Be a Clown

By Dr. A.C. Covey

Around 1925, when I was 7 or 8, I desperately wanted to join the circus and be a clown. I'd never been to a circus, but I'd seen clowns at the movies, in newsreels and feature films. So, when my fourth-grade teacher at Adams School in Minneapolis decided to have a masquerade party at Halloween, I naturally decided to go as a clown.

"But don't wear your costumes to school," the teacher said. "Bring them in a bag or whatever. You can change into them here. I'll arrange the cloakroom in such a way that everyone can change in secret."

For the next few weeks, my mother and Aunt Peggy worked busily to design and put together my costume. They were excellent seamstresses, and my suit looked as professional as anyone could wish for. I was very proud of it—so proud I forgot my teacher's instructions that it was not to be worn to class. As a consequence, I arrived in full costume, mask and all.

As I was about to settle myself in my seat, my teacher shot over and grabbed me. "We have a visitor," she told the class. "Arthur won't be here today. His mother called and said he was sick."

Roughly she escorted me to a vacant seat and shoved me into it. "Don't say a word," she hissed, "or suffer the consequences."

She's mad, I thought. *What do I do now?*

The teacher kept me in during morning recess. "You were supposed to bring your costume to school," she lectured me, "and change here. Why didn't you?"

I blamed my mother and my aunt. She looked at me quizzically. "It's a very beautiful suit," she conceded. "It looks tailor made."

"My mother and my aunt made it," I said. "They sew real good."

Again she looked at me quizzically. "Arthur," she said, "I think at times you're somewhat of a prevaricator."

"A what?"

"Never mind," she said.

The bell rang. Recess was over. The kids changed into their costumes and the party began. A friend of mine reached out and pulled off my mask. "Hi, Art," he said. "I knew it was you all the time."

The teacher scolded him, but it was too late. My cover was blown; everyone now knew who I was. But it was a great party. Candy, nuts and cake were served, and plenty of soft drinks, so all of us were more than pleased.

We were to be dismissed for the day when the party ended. But before we went home, everyone voted on who had the best costume, and—wonder of wonders!—I won. The teacher gave me a little prize and the party was over.

All the way home, I kept thinking about what a nice time I'd had. I'd won first prize for my suit, and the teacher had said I was "a prevaricator," which I thought must mean something real nice, or she wouldn't have said it.

My mother and my aunt were very pleased when I showed them the prize. But when I mentioned the word *prevaricator,* they laughed and laughed. That puzzled me, but since they didn't explain it further, I soon forgot about it.

After that, much to my brothers' consternation, I wore my clown suit wherever I thought it appropriate. I wore it at Thanksgiving, at Christmas, at birthdays—any time there was any sort of celebration.

Then, the following spring, the Barnum and Bailey Circus came to town. Having seen it when he was young, my father was a great admirer of it. Since his boys had never seen it, he insisted that we go.

I, of course, was determined to wear my clown suit. My brothers protested long and loudly, but in the end, my parents overruled them and I was allowed to wear it. Walking to the streetcar, however, I had to walk several paces behind them. And

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on the streetcar, I had to sit across the aisle and pretend I didn't know them.

It was the same in the circus tent. I had to follow behind them until they were seated. Only then was I allowed to join them. The seats had no backs. They were just a series of planks set up so that when you leaned back, you leaned against the plank above you. There was a large space between the plank on which you sat and the seat on which the person above you sat.

Sometimes excited and sometimes bored, I kept squirming in my seat. Then, suddenly, I slipped through the opening between the seats and found myself on the ground beneath them. Out of nowhere, two men quickly appeared, both dressed in clown suits. "How did you get here?" they asked. "Are you with the circus?"

"No," I said. "I came from up there. I came to see the circus." Then, looking shyly at the two clowns, I added, "But I always wanted to be a clown."

"That's a dandy clown suit," one of them said. "Couldn't be better. So you're surely dressed for the part." They looked at each other, smiling. Nodding to each other, they said in unison, "Let's show him to the boss."

Taking me by the hand, they led me to a small office where their boss was. "What have we here?" he said. "He's surely dressed for the part! That's a tailor-made suit." Still smiling, he asked, "Are you ready to sign a contract?"

"A contract?" I replied. "What's a contract?" When he explained, I said, "Not yet. I'm only in the fourth grade."

They all laughed. Then the boss said, "I'll tell you what. I'll make out a paper that makes you an honorary clown. Then, when you're old enough, maybe we can do business. What's your name?"

I told him and he wrote something on a piece of circus stationery. "From now on," he said, "you will be known as Art 'Joey' Covey, honorary clown of the famous Barnum and Bailey Circus."

I nearly died from pleasure. I thanked him and thanked him. Then the two clowns took me back to my brothers. It seemed they hadn't even missed me. When I showed them my honorary clown certificate, however, they were very impressed. They shook hands with the clowns, got their autographs, and generally acted as people do when they meet celebrities.

The clowns, though, seemed more interested in me. They patted me on the shoulder, shook my hand and said they were looking forward to the day I would join them. As they left, their final words were, "Be seeing you, Joey." Sadly, I waved to them until they were out of sight.

After that, my brothers seemed to treat me differently. Never again did they object when I decided to wear my clown suit. I wore it proudly and often, with my honorary certificate carefully tucked in the recesses of my beloved suit. I showed it to anyone who doubted my status as a clown in good standing. ❖

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