

## Terror! Terror!

I'll never forget that day as long as I live! It was July 6, 1944. The sun was shining brightly, reflecting the glee of anticipation within me. I was going to the circus. Not an ordinary, small-town affair that you see in pictures, but one with a big top, hundreds of huge animals, and a large grandstand. A youngster of six years, accompanied by my mother, I was on my way to see the celebrated Barnum and Bailey Circus.

I recall my thoughts as we entered the huge tent. How anxious I was to see that circus! Later would come the joy of relating the episode to my friends. Little did I know of the crisis soon to occur.

Today my recollections of the elaborate circus events are hazy. However, from the conclusion of the trapeze artist's act to the termination of that never-to-be forgotten day, my memories are extremely vivid.

At first I was entranced by the glamorous world of circus life. I entered it through a maze of cages and meaningless tents. All around me there were people staring, pointing, and laughing. I was entering a world about which I knew nothing, and to some extent I was frightened.

As I wandered about among the different cages, I was amazed that I recognized so many animals and was equally fascinated that many more were completely new to me. This was only the beginning, as one by one I entered the many large tents surrounding me. Each tent was completely new to me, and each contained sights I had never seen before. In the first tent I

entered I saw the trapeze securely fastened and the tightrope across which I could all but imagine people walking. Among the maze of seats which confronted me, several men were selling cotton candy and soda, and peanuts to feed to the elephants.

Leaving the second tent, I walked towards the Big Top. This being the largest of all the tents, I could only imagine the great thrills in store for me. When I finally entered, I was certain that all my dreams had been fulfilled. Facing me were virtually thousands of seats and countless people wandering about. Soon I was seated in full view of the arena, impatiently waiting for the show to begin. Suddenly it did begin, with a roar I thought would deafen me. Animals were parading in front of me pulling the most beautiful floats I had ever seen. Clowns were running around in such a way that made it virtually impossible to keep from laughing. As I made myself comfortable in my seat, I began to picture how jealous my friends would be when I related my story to them.

Suddenly my thoughts were shifted to reality by a tremendous flash of light followed by a loud crackling of fire. And then the nightmare began! Yes, this was the shocking Circus Fire of '44 about which many people, tucked securely in their homes, read. Although they thought they knew of the horror that accompanied the injuries and loss of life, only the figures in this real drama of human slaughter could possibly conceive the pain, horror, anxiety, and despair which accompanied this tragedy.

Terror! Terror! Terror! People throwing children into

waiting arms, chairs tumbling down through the grandstands, shouts, screams, cries, animals prancing madly in their cages; people racing, falling, pulling, pushing, dragging, crawling, crying--these things drew me further into my world of fright as I groped towards safety, the rush and roar of the fire following close behind. I made it.

Out in the panic-stricken crowd, away from the danger of death, my fears began to mount. Where was my mother? I can only remember running frantically about searching for the person whose presence meant so much to me. Nowhere in the turmoil could I find her. It seemed as though there were thousands of people included in this turmoil of fire engines and ambulances filled with injured people. At this point the effects of shock seized me and I lost consciousness.

I was taken by two strangers to a drugstore. They found my telephone number in my wallet and called my father. I suppose that he came to the designated meeting place immediately, for my next fleeting recollection is that of my father and me searching desperately for my mother. Finally she was found, badly hurt, and was rushed to the hospital. Although she had been suffering from third degree burns, she had continued her quest for me.

Her survival was a greater miracle than mine. After telling me exactly how to reach safety, she had been caught in the grandstands between falling chairs. Somehow, she had managed to escape just as the tent collapsed. It was not the actual flames that had scalded her, but the heat of the fire.

After many weeks of hospitalization, and many more months of

slow convalescence, my mother gradually recovered.

My own recovery was not complete until months later. In the darkness of my dreams, even now, I often awake, fearful, horrified, crying: "Terror! Terror!"

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