" said Joe soothingly.

He slowly and carefully stooped down. It was a trick he had often performed in the circus on the high wire. But never under circumstances like this.

Joe's hands came in contact with the fur of the cat's back. He gently stroked the animal, murmuring:

"Come on now, Peter! Let go! Loosen your claws! I'm not going to hurt you. Let me pick you up!"

Again it is hard to say that the cat knew what Joe was saying, but it certainly made its body less tense. The claws were loosed. Joe straightened up, holding the cat in his arms. He could feel its heart beating like some overworked motor.

A roar arose from the crowd, but it was instantly hushed. The throng seemed to realize that the return journey was infinitely more perilous than the outward one had been.

Joe could not turn. He must walk backward to the window, carrying the cat, which at any moment might become wild and scramble from his arms, upsetting his balance.

Yet Joe Strong never faltered.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRE ACT

Realizing that he must use every caution, Joe Strong had two things to think of. One was himself, and the other the cat. He could not carry the creature in his arms, as he needed to extend them to balance himself. He had walked short distances along slack wires without doing this, but in those cases he had been able to run, and his speed made up for the lack of balancing power of the extended arms. Now, however, he needed to observe this precaution.

What could he do with the cat?

In that moment of peril a boyhood scene arose to Joe's mind. He recalled that on the farm where he had lived there was a pet cat which liked to crawl up his back and curl on his shoulders, stretching out completely across them and snuggling against the back of his head.

"If I can get this cat to do that I'll be all right," thought Joe. "I'll try it."

Balancing himself, he changed the cat's position and put it up on his shoulder. Even if it rested on only one it would leave his hands free and he could extend his arms and balance himself. But Peter seemed to know just what was wanted of him. With a little "mew," the animal took the very position Joe wanted it to---extended along his back, close to his

head.

And not until then did Joe begin to step backward. Breathlessly the crowd watched him. Step by step he went, feeling for the wire on which he placed his feet. And each step made him more confident.

The crowd was silently watching. It was reserving its wild applause.

Step by step Joe walked backward until he heard the low voice of the woman at the open window.

"Shall I take Peter now?" she asked.

"Can you reach him?" asked Joe. He knew he was close to the building.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then do," said Joe. "He may try to spring off when he sees himself so close to you. Take him. I'll stand still a moment."

He felt the cat stirring. The next instant he was relieved of Peter's weight, and then, with a quick turning motion, Joe himself was half way within the window and sitting on the sill.

He had walked out on the wire, stretched a hundred feet above the street, and rescued the cat. The pet was now in the arms of the woman in black.

And then such a roar as went up in the crowd! Men thumped one another on the back, and then shook hands, wondering at their foolishness and why there was such a queer lump in their throats.

"Oh! Oh!" gasped the woman, as she hugged Peter to her. "I can never thank you enough---not in all my life. It may be foolish to care so much for a cat. But I can't help it. It isn't all that. I couldn't have borne it to have seen him fall and be killed."

"He's all right now---after he gets over being scared," said Joe, as he stroked the cat in the arms of the woman in black.

"And now will you let me know to whom I am indebted?" she asked. "Please come in, and I'll pay you the reward."

"Well, I'll come in and put on my shoes," said Joe, with a smile. "I didn't need the gloves," he added. "Peter was very gentle."

"Oh, he's a good cat!" said his mistress. "And now," she added, when Joe had resumed his shoes and coat, "will you please tell me your name and how you learned to walk wires and rescue cats?"

"I never rescued cats before," Joe returned, smiling. "It's something new. But walking wires is my trade---or one of 'em. I'm with the circus. I do some tricks and---"

"Oh, are you the man who gets out of the box?" she cried. "I have read about that trick."

"It is one of mine," said Joe modestly.

"I'm so glad to know you!" exclaimed the woman. She seemed less of a recluse than at first. "I haven't been to a circus for years---not since I was a child," she continued, half sadly, Joe thought. "But I'm coming to-night!" she exclaimed. "I'll have the janitor look after my cats and dogs, and I'll go to the circus. I want to see you act. It will bring back my lost youth---or part of it," she murmured.

"Allow me to make sure that you will be there," said Joe. "Here is a reserved ticket. I will look for you."

"And now let me give you the reward I promised," begged the woman, as Joe was about to leave. "I have the money here---in cash," she added quickly. She went to a bureau, putting Peter down on a cushion. The cat observed Joe intently. The woman came back with a roll of bills.

"No, really, I couldn't take it!" protested Joe. "I didn't save your cat for money. I was glad enough to do it for the animal's sake."

"Please take it!" she urged. "I---I am well off, even if I live here," she said hesitatingly. "I shall feel better if you take it."

"And I shall feel better if you give it to the Red Cross," said Joe. "That needs it, to help the stricken, more than I do. I make pretty good money myself," he added. "And I didn't do this for a reward."

"But I promised it!"

"Well, then consider that I took it, and you, in my name, may pass it on to the Red Cross," said Joe. "And now, may I ask your name?"

The woman told him. It was Miss Susan Crawford. The name meant nothing to Joe, though he afterward learned she was a member of an old, wealthy and aristocratic family. She had had an unfortunate love affair, and, her family having all died, she made for herself a little apartment in one of her many buildings and lived there with her pets---a recluse in the midst of a big city. It was a pathetic story.

"I wish you would let me reward you in some way," said Miss Crawford wistfully, as Joe left. "You did so much, and you get nothing out of it."

"Oh, yes I do," returned the young acrobat. "I'll get a lot of advertising out of this, and it will be the best thing in the world for the circus."

And Joe was right. The next day the papers all carried big stories of his wire-walking feat to save the cat that had ventured out over the street and was afraid to go back. Bigger crowds than ever came to the circus.

As she had promised, Miss Crawford was at the evening performance, and Joe introduced a little novelty in one of his "magic stunts," producing a cat instead of a rabbit from a man's pocket. As he held it up he looked over and smiled at the old lady in black, for he had given her a seat near his stage. She smiled back.

Joe never saw her again. She was found dead a few months later in her lonely rooms, with her cats and dogs around her. But Joe always remembered her.

The street wire-walking feat was the talk of the city, and when, the following day, Joe announced that he was ready to put on his fire act, which had been well advertised, every one was on figurative tiptoes to see what it would be.

Joe had made all his preparations, and he had taken care to provide against danger and accidents. He realized the risk he was running in handling fire in a circus tent before crowds of people. But extinguishers were provided, and one of the fire-fighting force of the circus was constantly on hand.

After the preliminary whistle of the ringmaster which ended the other acts and prepared for Joe's new one, the young magician advanced to the platform and gave a little "patter."

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "in introducing my new act I wish, first of all, to assure you that there is no danger. Even though I seem to be in the midst of fire, do not be alarmed. I shall be safe, and no harm will come to you."

Joe did this to forestall a possible panic.

"You have all heard of the ancient salamanders," he went on. "It is reputed that this animal was able to live in the midst of fire. As to the truth of that I can not say. I never saw a salamander, that I know of. But that fire may safely be handled by human beings, and not at the risk of being burned, I am about to demonstrate to you. I shall first show you how to carry fire about in your hands, so that if you run short of matches at any time you will not lack means of igniting the gas, starting your kitchen range, or enjoying your smoke. While the stage is being made ready for my main act, I will show you how to carry fire in your hands."

CHAPTER XIII

A SENSATIONAL DIVE

Striking a match, Joe ignited two candles that stood on a little table at one side of his stage. On the other side his assistants were setting up the apparatus he intended to use in his more elaborate experiments.

"You observe that the trick has not yet begun," said Joe, with a laugh, as he blew out the match. "In other words, I am lighting these candles in the ordinary way---just as any one of you would do it, if he needed to. In a moment I will show you how to light the candles in case one is accidentally blown out and you have no match."

Allowing both candles to burn up well, with clear, bright flames, Joe suddenly blew out one.

"Now," he said, "I will show you how to carry fire in your hands from the lighted to the unlighted candle. Watch me closely!"

Joe cupped his hands around the lighted candle, seeming to take the flame up in his fingers. When he removed his hands, which he still held in cup, or globular, shape, the second candle had been extinguished. Both were now out.

"You will notice that I am carrying the flame in my hands from one candle to the other," said Joe, in a loud voice, as he walked across the stage.

For an instant he spread his hands, cup fashion, around the candle he had first blown out. Suddenly he withdrew his hands, holding them wide apart and in full view of the audience, and, lo! the unlighted candle was glowing brightly.

There was a moment of silence, and then the applause broke forth. Joe bowed and said:

"That is how to carry fire in your hands. But please don't any of you try it unless you get the directions from me."

"Tell us how to do it!" piped up a small boy.

"Come and see me after the show!" laughed Joe.

And, while on this subject, it might be well to explain how Joe did the trick. It is very simple, but it takes practice, and an amateur may easily be fatally burned in the attempt, simple as it is.

Joe lighted the candles in the usual way, with a match, as already explained. There was no trick about this, nor about blowing out one. But immediately after that the trick started. Joe placed a little piece of waxed paper between the first and second fingers of his left hand as soon as he had blown out the first candle. This paper was a slender strip, and could not be seen by the audience.

When he cupped his hands around the remaining lighted candle Joe ignited this waxed strip, taking care to work it away from his palms and fingers. It burned with a tiny flame and with scarcely any heat in the middle of the hollow cup formed by his hands.

As soon as he had ignited the paper Joe, by pressing the lower edges of his palms against the blazing wick of the candle, extinguished it. This had the same effect as though he had "pinched" out the flame with finger and thumb, as many country persons put out, or "snuff," candles to-day---for candles are still much used in some places.

Now we have Joe with a little blazing taper concealed in his cupped hands, advancing to the candle he first blew out. He placed his hands around this, lighted the wick from the taper, which he at once crushed between his fingers, and the trick was done.

The candle was lighted, the remains of the little taper were concealed between Joe's fingers, and it looked as though he had really carried fire in his hands. The quickness with which he pinched out the candle flame, and also smothered the taper after he had used it, prevented him from being burned in the slightest. But it is best for a boy unpracticed and without the dexterity of a professional prestidigitator not to undertake to play with fire.

Joe Strong believed in doing his tricks and acts artistically and elaborately. He had watched other performers "dress their act," and he had often improved on what even stage veterans had done. His apprenticeship had been a stern but good one.

And now he was going to introduce something novel in his fire-eating tricks, but he was also going to add to that. He had read considerable of late about the fire-eating tricks of the old "magicians" and had delved into many curious old books. Now he was going to give his audience some of this information.

"There is a trick in everything," said Joe, as he faced his audience in readiness for the fire-eating act. "If I told you that I actually swallowed blazing fire, any physician would know that I was not telling the truth. I do not really eat the fire. I only seem to do so. But if in doing so I can deceive you into thinking I do, and you are thrilled and amused, you get your money's worth, I earn mine, and we are all satisfied. So don't be alarmed by what you see.

"The resistance of the human body to heat is greater than many persons suppose," said Joe. "And there is a vast difference between wet heat and dry heat. Water, above one hundred and fifty degrees, would be unbearable. It would really burn you badly. Water, as you know, boils at two hundred and twelve degrees Fahrenheit. But before this point is reached it is capable of ending life.

"Dry heat, however, is different. Men have frequently borne without permanent discomfort dry heat up to three hundred degrees. This heat is often reached in the drying rooms of oilcloth and oiled silk factories.

"Now the fire I handle is dry heat. I would no more think of pouring boiling water over my hands than I would of taking poison. And yet I will show you that I can thrust my hand into a blazing fire and suffer no harm.

"In an old book I read that to enable one to thrust one's hands into the fire all you had to do was to anoint them with a mixture of *bol armenian*, quicksilver, camphor and spirits of wine. I should prefer to leave that mixture alone, though in the book it is said that if one puts that mixture on his hands he may handle boiling lead.

"Perhaps some ancient magician did this, but I think he depended more on water than on anything else. If your hands are wet there is formed on them a film of moisture which, for a moment, will enable you to withstand high degrees of dry heat.

"In another old book I read that if one prepared himself with 'liquid stortax,' which is juice from a certain tree growing in Italy, he could enter fire, bathe in fire, put a burning coal on his tongue, and even swallow fire.

"Now I am not going to let you into all my secrets. You shall see---what you shall see!" concluded Joe.

As intimated before, the method Joe Strong used is not going to be printed here. You have been given some genuine ancient formulae, safe in the knowledge that some of the ingredients can not be obtained. And the modern substitutes are not going to be told. Enough to say that Joe had "prepared himself."

The young magician looked to see that all was in readiness. Perceiving that it was, he retired for a moment to a cabinet set up on the stage, and when he came out he was ready for his tricks.

Joe advanced to what seemed to be an elaborate candelabra in which seven tapers were set. He stood in front of this a moment, and then he announced:

"Having lived on a fire diet so long I have a bit to spare. I will light these candles without using a match."

He waved his hand over the candelabra. Sparks were seen to shoot from his finger tips, and in an instant the seven lights were glowing. That was an electrical trick. In reality the candles were gas jets, made to look like wax tapers, and Joe lighted them from an electric current produced by a dry battery he carried on his person.

He then proceeded to his main trick. He picked up a plate. It seemed to contain pieces of bread. Joe touched the edge of the plate to a flame of one of the candles. In an instant the plate was ablaze, and Joe calmly began putting the blazing stuff on it into his mouth.

Cube after cube of the blazing "bread" he lifted up on a fork and thrust between his lips. And he seemed to enjoy the "eating" of it.

The audience was spellbound. Every one's eyes were on Joe Strong doing his fire-eating trick.

The plate was empty. Joe looked about as though for something else hot to eat. He caught up an article from a table. Holding it to the flame of a candle, it was at once ablaze.

And then, with a thrilling cry, Joe Strong leaped from the stage, his two hands, held high above his head, seeming to be enveloped in a mass of fire. And with this fire held over him, he ran toward the tank in which Benny Turton did his "human fish" act.

The next instant Joe Strong, apparently ablaze all over, dived into the tank.

CHAPTER XIV

HEAD FIRST

Which was the more surprised---Benny Turton, who had just finished his fish act in his tank, the spellbound audience, or Jim Tracy, who was, in a way, directing Joe's performance---it would be hard to say. All three were thrilled by the unexpected outcome of the fire-eating act. Joe Strong alone seemed perfectly at his ease, and, it might be mentioned incidentally, perfectly at home in the water. He had, as told in a previous volume, entitled "Joe Strong, the Boy Fish," perfected himself in this sort of work, and could remain submerged for an unusually long time.

Of course the fire which seemed to envelop the young magician was instantly put out when he leaped into the tank. He was wearing a rather fancy suit, and as he came up, wet and bedraggled, Jim Tracy could not help wondering what Joe meant by his performance.

"Joe! Joe! was that part of the act or an accident?" asked Jim in a low voice, as he ran over to where Joe was now climbing out of the tank. For one instant Joe hesitated. The audience was wildly applauding now. Clearly there was but one thought in their minds. The whole thing was a trick---Joe had only pretended to be on fire and had taken that sensational means of appearing to extinguish the blaze.

But the ringmaster noted a queer look on his friend's face. It was not the look it usually wore when Joe had completed some hazardous or sensational trick.

"Are you hurt, Joe---burned?" asked Jim Tracy anxiously.

"No," was the answer. "It was all part of the act!"

The ringmaster looked satisfied, and it was not until some time afterward that he learned what a narrow escape Joe had had.

"This will be part of the fire-eating stunt at every show," said Joe to the ringmaster. "You might make the announcement so the people won't be scared."

"I will! Say, it's some stunt all right!" And then Jim began with his sonorous "Ladies and gentlemen!" He stated that the young fire-eater would show his familiarity with, and mastery over, fire by setting himself ablaze and leaping into the tank to extinguish the flames. The ringmaster added that there would be no danger to either the audience or the performer in this feature.

Joe bowed to the applause that followed, and then hurried to his dressing room to don dry clothes for his mystery box trick.

"I should think, if you were going to do tank work, you'd wear a suit better adapted to it---like mine," said Benny Turton, whose apartment was next to Joe's in the dressing tent.

"I'm going to," Joe announced, looking around to make sure no one overheard. "The fact of the matter is, Benny, I didn't count on pulling off this stunt. It was an accident. Some of the alcohol I use on the tow was spilled on my sleeves and caught fire. Then more flames burst out. Luckily they were at my back, so when I ran the flames were fanned away from me. But I knew the tank was the safest place to go, and in I jumped."

"But I heard you tell Jim it was all arranged."

"I did that so the crowd wouldn't get into a panic. However I am going to work the trick at each performance after this, only I'm going to wear a different suit."

And Joe did. He had a garment partly made of asbestos, though outwardly it did not resemble that fire-resisting material any more than do the asbestos curtains in theaters. And at the conclusion of his fire-eating act Joe would seemingly burst into fire and run blazing across the stage to leap into the tank of water.

This finish to the act never failed to win great applause. And once in the tank Joe did some of the under-water tricks that had brought him fame. He was careful, however, not to duplicate anything that Benny Turton did, for he did not want to "crab" the act of his friend.

But Joe's fire and water act was one of the big features on the circus bill.

"Is this the sensation you were speaking of?" asked Helen one day, when they had concluded an afternoon's performance.

"No," answered Joe. "This only came about by accident. I'm working on something more sensational yet, and I am going to ask you to help me."

"I'm sure I'll do anything I can," said she.

"You won't be in any danger," the young magician went on. "I'm beginning to understand fire better the more I study it. I'm not getting too familiar, either, let me tell you. Even a little scorch is very painful."

"I glanced through one of your books the other day," remarked Helen. "Do you really suppose some of those old magicians actually handled fire in the way it is stated?"

"Well, at least they pretended to," said her friend. "There are tricks in all trades, you know."

As the circus went on its way business kept up well, and it was seen that the season was going to be an excellent one from a financial standpoint.

"Any more bogus tickets coming in?" asked Joe one day of the treasurer.

"Not since we adopted the new style," was the answer.

"Have the detectives gotten on the trail of the man, or the men, who cheated us?" asked Helen.

"Not yet," reported Mr. Moyne. "The last report I had from them was that they were getting nearer and nearer to a certain person whom they suspected. They promise an arrest soon."

"That's the usual story," remarked Joe. "However, we don't so much care about an arrest now if we have stopped the counterfeit tickets from being worked off on us."

"Well, there's always a chance that the same thing will happen again," returned Mr. Moyne. "It's too easy money for the criminals to give up, I'm afraid. I'm on the lookout every day for more counterfeits."

"Well, I'll leave it to you," remarked Joe. "Whenever anything happens let me know and we'll take some action."

Joe Strong was now kept very busy in the circus. In fact he was what would be called a "star." He did his mystery box trick, and, with Helen, worked the "vanishing lady" trick so neatly that no one guessed how it was done. The ten thousand dollars was not claimed, successfully, though several tried it, with the result that several local Red Cross organizations were enriched by the hundred dollar forfeit.

In addition to these mystery acts, and some more ordinary sleight-of-hand tricks which he used to fill in with, Joe did his fire-eating trick, ending that act with the plunge into the tank. This never failed to create a sensation.

"But it isn't the big sensation I'm after!" said Joe, when his friends congratulated him. "Wait until you see that!"

Another feature of Joe's performance was his wire-walking. Since he had rescued the lady's cat he had added this to his share of the program, and it was a thriller enjoyed by many audiences.

"But it's a little tame," said Joe one day to Jim Tracy. "I want to put a little more pep into it."

"How are you going to do it?" asked the ringmaster.

"I think I know a way," was the answer.

And a few days later Joe gave a demonstration.

The wire on which he performed was a high one, stretched between two well-braced poles. On each pole was fastened a small platform, somewhat like those high up in the tent where the big swing was fastened.

Joe walked across the wire from one platform to the other, doing various "stunts" on the slender support. One day Jim Tracy noticed that a long to the ground between one of the rings and a wooden platform.

"What's that, Joe?" asked the ringmaster, "Looks like an extra guy wire for the pole."

"No, that's for my new stunt," said Joe. "I'll show you at this show."

The audience watched him performing on the high wire. Jim Tracy was watching, too, for he remembered what Joe had said. Suddenly, at the conclusion of the usual wire-walking feats, Joe stooped, placed his head on the slanting wire, raised himself until he was standing with his legs up and spread apart. Then he quickly flung wide his hands and slid on his head down the slanting wire to the ground, stopping himself just before he reached it by grasping the wire in his gloved hands.

Jim Tracy, who was sitting on a box, leaped to his feet.

"Head first!" he cried. "That's some stunt!"

And the audience seemed to think so, too, from the way it applauded.

CHAPTER XV

THE SWINDLERS AGAIN

Joe Strong, having checked his rapid, head-first and head-on slide down the slanting wire by grasping it in his gloved hands, gave a "flip-flop" and stood up, bowing to the loud applause. Jim Tracy and some of the other circus employees surrounded the young man.

"Why didn't you tell us you were going to pull off something like this?" demanded the ringmaster.

"Because I wasn't sure until the last minute that I would do it," answered Joe. "I hadn't practiced it as much as I should have liked, but when I got up there on the platform I felt pretty sure I could do it. I wasn't running much risk anyhow, except that of failure. I knew I wouldn't fall, for I could have grabbed the wire in my hands if I had started to topple over."

"But how did you do it?" asked some one, who came up to join the wondering throng after Joe's feat had been performed. "I've seen you stand on your head before, but to slide down a wire---say, what sort of scalp have you, anyhow?"

Joe laughed and held out a close-fitting skull-cap of leather. Fastened to the leather was a small steel framework, and in this frame were two small grooved wheels, like the wheels of a trolley by means of which street cars receive the electric current from the wire. Joe put the cap on his head to show how it enabled him to do the trick. The big races were on now, as the close of the performance was close at hand, and the crowd was paying attention to the contests and not to the group of performers surrounding the young magician.

Once they had seen the cap with the grooved wheels on top placed on Joe's head, his friends understood how the trick was done. He had simply to balance himself on his head on the wire, a feat he had often performed before. The natural attraction of gravitation did the rest. He simply slid down on the wheels, his extended arms and legs steadying him.

"It's just as if you had a roller skate on your head," said Senorita Tanlozo, the snake charmer, who had strolled into the main tent after her act in the side show was over.

"Exactly," said Joe, with a smile. "Would you like to try it?"

"Not while my snakes are alive!" she assured him.

"Well, it's another drawing card for the Sampson Brothers' Show," said Jim Tracy that night when the receipts were being counted and preparations being made for moving on to the next city. "How long are you going to keep it up, Joe?"

"As to that, I can't say," was the answer. "But I like the game, and I want to see the circus a success."

"It's a big one now, thanks in a large part to you," observed the ringmaster. "But you'd better take a rest now, Joe, my boy. Don't try to pull off any more spectacular stunts."

"Oh, I haven't pulled off my big one yet," replied the young magician. "I mean the one with the fire. I'm working on that. If it comes out the way I think it will we'll have to give three performances a day instead of two."

"Oh, we can't do that!" protested Mr. Moyne, the treasurer. "It's hard enough keeping account of the money and tickets now, with two shows a day. If we have three---"

He paused, for it was very evident Joe was only joking, and there were smiles on the faces of the other circus folk.

"Don't worry!" said Joe to the treasurer. "I don't want to act three times a day any more than you want to count the tickets and cash. And, I suppose, if we could, by some means, give three performances, it would only give our swindling ticket friends more chance to work their scheme. By the way, there are no further signs of their putting bogus tickets on sale, are there?"

"Not since we started the detectives at work," the treasurer answered. "But I'm always on the watch, and so are the men at the entrances."

"It's about time those detectives got results, I think," declared Jim Tracy. "I wonder what they think we're paying them for?"

"It takes time for a thing like that to be cleaned up," said Joe.

"Well, I know what I'd do if I were detecting," half-growled the ringmaster.

"What?" inquired the treasurer.

"I'd round up and arrest a certain few worthless men I know who used to be in the circus business---some with this show!" declared Jim. "It's queer, but our outfit seems to be the only one that they pick on. That's what makes me think it was some one who used to work for us."

"Who?" the treasurer wanted to know.

"Well, I'm not mentioning any names," declared the ringmaster, as he prepared to divest himself of his dress suit in readiness for the trip to the circus train. "But I have my suspicions."

"What makes you say ours is the only circus to have lost money on bogus tickets?" asked Joe.

"Read it in *Paste and Paper*," was the answer. That was the name of the trade journal devoted to the interests of circus folk, tent shows, and the like. "The last number had a piece in it about our losing money on fake tickets," went on the ringmaster, "and it said it was the first case of its kind to appear in several years. There have been no complaints of circuses in other parts of the country being cheated that way, this article said. So I know it's some one picking specially on us."

"Well, perhaps you're right," assented Joe. "But as long as we have changed our style of tickets and they haven't tried their tricks again, maybe we've settled them."

"All the same I'm going to be on the watch," declared the treasurer.

The city where the circus showed the following day and night was a large one. A new automobile industry employing many hands had located there within the last six months. It was decided to make a stay of two days in this place, since the advance agent reported that many of the men worked overtime and nights, and otherwise they could not see the performance.

"Well, I'm glad we're to be here two days," remarked Helen, as she passed Joe's private quarters, where he was going over some of his apparatus, costumes, and effects.

"Yes, we'll have a good night's rest," he agreed, though, truth to tell, the circus folk were so used to traveling that the train journey almost every night did not bother them. Still they always welcomed a stay in a city over night.

"You seem busy," remarked Helen, as she sat down on a box and watched Joe.

"Yes, I'm going to introduce a little novelty in the slide down the slanting wire," he answered. "I'm going to work in a fire stunt."

"A fire stunt!" exclaimed Helen. "Surely you aren't going to---"

"Oh, it won't be dangerous!" Joe assured her, guessing her thoughts. Helen had learned that the jump into Benny's tank the first time was due to an accident. "It's just a bit spectacular and will liven things up a bit, I think. If it goes well I have an idea you can work one of the features in your bareback act."

"Oh, Joe, I never could walk a wire, nor slide down on my head, the way you do. And I don't see how Rosebud could, either." And Helen gave a merry little laugh at the vision she raised.

"Oh, I'm not going to have your horse walk the tight rope nor the high wire!" laughed Joe. "It would be a corking good stunt if we could, though. No, this is simpler. I'll tell you about it later."

Mrs. Watson, wife of the veteran clown, called for Helen just then, asking her to go to see one of the women performers who was ill.

"I'll see you later, Joe," Helen called out, as she left him.

Joe was busy mixing up some chemicals in a pail on the ground outside his tent when he was accosted by a rather hoarse voice asking:

"Any chance for a job here, boss?" Joe looked up to see a somewhat disreputable figure of a man observing him. The fellow looked like the typical tramp, perhaps not quite so ragged and dirty, but still in that class. However, there was something about the man that attracted Joe's attention. As he said afterward, his visitor had about him the air of the "profesh."

Joe's first impulse was to say that he knew of no job, or else to refer his accoster to the head canvas man, who hired transient help in putting up the main top and in pulling or driving stakes. But as Joe observed the man curiously watching him, he had another idea. Before he could act on it, however, the man exclaimed:

"You do a fire-eating stunt, don't you?"

"Yes," Joe answered. And then it occurred to him to wonder how the man knew. True he might have observed Joe in some of the many performances, but the man did not look like one who would spend money on circus tickets. He might have crawled under the tent, but it did not seem exactly probable. And, of course, some of the circus employees might have pointed Joe out to the man as the actor who handled fire. But, again, Joe did not believe this. So he asked:

"How did you know?"

For answer the man pointed to the pail of chemicals into which Joe was about to dip a suit of tights.

"Smelled the dope," was the brief answer. "You're using tungstate of soda, aren't you?"

"Yes," answered Joe, surprised that a man, evidently of such a class, should recognize the not very common chemical.

"We used to use alum in the old days," the man went on. "I guess the new dope's better, though I never tried it."

"Are you in the business?" asked Joe.

"Well, I--er---I used to be," and the man straightened himself up with an air of forgotten pride. "I was with a circus once---used to do a fire-eating act and jump into a fake bonfire. I doped my clothes with alum water though. That's great stuff for preventing the fire taking hold if you don't stay in the blaze too long. But, as I say, they've discovered something new."

"You used to be a fire-eater?" asked Joe curiously.

"Yes. And I was counted a pretty good one. But I lost my nerve."

"How?"

"Well---er---not to put too fine a point on it, I got too fond of the fire-water. Couldn't stay on the water-wagon long enough, got careless in my act, went down and out. Oh, it's the old story. You've probably heard it lots of times. But I would like a job now. I'm actually hungry, and I've seen the time I could blow the bunch to champagne and lobster."

Joe, on impulse, and yet, too, because he had an object, was just going to offer the man help when he saw Mr. Moyne coming across the lot toward him from the ticket wagon. The afternoon performance was about to start.

"They're here again!" cried the treasurer.

"Who?" asked Joe.

"The ticket swindlers!"

CHAPTER XVI

RINGS OF FIRE

Instantly Joe Strong lost interest in the "tramp fire-eater," as he afterward came to call the man. All the attention of the young magician was centered on what the treasurer had said.

"Are you certain of this?" asked Joe.

"Positive!" was the answer. "We've been keeping careful watch, paying special attention to the red serial numbers, and some duplicates have been taken in at the main entrance. The swindlers are at work again."

"But our new tickets!" exclaimed Joe. "The new style of paper and the precautions we have taken! What of that?"

In answer Mr. Moyne held out two tickets, both bearing the same serial number in red ink.

"Which is the bogus and which is the genuine?" he asked.

Joe looked carefully at the two. He examined them for a full minute.

"I can't tell!" he admitted.

"And no one else can, either," declared the treasurer. "We're up against it again! Those fellows are too clever for us. Now we'll lose a lot of money!"

"Well, it won't break us," said Joe easily. "Though, of course, no one likes to be cheated. The only thing to do is to get the detectives busy. Let them know the new turn affairs have taken, and I'll send these two tickets to our chemist friend. He can tell which is printed from our regular stock, and which is the counterfeit.

"Then, too, it ought to be easier to catch the rascals now than it was at first. You see, we didn't know how long the old tickets had been counterfeited. Now we're warned, first shot out of the box, about the new ones. And since the paper mill hasn't been supplying our printer with the new kind of paper very long, it ought to be easy to trace where the new and clever counterfeit supply is coming from."

"Well, I hope they can catch the scoundrels," said Mr. Moyne. "I certainly hate to see money lost."

Mr. Moyne was an ideal treasurer. He always had the interests of the circus at heart, and one would think that the money came out of his own pocket to hear him talk about the counterfeit tickets. In a way he did lose, personally, since he was one of the owners of the show, and the less money that came in the less his stock dividends would amount to.

"I'll write to Mr. Waldon to-night," said Joe, as he took the two tickets. "And we'll notify the detectives. Now I must get ready for my act. That can't be dropped."

"Having trouble, eh?" asked the tramp, who had moved a little to one side.

"Oh, well, just a little," admitted Joe, who was not altogether pleased that this talk should have been overheard by a stranger.

"Did you say there was any chance for a job?" asked the ragged man.

"Well, I don't know," said Joe, rather doubtfully. "Is that straight goods, about your being a fire-eater?"

"I was once. But I'm not looking for that kind of a job now," was the quick answer. "I lost my nerve, I tell you. Handling stakes or driving a wagon would be my limit."

"What sort of an act in the fire line did you have?" asked Joe, for a certain idea was beginning to form in his mind.

"It was a good act!" was the response, and again the spark of pride seemed about to be fanned into a flame. "Got any old-timers in this here circus of yours?"

"Yes," answered Joe. "There's Jim Tracy and Bill Watson and---"

"Bill Watson who used to clown it?" cried the man eagerly.

"He clowns it yet."

"Old Bill!" murmured the tramp. "Him still making good in the business, and me a bum! Well, it's all my own fault. If I'd stuck to the fire-eating and not drinking fire-water I'd be somewhere to-day. Just ask Bill Watson what sort of an act Ham Logan had---'Coal-fire Logan!'" exclaimed the man. "That was my title. Hamilton Logan is my name, but I haven't told any one in---not in a long time," he added, and he looked away. "But ask Bill Watson about me."

"Here he comes now," said Joe, as he observed the veteran clown approaching. "Suppose you ask him yourself."

For an instant Ham Logan hesitated. Then he stepped forward and confronted the old clown. The latter paid no attention at first, evidently thinking the man one of the many hangers-on about a circus ground.

"Joe," began Bill Watson, "Helen sent me to ask you if you have any ammonia in your kit---I mean the kind they give the ladies when their hearts are weak, or something like that. One of the girls has some kind of a little spell, and we can't find the doctor."

"Yes, I have some ammonia," said Joe. "I'll get it."

Ham Logan looked Bill Watson in the face, and asked:

"Don't you remember me?"

"Can't say that I do," was the somewhat cool response of the veteran clown. "Is there any reason why I should?"

"Do you remember Coal-fire Logan?"

Bill Watson started, looked more closely at the man, and then slowly asked:

"Are you Ham Logan?"

"What's left of me---yes."

"Well, I'll be gum swizzled!" exclaimed Bill. "Say, did the elephant step on you or one of the tent wagons roll over you?"

"Neither one. I'm down and out, that's all---and it's enough, too."

"Well, that's enough, I should say," commented the clown, as he took the bottle of stimulant Joe handed him. "Last I heard of you you'd gone on a theater circuit. That was just after you'd quit the Dobling show."

"Yes, I did do a theater circuit," admitted Ham Logan. "But it didn't last. Or rather, I didn't last. I was just asking the young man here for a job. I said you'd remember me."

"Well, I certainly do," returned the old clown, who was not to do his act until later in the day.

"And I'm sorry to see you in this state, Ham. You did me a good turn once, and I haven't forgotten. Stick around a while, and I'll see you as soon as I play first-aid. Joe, if it isn't asking too much, will you look after Ham for a while? He used to be a good sort, and---"

"Better say too much of a 'good *sport*,'" paraphrased the man.

"I'll take care of him," promised Joe. "Did you say you were hungry?" asked the young magician, as the old clown turned and hurried away with the ammonia.

"You said it! But I'm not altogether a grafter. I can work for what I eat." And again there was a flash of pride.

"We'll talk of that later," said Joe. "Just now I want to get you something to eat. Here, take that over to the dining tent," and he scribbled a few words on one of his cards. "After you've eaten all you want, and after the show this afternoon, look me up."

"Do you think you can give me work?" asked the man eagerly. "I don't mean to act," he hastened to say. "I'm past that---down and out. But I'm strong. I can pull on the ropes or drive stakes."

"We'll talk of that later," replied Joe gently. "Go and eat now."

"Well, I sure can feed my face!" exclaimed the man. "I---I don't know how to thank you. Bill will tell you that I wasn't a bad fellow in my day. I just lost my nerve---that's all. False friends and fire-water---"

"See me later," said Joe, with a friendly wave of his hand. And the man hurried toward the dining tent, next to the cook wagons. Already he seemed imbued with more hope and pride, something that filled Joe with pleasure.

Joe busied himself with mixing the chemicals in the pail. As Ham Logan had guessed, the young fire-eater was mixing up a solution of tungstate of soda. This chemical is a salt, made by roasting wolfram with soda ash, and wolfram is a native tungstate of iron and manganese. This soda preparation is used commercially in making garments fire-proof, and Joe had learned this from Mr. Herbert Waldon, the chemist. He had decided to use this instead of an alum solution, which is credited with great fire-resisting qualities. It has them, too, to a certain extent, but by experimenting Joe had found the tungstate of soda best.

It was the evening of the circus in the city in which the show was to remain two days. Ham Logan had returned to Joe after having eaten a good meal, and later Bill Watson formed the third member of a trio that talked for some time in a corner of Joe's tent.

As already said, it was the evening performance, and as Helen finished her act on Rosebud she looked over toward the place where Joe was preparing to do his slide down the slanting wire.

"I wonder what he had in mind as a new act for me," mused Helen. "I do hope it isn't anything to do with fire. That sort of stunt creates a sensation, but it's dangerous, in spite of what Joe does to himself. I don't like it! Not after what happened to Joe that day!"

She had seen that Rosebud was given in charge of the groom who always looked after the clever steed, and now Helen moved over where she could watch Joe's comparatively new wire act.

As she approached this part of the circus tent Helen was startled to see several men carrying large hoops on long poles, take their positions on either side of the slanting wire down which the daring performer was soon to slide on his head, by means of the wheeled cap.

"That's something new!" exclaimed Helen, as she saw the men with the big hoops. "I wonder if Joe is going to jump through them, as I jump through the paper hoops from Rosebud's back?"

Joe was up on the little platform now, having finished his wire act. He was adjusting to his head the leather cap.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" began Jim Tracy in his sonorous voice, as he pointed to Joe on his high perch, thus calling attention to the performer.

All eyes were turned in his direction. Then, as Joe stooped over and stood on his head, preparatory to sliding down the wire, the hoops, which the men held over the cable by means of long poles, suddenly burst into flame. Held over the wire, down which Joe would in a moment slide, was a row of fiery circles!

Helen held her hand over her lips to stifle a scream.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BROKEN BOTTLE

So still was it in the big circus tent after the band stopped playing, while Joe prepared to do his head slide, that the whirr of the steel wheels in his leather cap could plainly be heard as he slid down the wire.

And as Helen and the others watched, the intention of the daring young performer became evident.

He was going to coast through the blazing hoops of fire which the men held in such a position that Joe could slide through them without touching them. Though they were called "hoops," in reality they were not completely closed, there being a slight opening to enable them to be slipped over the slanting wire. If a gigantic letter "C" with a long pole fastened to the lower curved part, can be imagined, it; will give an exact idea of what is meant.

As to the fire itself, it was caused by blazing bits of tow fastened to the circumference of the big wire hoops. And thus through the blazing circles Joe Strong slid down the slanting wire on his head. At the lower end of the wire, where it was fast to a stake in the ground, he caught hold of the cable in his gloved hands and so slowed his speed. Then he leaped to his feet and bowed in acknowledgment of the applause.

"Oh!" murmured Helen, as she watched. "It was only another of his sensational acts. When I first saw the blazing hoops I half thought that some one was trying to injure Joe, as they did when the acid was used on his high trapeze. Oh, it was only a trick!"

And so it was. Joe had planned it that day after meeting Ham Logan. The latter, talking about the time when he, too, had been a fire-eater, had mentioned an act where a performer leaped through blazing hoops, and Joe determined to use the idea, varying it to suit his purpose. That it was effective was evidenced by the long-continued applause.

"But, Joe," asked Helen, when the performance was over and she and Joe had received another ovation at the conclusion of the box mystery and the vanishing lady trick, "wasn't there danger of setting your clothes on fire when you went through the blazing hoops?"

"None at all," Joe assured her. "I have been planning a stunt like this for some time, and my garments were fire-proofed. Of course I wouldn't have done it otherwise. Look here!"

He took up a fancy jacket he had worn in his wire slide. Taking a match Joe lighted it and held it against the cloth. It did not take fire.

"There was that day---"

"But I have perfected the act since then, Helen. Of course the tungstate of soda that I soaked the clothes in wouldn't keep them from catching fire if I put the suit in a furnace. But the solution will make cloth resist a blaze temporarily, as will alum under some circumstances. I use alum on the suit I wear when I pretend to set myself on fire and then jump into the tank of water," went on Joe. "But after this I'm going to use the soda. It's more certain."

Joe worked the trick of seeming to set himself ablaze in this way. As he said, his suit was made as nearly fireproof as possible. Then on the back of his jacket were placed some bunches of tow saturated with alcohol. When this tow was set on fire it burned quickly, but Joe knew the flame would not last long. And the fact that the garments on which the burning material was fastened were as nearly fireproof as was possible to make them gave him additional safety. He really ran little risk, as the fire was at his back, and, as he ran toward the tank, his speed carried the flames away from him.

Joe, and all others who do a fire-eating act, calculate to a nicety just how long a certain fire will burn. And they do not place the blazing material into the mouth until the flames are almost on the point of going out of themselves. This, added to the fact that a chemical solution protects the tongue and lips, makes the act comparatively safe. But one word of caution. *Do not try to fire-proof the mouth with tungstate of soda.* This warning cannot be made too strong!

In fact, it is well not to try any fire-eating *at all*. It is too risky unless one is a professional.

"Well, Joe," remarked Jim Tracy, later that night when most of the circus folk were asleep, "if you want to add this fellow to our show, go ahead. You have the say, you know."

"Well, I don't want to do it in just that way," replied the young fire-eater. "Bill Watson says that Ham Logan was once a good man. He is down and out now, but he knows a lot about circus life and this handling of fire. I believe I can work him up into something useful---use him in a new act I'm thinking of putting on. If we can only keep him away from intoxicants he'll be all right, and I'd like to give him a chance."

"Well, Joe, as I said, it's up to you. Go to it! But remember, while he means all right, he may not have the spunk to keep his promise not to drink."

"I think he'll keep it," said Joe. "Anyhow, I'd like to give him a trial. He helped me with that fire hoop stunt, and it would be an act of charity to give him work."

"All right---you can be the charity," said the ringmaster. "What do you say, Bill Watson?"

"Oh, give him a chance," replied the old clown good-naturedly. "We all have our troubles. He can't do much harm, anyhow."

"I don't know about that," said Jim, with a shake of his head. "This playing with fire by a man who can't keep away from fire-water, is risky."

"Well, I'll take the chance," said Joe. And that was characteristic of him---taking chances.

Ham Logan was deeply grateful to Joe for what the young performer did. That is, he hired the former fire-eater as a sort of handy man in the circus, Ham to be subject to Joe's direction day and night.

"And let the fire-water alone!" demanded Joe. "I will! I really will!" said the old circus performer. He seemed to mean it.

Joe advanced him money enough to get some better clothes, to have a bath and be shaved, and it was quite a different person who appeared at the tent the following day, ready to help Joe. As Ham knew more about fire than any assistant Joe had yet been able to train, the new man was given charge of the various apparatus Joe used in his sensational acts, including the one of sliding down the wire on his head through the blazing hoops.

One matter bothered Joe and his friends, in spite of the great success the circus was having, and this was the bogus tickets. Several hundred of them were presented at the performances in the city where the two-day stay was made---the city already mentioned as being the location of a big automobile industry. And where the tickets came from remained a mystery. They were so nearly like the ones issued from the ticket wagon that not until duplicate numbers had been observed could the fraud be detected.

And as the men at the main entrances had no time in the rush to compare serial numbers, there seemed no way of stopping the cheating. It was impossible to see to it that every one who came to the show purchased admission tickets at the wagon. The surging crowds around prevented this.

Men engaged by the circus circulated through the throngs about the tent, seeking to learn whether any unauthorized persons were selling bogus tickets. But none was seen.

"It is evident," said Mr. Moyne, "that the counterfeiters get a bunch of the fake tickets and sell them in large lots to some men. These men, in turn, dispose of them at reduced prices to others, and perhaps the persons who use the tickets do not know they are counterfeits. I believe the swindlers go to the big factories and stores, and sell the tickets at a slightly lower price than we ask."

"We ought to be able to put a stop to that," said Joe.

"We'll try it!" said the treasurer. "It seems the only way---that and having the detectives stop the fraud at the source. You see, we can't tell which are the counterfeit tickets until after we check up the serial numbers---that's what makes it so hard."

And so, in spite of the success of Joe's acts and The success of the show in general, there was this element of annoyance. Joe wished the mystery could be cleared up. He had received back from the chemist the two tickets sent on last, and the counterfeit was marked. This was sent to the paper mill and the detectives notified. That was all that could be done for the present.

"Well, how's Coal-fire Logan making out?" asked Bill Watson of Joe one day, just before an afternoon performance.

"Very good," was the answer. "He's faithful and steady, and he's good help to me. He certainly knows the fire-eating stunt."

"Well, as long as he doesn't do any fire-drinking maybe he'll be all right," said the old clown.

"I haven't noticed any lapse," said Joe. "I have great hopes of him."

But that very afternoon, during the performance, Joe felt doubt beginning to creep over him. He caught Ham in several mistakes---slight ones---but enough, if not noticed in time, to have spoiled the act.

"I wonder what the matter is with him?" mused Joe. "He doesn't seem to have been drinking, and yet he acts queer. I wonder if he can be using drugs."

It was at the close of the act and the wind-up of the circus for the afternoon that Joe told Ham to put away some of the apparatus until evening. Joe was called away from his dressing room for a moment and when he came back he saw Ham hastily throw away a dark brown bottle which struck on a stone and broke. Immediately a queer odor filled the air.

"I wonder if that was liquor he was taking, and if he threw away the empty bottle," thought Joe quickly. "I'm going to find out, I've got to stop this thing at the start."

He hurried to the place where Ham had tossed the bottle. The fragments lay there, and the queer odor was more pronounced.

"Don't touch that! Let that bottle alone!" suddenly cried Ham Logan, as he became aware of Joe's intention. "Don't touch it!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

Joe Strong was in two minds as he heard this warning and observed the face of the man he was befriending. His first thought was that Ham had broken his promise and was indulging in intoxicants. Naturally the man would want to conceal this as long as possible. The other thought was that the tramp fire-eater was up to some trick---perhaps he was jealous of Joe's success and his own failure and wanted to spoil some of Joe's apparatus. Yet Joe did not recognize as any of his property the brown bottle, which when broken emitted such a queer smell.

Joe decided to investigate further, and so, not heeding the warning call of the former circus star, he walked closer to the broken flask.

"Keep away from that!" cried Ham sharply. "Keep away!"

"Why?" asked Joe, with equal insistence.

"Because it's dangerous," was the answer. "Very dangerous."

"Dangerous for you or me?" Joe wanted to know. "Look here, Ham," he said earnestly, "are you up to---any of your old tricks? You know what I mean. Are you?"

The man flushed. Then, looking Joe straight in the face, he said:

"You have a right to ask that, and I'll answer you as straight. I haven't broken my promise---that is, only the times you know about. I haven't broken it this time. I found that bottle in among your things, and I was mighty sure it didn't belong there."

"What's in the bottle?" asked Joe, for, though he had dabbled in chemistry, he did not recognize the queer odor.

"A combination of the strongest acids ever known!" was the answer of Ham Logan. "A drop of it makes a terrible burn, and it will eat through solid steel and iron. I knew that if it broke where it was, among your trick things, a lot of them would be ruined. And I knew you couldn't have left the bottle there by mistake, as it wasn't there the last time I packed away your duds. And I knew if you knew what it was you wouldn't have left it around in that careless way. So, taking no chances, I threw it away, and I meant to break the bottle. That acid is awful stuff. It's best to let it soak into the ground. Come over and see what it does even to earth and stones."

He led the way to where the fluid had escaped from the broken flask, the fragments of which were scattered about. The odor was less strong now, as the acid was soaking into the earth. But there was a fuming and bubbling at the spot, and the very stones and earth seemed to be burning up in a small area.

"Don't step in it!" warned Ham Logan. "It will eat right through your shoes. Glass is the only thing it won't hurt---glass and porcelain. They mix it in porcelain retorts. I'll throw some loose earth over this place. The effects of the acid will soon be lost, but while it's active it's terrible stuff, believe me!"

"And you say you found that bottle in my baggage?" asked Joe.

"Yes," answered Ham Logan. "And am I right in saying you didn't know it was there?"

"I certainly didn't," declared Joe. "Who in the world could have put it there?"

"Have you any enemies?" asked Ham. "I mean some one who would like to see your circus acts spoiled, or even see you laid up for a while?"

"Well, I guess perhaps there are some I've made enemies of by having to discharge them, or something like that," admitted Joe, his thoughts going naturally to Bill Carfax. "There's one man, but he hasn't been seen around for a good while."

"That doesn't count. He may have gotten some one to do his trick for him," asserted Ham. "You'd better look out, Mr. Strong."

"I will!" declared Joe. "And thank you for your watchfulness. As you say, I didn't know that bottle was there, and I might have broken it by accident or have opened it and spilled some out. How did you come to discover it?"

"Just by accident. The smell is something you never forget. It comes up even around the glass stopper. As soon as I began overhauling your things, as you told me to, I smelled the stuff and I went on a still hunt for it.

"I was careful, too. I knew what it meant to get any of that acid on you, or on any of the things about you. I used to work in the chemical plant where they made the stuff---that was after I left the circus. Well, it can't do any harm now," he said as he got a shovel and covered with clean earth the bits of broken glass and the still fuming drops of acid.

"Thank you," said Joe fervently.

He went into his private tent. Presently he came out with a bit of wire cable, such as is used in making circus trapezes. One end was blackened and partly fused, as though it had been in the fire. Joe held out this bit of wire rope. It was part of the trapeze he used in his big swing.

"What would you say had eaten through these strands?" he asked.

Ham Logan looked carefully at the cable. He sniffed it cautiously. He held it up to the light and again smelled it.

"It was this same acid that ate those strands," he declared. "I know how it used to eat metal out at the chemical works, and it does so in a queer way. This wire rope is eaten through just like that. There isn't any odor left, though sometimes it lasts a long time. But I'm sure the same kind of acid was used. You don't mean to tell me you have been experimenting with it!" and he looked in surprise at Joe.

"No indeed!" and the young fire-eater shook his head. "I never handle the acid. And the fact that the cable was eaten through nearly caused an accident." He then explained how he had discovered the partly severed wire rope just in time.

"They must have put on a weak solution of the acid," declared Ham. "Otherwise it would have eaten the rope through in jig time. So that's the game, is it? Well, they may have been trying it on a larger scale. Did you find out who doped the rope?"

"There was a man who might have done it," said Joe, thinking of Harry Loper. "But I don't believe he did."

"Is he still with the show?"

"Yes. I'll tell you all the circumstances," which Joe did, mentioning Loper by name.

"Well, we won't say anything," declared Ham Logan; "but I'll just keep my eyes on this Loper. As you say, he may not have done it, but he may know who did. I'll keep my eyes on him. Meanwhile be careful in overhauling your things. Look out for bottles that smell as this one did."

"I will!" promised Joe. "I guess I won't forget that odor. I can't tell you how I thank you, Ham. You've done me a good turn!"

"Well, you did me one," was the answer. "I was down and out when you gave me work, and I won't forget that in a hurry."

Joe pondered over what had happened as he performed his circus acts the remainder of that day and evening. He shuddered at the narrow escape he had had, and, when he had a chance, he carefully noted the conduct of Harry Loper. But that young fellow did not seem at all to act like one who had tried to do a dastardly trick. He was jolly and good-natured, as he always was, albeit somewhat of a weak character.

The circus performances went off well, Joe and the other actors receiving wild applause as they did their specialties. Joe's fire-eating was eagerly watched, and when he slid down the rope on his head, through the blazing hoops, the crowd went wild, as they did when, seemingly all afire, he leaped into the tank.

"When you going to spring that sensation you've been talking of, Joe?" asked Jim Tracy, at the conclusion of one afternoon show.

"Oh, pretty soon now," was the reply. "Ham Logan and I are working on it."

"Ham Logan! Is he going to be in it with you?" asked the ringmaster in some surprise.

"Of course!" answered Joe. "It's partly his idea. He's an old fire-actor, you know, and he's given me some good suggestions. Yes, he's going to help me. I think we'll put the act on next week. We've got to train some new performers first."

"New performers! Say, what are you going to do, Joe, take a troupe of fire-eating actors out on the road?"

"Something like that, yes," answered the young magician, with a laugh. "You'll see."

Joe Strong varied his acts in the circus tent. Sometimes he would omit the "vanishing lady" act, as Helen wanted to put through some extra work with Rosebud, and there was not time for both. Again he would leave out some of his acrobatic work, or perhaps not do the trick of seeming to catch fire and extinguishing the flames in Benny Turton's tank. Once in a while he would omit the ten thousand dollar mystery box trick.

But on the day when he had the above conversation with Jim Tracy they were showing in a large factory town. There had been good business in the afternoon, and Joe had not done the box trick. But just before the evening show Jim came to Joe and said:

"There've been several requests, Joe, that you put the box trick on to-night."

"Requests from whom?" Joe asked.

"One of the newspaper men was telling me they received a lot of telephone calls to-day asking if the box trick would be done and the reward paid in case some one discovered the way it was done."

"What did you say?"

"I said I thought you'd put the trick on in that case. Don't you think you'd better? We didn't advertise it specially for to-night, but there might be a lot of sore-heads if we don't pull it off."

"Oh, I'll do it all right!" declared Joe. "I thought it was getting a bit stale. But if the crowd wants to see it I'll do it."

"I guess it will be better," said the ringmaster.

Accordingly, at the proper time, Joe, in his dazzling white suit, took his place in the silk-curtained enclosure. Helen, in her black dress, was ready to help him. The fireman, with his gleaming ax, ready to chop Joe out of the box in case anything should go wrong, was also on the stage.

As has been related in the other book, this last was done only for effect. Joe well knew that he could get out of the box. The manager made the usual offer of ten thousand dollars to be paid to any one who would disclose how the trick was done.

"You will all be given a chance to claim the reward under the usual conditions after the trick has been performed by Professor Strong," was the announcement made.

As the description of the manner in which Joe and Helen did the trick is given in all its details in the volume preceding this, suffice it here to say that Joe got into the box, which was locked and roped, and, at the proper time, he appeared outside.

"Is there any one who can tell how the trick was done, and so earn the ten thousand dollar reward?" asked the manager. He had made this announcement many times. Seldom, of late, had any one come forward. But now, somewhat to the surprise of Joe and his friends, a man's voice called from a location near the platform:

"I can tell how it was done!"

"Will you please come forward," invited Joe, now taking charge of the proceedings.

A fairly well-dressed man stepped across the arena and approached the stage. Joe and Jim Tracy and the others vitally interested looked closely at him. He was not Bill Carfax---that was certain. And Joe did not know the man, nor, as Jim Tracy admitted afterward, did he.

"You say you can tell how I get out of the box?" asked Joe, and the audience listened intently.

"Yes. I know the secret."

"Are you willing to post a hundred dollars to be forfeited to the Red Cross in case you fail?" went on the young magician.

"I am. Here is the money!" was the cool response. This quick compliance with the terms of the offer rather staggered Joe. But he had no fear as to the outcome.

"Very well," went on the originator of the box trick. "The ringmaster will hold your money. If you are successful in telling how I get out of the box the cash will be handed back to you, and you will receive, in addition, a check for ten thousand dollars. Now then, how do I get out of the box? Tell the audience."

There was a moment of suspense, and then the man, with an air of confidence, stepped close to the big, heavy box and, pointing to a certain corner, said:

"Right there is a secret panel. You slip it back and get out that way!"

The man seemed so triumphantly confident and so sure of his statement, that several in the audience cried:

"Is that right? Is that how you do the trick? If it is pay him the ten thousand dollars!"

Joe looked at Jim Tracy. This was the first time any one had ever come so close to the truth. Helen, standing at one side of the stage, began to be fearful that, after all, Joe's secret was discovered. It would mean an end of the box trick.

Then Joe smiled, and stepped forward. And there was something in the smile that reassured Helen.

"Has he guessed it?" she asked in a low voice, as Joe passed her.

"No. But it was a narrow escape," was the answer.

CHAPTER XIX

JUGGLING WITH FIRE

Smilingly the man who had made claim to the ten thousand dollars waited for Joe Strong. The fellow seemed already to have the money in his grasp.

"You say there is a sliding panel in that corner?" asked Joe.

"Positive."

"And that I get out that way?"

"Yes."

"Well, I say you are wrong, and I am going to prove it," returned Joe easily, and also smiling. "Now I'm going to let you, and any one you may select from the audience, paste sheets of paper over that corner. Then I'll do the trick over again. If I get out of the box, and the paper you paste on remains unbroken, you'll have to admit that I didn't come out through the place where you say is a sliding panel, won't you?"

"Well, if you don't break the paper, I guess I'll have to admit you didn't get out that way," said the man, with a grin. "But I want to see you do it first."

"Very well. I'll send for some paste and paper," went on Joe. "Meanwhile call upon any of your friends you like to help."

"Come on up here, Bill!" called out the man.

For an instant Joe, and Helen also, as she admitted later, feared it might be Bill Carfax to whom he referred. But an altogether different individual shuffled up to the stage.

"We'll paste paper over this end where the trick panel is," went on the man who had claimed the reward. "He won't get out then!"

"Sure he won't," agreed his companion. "Do we get the ten thousand then?"

"Naturally, if you have guessed right," said Joe. "But that remains to be seen."

There was no trouble in getting paste and paper. That is part of a circus, for, even though it is old-fashioned, paper hoops are still used for the clowns and some bareback riders to leap through.

A plentiful supply of large, white sheets and a pail of paste with a brush were brought up to the stage. Then the men were invited to begin their work, which was to seal up the corner the man had picked out as the location of the secret panel.

Before pasting on the paper the men looked closely at the joinings of the box. They seemed rather puzzled in spite of the cock-sureness of the first individual.

The pasting was not a work of art, but it was effective. The corner of the box was plastered over with sheets of white paper, in which there was no break.

"If I get out of the box without cracking, tearing, or disturbing the paper you have pasted on, without moving it in any way, you'll admit that you're wrong, won't you?" asked Joe, as he prepared to do the trick again.

"Yes," was the answer. "I will. But I've got you sewed up!"

"Pasted up would be a better word," returned Joe, with a smile. "But that remains to be seen."

The box was placed in position, and Joe took his place in it. The lid was slammed down, locked, and the rope was knotted about it. The two men who had done the pasting assisted in this.

Then the curtains were drawn, and Helen and the firemen took their places. There was a period of waiting. The tense suspense of the audience was manifest. Even Jim Tracy and Bill Watson, veteran circus men though they were, seemed a bit worried. The man who had claimed the ten thousand dollars and his companion seemed a bit ill at ease.

Then, suddenly, the curtains parted and Joe Strong stood in plain view, outside the box, bowing to the applause that greeted him. When it had subsided, he said:

"Will you two gentlemen kindly look at the paper seals you placed on one corner of the box? If they are unbroken and undisturbed I take it you have lost. Kindly look and announce what you find."

The men shuffled to the case and bent down over the corner that was covered with the pasted sheets. Look as they did, they could find no evidences of a break or tear in the paper. And it had not been removed and put back again. The men admitted that.

"Then you have to admit that I didn't get out of the box by means of a secret panel in that corner, don't you?" asked Joe, when the two had asserted that the paper was intact.

"Yes, I guess you win," said the first man. "But there's some trick about it!"

"Oh, I admit that!" laughed Joe. "It is a trick, and if you discover it you get ten thousand dollars. But not to-night. Red Cross is richer by a hundred dollars."

"Um!" grumbled the man, as he walked off, and many in the audience laughed. Joe had won.

The circus performance went on to its usual exciting close in the chariot races, and when preparations were being made to travel on to the next city, Helen had a chance to speak to Joe.

"It was a narrow escape," she said.

"Just what it was!" he replied. "If he had picked the other corner---the left instead of the right---he would have had me. But luck was with us."

"I'm glad," said Helen. "But how did he happen to select any corner? Some one must know more about your trick box than you think."

"I'm afraid so," admitted Joe ruefully. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised but what this was some of the work of Bill Carfax."

"Has he been around again?" asked Helen, and there was a note of annoyance in her voice.

"He hasn't been seen," said Joe. "But this man may have been in communication with him. Bill may have been studying the trick out since his last failure, and I must admit that he's on the right trail---that is, if it was Bill who put this man up to making the claim."

"What makes you think Bill had anything to do with it?" asked Helen.

"Well, for the reason that this is just the kind of town where Bill would be likely to have friends---I mean in a big manufacturing center. Bill may have found a man who is willing to act to help pull down the reward for him. But this time they failed."

"He may succeed next time," remarked Helen.

"No, I'll take care of that," Joe said. "I'm going to make a change in the box."

As the mechanism of the trick box has been explained in the preceding volume, it will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that Joe's method of getting out of the box could be changed, so that if a person thought he had discovered the secret panel it could be shifted to another part of the case.

It was two or three days after this, and Joe had made a change in his box which satisfied him that the secret would not soon be discovered, that Helen, coming over to where he sat in his private tent, saw him making what seemed to be torches.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Do you think our electric lights or gasoline flares are going to fail?" she went on jokingly. The Sampson Brothers' Show was a modern one, and carried a portable electric light plant.

"Oh, no, I'm not worrying about that!" answered Joe. "But I have a new idea for my wire act, and I want to see if it will work out."

That night, at the proper time, when Joe was introduced as about to perform his wire act, Helen noticed Ham Logan come out with the young fire-eater, carrying a number of the torches Joe had made.

Joe started across the high, slack wire, and on it performed many of his usual feats. They were not specially sensational, and Helen wondered what he had planned.

But, after a daring run across the slender support, following some risky side swinging, Helen saw Joe lower from the high platform where he stood a flexible wire. Standing on the ground below, Ham Logan received it and fastened on the end several of the metal torches Joe had made. The young magician hauled them up to him by means of the wire.

Then, as Helen and the audience watched, Joe set the torches ablaze. They were made of hollow cones of sheet iron, in which were placed bits of tow, soaked in alcohol.

With four blazing torches, two in either hand, Joe Strong started out to cross the high, slack wire. And then, to the wonder and amazement of the audience, no less than that of his friends in the show, Joe began juggling with fire.

CHAPTER XX

THE BLAZING BANQUET

Across the wire walked the young performer, and as he walked he tossed into the air, catching them as they came down, the flaming torches. When it is remembered that the fire was of the real, blazing sort, and hot at that, also when it is recalled that if Joe happened to catch hold of the wrong end of any of the whirling torches, and when it is evident that he must "watch his step," it will be seen that he was performing no easy feat.

Yet to watch him one would have thought that he had been doing it right along for many performances, instead of this being his first in public, though he and Ham Logan had practiced in private.

Across the wire walked Joe, juggling with fire, and when he reached the other platform he walked backward along the swaying wire.

Then the applause broke out, loud and long. The crowd appreciated the trick, with all its dangers. True, Joe Strong was an expert on the wire, and he was also a good juggler. But juggling with torches while on a swaying cable was not as easy as handling harmless rubber balls or Indian clubs, and the circus throng seemed to appreciate this.

Getting back to the platform whence he had started, Joe dropped the still blazing torches into a tub of water where they went out hissingly. This provided a fitting climax to the act, as showing that the flames were real ones.

And then Joe donned his cap of leather, with the little grooved wheels fastened in the top, and on his head he slid down the slanting wire through the blazing hoops. It was a good end to a good trick; and the crowd went wild.

"Well, Joe, you sure did put another one over for us," said Jim Tracy, at the conclusion of the performance. "That fire juggling was a great trick. That's the sensation you promised us, I suppose."

"No, it isn't," was the answer. "I'm not ready for that yet. But I'm glad you liked the trick. No, what I have up my sleeve is something even better, I think."

"Well, I hope you haven't any blazing torches up your sleeve," remarked Helen, with a laugh. "You'll need a new coat, if you have."

"No danger," laughed Joe. "I think I'll be ready soon. By the way, any news of the bogus tickets--I mean the detectives haven't found out anything positive, have they?"

"Not yet," answered Mr. Moyne, who had joined the little party. "And it's keeping all of us who have to do with the financial end guessing as to where the trouble will break out next."

"It is an unpleasant state of affairs," agreed Joe. "But I don't see what we can do except to wait. You haven't noticed any more of the counterfeit tickets of late, have you?"

"No," answered the treasurer. "It's only when we hit the big mill cities that they are worked in on us. That's why I believe there is some system to it all."

"Well, we'll have to break up the system," declared Joe. "As soon as I get this new act of mine perfected I'm going to take a day or two off, over Sunday say, and visit the detective agency. They may need stirring up."

"I wish something could be done," declared the treasurer.

About a week after this conversation, during which time the circus had moved from place to place, doing good business, Mrs. Watson, meeting Helen on the lot, said:

"Who are Joe's new friends?"

"New friends? I didn't know he had any specially new ones," remarked the young bareback rider. "Has he been befriending some more poor broken-down circus men, like Ham Logan?"

"These aren't men," said the clown's wife. "They are three pretty girls. I saw Joe coming back from downtown with them. They seemed jolly---laughing and talking."

"Three pretty girls!" murmured Helen. And then she quickly added, with an air of indifference: "Oh, I suppose they may be some cousins he hasn't seen for a long while."

"I thought Joe said he had no relatives in this country," went on Mrs. Watson.

"I'm sure I don't know," and Helen's voice was very cool.

"There's something behind all this," mused Mrs. Watson, as Helen walked away. "I hope those two haven't quarreled. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

However, it was too late now. The seeds of jealousy seemed to have been sown, though unwittingly, by Mrs. Watson. Helen walked on with her head high in the air, and as the clown's wife passed Joe's official tent a little later she heard, issuing from it, the jolly laughter and talk of several girlish voices.

"I wonder what Joe Strong is up to," thought Mrs. Watson. "He never acted like that before---going off with other girls and neglecting Helen. I'm going to speak to him. No, I won't either!" she decided. "I'll just keep still until I know I can help. It's better that way."

It was perhaps an hour after this that Joe, meeting Helen, called to her:

"Oh, I say! don't you want to do me a favor?"

"What sort?" asked the rider of Rosebud, and if Joe had not been thinking of something else he would have noticed the danger signs about Helen's countenance.

"The fancy jacket I use in one of my tricks is torn," went on Joe. "Would it be asking too much to request you to mend it?"

Helen tossed back her head and there was a snap to her eyes as she answered:

"Why don't you get one of the three pretty girls to do your mending? I'm afraid I'm not clever enough!" And with that she walked on haughtily.

For an instant Joe was so surprised that he could not speak. His face plainly showed how taken aback he was. Then, after a moment, he managed to stammer:

"Oh, but I say! Helen! Wait a moment! Let me explain. I---er I---I only---"

But Helen did not pause, she did not look back, and she did not answer. Joe stood staring after her in blank amazement. Then he gave utterance to a low whistle and exclaimed:

"Oh, ho! I see! Well, it will be my turn later!" and he laughed silently.

"He's either playing a mean trick or else he's up to some joke," declared Mrs. Watson, who, from a distance, had watched this little scene. "And," she added with a shake of her head, "I can't be sure what it is. Young folks are so foolish! So foolish!" and she sighed as she walked away.

Joe, with the torn jacket in his hand, turned back toward his own tent, and presently there came from it the sounds of several young persons, including girls, in conversation and laughter.

It was later, that same afternoon, when Helen noticed Joe in one part of the big tent. He was surrounded by three pretty young ladies and three good-looking young men. They were on one of the platforms seated about a table, and Joe seemed to be entertaining them, for there were plates, cups, knives and forks on the board---all the outward indications of a meal.

The time was late afternoon, following the day performance and prior to the evening show. Helen looked curiously over at the gay little scene, and something tugged at her heart-strings. Then she looked away, and Mrs. Watson, observing her from the other side of the tent, shook her gray head.

"I can't understand Joe Strong," murmured the clown's wife. "What has come over him?"

It was just before the opening of the evening performance that night when Joe, meeting Helen in the dressing tent, said:

"I shan't need you in the box trick, to-night, nor in the vanishing lady stunt, either."

"Oh, I suppose you're going to use one of the new, pretty girls," snapped Helen.

Joe looked at her quietly.

"No," he said, "I am not. But I am not going to put on either trick. I thought you'd like to know, so if you want to introduce any of your extras you'll have a chance."

"Thank you!" she said coldly, and passed on.

Joe smiled as he looked after her.

With a blare of trumpets, a boom and ruffle of drums, the gay procession started around the circus arena. The stately elephants, the hideous camels and the beautiful horses went around to be looked at, wondered at, and admired. Then, when the last of the cavalcade had passed out, the various acts began. Helen had a new costume for her bareback act, and as she started it she looked over to where Joe was busy on his stage. She saw the young men and women around him. They wore fancy costumes and seemed a part of the circus. Helen wondered what act they were going to appear in, since none including them had been announced.

She danced about on the back of Rosebud, and thought bitterly that Joe had never noticed her new dress. She was wearing it for the first time, too.

The whistle blew. All acts stopped and Jim Tracy advanced toward Joe's platform.

"A most marvelous and striking act!" he cried, not stating what it was to be.

All eyes, even those of Helen Morton, turned in the direction of Joe Strong.

He acted quickly. With a wave of his hand he invited the three pretty girls and the three well-appearing young men to be seated. They took their places around a table, with Joe acting as host. The table appeared to be well laden, and at first the act seemed to be only a rather elaborate meal being served in public.

"What is it all about?" mused Helen. "I can't see anything very wonderful in that."

But, even as she thus mused, something strange happened. The banquet table seemed to burst into flames. The dishes of food blazed up, and the audience gasped.

But the young men, the young women, and Joe Strong did not seem in the least surprised. They kept their seats and went right on eating.

And then, with a thrill of surprise, it was noticed that Joe Strong and his guests were devouring the blazing food itself! The girls and young men put portion after portion of the blazing viands into their mouths!

CHAPTER XXI

HAM IS MISSING

Surprise and astonishment held the audience silent and spellbound for a moment. Then a woman screamed, and, ready for this emergency and fearing a panic, than which nothing is more dreaded by circus men, Jim Tracy cried:

"Sit still! Keep your seats! There is no danger! This is all part of the show. We are merely showing you how to eat your meals in case any of you ever get caught in a blazing volcano. Watch the ladies and gentlemen eat their stuff hot--right off the fire!"

There was a laugh at this sally, and a laugh was what the ringmaster wanted more than anything else just then. He knew the tide of fear had been changed to one of wondering admiration.

And so, sitting on the stage in sight of the thrilled audience, Joe Strong and his guests, in the shape of pretty girls and manly young fellows fancifully attired, continued to eat the blazing food.

The very pieces of bread seemed to be on fire, there was a dancing flame over the butter, and each bit of meat or other food Joe and the performers lifted on their forks was alive with leaping fire.

Then the daring feature of the act was borne home to the audience and the applause broke forth--applause loud and long. There were yells and whistles from the younger and more enthusiastic portion of the circus crowd.

And then the fires died away. The table seemed emptied of victuals, and the young men and women, imitating Joe's example, leaned back in their chairs as though well satisfied with their hot meal.

"There you are, ladies and gentlemen!" declaimed the ringmaster. "They have come to no harm from eating living fire. If any of you are tired of cold victuals, kindly step forward and you will be treated to a free, hot lunch by Professor Strong."

"Not any in mine, thank you," murmured a man, and that seemed to be the general opinion.

As Joe and his new associates arose to bow to the renewed applause, the ringmaster made an announcement.

"A blazing banquet, such as you have just witnessed, will take place at each and every performance," he declared. "Come and bring your friends! Nothing like it ever seen before on any stage or in any circus in the world!"

"Remember, you will see the same and identical act at each and every performance and all for the price of one admission. Professor Strong and his gifted salamander associates will eat fire as they did just now, at each and every show in the big tent. I thank you!"

"Well, Joe, it went all right!" said Jim Tracy when the performers had left the stage and the young fire-eater was alone on the platform. "It went like a house afire!"

"Yes," said Joe, "it seemed to. I guess it went better than if we had made a lot of preliminary notices. The suddenness of it took them by surprise."

"But we can advertise it big now," said the ringmaster. "We don't need to specify exactly what it is. Of course those who have seen it will tell their friends who are coming and who haven't seen it. But the big majority of the audiences will be as much surprised as this one was. It went big."

"Yes," agreed Joe, "it did. And I'm glad of it. This is the sensation I was planning, but I didn't want to go into details until I was sure it would work. I had to engage my helpers in the dark, so to speak, and I didn't even tell you what I was planning until the last minute."

"No, you didn't," said Jim.

Helen Morton came slowly across the arena. Her act was over, and she had seen the blazing banquet and Joe's part in it.

Her cheeks were unusually red as she approached holding out her hand, and there was a rather misty look about her eyes as she said:

"Will you forgive me, Joe?"

"For what?" he asked tantalizingly.

"Oh, you know perfectly well!" she exclaimed. "It was very silly of me, but---"

"I know, Helen. I did tease you a bit," he said. "I suppose I might have told you that the pretty girls were those I had engaged to help in the banquet scene, together with the young fellows. We had only a few rehearsals in my tent, and I didn't want to spread the news too generally, even among the circus crowd, for fear of a leak. But I suppose I might have told you."

"It would have saved me from acting so silly, if you had," she murmured.

"Then it is I who should ask forgiveness," said Joe. "But it's all right now. And may I come to lunch with you, or would you rather that I should go with--one of the pretty girls?"

"If you do I'll never forgive you!" declared Helen, blushing more than ever. And so the little quarrel ended.

As Joe had intimated, he had engaged his banquet helpers secretly, and they had met him at the city where the circus was to remain three days and nights. Ham Logan had been instrumental in getting the performers for Joe, since the old circus man knew the best theatrical agency at which to apply. So Joe had hired the young men and women to act the part of guests at the "banquet." He had guessed that Helen's actions denoted her jealousy, but he could not forbear teasing her.

"But did they actually eat the fire?" Helen asked, when she and Joe were together again. "Of course I know they didn't," she went on. "It's silly of me to ask such a question. But it was very realistic."

"I'm glad of that," said Joe. "No, they didn't actually 'eat' the fire, any more than I eat it. And I may say that I had quite a little trouble in getting them to put it near enough their mouths to make it seem as if they did.

"But the 'food' was only very thin paper of a peculiar kind, which Ham Logan and I worked out together. It can be made to look like almost any food, and yet it is treated chemically so as to burn easily and quickly. The flames go out as soon as they come near enough our mouths to feel the effects of certain chemicals that are on our faces. I can't tell you all the secrets, but that is enough to show you how we worked it.

"There was no more danger than there is when I 'eat' fire, and the trick is done in much the same way. Ham Logan is getting to be an invaluable helper. I hope he stays with me. I never could have done this trick without him."

The blazing banquet was the talk of that and other cities. As Jim Tracy had said, the feat was shown at each and every performance, Joe cutting out some of his less sensational acts. The circus made a longer stay than usual in the city where the fiery food was first "eaten," and played to record-breaking business.

"And the best of it is that we haven't seen a bogus ticket!" said the treasurer, much elated.

Joe, as one of the chief owners of the circus, was able to hire the "fire-eaters" unknown to any of his associates until the last minute, and thus the surprise was all the greater.

Joe's fire tricks were now the talk of the theatrical and circus worlds, and he received many offers to leave Sampson Brothers' Show and star by himself. But he refused them all, saying he wanted to build up his own show to a point never before reached.

As he had said, Ham Logan proved a valuable helper. The man, a fire-eater of the old school, knew many valuable secrets, and he held himself under such obligation to Joe that he revealed many of them to the young magician.

"Have you learned anything more about who left that bottle of powerful acid in among my things?" asked Joe of Ham, one afternoon when the fire banquet had been unusually successful.

"No, not exactly," was the answer. "But I'm on the trail, I think I am working along the right lines, but it is too early to make any statement."

"Well, take your time," said Joe. "Only I don't want to get mixed up with any of the deadly stuff."

"Don't worry. I'm on the watch," declared the old performer.

That night, when the time for Joe to prepare for his acts, including the fire tricks, came, he did not see Ham in the dressing tent, where the assistant was usually to be found.

"Have you seen him?" asked Joe of Harry Loper.

"Yes, about half an hour ago," was the answer. "He said he was going in to town."

"Going in to town---and so near performing time?" cried Joe. "I wonder what for! He ought to be here!"

Joe was worried, and when his signal for going on came Ham Logan was still missing. Joe Strong shook his head dubiously. It had been found necessary to get another man to help with the act.

"I don't like this," he murmured. "I don't like it for a cent!"

CHAPTER XXII

A SUDDEN WARNING

Only the fact that he had strong nerves and that he possessed the ability of concentrating his mind on whatever was uppermost at the time, enabled the young circus man to get through his various circus acts with credit at that performance. He began with the worry over Ham Logan's disappearance before him. And he was actually worried---a bad state of affairs for one whose ability to please and deceive critical audiences depends on his snappy acting, his quickness of hand and mind, and his skill.

But, as has been said, Joe possessed the ability to concentrate on the most needful matter, and that, for the time being, was his box trick, his fire-eating, and his slide on his head down the slanting wire through the blazing hoops.

Then came the blazing banquet, and this created the usual furor in the audience. Joe managed to get through it with credit, though his rather strange manner was noticed and commented on afterward by the young people associated with him.

"I wonder what's bothering the boss?" asked one of the young fire-eaters of another. "He nearly made a slip when he was lifting up that fake fried oyster."

"Maybe the circus is losing money and he's got to cut out this act---let some of us go---can't pay our salaries," was the reply.

"Don't you believe it!" declared the other. "The circus is making more money than it ever did---more even when the fake tickets are worked off on it."

"Well, it's none of our affair."

"I wouldn't like my salary to be cut off."

"Oh, neither would I."

"Fake tickets? I hadn't heard of them."

"Oh, yes," explained the first speaker, and he went into the details of the affair.

"But there's surely something worrying the boss," commented still another of the young men, and his associates, including the "pretty girls," agreed with him.

And what really was worrying Joe was speculation over the fate of Ham Logan. Not since Joe had first taken the old and broken circus actor into his employ had Ham been away more than a few hours at a time, and then Joe knew where he was. This time Ham had left no word, save the uncertain one that he was going into the city, on the outskirts of which the circus was at the time showing.

"But don't you think he'll come back?" asked Jim Tracy, when, after the performance, Joe had spoken of the missing Ham.

"I wish I could think so," was the reply. "I sure will hate to lose him. I depend a lot on him in my fire tricks."

"What makes you think you will lose him?" asked Tracy curiously.

"Well, his going off this way, for one," declared Joe. "What I'm really afraid of is that he may have gone back to his bad habits. You know how it is. A man starts to reform, and he keeps the pledges he makes until he meets some of his boon companions who used to help him on the downward road. They invite him to come along for a good time, and he goes."

"And you think that's what's happened to Ham?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm going down town and see if I can get any trace of him."

And this Joe did as soon as he was relieved of his duties in the circus. The show was to remain in town over night, and this gave him just the chance he wanted.

It was an unpleasant errand, but Joe went through with it. He had to call at many places that were distasteful to him, but in none of them did he get a trace of Ham Logan. Joe saw in the more brilliant parts of the city a number of the circus men, including some of the chief performers. They were taking advantage of the two-days' stay, and were meeting old friends and making some new acquaintances.

Of these Joe inquired for news of Ham, but no one had seen him. The old fire-eater had endeared himself to more than one member of the Sampson Brothers' Show, for he was always ready to do a favor. So more than Joe were interested in seeing that Ham kept on the good road along which he had started. But all of Joe's efforts were of no avail.

It was after midnight when he ended his search, and, rather than go back to the sleeping car where the other performers spent their night, Joe put up at a hotel, sending word to Jim Tracy of what he intended to do.

"I want to find Ham," Joe wrote in the note he sent to the ringmaster by a messenger boy, "and I've asked the police to be on the quiet lookout for him. If I stay at the hotel I can help him more quickly, in case he's found, than if I am away out at the railroad siding where the circus train is. I'll see you in the morning."

But Joe's night at the hotel was spent in vain, for there was no word of Ham Logan, and the morning which Joe put in, making inquiries, was equally fruitless.

"I guess Ham is gone for good," sighed Joe, and his regret was genuine, and almost as much for the sake of the man himself as for his own loss of a good assistant.

For Ham Logan was that and more to Joe. The former tramp had much valuable information regarding the old style fire-eating tricks, and though he was not up to the task of doing them himself, he gave Joe good advice. It was by his help and advice that Joe had staged the blazing banquet scene, which was such a success and which the newspapers mentioned constantly.

True, Joe did not actually need Ham to go on with his acts. He could break in another man to help him, to hand him the proper article at just the right time, to see to the mixing of the fire-resisting chemicals and to the preparation of the viands that seemed to be composed of fire itself.

"And that's what I'll have to do," mused Joe, when he became convinced some days later that Ham was not to be found.

He wished that Helen was able to act as his assistant in the fire scenes, as she did in the box trick and the vanishing lady act. But she could spare no more time from her own act with Rosebud, since she was billed as one of the "stars." Then, too, Helen had a fear of fire, and though she had succeeded in overcoming part of it, still she would not have made the proper sort of assistant in those acts. Besides, she would not have been able to mix the chemicals Joe required to render himself immune from such fire as he actually came in contact with, though momentarily.

"I've got to train in a new man," decided Joe. He mentally considered various circus employees, rejecting one after another, and finally selected one of the young men who acted in the blazing banquet scene. This youth was a bright, manly fellow, and had introduced some new "business" in the act which made it more interesting.

"I'll train him in," decided Joe, "with the understanding that if Ham comes back he'll get his old place. If he comes back! I wonder if he ever will, and if he'll be in a condition to help me."

Joe shook his head dubiously.

The circus moved on. It had played to good business, and there was more good business in prospect. Mr. Moyné, the treasurer, was on the anxious seat much of the time, fearing another flood of bogus tickets, but the efforts mentioned, on the part of the swindlers, following the use of new paper, was all they had to complain of so far.

"Either the detectives are too close to the trail of the cheats to allow them to work in safety, or they've given it up altogether," decided the treasurer.

"I hope so," said Joe. "Still it won't do to relax our vigilance. I wrote to the detective firm, as I said I would, jacking them up a bit. Maybe they are ready to make an arrest, and that would stop the swindlers."

The young man Joe had picked out to act as his chief assistant in the fire scenes was Ted Brown. Ted was about eighteen years old, and this was his first position with a circus. But he was making good, and he had not yet been afflicted with the terrible disease known as "swelled head," something which ruins so many performers.

Ted learned rapidly, and Joe felt that it would be safe to trust him with some of the secrets of the tricks--the mixing of the fire-resisting chemicals and the like. Joe's choice seemed to be a good one, for Ted did well, and his part in the banquet scene was made even better by his knowledge of the inner workings of the material used.

But though Joe did not lose materially by the desertion of Ham, if that was what it was, since he could now depend on Ted, the young circus man many times found himself wondering if he would ever see the old fire-eater again.

The circus opened one afternoon in a large city---one in which lived many thousands of men employed in a large ship-building plant.

"There'll be big crowds here," said Mr. Moyne, as he walked toward the ticket wagon in preparation for the rush. "And it's here we'll have to look out for bogus coupons."

"Why?" asked Joe, who was getting ready for his acts.

"Because in every other case the swindlers have worked their game where there was a big plant engaging many men of what you might call rough and ready character---ready to take a chance on scalped admission tickets, and rough enough to fight if they were discovered. So I'm going to be on the watch."

"It's just as well to be," decided Joe. He turned back into the tent which was his combined dressing room and a storage place for his various smaller bits of apparatus and the chemicals he used in his fire act.

Before giving his last act Joe always washed his hands and face and rinsed his mouth out with a chemical preparation that would, for a time, resist the action of fire. It was a secret compound, rather difficult to handle and make, and Joe had taught Ted Brown how to do it.

The young fellow was handing Joe this mixture, some of which was also used by all who took part in the blazing banquet scene, when the flap of the tent was suddenly pushed aside and Harry Loper entered.

"Stop!" he cried, raising a restraining hand. "Don't use that solution, Mr. Strong! It's doped! Don't use it!"

Joe, who had been about to apply some of the stuff to his hands, turned in surprise. He was alarmed at the strange look on the face of the youth who acted as his helper in the high wire and in some of the trapeze acts.

"Don't use that stuff!" cried Harry. "It's doped!" and then he sank down on a chair and, burying his face in his hands, burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXIII

A STRANGE SUMMONS

Joe Strong looked from the sobbing Harry Loper to the amazed Ted Brown. The latter's face showed his great surprise. For an instant Joe had an ugly suspicion that his new assistant had played him false---that, because of jealousy or from some other motive, he had mixed the chemicals in some way to make them ineffective. This would spoil the illusion, or it might even cause injury.

"Look here, Harry! what's the matter?" cried Joe, purposely using a rough voice, so as to stop, if possible, the display of emotion on the part of the youth. "Act like a man, can't you! If you've done some mean trick tell me about it. What do you mean when you say this mixture is doped?"

"Just that!" exclaimed Harry, looking up with haggard face. "I can't stand it any longer. I promised not to tell, but I've got to. I---I can't see any harm come to you."

"Harm!" cried Joe. "Do you mean this is poison?"

"No, not that. He said it wouldn't do you any harm---that it would only make the act turn out wrong---that you, nor anybody, would not be hurt. But I don't believe him. I believe he wants to harm you, and I'm going to tell all I know. I can't stand it any longer."

"Look here, Harry!" said Joe sternly, "are you perfectly sober? Do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes, I know that, all right, Mr. Strong," whined the lad. "I won't say I haven't been drinking, for I have. I did it to try to forget, but it wouldn't work. I'm plenty sober enough to know what I'm saying."

"And you tell me this chemical preparation will work harm to me and those who help me in the fire acts?"

"I don't know as to that, Mr. Strong. He told me that it wouldn't harm you. But I don't believe him! I won't trust him any more."

"Who do you mean?" asked Joe. "Do you know anything about this?" he demanded sternly of Ted Brown. "You prepared this mixture, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Strong, I did. I made it just the way you told me. If you think---"

"No, he doesn't know anything about it," murmured Harry, who seemed to have recovered some of his composure, now that the worst of his confession was over. "He didn't have a hand in it. I'm to blame. If I hadn't let him into your tent he couldn't have doped the stuff. Oh, I'm sorry! I was a fool to believe him, but he promised me a lot of money just to keep still, and I've done it up to now. But I'm through with him!"

"Look here!" cried Joe. "How long has this been going on? Was this mixture ever doped, as you call it, before?"

"Oh, no, not that I know," was the answer. Joe knew this much, at least, was true. The mixture had always worked perfectly before, and if it had been tampered with that would not have been the case.

"Then what do you mean?" cried the young magician. "Speak up, can't you? Be a man! If you haven't done anything really wrong you won't be punished. I'm after the person back of you. Speak up! Who is he?"

He realized that Harry Loper was but a weak tool in the hands of some one else, and many things that had seemed strange came back to Joe with a sudden rush now. He might be able to learn who it was that had such enmity against him and the circus.

"Are you going to tell me?" demanded Joe.

"Yes! Yes! I'll tell you everything!" was the answer. "I can't stand it any longer. I can't eat in comfort any more, and I can't sleep! First he promised to pay me for letting him come to your tent when you were out. Then he threatened to kill me if I told. But I'm going to tell. I don't care what he does!"

"But if this is the first time my chemical mixture has been doped, what do you mean about 'him,' whoever he is, coming to my tent at other times?" asked Joe. "What other times were they?"

"Don't you remember when the bottle of acid was found?" asked the abashed youth.

"Yes! Was that some of your doings too?" cried Joe hotly.

"No, I didn't do it. He did. But I--I looked the other way when he did it. And then there was the time when the trapeze wire broke. It was acid that did that. He put it on."

"Who is this mysterious person you call 'he' all the while?" asked Joe. "I want to get after him."

"I'll tell you!" promised Harry. "But you'll protect me, won't you, Mr. Strong?"

"As far as I can with decency, yes. Now tell me!"

But there came another interruption. A man thrust his head into the tent and exclaimed:

"Mr. Tracy wants to know if you can advance the fire scenes about ten minutes, Mr. Strong. One of the men acrobats has sprained his wrist and they've got to cut out his act. Can you go on ten minutes sooner than usual?"

"Guess I'll have to," said Joe. "Quick, Ted, make up some new solution. I'll help you. As for you, Harry, you stay right here. I'll talk to you later. Haven't time now. And I'm going to have some one stay with you, to make sure you don't weaken and run away. It is as much for your own sake as mine. If you've decided to leave the man who got you to help in this work I'll stand by you. But I want to be sure your repentance is genuine. So stay right here, and we'll talk about this later. Don't say anything outside," he cautioned Ted.

"I won't," was the answer. "Say, I hope you don't think I had any hand in this?"

"No," Joe answered, "I don't. I'm trusting you--that's my best evidence."

"Thank you," said the young fellow, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Quick work was needed on the part of Joe and his new helper to get ready for the act. New chemicals had to be mixed, to render it safe to handle fire. This was in the acts where Joe seemed to swallow flames and where he and the others "dined" on blazing food.

In the other acts, where Joe juggled on the slack wire with the flaming torches, where he slid down the wire through the blazing hoops, and where he jumped into the tank of water with his garments apparently in flames, no change was needed. In these feats Joe's costume was fireproofed, and, as they had been treated some time before, he knew there was only a remote possibility that they had been tampered with.

Still he was taking no chances, and while he was waiting for Ted to complete the mixing of the fire-resisting chemical mixture, Joe tested his garments with a blazing bit of paper. They did not catch fire, which assured him of safety during his sensational acts.

"How about you, Joe?" asked Jim Tracy, thrusting his head into the tent a little later. "Are you going to be able to make it?"

"Oh, sure. I'll be there!"

"Sorry to have to make the change," went on the ringmaster. "But Baraldi is hurt, and his act had to be cut out completely. So I had to move you up."

"Oh, that's all right," Joe assured him.

"Hello, what are you doing here---and what's the matter with you?" cried Jim, seeing Harry Loper sitting dejectedly in a chair. "Why aren't you out fixing the trapezes? You know Mr. Strong goes on them soon."

"I---I---he told me to stay here," Loper stammered, indicating Joe.

"Yes," supplemented Joe Strong, "there's something doing, Jim. I'll tell you later. I want some one to stay in here with Harry. Some one we can trust," he added significantly.

"I'll send Paddy Flynn," promised the ringmaster. As he went out he looked curiously at Harry.

"How's the stuff coming on, Ted?" asked Joe, when the doctored mixture had been thrown away and new made.

"All right, I guess. I'll try it."

He put some on one finger, thrust the member into the flame of a candle, and held it there longer than usual.

"Look out!" Joe warned him. "You can't be too familiar with fire."

"The stuff's all right," was the answer. "It's better than the last we used."

"Good! Well, let's get busy!"

In spite of the strain of what he had gone through in listening to the partial confession of Harry Loper, Joe did some of his best work in the fire acts that day. The blazing banquet was most effective.

Having changed to his costume for his magical box and other tricks, and learning that Harry was still safe under the watchful eye of Paddy Flynn, Joe hurried out to his stage, where Mr. Tracy was already making the ten thousand dollar offer.

As Joe hurried across the arena one of the tent men thrust into his hand a scrap of paper.

"What is it?" asked Joe.

"I don't know," was the reply. "A boy just brought it and told me to give it to you."

Joe had a half minute to wait while the ringmaster was talking. Quickly he read the note---it was really a scrawl. But it said:

"Please forgive me and still believe in me. I am suffering! I can't come to you in the condition I'm in now. But I have something to tell you if you could come to me. The boy will bring you."

The note was signed "Hamilton Logan."

"Whew!" whistled Joe. "Worse and more of it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAP IS SET

Pausing only long enough to tell the man who had given him the note to be sure and detain the boy who had brought it, Joe Strong hurried over to the stage to begin his box trick. That was to be followed by the "disappearing lady" act.

And here again Joe had to use all his reserve nerve to enable him to go on with the performance as smoothly as he usually did. He had to dismiss from his mind, for the time being, all thoughts of Ham Logan, and he steeled himself not to think of what the strange summons might mean.

"If Ham is in trouble I'm going to help him---that's all!" declared Joe.

Following the usual announcement by Jim Tracy, Joe got into the box. It was locked and roped and then Helen took her place, as did the fireman with his gleaming ax.

Joe worked unusually quickly that night in getting out of the box. He knew this haste would not spoil the illusion of the trick. In fact it really heightened it. For he was out of the heavy box in much shorter time than it had taken the volunteer committee to lock him in.

And Joe was glad no one came forward at this performance to claim the ten thousand dollars. That would have taken up time, and time, just then, was what Joe wanted most.

"Evidently none of you know how the trick is done," commented the ringmaster, when his offer of ten thousand dollars was not taken advantage of. "We will now proceed to the next illusion, that of causing a beautiful lady to disappear and vanish into thin air before your very eyes. There is no reward offered for the solution of this mystery."

Helen then took her place on the trick chair over the trap in the stage. The silk shawl was placed over her, and, in due time, the chair was shown empty.

The usual applause followed and Joe was glad his acts were over for the time. Bowing to acknowledge the fervor of the audience, Joe started toward his dressing apartment.

"I want to see you as soon as I can," he quickly told Helen. "But I have to go away. It's about Ham," he added. "I've heard from him."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. Just a scrawled note. The messenger who brought it is going to take me to him."

"Oh, Joe, I'm so glad you've heard from him. I liked him."

"I did too. I hope I can continue to like him. But I'm afraid, from the tone of his note, that he's broken his pledge. However, we can't expect too much. Don't go away for an hour or so. I'll be back as soon as I can and I'll tell you all about it."

"I'll wait for you," promised Helen.

As Joe hurried across the arena he saw the tent man who had given him the note.

"Where's the boy?" he asked.

"I took him to your tent. Paddy Flynn is there and Loper. Is anything the matter, Mr. Strong?"

"Oh, nothing that can't be made right, I hope."

Joe found a red-haired boy sitting on the edge of a folding chair in the dressing tent. The lad was looking wonderingly about the place.

"Did you bring this note?" asked Joe, showing the crumpled paper.

"Sure I did! And say, I wish I could see the show!"

"You can to-night after you take me to Mr. Logan," replied Joe. "You know where he is, don't you?"

"Sure I do! Didn't he give me the note to bring youse?"

"Where is he?"

"Down in Kelly's joint. I live next door."

"What is Kelly's joint?"

"A saloon," answered the red-haired boy. "De name on de winders is cafe, but they don't pronounce it that way---anyhow some of 'em don't. It oughter be cave I guess. It sure is a joint!"

"Is Mr. Logan there?" asked Joe.

"Sure he is. Upstairs in one of de rooms. He's been on a terrible spree he said, but he's sober now and sick---gee, mister, but he sure was sick. Me mudder helped take care of him."

"I'm glad of that," said Joe. "We'll go to him at once. Where is Kelly's---er---cafe?"

"Down by de river near de shipyards," answered the red-haired lad.

For an instant Joe hesitated, but only for an instant. The district named, as he well knew, was a bad one. It was also dangerous.

But it was still afternoon, though growing late. It would not be dark for some time, however, and Joe felt that he would be safe enough in going alone. At night he would have taken some one with him.

But there were two reasons why he did not want to do this now. One was that no one whom he felt he could trust to be discreet could be taken away from the circus, which was not yet over, though Joe's acts were finished. Another reason was that he did not want the possible degradation of Logan seen by any of his former associates. Possibly he might come back to the show, and he would always have a feeling of shame if he knew that those with whom he worked had seen him recovering from a "spree," as the red-haired lad called it.

"I've got to go away," said Joe to Paddy Flynn. Joe and the lad had talked at one side of the tent and in low tones, so the young circus man knew their voices had not been overheard by Paddy and the man he was guarding, Harry Loper. "I'll be back as soon as I can," went on the young fire-eater. "Meanwhile you stay here, Loper. Paddy will take care of you, and when I come back I'll have a talk with you."

"All right," assented the other wearily. "I feel better now I've told you."

Joe and Micky Donlon, which the red-haired boy said was his name, though probably Michael was what he had been christened, were soon on their way toward the river and the location of one of the shipyards.

"Are youse sure I can see de show to-night?" asked Micky eagerly, as they walked along.

"Positive," said Joe. "Here's a reserved seat ticket now. Two, in fact, in case you want to take some one."

"I'll take me mudder," declared the lad. "I got a girl, but she's goin' wit another feller. He bought two tickets, but dey wasn't reserved seats. I didn't have the dough---dat's why she shook me, I guess. But when I flash dese on her---say, maybe she won't want to shine up at me again! But nothin' doin'! I'll take me mudder. She needs a change after waitin' on dat guy what's been on a spree."

"How long has Mr. Logan been ill?" asked Joe.

"Oh, he's been in Kelly's joint for a week."

"He must have been waiting for the circus to arrive," thought Joe. "He knew we were booked for here. Poor fellow!"

Joe was glad it was still light when he entered the district where Kelly's cafe, or saloon, to be more exact, was situated. For the place was most disreputable in appearance, and the character of men loitering about it would have made it a place to stay away from after dark.

Suspicious eyes looked at Joe as he entered the place with his young guide.

"He's come to see de sick guy," Micky explained to the bartender.

"Well, I hope he's come to pay what's owin'," was the surly comment.

"I'll settle any bills that Mr. Logan may owe for board or lodging," said Joe.

"Board! He don't owe much for *board!*" sneered the barkeeper. "He hasn't eaten enough to keep a fly alive. But he does owe for his room."

"I'll pay that," offered Joe. Then he was guided upstairs to a squalid room.

"Come in!" called a weak voice, and Joe, pushing back the door, saw, lying on a tumbled bed, the form of the old fire-eater. It was a great change Ham Logan was in even worse condition than when he had applied to Joe for work. He was utterly disreputable. But in spite of that there was something about his face and eyes that gave Joe hope. The man was sober---that was one thing.

As Joe looked at him, Ham turned his face away.

"I--I'm ashamed to have you see me," he murmured. "I fought it off as long as I could, but I just had to see you. 'Tisn't for my own sake!" he added quickly. "I know you're through with me. But it's for your own---and the good of the show. I've got something to tell you, and, when I've done that, you can go away again and forget me. That's all I'm fit for---to be forgotten!"

A dry sob shook his emaciated frame.

"Son, here's a quarter," said Joe to the red-haired Micky. "You go out and get yourself an ice-cream soda and come back in half an hour."

And after he had thus delicately removed a witness to the sad scene Joe closed the door, and, going over to the bed, held out both his hands to the man.

And then tears---tears to which he had long been stranger---coursed down the sunken cheeks of Hamilton Logan.

Just what Joe said to the man whom he had befriended and who had gone back to his old ways and what Ham Logan said to his young benefactor will never be known. Neither would tell, and no one else knew. As a matter of fact, it did not matter. Afterward, though, following some sensational happenings which did become known, Joe told his closest friends enough of Ham's story to make clear the trend of events.

Punctually on the time agreed, Micky Donlon was back at his post. Joe was coming out of the room.

"Are you engaged for the rest of the day?" asked the young circus performer of his guide.

"Engaged?"

"I mean have you anything to do?"

"Not so's you could notice! Me mudder's goin' to dress up to see de show, but me---I'm all ready!"

"Good! Then you can help me. I'll pay you for your time. Can we get an automobile in this part of the city?"

"Gee, no, mister! Dere's jitney buses about two blocks up, though."

"Well, perhaps they'll do for a time. I've got a lot to do, and you can help me."

"I sure will, mister!" cried Micky. "Are youse in de circus---I mean does youse ride a horse or jump over de elephants?"

"Well, something like that---yes," answered Joe with a smile. "You'll see to-night if you come."

"Oh, I'll be dere! Don't forgit dat!"

Joe and his guide took a jitney to the nearest public hack stand, where a number of automobiles were waiting, and Joe entered one of these with Micky.

"Gee, if me girl could see me *now*!" murmured the red-haired lad, as he sank back in the deep seat.

Joe was too preoccupied to more than smile at the lad. There was much that remained to be done. The circus was to remain in this city two days more, over Saturday night, in fact, leaving on Sunday for a distant city.

"There's time enough to trap them!" mused Joe. "Time enough to trap them!"

And, getting back to the show lot, he dismissed the automobile, and, taking Micky with him, sought out Jim Tracy, Mr. Moyne, and some of the other circus executives.

And then the trap was set.

CHAPTER XXV

A BLAZE OF GLORY

"Well," remarked Joe, after having talked rapidly and said considerable to his friends, "what do you think of my news?"

"Great!" declared the ringmaster. "I didn't think things would take just that turn, but after Loper's confession and what Ham told you, I believe it all. That scoundrel ought to be sent away for life."

"He'll go for a long time if I have anything to say," declared the treasurer. "Did you know we spotted more bogus tickets to-day?" he asked Joe.

"No."

"Well, we did. I found it out just after you left. There were only a few. The rush will come to-night."

"Unless we stop it," put in Jim Tracy.

"We'll stop it!" decided Joe. "That's why I wanted to get things started in a hurry. The trap is all ready to spring. The detectives will be here at eight o'clock, just when the rush is at its height at the ticket wagon."

"Are you going to bring Ham back?" asked Jim, when the conference was over.

"I certainly am," was the answer. "I think he's been on his last spree. And he wouldn't have gone on this one only that he was tempted by some person. Put this tempter out of the way, and it will mean Ham's safety. Now we've got to work."

There was an exceedingly busy time at the circus from then on, and very little of it concerned the show itself. The performance was delayed half an hour that night to enable the trap to be sprung.

Joe and Jim Tracy met a certain train that came in from a large city, and saw alight from it two quiet, unassuming men.

"There they are," said Joe. "Now things will move!" And he and the ringmaster were soon in conversation with the two new arrivals.

A little later the four entered Joe's dressing tent at the circus grounds. And some time after that four men, whose faces were black from the smudge of machine oil and grease and whose clothes carried like marks, left Joe's quarters.

"Down near the shipyards when the last of the day shift comes off will be the time and place," said one of the four smudge-faced men.

"Right!" declared another.

From the big shipyard poured hundreds of men. As they began to emerge from the gate the four soiled-faced individuals who had come from Joe's dressing tent mingled with them. They heard some one ask:

"Are you sure the tickets'll be good?"

"Sure," was the answer. "This fellow and his pal are part of the show. He sells 'em this way so there won't be such a crowd at the wagon, and that's why he makes such a big discount. It sort of guarantees a pretty big crowd, too. Oh, the tickets are good, all right. There's the ticket guy now."

The crowd of men turned down a side street, and the four smutty-countenanced men went with them. One of the four said:

"Wait till he sells a few tickets and then nab him."

"There's two of 'em," said another voice.

"Nab 'em both! They work together."

Soon the men from the shipyard surrounded the two men, one of whom had been designated by the sentence: "There's the ticket guy now."

Money began to change hands, and tickets were passed around. The four men who had kept together shoved their way through the crowd of ship workers.

"How much are the tickets?" one asked.

"Thirty-five cents," was the answer. "They'll cost you fifty or seventy-five at the wagon. The only reason we sell 'em this way is to avoid the rush. Then, too, you're really buying 'em at wholesale."

"I'll take four," said the man of the quartette.

"Here you are! Four."

There was another clink of money and a rustle of slips of paper. Then the man who had passed over the tickets, said:

"Here's your change. That was a five you gave me, wasn't it? Take your change."

"And you take yours, Bill Carfax!" suddenly cried one of the four. "It's quite a sudden change, too!"

There was a flash of something bright, a metallic click---two of them, in fact---and the ticket seller tried to break away. But he was held by the handcuffs on his wrists, one of the four grasping them by the connecting chain.

"Get the other!" cried a sharp voice.

There was a scuffle, another flash of something bright, two more clicks, and one of the four cried:

"That'll be about all from you, Jed Lewis, *alias* Inky Jed."

The two handcuffed men seemed to know that the game was up. They shrugged their shoulders, looked at each other, and grew quiet suddenly. The set trap had been successfully sprung.

"Hey! what's the big idea?"

"What's it all about?"

"Don't we get our tickets?"

Thus cried the men from the shipyards.

"You don't want these tickets," said Joe Strong, for as Bill Carfax looked more closely at one of the four he recognized him as the young circus man. "You don't want any tickets these men could sell you."

"Why not?" demanded a man who had bought one.

"Because they're counterfeit," was Joe's answer. "This man, Bill Carfax," and he nodded toward the one first handcuffed, "used to work with the Sampson show. He was discharged---ask him to tell you why---and soon after that we began to be cheated by the use of counterfeit tickets. We have been trying ever since to find out who sold them, and now we have."

"You think you have!" sneered the man who had been called "Inky Jed."

"We know it," said Joe decidedly. "Ham Logan overheard your plans discussed, and he's told everything."

"Oh!" exclaimed Bill Carfax, and there was a world of meaning in that simple interjection.

"And who might you guys be?" asked one of the shipyard men.

"I'm one of the circus owners," said Joe quietly, "and this is the ringmaster," he went on, indicating Jim Tracy. "These other two gentlemen are detectives who have been working on the case since we discovered the counterfeits. We disguised ourselves in this way in order to trap these two," and he pointed to the handcuffed men.

The ship workers nodded. One of them asked:

"And aren't they with your show, and can't they sell tickets at reduced prices?"

"Never!" exclaimed Joe. "You might get in on the tickets you bought from them, but it would be illegally. The counterfeits are clever ones," he said, holding up four he had bought for evidence. "But we can detect the difference by means of the serial numbers. And now, if you men really want to see the show, go up to the lot and get your tickets from the wagon, or buy them at one of the authorized agencies."

There were many questions fired at Joe and his friends by the shipyard men, but they had time to answer only a few.

"We've got to get back to the performance," said Joe to the detectives. "You can take them with you," and he nodded toward Bill Carfax and his crony. "Jim and I will see you later."

"Oh, we'll take them with us all right!" laughed one of the detectives. "Move lively, boys!" he added to the two prisoners. "The jig is up!"

And the two counterfeiters seemed to know it.

"What does it all mean?" asked Helen of Joe, when he got back a little before the time to go on with his acts. He had washed his face and changed to his circus costume. The two prisoners had been locked up.

"Well, it means we killed two birds with one stone," said Joe. "We got rid of the men who have been making us lose money my means of the counterfeit tickets, and we have also under lock and key Bill Carfax, who tried several times to injure me, or at least to spoil my act, by means of acid on the trapeze rope and by changing the fireproof mixture."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Helen. "Then you were in danger?"

"I suppose so---danger of injury, perhaps, but hardly death. I think Carfax, desperate as he was, would stop at that."

"How did you find out about him and the other man?"

"I'll just have time to tell you before my first act," said Joe. "It was Harry Loper who gave me the first idea. When he broke down it was because of what he had done, and on account of what Bill Carfax wanted him to do again. It was Bill who got into the tent once and put acid on my trapeze wire. And it was because he bribed poor Loper that he was able to do it. Bill pretended it was only a trick to make me slip, because he wanted to get even with me for discharging him. So poor, weak Harry let him sneak into the tent, disguised so none of our men would know him. Bill climbed up, put acid on the wire, and the fiery stuff did the rest.

"Well, that preyed on Harry's mind, but he kept putting it away. But finally, knowing the hold he had on him, Bill came back and gave him a bottle of acid to work some further harm to me or my apparatus. But Ham discovered that in time.

"Bill was provoked over his failure, and, when he wasn't helping Inky Jed get out the bogus tickets, he followed the show and tried to prevail on Harry to play another trick on me. Just what it was Harry doesn't know. He refused to do it, and then he came and confessed to me. So much for Harry. He's a sorry boy, and I think he'll turn over a new leaf.

"Now about Ham. Just as I feared, he got to drinking again. But it was because Bill met him when poor Ham's nerves were on edge, and Bill induced him to take liquor. Then Ham went all to pieces and started on a spree which lasted until now. He managed to get from place to place, always under Bill's eye, and at last he landed here, very weak and ill. Mrs. Donlon looked after him.

"And it was here that Ham first heard Bill and his crony plotting about the bogus circus tickets. The two counterfeiters planned to make a big strike here with the shipyard workers. Then Ham sent the warning to me. I called on him, learned the plans of Bill and Jed, and we sent for the detectives. The latter, we learned, were about to make an arrest anyhow, but it was of the men who really printed the bogus tickets. They hadn't a clew, as yet, to Bill and Jed, who were the real backers of the game. The detectives came on, disguised themselves with us, and we caught the scoundrels in the very act. Now they're locked up."

"Oh, Joe, it's wonderful!" exclaimed Helen. "I'm so glad it's all over. And are you going to bring Ham back to the show?"

"Just as soon as he's able to travel. Micky Donlon wants to join too, and I may give him a chance later. Well, our troubles seem to be over for a time, but I suppose there'll be more."

"Oh, look on the bright side!" exclaimed Helen. "Why be a fire-eater if you can't look on the bright side?" she laughed.

"That's so," agreed her admirer. "Well, I've got to get ready to eat some fire right now."

As Joe had said, everything was cleared up. Bill Carfax was at the bottom of most of the personal troubles of the young circus man, and his acts were actuated by a desire for vengeance. As to the ticket trick, Bill was only a sort of agent in that. Jed Lewis, alias Inky Jed, was an expert counterfeiter. He had already served time in prison for trying to make counterfeit money, and when he fell in with Bill, and heard the latter tell of some of his circus experiences, the more skillful scoundrel became impressed with the chance of making money by selling spurious tickets.

They had some printed and worked the scheme among crowds of men coming from factories, just as they were doing when they were caught.

As Ham told Joe, the old fire-eater had overheard the plots and saw his chance to do Joe a favor. Carfax, it was surmised, hoped to get Ham Logan under his influence through drink, so that he might use him in order to injure Joe, after having failed with Harry Loper.

It developed, afterward, that the paper mills had, innocently enough, furnished the swindlers with the paper for the counterfeit tickets. The material was secured through a trick, and Inky Jed knew an unscrupulous printer who did the work for him.

It was Bill Carfax who had sent the man who so nearly exposed Joe's box trick. But fortune was with the young circus man.

The music played, the horses trotted about, clowns made laughter, and Helen performed graceful feats on Rosebud. Joe did some magical tricks, walked the wire, slid down on his head, and then prepared for the blazing banquet.

In order to show what he could do, Ted Brown had introduced some novelties. After Joe and the guests had devoured the blazing food there was a pause, and then, suddenly, from the center of the table spouts of red fire burst out, so that the banquet ended in a blaze of glory. Joe's new helper had used some fireworks effectively.

In due time Bill and his crony were tried, convicted, and sent away to prison for long terms. Harry Loper changed his rather loose and weak ways and became one of Joe's best friends. Ted Brown was continued as an "assistant assistant," for in a few weeks Ham Logan was able to rejoin the show, and he again became Joe's chief helper.

"Well, what are you going to spring next on the unsuspecting public as a sensation?" asked Helen, when the show had reached a city where two days were to be spent. "Have you other acts as good as the fire-eating?"

"Well, perhaps I can think up some," was the answer.

And so, with Joe Strong thinking what the future might hold for him and the circus, we will take our leave for a time.

THE END