



Saltimbanco was a Clown. He wasn't sure if he liked being a clown, but there it was. Lots of clowns are just people dressed up, but Saltimbanco was a *real* clown. He had a big, round, red nose and round cheeks of the same red, and all three were real; he couldn't take them off after a performance and go back to his caravan looking like an ordinary person, because he wasn't an ordinary person. He was a clown.



In the same way, his best friend, Dolly, was a doll. She too had round red cheeks, but she had no nose at all, or only a tiny one, and the skin on her face, arms and legs was made of cotton cloth. She, on the other hand, didn't mind being a doll at all. She was what the clever people call well-adjusted. She lived in a caravan, too, and wherever the circus stopped, they would park their caravans close to each other and take their meals together.



Dolly was good at just about everything. She would perform with the acrobats, balancing carefully on top of a pyramid of them, dancing on the high wire, swinging on the trapeze. She wasn't afraid of falling off, because she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be hurt. She was a doll.



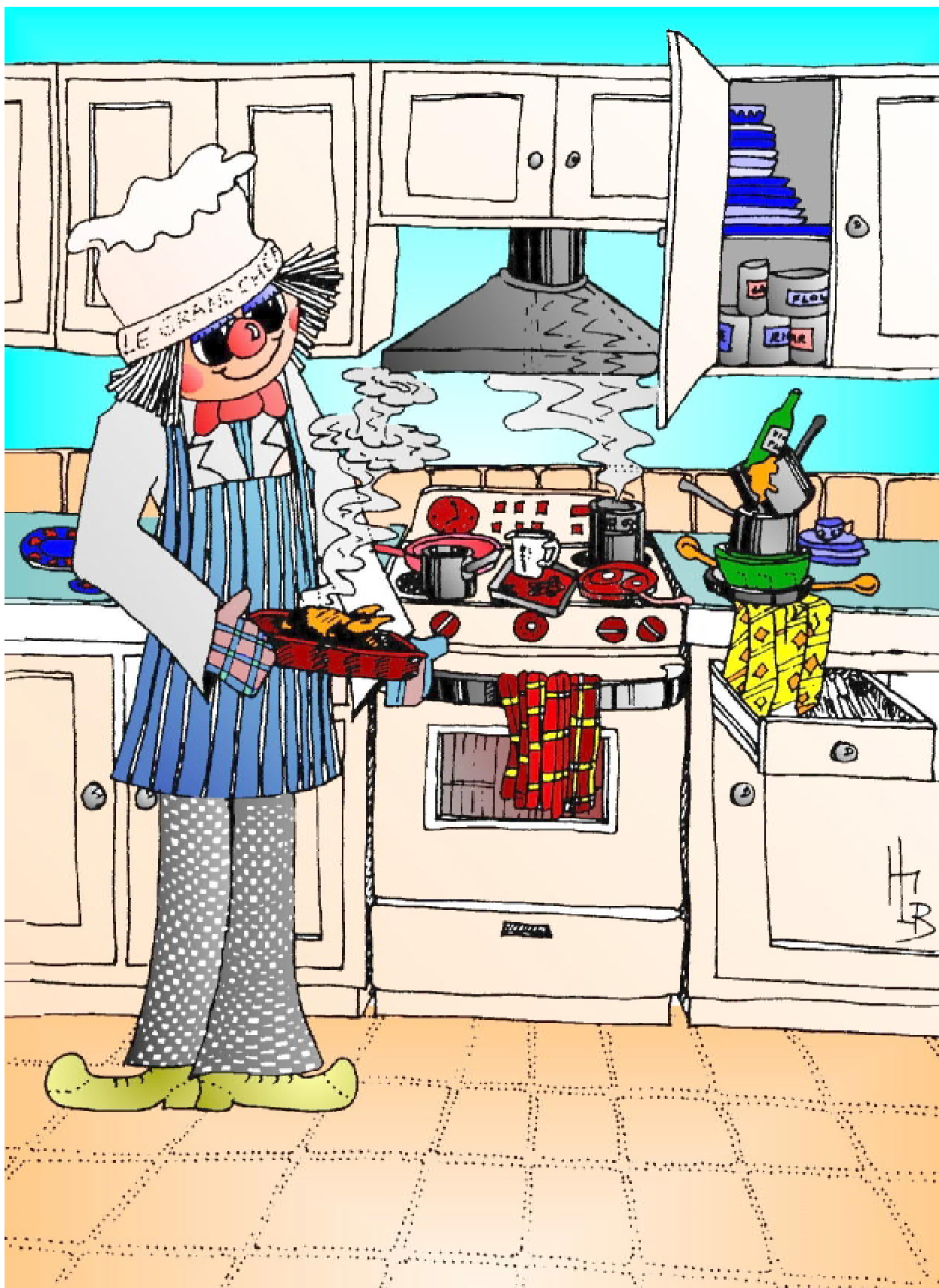
Saltimbanco, though, fell off everything, all the time. He would get halfway along the high wire and trip over his long clown's feet and crash to the floor. He never broke any bones, because he knew all about falling, which was the one thing he was really good at; what he minded, though, was that when he fell, everybody laughed. They were expected to laugh. After all, he was a clown. Clowns fall down so that people can laugh at them.



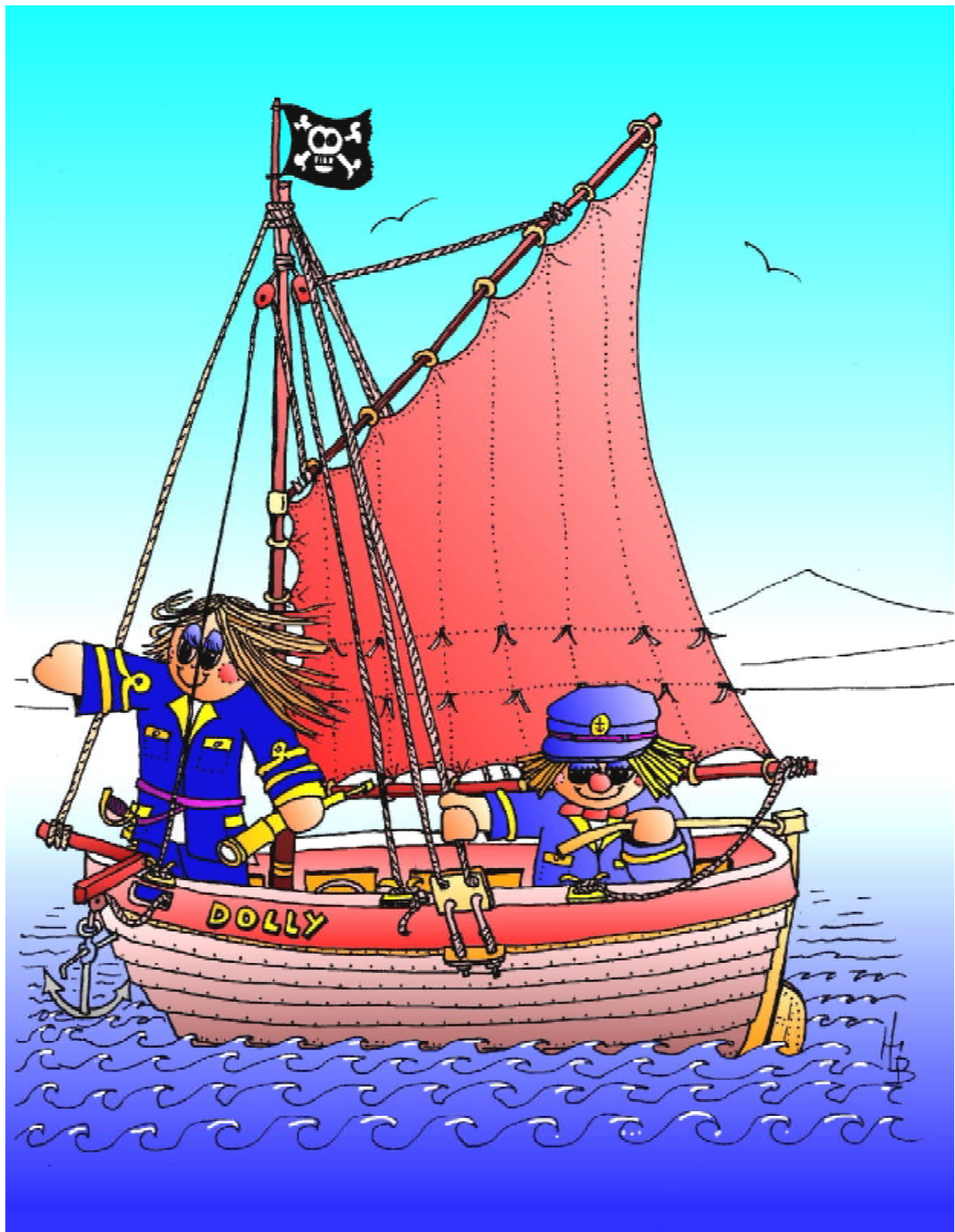
In the circus, he could accept the laughter. That was what he was there for. But outside, whenever he tried a new amusement just for his own pleasure, he still got everything all wrong, and people still laughed because they thought he was still performing. But he wasn't, and he thought they shouldn't.



The only person in the whole world who understood this was Dolly. After each disaster she would pick him up, dust him down, and try to think of some activity at which he would be as good as she was. They were good at dancing together, as long as nobody was watching; but if they tried dancing where people could see, Saltimbanco's feet would get in the way again.



'Listen, Sal', she said one day while he was cooking her a particularly delicious dinner (they called each other Sal and Doll when they were alone, because they were friends), 'Listen, Sal, the circus is going nowhere this next week. Let's take a holiday and really work on finding you something to do.'



So that's what they did. They went and stayed in a little cottage between the mountains and the sea, near to all sorts of exciting places where they could try exciting things to do. On the first day they went sailing, because they knew already that they enjoyed that; it was something they could do together with nobody watching. But it was no use for Clown alone.



So the next day Dolly said. 'I'm going to play tennis. Do you want to try?'
'Well...' said Clown, Lots of people watch tennis players. Can I try, er,
Badminton?



So he tried. But he missed the shuttlecock every time.
And, though there were not many people watching, they all laughed.



That evening, they tried trampolining. It was fun. You could fall over as often as you liked, and still bounce right up again. They had so much fun and made so much noise that quite a crowd gathered round. They all laughed at Sal's antics, and he didn't mind because he was enjoying himself.

But all the same....



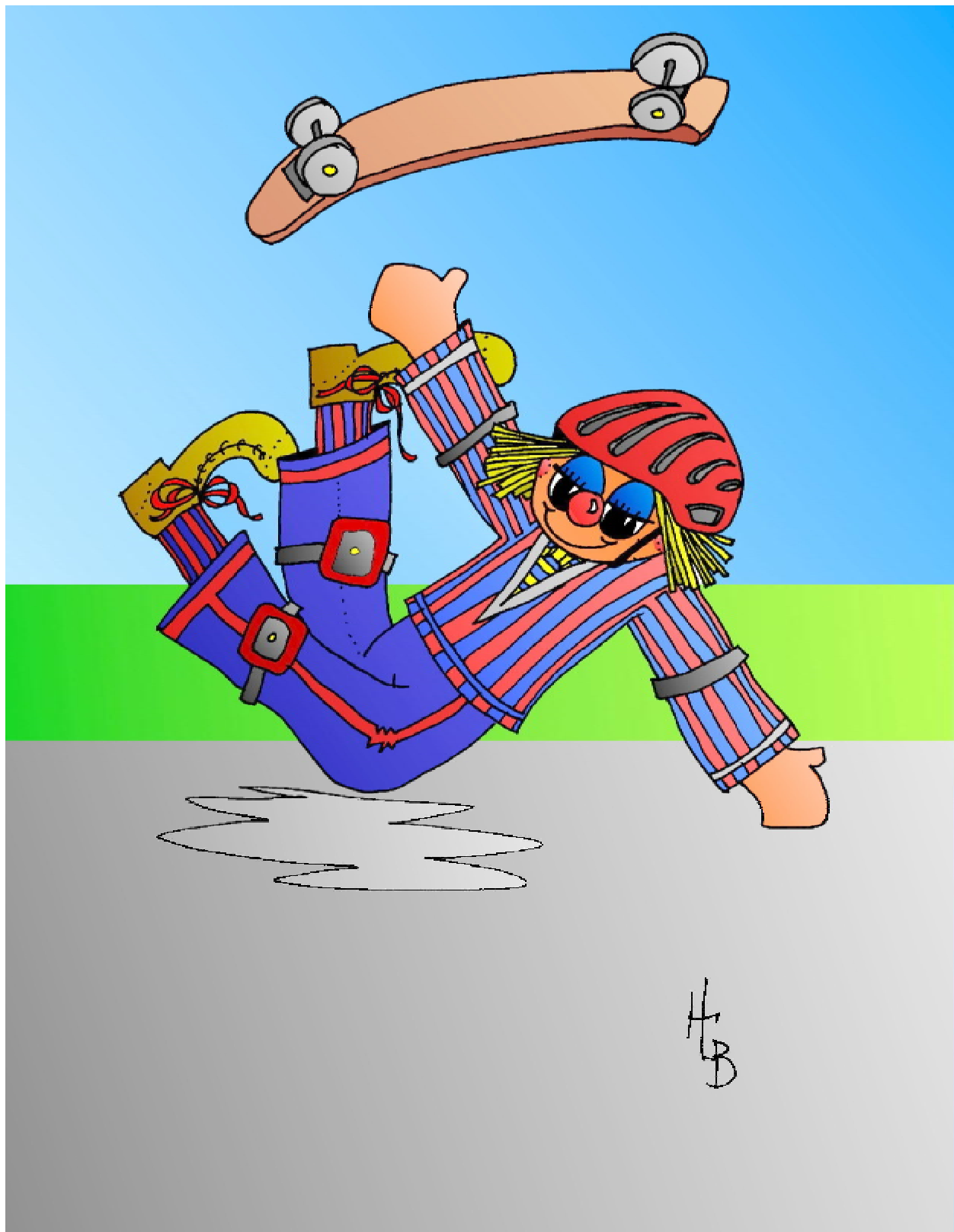
The next day they went to the mountains.
Dolly was very good at skiing. She could leap in the air and make a cross
with her skis, and still land just right.
Saltimbanco thought he'd better try something that looked a bit simpler.



So he hired a snowboard. It looked easy.
And it was, until he reached the bottom of the slope, where there were lots of people watching. The snow there was soft and the board went into it and stopped. Sal went on going, head over heels in the soft snow. He wasn't hurt, but he could hear the laughter. No, that wouldn't do.



But it gave Dolly an idea. 'You did all right till you hit the soft snow', she said. Maybe if we did the same thing on a hard floor..' So they went to the skate park. Dolly was great on in-line skates.



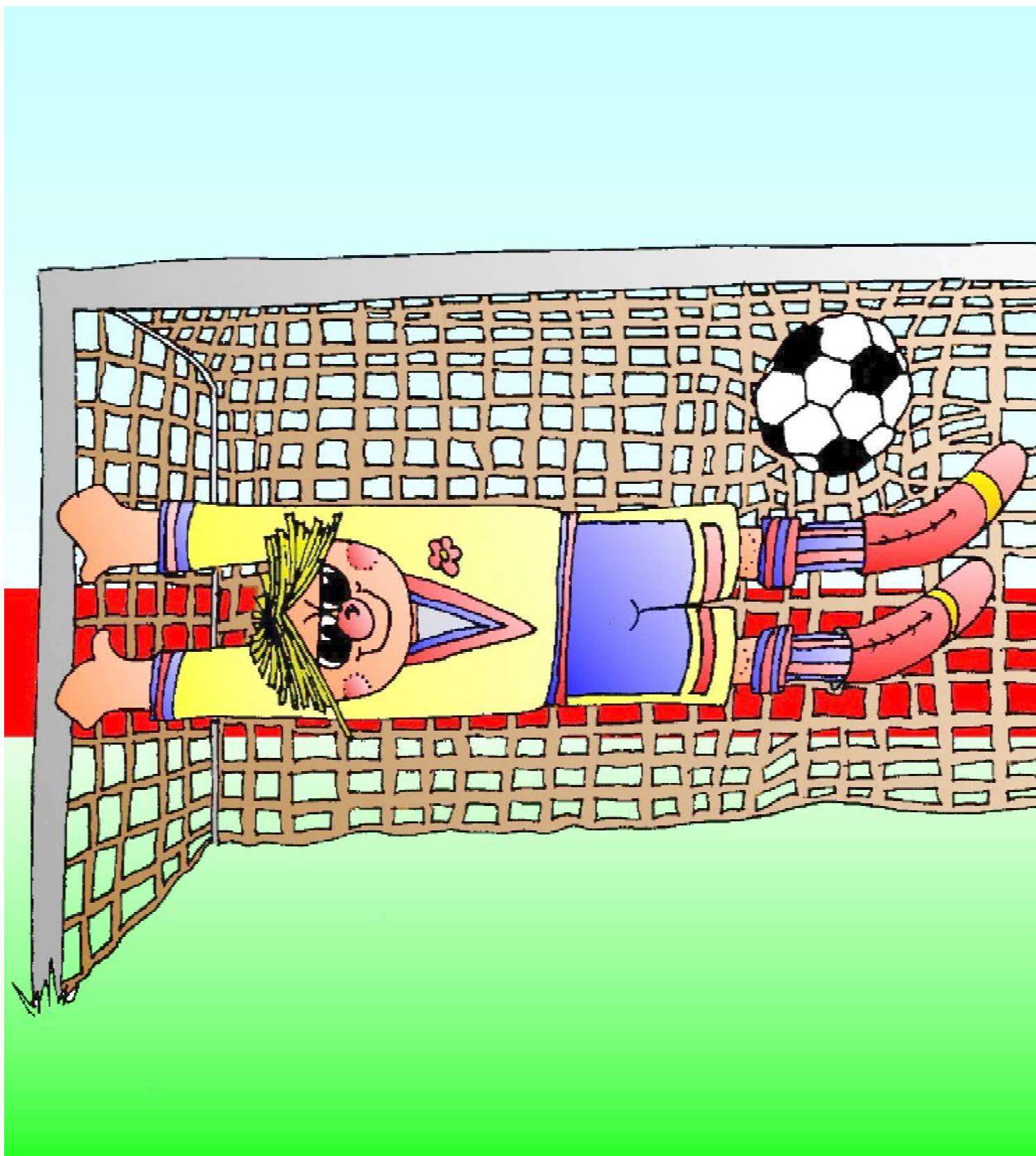
But poor Saltimbanco! He couldn't keep his feet on the skateboard, and he couldn't keep himself off the ground. And all the children shouted to their friends, 'Come and see this funny clown pretending he can't skateboard!' And the friends came running, and they laughed and they laughed and they laughed. And Sal said to himself glumly, 'This won't do either.'



'Oh dear', said Dolly, 'We're halfway through the week and we haven't found you *anything* yet. Let's try team games. I used to be a cheerleader for our football team. Nobody dared laugh at *them*.' 'Football?' gasped Sal, 'I'd be carried off within a minute. No, how about, say, basketball? That should be better.'



But it wasn't. Saltimbanco got everything muddled up. When he dribbled, the ball stood still and Sal bounced. When he passed the ball, it was always to the other team. And when he tried to score, he put himself through the hoop instead of the ball. The crowd thought he was wonderful. They clapped and cheered and laughed and laughed and laughed.



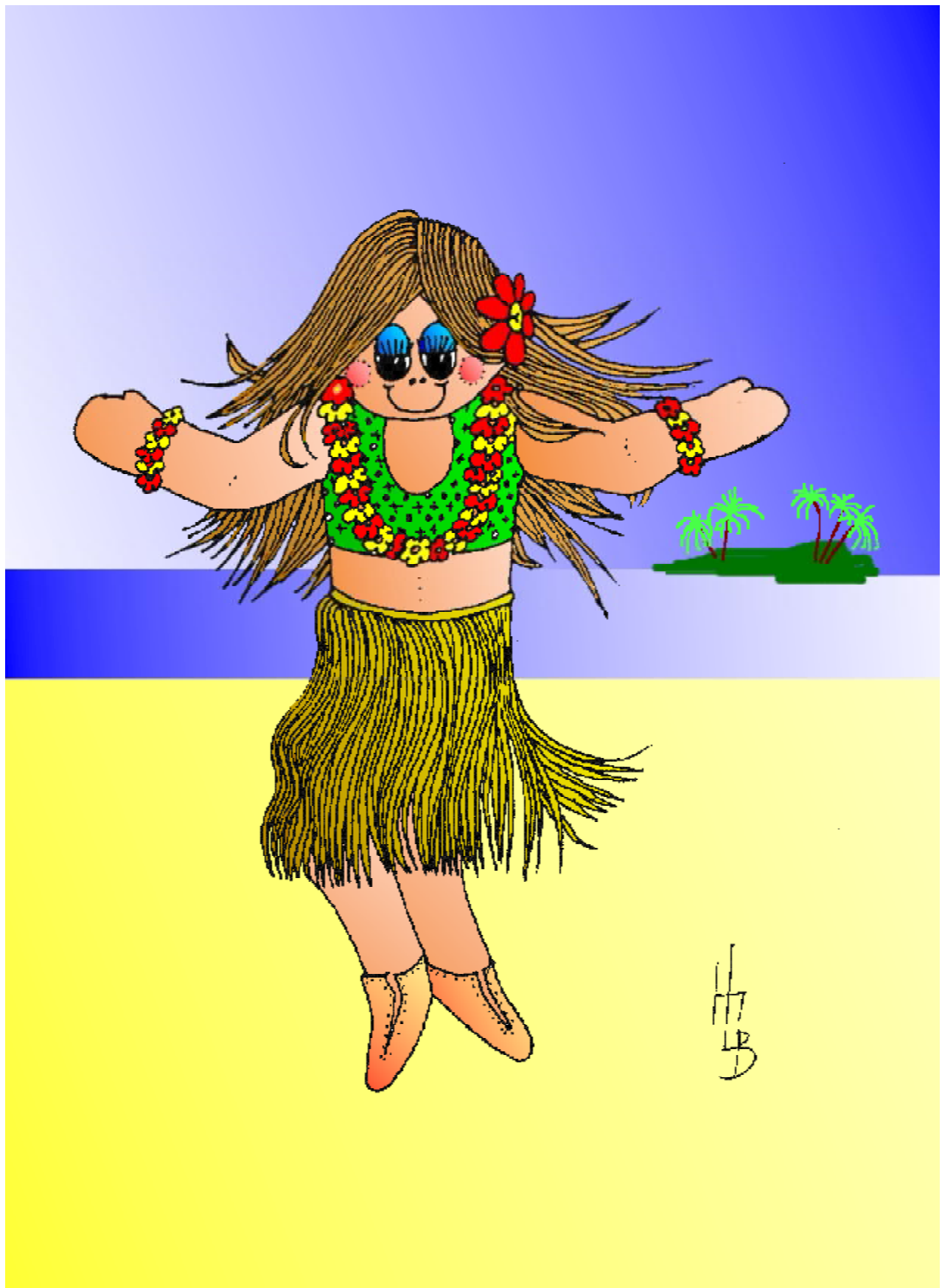
Soccer wasn't any better. Dolly told him to be the goalkeeper, because that way he couldn't score at the wrong end of the field.

Trouble was, he couldn't stop anybody else scoring at *his* end.

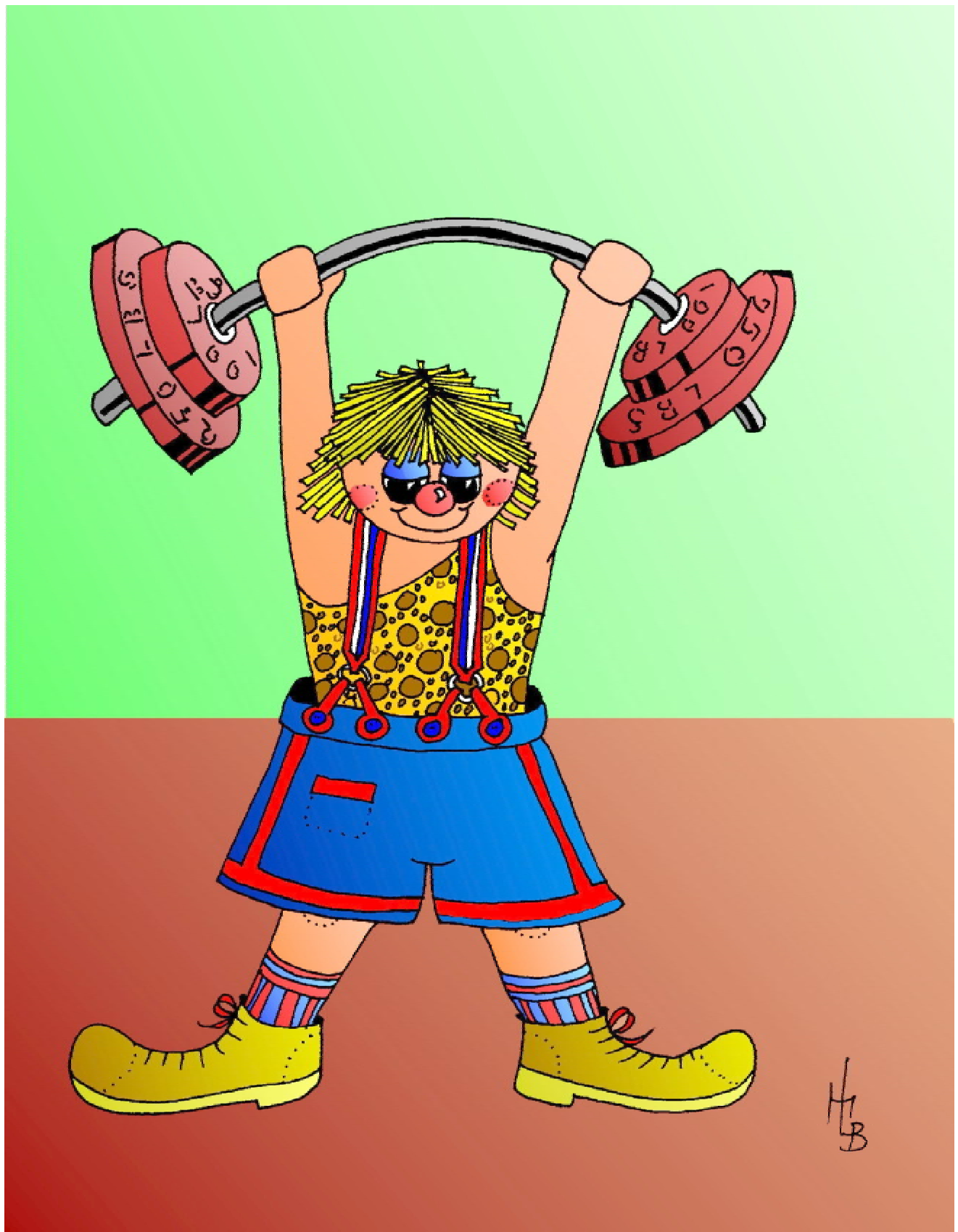
After he'd let in 25 goals, even his own teammates were rolling on the ground, laughing. No, team games were definitely not the answer.



'To finish the day', said Dolly, 'Let's do something *together*.'
So they ran a race. Saltimbanco thought he could beat Dolly, because his legs were longer. But his big feet got in the way, and Dolly won the race. So they decided that the next day, whatever Dolly did, Sal would do something completely different.



In the morning, Dolly went Hula Dancing.
She was very good at it. Dolls find it easy to bend and wiggle,
because they don't have any bones.



Saltimbanco reckoned that weight-lifting was about as different from hula as he could possibly get. But the gym attendant gave him a rubber bar to lift, and when it bent in the middle, everybody laughed.



In the afternoon, Dolly did some gardening. She loved to take a bit of ground that was nothing but mud, and dig it and smooth it and plant it until there was grass and flowers there instead. It was fun.

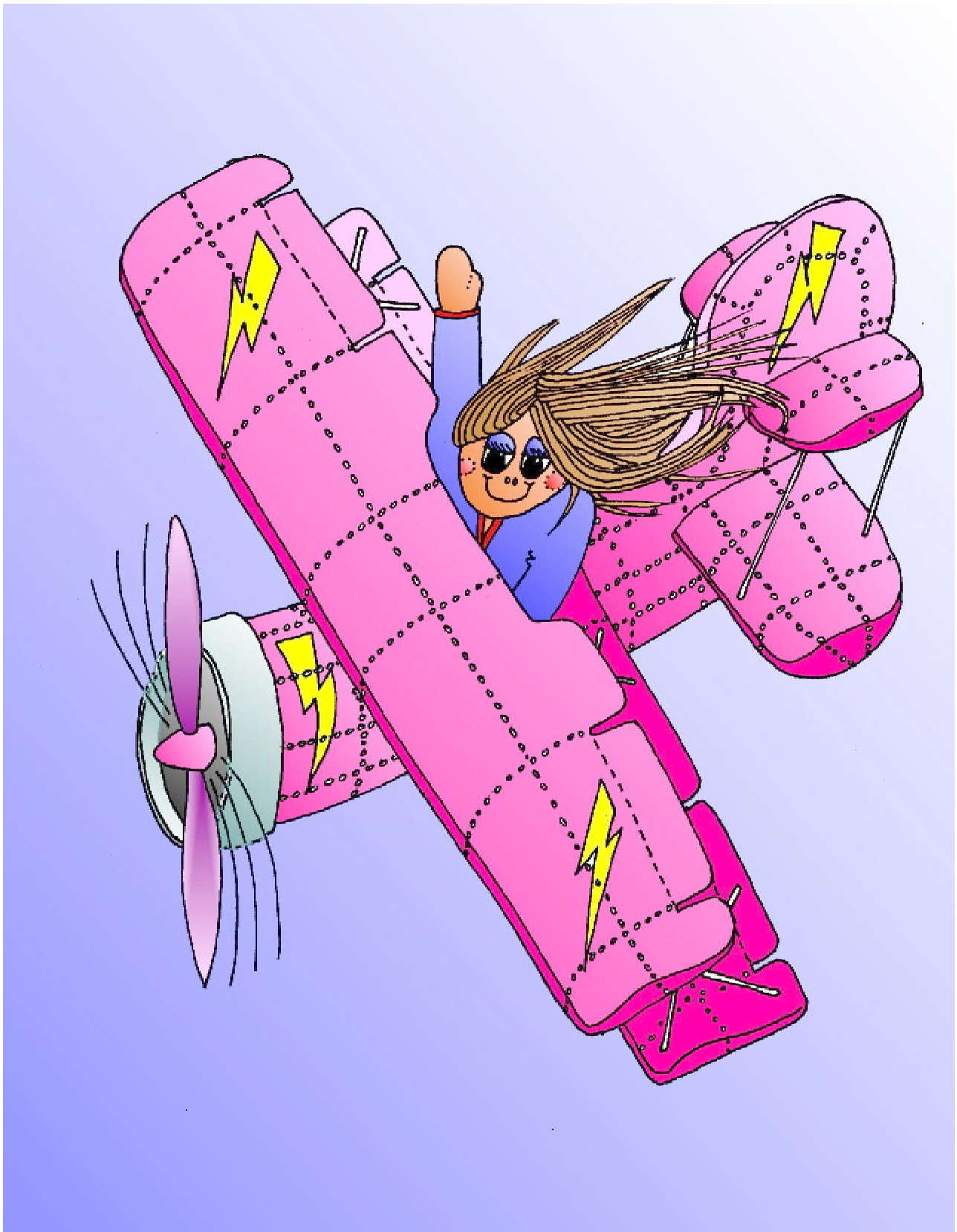


So Saltimbanco went cross-country biking.

He and the other bikers found a piece of country with grass and wild flowers, and rode over and over and over it until there was nothing but mud. That was fun, too. Unfortunately, once the mud was there, Sal just couldn't help falling in it. Everybody loved that. 'Oh, do it again!' they shouted, 'Do it again! It's so *funny*!'



With two days to go, the friends went back to the mountains and climbed up the rocks. There was nobody to watch when Saltimbanco fell off, and he would dangle at the end of the rope, saying, 'Wheeeee! This is just like flying!' And that gave Dolly an idea for the last day....



For the last day, Dolly hired an airplane. Here she is, speeding through the air and waving to.... Wait a minute! Where is her best friend, Saltimbanco the clown? Why is he not with her? Has he fallen out of the plane?

That would be just like him, but surely he'll be hurt!

The plane is a mile high in the air!



But Saltimbanco is not hurt. Dolly finally thought of the one sport that's just right for a clown, because in parachuting there's nothing to do except fall and fall and fall until you land gently on the ground. And with a parachute you fall so gracefully that nobody even thinks of laughing.



So now, when Saltimbanco gets tired of the circus and the crowds and the way they laugh at everything he does, Dolly takes him up in an airplane and he parachutes down to earth, and he loves the floating, flying feeling of the long, slow fall. And when the two friends get together again on the ground afterwards, they are so happy that they dance and dance and dance.

The End

