

A DAY UNDER THE BIG TOP

A Study in Life and Art

By

IRVING K. POND



With Four Diagrams by the Author

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THE DIAGRAMS

The diagrams present in a highly conventionalized manner the rhythmic movement of the body of the acrobat in certain notable "turns." The term acrobat, as herein employed, includes aerialists, equestrians, tumblers, jugglers; performers whose aim is the accomplishment of rhythmic beauty.

NUMBER 1

The acrobat swings from his trapeze, throws a double backward somersault followed by a pirouette, is caught by his brother swinging head downward on a shorter trapeze (upper line), and is returned with a pirouette to the free swinging bar and thence to the perch (lower line).

NUMBER 2

A double back somersault and a twister; otherwise the movement being as in Number 1.

NUMBER 3

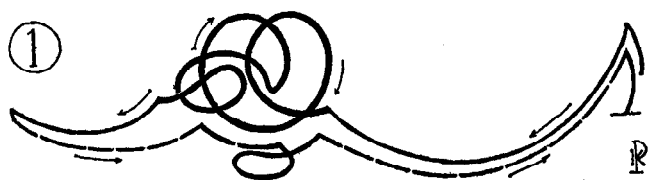
Example of a beautiful and intricate rhythm in tumbling. Back somersault into a bounding mat; followed by a back somersault, a full twister, and another "back," in mid-air, before the feet again touch the earth.

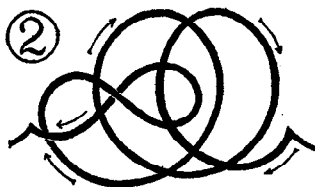
NUMBER 4

A "round-off back" followed by a full twister; on the tumbling mat.

Note:

With the "twister," the "pirouette," and the "round-off" is introduced movement in the third dimension, making a diagrammatic presentation of these "rhythms" unsatisfactory.





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A Foreword

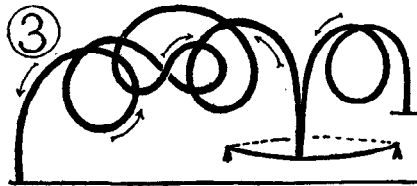
An editorial in *The Dial* (Chicago, March 1, 1911) contained one particular sentence that induced me to send post-haste a communication which was given space in the following issue. In sorting some old files I came upon the matter and determined to use it as an introductory passage to the present essay, the manuscript of which I had then just completed. In a way my, shall I say, elucidating, missive supplements the essay. It presents a phase which I had hoped to enlarge upon in the more extended presentation of the topic, but space limitations forbade. I make, therefore, my *Dial* communication a portal to the essay dealing with "the life lived and the art wrought" under the "Big Top."

To the Editor of "The Dial":

The editorial on "Stage Children" in your issue of March 1 was sane and pointed, and so of course I agree with its conclusions and commend its spirit. One sentence, however, which was clearly interjected, serves as an excuse for this communication. The editor disparages "a law which places trapeze tricks and Shakespearean fairies under the same ban."

And so, indeed, would I, though not as he would seem to. I take it that, as quoted above, "trapeze tricks" stands for the practice of the art of acrobatics and "Shakespearean fairies" stands for the practice of the histrionic art, and I for one should dislike to see subjected to the operation of the same laws or rules of criticism an art in the expression of which the mind of the practitioner is of necessity swayed and controlled by the very essence of rhythmic beauty to the exclusion of all else, and an art in the exercise of which even in its highest flights the thoughts of the practitioner may be far away in realms fair or foul, while in present word and gesture he reaches the consummation of the art. I say this to disparage no art; but consider, please, if it has no moral bearing. There is in the art of the acrobat not one sensation that induces to impurity in thought or act, not one ideal which is not lofty. One has no need to censor this work to determine if it be detrimental to the morals of the child actor or to the adult player or to the susceptible audience. As to the danger to life and limb, any active boy between 6 and 16 years of age takes more chances and runs greater risks of getting hurt than does the child acrobat. Restraint should be placed upon foolhardy acts as upon immoral plays, but not for the same reason. A fracture of a youthful limb, though not to be courted, is more easily healed and sooner forgotten than is the open sore which evil impressions leave upon the youthful mind. The life of the acrobat must necessarily be one of self-restraint; the child acrobat is reared with his father and mother and as they were, and the gaieties of life do not lure him. His work is glorified play to him, and it is not tainted with selfishness or vanity. . . . Please, Mr. Editor, do not disparage the purest and loftiest and most abstract of the arts of rhythmic motion or lightly place it under the ban.

I. K. P.



A Day Under the Big Top

ART—as measured by the span of the individual's life on earth—is long. However, as art is purely a human product it cannot outspan conscious human existence upon the planet. It did not antedate the first conscious expression of Self on the part of the first individual consciously to express himself and will cease to exist as art, with the last consciously-drawn breath of the last specimen of an expiring race—if not before.

This somewhat pessimistic phrase, “if not before,” is really an aside on the part of the sensitive artist—the idealist in beauty—who feels himself bewildered and swamped by an ever increasing tendency of the race and age toward mechanical production; toward so-called efficiency; toward standardized professionalism; toward individual and class activities under a banner inscribed “Service to Humanity,” “service” being mostly the cant term for the unloading of the individual's native or manufactured sentimentalism upon long-suffering society; toward trades unionism, debasing manhood and degrading the ideal. In such an atmosphere the sensitive artist feels that art cannot breathe, and such an atmosphere, he feels, is to envelop all the world and stifle all idealism; and if it does, art will have ceased to exist before the race itself shall have become extinct.

But art, though a human product, sends its roots and ramifications so far back into the past, into a past so far antedating the appearance of the human race upon the earth, that it is fair to assume that art will

endure while the race endures. Whether it does or not it is with us today and potent in our individual lives and worthy to be entertained at our spiritual and intellectual board; and if so entertained it will bring joy to the hearts of its hosts—for that is the supreme function of art—to irradiate life with joy. Other factors may be puissant in bringing happiness or in bringing pleasure; but art brings joy both to endeavor and to contemplation, and in dimming or extinguishing the flame of art one would truly be taking the joy out of life.

Let us in imagination penetrate to that remote past ere human consciousness or any animal consciousness had evolved, and let our souls sway in the rhythm of the universe. Let us enjoy from within the ecstasy of the creation; feel the systems detach themselves from the central incandescent mass and swing off into space; watch planets detach themselves from suns and find their orbits; watch chaos become order; watch systems co-ordinate and correlate and feel the swing, and the rhythm of the movement; watch the emergence of life upon the cooling planets and feel the rhythm of its cycles and changes; watch the emergence of mind from swinging, swaying, rhythmic masses of moving matter; feel what we call spirit issue from this striving and conflict, from this struggle toward co-ordination and correlation; this spirit which recognizes the difference between conflict and co-operation, between what is expedient and what is suicidal, between what at any particular moment is right and what is wrong; the spirit which reacts in joy to the perfect co-operation of mind and matter; a spirit inherent in the force which stirred, which was, the central incandescent mass—that mass which must have appeared to one on the outside as mere chaos but through which we within saw spirit striving to express itself in terms of sentient life.

It is the reaction of the spirit which determines the phases of art.

And now, having, at least in imagination, sensed something of that wonderful background of rhythmic movement which underlies the life of the artist, let us participate, for the brief span of a day, in the life lived and the art wrought in those mysterious spaces bounded beneath by Mother Earth and above by the "Big Top." When the proper moment arrives you and I will enter, not at the main portal with a crowd all eager for an exciting entertainment (nor under the tent wall as we did as boys), but through the "stage entrance" from the dressing compound in company with artists, adventurers in the quest of beauty.

In this day of organization and efficiency not all the interest centering about the big top lies in the art enacted therein. There is something in the almost magical appearance of the tented colony, with its billows of canvas gleaming in the morning light, upon the "lot" on which the rising sun saw no sign of life, that appeals to the imagination of even staid men of affairs. The presence of system, the absolute lack of confusion, the capital involved, appeal to captains of industry and make the circus an important matter on its purely business and administrative side. The methodical transportation and housing and feeding of hundreds, even thousands, of men and invaluable beasts is in itself an accomplishment of high order in the business world, meaning as it does so much of foresight, forethought, and sustained endeavor. But that phase I shall leave for others to present; it is the art, and the life lived in its cause, that is now uppermost in my mind and even now sending its tinglings through the veins and nerves of my body. Would that I might impart some of the spirit to my reader.

Let us for the moment be boys again in the old environment; only it was not environment when we were boys; it was surroundings. It is before the days of "railroad shows." All vehicles are horse drawn and the circus moves from town to town over the dusty or muddy and often not too well-kept country roads. The posters have been stuck up for some weeks and we boys have studied the contour of the back of "James Melville the Australian horseman" as he was pictured gracefully poised upon his flying steed. The curve of that back entranced us. The pictured lions and tigers and rhinosceri and hippopotami—these we took for granted—they were nature and nature in some form we saw every day—but that pose and the curve of that back! that was art! and art, living art, was what the eyes of our spirit were longing to see.

The morning of Circus day dawned and we were up betimes and out on the Dexter road to see the Show come in. But first we visited the circus lot and watched the engineers, who had arrived upon the scene very early in the morning, stake out the tents. They worked with a long tape line or a surveyor's chain establishing the site of the center pole as a base and stuck into the ground, wherever a stake was to be driven, a slender iron pin with an eye formed by a loop in which was tied a strip of bright red flannel. And while we were watching the surveyors the wagons, containing first the poles, then the stakes, and then the canvas, began to straggle in and the stake wagons circled the lot, dropping stakes of various sizes where they were needed, sometimes one, two, three, or more at a single point; smaller stakes to hold the supports of the tent walls, stouter to stay the great center pole. And then the gang of tent men, standing in a circle about the stake, got busy with their heavy sledges, the leader striking the first blow. Then

each of the half dozen men struck his blow in turn, the stake being driven home with a rhythmic succession of blows which it was a pleasure to deliver as it was to watch.

Within the outer circle were driven stakes to which to anchor the secondary or quarter poles so that the wind might not lift the big top from its moorings; and last—but not least to the heart of the boy—the stakes to which shall be made fast the guy lines that hold taut and level the frames from which are suspended the flying trapezes, the double trapeze, the flying rings, and the swinging ropes.

Having seen the stakes well placed, the canvas spread and laced and having, perhaps, seen the top elevated, we “skedaddled” as fast as our short legs would let us out to meet the real show which formed on the outskirts of the town, and marched in triumphal procession through the main thoroughfares and out to the circus lot. That was the early morning routine of the first circuses I remember. Later, as the shows became larger and better organized, the cook’s tent was the first one struck at night and the first one pitched on the new lot in the morning; and all the various functionaries of the show came to the lot in quick succession, partook of the morning meal, and went about the customary business of the day—whether it was pitching the tents, feeding the stock, or tending the animals. When the procession started it wended its way out of the tents, through the town, and back to the lot. But years have not robbed me of the delectation again and again experienced in going out to meet the show; in watching the gathering caravan as it straggled up to the rendezvous at Allen’s Creek, where horses were watered and wagons washed, and where the procession was formed as sleepy acrobats and retainers donned their uniforms, took

their places in the saddle or on the box, while the musicians slung the big drum into its brackets overhanging the back of the ornate and heavily gilded band-wagon, and the cavalcade started off in the morning sunshine, the elephants leading, toward town and the circus lot.

Somewhere, possibly, shows still are coming to town somewhat after the same manner and boys are experiencing the same sensations; but mostly now the hauls are longer and are made by train and the show, if met, has to be met at the railroad yard. This must take a bit of the glamor and romance out of it all; for a railroad comes from somewhere definitely marked on the map, while a show coming in over a country road comes right out of the land of pure imagination and vanishes as mysteriously as it came. Now, for us at least, the enviroing conditions have changed and I shall take up a consideration of those conditions after relating an incident or two which will serve to show to how remote an individual past my interest extends, and the stages through which I came to my understanding and appreciation of acrobatics as a fine art and one of the purest and most abstract means of self-expression.

While yet considerably under four years of age, with my brother, who was still younger, I watched from the vantage point of our front fence posts a circus which had pitched its single center-poled tent in full view on the common not far from our home. As a drawing-card an acrobat in very pink fleshings performed upon a rope drawn taut from the top of the center pole, outside the tent, to a stake in the ground. As a fall upon the yielding canvas of the tent would be fraught with comparatively little danger, the man, for really it was a man, performed with great abandon, doing things which to our childish and unsophisticated minds no mere man could possibly accomplish or even conceive. This

object, which to our mind's eye was a marvelous "super being" (the "super man" had not yet arrived), was of a color which up to that time we had seen only in the products of the meat market, and as it was shaped like a man we called it the "Meat-man"; and the mention of him today will awaken deep within us the "long, long, thoughts." No mere man, as it seemed to us then, could have possessed the grace, daring, and agility of that creature; and as I witness certain performances now-a-days, even in the light of my own experience, I am inclined to the same opinion concerning their authors; though I know now that they are men like unto us, or such as we would be were our bodies, like theirs, subtle and responsive and in every nerve and fiber as "tender to the spirit touch" as are the finger-tips of a violin virtuoso.

Shortly after the "apparition" of the "Meat-man" our next-door neighbor's hired man, who was said to have "been with the circus," gave a performance on a slack rope slung from opposite sides of a spacious wood shed. My impression was, and still is, that, throwing one leg over the rope, which he engaged in the bend of the knee, the man executed with his body a series of revolutions, the centrifugal and tangential force of which caused any point on the rope to describe continuously and rapidly a full circle. Whether or not the impression was correct (and the best of the aerialists have since told me that it was not, but that what I saw was a turn at each end of a rapid pendulum-like swing), these two performances, that of the "Meat-man," whom I regarded as an abstract being unrelated to human life, and that of the hired man, whom I knew to be real everyday flesh and blood, inspired me, and in a short time I had a trapeze of my own contriving suspended over a manure heap from a spar thrust out from

the roof of our barn; and there before the age of five I had begun those exercises in the air which eliminated all sense of fear of altitudes, if ever any had been latent within me, and gave me a self-reliance which has contributed to a practical as well as aesthetic advantage. In me was instilled the confidence which permitted me to walk, as I have many a time in supervising construction, the narrow flange of a twelve-inch I-beam two hundred feet in the air—with a chance to fall the entire distance; or to stand upon my head on a perch about eighteen inches in diameter with a clear fall of one hundred and fifty feet beneath me—as it has been recorded in print that I did in my thirteenth year. "But then," the chronicler goes on to say, "he was always regarded as a harum-scarum sort of chap and had his full share of hair-breadth escapes." And looking back on it from today I really think I had—and, in both senses, I am glad not to have missed one.

In all those earlier doings there seems more of "self-expression" than of conscious "art." Psychology had not as yet correlated the two. Although my father was a writer of ability and of a poetic temperament, a printer with fine taste and skill, and a maker and lover of beautiful books; and although my mother had done some drawing and fancy work, and her sister had published a novel and had taught painting, yet art as we conceive it now—certainly as I conceive it—was not highly appraised in my family nor generally accredited in the life of the day. As touching my physical activities, my mother thought my antics, some at least, were "showing off"; my father thought them dangerous. After I had had a fall, some time after my middle 'teens, spraining both wrists, a fall due to a swaying frame or a gust of wind, or perhaps to a miscalculation on my part, my father cut down the frame which held

my double trapeze. I still remember my sensation as I passed, head downward, the swinging bar which I had missed in my flight, and the quick realization I had of the necessity for making a half turn in the air to save my neck. I made the turn and struck the ground in a sitting position far wide of the mattress; but I experienced at the same time a far more pleasing sensation, that which comes from consciously introducing an unpremeditated rhythm into a movement in mid-air.

I make no apology for including herein, as I do now and shall again later on, a brief reference to my relations to, and participation in, certain of the arts. For I am writing out of experience; and without that experience I should be able only to theorize and could not speak as one having first-hand knowledge. It is because I have that knowledge that studios have opened their doors to me and my friends of the circus welcome me to the dressing compound and invite my presence under the big top during the precious practice hour.

When I left high school I was just as well prepared to enter the acrobatic profession as I was to enter college. I knew and had combined in fair form the elements of tumbling, had worked, or played rather, on the trapeze, on the horizontal bar, and on the rings. I had done double somersaults from the springboard; and have kept up an active participation in acrobatics, especially in tumbling and juggling, even to this day. As to other of the arts: I once knew something of music and, having a fairly accurate sense of time and rhythm, drummed in my college orchestra. (My drum, the first used in a University of Michigan orchestra, rests unstrung and silent in the Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments in Ann Arbor.) I have a working acquaintance with brush and pencil; while drawings from my pen have been reproduced at home and abroad. In

groping toward a means of "self-expression" I studied the manners and methods of the great actors of my early youth and learned many Shakespearean parts. (Edwin Booth was the first actor I ever saw in a theater, and "Hamlet" the first play.) I have strutted my bit upon the amateur stage; my attitude toward the art, if such it may be called, was now and then misinterpreted and more than once I was offered professional engagements. One offer might have looked tempting had I not already become thoroughly convinced of the futility and essential triviality of the stage as a life work. For nearly forty-five years I have been engaged in the practice of architecture with results, it is said, not wholly devoid of distinction; and during these years I have written and published to a considerable extent.

Now, I am saying all this not in the least to magnify my slight accomplishment—no one knows better than I how slight it is—but, having, on numerous occasions, included acrobatics in the realm of the fine arts—to the distress of some, to the amusement, not to say amazement, of others, though to the entire satisfaction of the elect—I am saying these things that, when I speak of the art of acrobatics in conjunction with these other arts, my readers may feel that I quite fully realize what the practice of these arts involves and that I have some background of knowledge and experience against which to project my opinions.

Before undertaking a study of acrobatic performances as embracing an art expression, and the attitude of the acrobat toward his art, let me trace rapidly the development of the circus from the one-ringed, one center-poled affair of our boyhood to that with the present monster tent accommodating from ten to fifteen thousand spectators and displaying its wares in three rings and upon four platforms or stages.

In the days of my early youth society in America was more or less Puritanical in its outlook on life; and art as touching pleasure or entertainment was below par. The circus proper was taboo generally, as it is in the Methodist Episcopal Church today. To attend the circus was to sin, as was to dance, play cards, or attend horse races. Of course there was an element in society which enjoyed indulging in such sin—the wide popularity of these forms of amusement attested that. But the circus, in order to appeal to the generality, must needs combine with itself an accredited moral element such as the menagerie. There were menageries, like "Van Amburg's Great Moral Show," which traveled without circus accompaniment. (Once when I was attending an evening performance of this show the tent collapsed in a hurricane. You know that moral qualities in a man or a thing do not necessarily insure him or it against the devastating action of the elements!) To accommodate the circus and the "moral" ingredient the tent was arranged to provide for the cages along the wall, leaving a space for the public between the cages and the back of the tier of seats or benches which encircled the ring. This arrangement brought the audience in close touch with the ring performance, made the show more intimate, and made possible what was then one of the great attractions, the acrobatic talking clown. Dan Rice, of Dan Rice's Circus, was one of the foremost exemplars of this popular type. Those who loved acrobatics and beautiful horsemanship, and could ignore the trend of pious opinion, got full satisfaction in such shows as J. B. Lent's New York Circus, which had no menagerie accompaniment and furnished no street parade. There the art was shown in the purity of its abstraction.

The introduction of a second center pole cleared the ring of obstructions and made it possible to hang the frame of the flying trapezes, and with that the trapeze act began to develop in importance and in characteristic beauty. In the early days the ring was always plowed and an embankment of earth thrown up about it. The surface was raked smooth and rolled and a thin layer of tan bark spread upon it. This, with a carpet over it, formed a perfect mat for the tumblers and ground acrobats, while the footing for the horses against the earth embankment was much surer and more normal than that furnished by the present-day level ring with its more formal border, built up in wooden segments which are clamped in place. When the circus shows on a sunbaked city lot, or in a great building, which latter it generally does at the beginning of the season, it covers the entire area of the rings and surrounding track with fresh earth spread with sawdust or fine shavings. Thus the performer feels always after a fashion in intimate touch with Mother Earth, whence comes his strength and inspiration.

Somehow the morals of the menagerie and the art of the circus did not long remain on intimate terms; they soon were divorced and each came to dwell in its own particular tent, the menagerie taking along with itself for company the museum freaks. Joe Warner, onetime mayor of Lansing, Michigan, was one of the first, if not the first, to effect a further separation and he started on the road with a show under three canvases sheltering respectively, the museum, the menagerie, and the circus. Later the museum idea was generally abandoned, and the side show, holding a concession from the main show, took the freaks and their tent and charged an extra entrance fee. It is only when the show starts the season in a permanent building in some

large city that the museum is merged with the menagerie. On the road they are separate entities.

What with enlarging tents and multiplying attractions correspondingly, rings and stages increased in number so that now the limit seems to have been reached if not exceeded. For the benefit of the uninitiated I may say that, as nearly as possible, similar performances are going on in the rings, or on the stages, simultaneously, so that a spectator sees a sample of each sort by keeping his eye on one ring and one stage. When a principal act is on, attention is directed to it and all other acts cease. However, at that, the large six or seven center-poled tent makes it impossible to view from the ends an act in the center ring; and, as the "big" acts generally are there or on the neighboring stages, this is unfortunate.

With the shows of today, no matter how important may be the menagerie feature, the animal tent is in reality but the vestibule to the big top, as by this time you may have guessed the circus tent proper is called. With the exception of the elephants, and now and then some individual specimen, the performing animals are kept in cages out in the dressing compound, in the environs of which absorbingly interesting center of circus activity we now find ourselves.

In order to avoid the curious throng of sightseers who crowd the entrance from the outside world, and to enter expeditiously, we slip in quietly and unobserved where the wall of the compound meets that of the big top. We come unexpectedly upon a bunch of colored canvasmen and attachés (technically known as "Rough-necks"), with fists full of money, shooting craps. We pass unheeded and the compound opens up before us. On the right is the stage entrance blocked off with a curtain, on the left are one or two baggage wagons

which shield the crap players from sight and sound; then two or three small tents, with flies before them sheltering a sitting porch where the occupants receive their friends, do fancy work, read, and write their letters. The occupants of these small tents, of which there are sometimes a half-dozen in the compound, are star performers with their families, or families of stars. If the stay is for some days these tents are made homelike with the lares and penates brought from the Pullmans in which the performers, as well as others of the staff, live, each in his own individual quarters, while the show is on the road, and where most of them sleep even during the few-day stands; all except the few stars who go to hotels.

Over across the compound is a somewhat larger individual dressing tent occupied by the troupe of dwarf clowns and for storing all their elaborate paraphernalia. Next to that is the homelike tent of the "Leading Lady Gymnast of the World," and if we were to stop a moment she would graciously insist that we drop into easy chairs, make ourselves comfortable, and, if time served, watch the procession form for the grand entrée. But there is too much to see today and we must forego the pleasure of any extended visit with the fair and altogether charming aerialists and equestriennes, and with their husbands and brothers and fathers and mothers, for the whole family is here, all except a few of the older children who are off at school or college, if it be early or late in the season, but who may be visiting their parents with the show if it is vacation time; for not all the children born of circus parents follow the profession, though we shall see one or two of the fourth generation of circus folk as we pass through the compound. We may meet other than circus people in the compound; we may meet other visitors, whose

vision, possibly, is not so keenly penetrative as our own. These are professional writers, painters, and photographers all intent on gathering material with "local color"; all with minds and eyes fixed upon externals; all oblivious to the fundamental spiritual fact for the presentation and interpretation of which, alone, these absorbing externals exist; all supremely unconscious of "the part for which the whole is made."

On beyond the individual tents first sighted is the doctor's tent, for he, with his remedies and bandages, is not infrequently in demand; and there flanking the doctor stand the cages of wild animal actors, the lions, the tigers, the leopards, the polar bears, the seals; and there stand the wise old elephants which, when the time comes, are to push the animal cages into the arena. Behind the cages, but still within the compound, are some fantastic vehicles which will appear in the "tournament," as the opening procession around the track is called;—and some broken-down or rather "broken-in" automobiles, and the fire engines and patrol wagons, which will augment the clown acts. The compound is the nerve-center of the circus. Between the trained animal cages and the wardrobe wagons a wide space marks the main avenue of approach from the outside. Here the comparatively few visitors enter; here the crowd of sightseers stands and gapes; and here enter the performing horses, when they are led over from the horse tents, where the tenderest of care is lavished upon them.

We will glance out of the compound just long enough to note the array of canvases beyond. The tents for the performing horses, the tent for the performing dogs, the tents for the draft-horses, and last but not least, or perhaps I should say first but not least, the cook's tent, where twelve hundred persons are served at a meal.

Perhaps we shall be asked to dine in the cook's tent. If so we shall accept and enjoy an added experience. In the cook's tent we are inducted into the larger family life of the circus and may note the general good-fellowship which prevails. The conversation strikes us as that of the domestic board rather than of the club table. Another thing we note with pleasure; we are not in a bunch of competitors, but in a circle of friends where no jealousy exists and where each takes a kindly interest in the successes and achievements of his co-workers. This is the atmosphere of the cook's tent, of the compound, and of the big top. The performer has in view only the achievement of beauty—never the desire to win or overcome; this conception of the ideal marks the wide distinction between acrobatics and athletics, respectively the poetry and the prose of physical endeavor.

There are other wagons which we note as we refocus our gaze upon the details of the compound. These nearest are presided over by the mistress of the wardrobe—and that other, just beyond the entrance to the big dressing tent—dare I expose the secrets of the charnal house?—that other is the dressing-room of a man who appears during his extremely popular act clad in feminine garb and widely advertised as a woman. He couldn't dress with the women, of course, and if he were to make up for his act in the men's tent he would have the life "ragged" out of him. So he retires to his wagon fortress, the doors of which are guarded by the maid-in-waiting (his wife), who takes his wraps at the ring side and daintily restores them to his shoulders when his act is done. The principal bareback act in a large circus other than the one we are now visiting is performed by a man masquerading as a woman. His is a clever act and he has no need to resort to this means

of gaining approbation. I can understand that a boy might don female raiment as a joke; but I cannot in the least comprehend a man's willingness seriously to create and maintain the illusion of being a woman. Such a demonstration degrades rather than exalts an art. There is a male performer in the dressing tent we are about to enter, who appears in the ring in a blonde wig and the costume of a woman of the ballet. He deceives no one, for more than a moment at most, and at the conclusion of his turn removes his wig and gives the spectators his own sweet, manly smile. We may miss him in the dressing tent, so I shall picture him to you now.

When Giuseppe Bignoli Di Bagonghi and I stand erect, side by side, my down-extended fingers will scarce reach the top of his head. Joe Bagonghi or simply "Joe," as his friends call him "for short" to correspond with his diminished stature, is a rare acrobat and does a comedy bareback act in the center ring. Stunted in body he is big in heart and understanding. I wish we might meet him that together we might fall under the spell of his gentle voice and sweet smile. He has a wonderful comedy sense and a well-developed sense of humor which can include himself. He asks no sympathy though mine pours out to him; and I think he rather sympathizes with that one of us who has acrobatic leanings—sympathizes with him because of the handicap of size and weight under which he always has labored and the handicap of age which is being laid surely and insidiously upon him. However, the handicap of age may be laid on Joe Bagonghi himself. I wager he accepts it with gentle philosophy and a smile.

Let us peep for a moment into the interior of the dressing tent. It is a canvas of considerable magnitude for hundreds of performers, men and women, are shel-

tered by its ample top. The entrance giving upon the compound is just off the center of the long side. From this entrance there extends across the tent on the short axis a space a few yards wide walled in on either side with canvas. This forms a common meeting ground for the sexes. Beyond the wall at the right is the woman's dressing-room, as it is called, and at the left, the men's. A bugle has just sounded, the band begins to play, and the procession leaves the compound through the stage entrance, so we shall miss in the dressing tent the presence of all the clowns and those performers who are taking part in the tournament. This leaves the tent more free for our inspection.

A few star performers, who are relieved by the terms of their contract from participating in the tournament, are sitting on their trunks or are reclining in easy camp chairs, reading or conversing. We are invited to sit, which we do, and chat while letting our eyes take in the surroundings. We note the orderliness which prevails. Along the center of the aisles which parallel the shorter axis, are innumerable pails of fresh water for the scrub-down which follows each turn. Each performer has a particular space allotted to him for the season and when he comes into the tent on a new site he finds his trunk in its proper location, placed there by the baggage man. A tall iron rod is driven into the ground beside each trunk and on its branching arms are hung the make-up mirrors, the street clothes, and personal belongings of the performer. Now suddenly all is bustle and activity. The procession has returned to the compound. The fantastic garments are being laid aside, and the performers are donning their tights and preparing for their "turns." Your ear catches a snatch of song and bandied words. Your eye notes the leisurely application of grease-paint and make-up,

and catches a glint of color and the glitter of spangles. But there is no evidence of haste; all is moving with the artist's deliberation and sureness of touch; no call boys—no hurry up calls! Indeed you may be engaged in leisurely conversation unconscious of externals when one of your companions remarks apologetically: "Will you kindly excuse us now? I'm sorry but that is the music for the perch act; we're on next."

Let us enter the big top with these two men with whom we have been conversing, two gentle, restrained, and quiet-spoken men of the third generation of circus folk, and watch their performance and marvel at it, as I tell you something of what I have learned of it, some of it from their own lips. They mount, one to a perch, the other to a trapeze over the center ring. The location marks this as a principal act. Beneath the frame an ample net is stretched so that you may watch the performance without nervous strain as seldom one falls and, with the net, the probability of a serious termination to a fall is minimized; with these men I should say it was all but eliminated as they have reduced the art of falling to perfection. You watch them doing their fly-aways, somersaults, twisters, and pirouettes or spins in the air, catches and returns—all executed with perfection of form, all expressions of ideal and abstract beauty—while I describe as well as I can in words the turn with which Ernest Clarke and his brother Charles conclude their act. Charles is pendent, head downward, from a rhythmically swinging trapeze some yards away from and facing his brother. At a signal from Charles, Ernest, who is poised on the distant perch, attuning himself to the rhythm, grasps with both hands the bar of his trapeze, which moves through a longer arc than does that of his brother, and, with a vigorous, initial movement, makes a rapid swing at the

end of which he leaves his bar, makes two complete backward revolutions in the air, that is, throws a double back somersault, follows with a pirouette or full turn on a vertical axis at right angles to the axis of the somersaults, and catches, and is caught by, his brother who returns him with a pirouette to the bar and thence to the perch or pedestal from which he started: and this without a break in the complex and synchronized rhythm of the factors in this entrancing equation of movement (see Diagram 1).

This act appears to be, and generally though erroneously is announced as, "two somersaults and a twister" (Diagram 2); but really it is more difficult of accomplishment even than that, involving as it does a more complicated rhythm. A twister is a turn in two directions and on two axes at one and the same time, and in conjunction with a somersault merely involves a continuity, though with a thematic variation, of the original movement. The pirouette, or spin upon a vertical axis, means, as you will readily perceive, the introduction and harmonizing of an entirely new rhythm. These movements, the twister and the pirouette, involve the third dimension; and I know from personal experience, as well as from contact with the artists, that transition into the third dimension and the accomplishment of a rhythm in the three dimensions of space induce a joy akin to ecstasy. What would a fourth dimension not mean to an acrobat!

Now, an act such as just described does not come all at once full blown and perfect out of a clear sky, but its final accomplishment involves travail of spirit and a discipline of mind and body almost beyond belief. But before I speak of that let me call your attention to the fact that in the performance you have just witnessed you have seen no third party grasp the trapeze which

the performer left swinging free in air, and, at the opportune moment, return it to him. You have, quite otherwise, seen the trapeze come back, as it were, of its own volition, to the point at which it may conveniently be grasped when the performer is returned to it by his partner. This fact creates a distinction between this and the performance of any other troupe of aerialists you have seen on this side of the Atlantic or that you have seen anywhere in recent years. It marks this act as of a superior type. The appearance of that free swinging bar at the right place, at the right time, is bound up with that domination of the spirit over mind and body and inert matter at which I have hinted and of which I shall now speak more fully. In it is involved the pendulum movement of the trapezes, their radii, and the length of the arcs through which they must swing, the synchronism, rhythm, and speed of the movement and the manner and force in and with which the performer leaves the bar when he makes his turn in air. These are the physical factors which through spiritual direction will receive correlation and co-ordination. Let us remember that the net is underneath the performer and, too, that no mechanical means for keeping the body from falling can be used in working up an act of this character.

Now we are again in the dressing tent—or at table in the cook's tent. "Ernie," I make bold to say, for he is "Ernie" to his friends, and no one knows him who is not his friend, "you must have had a few falls into the net before you got that trick to perfection. Five hundred, say?" "Well," he answers quietly, "five hundred would hardly be a circumstance. We tried that at every rehearsal for a year, and no fewer than ten times at any rehearsal, before ever our hands came together" (and every try meant a drop into the net).

"Then we caught and held, and in three and one-half years more—four and a half years in all—longer than a college course—we reached the point where we thought we would be justified in letting the public see the act."

Think of it, you people who, comfortably disposed in your studios and libraries, are writing essays, painting pictures, modeling figures, learning pieces on the piano or on the fiddle for the edification of the public and gratification of self—think of it! more than two thousand falls, fraught with danger, into the net before the hands of the two performers came together; and then three and a half years involving many hundred failures before patience and endurance, courage and determination, had mastered the order and rhythm out of which came an act of transcending beauty so approximately perfect in execution that its authors could conscientiously submit it to the consideration of a highly critical though equally uncomprehending public.

We get something more than a good dinner out of this visit to the cook's tent, we get food for thought as well. In contemplative mood we go to the horse tent with our guide, a star equestrian, down on the bills as "the world's greatest champion bareback somersault rider."

(My! A string of them crowds my memory—The Melvilles, Dan Rice, the Robinsons, Charlie Fish [perhaps the most brilliant and daring of the throng], and later the St. Leons, the Hannefords, the Davenport—not to omit, in this day of feminine ascendancy, Rosa Rosamund and May of the Wirths—but gentle, mild-mannered Percy Clarke, our guide, in charm of finished artistry is peer of them all.)

Some new horses are to be broken in, and a new trick is to be practiced, so we go in again under the big top; our escort gets us chairs from the stands and we

draw up with a little party at the side of the ring. The "champion" takes a horse and devotes himself to it and to the young daughter of the head of the "Wild West Show," which has but a short hour since finished its after-the-circus performance on the track. The young miss is at boarding-school in the East, but she is spending her vacation period with the circus and is learning the fine art of equestrianism—and at the hands of a past master. Every ungraceful motion, every constrained movement, is ironed out—not with the rod but by example and encouragement.

But we direct our attention otherwheres for Ernest Clarke who, with his brothers, rides as well as he does the trapeze, is going to try to throw a forward somersault from the ground alighting on the back of a running horse. He is using the mechanic now that he may not get a fall, for the performers take no unnecessary risks in practice. He essays the turn once or twice. Turning to the fair neighbor on my right I say, "Now, if I were doing that I should take off so and so." To which she responds, "I think you are right; why don't you speak to Ernie?" "He'd like my nerve! giving advice to a man of his standing!" "Oh, he wouldn't mind. We're all glad to get suggestions. You know I am a rider. I was one of the Hodgenis." "I know," I say, "that you are one of the 'riding Rooneys'" (this in contradistinction to the "flying Rooneys" of the double trapeze), "but I did not know that you were a Hodgeni. I know your family's act very well." "Yes, I was a Hodgeni," and she spoke with a pride of family which would have done credit to a Cabot or a Lowell. And there on the track was her husband, the other "riding Rooney," trying out a beautiful horse. The two Rooneys, brothers, and their wives, were doing a graceful riding act with the show while the Clarkes, three

brothers, assisted by a clever partner, were performing simultaneously in another ring. This will give a bit of an idea of family participation in the life which the circus not only permits of but almost demands.

Having, as I have said, drummed in an orchestra, where the results of an ill-timed stroke would be unpleasant, I know something about "concerted movement," "precision of attack," and such matters as affecting chamber music and orchestral performances. And along that line in another art let us glance at what the Picchianis are doing with their practice hour on the stage which is in full view of our seats by the ring-side. This troupe of acrobats, six or eight in number, uses the teter-board in its act. It would seem unnecessary to go into the mechanics of the teter-board. You all have "see-sawed" upon it in your youth, and you know how a heavier weight suddenly applied to one end will send skyward a lighter weight resting on the end opposite. That is the principle applied in the act we are now about to witness in rehearsal. A mechanic is being used, so we shall see no man hurt by falling to the floor, though we may see a human pyramid crumble. The "mechanic," roughly speaking, is a rope run through a block at the top of the tent with one end attached to a belt around the waist of the performer and the other held by an assistant, leaving the rope slack so as not to interfere with the movements of the acrobat; though should he miss the turn the rope is drawn taut, preventing a fall to the ground. Notice that three of the men are standing "three high"; that is, one man stands upon the ground, a second has mounted lightly to his shoulders, and a third to the shoulders of the second. They are, named in the order in which they stand, the "understander," that is the man on the ground; the next above is the

"middleman," and the third, or one at the top, is the "top mounter." In a moment, and after this manner, the third man will become a second "middleman," and the fourth, then the "top mounter," will be added. Watch this, it is interesting. The men standing "three high" are about a yard from the grounded end of the teter-board upon which the fourth man is standing poised, alert, with his back to the three, though the four are facing in the same direction. A fifth mounts to a pedestal or perch about ten feet above the ground facing his companions in the act. At a signal he jumps straight downward, landing with all his force upon the tilted-up end of the teter-board. Simultaneously with his impact number four rises like a human arrow, does a back somersault at the top of the rise, and lands with his feet upon the shoulders of the third man—and there they stand "four high."

I shall not take time to give further details of the Picchiani performance—beautiful and interesting as it is; I shall only remark that in no musical performance, whether by trios, quartets, or full orchestras, is there required or often achieved such concerted action, such precision of attack, such flow of mental rhythm, and, I was about to say, such manifest spiritual quality, as is present in the act which we have just witnessed on this stage under the big top; nor does that absolutely perfect judgment of interrelated time and space, so necessary to the consummation of this act, as of all the others we have witnessed, in the least inhere in any musical performance; and we are fortunate in witnessing these acts in rehearsal where we can study them intimately, as would not be possible during the confusion and excitement of a regular exhibition.

Now, these performances on the flying and double trapezes, on horseback, and with the teter-board, not to

mention countless others (see Diagram 3), which it will take us more than one day under the big top to study and spiritually and mentally to digest, require technical perfection in their execution, and spiritual qualities in the performers, beyond the demands of any or all other of the arts; for life and limb are involved as well as pride of profession and of artistic accomplishment. Not only are these performers fine technicians, they are creative artists of a rare type. No theatrical "illusion of the first time" need envelop their performances; each individual act is a new creation—is a new birth. I am aware that this statement, as regards creativity, may be challenged; but not by one who, besides being temperamentally and physically equipped, has had personal experience of the art. Such a one well knows that each and every turn successfully and artistically accomplished—and no turn is successful if it be not artistic—is a new adventure, a new act of creation, even though it may have been performed one thousand times before. No somersault thrown is a copy of the ones done previously. The same mental attitude, the same power of co-ordination, the same rhythmic impulse, the same fine frenzy, are all present in the last, as in the first, and as in all intermediate perfected accomplishments. That does not hold in painting, in sculpture, in architecture, in literature, nor in musical composition; a thing in these arts once done is done once and for all and never will come again in response to the call of creative impulse. Whatever is done a second time in these arts, whether by the originator himself or by another, is merely a lifeless copy, not a living creation.

Underlying all these beautiful movements in tumbling, in juggling, and in mid-air is "feeling"—intense emotionalism controlled by the mathematics of the mind. I am using mathematics as applied to aesthetics

in its true spiritual meaning and not in the vulgar, mechanical sense in which it is applied by Dynamic-symmetrists, Ad-quadratumites, and those other mechanistic minds who would make all aesthetic expression in the plastic and graphic arts depend upon a previously constructed framework of geometry; whether of squares, rectangles, triangles, revolving diagonals, or arcs, or any or all in combination. Undoubtedly a sufficiently learned and practiced mathematician, given all the factors of the equation, and they are multitudinous to a degree, could plot the curve of the center of gravity of the acrobat's body as it traverses its beautiful path in space; and this conceivably might be done before, or after, the fact. But woe betide the individual, acrobat or other, who should attempt to achieve the "turn" by following the mathematical formula. The first attempt would never be followed by a second. If the victim of the mathematical fallacy were to survive to essay another "turn" he would call upon experience, instinct, and "feeling" rather than upon abstract mathematics. It is when brought into contact with a living art like acrobatics that these geometric and dynamic theories of design find themselves so palpably reduced to rank absurdity; as they do, also, when applied to architecture of other than the copy-plate type.

And now a word as to the music which strikes up as the procession leaves the compound for the big top at the beginning of the show and never ceases, except for a moment or so, until, at the conclusion, the last performer has vanished through the stage entrance. The silent moment is that during which some exceptional act, such as the Clarke or the Picchiani turns which I have described, holds the boards. Then the mental rhythm of the performer must not be disturbed even by delectable strains of music. The circus band

is a well-trained organization of talented musicians who discourse really excellent music. Until the tent assumed its present huge dimensions one never heard under its top the steam-calliope, or the electric piano, which were designed originally as features of the street parade, but which later were requisitioned to relieve the overworked bandsmen; though their strident and, to me, distracting tones are in evidence only during the vivacious acts—never in the dreamy music which accompanies “turns” in the air. Circus music, unlike the music of the dance, never synchronizes with the movements of the body; that would be impossible when various acts, of varied sorts, on varied apparatus are in progress at one and the same time, as is so frequently the case under the big top. Each separate sort of act has its own distinguishing musical accompaniment differentiated as to theme, tempo, and rhythm. The bracing and inspiring roll of the snare drum accompanies the head slide on the inclined wire from the top of the tent—the monotonous boom of the bass drum marks the progress of some turn in air where strength and endurance are being displayed to the accompaniment of skill. Circus music is the music of mood and the mood is quite of as much importance to the spectator as to the performer through whose brain is running the spiritual rhythm of his particular act, and to whom the music is but a harmonizing background.

It has been intimated to me, now and then, that there is nothing new to see at the circus; that if you have seen one you have seen them all. The person who says that has never seen, really and truly seen, anything at the circus. What, by the way, has he seen at the annual art exhibitions? The same old landscapes, the same old nudes, the same old painting of draperies, the same old attempts at allegory and symbolism?

However, an impression exists that all this is new each year to him who has the seeing eye. And what is new in architecture? Here I grant with sorrow that people of fine discrimination are aware that architecture in general is tending more and more to the copy-plate type, and that, except in rare instances, creation in architecture, and the power to create, are very mildly in evidence.

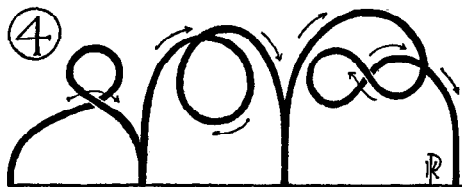
What with the regular performances, the rehearsals, checking up the apparatus, and so on, the performers have comparatively little leisure time; and this is spent in accordance with the nature and taste of the individual. Some visit places of interest, if the town affords them; some read, others rest. I have visited the galleries of the Art Institute with a friend of the circus and found him to be a careful observer and able critic. The minds of the circus people are not stagnant. Many of them have made protracted stays in many countries of the globe and have kept their eyes open. I have seen some clever designs in pen and ink being executed in the dressing tent; while fancy work for the home, costumes for themselves and their men, and the care of the children engage the leisure time of the circus women. One highly endowed specimen of physical womanhood, with no mean intellectual equipment, we saw in the ring with her husband's troupe of "ground and lofty" tumblers. Although she is of the third generation of circus folk, married to a husband of old circus stock, the strain skipped the son, who now is a student in Columbia; while a nephew and two nieces also of circus stock are preparing to enter the university at Madison. The sons and daughters of acrobats of high ideals and accomplishment are not forced into the life nor, I might say, are they advised to follow it unless they show special aptitude and manifest a strong desire.

But we were going to study such manifestation of a life and expression of art as we might be able to in a "day under the 'Big Top,'" and so we will not follow our circus friends at this time into their homes nor seek out their lives beyond the borders of the circus lot.

No one, I imagine, after reading the foregoing, will be inclined to ask a question that has been put to me more than once, namely: how is it that a distinguished architect should have or seek friends among the circus folk? My answer always has been: I, a "distinguished" architect, if you will, have acquired friendships among artists of distinction in all branches of art, because of my interest in them and their work. Among my friends are numbered the most talented of the painters and sculptors of our land; and so, too, with composers and with writers of prose and of poetry. Many architects, of course, including the most distinguished, are in the category of my friends. These arts and their practitioners occupy a space in my artistic life but do not fill it.—Down deep in me, as in many another, is that love of rhythm, that love of something which must find expression through the mental, spiritual, and bodily fibers of my being; a love of order and of mental, spiritual, and physical co-ordination and correlation; a love which banishes fear and makes the body a willing and eager tool of the spirit; which engenders courage and begets poise of body and mind; and a joyous ecstasy in perfect accomplishment.

Some men, I realize, even young men, youths, are content with other, I think lesser, ideals. I get a bit of amusement when I read on the "sporting page" that some young male person has won a golf championship! Can that satisfy full-blooded youth? I appreciate that not all boys have the acrobatic sense, that not all boys or girls can be or become acrobats. Fate laid

upon many of them in infancy, or before, the icy hand of fear and the disqualifying touch of age. For one who never was young and for one who cannot overcome fear, there is no such thing as indulging in manly sports and activities. For fear and age dread danger; and the element of danger inheres in all manly sports and has since the birth of the race. Sports and activities are not to be avoided because of danger and risk involved but are to be entered into with zest and skill and judgment that, risk and danger overcome, spirit and body may rise triumphant. How wonderful for a joyous existence that we have an art, which, while we see its finest exemplification under the big top, any normal human being can in a measure enjoy in practice—acrobatics—an art which calls forth high qualities of virtue, such as courage, consideration, firmness, gentleness, judgment; and high ideals, such as a passion for beauty, and a love of that perfection of achievement through which alone can beauty reach its fullest and most radiant expression.



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