

A Circus Star's
Hospital Vow:

"I'm Going Back on the Trapeze!"

THE CEILING was white, the walls faint blue. It was a small room, and I was in a big bed. I was confused about where I was, even who I was.

Then my eyes dimly focused on something hanging from the head of the bed. It was a crucifix. From the jumble of images and distant voices came a recollection.

A nun was leaning over me, concern lining her face. She touched me gently, then fumbled at a string of beads at her side. She detached something and pressed it into my hand. "You need this now, Mary Lou," she whispered. It was the crucifix now over my bed. The nun was Mother Rose, a friend of my mother whom I hadn't seen in a long time. I was confused. Where had that idea come from?

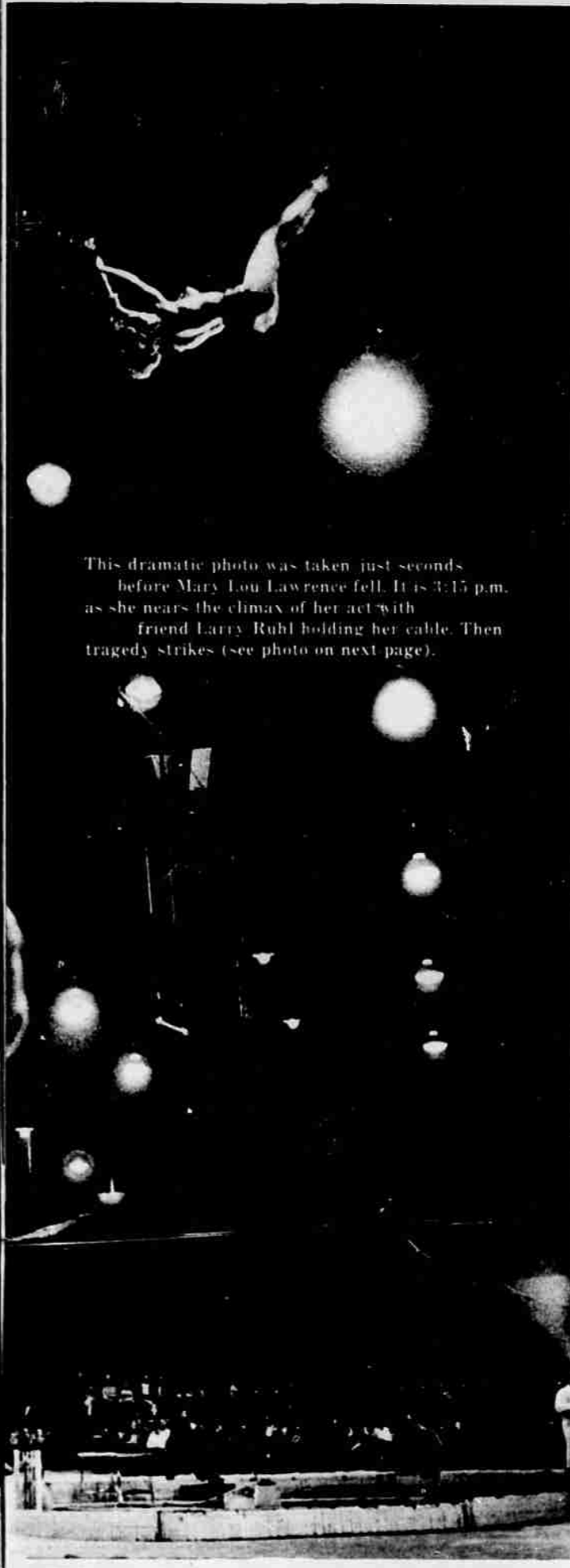
I would slip back into unconsciousness, then awaken and look for the crucifix for reassurance in this sort of limbo. Then suddenly a distinct picture took focus in the haze.

I was swinging on a trapeze high above 2,000 spectators at the Dane County Arena in Madison, Wis. The announcer had introduced me: "The William Kay Circus proudly presents, Mary Lou Lawrence, the Hollywood Skyrocket, in a daring display . . ." The band had played its flourish, and as the spotlights pinpointed me near the roof I began the second-to-last part of my aerial act, a "roll out."

In a performer's life, probably the greatest moment is when he approaches the climax of his act, sensing he has captured his audience. I felt this. Just before, I had swung by my knees above a concrete floor 38 feet below, then slipped along the bar, catching hold at the last moment with my heels. From the darkness below, I could hear the crowd gasp and feel the tension build. It was a wonderful feeling. People go to a circus to be thrilled, and I get paid to thrill them.

I had planned my act to make the excitement mount. In the roll out, I would swing on the trapeze with one hand, then let go and execute a half turn. For a moment I would appear suspended in mid-air; just as it seemed the bar would swing out of my grasp, I would catch hold with my other hand. As a climax, I would do my "iron-jaw spin," whirling dizzily from the trapeze, holding on only with my teeth.

I don't come from a circus family as many performers do. My father has worked in the steel mills of Gary, Ind., for more than 40 years. So maybe I have a more romantic idea about being a solo aerialist in a circus. Working rhythmically in a glittering, spangled costume before kids and their parents is something I've dreamed about constantly since my mother first



This dramatic photo was taken just seconds before Mary Lou Lawrence fell. It is 3:15 p.m. as she nears the climax of her act with friend Larry Ruhl holding her cable. Then tragedy strikes (see photo on next page).

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Her dreams and body
lay smashed in a brutal fall—
but not her spirit

By MARY LOU LAWRENCE
as told to Jack Ryan

took me to an acrobatic dancing class when I was six years old.

Now came my queenlike moment. The trapeze arc heightened as I picked up momentum. The drum rolled and the crowd hushed; just the cries of vendors sounding hollow among the rafters. My tempo seemed right, so I began the dislocation—our word for letting go. There was the exhilarating sensation of suspension in air, then I twisted into my turn and reached out.

But there was no shoulder-jarring grasp; no abrupt halt to my spin. Just rushing space which dissolved into darkness.

I do not recall falling. I experienced no pain. My first awareness was of shadows and shapeless forms. Day by day the hodgepodge began to arrange itself, and I realized I was in a hospital, badly injured. I had taken a real good "buster"—right smack on a concrete floor.

My first thought was about my parents. I could hear my mother saying: "Why do you want to be an aerialist? You're a wonderful acrobatic dancer—why go up there?" I could never answer her because I have never been afraid in my work, just very much alive. But how Mom and Dad had worried, and now . . .

THEN I THOUGHT about Thunder Von Blitzen. He's my German shepherd. Together, in a trailer, we tour the circuses, town to town, as I do my handstands on a 100-foot pole at outdoor shows, or the trapeze act when under cover. Towns are never lonely for circus people; we have too many friends and old associates. But between towns the journey can be lonely, and Thunder is my protector and confidant. Now whom could he depend on?

It was much later when I thought about myself, but when I tried to ask how badly hurt I was, I could not form all the words. Somebody must have seen my terror and said: "You'll be all right. It will take time."

But would I be all right—or only half right? I looked at my body. It was rigid in bandages. My reflexes? I could guess how bad they were: my simplest thoughts could not follow in sequence for very long.

My body and reflexes have given me the most wonderful job in the world—they and my teachers. Without them I would have nothing.

From that first dancing class, I knew I wanted to be a performer. As a kid I'd toured with a group called the Comets, and after graduating from Merrillville High School I joined a circus tumbling act. At a show I would be just like a kid—I'd run out to watch the aerialists soar high above us like special people in an unattainable world. One day at the Shrine Circus in St. Louis, years of longing got the better of my timidity, and I blurted out to an aerialist: "I'd like to work out on your rigging, okay?"

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