

A clown's story through decades of American and circus history.

Whiteface and White Wardrobe

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Chapter 4

He wanted to be a clown. Probably the person most surprised when he blurted this out was Jake himself; he would always remember that before he said it, he had not consciously considered the idea.

Agnes Lowry was taken off guard, but only momentarily. Of course! This was what was in his heart; it was meant to be.

For Zachary, there was really no surprise at all; something deep and unfathomable had already told him that this was the boy's destiny. The words were only a confirmation. "Okay, young man, we'll give it a try. If you are willing to take on a lot of hard work, hours and hours of instructions, and a measly pay of \$10.00 a week plus room and board, you are now hired as a clown apprentice."

"Oh, I'm willing. You don't know how willing."

"Alright then, tell this good lady goodbye. It's almost showtime, and your learning process starts right now." With that, Zachary thanked Agnes for her help and limped away to get Sancho and Socrates ready for the opening of the show.

Tears had to be held back when Jake and Agnes said their goodbyes. On impulse, she gave him a quick hug and told him nonsense when he said that he should escort her to the streetcar; she would be fine. And then, with a reassuring smile she was gone; tears could come at home.

When Jake caught up with Zachary, the clown was already in the donkey cart, Socrates sitting beside him, driving toward an exit in the menagerie tent. When they emerged, Zachary told his apprentice that they were in the backyard, and then he pointed out a tent from which saddled horses were being led. "In that top is the pad room where the ring stock - the performing horses - are kept, and at the far end are the dressing rooms." Performers in full

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costume were emerging from the tent, starting to assemble for the opening pageant.

Zachary drove to an opening at the back of the main tent. “This is the performers’ entrance; we call it the back door. The bleacher seats there at the end are called the blues because that’s the color they’re painted. I want you to go about halfway up those seats, plunk yourself down right beside the back door and very closely watch everything that goes on there, nothing else.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Zachary.”

“It’s just Zachary. I’ll come and get you when the show’s over.”

Jake did as he was told, and it was no easy job to concentrate on the comings and goings at the back door when his every fiber wanted to see the show once again. His learning process was off to a good start.

When the show ended, Zachary came for him. The clown had removed his makeup and changed out of his costume which he told his apprentice was referred to as “wardrobe.” It was the first time that Jake had seen his mentor without makeup, and the instant impression was that kindness radiated from this face that others would find homely with a certain toughness. They walked out the back door and Jake was shocked; a good part of the circus was no longer there! The menagerie – tent, cages, concession stand – all gone. There were empty spaces where other tents had been, and a steady procession of teams and wagons was leaving the lot. Everywhere there was frenzied activity – teamsters shouting, bosses on horseback barking orders, workers grunting and sweating as they brought down more tops and loaded wagons, performers hurrying to the dressing rooms to get changed and packed before their trunks were whisked away and the pad-room top came down. To the novice it looked like utter chaos, but he would learn that everything was very well organized.

“Where are Sancho and Socrates?” Jake asked.

“They’ve been taken to one of the train cars that the lead stock rides in - that is, the animals that are lead, like ponies, zebras, camels, and donkeys. Sancho has his own little donkey

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stall, and Socrates has a bed on a shelf in that stall; they're good friends, and they don't like to be apart. Also, with this arrangement, Socrates doesn't have to be in a compartment in the dog wagon."

They hitched a ride on a wagon to the railroad siding where the scene was one of guttering torches, straining teams, more sweating workers, more shouted commands. On the track was a string of flat cars and, as they watched, a wagon was maneuvered to a pair of steel ramps on the end of the last car.

"Let's get out of the way, Jake, and I'll tell you what's going on. The wagons are loaded on the flatcars in the order that they will come off in the next town. See how they're pulled up those runs - what you might call ramps - along the car and across joining runs to the next car? It took a lot of years to work out this loading system, and it's so efficient that, before this war broke out, German army officers were trying to learn how we do it. See the guy holding on to the end of the pole - what you probably call the wagon tongue? He's called the "poler," and he's guiding that wagon. It's one of the most dangerous jobs on the circus and if something should cause the wheels to suddenly turn, he could be thrown, probably hurt badly or even killed. Actually, there's a great deal of danger in much of this work."

A haunted look came to Zachary's face, and he turned quickly to point to other sections of the train. "Over there are the stock cars I told you about - the ones that look like they're for cattle. The elephants have their own car, and so do the performing horses and the working horses."

Zachary let the wide-eyed boy watch for a while, and then led him along the train to the sleeping coaches. The heat in these cars was oppressive, so the show people whose work day was over were lounging beside the tracks, chatting, playing cards, relaxing.

Zachary spotted a bunch of clowns and pulled Jake, who was feeling very shy, to them. "Boys, meet Jake McGregor, our new clown apprentice; I'm going to train him to replace Windy."

"You're the boss. Hey there, First-of-May."

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Three of the group shook hands. One, who could not have been more than three feet tall, introduced himself. “How do you do sir; I am Lord Zinger.” Only later would Jake learn that this was a parody of Lord Sanger, one of Great Britain’s most prominent circus owners. The little man had medium brown hair and brilliant green eyes which, at present, were lit with laughter, curiosity, and acceptance for a newcomer. Later Jake would see that these eyes could also spit cold fire - particularly if their owner encountered unfairness or discrimination of which he had been a victim more than once.

In sharp contrast to Lord Zinger was Sime Carmody, a string bean of a man who stood several inches over six feet. Under his dark brown hair was a long, sorrowful visage that somewhat resembled the face of a hound dog. But, his warm brown eyes belied this appearance with their subtle humor and friendliness. He was a quiet individual – almost shy – who offered his large hand in a sincere greeting. “Welcome to our world, Jake; you’ll find that it’s a lot different than anything you’ve ever known, maybe even a little crazy, but it really is a great life.”

“Hi; I’m Dumpy Jackson.” The speaker was short and stocky with a mop of curly black hair and hazel eyes that danced with mischief. Jake took his plump hand eagerly, but then jumped back with a yell, as he checked to see what was wriggling in his palm. A big black insect – a click bug, it was called – scrambled away and dropped to the ground as everyone howled. The apprentice would learn that clown alleys were always populated with practical jokers and, on this circus, Dumpy was the ringleader. But now the burly trickster came up once again and laid a friendly, innocent hand on Jake’s shoulder. “Seriously, kid, welcome to the show. You’ve got the best teacher there is, and we’ll be watching for great things from you.”

The rest of the clowns had reserved smiles, and a few casual waves of the hand. They would reserve judgment – let this First-of-May prove himself. Remembering what they had said when he was first introduced, Jake turned to Zachary. “Are you really the boss?”

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“I guess so; I’m what they call the ‘producing clown.’ I’m responsible for putting together our acts, training novices, reviewing and scheduling ‘walkarounds and stops’ - the gags that we do while equipment changes are being made for the other acts. Sime over there is our ‘production clown’ - that is he builds props and he works with me to come up with ideas for acts and gags.”

Finally, the train was loaded and assembled; there was a warning whistle from the engine, and everyone boarded. Because he had been hired as a clown, Jake was to have an upper berth in the clown section of a performers’ coach. If he had joined out as a helper in the menagerie, he would have had to be in a workers’ sleeper where the men slept two to a bunk in three-high berths.

Zachary led his apprentice down the aisle of the coach and showed him where he would sleep. Then he pointed to a row of floor-level drawers under the lower berths, pulled out an empty one, and explained that it was for a suitcase or other personal effects. Jake’s meager possessions didn’t take up much space in his drawer.

Every berth was made up with fresh, clean sheets, a soft pillow and a blanket, which certainly wouldn’t be needed tonight. The apprentice would learn that all this was through the efforts of the porters who took great care of the people in their cars, and he would also be informed that tips were expected for these services. Three of the clowns had wives, so they bunked in a married couples’ coach where there were lower berths for the wives and uppers for the husbands.

The train was moving, but it was still too hot to sleep, so people sat on their bunks and talked, played cards, or read. In a while, the air coming through the open windows brought some cooling, but it also brought smoke and cinders.

Jake didn’t sleep very much that night; he had never been on a train, and had to get used to the clacking of the wheels and the rocking, bumping motion. And of course, he was experiencing a riot of emotions – excitement, apprehension, loneliness, repressed grief and anger. Finally he drifted off, only to be awakened by something crawling on his face – a bug, then

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another. A swat and a muffled curse from elsewhere in the car let him know that he wasn't the only one with this problem. The train crew religiously fumigated the sleepers, but these were wooden coaches, and many of the insects managed to survive by burrowing deep into the siding. This was a problem that a trouper just had to get used to.

At about 4:30 in the morning, the train bumped to a halt, rousing Jake from his fitful sleep. Instantly excited by the realization that this must be the next town they would play, he struggled into his clothes and jumped out of the berth, hitting the floor with a thump. "Quiet!" somebody hissed through the darkness. The apprentice tip-toed to the end of the car, somehow got the outside door open and jumped to the ground, managing to stumble and scratch his hands something fierce when he caught himself on the cinders of the rail bed. But no way was he going to miss seeing the show set up!

Wagons were already being unloaded and driven through the darkness, following the intermittent torches that marked their route. Jake trailed them to the showground – the lot it was called – and once more was greeted by a scene of whirlwind activity. Several times he was told to get out of the way – even roughly jostled twice – until he finally learned where he could safely stand.

At religious camp meetings, to which he had been taken, Jake had seen tents erected, but the setup of a large circus top (all circus tents were called tops) proved to be far beyond his comprehension. An army of workers raised center poles that seemed to reach almost to the sky, and then drug what must have been miles of canvas sections to the poles. These sections were then laced together around the poles to form a giant roof. Also involved was the lashing of central openings in the canvas to massive iron rings that surrounded the bases of the poles – rings that would eventually be pulled up the poles to raise the top. And, there were canvas sidewalls, side poles, quarter poles, miles of rope, and iron stakes around which the ropes were wrapped and snubbed. It was a highly complicated process that Jake had to

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watch a number of times before he fully comprehended it, and which would take circus historians many pages to describe.

The stakes were driven by gangs of workers who alternated the swings of their sledge hammers - the rhythmic blows blending into a steady ringing. It all went at break-neck speed, and suddenly the top was up as were those for the menagerie, sideshow, pad room, and all of the other show departments.

Helping to drag and lace the canvas had been scores of town boys who were paid with free passes to the show. It was often said by showmen that no circus could have set up if it had not been for the boys.

No sooner was a top erected than wagons would pull up with their contents of properties (props), ring curbs, rigging, and seats. The town boys were now assigned to perform a wide variety of tasks, such as carrying in and setting up the big top's reserved seat chairs. Jake would learn, however, that the old story about boys carrying water to the elephants was only a myth. No way could enough water have been carried bucket-by- bucket to satisfy the thirst of these huge beasts. It took a large canvas trough or some other means of holding a great volume - or perhaps a nearby pond or stream.

Some of the first wagons that had been unloaded were those for the dining department so that the kitchen tent could be set up right away, stoves fired up, and breakfast started. Next to it the dining tent which was called the "cookhouse" by veteran show people, was put up and rows of tables and benches assembled inside.

Jake was so engrossed in watching the tops go up that he hadn't noticed that droves of show people were coming onto the lot. Suddenly he felt a pair of tiny feet on his leg, and there was Socrates. Kneeling down to pet the little terrier, Jake saw Zachary taking in the scene, a knowing smile on his face.

A flag with the word "Hotel" appeared at the top of a cookhouse pole, and people started filing into the entrance. Socrates trotted away, heading for the back of the kitchen tent.

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“He’ll get his breakfast from the cooks,” Zachary explained. “Actually, there will be a bunch of dogs back there. A lot of the departments, like the blacksmith’s and the work-horse crew have dogs, and believe me, they stake out their territory. But, come mealtime there is a truce, and they all eat together in peace.”

Inside the cookhouse tent another page was added to Jake’s education as he learned that the circus had a definite caste system, now illustrated by the seating. At a special table - set apart from the others - sat the owner and top management. Close by was a table for concessionaires, ushers, ticket sellers and those who worked at the front entrance of the big top, for it was from these groups that future managers would come. Performers were segregated by traditional hierarchy – equestrians first, aerialists next, and so on. The workers or roustabouts had their own area across an aisle from the performers and administrators; on some circuses, this section was further separated from the other by a canvas curtain.

Zachary led Jake to the head table and introduced him to “Pop” Harrigan, the owner of the circus - who also chose to be its general manager - and to other members of the upper management team. Pop, the man Jake had seen leading the parade, had a cherubic face with a wide, good natured smile and twinkling eyes. He gave Jake a hearty handshake and wished him well, saying that he knew that the apprentice would get the best training ever.

Zachary then took Jake to the clowns’ table which, by the pecking order, was farther away from the tent’s entrance than those for other performers, followed only by the seating for the sideshow attractions. Finally, there was the table for the sideshow band whose members were all black.

And, here was another lesson for the First-of-May; as with other organizations across the land, the circuses of those days were racially segregated. Not only did this discrimination affect the sideshow band members, but it extended to black workers who throughout the day toiled side-by-side with white cohorts, but who also had separate tables in the cookhouse and designated bunks in the sleeper cars. It was a situation that Pop Harrigan abhorred – he

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considered all humans to be equals – but he was man far ahead of his time, and was forced to follow tradition in order to avoid labor problems and public ostracism - or worse.

At the clown table, Jake was pleasantly surprised by another important facet of the circus; any show owner worth his salt prided himself on the quality of the food served in his cookhouse. For breakfast there were cereal, eggs, sausage, boiled potatoes, hotcakes, and coffee – all delicious and with unlimited refills. The apprentice also learned that, as with the train porters, tips were expected for waiters and stewards – that is if you wanted “luxuries” like fresh milk and butter.

Soon after everyone had had their breakfast, it would be time for the dining department to be preparing lunch. The final meal of the day – called supper – was served during the period between the matinee and evening performance.

In less than twenty-four hours, Jake was well aware that he had entered a different world; the succession of days would show him just how different. He would learn that the circus ran on a rigid schedule where every minute counted; any variance, any delay could result in a cancelled performance and a great loss of income. Meals were served only at specific times; get there late and you were just out of luck. Performances ran like clockwork, and one had to be ready for an entrance, had to have props in place, all exactly on time; not a second to be spared. Every act had its own special music, so performers learned to listen for the composition that was played just before their own performance and to use that to be their cue to be at the back door waiting to go on.

And then there was trying to understand what people were saying to you, for the circus had practically a language of its own. All elephants, male or female, were “bulls;” zebras were called “convicts;” an acrobat was a “kinker.” The sideshow was the “kid show;” the man who gave a spiel from the sideshow platform was a “talker” (not a barker as he was often called by the general populace). The men who circulated through the show audience selling candy, popcorn, peanuts, and drinks were “candy

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butchers;” the person who sold chameleons on tiny tethers was the “bug board man;” a balloon vendor was a “rubber man;” cotton candy was “floss.” The people of the communities where the circus showed were “towners;” towners who came only to look, not buy paid admissions were “lot lice.” The concession stands that sold food were “grease joints;” a toilet facility was a “doniker.” Reminiscing and swapping circus yarns was referred to as “cutting up jackpots;” and so on and so on.

Some terms could have more than one meaning – like “blowoff.” For clowns, this could be the surprising conclusion to one of their gags. It could also be an extra attraction in a sideshow, usually behind a canvas divider and for which patrons had to pay an extra fee. Or a blowoff might be an audience leaving the big top after a performance.

On the train there was the “pie car” or “privilege car,” as it was also known, where one could go for coffee, dessert, even a meal – a gathering place for relaxation and socializing. On some circuses, there were slot machines and other games of chance in the privilege car, but not on the Harrigan show.

Every circus person had a chamois or cloth “grouch bag” with a long drawstring to permit wearing around the neck, a repository to keep one’s accumulation of pay safe from theft. Many of the show people converted extra cash into diamonds which took up less space in the little bag, and which could be exchanged for money when necessary.

Jake learned that his designation, “First-of-May,” was a term that came from the circus tradition of starting out on the road around the first of the month of May. Therefore, a new person on the show was referred to in this way.

For many of the show people there were only “today’s town” and “tomorrow’s town;” community names weren’t all that important. However, Jake always knew the town they were in because, for a dime, you could buy a monthly itinerary - a “route list” - at the commissary wagon where you could also purchase tooth brushes, razor blades, stationery and other essentials. Zachary faithfully bought these lists because, as he would teach

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Jake, circus travel provided the opportunity of never-ending courses in geography, history, regional customs and folklore.

The education as a clown apprentice was a slow process. Zachary had started out by just having Jake observe the-day-to-day routine in clown alley - the section of the men's dressing room clear at the back of the pad room top, farthest from the entrance. It was located there because the clowns used powder, liberally applied, in applying their makeup, and the other performers did not want this powder getting to them.

Zachary also had his apprentice carry props and assist the clowns in any way he could. And, he assigned his pupil to help Production Clown Sime Carmody make needed repairs to the props. It was great working with Sime - a terrific teacher who willingly shared his vast knowledge, even showing Jake his notebook with sketches of props that he was planning for next season. The man was a genius! The gags he planned would have the big top rocking with laughter.

As Jake got to know Sime, he also came to another realization about the tall, quiet man. At that first introduction, the First-of-May had noticed only the friendliness and humor in the warm brown eyes, but sometimes he now detected a glint of an underlying sorrow. It was Lord Zinger who finally told him the story. Once Sime had been happily married, but a few years ago, a tragic accident had snatched away his loved one. Since then he had thrown himself into his production-clown work, striving to push away his loneliness. It was a mark of the man that he didn't let himself become bitter and that, regardless of his heartbreak, he always had a smile and a kind word for others.

When the afternoon show had concluded and supper had been eaten, the hours before the evening show were free time for the performers. If they were close enough to a town, they could go shopping, sightseeing or exploring. It was during one of these breaks, when the Harrigan Circus was playing Bowling Green, Ohio, that Zachary introduced Jake to another phase of his education. Following the matinee - after Zachary had scrubbed his makeup and changed into street clothes, they ate supper then

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caught a streetcar downtown where Zachary led the way to a moving picture theatre. The first films that Jake had ever seen turned out to be *The Rink* starring Charlie Chaplin and an episode of Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops. It would be an understatement to say that the boy laughed; his sides ached for an hour.

Outside, after the show, Zachary asked, "What did you learn?"

"A lot about being funny - ways to walk, how to fall, different ways to hold your face - so much."

"Very good. Did you also notice that Chaplain and the Kops were very serious about it all? There's an old saying - clowning is serious business; this way you avoid just being silly."

"So, what you're saying is that it's the situation that's funny."

"You've got it. Tomorrow you put on the makeup."

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