

Clown Alley

A Short Short Story
complete on this page

By Courtney
Ryley Cooper

JOE HEPP, owner of the Great Antwerp Shows, scowled down at the chiseled features of Milwaukee Whitey.

"Listen, egg," he announced, "didn't I tell you we was runnin' Sunday school in this town?"

"Yeh, you told me." Milwaukee Whitey was rebellious. "But when I seen a chance to fan a guy for three thousand smackers, I grabbed it. And it stays grabbed!"

Joe Hepp growled.

"Yeh—in a thistle-chin town where the Burnell Shows had a hey rube last year. What d'you think I closed all the gamblin' stores down for—for fun? And cut out the cooch dance? An' left all the lucky boys behind in the last stand? For exercise? Now you go out and pick a sucker's pocket for three grand!"

"Well, what do I do? Give it back?"

"No. Not three grand. But we got to be careful. The guy may be able to describe you. Duck into Clown Alley and put on a clown suit and make-up. Don't take no chances; fix that mug of yours so your own brother wouldn't know you!"

Whitey grinned.

"I ain't ever failed at it yet," he said, and hurried away.

An hour passed. Then an old man in a blue uniform, with "Chief" on his cap, came hesitantly to the front gate. A girl was with him. She had been crying.

Joe Hepp moved swiftly and pleasantly forward.

"Well, Chief," he announced, "anything I can do for you?"

The officer rubbed at his chin.

"Well, I guess I'd like to see the owner."

"You're lookin' at him, Chief. Joe Hepp's my name. Any little thing I can do for you?" The old man looked up at him with mild blue eyes.

"Well, I'd sure love to see the show," he confessed. "But—" Then suddenly, "This is Nancy Merlin. She's the post-mistress here."

The girl shook hands with him. She did not speak. Her lips were trembling.

"I guess I might as well tell you the straight of this," the chief said. The girl nodded. "You see, Miss Merlin's brother ain't overly bright. She gave him some money—postal savin's—to take to the bank. But he didn't go to the bank. He came out here. And a fellow named Milwaukee Whitey robbed him. I thought maybe he might be with your circus."

"Say, we're Sunday school," snapped Joe Hepp. "You won't find no rough stuff around this circus. Must have been some crook passin' through town and wantin' to give the circus a bad name. Milwaukee Whitey, eh? Never heard of him. How'd you get the identity?"

"One of my men saw it happen and tried to catch him. Recognized him as

Milwaukee Whitey, an old-time crook. But he's a slick fellow, I guess, this Whitey. Lost himself in the crowd. I got his rogue's-gallery picture here."

Joe Hepp frowned at the picture.

"That's the way it goes. You can count on me, Chief. I'll bust things wide open to help you." He flared. "Maybe the dirty crook's hidin' around here somewhere!"

The chief rubbed his chin.

"Maybe you'd better go back to town, Nancy," he said at last. "Mr. Hepp and I'll look around a bit. You see," he explained to Joe Hepp, "if we don't find that money, it'll mean Miss Merlin's job."

"Or they might slap an embezzlement charge against her," said Joe Hepp with great agitation. "Don't I know all that? Where would you like to look first, Chief?"

A HALF-HOUR later, Joe Hepp and the chief moved through the menagerie toward the big top. Behind them ushers, ticket-sellers and concession men signaled one another; ordinarily these men worked roll-down games, or dealt monte, or sold things which did not exist.

"You've got a mighty nice circus," the chief confessed as they reached the big top. "Yes, sir, this is just about as neat a circus as I've ever seen."

"It's more than that," said Joe Hepp. "It's an honest circus. Look in that center ring. How many elephants do you see?"

"Eight."

"And we advertised eight. Remember. Not ten or fifty or thirty-six elephants. The posters said we'd have eight, and we've got eight."

The chief nodded.

"That's right. I remember lookin' at the posters."

A concessionaire passed. Joe Hepp flashed him a glance. It traveled through the circus. Another squawk

was being rounded; a tough cop no longer hostile.

"Go all the way through the show and you'll find the same thing," boasted Joe Hepp. "Look up there on the flying trapeze. The posters said we'd have that act—and there it is. You can't find a thing here, Chief, that ain't just as it's advertised. Why—"

Noise broke the sentence, the ringing of bells and roaring of diminutive motors. Red fire glowed. The band blared. With yells and shouts and tumbling, the clowns piled into the arena for the clown fire scene without which no circus could exist. Joe Hepp laughed and the chief laughed with him, while the man he sought whisked about without even being noticed. The clown baby was rescued from the clown house. Clown firemen splashed water everywhere except toward the fire.

The clown police department herded up clown spectators, brawling in a sudden fight. The clown cop fell on the hippodrome track and couldn't get up again. All this while the real chief beside Joe Hepp laughed until his cheeks were wet. "That's the best I ever saw," he chuckled. "A person gets his money's worth here all right, Mr. Hepp. And then some!"

"Only one rule to follow in the circus business," said Joe Hepp. "Run a good show an' a clean one. An' always live up to your promises. Where shall we go now, Chief? Can't forget that little girl and her three thousand bucks, you know."

The chief rubbed his chin.

"Yeh," he admitted. "I guess we'd better make the whole rounds—even if it don't seem much use."

Ten minutes later, happy, friendly, the two strolled into the dressing tent. The chief glanced about him. Suddenly he moved toward the row of trunks where a group of men with splashed and motley faces loafed at their trunks. Clown Alley. His arm shot under his

blue coat, the return motion brought the ugly gleam of a long-barreled revolver.

"All right you, there!" he commanded. "Line up."

Astonished clowns faced him, gaped, then obeyed. Joe Hepp raced beside the officer.

"Say, what's eatin' you?" he asked. The chief did not answer.

"Milwaukee Whitey!" he commanded. "Step out!"

THERE was no answer. The old chief, his wrinkled lips grim now, centered his cold gaze on first one, then another. He jerked his head, signaling Joe Hepp beside him.

"Just tell Milwaukee Whitey, whichever one of those clown make-ups he's hidin' behind, to step out." There was no request in the tone, only command. "Either that, or I'll take the whole gang to headquarters and search them there."

Joe Hepp gasped.

"But what about my show?" pleaded Joe Hepp.

"To hell with your good, clean show," answered the old chief. "I'm thinking about Nancy Merlin's money. Does Milwaukee Whitey step out?"

Joe Hepp ground his teeth.

"Step out, Whitey," he said at last.

"And hand over that money," the chief supplemented. He turned then to Joe Hepp. "And I'm taking you along too, for aiding and abetting a known criminal."

Down in the post office, with Nancy Merlin—a happier Nancy Merlin now—the old chief glanced across the street toward a circus poster.

"Yes, sir," he said, "that was a darned nice show. Gave exactly what it advertised, except once. There it is, on that poster—twenty—count 'em—twenty clowns. So when they all come in in the fire scene, I did count 'em. And I'll be hanged if there wasn't twenty-one!"



Courtney Allen

"That's the best I ever saw," he chuckled. "A person gets his money's worth here, Mr. Hepp"



"DIVING TAKES HEALTHY
NERVES — AND SO DOES
MY OFFICE JOB!"

Frank Crilley, Champion Deep-Sea Diver, says:
"Deep down under 300 feet of water, working feverishly under terrific pressure—no place for a nervous man! A diver's nerves must *always* be in perfect condition. I smoke Camels and have smoked them for years. They are a milder cigarette and they taste better. They never upset my nervous system."

Miss Elizabeth Harben,
Garden City, L. I., says:

"I know that deep-sea diving calls for healthy nerves. But, believe me, you can also feel plenty of real nerve strain being a secretary to a busy office executive! Telephones, callers, dictation, and a million other demands all take their toll. As to smoking—I smoke a great deal, but I'm careful in the choice of my cigarettes. I prefer Camels. They don't make my nerves jumpy, and I like their flavor better."


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How Are Your Nerves?

Do *your* responsibilities give you that "dragged through a knot hole" feeling? Do you come home tired, irritable, with nerves all askew?

Whatever your job or place in life, healthy nerves are worth any effort. Check up on your

habits—your eating, your sleeping, your recreation—and do not overlook the subject of smoking. Turn to Camels, for the sake of your nerves. Any impartial leaf-tobacco expert will tell you that

 Camels are made from finer, **MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS** than any other popular brand. An important fact to nervous people!

Camel pays millions more—for your enjoyment. And how much better Camels taste—mild, rich in flavor, delightful. They never get on your nerves... never tire your taste.



NEVER GET ON YOUR NERVES... NEVER TIRE YOUR TASTE

Trouping Alone

By Kyle Crichton

The story of Cornelia Otis Skinner, the one-woman theatrical company, who does pieces and makes people like them—to the tune of \$30,000 a year



CORNELIA OTIS SKINNER is the young lady who has made a success by the mere device of walking out on a stage and pretending to be eight other people. In those sad theatrical days of 1932-33 when regular dramatic companies were doing everything but selling candy in the aisles between the acts in an effort to make ends meet, Miss Skinner was netting \$30,000 a year with no other equipment than a table and two chairs, so arranged as to represent everything from the Tower of London to the beach at Barbados. In brief, Miss Skinner is a one-woman dramatic company who gathers her own material, writes her own sketches, assembles her own costumes and does her own acting. She has never tried selling tickets although there is no reason why it couldn't be done.

This state of affairs was brought about by two happenings: (a) She was fired by her father, Otis Skinner, after appearing with him in *Blood and Sand*. (b) She attended a party at which the guests were expected to do stunts. Not being able to hang from the chandelier by her toes and having been warned that the death rate among those attempting card tricks was mounting with startling rapidity, she did one of the sketches she had been amusing herself with since her school days. Several days later she was called by a lady who had also been a guest at the party and asked if she would repeat the performance for a fee. The fee was not great—something like fifteen dollars and car fare—but it was a fee nevertheless. From this has grown one of the smaller and sounder American Industries.

During the present season Miss Skinner has been playing *The Loves of Charles II*. Charles, it seems, had a very nice time as King of England, despite the fact that his father had been beheaded while occupying the same throne. It appears that the people became a bit irritated by the way the original Charles had been carrying on. Between the father Charles and the son Charles had come Oliver Cromwell and life was serious, with anybody caught laughing in the streets being asked to wipe that smile off. When young Charley came bounding back at the head of the Restoration Court, things took on a lighter air and morals were temporarily lost in the shuffle. Miss Skinner has been re-creating the ladies who were kind to Charles and the one-woman company has been having another good year of it.



Cornelia Otis Skinner, in her new solo drama, *The Loves of Charles II*, portraying the characters of Louise Queroualle (left, above), Nell Gwynn, and, below, a Dutch tavern girl

Photographs by Ben Pinchoi

In the two previous seasons she has been doing *The Wives of Henry the Eighth* and *The Empress Eugénie*, and the paying patrons have insisted on laying the money on the line for the sake of seeing the beautiful young lady do her elocution.

The Great Theatrical Mystery

Just why patrons of the drama would pay regular theater prices to see a one-woman dramatic company when for twenty-five cents and up they can see seven movie stars, the *Battle of the Marne*, the *San Francisco Fire* and the *Fall of Rome* is more than Miss Skinner can figure out herself and she has given some thought to it. As it stands, it constitutes one of the miracles of the American theater, and just as soon as Miss Skinner can get a minute to spare from her acting she's going to do a little investigating on her own. For the time being it can be considered as a definite scientific verification of the theory that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points—a matter of one actor dealing directly with each customer and no monkey business.

As a child Miss Skinner had little to

do with the theater. She went to school, saw an occasional show and led the life of the average city child. Any real taste of the theater came at Christmas time when her mother led her in the general direction of Chicago or Oskaloosa, Iowa, where Otis Skinner was playing *Kismet*. Her memory of that is of a Christmas tree set up in a hotel room and a lot of jolly people trooping up there after the performance on Christmas eve, often in their stage costumes and with the grease paint still on their faces.

But that was soon over and she went back to school. When it came time to leave home she was sent to Baldwin School, Bryn Mawr, and later to Bryn Mawr College. Things were quite all right there. As the daughter of Otis Skinner, she had parts in all the school plays whether she wanted them or not. It happened that she wanted them. She could also act wearily wise with stage-struck young women who thought that life behind the footlights must be the only bearable existence. Yes, actors were fascinating people, admitted Miss Skinner. Yes, they traveled all over the world and met the most distinguished people (including bell-hops, Pullman

porters, stage hands and station agents trying to keep awake at three o'clock in the morning while the company waited at a lonely junction to take another train). No, they were just like ordinary people when they were at home. You'd never know they had their names on billboards and all that. They ate and slept and got mad when a fuse blew out and only rarely appeared at dinner in the coat of armor they had used in their last play. At Christmas time, instead of going home, Cornelia Skinner went off to Texarkana or Little Rock to visit her father, who was playing *Kismet*. This was held to be unfortunate or romantic, according to the mind of the observer.

A Lady or Nothing

At Baldwin School she played male parts because of her height, but she let it be known at Bryn Mawr that, although she adored Hamlet and the other gentlemen of Shakespeare, she was going to be a lady from now on or nothing. This led to a production of *Macbeth* in which she played Lady Macbeth, and a young lady named Ann Harding played Macduff. Since there is no indication that Miss Harding was any more Carnera-like than at present in Hollywood, it is hard to see what fears could have been entertained by her opponent in the duel, but having been assigned to play Macduff, Macduff is what she played. It was at Baldwin that Miss Skinner began writing monologues and, what was worse, giving them. "I would write one in the morning and get it off to the girls in the evening. It must have been awful," she says.

When that period was ended, Otis Skinner decided that if his daughter insisted on going on the stage she might as well know something about the theater and she was forthwith bundled off to Paris where she studied under Dehelly and Jean Herve at the Comédie Française and later with Jacques Copeau at the Theater du Vieux Colombier. It was here that she learned to act and got that start at languages which makes it dangerous for people to be about in the streets of foreign cities when she is abroad. She speaks English, French and German, and has added Spanish and Italian and a dash of Chinese, getting most of her knowledge by buttonholing individuals in public places and entangling them in a conversation which may be baffling to them but highly instructive to her.

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