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**Joe Strong the Boy Fire-Eater The  
Most Dangerous Performance on  
Record**

Vance Barnum

# Imprint

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## CHAPTER I

### 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 Seqor Bogardi, the lion tamer, Mrs. Talfio, the professional "fat lady," Seqorita 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 Seqor 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 fianci'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 tomorrow."

"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,