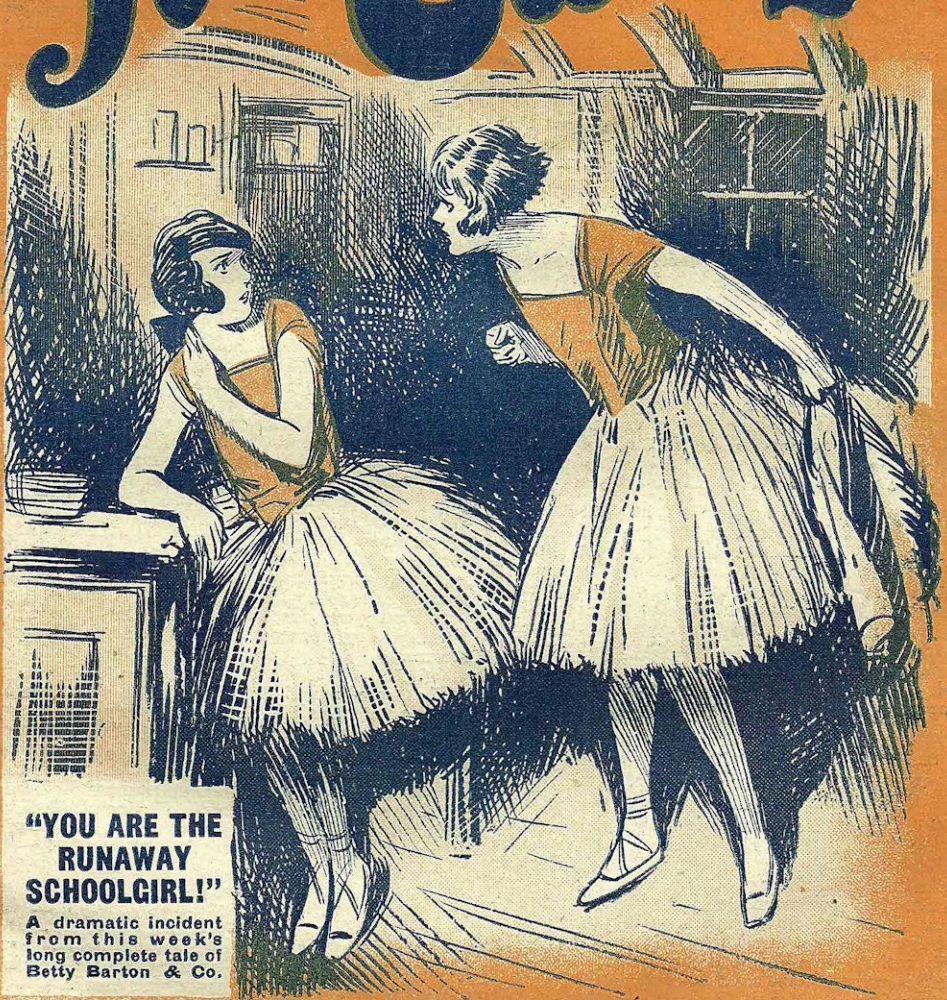


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The Schoolgirl's Own 2^d



**"YOU ARE THE
RUNAWAY
SCHOOLGIRL!"**

A dramatic incident
from this week's
long complete tale of
Betty Barton & Co.

A Fine Complete Tale of Zonia Moore, the Runaway Schoolgirl.

FROM SCHOOLROOM TO CIRCUS-RING!



By **MARJORIE STANTON.**

Anxious for the One They Love.

"**C**OME in, girls—come in! Good gracious, what a terrible thunderstorm it is for you to have been caught in! Aren't you drenched?"

"No, Mrs. Spenlow, thanks! We probably look wetter than we are—"

"Wather, bai Jove! My goodness, haw, haw, haw! Haow we did wun, geals, what! But this is all wight—wather!"

And Paula Creel showed a beaming face under her waterproof hat, as she voiced that fervent cry of relief.

It was the porch of Cliffedge Bungalow where she and three of her chums of Morcove School had just got under cover, whilst out in the open torrents of rain made a blur of the surrounding scene.

A vivid flash of lightning that went down the inky sky was only the second flare there had been so far. It was followed by an appalling crash of thunder, and then a prolonged rumbling that rendered all talk inaudible.

Mrs. Spenlow, whilst she waited for the long roll of the thunder to end, looked full of concern for the four girls. They, for their part, made haste to convince her that she need not be uneasy, by unbuttoning their dripping macs and revealing perfectly dry clothing.

"You see, Mrs. Spenlow," panted Betty Barton—for she and her chums were out of breath with running—"we started out prepared for a deluge. We have seen the storm hanging about ever since midday, and we thought it might burst at any moment."

"Then I might say, girls, what on earth possessed you to come across to the bungalow? But that would seem as if you are not welcome!" smiled Mrs. Spenlow. "Girls, you know we are always glad when you give us a look in; but this storm—"

"Ooo, I not like it!" confessed little Naomer Nakara, as the gloom was suddenly lit up by another vivid flash. "Look out, eet will be another nasty bang!"

And it was. A hurtling bang—crash! seemed to shake the very world of Morcove, and her Serene

Parted from the friends who are constantly seeking her, Zonia Moore is forced once again to take to the life of the road and countryside. Little does she know that she has been made a victim of a cunning plot, which would have been spoiled had she taken Betty Barton & Co. into her confidence.

Highness Naomer Nakara looked anything but "serene" as she stopped her ears to the thunder-clap.

"It's all right, Naomer darling!" chuckled Polly Linton. "The louder it is, the sooner it will be over, most likely."

"Pwecisely!" rejoined Paula Creel. She, however was by no means as composed as she was trying to look. "I wouldn't be afraid, deah! After all, thunderstorms serve a useful purpose, what! Good for the growing ewops, yes, wather! Tweak it as a pefectly natural phenomenon, Naomer deah, and don't be af—Ow!"

Another flash had caused a sort of crumpling-up effect upon Paula, and Betty and Polly laughed. So did Mrs. Spenlow.

"But there, I can't deny that I don't like it," the lady owned, smiling frankly. "Don't let's stand here, girls, but come in and make yourselves at home. Miriam is somewhere about the place. Mr. Spenlow has gone into Barncombe, and I only hope he has got there by now."

Then, whilst the four Morcovians were discarding their dripping macs in the porch, so as not to bring the wet into the house, the lady called loudly:

"Miriam, Miriam dear!"

"Coming, auntie!" was the faint response, hardly audible above the hurly-burly of the storm.

Mrs. Spenlow turned to the girls again.

"Were you meaning to say that you started out on purpose to come and see us, girls? If so—"

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Spenlow!" they all answered together; and then Betty found that the others were leaving it to her to explain.

"It's about poor Zonia," said Morcove's Fourth Form captain. "Only half an hour ago some news came through to the school that we felt you ought to be told about at once. So, although the sky was threatening—"

"It was good of you to think of us here at the bungalow like that!" Mrs. Spenlow exclaimed earnestly. "Any news about that poor missing girl is indeed welcome. It is just as if we had known the girl all along, we feel so concerned. And yet the strange thing is that we—my husband and I, and Miriam—we have never spoken

with Zonia Moore, never even set eyes upon her. What is the news—tell me please?"

"It's this!" Betty answered, rather excitedly. "Over at Stormwood School it was suddenly remembered that, a few days before Zonia went away so mysteriously, a man and a woman came to see her. They gave the name of Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis, and it appears that they were common-looking people—coarse and shifty-looking."

"Well?" Mrs. Spenlow questioned eagerly. "The Stormwood headmistress caused inquiries to be made about that couple. And now to-day a woman who lets lodgings at Henscombe—"

"The village near Stormwood?" Betty nodded, and continued: "This woman has come forward to say that she had two lodgers of the name of Jarvis. They have been gone from her cottage ever since last Friday morning."

"Last Friday morning—in fact, the morning after the flight of Zonia from Stormwood School?" was Mrs. Spenlow's agitated comment. "Then, surely, that points to their being concerned in the girl's disappearance!"

"Yes—?" "Yes, wather, bai Jove!" Paula said, having followed the talk with keen interest, although she was fiddling with her damped and ruffled hair. "That's what they are saying at Stormwood, Mrs. Spenlow, and—"

"It's what everybody is bound to think!" chimed in Polly. "So now it becomes a case of searching for the Jarvises as well as Zonia Moore."

"And there is no clue to the Jarvises?" "No more likelihood of finding them, it seems, than there is of finding Zonia herself!" was Betty's rueful exclamation. "Oh, what a strange mystery it all is, Mrs. Spenlow! We girls—"

"Bai Jove, the distwess in the school—?" "I can quite imagine," said Mrs. Spenlow sadly; and then she turned her troubled face to the door as Miriam Loveless came in.

"Miriam dear, have you heard what these girls have been telling me about poor Zonia Moore's case? The latest is that two people called Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis must have been concerned in her sudden disappearance. And now there is no tracing the Jarvises!"

Miriam Loveless seemed to look deathly pale; but, perhaps that was due to the wan light that filled the room. She was going to answer, but winced sharply instead as another flash of lightning came.

Then she gave a nervous jump as the thunder crashed across the darkened sky once more.

"The Jarvises?" she said, in a faltering way, after the rumbling crash had passed. "Who are the—the Jarvises?"

"Just what we all want to know!" Polly exclaimed, with a rather impatient laugh at the futile question. "If we knew that—"

"Yes, wather! Then, don't you know, we might know ewerything!" beamed Paula. "If wather stands to reason, what!"

Miriam did not answer, but she gave a glance to all four Morcovians that displayed her ill-will towards them. Mrs. Spenlow noticed this, and she clearly deplored the girl's hostile attitude.

"I can't make you out just lately, Miriam," the lady said half-reprovingly. "You might be a little nicer to Betty and her chums, when they have come here on purpose to let us have the latest news."

"I'm sorry; I'm not feeling well to-day," was the answer. "It's the weather, I suppose."

She added sullenly:

"I didn't want to come away from my room, but you called me, auntie. I was lying down."

"Oh, then, the girls will excuse your—your brusqueness?" Mrs. Spenlow instantly rejoined generously. "I should be so sorry if you gave offence, when I'm sure the girls want to be—"

Again the huriling roar right above the house-top interrupted the talk. When those in the room could make themselves heard once more, Miriam's curt mood was no longer under discussion.

There she stood, looking as if she would be glad to slip away to her room, whilst Mrs. Spenlow and the chums gravely debated the strange case of the missing Zonia Moore.

As they all realised, it was a startling development, this revelation in connection with the Jarvis couple. At the same time, it had the unfortunate effect of aggravating all the anxiety.

Hour by hour Betty and the rest were yearning for something to turn up that would throw light on the mystery—something that might even lead to the tracing of the missing girl. But this news concerning the Jarvises—it only made the case more puzzling than ever.

"Four days, now, since Zonia vanished from Stormwood School like that!" was Polly's sighing remark, when at last there was a general move towards the bungalow porch.

The deluge had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. A stiff breeze had got up, and it was taking the storm inland. Black as ink was the sky towards the south, but overhead the clouds were broken up.

"Four days—yes!" echoed Betty, resuming her mac with a very dispirited air. "It hardly seems possible that a girl could be missing for so long without something coming to light as to where she made for, and why she went away."

Naomer exclaimed in an awed tone: "Ooo, look how dark it is over there—do you see? The storm is very bad over there, and perhaps—perhaps eet is where Zonia is all this time, and she has no shelter to go to! Eef she is hiding on ze moors—"

"Naomer, don't—don't suggest such things, pway!" entreated Paula, looking almost ready to cry. "I weally can't endure the thought, you know. Poor Zonia!"

"Let us hope that she is not only safe from this fearful storm, but also safe from all other dangers!" Mrs. Spenlow murmured, standing to say good-bye to the departing scholars. "After four days, though—ah, it makes one almost despair of ever seeing her alive again! Miriam dear, the girls are going!"

This was said to draw Miriam the rest of the way to the porch, for she had lingered half-way out of the room. As moodily as ever she came out to bestow farewell nods upon the chums, and then she turned upon her heels and retreated to the privacy of her tastefully furnished bed-room.

Alone there, the handsome girl was soon showing signs of agitation. But it was not the sort of agitation that means panicky anxiety. On the contrary, she seemed to be swayed by a tremendous excitement arising out of a feeling of security and triumph.

Suddenly she was even smiling to herself, in a malicious fashion, as she muttered:

"Who are the Jarvises? Just what they all want to know, as that Polly Linton said. Well, they won't find me telling them—not likely! Let them find out for themselves, if they can!"

It was hardly a wonder that Miriam's evil grin widened as she said that under her breath. For she knew that the Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis who had

suddenly vanished from those lodgings in Henscombe village had done so to become Mr. and Mrs. Loveless again.

In other words, there never had been a real Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis; they were only Miriam's own rascally parents, in disguise.

"My clever parents," the girl was musing proudly, now, as she prowled to and fro in her bed-room—"taking jolly good care that Zonia Moore never comes face to face with the Spenslows, to let them discover who she is!"

This Other Life.

THE violent thunderstorm that had treated Morcoove to only a half-hour's deluge was not going to let off neighbouring districts so lightly.

All that evening the inky clouds hung over a portion of the beautiful Devonshire countryside that was no great distance from the coast. Steadily the heavy rain streamed down, whilst the lightning flared and the thunder continued to clatter and rumble amidst the great hills that were, perhaps, causing the storm to hang around this locality.

And for the travelling circus encamped in this rural district that was unhappily getting the very worst of the deluge, what a time of discomfort it was!

There were the lucky few who could remain snugly sheltered in the cosy living-vans or in tents that were watertight. For the majority of these hard-worked circus folk there could be no idle standing-by whilst the torrents of rain sheeted across the trampled meadow.

Men and lads were called upon to toil around, some with nothing better to protect them from the storm than a bit of sacking thrown about the shoulders. At one time, when the wind took a hand at making conditions as distressing as possible, one rigged-up canvas shelter for some horses looked like collapsing, and then it was a case of squelching about in the puddled grass to avert the disaster—a round dozen of the sturdy fellows all uniting to carry out the bawled orders of the "boss."

For even Mr. Joe Sarkey—the rather swaggering proprietor of Sarkey's Stupendous Circus—was out and about in the rain and mire, along with his oft-bullied underlings. And if they were sick at heart and bad-tempered at what they were having to endure, Mr. Sarkey was even more entitled to abuse the elements, he felt, since he was—the "boss"!

If anyone had a right to be under cover, surely it was he, Joe Sarkey, the man who owned the whole show, and whose word "went."

"But there, it's allus the way!" this same stout and red-faced worthy fumed disgustedly, when at last he was able to rejoin his good lady in the grand caravan which served as their travelling quarters. "If ever things ain't going quite smooth, Martha—if ever there's trouble o' any sort—the weather or what-not—there's no one to be trusted!"

Mrs. Sarkey, who would have fitted the caravan much better if she had been some sizes smaller around the waist, marked her entire agreement with Mr. Sarkey's sentiments by nodding in a sympathetic manner.

"Too bad it is, Joe, that you should ha' to be the one to stop around, sup'intending! There's some on 'em—why you put up with 'em another hower, I don't know! Sack 'em! I would!"

"Ay, that's all very well, Martha!" puffed

portly Mr. Sarkey, clawing off his dripping waterproof and then sitting down to get rid of his worn gum-boots. "But when you sack one o' my men for being a lazy, careless rapsallion out o' th' ring, you sack a man that's clever in the ring. I ain't a blessed farmer, and they ain't mere farm-hands!"

"Well, o' course, that's the difficulty; I see it, Joe. In our profession you must take account o' talent. Here, have this cup o' cocoa, Joe."

Mr. Sarkey, as he proceeded to sip at the beverage, was an eloquent testimony to the "grateful and comforting" virtues of hot cocoa. He was soon eyeing his devoted partner in life—incidentally, a very active partner in the profession—with the expression of a man whose cares are forgotten for the present.



THE MISSING SCHOOLGIRL!

As Mrs. Sarkey tapped on the tail-board of the cart, there came a rustling sound, and the next instant the face of a girl came through the hanging tarpaulins. It was the face of Zonia Moore.

But suddenly his forehead furrowed again, as some particularly annoying circumstances connected with the storm recurred to his mind.

"Just the riling part about it," he exclaimed huffily, "when all hands was wanted to give a bit of help at the horse-lines, one o' th' youngsters must be slinking off where he wasn't wanted to go!"

Mrs. Sarkey had been raking the bars of the tiny stove. She now set down the poker with a clatter and gazed across at her husband in a startled way.

"You mean, Joe—"

"Ay, that sheeted wagon that's our spare 'un; young Harris would ha' been making off to it, if I hadn't spotted him in time. And then—"

"Good gracious, a nice thing that would have been, Joe!" Mrs. Sarkey exclaimed dismayedly. "Then the lad would have come upon that schoolgal that we've allowed to remain in hiding! Well, it only shows, Joe, it isn't good enough to let the girl go on sheltering in that there wagon. Sooner or later some'un'll happen upon her—"

"I know, Martha; and it's my feeling, too, that it's time we did summat. The hands are not going to find out about that girl without starting to talk. She shouldn't be there, Martha."

He added, after a brooding pause:

"Not that the girl is in any way suffering by being where she is. You've seen to it that she hasn't gone hungry, and has had plenty to keep herself warm o' nights. Bat—"

"It's been made worth our while, Joe, to allow the girl to hide from them as is seeking her. There's money in it for us—"

"Ay, and money that we need badly enough, Martha," was Sarkey's gloomy rejoinder, "if the show is to go on being a draw. I've got them special expenses—renewals, and other costly items—and we aren't having the takings that we used to get."

"Then, Joe, we'd best see to it that we carry out the wishes of that woman as came to us, at dead o' night, and offered us such good money, if only we'd keep quiet about the gal being amongst us."

The showman got to his feet, nodding.

"That's the game, missis," he agreed softly. "It means no harm to the gal, and you can see the pickings there are going to be for us. Only"—and he scratched his head—"how to have the gal amongst us openly and yet not let her be traced!"

He stood looking across at his wife perplexedly, whilst he fished out his pipe and pouch. Mrs. Sarkey seemed no less at her wits' end, for she was frowning heavily for the minute that it took her husband to get his pipe drawing.

Suddenly, then, her face lit up.

"Here's my idea, Joe!" she exclaimed excitedly. "The best thing will be for the girl to be introduced by you and me to all the rest of the show as summun we've took on as a learner. Soon as ever we can, let's pretend the gal has been engaged through the post—has turned up here by appointment, so to speak—"

"Martha, that's not at all a bad notion!" Sarkey struck in, looking immensely relieved. "Your idea is that you'd go off for an hour or two and come back with the girl, as if—"

"As if I'd been to meet her at the station—yes, Joe. And who can start asking questions then?"

The showman puffed at his pipe for a moment or two. Then he nodded his decision.

"We'll do that, Martha. It won't be the first time we have had a young person join the show as a sort of learner. It'll be dust in the eyes of our own hands, and no outsiders will get suspicious. I shall trust you to carry out the plan—"

"You may trust me, Joe! As you say, there's more in it than that ten-pound note which the woman gave us the other night to hold our tongues."

A lengthy pause ensued. Possibly the showman and his wife were both recalling vividly the strange affair that had happened a few nights ago, when the circus was halted for a few hours some five miles out of Stormwood.

The pair of them had been roused up by a man

who was doing a watchman's duty, to be told that a stranger wished to have word with them. It was a woman of sinister appearance with whom they had been in talk, during the next half-hour learning from her that a schoolgirl had fled from Stormwood School and was at present hiding in a covered wagon at the tail-end of the halted procession.

Joe Sarkey would have been off in a moment to "roust out" the runaway, only the woman had suddenly flourished the ten-pound note before his eyes, and whispered that it was his, if—the girl was allowed to remain in hiding!

Nor had that mysterious visitant—Miriam's mother, and no other—gone away with that bank-note still in her possession. The showman and his wife had needed some talking round; but in the end that bribe had gone into their exchequer, and they themselves were pledged to further Mrs. Loveless's interests.

"Is the rail giving over, Joe?" came from Mrs. Sarkey all at once. "I don't 'ear it so much on the roof now."

He got to his feet again, opened the door at the rear end of the little home-on-wheels, and looked out.

"Ay—at last!" he muttered. "High time, too! There's a break in the clouds as if we'd get a fine night, after all."

Presently, indeed, the riven clouds let through such a lurid sunset light that the effect was theatrical. For a few minutes the medley of tents and cages in the waterlogged meadow caught this crimson light that was flooding through the broken-up storm-clouds. Then the fiery glow dulled, and quickly died away, and there was a misty twilight that made the lighting of old lanterns here and there give a welcome touch of cheeriness to the romantic scene.

When complete darkness was upon the resting circus, Mrs. Sarkey quietly prepared herself for out of doors, whilst her husband still sat and smoked his pipe. On the point of letting herself out of the caravan, she paused to explain her intentions in a guarded voice, and he gave his approving nod.

"You see, Joe," she whispered, "the great thing is going to be our introjucing the gal as one we've been in touch with for some time now. I shall bring her straight in here, jest as if I'd been to the station to meet her."

"Right you are, missis; you do that, and I'll answer for the rest. Keerful, though!"

"I'll watch it, Joe!" leered Mrs. Sarkey, starting to let herself out of the caravan.

And next moment she was stepping down on to the grass, to go straight across to a gateway that opened on to the highway.

The evening was not so far advanced that her movements, if observed, were likely to cause surprise, especially as there was a village close by. What Mrs. Sarkey had to be "keerful" of was her not being seen when she was turning into a narrow lane that bordered one side of the meadow, and finally scrambling through a gap in the hedge.

One thing was greatly in her favour—the heavy ground mist which was blanketing the meadow, after the sudden drenching of the sun-baked soil. Screened as much by this fog as by the darkness of night, she easily made her way unobserved to a certain outlying wagon.

It was the one that had come last in the straggling procession which the circus made when on the road.

Mrs. Sarkey, when she had crept up to the back

of this ramshackle cart, stood still to look about herself cautiously, listening. Then, stepping closer, she reached forth a hand and tapped the tail-board softly—once, twice, thrice.

Instantly there was a rustling sound from inside the cart, and next instant one of the hanging tarpaulins was drawn aside to let a white, girlish face peer out.

Deceived Again.

"SH!" gestured Mrs. Sarkey. "Come down out of that, my girl—at once, at once!"

"But—"

"Are you a-going to disobey me, when you know what a kind friend I've bin to you? Hurry, I tell you!" urged the showman's wife, in the most guarded tone. "You're to be done with hiding there, my gal!"

There was a look of great dread in Zonia's large, dark eyes. It was not that she was afraid of Mrs. Sarkey; once again it had been the poor girl's fate to be cruelly deceived, and she had been given good cause for treating this woman as a friend in need. The dread was lest Mrs. Sarkey was going to say that she, Zonia Moore, had been traced at last.

"They have come, then?" she whispered down to the woman despairingly. "The police, or other searchers—"

"No, and don't you look so scared!" was the hasty answer that left Zonia breathing freely again. "It's going to be all right for you still, dearie—better than ever, in fact! You join me in the lane as quick as you can!"

With that whispered injunction, Mrs. Sarkey started to withdraw, but she instantly turned back to speak up as softly as ever into the pitch-dark van.

"Hist! I was forgetting, dearie; mind you bring everything o' your'n away from the wagon. Look sharp, now!"

She was off again, and this time she made her way back into the misty lane, where Zonia soon came stealing up, with a small bundle hugged under one arm.

"Here I am, Mrs. Sarkey!" the girl began agitatedly. "You are going to order me to leave that bit of shelter I have had, are you? All right; I am only so grateful to you for having been so kind. I—"

"Tush, you needn't make such a fuss about the little I done for you, dearie!" Mrs. Sarkey disclaimed, for it was part of the plot that she and her husband had got to figure in Zonia's eyes as a kind-hearted couple who wanted no reward, no thanks, even, for the "pity" they had shown.

"I only wish, my gal, that I and my husband—the only ones that know—could ha' done a good deal more than jist leave you to go on hiding in that there van, and smuggle food out to you. For our 'arts, my dear, was quite touched, as I told you—"

"Ah, you have been just too wonderfully kind!" was Zonia's fresh outburst of gratitude. "Considering I could only give you such a very vague explanation as to how you came to find me hiding in that van, it is wonderful that you—"

"Yes, well, come along o' me now, dearie; quick, afore we get seen!" interrupted Mrs. Sarkey, plucking Zonia by the sleeve. "It's not far I am taking you—only half-way to the village."

"But—"

"Quiet for a bit! You'll see!"

This was said so good-humouredly, Zonia felt all sorts of vague misgivings yield place to a feel-

ing of greater confidence than ever in the woman to whom she was already so indebted. Repressing the inclination to ask questions, the girl who was Stormwood's runaway put herself into step with the showman's wife, and in a few minutes they were some distance from the circus meadow, on the nightbound highway.

"Now!" Mrs. Sarkey suddenly broke out, checking to a standstill. "See if we ain't being better friends to you nor ever. Dearie, how would you like to come straight back with me now, and become a member of the circus staff?"

The proposal was one that simply took Zonia's breath away. She gazed at Mrs. Sarkey in a stupefied manner.

"Ay, dearie, but I mean it!" the woman leered, giving an oily smoothness to her tongue. "For this is the position, you see. We can't have you going on as you have bin. On the other hand, we believe you when you say as there's a good and proper reason why you don't want to be traced—"

"And so there is—oh, indeed, there is, Mrs. Sarkey!"

"My dear, we've no reason for doubting you. We certainly haven't heard a word o' complaint agin the gal who ran away. There's only a great desire to git in touch with her. You have friends and well-wishers—"

"And it is for some of their sakes that I ran away!" Zonia exclaimed earnestly. "Because I—ah, I can't explain! But—"

"You are not arst to explain, my dear!" cut in Mrs. Sarkey soothingly. "We take your word for it, my gal, and we feel touched to the 'art by your sad state, and want to help you. Well, then, here's what I suggest, if you like to accept—only if you like to, mind! You can come back with me now, and I'll give out that you've joined up with us by arrangement—got here by the last train—"

"That won't be the truth, Mrs. Sarkey!"

"Oh dear, are you as particular as all that?" the showman's wife exclaimed, rather derisively. "All right, then; we'll say summat that does fit in more or less with the truth. I'm a lover of the truth myself, my dear, goodness knows I am! Only, being that anxious to help you—"

"Yes, and I thank you once again—"

"You shall thank Mr. Sarkey, my dear—that is, if you are willing to fall in with this suggestion?"

"Become a member of the circus?" Zonia exclaimed tensely. "Travel on with it, and—and do something to earn my keep?"

"Ay, we'll find an opening for you, dearie!" the woman nodded, leering affectionately. "I've seen you by daylight, and know what looks you have, and what a lithe little thing you are, too—jist the sort to come on well in the ring, with a bit o' training!"

Once again Zonia drew a loud breath of joyful relief.

"Mrs. Sarkey, if only I can be taken on like that, without anyone suspecting that I am Zonia Moore—oh, I will do my best; I will work hard from morning to night to repay you. You want me to come back with you at once, then? Very well, I am ready!"

"That's the way, dearie. Then come!" was Mrs. Sarkey's applauding rejoinder. "And 'tis my belief that you'll soon be quite one of the profession. A hard life it is, no denying; but it's a honest life, my gal, and summat to be proud of!"

Zonia glanced herself down as the two of them turned back towards the encampment. She was



THE SHOWMAN'S WELCOME.

"Evening, young lady. So here you are!" said the showman with enforced cheeriness. "Our new star turn, eh? You're going to become the rage and 'ave your name in big letters on the 'andbills, eh?"

no longer dressed as a schoolgirl. Her imagined friend had given her other things to wear within a few hours of what Zonia herself had believed was the "chance discovery" of her presence in the old van. So now there was nothing to fear on the score of her appearance.

Altogether, she felt there was a great and glorious chance of her remaining with the circus folk, no longer as a fugitive in hiding, but as a recognised member of the staff. And it was a prospect for which she felt she would be thanking kind Providence ere she next closed her eyes in sleep.

Safe!

She was to be undetected, untracked—safe in a new life that was free from peril, however hard a life it might prove to be. Honest employment!—the very thing she had hoped so earnestly she might be able to derive, without giving away her true identity. Oh, what a blessing it was indeed! What a fortunate thing that, on the night she fled from Stormwood School, she had come upon the encamped circus, and had found shelter for herself in that deserted van!

With an eager step she came now with Mrs. Sarkey to the entrance to the meadow. Through the misty darkness gleamed a few stable lanterns, and there were tiny, lamp-lit windows of the various caravans to look as cheerful as beacon-lights in the night. Thrilling with the excitement of the moment, Zonia yet felt pangs of alarm as she discerned shadowy figures on the move here and there. She was inclined to harg back, but her companion whispered steadily:

"Take no notice o' anyone, my dear. Just you trust to me and Mr. Sarkey to make it all right."

And so in another minute Zonia was going before the showman's wife up the few steps to the Sarkeys' own living-van door.

She had encountered no one up to now belonging to the circus except Mrs. Sarkey. To find herself suddenly face to face with such a mountebank sort of man as the showman gave her something of a surprise.

Then, whilst he and she were still meeting each other's eyes without speaking, the girl remembered that this man must be just as good-hearted as his wife, since he was a party to the daring plan that compassion had inspired.

Compassion!

Poor Zonia! How little she knew the couple for the sort they really were, and the mercenary motive that was the real cause of their being ready to shield her!

The Circus Queen.

"GOOD-EVENING—sir!" Zonia jerked out at last faintly, whilst Mrs. Sarkey followed into the van and shut the door.

"Evening, young lady! Well, there you are, hey?" the showman said, wanting to be all friendly cheeriness. "Our new star turn, is that it, hey? The coming rage, with your name in big letters on the 'andbills, isn't that it?"

"Now, Joe," remonstrated his wife, half-seriously, "don't joke and tease the poor young thing at a time like this, Joe."

"I'm not a-teasing, missis. I'm mortal sure, now the gal is afore me, she has the makings o' a star turn in her. Hold your head up, my gal, that's right! Ay, a nice, pretty, clever-looking youngster, to be sure!"

"Hold your tongue, Joe, whilst I do a bit o' thinking," Mrs. Sarkey enjoined him good-humouredly. "First of all, we must fix on a name for you, my gal. Not a programme name; that'll do later. We want—"

"A name that sounds ordinary like; one you might ha' been christened with!" threw in Joe Sarkey. "Well, let's see. There is Mabel—no, you don't look a Mabel. Elizabeth—Beth for short? But Beth what?"

"Beth Jackson," suggested Mrs. Sarkey promptly.

The showman took to the name as being a plausible one, and so in a moment Zonia became Beth Jackson of Sarkey's Circus.

"And now," Mrs. Sarkey wound up, after some further discussion, "I think it will be best if the girl gets to bed at once, for it's precious little proper rest you can have had lately—Beth! I shall take her across to Sybil's van, Joe."

"What!" exclaimed the showman. "Sybil won't like that, Martha. Best be careful there; we don't want any bother with Sybil."

Mrs. Sarkey said with unshaken confidence:

"Come along, Beth—for so we shall be allus calling you now. I know how to handle Sybil."

So they passed out into the nightbound meadow again, and Zonia found herself being conducted towards one living-van that stood somewhat apart from the others. She divined that "Sybil," whoever that person might be, came in for special consideration. Mr. Sarkey had spoken as if he rather stood in awe of her, and now Mrs. Sarkey was careful to give a polite tap upon the vandoor, before ushering in the new member of the "staff."

Zonia could pay no heed to the form in which the introduction was made. She was so impressed—fascinated is perhaps the truer word—by the personality of the girl by whom she was now confronted.

For Sybil Lemur—as her full name proved to

be—was still only a girl, even if she was a few years Zonia's senior.

It was altogether astounding to find such a comfortable little caravan given up to this one circus-girl. She certainly seemed a being apart from the rest of the circus folk; not only strikingly handsome, but with an air of being very haughty, very proud of herself.

In any case, to come under such a pair of lovely yet searching eyes would have been a disconcerting ordeal for Zonia, in her present circumstances. But pure nervousness was to become secret dismay of the wildest kind as the fugitive from Stormwood School suddenly realised—she and Sybil Lemur had seen each other before!

Yes, once before, and only just lately, they had met each other's eyes like this!

In a flash Zonia was recalling that early eventide when the travelling circus had gone rumbling past the gates of Stormwood School. Held up by the procession, she had been watching it go by; and it was then that she had seen a certain beautiful, proud-looking girl standing at the door of a caravan. This girl! And what a keen scrutiny the lovely eyes had given her then!

Was a mutual recognition taking place, then, at this moment? If so, Zonia knew what to expect! Heart in mouth, she waited for a look, a word, that would be Sybil's: "I have seen you before; I know you to be a schoolgirl—the schoolgirl who is a runaway!"

But nothing of that sort transpired, and, oh, the relief it was to the poor, fugitive girl, haunted as she was by the dread of having to go back, and of all that going back meant!

She grew calm again. Evidently her changed garb had prevented the recognition. After all, it was but a passing sight of her that this other girl had had. And now Zonia began to pay heed to what her imagined friend, Mrs. Sarkey, was saying.

"You won't mind, for once, Sybil, having someone with you? Beth is a nice girl—comes of a decent family. And although she is sort of apprenticed to me and Mr. Sarkey, I'm sure she won't mind doing for you a bit, in the van. Will you, Beth?"

"Housework, do you mean? Oh, no, of course not!" was Zonia's eager answer. "I am willing to do anything to—make myself useful. What a pretty little place this is!"

Sybil Lemur seemed to soften towards the girl who, so far, she had been regarding with haughty resentment. Zonia's words had evidently ministered to this girl's passionate pride in herself, and the position she had won. For that, Zonia was to find, accounted for such deference being paid to Sybil.

She was, in fact, the queen of Sarkey's Circus. Her performance was the great draw, and the Sarkeys stood in dread of her leaving them.

"You have had this van all to yourself up to now!" Zonia exclaimed rather incredulously, when she and Sybil had been left alone together for the night. "How the others must envy you!"

"It was the one condition on which I consented to stop," Sybil answered proudly. "My mother used to share the van with me; but she died last year—"

"Oh, I am so sorry! I—I—it must have been a cruel loss for you!" was Zonia's pitying murmur, and her eyes shone, being the tender-hearted girl that she was.

There was a pause. At that moment, Zonia felt that the other girl was on the verge of melt-

ing towards her entirely. The outburst of pity had been too genuine for Sybil to suspect that this newcomer was "buttering" her.

But, after the circus queen's starry eyes had regarded her new companion for a few moments very steadily, their look became less liquid.

"I was saying," she resumed, with a chilly aloofness, "I told the Sarkeys I must have my own van, or I would leave the show."

"And they gave in to you?"

"Gave in—of course they did!" And Sybil tossed her head round to catch her reflection in a small mirror. "They know what happened when I was laid up for a week and had to be out of the performance. What do you think you are going to do?" she asked abruptly, and with a faint, derisive smile. "Take my place in the end?"

"Oh!" Zonia said, laughing and colouring confusedly. "I can't see myself doing that! No, I—I don't quite know—"

"But you have joined the circus with some definite idea of being a star turn!"

"It—it won't be a life I shall dislike, I'm sure. I have had some experience," Zonia said, thinking of her long-ago gipsy life.

"What experience? You have had a go at theatricals, perhaps?"

"Well, yes," Zonia was sticking to the truth. She had had many a turn at theatricals during her happy days at Stormwood.

Again there was a pause, with Sybil still retaining that superior, slightly contemptuous, slightly hostile bearing.

"Oh, well!" she broke out at last, after yawning as if she felt it was the right thing for a



NO MERCY ON THE NEW GIRL.
 "Sybil, don't tell them who I am!" pleaded Zonia, but there was no pity in the other girl's face. "You are in my way," she retorted. "You will always be in my way. So you don't get me to shield you!"

proud beauty to do. "I am going to bed. The only place for you is on the floor."

"That will do for me nicely," Zonia said, still trying to conquer the other's hinted resentment. "I have had the hard earth to sleep upon before now."

Then she bit her lip, for the words had made Sybil turn round in the act of starting to undress, and the starry eyes glinted with their owner's quickened interest.

"You've had to sleep on the hard earth? Why? What were you, then—a gipsy child?"

"I—at school—we went camping. We used to roll up on the ground, under canvas."

"Oh, I see! One of those Girl Guides!"

And Sybil smiled again, derisively, then resumed her disrobing. If she spoke again during the next few minutes, it was only to tell Zonia how best to lie along the floor, and what coverings she could have.

Zonia was ready for sleep in a jiffy, and only waiting for Sybil to settle down in the narrow bunk at the forward end of the van before rolling up on the floor. It would never have done for Zonia to lie down before the other girl was in bed, for she would have been in that girl's way.

But at last the circus-rider was in her clean and comfortable little bunk, and she said a cold good-night to Zonia, without inquiring if that girl would be quite comfortable.

This left Zonia still in doubt as to whether she was going to have a friend in Sybil, after all, or was to find that proud beauty treating her with coldness and contempt. The difference it would make, one way or the other!

So Zonia could not help thinking, distressfully, when at last she was settled for the night. The lamp had been turned out, but through one little muslin-curtained window came a little light from a young moon. And suddenly Zonia felt compelled to lift herself up on one elbow, as she lay along the van-floor, and to gaze earnestly, anxiously at the occupant of the bunk.

She was already asleep, apparently, for the glimmer of moonlight upon her beautiful face showed the eyes to be closed. Her lips were parted in a faint smile that might mean cruelty or kindness—impossible to say which!

What, then, was the girl's nature going to prove in the long run? What her attitude towards Zonia?

That poor child of destiny wondered. Somehow, as she gazed upwards at the sleeper, she felt that all depended upon that. Friend or enemy—which?

And, like a mere teasing, baffling answer to that anxious question, Sybil still smiled that enigmatic smile in her sleep, so that at last there came a faint sigh of suspense from Zonia, as she laid herself down again, to try and forget all her trials and troubles in the slumber that she longed for.

Tense Moments for Miriam.

"GIRLS, if you care to go at once—"
"Ooo, yes, queek, queek, what is it?"
Miss Redgrave—

"Yes, wather, haw, haw! Bai Jove—"

"How you jump down one's throat, some of you!" was Miss Redgrave's smiling comment on the excitable outburst her appearance in Study 12 at Morcove had caused.

She was fending off Naomer as she said it, but suddenly she let the dusky one come at her again in one of those loving rushes for which Morcove's royal scholar was renowned.

"I love you, Mees Redgrave, and please, what ees it we can do, if we go at once?"

"Well, give me a chance to speak!" laughed the popular Fourth Form mistress. "Betty dear—Polly; there is room in the car for four of you, if you would like a spin?"

"Bai Jove! How wipping! Geals—"

"Car? Whose car?" was Betty's wondering cry, as she and Polly began to look just as eager as Paula and Naomer. "Miss Somerfield's?"

"No, girls. It is Mrs. Spenlow who is ready to take you for a run round, if you like to go. She and Miriam Loveless have just had tea with Miss Somerfield. They are going off now, and you have this invitation—"

"Hooway! Hoowah! Geals, I must wush and get myself to wights! Bai Jove, excuse me, Miss Wedgwavel! Yes, wather, haw, haw, haw!"

And Paula, floating past the smiling mistress, was gone in a flash from Study 12, to make herself just-so for the jaunt.

Naomer also scampered away to prepare herself. This being Betty and Polly's study, those two were able to prepare for out of doors on the spot. That they did so in a very short space of time there is no need to say.

Even Paula Creel, wonderful to tell, was down at the front porch with the three other girls, before a couple of minutes had elapsed.

A magnificent six-seater was standing on the gravel, with Mrs. Spenlow at the wheel. Beside this lady sat her so-called niece, the as-good-as-adopted Miriam. The girl was playing a gracious part in that good-bye which was being said between Mrs. Spenlow and the school's headmistress, who now smiled upon the chums affectionately.

"Isn't it kind of Mrs. Spenlow to offer you the ride, girls?"

"Bai Jove—"

"Rather! Thanks awfully, Mrs. Spenlow!" cried Betty and Polly, whilst Naomer capered on the gravel and clapped her hands.

"Bet will be jolly, yes! Which way do we go, please? Let us go miles and miles, please! Let us go feefy mile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You have all been so kind to us at the bungalow," said Mrs. Spenlow, looking round to see that the girls settled down nice and comfortably. "Ready?"

"Yes, wather! Haw, haw, haw! Geals—good-bye, Miss Somerfield! Bai Jove, gwand, what? Hooway!"

"Good-by-ee!" shrilled Naomer, merrily, and the headmistress stood waving a hand gaily as the car hummed off.

Betty & Co. were not surprised to find Mrs. Spenlow at the wheel of a car like this. They knew that she and her husband were keen motorists. Their own car was laid up, and so they had hired one from the Barncombe garage, now that they were settled at Cliffedge Bungalow. It was like this genial, good-natured couple not to make a grand show with their ample wealth, but to live such a quiet holiday life at the bungalow, with only one maid.

To be suddenly whipped off on a joy ride like this, however—it was a great surprise for the chums. If Mrs. Spenlow had cared to give heed to all the exclamatory talk that was going on behind her, as she sent the car speeding along the leafy highways, she would have heard much in praise of herself.

But she was all for giving close attention to the driving, and only Miriam gave ear to the chatter

going on in the body of the car. It should have pleased that girl to hear her own benefactress being praised by the Morcovians; but it had just the opposite effect upon her with her nasty, crafty nature.

She was, in fact, secretly up in arms against the chums being out for this joy ride. Miriam was one of those girls who want everything for themselves—money, pleasure, everything! What else but that selfish, jealous disposition had set her in dread of the Spenlows' possible discovery of their own long-lost daughter?

As to Zonia Moore, however, Miriam was able to feel much more at ease now. Now that a full week had passed since the one-time gipsy girl had fled from Morcove School, and still her whereabouts were all unknown.

Full well Miriam knew where Zonia was to-day. Only this morning there had been a letter for Miriam at the bungalow—a letter that she had not shown the Spenlows, although it was from her parents.

Her mother it was who had written, confiding information that must be breathed to no one else. All was going splendidly. Zonia was no longer hiding herself away, in fear of being found and taken back to Stormwood. The showman and his wife had been bribed, and now Zonia was installed amongst the circus-folk under an assumed name, and disguised beyond recognition.

That letter—Miriam had burnt it the instant her eyes had excitedly devoured it. Yet she felt she would remember it as if she had read it twenty times over. It had been such splendid news. Zonia, only too glad to embark upon the circus life, under an assumed name, and the showman and his wife only too glad to be bribed to silence! What could be better—not from Zonia's point of view, certainly, but from one's own selfish standpoint.

After a half-hour's steady run Mrs. Spenlow brought the car to a standstill at the crest of a hill. The surrounding views were magnificent. All the fair world of Glorious Devon seemed to be spread before the eye, with the mellow light of early evening upon it.

"Bai Jove, geals, that's weally gwand!" beamed Paula.

"It is!" said Polly heartily. "Good old Devon—my county, and beat it if you can!"

Miriam was the only one to make no response to this. The others all agreed that Devon would take some beating, whilst their eyes roamed the wide expanse of hill and vale.

Some parts of the landscape were patterned out by the tilled fields mingling with green pastures, whilst there were wild places where the heather grew, and many a great old woodland deep in the fold of the hills.

"How pretty that village spire looks, far down there," Mrs. Spenlow murmured presently. "You Morcove girls know every inch of the district. What is the name of that village, girls?"

"Brenscombe—quite an important little market town," said Polly. "They have the railway at Brenscombe!"

"Ooo, and look, they have a circus, too!" was Naomer's quaint rejoinder. "You see the sun shining on ze big tent? How I would like to visit the circus when he is showing!"

Mrs. Spenlow laughed.

"We have missed the afternoon performance, and are too early for the evening one. But we'll take in Brenscombe on our run round, if that will please your majesty!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" chuckled Paula, with the result that she got a dig in the ribs from Naomer, who resented the giggle.

"Yes, please!" the dusky one entreated joyfully. "Then we can ask if they are coming to Barncombe some time soon!"

"Oh, we don't want to go to Brenscombe!" was the sulky exclamation with which Miriam suddenly startled her companions. "Auntie—"

"Why, Miriam, what ever makes you so cross? Really, just lately you have been a touchy girl!" the lady said regretfully. "I think it will be best to see about your attending school again, Miriam. The term's absence that the doctor recommended doesn't seem to be answering."

She added, at the same time starting the car: "We shall go to Brenscombe, and stop at the circus. Naomer would like it, and in any case this is a treat for her and her chums, Miriam. You have your treats, you know."

The censured girl did not answer, but lapsed into a silence that may have seemed a mere sulky one. It was, however, the silence of one in utter dismay.

A travelling circus at Brenscombe!

Was there any doubt that it was Sarkey's Circus? And "auntie" meant to let them all get down to have a look round!

No wonder Miriam's heart was going thug-thug violently. She was thankful to have the cool breeze buffeting against her face as the car ran on, working down to the little market town that nestled amongst the hills. She felt as if she was on the verge of a swoon.

When all had seemed to be going so well—this sudden fateful happening! It was too bad—maddening!

Nearer, nearer they drew, rapidly, to that tented field which had been four miles away when they first sighted it. Miriam gritted her teeth as she strove to keep calm in the face of what seemed to be certain disaster to all the recent plotting and bribery. Zonia was amongst those circus-folk—Zonia!

And now the car did a nice, fast spin along a bit of level road, and was suddenly pulled up by its skilful driver at the entrance to the circus meadow.

Out jumped the Morcovians, brimming over with high spirits. Naomer for one went scampering off across the grass, towards the huge marquee, as fast as her legs would carry her.

"Come, Miriam, don't be unsociable!" Mrs. Spenlow appealed to that girl, who seemed to want to remain in the car. "We are all going to have a look round. I don't suppose the circus-folk will mind. What a little colony of its own it is!"

"Yes, wather! Geals—" Paula began, but broke off to listen to what Naomer was shrilling across to them, having reached the entrance to the marquee.

"Queek, queek! Eet is a performance!"

"Weally? Bai Jove—"

"Can't be!" doubted Polly shrewdly. "Naomer must mean that it is a rehearsal. Still!"

"Yes, wather!"

And forward they went, eagerly, Miriam sullenly keeping them company. As they passed a man who was carrying buckets of water to the horse-lines, Mrs. Spenlow inquired, was there a performance going on, or only a rehearsal? In any case, they could have a look?

"Certainly, lady; the boss won't mind," the man said, setting down his pails first to touch his

forelock and then to receive with pleased surprise the "tip" that Mrs. Spenlow slipped him. "It's a rehearsal."

"How jolly! A peep behind the scenes for us!" Polly said gaily, running on to where Naomer was already peeping into the marquee.

Next minute the entire party of them had quietly stepped past the curtained entrance, and were standing fascinated by what was going on.

In the centre of the ring was a stout woman who was doing duty as the ringmaster. She held the long whip, to the crack, crack of which a fine white charger was prancing round and round, with a broad flat saddle on which the circus-rider had to do her equestrian tricks.

But the girl who was going round and round with the horse was evidently a beginner. She had a belt round her waist, and from this belt ran a lifeline, to save her if she missed her footing.

The lifeline ran from the rider's waist up to an extension from the centre pole, where it passed through a pulley and down to someone who had hold of the other end. This person, the chums presently noticed, was a girl of about seventeen. She looked as if she was an expert rider, and she was evidently a bit amused and a bit scornful at the way the learner kept on falling off the saddle.

Every time the learner slipped like this, she was swung by the lifeline, the other girl letting her down gently to the ground. Then the exercise had to begin all over again.

Both girls were in circus attire, and Betty & Co. would have found it hard to decide which they thought the lovelier of the two. In any case, their admiration was all for the younger

one, the learner, because she had such pluck and perseverance, and took her repeated falls so patiently.

Nor was it long before she suddenly reaped the just reward for such a dogged spirit.

All at once, whilst the uninvited motorists were still looking on, amidst the tiers of empty seats, the novice went round and round again without a slip.

"Bai Jove, she's getting on, geals!" Paula murmured softly, and the stout woman in the ring-centre seemed to think that a word of praise had been earned.

"That's the way, Beth—bravo!" applauded Mrs. Sarkey, with a creak-crack of the whip. "Faster now—keepful! That's right, my gel!"

Six times round the learner went with the prancing horse, standing aloft upon the saddle, and eagerly the Morcovians still watched, little dreaming who the rider was.

A girl belonging to the circus, dressed as for a performance and practising hard at the ring-riding—how could they associate her with Zonia, the runaway from Stormwood School?

They needed to stand quite close to the girl, in a place as dim as that great marquee was, to know her by her looks.

But, if the chums were not to make the sensational discovery, Zonia was to have the sudden appalling shock of knowing who was here.

Not a glance as yet had she given the people who had strayed inside, being so intent upon her task. Even as she made that circuit of the ring for the sixth time, however, and was fairly panting for breath, the schoolgirls could no longer suppress their admiration.

"Bravo, bravo!" Polly led off; and whilst Betty sang out to the same effect, Paula exclaimed loudly:

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals, she can do it!" "Ket is so clever; she look so pretty—I love her!" was Naomer's delighted outburst. "Bravo, yes, bravo!"

Those voices—all so familiar, so dear, to the schoolgirl runaway!

She all but gave a wild cry of surprise and dismay, and next second—thrown into utter confusion as she was—the poor girl lost her balance and tumbled away from the galloping horse, to swing helplessly by the lifeline.

And now, as she was realising dismayedly, it was only necessary for Betty and the rest to come rushing a little closer, to know her in an instant.

What Jealousy Can Do.

THE older girl who had charge of the line let the novice down to the ground as a matter of course. Neither she nor Mrs. Sarkey saw anything unusual in what had happened. But poor, bewildered Zonia could hardly rise erect, her brain was in such a whirl, and then the showman's wife hurried towards her.

"What's the matter, my gel? You're not hurt, are you? You can't be, not when—"

"No, it's those people!" was Zonia's gasping whisper. "Send them away—send them away! Those girls know me!"

It was Mrs. Sarkey's turn to feel ready to collapse. In a palpitating way she turned round, stared wildly at the intruders, then made signs to Sybil Lemur to turn them out.

Not a word could Mrs. Sarkey voice; she was too flabbergasted. She could only rely upon Sybil to read the gestures aright.

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of
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Next second that handsome girl was advancing quickly towards Mrs. Spenlow and the girls.

"You can't stay there, ma'am; it isn't allowed."

"Oh, sorry! But we were told—"

"This is a rehearsal; we don't allow visitors. It's bad for those who are practising their turns."

Mrs. Spenlow did more than look apologetic. Somehow a pound-note was in her hand suddenly, and she was saying as she passed it to Sybil:

"That's to make amends for the intrusion, then. If you would let that girl have it, please? She has earned it—"

"Yes, wather! Bwavo, you!" Paula cried, beaming across to the still unrecognised Zonia, who was keeping her back turned to them all. "Bwiliant pwogwess!"

"She will be quite the queen of the circus before long, I'm sure!" said Polly, and at the words Sybil's eyes gleamed jealously, as the chums could have noticed, only they themselves were all eyes for the learner.

"Queen of the circus—bah! You don't know

older one, in a different sense!" added Betty glumly. "Such jealousy—"

"We shouldn't have gone in!" interjected Miriam sullenly. "It serves us right! These circus people—they're always a rude lot!"

Meantime, Sybil Lemur was standing just short of the tent entrance, watching the motorists as they tramped across to their car. Not until they had driven off did she make the least movement. Then, however, she gave a haughty turn and stalked gracefully back into the ring.

Mrs. Sarkey had called to one of the stablemen to fetch the horse away, and now Zonia was fumbling nervously to unhook the lifeline from the belt about her waist. She was trembling and breathless. The showman's wife began:

"She's done enough, Beih has, Sybil dear—"

"Oh, she is a marvel—those people said so, and they ought to know!" was the circus-rider's scathing outburst. "Here, you!"—and she held out the pound-note to "Beih." "That's yours, so take it!"



THE PANGS OF JEALOUSY! "Queen of the circus! That girl!" was the scornful exclamation from Sybil. "Bah! Do you think I am ever going to take second place to her? Pass out of the tent, please. You had no right to come in!"

what you are saying!" was the fiercely scornful exclamation with which the older circus-girl suddenly startled them all. "Do you think I am ever going to take second place to that girl? Pass out, please!"

"We are going—"

"You should never have come in!"

It was a retort so passionately insolent that Mrs. Spenlow and the chums felt quite upset. Very uncomfortably they made their hasty exit, conscious of being watched out of sight by one whose beautiful face was white with rage.

"Good gwacious!" Paula breathed, as soon as they were in the open air. "What did we do for her to break out like that?"

"Some jealousy there, I'm afraid," Mrs. Spenlow lamented distressfully. "It was our praising that younger girl—and I suppose my saying the money was to be given to her, all helped to aggravate the jealousy."

"Well, I hope that girl gets it from the older one—the money, I mean," said Polly.

"I only hope the girl doesn't 'get it' from the

"Oh, Sybil—Sybil, wait!" was Zonia's pleading cry, as the older girl turned and strode away, chin in air. "It is for us to share, Sybil—"

"Who wants to share with you?" came fiercely from the girl whose worst fault was her intense jealousy. "D'you think I've no pride?"

"Now, now, Sybil dearie!" Mrs. Sarkey intervened; but the passionate girl paid no heed. With a fling of her handsome dark head she quitted the ring and went straight to her living-van.

Giving a slam to the door, she sat down. Angrily her hands were clenched in her lap. She could not get over the fancied slight that had been put upon her, but muttered fiercely:

"I am to be no one, am I, now that that pert thing has come along? Who is she, I would like to know? Where does she come from, that I should have to—"

The jealous girl abruptly ended her passionate mutterings. Sitting forward in a startled manner, she stared hard at the little heap of apparel which the Sarkeys' "learner" had discarded an hour ago, to dress for the rehearsal.

After a moment or so, Sybil started out of her chair and clutched at one of Zonia's garments. She took it to the small window to examine a certain part of it—a bit of the hemmed neck-opening—that had a frayed appearance.

The closer inspection convinced Sybil; a clever hand had been busy here, to unpick a name that had been stitched into the material.

At that instant she heard Beth mounting the van-steps. She flung back the garment, and was looking unconcerned about it when the younger girl entered.

"Sybil, you are angry with me, but why?" Zonia exclaimed distressfully. "Oh, I am so sorry if I have—"

"Don't talk to me!" flared out the jealous circus queen, stamping a foot. "It's bad enough to have to put up with your presence here! Crowding out my van—always in my way—coming in for all the praise and petting—"

"Sybil!"
"You needn't try to excuse yourself, I tell you. It won't answer!" was the vehement response to poor Zonia's regretful cry. "I say it is enough to have to put up with you. Put up with you? But why should I? I won't! Either you leave the circus or I will, and the Sarkeys shall know it!"

The younger girl was pale and shaking again. What wonder, when this outburst of passionate animosity had followed so soon upon the other upset? She made a pleading gesture, hoping to appease Sybil, but that girl stormed on:

"A cuckoo in the nest—that's what you are! It's an artful dodge on the part of the Sarkeys to get someone who will take my place in time! I watch that you don't take it, though! Who are you? And that reminds me!" the infuriated girl broke off, with a sudden snatch at the garment she had been examining. "What about this?"

She held it out, displaying the part that had had the owner's name picked out of it.

"What does that mean, Beth Jackson? Why did you have to pick the name out of your clothing before you joined the circus? You can't answer! There's no need to answer, for I can guess!"

"Sybil—"
"You are a fraud—a little fraud!" the circus queen cried fiercely, flinging the bit of clothing at the object of her jealous rage. "Beth Jackson is not your real name—deny it if you can! You are some girl who—"

Again the vehement voice fell silent suddenly. Sybil was bending towards the quailing Zonia, to scrutinise her closely.

"You! I know you now!" the circus queen exclaimed excitedly, after a moment. "No wonder I felt there was something in that pretty face of yours that was familiar. You are a school-girl I noticed the other day. You are the runaway scholar from Stormwood School!"

There was a moaning cry for pity from Zonia, as she shrank away from her denouncer, with a trembling hand in front of her eyes.

"It's true!" hissed Sybil. "So that is what you are, and now that I have found you out—"

"Sybil, stop! Listen to me—oh, please!" Zonia moaned imploringly. "Have a little pity! I did it for the best of reasons! I thought you might be my friend—"

"Your friend! Friend to a girl who is out to take away my living! No, I am not your friend," Sybil said furiously. "so don't think it! You'll go back to the school you ran away from—"

"I can't—I daren't! Oh, Sybil, if you only knew!" wept Zonia. "Let me explain—"

"No! Get out of my way; let me get to the door—"

"Sybil, wait!" Zonia was desperately barring the way, the tears streaming down her deathly face. "I will do anything, bear with anything, rather than have to—"

"You are in my way! You always will be in my way, whilst you are here! So, then, you don't get me to shield you!"

With the words, Sybil roughly dashed the other girl aside, and then stamped past her to the door. A hand whipped it open fiercely, and next instant the circus queen was gone from the van, whilst poor, distraught Zonia crashed down into a chair and gave way to wild weeping.

All over now!

So she was thinking, in a very frenzy of despair. She was to be publicly denounced, which meant being taken back to Stormwood. Taken back, not to resume the old happy school-life—ah, if only she could think so! But no, it meant the other thing.

It meant—it must mean!—going back, only to have to make one's life with those ne'er-do-wells who had claimed her as their daughter. Either that, or submitting, after all, to that cruel batten- ing upon the Bartons which clashed with every idea the poor girl had of what was right and honest!

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

Will Sybil keep her threat? Will she tell the Morcove girls where Zonia is hiding? And will that lead to Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow discovering their long-lost daughter at last? You must not miss next Tuesday's fine complete tale, which is entitled: "The Circus Girl's Secret!"



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