



It is 3:16, and tragedy is etched in Ruhl's face. Mary Lou has crashed to concrete floor before his eyes.

"I'm Going Back on the Trapeze!"

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He looked at me as if I were just another fresh brat, but some of the want inside of me must have reflected on my face because he waved me up. I was unsure and uncoordinated on the rigging—but not afraid. I hated to come down because I thought I'd never soar so high again. But another performer was waiting below for me.

"Would you like to be an aerialist?" he asked. "Before you answer, remember, you must be willing to accept rigid discipline and hard work."

I didn't hesitate. This was Willie Hustrei talking to me, a member of a world-renowned aerialist family and a master teacher. Soon I was living with his mother in California. The family had aerial rigging in their back yard, and for months they schooled me. Thanks to the Hustreis' patience, I was able to join Willie in a duo act. It seemed as if everything I ever wanted was mine now. Then after one of our performances, Willie slid gracefully down from the high wire and began to walk off. Suddenly he slumped to the sawdust and died of a heart attack.

MY FIRST THOUGHT was that part of me had died, too. But circus people have taught me wise things. One is that a teacher like Willie never dies: instead he goes on in his pupils' performances. Like generations of circus people before him, Willie had passed on some of his great ability. So I went back to the kind Hustrei family and they helped me prepare a solo act.

Willie had once told me: "If you do things right, you will always be safe." But at the Madison show I had *not* done something right. And I had no idea what it was. All I could tell people was that "I goofed." I knew that was not enough for a professional. Somebody would have to fill in the blank for me before I could go back up—if I could go back up.

I looked at the crucifix and said another prayer. I knew now that my mother and father were anxiously at my side and had been for days. As I became better, they told me they were caring for

Thunder and also that I had been in a coma when Mother Rose gave me the cross; apparently my mother described the scene to me when I was semiconscious, and it became so meaningful to me that it had become like a real experience.

I learned, too, that I had a fractured shoulder and broken ribs and pelvis. I had slid heels-first across the concrete and collided with the grandstand. (I never work with a net. Like many aerialists, I don't think they help much—in my fall, for instance, momentum catapulted me far beyond the reach of any net.) My head had whiplashed back on the hard floor and had been severely fractured. For days I had been near death, and even now it was uncertain how fully I would recover. For a while that thought haunted me. Then one day I told my mother:

"I'm going to get well. I'm going back up!"

But my first attempts to move frightened me. My limbs seemed detached from my body. And I still couldn't form sentences well, much less lengthy thoughts. I lay in bed exhausted by my first efforts, staring from crucifix to ceiling to wall. Then I remembered something else Willie had said when we first stepped into the Hustreis' yard to begin my long training:

"Have faith in God and confidence in people, and you don't have to be afraid."

I fell Feb. 15. It was April before I could walk much. Meanwhile, I was deluged with letters from people telling of their prayers for me. Technicians from the movie "Jumbo," in which I had worked, wrote to me; so did show-business and circus people I'd never met. A little girl in Germany sent "the trapeze lady" a colored drawing of flowers and explained: "I do not have much money to send you flowers, so I have drawn these for you."

"Have confidence in people . . ." Willie had said. One day a young teacher from the University of Wisconsin visited my hospital room. She taught calisthenics and asked me about some points in tumbling. I tried to explain but didn't do too well. Finally, I almost leaped across the bed—"Oh, if

I could only *show* you what I mean!"

Right then I knew I *could* show her. My body had healed; I could feel its strength and limberness as I stood before her. But I knew, too, that excitement or strain could cause irreparable damage to my brain. I must hold myself back for months more. More patience, more prayer.

Now, however, I had the courage to look for the answer to my "goof." I turned to a good friend, Larry Ruhl. He and a long-time friend of mine, Sandy Winters, form the act of "Michele & Michael," a top aerial duo who sometimes perform from helicopters. At the time of my accident, Larry had been below controlling the lines to my rig. Nobody had been closer or was more expert. Larry was now on the road, but he wrote immediately to my query.

"Remember the morning of the accident?" Larry said. "Sandy, you, and I had breakfast. Then you and I went over to inspect your new rigging. I told you it would be a good idea to work out on it because you had a new crane bar with ball-bearing hangers. This naturally would increase the tempo of your swing. You agreed and worked out, but you didn't try a roll out."

"Mary Lou, I'll never forget that afternoon. I was holding your cable and looking up. The moment you started the dislocation I knew it would be impossible to hang on. I couldn't look—then I ran to you."

"The saddest thing I ever did in my life was to return to the arena and take down your trapeze. When I put it away, I wondered if you would ever use it again. Now I know you will. A real performer doesn't give up because of a buster, and you're a real performer in every sense of the word."

"And believe me, you didn't 'goof.' The unexpected physical force that built up in those ball-bearing hangers was just too much for any performer to handle."

So now the tormenting blank spot had been filled in.

ABOUT THIS TIME I began collaborating on this story. In interviews before, I had been confused. I would stammer, repeat, forget. But as I worked on this article, I came to realize that was no longer true. All the fragments fitted together again and I could translate thoughts into words. What a wonderful discovery that simple thing is! I guess that was one of the tests because three months after the fall, my doctor said: "You can go home Sunday. You need more rest, but you can get that with your parents."

And Bill Kay, the circus producer, called from his headquarters in Sarasota, Fla., and said: "Mary Lou, we're opening in Eau Claire in July. We want you on the program if you can make it." I told Bill I didn't know about that. "Well," he said, "if not Eau Claire, then some other town soon after. We're waiting for you."

I packed all the wonderful letters and said goodbye to the many people in Madison who had helped me. One of the last things I did was untie the crucifix that I had turned to so often. It had been part of Mother Rose's own habit, and I felt it must have special meaning to her, as it did to me. When I offered to return it, though, she said:

"It isn't mine now. It belongs to you."

It did, too. Just as Willie said: ". . . have faith in God, and you don't have to be afraid."

I don't know how long it will be before I hear the announcer introducing "The Hollywood Skyrocket." But it will be soon. Meanwhile, old lessons have taken on new importance for me.