

CHAPTER VIII

THE CIRCUS

The greatest red letter day of the year was when a circus came to town. We were up before dawn to see the circus arrive. A small circus came by wagon, with the elephants and camels walking. A large circus came by special train.

When the first wagon or first section of the train came in sight there was a great shout of joy. First the men set up the mess tent and fed all the help breakfast. Then the big tent and then the show itself. A few of the biggest boys got a free pass by carrying countless buckets of water to the elephants. Those of us who were short of stature had usually saved up our pennies until we had a quarter - the unvarying price of a child's ticket. Some impecunious urchins usually tried to sneak in under the tent. This usually led to embarrassment and pats on their pants. Late at night we watched the last wagon or last section of the train depart and returned home very tired but very happy, to dream we had run away and joined the circus like Tobey Tyler had done in a popular book of the day.

Next day we began to try the stunts which had held us spellbound the day before. We had no Y.M.C.A., no school gymnasium, no instructor - just plenty of time to do things for ourselves. One of the boys in our crowd was called Donick Ames. This real name was Will, but his older brother once said, after Will had taken a great fall, that Will's head was like a donick - i.e., like a great round stone - and thereafter Will was always known as Donick Ames. If some day you should go back to Brodhead,

you would probably find Donick - scarcely anybody is left who is old enough to remember that once upon a time his name was Will - selling popcorn on the main corner.

Donick made himself a horizontal bar and learned to do most of the circus stunts. The rest of us were less proficient but learned the easier tricks. The horizontal bar was erected near a sidewalk. Sometimes a little kid would sit on the bar and wait for some lady to come along and just as she got near him, he would cry out as though he had lost his balance, throw his hands over his head and appear to fall backwards off the bar. The lady would scream, but the kid would catch the bar under his knees, swing around under the bar, light on his feet and scamper off much amused at the lady's fright. We do not think that was nice, do you? But boys in that day were not so thoughtful as boys are now.

Across the railroad track was a settlement of Irish boys with whom our gang had more or less argument, but of that we will not write, but will say what we started to write - namely, that one of the boys in the crowd, Joe Gibbons, also made himself a horizontal bar and learned all the stunts, including the "giant swing" where you hang by your hands and swing at arms length around and around and around the bar. In fact, Joe became so proficient that he joined a regular circus and traveled with it, doing stunts until he died.