

THE ART OF THE ACROBAT

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WHEN HUCKLEBERRY FINN went to the circus, he sneaked in under the tent when the watchman was absent. He had money in his pocket, but he feared that he might have other expenses to meet. "I ain't opposed to spending money on circuses," he confessed, "when there ain't no other way, but there ain't no use in *wasting* it on them."

In spite of the fact that he had not paid for his seat and that he was thereby released from the necessity of getting his money's worth, he declared cheerfully that "it was a real bully circus. It was the splendidest sight that ever was, when they all come riding in, two and two, a gentleman and a lady, side by side, the men just in their drawers and undershirts, and no shoes nor stirrups, and resting their hands on their thighs, easy and comfortable . . . and every lady with a lovely complexion, and perfectly beautiful, and looking like a gang of real sure-enough queens. . . . And then, one by one, they got up and stood, and went a-weaving around the ring so gentle and wavy and graceful, the men looking ever so tall and airy and straight, with their heads bobbing and skimming along, away up there under the tent-roof, and every lady's rose-leaf dress flapping soft and silky around her hips, and she looking like the most loveliest parasol."

By the side of this passage from the Twain masterpiece may be set a passage from Mr. Hamlin Garland's best story, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, in which we find recorded the impressions of a girl of about the same age, the daughter of a hard-working Wisconsin farmer. Rose had never seen a circus before; and even the morning street-parade fired her

imagination, and gave her a new idea of beauty.

"On they came, a band leading the way. Just behind, with glitter of lance and shine of helmet, came a dozen knights and fair ladies riding spirited chargers. . . . The women seemed small and firm and scornful, and the men rode with lances uplifted looking down at the crowd with a haughty droop in their eyelids." Rose "did not laugh at the clown jiggling by in a pony-cart, for there was a face between her and all that followed—the face of a bare-armed knight, with brown hair and a curling mustache, whose proud neck had a curve in it as he bent his head to speak to his rearing horse. . . . His face was fine, like pictures she had seen."

In the afternoon, Rose attended the performance in the tent and "sat in a dream of delight as the band began to play. . . . Then the music struck into a splendid gallop and out from the curtained mysteries beyond, the knights and ladies darted, two by two, in glory of crimson and gold, and green and silver. At their head rode the man with the brown mustache." A little later "six men dressed in tights of blue and white and orange ran into the ring and her hero led them. He wore blue and silver, and on his breast was a rosette. He looked a god to her. His naked limbs, his proud neck, the lofty carriage of his head, made her shiver with emotion. They all came to her, lit by the white radiance; they were not naked, they were beautiful. . . . They invested their nakedness with something which exalted them. They became objects of luminous beauty to her, though she knew nothing of art. To see him bow and kiss his fingers to the audience was a revelation of manly grace and courtesy." When at last the show was over and Rose went out into the open air "it seemed strange to see the same blue sky arching the earth; things seemed exactly the same, and yet Rose had grown older. She had developed immeasurably in those few hours."

SHE never saw this acrobat again, and after a little while, she knew that she did not want to see him. He lingered in her memory, a vision from another world than any she had ever dreamed—a world of heroic romance and of lofty idealism. "She began to live for him, her ideal." And while her soul was expanding under the influence of her poetic idealization of a manly figure revealed to her only for two or three hours, all unconsciously she patterned her movements upon his. She walked with a free stride and her body came to have the easy carriage of the athlete. Later, when Rose had matured into a beauty of her own, she confessed to an

elder woman this sentimental awakening in her early girlhood; and it became evident to her friend that "the beautiful poise of the head and supple swing of the girl's body was in part due to the suggestion of the man's perfect grace."

To the realistic imagination of the boy, Huck, the circus was a fleeting spectacle of beauty; and to the romantic imagination of the girl, Rose, it lingered long as a dream of poetry. Young Americans, both of them, living in these modern days when the human form, male and female, is decorously dissembled and disguised by ugly and complicated garments, they had been allowed by the exceptional freedom of the circus to recapture something of the frank and innocent delight of the Greeks in the beauty of the body, in its beauty merely as a body, and not as the habitation of the mind and the soul.

ALERT as the Greeks were to admire the deeds of the mind—no race ever more so—they were no less keen in their appreciation of the things of the body. They were glad to crown the poet for his lyric conquest, but they bestowed the laurel wreath also on the athlete who had won to the front in the race. The lofty nobility of their tragedy testifies to the clarity of their intelligence; and the supreme power of their sculpture is evidence of their loving study of the human body, bearing itself in beauty, clad in few and flowing garments which allowed the eye to follow the free play of the muscles.

It is because the circus preserves for us this occasional privilege that it deserves to survive. The jocularities of the clowns, the intricate evolutions of the trained animals, the golden glitter of the gorgeous cavalcades; all these (Continued on Page 10)

