

HILDA RICHARDS

BESSIE BUNTER JOINS THE CIRCUS

CHAPTER I **At the Roadside**

‘WE’RE early,’ commented Barbara Redfern, glancing round. ‘I don’t see Sheila, Janet.’

Janet Jordan, of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, and the daughter of Jonathan Jordan, the proprietor of the world-famous Jordan’s Gigantic Circus, Menagerie, and Fun Fair, gazed up at the big clock that overhung the platform at Westhampton Station, and nodded.

‘Bessie’s fault,’ Jemima Carstairs put in. ‘You see what you’ve let us in for, Bessie!’

Bessie Bunter, the fattest girl in the party, blinked.

‘Oh, really, Jemima, I don’t see that you can blame it on me!’

‘Well, who was it who insisted on catching the luncheon train instead of the three-thirty, as arranged?’ Jemima asked. ‘Janet’s sister arranged to meet the three-thirty, didn’t she, which doesn’t get into this station for another hour or more. You can’t back out of it, you know, my fat Spartan! It was your appetite that brought us here.’

‘Well, we couldn’t miss lunch, could we?’ Bessie protested indignantly.

‘Well, the question is,’ broke in Mabel Lynn, ‘what are we to do? Wait about here for Sheila, or what?’

But Barbara Redfern shook her pretty brown head.

‘No, that’s silly,’ she said. ‘Besides, it’s none too warm. I vote we make our way to the circus by ourselves and save Sheila the trouble of coming to meet us. I suppose you haven’t any idea how far away the circus is, Janet?’

‘Not how far. I know it’s being held at Bigswell Hall, and that, I believe, is on the outskirts of the town. I’ve not been there since I was a kid.’

The chums nodded at that. There were seven of them altogether. Barbara, the pretty blue-eyed leader of the party; Janet herself; Clara Trevlyn, the tomboy; Marjorie Hazeldene; Jemima Carstairs, of the sleek Eton crop and the inevitable monocle; Mabel Lynn, Babs’ golden-haired lieutenant; and lastly, and most conspicuously, Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter.

Just a fortnight remained before they must return for the new term at Cliff House School, and for that fortnight the seven of them — known

collectively as Babs and Co. when at Cliff House School — had accepted the delightful invitation of Janet Jordan's father to be his guests at the circus.

Janet, who had been stopping with Babs, Mabs, and Clara at Babs' home at Holly Hall, in Hampshire, had asked her elder sister, Sheila, to meet them on the three-thirty train's arrival at Westhampton, never realising at the time that the train had not a restaurant car attached.

But Bessie, in London, had insisted upon travelling by restaurant train. Otherwise it would have meant their missing lunch; and to have missed a lunch would have spoiled Bessie's holiday for days to come!

So here they were, an hour and a half before their time.

'It's not much good waiting for Sheila,' Janet said. 'The afternoon performance is on now, you know, and Sheila's one of the turns. She comes late in the bill, too. I vote we push on.'

'Unless we spend the time in the station buffet,' Bessie suggested eagerly. 'I say, that's a jolly good idea, you know! Besides, I — I could do with a snack after that long train journey. Train journeys make me fearfully hungry, you know. And it wasn't such a good lunch, was it?' 'Well, you seemed to enjoy it all right,' Clara sniffed. 'You managed to tackle all the courses, didn't you?'

'Oh, really, Clara, if you're going to throw that in my face —' Jemima shook her head.

"Those," Bessie, old Spartan. Remember your grammar, you know,' she chided severely. 'When speaking in the plural you should say "those," not "that."'

'You were referring to many courses, not one.'

'Well?' Bessie glared stonily.

"Those," Jemima went on, pulling Bessie's leg, and quite prepared, apparently, to lecture at length, 'means more than one —'

'Oh, chuck it, Jimmy!' Clara pleaded. 'You'll give us all a headache.'

Now, Janet votes we push on. I second that. Any supporters?'

'But look here, you know —' Bessie said warmly.

'We won't look here! The thing,' Clara went on, 'is to hire taxis. Bessie'll pay, seeing that she got us into this fix. Come on, everybody.'

'But I haven't got any money!'

'Oh, Bessie!'

'Didn't old Lord Diddlums de Bunter give you a tip before you came away?'

'But look here —'

'Taxi!' sang Clara gaily; and, chuckling mischievously, she ran up the platform.

Bessie glowered. But there was no help for it, it seemed, but to run after her chums. Fortunately, they had sent on their luggage in advance, and so

had no encumbrances. Taxis were waiting — a whole rank of them. Babs held the door of one open.

‘Jump in!’ she cried gaily. ‘This way, Mabs! This way, Jimmy! Come on, Janet! Bessie, you follow in the next with Clara and Marjorie.’

‘But I say —’

‘All aboard? Right we are!’ Babs sang out serenely. ‘Jordan’s Circus,’ she instructed the taxi-driver. ‘Know where it is?’

The man grinned broadly.

‘Who doesn’t?’ he chuckled.

Out of the huge station the taxi rolled, threading its way through a maze of other vehicles in the High Street.

Westhampton, on first acquaintance, was not an inspiring-looking town.

It was, as a matter of fact, an industrial district in the southern Midlands, and quite the biggest town for miles around.

To make matters worse, a fine drizzle of cold rain was falling, and the streets were congested. More than once they had to stop.

Apparently the one thing worth seeing and worth knowing in

Westhampton at that moment was Jordan’s Gigantic Circus. Bills and posters were plastered everywhere, depicting people doing most extraordinary things.

The cab, held up by a policeman, came to a standstill once more, and Babs found herself staring at a huge hoarding. A gaily coloured poster showed Fearless Ferdinand wrestling with three grown lions at the same time. Another showed a marvellous illusionist producing a sleeping woman, apparently, from mid-air. Still a third featured the weird doings of Dagmar, the Kashmir snake-charmer.

Babs laughed delightedly.

‘And we’ll see all this?’ she asked.

‘Free seats for every show!’ Janet promised.

Then Babs’ attention became caught and held by another poster — this time of a very pretty girl, dressed in a filmy costume, and mounted on a box, which was surrounded by a number of dogs of all descriptions and breeds, dressed in little red jackets. ‘She looks pretty,’ she said, and read out: ‘“Doreen, the Dog Charmer! The Most Wonderful Girl on Earth!” Who is she, Janet?’

Janet smiled.

‘One of daddy’s big finds,’ she replied. ‘She joined the circus with her father about six months ago. She’s rather clever with those dogs, I hear.’

‘Is she as pretty as the poster shows her?’

‘Well, my sister Sheila says so. Sheila says that she’s quite a draw. The crowds like her, you know. She’s only thirteen.’

‘My goodness! As young as that?’

‘And daddy has put her at the top of the bill for this district,’ Janet went

on. 'He gives her an awful lot of money, too. I think she gets something like twenty pounds a week.'

The cab splashed on, threading its way now down a maze of narrow back streets, obviously the homes of artisans who lived in the district. Then away, out into flat, open country, looking rather depressing in the January drizzle and the deepening dusk.

Now to their ears came, faintly and far-off, the blare of trumpets, the shrill, raucously sounding music of roundabouts and fun fair.

They were drawing near their destination at last!

Babs tingled!

Circus films, preferably those featuring beautiful, dashing film stars, were her favourites. Circus stories she could read by the hour.

But to live in a circus, to mix and move and talk with the circus stars day after day — that, indeed, was an experience she had longed for and dreamed of. And now it was to become a practical accomplishment.

'Afternoon performance just ending,' Janet said, glancing at her wrist-watch. 'We shall be there in time for tea.'

The taxi was speeding through fields now. The road was bumpy and filled with pot-holes, which probably accounted for there being little traffic upon it.

And then, ahead, at the side of the road, Babs saw a dog — such a large dog, that at first she took it to be a small pony or a donkey — squatting ridiculously upon its haunches.

She watched it with interest, and then regarded a girl who sat near it upon a boundary stone at the side of the road. As the taxi drew level the dog sat up, holding up its forepaws.

'Oh, what a lovely beastie!' Mabel Lynn cried. 'I say, Babs, stop the taxi a minute! It's begging! I must give it something!'

Babs smiled. She knocked on the window, and the cab came to a standstill.

She saw now that it was a St. Bernard, and certainly one of the finest specimens of its breed she had ever seen. It looked up at her pleadingly as she came forward.

'Oh, you beautiful old thing!' Babs cried, and ruffled its head. The dog dropped to all fours, looking at her with its expressive brown eyes.

'Bruno!' whispered the girl by the animal's side.

Once again Bruno raised himself, squatting on his hindquarters. He looked up at Babs and barked.

Babs laughed.

'Well, old fellow, what is it, then?'

Again Bruno barked. This time, however, he looked at his mistress. One great paw, as thick round as the trunk of a small tree, stretched forward, resting a moment upon Babs' dainty glove. He wanted her to speak to his

mistress.

‘You darling!’ Babs cried, understanding, and ruffled his head again. ‘Is he yours?’ she asked of the girl.

The girl looked up, smiling faintly. And Babs’ own face became a little overshadowed as she saw the pain in its expression.

She was attracted at once by the girl — wonderfully pretty indeed, with her curving lips, her delicate, shapely little nose, those big, wide, blue eyes.

But she was poor — obviously poor. The thin coat she wore was ragged at the edges of the sleeves, the shoulders threadbare. Her shoes, though clean, were obviously a size or so too big for her.

An overwhelming pity swept over Babs. Poor girl! So slight, so young, so pretty — and yet in this dire poverty.

‘Yes, he is mine,’ she whispered.

‘But you —’ And Babs stared down again at the girl, wondering faintly. Her face seemed familiar, and yet she knew she had never seen this girl before in her life.

It struck her as remarkable, too, that a girl in such poor circumstances should possess such an obviously expensive clog.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, hardly knowing why she said that. ‘You’ve been crying, haven’t you?’

The other taxi had stopped now. Bessie, Clara, and Marjorie joined them as they stood there. Clara, an ardent lover of animals herself — especially dogs — was fondling Bruno’s ponderous ears.

The girl smiled twistedly.

‘It was nothing,’ she said. ‘I — I —’ And stopped, crimsoning. ‘Well, you see,’ she added, ‘your friend was right. Bruno was — was begging! For — for me.’ The girl looked shamefaced. ‘I — I didn’t want to do it, really, but — but, you see, I must have money. Those people —’ She paused. ‘You see,’ she said, ‘I have to go somewhere — somewhere important to — to meet smart people, and — and I haven’t got a frock! I — I thought perhaps —’

‘Well, perhaps I can lend you a frock — or give you one,’ Babs said.

‘Look here, what is your name?’

‘Doreen — Doreen Radlett.’

Again Babs’ brows came together. Name and face were familiar, but still she was sure she did not know this girl.

‘And you live far?’

The girl smiled faintly. She looked down the road. ‘Not very. I live at the circus,’ she said. ‘You mean you work there? You are one of the artistes?’ Again the girl nodded.

‘I am Doreen, the Dog-Charmer,’ she answered in a low voice.



Her face seemed familiar . . .

CHAPTER II Guests of the Circus.

‘GOODNESS! You can’t be!’

The cry was echoed by each one of those seven Cliff House girls. They stared at the poorly-dressed little circus girl as though they could hardly believe their eyes.

‘But —’ Janet started forward; her face was puzzled. ‘You, Doreen — you like this? I thought my father paid you well. My sister Sheila —’

The girl looked startled.

‘I am Janet Jordan, the daughter of Mr. Jordan. My sister Sheila — you know her? She has often spoken about you in her letters.’

Doreen nodded sadly.

‘Sheila has been very kind to me,’ she said. ‘She would have helped me. But Sheila is bigger than I am, you know, and her frocks wouldn’t fit me. So —’ And she glanced towards Bruno again.

‘But I thought you were very highly paid?’ Janet Jordan persisted.

‘Yes, I am. Mr. Jordan pays me twenty pounds a week,’ Doreen answered.

‘And — and you can’t afford to buy a frock out of that?’

‘My — my father takes all my earnings,’ Doreen replied hesitatingly. ‘I have no money of my own at all.’

‘What — not a penny?’

Doreen shook her head.

‘Well, we’re going to the circus,’ Babs said, after an awkward pause, ‘and — and I think I can find a frock to fit you, Doreen. But we’ll give you a lift now. And Bruno — What a lovely old chap he is!’ she added. ‘You use him in your performance?’

Doreen laughed shyly.

‘Indeed I do. He is my leader,’ she said proudly. ‘And I taught him every trick he knows. It’s very kind of you,’ she added, as she ascended the steps to the taxi.

‘Pleasure! Hop in!’

And the chums, having stowed themselves in the cars again, went bowling on their way.

But Babs looked thoughtful. She sensed a story behind the tragedy on Doreen’s wistful face, and she hoped she would see more of the girl who earned twenty pounds a week, yet had no new clothes.

What sort of a man must her father be to allow his daughter to wander about so shabbily, while he, presumably, stuck to her earnings.

But now they were approaching the circus.

The circus itself was housed in Bigswell Hall, the huge square building which rose to their front — as big, some said, as the Olympia in London. Jordan’s Circus was a travelling circus, colloquially known among the profession as a ‘road show.’ It was a circus built up on the best and most old-fashioned traditions, and its popularity was enormous.

Westhampton people, especially, had a warm spot in their hearts for Jordan’s Circus, for Jonathan Jordan and his two daughters belonged to a local family — had, in fact, actually been born in this very town of Westhampton.

Bigswell Hall was a blaze of lights. There were two great main doors leading into the hall, and between these doors was a platform containing a dozen instrumentalists, each of them dressed in a different costume.

Above the platform, in letters two feet deep, spread an enormous electric sign:

‘JORDAN’S GIGANTIC CIRCUS,
MENAGERIE AND FUN FAIR!’

it read, and winked first in lights of yellow, then in lights of red, then in lights of blue.

A drum rolled. The twelve bandsmen on the platform blared deafeningly. An enormously long, thin, melancholy man uncoiled himself upon the platform, and, stooping, seemed to pluck something from the big drum at his side.

A yell of laughter went up when it was observed that the something was another man. But what a man! No more than three feet in height, yet fat and round and shiny faced — looking, in fact, like a tiny and masculine edition of Bessie Bunter herself

‘We’ll have to get out here,’ Janet Jordan sang. ‘I’m afraid the taxis can’t

get round with all this crush about.'

'Yes. Wait a minute, though,' said Babs. 'I just want to watch this. Who's the long, thin man?'

'Oh, him!' Janet Jordan laughed. 'He's been with father for years, you know. His name's Turner, really, but they call him the Human Snake. The little fellow is a dwarf. He's called Tiny Trotter. But wait till you hear him speak.'

The crowd was hushed now, expectantly facing the platform. With an expression of utmost misery on his face, the Human Snake hoisted fat little Tiny into the air. Tiny, apparently finding secure foothold on the thin one's shoulders, grinned, and nipped off the end of a cigar.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Tiny announced; but it seemed incredible that a voice of such volume could come from a frame so small.

'Here we are again!' Tiny went on cheerfully. 'Jordan's Circus — the greatest show of the age! Sixpence is the price of admission to the hall, and when you get in there they'll tell you how much you have to pay for your seats in the circus. But don't miss it! All the world's talent is before you! Yes sir!'

He chewed at the cigar.

'First you must see the new top-of-the-bill turn! Doreen, ladies and gentlemen — Doreen, the cleverest little star who ever kicked up the tan in a circus ring! See Doreen! See her handle the most intelligent crowd of bow-wows that ever barked! Almost human, some of them — in fact, more than human! Snaky, don't wobble, you big stiff!'

There was a laugh at that. Janet was calling now, and Babs and Co. with reluctance tore themselves away.

Janet was standing by the side of another girl, a girl older than herself by several years, but who was so unmistakably like her, that even had the Cliff House girls never met her before they would have known at once that she was Janet's elder sister. She still wore make-up upon her face, and beneath the cloak she wore they had a glimpse of her spangled costume.

'Welcome!' she cried. 'You know who I am, of course?'

'Why, of course, Sheila!' Babs exclaimed.

'And what about the old man?' came a gruff voice behind them, and Mr. Jordan, Janet's father, dressed in corduroy trousers and a vivid check jacket, came lounging forward, carrying his inevitable stick. 'Well, here you are!' he cried jovially.

The chums laughed. They all knew and liked Mr. Jordan. 'You'll find life a bit unusual here,' he went on. 'Caravans to live in. Wagons, we call them in the circus profession. Not hotels, of course, but comfortable — comfortable. I've fixed you up in the spare motor-wagons — three in each, you know. Janet, you'll sleep with Sheila, of course. Hallo, Doreen,

what brings you here?’

Doreen smiled nervously.

‘Miss — Miss Redfern brought me along.’

‘Indeed, now!’ And Jonathan Jordan raised his eyebrows. ‘Well, you’d better get along,’ he advised. ‘That father of yours is looking for you, and, as usual, making the dickens of a song about it. But you get along, girls. You’d better see your new quarters. They’re in the field at the back of the hall, you know; not in the hall itself. Sheila and Janet, will you take your friends round? I must be off to see Appleton, the ringmaster. And I say, Sheila.’ He cocked his head confidentially.

‘Well, dad?’

‘Just keep an eye upon little Doreen. Old man Radlett is in a fearful wax about something. We don’t want him beating the kid up again before the evening show.’

Babs, though she had not been intended to hear that, did hear it, and frowned. ‘Beating the kid up.’ Did that mean that Doreen’s father was in the habit of ill-treating her?

She looked round for the girl, but Doreen had gone.

‘Well, here we are!’ And Sheila, having led the way to the back of the hall, opened a small gate. ‘Your home!’ she added, with a gay laugh.

The chums paused. They found themselves in a large field, rather muddy near the gate, and Jemima, who was fastidious on some points, quite unnecessarily held up the skirt of her coat as she waded forward.

Here and there were marquees, rearing pointed pinnacles to the skies.

Tents and canvas-covered horse-lines seemed to be everywhere. Near at hand were two rows of caravans, some of them the latest and most up-to-date, and having the appearance of riverside bungalows.

Some of them were gaudy and old-fashioned, like the gipsy caravans the chums sometimes met in the woods about Cliff House.

A confused medley of voices, animal cries, the neighing of horses, the barking of dogs, assailed their ears.

Janet smiled.

‘Bit different from what we’ve been used to?’ she asked.

It was. But that in no manner detracted from its interest. It gave it a charm in the eyes of the Cliff House School girls. They were thrilled.

Sheila swept her arm round.

‘The big marquee is the restaurant,’ she said. ‘We all have our meals there, everybody, from the stable-hands to father himself. Those are the horse-lines, where the ponies and the performing animals are kept.

Farther along, over there, in the other big marquee, are the cages containing the wild animals. Then there are the kennels — above there.’

She pointed to another spot. ‘The group of tents you see near there are where the stable-hands and the workmen sleep. These caravans for the

most part are occupied by the technical staff and the artistes. Come along; I'll show you yours.'

She tramped across the field.

The chums, thrilled, followed her.

'Well, here we are!' Sheila stopped outside a caravan.

'This wagon will belong to you, Babs, and you, Mabs, and Bessie. I've had your luggage put in there. The other is for Jemima, Clara, and Marjorie. Like to inspect?'

'Rather!' the chums said enthusiastically.

Sheila laughed. She took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door.

'Electric light,' she said. 'We make our own electricity, you know.'

She switched on, and the chums exclaimed in delight at the snug little apartment which was revealed to their gaze. It was not big, but there was a suggestion of roominess about it which made it appear larger than it actually was.

'Here we are, you see,' Sheila added. 'Now let me show you how things work.'

The caravan itself was panelled in mahogany, but what surprises those panels contained!

First you touched this spring, and lifted up this piece of beadwork, and lo! there was a table running out from the wall. An expensive-looking cupboard tucked away in one corner proved, upon investigation, to be an artfully concealed washstand.

The wide, cushioned seats running beneath the windows opened at a touch of a button, to reveal the dinkiest little beds imaginable, all luxuriously sprung.

And there was a real fireplace built into the caravan, too, with narrow bookcases, full of books, each side. Another cupboard proved to contain padded collapsible armchairs.

A little cupboard on top of that turned out to hold a gramophone, and in one corner, fixed high up in the wagon, was a wireless set, with loudspeaker, connected by a tiny switchboard, screwed to the wall, containing three little switches.

'My hat!' Clara said. 'It's like a conjurer's hat! You just push a button and there you are! Whatever you want is at your hands!'

'Rather!' Babs laughed. 'My goodness, I shall spend half my time in here pressing buttons!'

'But, I say,' Bessie asked anxiously, 'do you keep food in the caravan? I mean —'

Sheila laughed. She crossed to a panel at the back of the door and turned a little mahogany knob. A door swung open and Bessie's eyes gleamed in surprise.

For there, in a wonderful electric refrigerator, were the most delicious

viands which even Bessie could desire — fruits, tarts, pies, pastries — even sausages. Bessie's eyes shone.

'And if you want to do a little cooking,' Sheila said, and pulled upon another panel immediately beneath it. And there, to the surprised glances of the chums, was revealed a whole series of pans, dishes, saucepans, and every other culinary article imaginable.

'And here is the wardrobe,' Sheila added, going to the other side of the door and opening another panel. 'And here, next to it, the chest of drawers. Now, ladies, anything else, because I want to get changed for tea? We shall have tea in the big marquee, you know.'

'Thanks, now!' Babs laughed. 'We'll change, too, if you don't mind. Now, Bessie, you old duffer, stop gazing at that cupboard and get changed. We don't want to be late for tea.'

'You — you don't think, I might sample that ripping pork pie, do you? I mean to say, I'm feeling rather peckish.'

Babs laughed.

'After tea, Bessie — if you've got any room left,' she promised, and Bessie, with a last longing look at the cupboard, had to be content. But Clara and Marjorie and Jemima, having seen the delights of Babs' caravan, were anxious now to get to their own, and mention of that word 'tea' had reminded them all suddenly that they were hungry. In another moment Babs, Bessie, and Mabs found themselves alone.

'Now, what do we put on for tea in a circus?' Babs laughed. 'And — oh, my goodness, I nearly forgot!'

'What?' Mabs asked.

'Doreen. I promised Doreen a frock.'

'Oh, gracious, so you did! What will you lend her, Babs?'

'My blue?'

'The one with the deep collar?' Mabs nodded. 'Yes, that would suit her, I should think. And, anyway, it is a bit on the small side for you, Babs.

She'll look nice in that. What was it she said she wanted it for?'

Babs shook her head. She was opening her case now, and unfolding the blue dress — a very pretty afternoon frock in blue georgette, with a blue silk underslip.

'She didn't say,' she replied, thinking of the little dog-charmer's wistful face.

'She had to go somewhere, and the occasion apparently called for her to look especially nice,' Babs went on. 'I don't know more than that, Mabs. I suppose you couldn't spare those black patent shoes of yours to lend the kid? You only take size two, and she can't wear the old things we saw her in with this frock!'

'Very well; you can have them. But —'

She stopped. Babs, in the act of putting the dress down, turned with a

start. Bessie, who was foraging in her own case, looked round.
‘What was that?’ she asked.
‘Listen!’ Babs exclaimed.
And she tensed as, plainly borne to their ears, came a girl’s terrified scream, a girl’s frightened voice.
‘Father, please don’t — don’t! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be rude!’
Followed by a whimpering cry of a girl sobbing.
‘Doreen!’ muttered Babs.
But hard upon the cry came a man’s gruff, savage voice. It was accompanied by a fresh cry, the savage slamming of a door nearby.
Babs bit her lip.
‘That was Doreen. Someone was hurting her,’ she cried. She put the frock over her arm, and took the shoes from Mabs. ‘I — I’ll just go and have a look at her,’ she said hesitantly.
Without waiting for her two chums to speak, she caught at the door and quitted the caravan.

CHAPTER III

The Difference the Dress Made!

IT had grown dusk while she had been in the caravan, and despite the lights which were beginning to gleam here and there, the scene represented itself to her as being strange and unreal.
Hoarse voices shouted through the darkness. There was the flare and hiss of naphtha lamps, the pounding of horses’ hoofs, the heavy, lumbering, thudding crash of a caterpillar tractor as, its headlights illuminating the features of its driver, it chugged past her, towing a clattering trolley containing cages.
A string of ponies, tugged on by a stable-boy, followed. She caught at the boy’s arm.
‘Oh, excuse me! Could you tell me the way to Doreen Radlett’s caravan, please?’
‘Doreen’s caravan is there,’ he said, pointing, and eyed her curiously.
‘Who are you — friend of hers?’
‘Yes.’
‘H’m!’ And the boy tilted his nose in the air. ‘Of course, you would be!’ he said disdainfully. ‘You belong to the Jordan crowd, I suppose? Bah! Traitor!’
‘Eh?’ gasped Babs.
‘Traitor — you!’ The boy looked savage. ‘Don’t talk to me,’ he added roughly, and jumped at the nearest pony with the stick he carried, at the same time deliberately stamping his foot into a puddle, so that mud

spattered all over Babs.

But Babs, instinctively jumping back, felt too astonished even to protest. Traitor — she — belonging to Jordan's crowd! What on earth did the boy mean?

But plenty of time to solve this minor mystery later on. Doreen — she must see Doreen. And there, a light now illuminating the windows, was Doreen's caravan.

It was a caravan of the old pattern, gained by a short flight of steps. Babs ascended the steps and peered through the glass of the curtained door into the interior.

Doreen, her head in her hands, was seated on a box, her elbows resting upon the table. She was staring out into space with an expression of misery upon her pretty face.

'Doreen!' Babs cried, and tapped at the door.

Doreen jumped. For a moment she stared downwards with such an expression of terror in her face that Babs blamed herself for having given her such a start of alarm. Then the circus girl saw Babs, and smiled.

'Oh, Miss Redfern,' she said awkwardly, 'will — will you come in?'

'Thanks!' Babs smiled, and walked into the tiny room as Doreen held the door open. 'I — I thought I'd slip across and — and give you these,' she added, extending her arm, on which the blue frock reposed. 'I — I hope it will fit you.'

Doreen's face lighted up. Her eyes grew round as she regarded the frock.

'If it will fit you, Doreen, you can have it — for keeps. But these shoes — you have shoes?'

'No. But — Oh, Miss Redfern, you are too kind!'

'Not at all,' Babs laughed. 'The shoes are Mabel's — Miss Lynn's, you know. She would like them back afterwards. I think they're your size.'

Doreen gulped; her eyes filled with tears.

'Oh, dear! Oh, how — how can I thank you?' she cried tremblingly. 'You are so — so kind to me when — when I do not even know you.'

She paused shyly.

'You have — have heaps of friends, Miss Redfern?' she asked.

Babs smiled.

'Well, yes. I have several.'

'Is it lovely?' Doreen looked at her, shaking her head. 'Oh, it must be!' she cried. 'Girls of your own age to talk to — to joke with, to go for walks and — and all those sort of things. There are no other girls here of my age except the — the gipsy children, you know. And they don't like me because they think I am a friend of the Jordans. They belong to the Smith crowd, you see.'

'The Smith crowd?' Babs said, puzzled.

'Yes! Didn't you know?' Doreen's eyes opened. 'Before he took over the

circus, Mr. Jordan was in partnership with a gipsy named Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith tried to swindle him out of the circus, you know, and so Joseph was found out and put in prison. But he left behind all the gipsies who look after the horses and the animals, and who perform in the circus. And the Smith crowd hate Mr. Jordan's men, and Mr. Jordan's men hate the Smith crowd.'

'Oh!' cried Babs; and then she understood the reason for the stable-boy's strange reception of her. That boy, then, was one of the Smith gang!

'And — and the Smith crowd don't like me,' Doreen went on wistfully.

'Oh, I say, isn't this pretty lace round the collar? They — they don't like Mr. Jordan putting me at the top of the bill, you know, and — and my father —'

She stopped quickly.

'But there,' she cried, 'don't let's talk about me, shall we? I'm longing to try on this dress. And — and — Oh, Miss Redfern, shall I have time?'

'For what?' Babs smiled.

'To go to — to ———' She paused. 'They said I was to be there by six o'clock, you know, and the house is in Westhampton. They —'

'The time is half-past four now,' Babs said.

'Then I shall.' A look of excitement came into the little girl's eyes. 'I shall!' she cried. 'The next performance isn't until eight o'clock. That means I can get there and back in time. Oh, quickly!' And eagerly now she began to divest herself of the shabby cloth frock she wore, almost dancing in her eagerness.

Babs smiled, glad that she had remembered to bring the blue silk slip along with the frock.

'Let me help you on with the blue slip,' she said.

'Oh, please!' And Doreen shivered with delicious anticipation. She caught at the frock then, rucking it over her arms so that she could drop it over Doreen's head. Suddenly Babs paused, her eyes widening at the sight of the vicious weal which ran across the girl's back. Red and swollen it appeared, with a faint white streak running its entire length.

'Doreen!' she cried. 'You have hurt yourself! Your back?'

'Oh!' And Doreen, biting her lip, suddenly swung round. 'Oh!' she gasped. 'I — I had forgotten. No, it does not hurt — now,' she said tremblingly.

'But how did you do it?'

'I didn't do it!' Doreen shook her head. 'It was Jim — my father, you know,' she added simply. 'He hit me with his belt. He often hits me — like that. He doesn't mean to hurt, you know. But quick — the frock,' she added eagerly.

But Babs, as she helped her on with the frock, was aware of a sudden burning indignation, of a lump in her throat. Poor, poor little Doreen, she

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thought. How Babs would have liked to give that brutal father of Doreen's a piece of her mind!

But the childish glee which Doreen manifested now at finding herself in so beautiful a garment, banished for the time being the sudden hatred for Jim Radlett which had taken possession of Babs. Doreen was as excited as it was possible for her to be.

'It suits me?' Doreen asked eagerly. 'Oh, say yes! Oh, dear, it is so beautiful! I am afraid to wear it. It — it's such a long time since I had a new frock of my own, you know,' she added, with a little catch in her breath. 'And I may keep this — for always?'

'For always.'

And Doreen, carried away by the ecstasy of the moment, threw her arms around Babs' neck and kissed her soundly. And then, as if realising her impulsiveness, she drew away.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' she gasped contritely. 'I — I didn't mean to do that, you know.'

Babs laughed.

'There, now, let me help you on with the shoes. This foot first!' she laughed, and stooped down.

'I say, that's a stunning fit!' she exclaimed. 'Now the other. There! Why, goodness,' she laughed, as she straightened up, 'I don't think I should have known you again! Got a comb?'

'Yes,' Doreen said eagerly.

'Very well. Now do your hair. What about a hat.'

'Oh, I shall not want a hat!'

'A coat? Look here, I'll lend you mine.'

'That is very kind of you.'

'Not at all. Wait a moment and I'll run and fetch it,' Babs said, and, anxious now to do anything for the girl, rushed from the caravan to her own. To secure the coat was the work of a moment. She rushed back with it.

Doreen laughed in sheer delight.

'Oh, Miss Redfern, thank you — thank you!' she cried. 'You are too kind!'

'Will you put it on now?' Babs asked.

'No, I mustn't. I want to finish my hair first, please. But listen!' She laughed. 'Your friends!'

From outside came a shout.

'Babs! Babs, old thing, where are you?'

'They are calling me,' Babs said. 'I'd better go. You're sure you are all right now, Doreen? You don't want me for anything else?'

'Thank you, Miss Redfern.' Doreen turned to flash her a very tender smile 'I can manage now,' she said.

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And with that Babs, her heart very full, turned and left the circus girl to join her chums and Sheila, who were waiting for her at the bottom of the caravan steps outside.

CHAPTER IV Sheila is in Charge

THE big marquee which formed the circus restaurant was ablaze with lights, and from every side came the hum of voices, the rattle of knives and forks against the plates.

Actually it was rarely referred to as the restaurant in the circus. It had many and various names; the 'grub-shack' being the most popular, the 'canteen' being second favourite.

Along one side ran an enormous counter, and from that counter rosy-faced waitresses went backwards and forwards with piled-up trays of steaming foodstuffs.

Row upon row of tables met Babs and Co.'s gaze, crowded with the circus artistes.

'Mum-my hat!' stuttered Bessie Bunter.

She stood and stared. Bessie had never seen anything quite like this before.

But at the chums' entry it was noticeable that a pause went throughout the whole assembly; it was a pause of interest, of curiosity. Babs, responding quickly to the atmosphere of the place, felt also something of suspicion and hostility in it.

But in a moment it was gone. After that one pause the noise was resumed as boisterously as before.

Jemima fixed her monocle.

'Jolly crowd, what?'

Sheila nodded.

'Yes,' she assented. 'But don't mind them. Circus folk don't take too quickly to strangers, but when you've been here a few days you'll find them the best people breathing. But this way,' she added, and tripped across to another portion of the marquee — a portion which was separated from the rest by a strip of canvas.

'This is father's private quarters, you know, and this is where we eat. By the way,' she added, 'I should have explained. Tea in the circus is a rather misleading term. We have three meals a day, you know, and tea is the largest of the lot — in fact, it is what you might call supper. But come along!'

Glances followed them as they made their way between the tables, and suddenly Sheila paused, as a girl rose, barring their passage.

She was a good-looking girl in a way, rather darkly handsome, with

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pouting red lips and bold, flashing eyes set in an oval face surmounted by a tossing mop of jet-black silken curls.

Quite obviously she had not troubled to change after the afternoon performance. Her face still bore its make-up; she was dressed in a tight-fitting glittering costume, on the bodice of which was traced in gold sequins a lion's head.

'Well, Lulu?'

'I wanted to speak to you, Sheila.'

'Well?' Sheila glanced at her calmly. 'Is it so important that it cannot wait?' she asked.

'Yes, it is!' Lulu cried. She eyed the chums again. 'There is a rumour in the circus that these girls have been brought in to take the place of some of us.'

'And because of that you are out to make trouble — as usual!' Sheila cried. 'Well, Lulu, the rumour is false. These girls are schoolfriends of my sister Janet, and they are just remaining here for the rest of the holidays. Now let us pass, please — and remember these young ladies are my sister's guests.'

Lulu tossed her head, and, without any apology, sulkily sat down.

'Who is that girl?' Babs asked of Sheila.

'She is Lulu — niece of Fearless Ferdinand, the lion tamer,' Sheila answered. 'A girl who requires keeping in her place. She does nothing in the show, except to announce her uncle's turn, but she's some big ideas. She's got some notion that she can do Doreen's act better than Doreen herself. She gives a lot of trouble.'

'Well, why isn't she sacked?' asked Janet.

Sheila laughed.

'Because, innocent, if she were sacked, Ferdinand would leave, too. And where's daddy to get another lion-tamer, in that case?' she asked.

'Ferdinand's a trouble, but he's worth his weight in gold. He's too clever at his job to be got rid of easily. Not only that, he's got some influence in the show. He was one of Joe Smith's crowd, and he hasn't yet got over the fact that Joe Smith's no longer boss here. But don't let's talk shop now. Sit down, everybody, and eat. Dad won't be along, I'm afraid — not till later. Oh, goodness!' she sighed resignedly as a new figure came from behind the canvas screen. 'Can I never get a moment's peace? Well, Ferdy, what is it now?'

The chums gazed interestedly at the man who had just intruded into the privacy of their dining quarters. He was a short, thick-set figure, with a whip in his hand, a very olive-tinted face adorned by a pair of flowing moustaches of incredible length, and black, bushy eyebrows so long that they seemed completely to cover his eyes.

'Miss Sheila, where is Mr. Jordan?'

‘Out!’ Sheila said laconically.

‘I want to see him. I have a complaint to make.’

‘What, another one?’ Sheila asked. ‘You know, Ferdy, I’m dying for the day when you won’t have a complaint to make. Well, what is it? I’m deputising for father. You can tell me.’

‘I prefer to tell it to Mr. Jordan himself.’

‘Go ahead, then. Find him,’ Sheila answered.

And as Ferdinand withdrew, scowling very savagely, she smiled at her friends.

‘That is Fearless Ferdinand in private life Mr. Ephraim Simpson. Billed as Austrian on the posters, but in reality born in a gipsy caravan in Peckham Rye. Sweet Lulu’s gentle nunky. And now,’ Sheila announced, ‘we’ll eat.’

And eat they did — this time with no further interruptions. The food was good, and there was enough of it to cause even Bessie Bunter to cry ‘enough’ at last.

But during the meal Babs, for once, sat in thoughtful silence. She was thinking of many things. And chief among those things was little Doreen, the girl star, and her brutal father, Jim Radlett.

CHAPTER V A Change in Doreen

THERE was a cracked piece of mirror above the shabby table, and Doreen, with a pleased little laugh, surveyed her pretty face in this as she fastened the warm fur collar of Babs’ coat round her neck and deliciously buried her chin into its warmth.

Delicious to feel these warm clothes upon her; lovely to be conscious of that gossamer-like dress beneath the beautiful coat. A lucky girl Miss Redfern was, to be sure!

She laughed again. And now, with a quick glance towards the door, she stepped towards the table. In the drawer of that table was the one treasure that Doreen possessed — a rather cheap treasure, it is true, but she loved it.

It was a little imitation leather handbag which one day old Mother Rattler, who kept the hoop-la stall, had given her for looking after the stall.

Doreen drew it out, shaking her head rather wistfully as she regarded it. She knew it was cheap. In a shop she could have bought it for two-and-eleven — even less at a sale—but it was all she had.

Fortunately, it was black and white, which, of course, went with anything. Well, Mr. Stewart would not notice it.

‘Mr. Stewart!’ she murmured, and thrilled.

Who was Mr. Stewart? Never in her life had she seen him before. His letter, delivered by hand this morning, had taken her by surprise. And yet it had breathed such hope to her, had set her pulses all on fire with the promise of what might happen as a result.

She groped in the handbag now, taking out the letter. For the tenth time she read it:

‘Dear Doreen, — You will be surprised to receive this, but I ask you to keep its receipt secret. You may know that you are not the daughter of the man who calls himself Jim Radlett, but for reasons which I will explain to you when I see you I am not at liberty to come to the circus and tell you who you really are. I shall hope to see you to-night at the above address — somewhere, say, about six o’clock.

‘Please burn this when you have read it.

‘Believe me, yours very truly,

FRANCIS STEWART.’

And then her eyes became clouded suddenly. Just for a moment she paused.

Stewart!

The name had a vaguely familiar ring, but she could remember it in no connection. But it was strange that, all her life, she had felt that Jim Radlett, who treated her so harshly, who took every penny of the money she earned, was not the man he pretended to be.

Desperately she had tried to feel for him that affection which a daughter is supposed to give to her father. How honestly she had tried to love him!

She looked at the letter again. Yes, she had better destroy it. The address—what was the address?

She glanced at the top of the letter, and then all the gladness, all the colour drained from her face. Someone else had handled this letter. Someone had tampered with it! For she noticed now, for the first time, that the top of that letter had been torn right off. The address was gone!

‘Oh!’ Doreen gasped.

She stood still, for a moment utterly stunned. Who had found the letter?

Who had tampered with it? And then, like a flash, the answer came to her. Only one person could have done it — only one ——

Jim Radlett!

Jim had known. That was why, upon her return to the circus, he had been so angry. He knew!

She felt crushed, hurt. She sank down on to a chair and, covering her face with her hands, wept tears of bitterness.

But suddenly she straightened up, and into her face sprang a new look; a new, determined purpose.

Always had she done Jim Radlett's bidding. Always had she tried to be a daughter to him. She had suffered whippings. She had bent under the lash of his tongue. But not now — not now!

Her eyes flashed. Her small teeth came together. And then she started, looking with fierce eyes towards the door. A shadow suddenly fell across the window — the shadow of a man.

The handle of the door turned. Doreen drew back as the door opened.

Tall, sinister, shabby Jim Radlett stood there.

For a moment Doreen, accustomed to the habit of years, shrank before the gaze he turned upon her. She could tell from that look that Radlett was in his worst mood.

His little eyes, fierce, bloodshot, gazed at her in astonishment as she stood there, still arrayed in Babs' coat and frock. His thick underlip came out from under the straggling, untidy moustache that he wore.

'You, Doreen! Where did you get that coat?'

Doreen's fingers clenched and unclenched. She gulped.

'Where did you get that frock — hey?' He came farther into the caravan.

His beady eyes were glittering now. His head, sunk between his shoulders, seemed to dart out from his body. 'Showing off, ain't you?' he cried coarsely. 'My eye, but that's worth money! Where'd you get it, hey?'

'Mind your own business!' Doreen retorted, and felt amazed with herself at the words and the passion with which she got them out.

He sprang forward, making a grab at her wrist. But Doreen dodged him, skipping round the table.

'Ho! Defiance, hey? Defiance!' the man snarled. 'Look here, young Doreen, take those things off. And when you've taken 'em bring 'em to my wagon! I know where I can raise money on em!'

'I won't take them off!' Doreen panted. 'They don't belong me!'

'Ho?' He stared. 'Fine friends we 'ave now, 'aven't we? One of them schoolgals, hey? I know! I've been talking to Ben, the stable boy He told me about that there Miss Redfern asking for you. Well, it makes no odds. I can do with finery like that. It'll fetch a good price. Now, Doreen, I don't want to hit you again, you know!'

Doreen drew a deep breath.

'Listen here, Jim —'

'Less Jim! I'm your father, ain't I?'

'No, you're not!' Doreen looked him straight in the eyes. 'You're not my father, Jim Radlett, and you know it! I've taken orders long enough from you. From now on I'm going to please myself a bit more.'

‘Ho! So that’s the tune, is it?’ His little eyes flamed. ‘I know! I read that letter you got this morning — see, and I’ll read every other one that comes! You think this Stewart man’s your father, do you? You think that you can go to him. Well, prove it! Prove I’m not your father!’

‘I can’t!’

‘No, you can’t — nor never will!’ Radlett shouted. ‘I’ve got your birth certificate, haven’t I? Get those bees out of your bonnet. Now, are you going to let me have that coat and things?’

And the man very grimly unbuckled the thick leather belt about his waist. But Doreen was not waiting for punishment now. On another occasion she would have shrunk before him; have taken the first biting lash of that cruel belt without a whimper.

But something new — something strangely defying — had been born in Doreen in those few moments. She was remembering that these clothes she wore were not her own. The memory of Babs’ Sweet face came before her. For Babs’ sake she felt ready to defy this man— would defy him!

‘You coward!’ she cried.

‘Ho!’ The belt sang in the air.

She was at one side of the table, he the other. With sudden desperation she grabbed at the side of the table and threw it on its side.

Radlett, unprepared for that swift movement, uttered an exclamation. He dropped his belt.

‘Doreen! Doreen, you little brat!’ he roared. ‘Come back! Come back, I say!’

But Doreen was not heeding. Like lightning she had skipped across the caravan, vanishing through the door. Radlett, hissing between his teeth, picked up his belt just as the door crashed to with a bang.

Slam!

And Doreen had gone!

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But Doreen, flying on with feet winged by fear, never even heard those shouts of Jim Radlett as she rushed out into the darkness of the circus grounds.

‘The coward! He’s not my father!’ she muttered as she ran.

But presently, realising that her blind steps were leading her nowhere, she paused, feeling a little sick and giddy, feeling now, indeed, rather scared of that defiant attitude she had maintained in front of him.

And, after all, was what Jim Radlett said right? Was he really her father? She shook her head wearily.

Without realising it almost, Doreen found herself at last in front of the

long, low-lying, canvas-covered shed which formed the corral in which her dogs were housed.

From inside, as though scenting her nearness, came an eager snuffle, a plaintive whine. Doreen smiled.

She pushed open the canvas flap and stepped into the dark interior.

‘Shush, my pets!’ she cried anxiously.

There was a clanking of chains, a chorus of eager whines, and ecstatic snuffles. Two or three of the twenty dogs housed in the corrals began to bark with lusty vigour.

Something within Doreen seemed to glow. A sudden pride took possession of her. In the circus she had few friends — few human friends, that is. But here, at least, were a score of pals whose devotion was undying. Doreen loved her dogs, and the dogs loved her.

‘Quiet!’ she called.

The chains clanked again. The dogs sniffed. But, obedient to their mistress’ voice, not another bark or whimper was heard.

She smiled down at her dogs, each of them in a little pen of its own, each fastened by a chain to a post driven into the ground. Expectant-eyed, they lay still, looking up towards her.

‘Well, how are you all?’ she cried.

There was a glad yap from one or two of them. Deep in his throat Bruno, the leader of the troupe, whined. Alsa and Rolfe, the two sturdy, grey Alsatians, stood up, ears stiffly erect, muzzles eagerly outstretched.

Little Ting-a-Ling, the Pekinese, for whom Doreen had a particularly soft spot in her heart, took a leap forward to the end of his chain, almost hurting himself in his eagerness to be near her.

Doreen slipped the chain from Bruno’s neck, however, and shook her head sadly.

‘No, old boys; not all of you! I’ve not come to take you out — not now,’ she said sadly, and sat on an upturned box, dragging Barbara’s warm coat about her as she faced them.

‘And it’s not show-time — not yet. But I had to come. You’re such dear pals, all of you. I had to talk to somebody.’

The dogs lay still, heads on one side, looking at her with eager alertness.

It seemed as if they understood the very words she said.

‘I’m in a bother,’ Doreen went on — ‘a dreadful bother! Jim — you know Jim, the man who sometimes beats you as he beats me — you don’t like him, do you? But, you know, you belong to him. You are his dogs, not mine. I only train you — try to understand you, and to make up to you for some of those beatings he sometimes gives you. Jim and I have quarrelled, pets.’

One or two of the dogs whimpered. Bruno rumbled.

‘Only Bruno, of you all, belongs to me,’ Doreen went on. ‘But if ever I

leave the circus, I shall do my best, pets, to take you with me. I couldn't bear to leave you behind here, knowing what your life would be with him! You know, I love you all so much — just as much as you love me! It's such fun, isn't it, to do all those silly and clever sort of things we do in the ring?"

Doreen felt the form of Bruno stiffening beneath her caressing hand as she saw the fur along the crest of Alsa and Rolfe suddenly ripple and rustle.

"Now what's the matter?" she exclaimed.

But she had no need to ask. The sudden, rigid attention of the dogs for the door told her what had happened.

"Oh!" gasped Doreen.

Her face paled. She took a step back. Bruno, with a menacing growl, stood stiffly upright, ranging himself protectingly at her side.

For there, framed in the entrance, stood Jim Radlett, his head sunk between his shoulders, the belt dangling from one hand. His little eyes were bloodshot.

"So this is where you are, is it?" he growled. "Here!" He came forward.

"Now, girl, you shall see what it means to defy me! Call that dog off!"

"I won't call it off!" Doreen retorted.

"Well, leave him there!" he said. "But dog or no dog, you're not going to get away with it. Now for the last time, are you going to give me that finery?"

"No!" Doreen whispered, white to the lips.

"Right!" he grated, and jumped forward.

Doreen shrank away. The dogs barked in a more deafening clamour than ever. But Radlett did not care. They were his dogs, and where Doreen ruled with sympathy and kindness, Radlett wielded brutality with the belt. The light in Bruno's eyes should have warned Radlett. He did not move; but as Jim Radlett lumbered forward, he crouched, and showed a glistening set of heavy teeth.

Doreen, sick with fear now, shrank back against one of the props which supported the canvas sides of the corral.

"Jim — father, don't — don't!" she cried agonisingly.

For answer Radlett aimed a blow at her.

That was enough for Bruno. With an agility surprising in a dog of his tremendous bulk, he launched himself through the air.

Just in the nick of time, Jim Radlett saw him, twisting to one side. He aimed a blow at the dog as Bruno soared past.

Bruno, with a howl, rolled over on to his side.

For the moment, Radlett forgot Doreen. With a snarl, he turned. The belt came up again, descending with merciless force between the eyes of Bruno and felling him again as he was in the act of recovering.

At the same time Radlett kicked out viciously, fetching a grunt from Bruno.

‘Father, please!’ Doreen cried.

Bruno squirmed in agonised helplessness.

The din was now deafening. Every dog in the corral was straining excitedly at its chain. Jaws snapped savagely together, eyes shone red-rimmed with hate.

‘Father!’ Doreen screamed.

‘Get out — get out! I’ll deal with you later!’ Radlett snarled, and kicked and kicked.

But Doreen, desperate now, caring nothing for herself in the spectacle of that poor animal being thus mercilessly ill-treated, rushed forward.

‘Father! You bully! You coward!’ she cried, and as the belt came up again, she made a snatch at it.

But Radlett, with a contemptuous twist, eluded her. He sprang back, his arm swung sideways. And, with a crash, the belt snaked out, descending with a vicious, whistling sound, to wrap itself around Doreen’s frail shoulders.

‘Oh!’ the girl gasped in agony.

And at the same moment there was a commotion near the door. The canvas flap opened suddenly, and a crowd of girls poured into the corral. And suddenly Jim Radlett wheeled, finding that belt plucked his hands, to confront the tensely white face of Barbara Redfern.

‘Why — you — you cad!’ Babs blazed.

CHAPTER VI **Told in Confidence**

‘YOU beastly bully!’

‘Doreen, has he hurt you?’

‘You great coward!’ Bessie Bunter put in indignantly. ‘You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself!’

Jim Radlett glared.

‘Wait a minute!’ It was Sheila who stepped forward. ‘Jim, what have you been doing to Doreen?’

Radlett scowled.

‘Is that your business?’

‘It is!’ Sheila, used to handling the unruly element of her father’s circus, showed no fear, not even surprise. ‘It is my business in this circus to put down bullying in any shape or form,’ she said levelly. ‘And when my father’s not here to do it for himself, I’m going to put it down — see?’

Janet, you might just look after Doreen,’ she added swiftly.

‘Look here —’ Radlett blustered.

‘Not a nice sight!’ Sheila retorted. ‘But still — Jim, I’ve told you before about this. You’ve just got to think of the show. If you upset Doreen, how do you expect her to do her best when she goes into the ring? And look at Bruno! Is that the way to treat your dogs?’

‘That isn’t my dog!’ Radlett scowled sullenly.

‘He’s one of the show dogs — that’s what matters!’ Sheila argued sharply. ‘It’s one of the dogs which brings you in your money, isn’t it? Look here, Jim,’ she added appealingly, ‘I don’t want to be hard, but this sort of thing has got to stop — see? Doreen’s the star turn now, and she’s just got to live up to it. My father put her at the top of the bill —’

‘Well, did I ask him to?’ Radlett asked.

‘You didn’t; but you ought to be pleased.’

‘Well, I ain’t!’

‘No?’ Sheila stared. ‘It meant five pounds a week more for Doreen, Jim — and that meant five pounds a week more for you.’

Radlett turned his head away in disgust.

‘All the same, I ain’t pleased!’ he retorted. ‘There’s more to be got out of those dawgs ’n what she’s getting out of ’em. There’s more, and it could be got if she’d only stop petting ’em and coddling ’em. Doreen’s just making fools of all of ’em. In a year they’ll be no good for nothing. What they want is the whip!’

Sheila’s lips compressed.

‘And you’d give it to them, would you? Jim, you ought to know that we don’t use Joe Smith’s methods here now. We either train animals by kindness, or we don’t train them at all. Valuable as the dogs are, you’re not, Jim! If you don’t want to be kicked out, just ease up a bit. Now get out of here!’

And Radlett, with a shrug, picked up his belt from the floor, where Babs had dropped it, and shuffled from the tent. While Sheila, staring after him, smiled grimly.

Janet gazed up at her admiringly.

‘My word, Sheila, you know how to handle ’em!’ she laughed. Doreen, surrounded by Babs and Co., smiled up at them.

‘You are all right?’ Sheila said.

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘What was the disturbance?’

Doreen shrugged.

‘Oh, he went for me,’ she said vaguely, ‘and — and Bruno went for him.’ She had the dog’s huge head in her hands now, was fondling its ears. ‘But it’s all right, I think. Bruno, old fellow, you’re not hurt?’

Bruno turned his faithful brown eyes up at her, and put out his tongue, then withdrew it.

‘No? Then that’s all right!’ And Doreen, gay once more, happy in the

knowledge that friends surrounded her, laughed. 'But — but thanks for coming when you did!' she exclaimed.

'But — wait a moment, Doreen!' Babs regarded her curiously. 'I thought you were going somewhere?'

Doreen flushed.

'Well, yes, I — I was,' she faltered. 'But, you see, it doesn't matter now. I lost the address, you know. I —' She paused. 'It was silly of me, I suppose,' she added wistfully, 'but I thought there might be something in it. But Jim found the letter, you see, and he says that — that I was wrong.'

'But what about?' Babs asked, and eyed the girl searchingly.

'We'd all like to help you. We all will help you,' Babs went on.

'We've been talking about you, you know. We all think it's a dreadful shame you should earn all that money and never get a penny of it. And Jim Radlett —' She paused. 'Doreen,' she asked quietly, 'are you sure that man is your father?'

Doreen started. Her eyes grew wide.

'Why?' she gasped.

'Nothing; but —' And Babs frowned. 'Oh, I don't know! It seems silly, somehow. That a father could treat his daughter as he treats you. And Sheila here says that there was a man in the circus the other day making inquiries about you — inquiries which seemed to suggest that — that — Well, that Jim Radlett isn't what he appears to be.'

Doreen's eyes opened wider still.

'Sheila, you — you didn't tell me.'

Sheila smiled.

'No, kid, I didn't tell you. I didn't want to put thoughts into your head. But — Well,' she added, 'I can't remember exactly what was said now, but this fellow's name was Stewart.'

'Stewart!' Doreen sprang to her feet.

'You know him?'

'No; but —' Doreen paused. 'Sheila, it was a Mr. Stewart who sent me that letter I got this morning.'

'Well, this fellow said his name was Stewart, and that he was making inquiries on behalf of a friend,' Sheila said. 'He asked who you were, and where you'd come from, and all that, you know. I told him as well as I could. But, Doreen' — and Sheila eyed her very frankly indeed — 'you heard what Miss Redfern told you — that we're all your friends here — that we want to help you. Don't you think you'd better tell us everything?'

Doreen hesitated.

'But you — you promise not to tell Jim — my father?'

'Of course.'

‘Then I will!’ Doreen gulped.

And she did. But outside in the gloom, a girl with raven-black hair and bold, flashing eyes stood with her ear pressed towards a hole in the canvas. And that girl was Lulu, the lion-tamer’s niece.

CHAPTER VII

Bessie’s Little Game!

‘HA, ha, ha!’

The Cliff House chums laughed merrily. It was half an hour later, and they were still in the dog corral, though Sheila had departed on business connected with the evening performance in the ring.

Doreen, in response to their pleas, had unloosed her twenty dogs, and those twenty dogs and the seven Cliff House chums were having the time of their lives.

Except Bessie.

Bessie, in fact, was alarmed. For Bessie had not bargained for the playfulness of the little Pekinese, Ting-a-Ling. Bessie, as it happened, had taken a fancy to Ting-a-Ling, not knowing that Ting-a-Ling was the ‘bad’ dog of the show, and that it was the most mischievous animal of them all. He insisted upon making playful runs at Bessie, seizing the end of her frock, and tugging hard.

‘Oh, I say! Get away, you animal!’ she panted, as Ting-a-Ling, with a terrific gr-r-r-r! shook the edge of the dress between his tiny teeth. ‘Babs, I say, Babs!’

‘He’s only playing, Bessie,’ Babs laughed.

‘Gr-r-r-r!’ yapped Ting-a-Ling playfully, and shook and shook.

‘Ting!’ It was Doreen who spoke. She spoke sternly. ‘Let go, you bad boy!’

Bessie blinked.

‘Oh, I say, don’t be cross with him!’ she said. ‘He was only playing, after all. And he’s a nice little dog, really. I like little dogs. Good boy, then!’

And she did the worst thing possible by stooping to pat the silky little animal’s head. ‘Here! Ow! Stoppit!’ she yelled.

For Ting-a-Ling, promptly accepting this as a signal for another ‘game,’ made a quick snap at Bessie’s cuff.

‘Look here, you beast!’ Bessie roared. ‘Leggo, can’t you? Oh, really, you know, Doreen! Oh, dear, call him off! Shoo!’

‘Gr-r-r-r!’ growled Ting-a-Ling happily.

Bessie, desperate at last, suddenly turned, hoping to outwit Ting-a-Ling by that manoeuvre. Unfortunately for Ting-a-Ling, Bessie failed to take into consideration that the dog was beneath her feet, and that quick turn did it.

Quite by accident Bessie stepped upon little Ting-a-Ling's tiny paw. At once a deafening yowp went up.

'Oh dud-dear!' gasped Bessie, and stood staring at the little dog as it ran round and round in a frantic circle, hopping upon three legs.

'Oh, really, you know,' Bessie said unhappily, 'I — I dud-didn't mean that! Oh, goodness! The little thing was right beneath me! Ting!' she cried. And now, her annoyance magically forgotten, she swooped down, scooping the silky little body into her arms. Good doggie, den! Nice doggie! Did Auntie Bessie hurtums, den? Oh! Phooh!'

Ting-a-Ling wriggled. He licked his paw, licked Bessie's face, licked his paw again, and Bessie's face again.

The chums had gathered round now. Laughter had disappeared. They hardly knew whether to feel more sorry for the anxious woebegone Bessie, or for the tiny dog who had received Bessie's considerable weight.

Doreen examined the paw, her face momentarily overshadowed. She smiled.

'Nothing much,' she announced at last. 'He'll get over it in a moment. Ting-a-Ling likes to make a fuss, you know. It's the only way he can make himself heard with all these bigger dogs about. Just cuddle him a minute or two, Miss Bunter.'

'Oh, thuth-thank goodness!' Bessie gasped, and hugged the little dog, quite complacent now and very docile, to her.

And then suddenly her eyes gleamed. Bessie had one unfailing method of mitigating any offence. And she remembered now that lovely pork pie in her caravan. Give Ting-a-Ling a slice of that, and Ting-a-Ling would forget his hurts, and become her friend for life.

Bessie smirked. Her chums, having satisfied themselves on the score of the little Peke, had turned away again now, and the exit lay most conveniently handy.

Just for a moment Bessie hesitated, and then, still clasping Ting-a-Ling to her ample form, hurried into the circus grounds.

But she had not gone far when a rough voice hailed her:

'Hi!'

Bessie turned, blinking in dismay. A huge man, accompanied by a girl, suddenly detached himself from the shadows of a caravan and frowned upon her.

'Where are you taking that dog?' he asked nastily.

And Bessie, looking up, found herself staring into the lowering features of Jim Radlett.

'Tut-taking it?' Bessie stammered flurriedly.

'Yes. Who gave you permission?'

'Pup-permission?'

‘Oh, you’re daft!’ Radlett said contemptuously. ‘You’re an idiot, like all them friends of yours! Take it back!’

Bessie’s eyes gleamed. Bessie might be a duffer, but Bessie was not going to be bullied. She froze at once.

‘Are you talking to me?’ she asked frigidly.

‘I am.’

‘Well, I’ll have you address me properly, my man,’ Bessie said loftily.

‘I’m not your daughter, you know. You cannot order me around! I’m a Bunter, I am.’ Bessie’s nose went up into the air.

‘I come from a distinguished and aristocratic line,’ she said haughtily.

‘The De Bunters, you know. Quite one of the oldest and most powerful families in the country — yes!’

Radlett sniffed.

‘Like all them star-backs!’ he said disdainfully. ‘You would go and pinch a poor man’s dawg, you would! Well, Bumper or no Bumper, you take that pup back — see?’

A soft chuckle came from the girl who accompanied the man. She came forward now, revealing herself as Lulu, the lion-tamer’s niece.

‘Take it back, Fatty!’ she urged.

Bessie’s eyes gleamed.

‘Look here, are you calling me names?’

Lulu laughed lightly. At the same moment there was a step behind Bessie, and Jonathan Jordan hove into view.

‘Hallo! What’s the trouble?’ he asked.

‘Oh, really, is that you, Mr. Jordan?’ Bessie blinked. ‘I protest! These — these persons have insulted me!’

‘She’s pinching one of my dogs!’ Radlett cried angrily.

‘I wasn’t!’ shrilled Bessie indignantly.

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute!’ Mr. Jordan held up his hand. ‘That’s piffle, Jim, and you know it! Miss Bunter is a guest here.’

‘Hear, hear!’ Bessie glowered.

‘And if Miss Bunter has a dog of yours, I’m sure she can explain to your satisfaction why she has,’ the showman went on. ‘Now, Miss Bunter.’

‘But, see here!’ howled Radlett. He thrust himself aggressively forward.

‘Look here, boss, I’m fed-up with this!’

‘Jim!’

‘And don’t “Jim” me!’ went on Radlett, beside himself. ‘I’m fed-up. I told you! I’m not going to stand for it — no! And a good many others in this outfit ain’t standing for it, either! You’ve brought these girls in to plant ’em with us. And we demand that you chuck ’em out — see?’

There’s been nothing but trouble ever since they came. They’re interfering. They’re getting the lie of the land, so’s they can take the place of others!’

‘Rubbish!’

‘Then you’re not chucking those girls out?’ Radlett demanded.

‘I certainly am not!’ Mr. Jordan returned, with biting emphasis. ‘Come on, Bessie, we’ll take the dog back!’

And, deliberately turning his back upon the furious Radlett and Lulu, Mr. Jordan strode back with Bessie in the direction of the corral.

CHAPTER VIII **The Fat Girl’s Great ‘Turn’**

‘READY, Doreen?’

‘Just a minute!’

‘Oh, mum-my word, dud-don’t you look lovely!’ Bessie Bunter sighed, and blinked again as Doreen, with another laugh, twisted round and round in front of the huge mirror which adorned her dressing-room.

What Bessie said was true. In her pretty pink ballet dress, with its gleaming sequins and its flashing paste ornaments, Doreen looked a picture indeed.

It was night at Jordan’s Circus. The show was booked to commence with the grand opening parade, and from eight until half-past ten it would continue.

Babs and Co., athirst for every experience the circus could give them, were this evening helping behind the scenes, and for that reason Babs, Mabs and Bessie were in Doreen’s dressing-room.

Next door, assisting Sheila, who performed on the high trapeze, were Jemima, Clara and Marjorie. Janet, for this evening, was helping her father.

The door was flung open suddenly. The ringmaster looked in. He beamed as he saw Doreen.

‘Pretty as a little fairy!’ he announced. ‘Well done, girls! Doreen, ready in two minutes! The band is playing the overture now.,

The ringmaster went out. There was a neighing, a scuffling, the snuffling and whining of dogs in the corridor outside. Babs threw the door open.

There was a shout from the entrance to the arena for Doreen, and Doreen, with a gay little laugh, caught up the silver stick with which she performed, and tripped forward.

‘Best of luck, Doreen!’ Babs sang. ‘Come on, Bessie! And you, Mabs!’

She pushed her way towards the entrance, anxious not to miss a single item of the procession. Jemima, Clara and Marjorie were already there. There was a jangling, a shuffle from all round the screen which hid the corridor from the spectators. And now Babs and Co. stood aside to make way for the troupe of dancing girls, dressed in brilliant blue and silver silk

uniforms, who stepped smartly into the arena.

There were twelve of them altogether, and each carried a silver trumpet, upon which they blew a few trembling notes. The audience hushed to silence.

Now the band struck up again. There was movement, life, colour. The procession, headed by the blue-and-gold band, advanced majestically into the arena.

First came Doreen, waving her stick, bowing from side to side. Behind her, headed by Bruno, each wearing a white ruffle, solemnly strutted her twenty dogs.

The audience cheered.

Then came the ringmaster, heading the Chinese acrobats, then the performing monkeys, followed by thirty liberty horses, necks arched proudly, pawing gracefully at the tan as they pranced along. Then came the clowns — a whole troupe making faces at the audience through their grease-paint and masks, crashing tremendous sausage-shaped balloons upon each other's head.

Sheila and her fellow trapezists walked after them, and following Sheila came the cowboys, more commonly known as the 'ropers,' swinging lariats of ribbon from side to side.

Then, with a dazzling smile upon her rather over-coloured lips, strutted Lulu, accompanied by Fearless Ferdinand, her lion-taming uncle, dressed in a black velvet uniform covered with facings of gold braid.

Three times round the ring the procession marched, and then, to the strains of the band, tramped back again, filing into the circular corridor behind the screens, leaving the clowns in the ring to amuse the audience. Doreen laughed at the chums as she joined them, whistling her dogs to her side.

'You liked it?' she asked.

Babs flushed.

'It was wonderful!' she replied ecstatically.

'Then wait until you see the show,' Doreen said, and tapped Ting-a-Ling playfully upon the nose as, recognising an old friend, he jumped at Bessie. 'Now, Ting,' she said severely, 'behave yourself!'

Bessie grinned suddenly. It was a fat grin, and showed that some idea had been born in Bessie's brain. That was not usual, of course, but there were occasions when Bessie had ideas.

And perhaps the display of all this talent about her had reminded Bessie that she, too, possessed talent of a high and unusual order, for Bessie, among the few accomplishments she possessed, was an extraordinary good ventriloquist.

She pursed her lips now, gazing down at the little dog. And from Ting-a-Ling's lips seemed to come the words:

‘Go on! Why should I behave myself? I like the pretty lady!’ Doreen jumped. She looked at Ting-a-Ling as though she had suddenly been bewitched.

‘What?’ she gasped.

‘Why should I behave myself?’ Ting-a-Ling seemed to inquire. ‘I like Bessie, and Bessie likes me! Don’t you, Bessie?’

‘Oh rather!’ Bessie replied in her natural voice.

Babs roared.

‘It’s just Bessie!’ she cried. ‘My goodness, I was startled myself for a moment. Bessie’s a ventriloquist, you know,’ she said.

Bessie smirked modestly.

‘Jolly good, wasn’t it?’ she asked. ‘But, you know, I can do better than that. Oh, hallo, Mr. Jordan!’ she added as the showman himself, who had been standing aside, came up. ‘I — Did you hear that?’

Mr. Jordan smiled.

‘I did, Bessie. That was clever!’ he said.

‘Oh, thank you!’ Bessie said. ‘That’s very nun-nice of you, Mr. Jordan. Of course, I’m too modest to say it myself but I’m a jolly clever ventriloquist, really!’

‘I’m sure you are.’ Mr. Jordan smiled. ‘By Jove, look at that scamp!’ he roared.

‘Ting —’

But Ting-a-Ling, rather frisky, had just spotted someone in the audience at the far side of the arena throw a piece of orange peel into the tan, and Ting-a-Ling, in a very playful mood indeed, gambolled after it.

‘Great Scott! Fetch that dog out of the ring!’ Mr. Jordan roared.

‘Oh, sus-certainly!’ Bessie gasped.

She did not hesitate — she simply plunged after the gambolling Peke.

‘Oh, my hat!’ cried Babs, aghast. ‘Bessie, you chump, come back!’

‘She’ll hold up the show!’

‘Bessie!’

But Bessie was there now, and the audience, thinking this was some little turn staged for their benefit, laughed. Ting-a-Ling, turning, caught sight of his pursuer, squatted on his haunches and barked excitedly.

‘Ting,’ gasped Bessie, ‘Come here!’

‘Won’t!’ Ting answered — or, rather appeared to answer.

‘You bad boy! Come here at once!’

‘Yah! Go and chop chips!’

The audience for a moment looked thunderstruck. They stared from Bessie, who had stopped in front of the dog, to the dog itself, then back again at Bessie. And when they saw the fat junior’s lips moving they guessed. A shout of laughter went up.

‘Oh, crumbs!’ muttered Babs, and looked at Mr. Jordan standing there,

pulling at one end of his moustache. But, in the ring, Bessie, superbly unconscious that she was delaying the show, went on with her 'act.'

'Will you come here?' she cried.

Ting-a-Ling cocked his head to one side.

The audience roared. At the same moment Ting barked and scampered away.

'Race you!' he appeared to cry.

'Oh, you will, will you?' And Bessie, taking up the challenge, lumbered forward and promptly came to grief as her feet caught the mat under the tan. 'Ow!' she gasped; and the audience, thinking this was still part of the show, went into convulsions.

But Bessie, in spite of her fall, was alive to the possibilities as Ting stopped and barked.

'Ha, ha!' he laughed. 'Now look what you've done! Get up, clumsy feet!

Come and catch me!'

Even Mr. Jordan was smiling.

'She's good!' he muttered.

'But the show,' Babs said worriedly.

'Oh, never mind! The audience likes it. Let her go on.'



'Won't!' Ting answered.

But Bessie's going on was decided for her at the moment by Ting himself. Perhaps Ting suddenly recollected that he had no right in the ring; perhaps he saw Doreen standing beside the screen. He barked suddenly, scampered away. Bessie followed.

'Here, Ting!'

'Can't! Got an appointment with a bone!' Ting appeared to answer, and scampered out of the ring, leaving Bessie blinking as a thunder of hand-clapping and cheering suddenly broke forth. 'Bravo, bravo, bravo! 'Core,

'core!' they howled.

Ting-a-Ling, excited, frisked back into the ring. 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen!' he appeared to say. 'Thank you, one and all. I hope you'll come and hear us again!'

'Who the dickens told her to go on?' came a furious voice near Babs, and she looked round to behold Lulu, her face beneath her grease-paint literally distorted with rage. 'Doesn't the fat idiot know that's she's holding up my act?'

Mr. Jordan frowned.

'It was an accident.'

'Accident — bah!' Lulu looked disbelieving. 'Doreen put you up to this! I know! Look at that girl! My goodness, anybody would think she was the star of the show. Come off, you idiot!' she shouted furiously, turning towards the ring.

But Bessie did not hear. Bessie, bowing this way and that in a most ludicrous manner, was tickling the audience to death.

She bowed and bowed, and finally bowed herself right into the furious form of Lulu, standing at the exit. Lulu, beside herself, gave the fat duffer a push which sent her staggering back into the tan.

The audience saw that. Suddenly the audience became hushed. They liked Bessie. And, deceived as they had been by Bessie's sudden precipitation of herself into the ring, they could hardly mistake that furious gesture, that act of Lulu's. A murmur went round.

'Bessie, you old chump!' Babs muttered, and, rushing forward, caught the fat girl's arm and tugged her back behind the screen.

While Lulu, striding into the ring, held up her hand.

'Ladies and gentlemen —' she said.

There was a movement. A murmur seemed to go round, and then from one corner of the big tent someone started to hiss.

'Ladies and gentlemen —' Lulu repeated less confidently. A storm of derisive shouts broke out.

Lulu, beneath her make-up, turned purple.

'Go home, nasty!'

'Spiteful!'

'We want Bessie Bunter!'

And then somebody threw an orange.

Lulu stood still, her face working savagely. The hall was now in an uproar. Everybody had seen that little act of spite on the part of this girl; everybody, resenting this girl's attitude to Bessie, was determined that her rival should not get a hearing. A perfect storm of hisses and catcalls went round the tent.

CHAPTER IX

Is There No Way Out

THE chums of Cliff House, gathered in Doreen's dressing-room, looked serious. It was obvious to them that trouble was in the offing.

For Lulu, howled out of the ring, was in a boiling fury; and Lulu, it was rumoured, had gone straight to Jim Radlett's caravan.

And rumour, spreading like wildfire through the circus, said that Jonathan Jordan had, after all, introduced the chums of Cliff House School into the circus in order that they should take the places of the younger stars.

'And they're blaming it on to Doreen,' Clara put in. 'That's not fair.'

Doreen smiled wistfully.

'They were first annoyed when Mr. Jordan put me at the top of the bill,' she said. 'They've hated me since, and Jim, my father, more than any of them.'

'But why?'

Doreen shrugged. Her pretty face was very troubled.

'I don't know,' she sighed. 'There are times when I think Jim would like to hound me out of the circus altogether. And I know for a fact,' she added sombrely, 'that secretly he has been teaching Lulu to do my tricks with the dogs. More than once he has hinted that she is better than I am.' Babs looked thoughtful.

'There is some other reason,' she said. 'I feel it, Doreen. And I believe more than ever that Jim Radlett isn't your father. Why was he so keen to prevent your meeting this man Stewart, in that case? Supposing —' She paused. 'Doreen,' she added quickly, 'supposing he is trying to get you out of the circus because he doesn't want you to meet this man?'

And for a moment they stared at each other in thunderstruck silence. Was that, in fact, the real reason why Jim Radlett was so antagonistic towards his supposed daughter?

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Bessie, with the back of a huge bill in front of her, was laboriously chalking words upon it.

'H'm!' said Bessie, and smirked fatuously at the legend she had written.

'Come and see
BESSIE BUNTER,
The Worl's Most
Famus Ventrilakwist,
Possitively Performing
At this Circus Tonite.'

Now, having executed this work of art — a jolly considerate action on her part, Bessie considered — her next job was to find a place where it would be conspicuous to the public.

And the only possible place for that, of course, was the front of the circus, where the bills announcing the virtues of other performers were prominently displayed.

With no little pride, therefore, Bessie ambled along in that direction.

After obtaining paste and brush she reached the palings that ran round the field.

Then, taking advantage of the fact that no one appeared to be about, Bessie, with

self-conscious pride, pasted the bill over some older ones already there.

But sudden footsteps behind her caused her to wheel round with a guilty start. She turned to find herself looking into the frowning features of Mr. Jordan.

‘Bessie!’

‘Oh, yes! Oh, hallo! Fuf-fancy seeing you here!’ Bessie stuttered.

‘Did you put that up there?’

‘That — why, what?’ Bessie asked. ‘Oh, that!’ she added. ‘Er — y-yes,’ I dud-did put that there. Jolly good, dud-don’t you think?’

Mr. Jordan, however, did not look convinced.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to take it down,’ he said. ‘That notice would only cause trouble at the moment, and there’s trouble enough about, goodness knows!’

‘Oh, I say —’ Bessie expostulated.

But what Bessie said at that juncture will never be known, for on to the scene, her face white and distressed, crashed Janet Jordan.

‘Daddy, come quickly!’ she cried. ‘There’s trouble in the circus. Jim Radlett’s interfering with Doreen, and won’t let her go out for her act!’

At the exit to the circus arena Doreen stood, her face pale, her frail form trembling. Jim Radlett, with Lulu on one side of him, faced her, his little eyes blazing.

‘And I tell you you’re not going on! You’re through with this show, Doreen!’

‘Indeed!’ said a new voice, and Mr. Jordan strode on the scene. ‘What’s this, Jim?’

Jim scowled.

‘You heard,’ he said. ‘Them dogs are mine, Mr. Jordan. We’d better have this out here and now. That girl ain’t no good to this outfit, daughter o’ mine though she is. She’s making mischief behind the scenes, and we ain’t standing for it — see? I’m not acting alone in this. I’ve got Ferdinand behind me, and the snake-charmer, and the equestriennes — they all support me. If Doreen goes on, they just don’t — see?’

‘Sort of strike, eh?’ the showman asked.

‘Well, yes, if you want to put it that way.’

Mr. Jordan looked angry. But he also looked anxious. Radlett, he knew, had behind him the power that he boasted. Mr. Jordan himself, as the proprietor of the show, had to keep faith with his audience, which was already beginning to shout from the other side of the screen.

And yet — he looked at Doreen, white, shaken, almost on the verge of tears. He bit his lip.

‘And if Doreen doesn’t take the dogs on, who does?’

‘Lulu.’

‘Lulu can do the turn?’

‘Yes, I’ve trained her.’

The showman looked harassed.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Doreen, I really am sorry, but you see how I’m placed. You see the fix I’m in. Get the clowns out, somebody. Go and keep the crowd quiet. Jim, is this your last word?’

‘Absolutely.’

And Jordan shrugged helplessly.

‘I’m sorry, Doreen,’ he muttered. ‘But — Lulu takes the dogs on!’

‘But, father!’ gasped Janet, in horror, while from Doreen came a low, plaintive moan like the cry of a stricken child.

But Jonathan Jordan turned quickly, and, his shoulders bowed, walked away.

Radlett broke into a scoffing laugh.

‘And that’s that!’ he cried. ‘Well, Lulu, now’s your chance. Just show this girl what I’ve taught you — what you can do. And you,’ he added, leering forward into Doreen’s face — ‘you can get out of here! As far as this outfit’s concerned you’re, finished — see? Get out, get out!’

‘You beast!’ Babs flamed.

He laughed.

‘And if you want to do the circus a good turn, you get out, too!’ he cried.

‘But —’ Doreen’s lip quivered. ‘Jim, you can’t throw me out like this,’ she faltered. ‘You can’t — you can’t! You say you’re my father —’

But Jim Radlett only laughed sneeringly. He turned on his heel, deliberately walking away.

‘Father!’ Doreen cried, in stricken accents.

Babs put an arm around the girl’s shaking shoulders. Her face was white.

‘Never mind, never mind!’ she soothed. ‘Let him go, Doreen. He’s disowned you now. He’s renounced every right to be called father. Come to us. We’ll look after you. We’ll get to the bottom of this mystery. Jim Radlett is not your father; but we’ll find out who is, and put you back on the bill at the same time if that is possible.’

But even Babs, in that moment, had not the faintest idea how that result was to be accomplished.

CHAPTER X A Circus Calamity

BABS drew a deep breath.

‘You’ve got to cheer up, you know, Doreen. Things may right themselves. After all, Mr. Jordan is the owner of this circus; and he and his daughters are your friends. They’ll do something.’

Doreen smiled tearfully.

‘I know. But — but what can they do?’ she asked. ‘You don’t realise, Miss Redfern. Mr. Jordan is the boss here, of course, but he can’t risk having half the circus on strike; and that is what it will come to if he doesn’t give in to Jim Radlett. I — I’ll have to go, I’m afraid!’ she added helplessly.

‘But even Jim Radlett can’t throw you out,’ Clara Trevlyn protested.

‘Why, dash it all, he says he’s your father! A father can’t turn his own daughter out into the street.’

Doreen smiled sadly.

‘Jim can,’ she replied. ‘But then I’ve always felt he isn’t my father. He just says that so that he can have what I earn. All the time he’s been training that Lulu girl to do my job in secret. Well, she’s got her chance now, and Jim doesn’t want me any more. And I —’

The chums stared at one another uncomfortably.

‘And you have no other relatives?’ Marjorie asked. ‘Not even an uncle — or an aunt?’

Doreen shook her head.

‘Of course, there’s Bruno,’ she said musingly. ‘Bruno is the one dog in the whole troupe which doesn’t belong to Jim Radlett. I’ve had him since his puppy days. Sheila Jordan gave him to me on my tenth birthday.

Bruno’s awfully clever. I might work up an act with him and get in with the small stars in another show. But that will take time, of course,’ she added, biting her lip. ‘And meantime —’ She rose restlessly. ‘I — I must go along and see how the dogs are getting on. Lulu has them in the ring now, you know.’

The chums nodded. Doreen dried her eyes. But before any of them so much as took a step towards the door there was a commotion in the corridor outside. Quick, agitated footsteps, the cry of a girl. The door was thrown open.

‘Janet!’ cried Clara Trevlyn.

Janet Jordan it was, her usually rosy face very pale, her eyes shining with the light of calamity. She looked distraught.

‘Father!’ she gasped.

‘Mr. Jordan? My goodness, Janet, you’re trembling!’ Babs cried, as she steadied her chum by catching at her arm. ‘Sit down — do! What’s the matter?’

Janet gulped.

‘Father — he’s ill! Had a sudden seizure in his caravan!’ she whispered.

‘And the doctor — oh, Babs!’

Babs felt her face turn a little pale.

‘Yes, dear? Quietly now; just tell us.’

‘The — the doctor!’ Janet cried. ‘He says that — that it is his heart. It — it was the upset to-night with Jim Radlett that brought it on, and — and daddy’s got to lay up and not be worried now for days and days and days. That means to say’ — Janet shook her head wearily — ‘that there’ll be no one in charge, except Sheila, and Jim Radlett and his friends are just ready for mischief!’

Babs’ face became grave. For she realised how much this might mean.

What could they do, indeed?

Only one thing, and in that moment Babs made a resolution. They must stand by Janet and her elder sister, Sheila, upon whose shoulders the mantle of authority would fall.

And at the same time they must look after Doreen, the victim of Jim Radlett’s callous scheming.

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The news of Jonathan Jordan’s collapse had flown like wildfire round the circus.

Long before even his daughter Sheila — who, as leading trapezist, was performing in the ring — had gleaned the tidings, most of the staff of Jordan’s Circus knew it.

On some the news produced an effect of extreme dismay. Those were the loyals of Jordan’s Circus, the men and women who would stand by the Jordan family through thick and thin.

But on others it produced an effect immediately of sheer, unrestrained joy. These formed the gipsy faction of the circus, the rebellious ‘diddies’ of the old regime, when Jonathan Jordan had been in partnership with the rascally Joe Smith.

For a long time the Smith gipsy crowd, headed by Jim Radlett and Fearless Ferdinand, the lion-tamer, had been the cause of trouble in the circus. Many a time Jonathan Jordan had felt inclined to dismiss them, but, being a wise showman, he forbore, hoping, sooner or later, that they would see reason.

For, actually, Jordan could not afford to dismiss them. In the gipsy

element of the circus he possessed some of his strongest and his most attractive turns.

In all circusdom there was no cleverer lion-tamer than Fearless Ferdinand. There was no cleverer troupe of dogs than those belonging to Jim Radlett. Kasmir, the snake-charmer, was also one of the gipsy camp; so was Mysti, the great illusionist; and Panglos, the leader of the acrobatic cyclists.

Such turns could not easily be replaced, and so, for the sake of his circus, Jonathan Jordan had been obliged to tolerate them.

‘It’s “sticks out”!’ Radlett chuckled now, using a circus term, which meant ‘trouble.’ ‘Everything’s fixed,’ Radlett went on easily. ‘We got the money. The diddies are all on our side. They’ll come at a snap of the fingers. We can start that rival show we’ve always talked about. Panglos, Mysti, and Kasmir will come with us for sure, but we’ve got to get the others on our side. Lulu can handle the dogs now, so that cuts out Doreen. But we want the rest of the bunch — the bull-man, the ropers, and the liberties, and the flip-flaps, and so on.’

Ferdinand scowled.

‘Well, tell me something I don’t know,’ he advised.

‘Then listen!’ Radlett’s face grew cunning. ‘To-morrow we tell the rest of the crowd that Jordan promised us all more money. We go and ask that girl Sheila for it. She won’t give it. So we go on strike. And, meantime, you get busy—see?’ Radlett went on. ‘You jump around, buy tents, wagons, get a marquee, seats — fix up a lot. The Radlett-Simpson Circus Combine! Plaster the town with bills announcing that all the late artistes of Jordan’s have joined the new show. Jordan is liked in these parts. Folks will simply roll in — and so will the money!’

‘But what about Doreen?’ Ferdy questioned. ‘She’s in with the Jordan gang, isn’t she?’

Radlett sneered.

‘She is — and she can stop with them!’ he growled. ‘I’ve got what I want out of Doreen, and I’ve been saving it good and hard, too. You needn’t worry about Doreen. She’s no more my daughter than Lulu is your son! That’s fake — always has been fake, but I had to trick the girl in order to get hold of the money she made while she was running the dogs. But there’s no need for that now. Lulu can handle ’em fine.’

Ferdinand nodded. His doubts seemed rested at last.

‘All right, Jim; it’s your say,’ he agreed. ‘We’ll get moving.’

Just in time, outside that door a shadowy figure moved away. Doreen, who had been on a surreptitious visit to the canvas-covered corral where the dogs were stalled, had seen those two figures inside Jim Radlett’s caravan, and had paused to listen.

And Doreen had heard all!

CHAPTER XI

Babs and Co. Will Help!

UPON the faces of the seven girls in Barbara Redfern's luxurious caravan utter dismay was registered.

Babs and Mabs were there. Clara and Marjorie were there. Bessie and Sheila Jordan, as well as Jemima and Doreen, were there. Janet at the moment was with her father in his caravan.

The chums were standing in various attitudes in the caravan, and Sheila, frowning, stood facing Doreen, the thirteen-year-old star, who had just rushed into the caravan with her breathless news. And Sheila's face was grave; her eyes were glinting.

'So there is to be a strike, eh?' she muttered.

Doreen nodded.

'And when the strike has disorganised the circus, Radlett and Ferdy are going to tempt the rest of the artistes away,' Sheila went on.

'But, Sheila, you won't allow them to strike?' Babs asked.

Sheila looked fierce.

'Well, if they want to strike, let them!' she cried. 'Yes, let them! If they haven't any sense of loyalty, we don't want them in Jordan's Circus. The sooner they clear out the better. I'm just a girl, am I? They can do with me as they like?' She laughed. 'Well, we'll see about that!'

'That's the spirit — what!' Jemima supported. 'Good for you, Sheila! If you want help, count me in!'

'Yes, and me!' Babs clamoured eagerly.

'And me!'

'And, I sus-say, Sheila, you know, you can jolly well rely on me!' Bessie said, her face flushing. 'Hurrah! Let them strike!'

Sheila laughed. Her little explosion seemed to have done her good.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I'll keep you all to that. But now, let's be sensible.

Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and, thanks to Doreen, we know exactly where we stand. I've got a pretty shrewd idea as to who will back up Simpson and Radlett in this. It'll mean five of our best turns at least going over to the enemy, and that means we've got to do something to replace them. You're all with me?'

'Rather!' came a chorus.

'And you'll help me?'

'To the last man, captain!' Jemima nodded.

'Thank you!' Sheila smiled. 'Right-ho, then! Now that we know the enemy's plan of campaign, we can draw up one of our own. But, whatever happens, my father mustn't know about this trouble. You understand? If he guessed there was a fight on in the circus, it might worry him into a relapse, and that would never do. We've just got to let

him think that everything is still O.K. You understand that?’

‘Oh, of course!’

‘Right-ho, then!’ And Sheila grinned now. She actually seemed to be welcoming the prospect of the fight. ‘Girls, I’m going to get you to come in and help me on this. And I’ve got an idea. We’ll form ourselves into an anti-strike committee. Now, look here, Babs!’

Babs sprang up, smartly saluting, Sheila nodded.

‘That’s the spirit!’ she approved. ‘Keep it up! There is going to be fun. We’re not going to pull long faces about it. I was at Cliff House myself once, and learned to meet all difficulties with a smile. Hurrah, now for the smile! Babs, I’m going to ask you to Sit on the entertainments side of the committee. I know from Janet that you’ve got ideas.’

‘But what about me!’ protested Bessie, jumping up from the window-seat.

‘Sheila wants somebody who carries her ideas in her head, Bessie,’ Jemima announced solemnly, and there was a chuckle.

‘Well, don’t I carry my ideas in my head?’ Bessie demanded.

‘Haven’t noticed it.’

‘Pax, pax!’ Babs sang out. ‘No quarrelling! Be quiet, Bessie! Stop pulling Bessie’s leg, Jimmy! Well, Sheila, go on. I’m on the entertainments committee. What do I do?’

‘You become my right-hand man — or, I should say, girl,’ Sheila replied.

‘Mabs, I want you on that committee, too. And you, Marjorie, and you, Doreen. That’s four. The duty of the new entertainments committee,’ she added solemnly, ‘will be to think out new turns to replace the strikers.’

‘That’s a tall order, Sheila!’

Sheila smiled grimly.

‘I’m serious,’ she said. ‘This is a fight, remember. And if Radlett and Co. get their way, we must go flop! Well, we’re not going to. Whatever happens, Jordan’s Circus is carrying on. It may be necessary for you, Bessie, to learn how to train lions and tigers before we’ve finished!’ she added mischievously, at which the fat one’s jaw dropped, and her spectacles almost fell off with dismay. ‘Now, all the rest of you will be formed into a utility committee — which means to say that you’ll do any jobs which want doing, irrespective of what they are. Is that agreed?’

‘Ahem!’ Jemima looked thoughtful. ‘Such as what, Sheila?’

‘Well, cleaning harness, you know.’

‘Oh, Jehoshaphat!’

‘I beg your pardon, Jemima?’

‘I said “I just love that,” ’ Jemima murmured faintly. ‘Ahem! Cleaning harness, you know. Such a jolly good old job. Anything else the utility committee might have to do?’

Sheila frowned.

‘Well, there’ll be the brasses to clean.’

‘Ahem !’

‘The horses to feed and water and groom.’

‘Really! Oh!’ Jemima grinned. ‘Ahem! How does one water horses?’

‘Scuse my ignorance, of course. I thought one only watered flowers — geraniums and aspidistras and jolly old cabbages and things.’

Sheila laughed.

‘Watering is an expression,’ she explained patiently. ‘It means giving water to the horses to drink.’

‘Oh, so?’ Jemima nodded wisely. ‘Well, what happens next? After I’ve fed the geraniums and watered the jolly old gee-gees? I mean, don’t let us off too lightly, you know, Sheila.’

‘Well, you’ll have to clean out the big marquee.’

‘Oh, easy!’ Jemima murmured. ‘Does one use a toothbrush or a vacuum cleaner, Sheila?’

Sheila laughed.

‘No, seriously! And then, of course, you may be called upon to cook.’

‘Cook?’ Bessie’s face beamed. ‘I say, Sheila, that’s ripping. I’ll do that. I’m a jolly good cook.’

‘All the better,’ Sheila laughed. ‘If it comes to it, you take charge of the kitchen, Bessie. Well, that’s all for the utility things which may crop up. But I don’t think they will. Except for the horses most of the performing animals belong to the artistes themselves, you know, and their owners are responsible for them. Well, that’s all settled then. You understand?’

The chums smiled. They all understood, and they were all agog and eager.

‘And now —’ continued Sheila, and stopped.

Sudden and breathless silence fell upon the caravan. From outside came the tramp of feet and a confused babble of voices. Sheila smiled grimly.

‘They’re here!’ she said. ‘They’ve had their meeting, apparently.’ She squared her shoulders. ‘Doreen,’ she added quietly, ‘open that door. I have a word or two to say to them!’

Outside the caravan, in spite of the bleak east wind, bringing with it the first flurrying flakes of half-frozen snow, more than fifty circus hands stood, grouped round the entrance to the caravan. One or two, who had sticks, raised them threateningly on high. Not for nothing had Jim Radlett harangued the crowd in the big marquee.

Jim Radlett stood at their head, with Fearless Ferdinand on one side of him and the girl Lulu — a pouting, red-lipped slip of defiance — on the other.

‘Well?’ Sheila asked. ‘What is the meaning of this, Jim?’

‘Well, it’s about that money,’ Radlett said.

‘What money?’

‘The money the boss promised us. He said he’d give us all a rise if we had good business covering Christmas. Well, we’ve had good business, but the money ain’t coming yet — nor has there been any mention of it.’ Sheila frowned. Then she smiled disbelievingly.

‘What are you trying to tell me, Jim?’

‘Just what the boss told us,’ Jim said.

‘Indeed! Then, sorry as I am to say it, Jim, you’ve made a mistake. Father pays you all very well — some of you he pays too well. The show can’t stand a bigger pay-roll, and you know it. And as for father’s promising more money — well, that’s a fib, and you know that, too. I’m running this outfit now, and you might just as well know where you stand before we start. There’s going to be no addition to the pay-roll until the boss gives the word.’

An angry murmur went up. Radlett scowled.

‘Look here, Sheila —’ he began.

‘Miss Sheila, Jim. I’m your boss now, remember!’

Radlett spat on the ground.

‘Look here, Sheila,’ he repeated deliberately, ‘that won’t do — see? You can’t turn the claims of half the show down like that. Boss Jordan promised us more money, and we want that money — see? You can’t come the high-and-mighty simply because you happen to be left in charge of the outfit, and if you do there’s going to be trouble. We demand a rise all round — two pounds for the performers, ten bob and a pound each for the hands. And if we don’t get it —’

Sheila laughed.

‘And if you don’t get it, what then?’

‘We go on strike!’

Sheila’s eyes gleamed.

‘Right!’ she cried. ‘Now listen to me. You never were promised more money by my father, and you know as well as I do that the show can’t stand it. You’re well paid. You ought to be satisfied, and if you’re not satisfied — well, get out! I’ll replace you!’ Sheila went on smoothly. ‘I’ll run this show without you. I know you all too well. You’ve been longing for trouble ever since Joe Smith was sent to prison, and this, you think, is your opportunity to get back at my father, through me. Well, get on with it. Go on! Strike! Pack up! Get out! Do anything! I don’t care!’

The mob looked flabbergasted. Jim Radlett’s eyes popped almost out of his head.

‘In any case, you’re all suspended from this moment!’ Sheila went on.

‘Now go to bed!’

‘But look here —’

‘I’ve finished!’ Sheila retorted contemptuously, and shut the door.

From outside a furious howl rent the air. Voices rose. Sticks were shaken.

A cry went up:
‘Come out!’
‘Come and show your face, you brat!’
Sheila wrenched the door open and stood upon the step. The noise subsided as if by magic.
‘Well?’ she asked challengingly.
For a moment she stood, arms folded, facing them, a proud smile of defiance on her face. Then she laughed shortly and shut the door again. But this time not a sound followed her.
‘My word!’ gasped Babs in admiration. ‘Sheila, fancy facing that crowd!’
Sheila laughed.
‘No great courage required!’ she cried lightly. ‘You see what they are — just a crowd of cowards! Once their bluff is called they’re beaten! And we’re going to call it, kids — all the time and every time! Now get busy!’

CHAPTER XII

‘Breakfast for a hundred!’

BANG, bang, bang!
‘Babs!’
‘My hat!’ And Babs, rubbing sleep from her eyes, sat up with a start.
‘Yes. Who is it?’
‘Sheila.’
‘Oh!’ Babs slipped from the bunk. ‘What is it? Anything happened?’

‘Nothing yet. Everybody is asleep. But I want you, Babs, as my lieutenant. This is work, you know. Let me in, will you?’
‘Why, certainly!’ And Babs, shivering, slipped her dressing-gown around her and went to the door, unlocking it. Sheila, very bright and rosy-faced, her rather tall figure wrapped in a fur coat, stood on the threshold.
‘Early to bed, early to rise,’ she chuckled. ‘Put on the light. I’ve been up for over an hour. We’ve got a busy day in front of us. I’m just going to do a round of the circus and find out who’s on strike and who isn’t. As my lieutenant I want you to come with me. And you, Doreen,’ she added as the little circus waif poked a sleepy face above the sheets.
‘Time to get up, Bessie!’ Babs called.
‘What?’ came Mabs’ voice.
‘Sheila wants us.’
‘Not you, Mabs. You can stay in bed another half an hour,’ Sheila said. ‘I want Babs and Doreen at the moment. Bessie, you’d better get up, too.’
‘But I say — Ow! Babs, you duffer, dud-don’t shake me like that!’ Bessie

stuttered. 'If you go on shaking me, you'll have my glasses falling off, and if they fall off and get broken, you'll jolly well have to pay for them, so there! Ow!'

'Duffer, you haven't got your glasses on!' Babs laughed. 'Here they are — on the chair by your side.'

'Well, they might have been on,' Bessie argued. 'You never know, you know! Oh, crumbs! What is the time?'

'Half-past six!'

'Half-past what? I say, you don't think I'm getting up at this hour?'

Bessie yelled indignantly.

'We do. Work, you know!'

'Come on, Babs! You ready, Doreen? Mabs, you might get Bessie up, in case,' Sheila advised. 'I'm going along to the canteen to find out if the cooking staff have started operations. If they haven't, you'll be wanted to cook the breakfast, Bessie. Come on!'

'But I say —' howled Bessie.

But what Bessie had to say was lost by the slamming of the door. Sheila, Babs, and Doreen had gone.

Babs shivered in the cold air outside. The circus, in the early morning light, did not look inviting. During the night there had been a frost, and the ground was patchy-white and hard.

Babs shivered.

'Jolly cold!' she said.

Sheila laughed.

'You'll soon get used to it,' she comforted. 'In the circus one has to do these things, you know. We'll make for the canteen first.'

Babs nodded, flashing a rather rueful smile at Doreen, who sympathetically smiled back at her. Together they padded across the crunching ground towards the big marquee adjoining the main hall.

The marquee, they discovered, was deserted. Sheila frowned.

'That means the cooking staff is on strike,' she said. 'By this time they ought to be about their duties. But I'll give them a chance. I'll go and see that it's not just mere oversleeping. Doreen, you might get the fire going, will you? Babs, will you light the gas under the urns? Here are the matches!'

While Doreen lit the fire in the big range, Babs went along the lines of urns, inspecting each to see that it was full of water, and lighting the gas-jet beneath it. From outside came a shouting.

'What's that?' Babs asked.

Doreen smiled.

'Just Sheila,' she said, 'rousing the canteen staff, I suppose. She's just splendid, isn't she?'

'She is,' Babs replied, and glowed with admiration for her task-mistress.

Sheila evidently did not intend the grass to grow under her feet.

She meant business!

She came in just as Babs had put a match to the last of the gas-jets, shaking her head.

‘As I thought,’ she said. ‘The canteen staff have joined up with Radlett. They’re out on strike, and that means, somehow, that we’ve got to get breakfast ourselves — which means breakfast for about a hundred, at a rough guess. Think Bessie will be equal to it, Babs?’

Babs laughed. Where cooking was concerned Bessie was equal to anything.

‘If we help her,’ she cried.

‘Good enough. We’ll get to it. Porridge first, of course. Eggs and bacon afterwards. Bread-and-butter — Piles and piles of it. Jam, marmalade, and cheese — some of the boys take cheese, you know. Babs, slip along and get Bessie and the rest of the utility committee out, will you?’

‘Trust me!’ laughed Babs, and sprinted across to the caravan again.

But Bessie, she found when she reached her own caravan, was up — thanks to Mabs. She was struggling at that moment very grumblingly into her frock.

‘All hands to the pump, Bessie!’ Babs laughed. ‘You’re in demand. Breakfast for a hundred people — at short notice! Mabs, take Bessie across to the marquee, will you, while I go and rouse the others, and have a small wash.’

‘Oh, really!’ Bessie expostulated.

But she hurried with her dressing, for all that. Next to eating food, the thing Bessie loved doing best of all was preparing it.

Babs, thoroughly on the warpath now, rushed to the next caravan. She thumped on the door.

‘Come on! Awake, you merry sleepers!’ she called. ‘Fall in, the utility committee!’

A chorus of groans came from inside. The door opened, and the tousled head of Clara Trevlyn peeped out.

‘Oh, crumbs! Isn’t it cold?’ She shivered. ‘Look here, Babs —’

‘Now, then, up you get, you slackers!’ Babs called. ‘Work! Hard work — heavy work! You’re wanted in the canteen!’

‘Oh, dear!’ sighed Jemima Carstairs, from her bunk, and groped for her monocle and stuck it into her eye.

‘Get up, Jimmy!’

‘But I say, you know! Oh, goodness, I’ve only just got to bed!’

‘It’s a quarter to seven.’

‘Ye little fishes! Is there such an hour on holiday?’

‘And there’s breakfast for a hundred waiting to be cooked,’ Babs went on. ‘Now, buck up, all of you. Come across to the canteen just as soon as

you can. I'm flying.'

And, leaving a groaning chorus of reluctant girls to dissolve the sleep from their eyes, she flew back the way she had come.

But the circus was stirring into life now. From half a dozen caravan chimneys thin spirals of smoke were rising in the air. Horses were neighing. In the long, low, tented corral at the rear the dogs, anticipating with impatience their morning meal, were beginning to bark.

A gipsy woman, one of the side-show people, was busily engaged in taking in a line of washing which had hung out overnight, and which, frosted like boards, crackled and snapped as she folded them with red hands.

'Well, here we are!' Sheila cried, as she entered the kitchen again — the kitchen being one end of the marquee, partitioned off from the remainder of the place so that the diners could not see what was going on. 'And here's Bessie,' she added, clapping that girl on the back with a heartiness which caused Bessie, who was tasting some soup stock, to gasp and splutter. 'Do come on, now! Wire into it, all of you! I've made some tea. Better have a spot before you start.'

'Thanks!' gasped Babs.

The tea was hot and welcome, and readily inspired her with new life. She was just finishing it when Jemima, Clara, and Marjorie Hazeldene came in. Janet, anxious for the latest news of her father, had rushed off to his caravan.

'Well, now we're all here,' Sheila said. 'Bessie's in charge. She'll give the orders. I must push off and find out how the land lies. Nobody who is on strike is going to have breakfast prepared for them. They can jolly well get it themselves. You'll find aprons hanging on the partition, and Doreen will tell you where everything else is. So-long!'

'So-long!' Jemima called. 'Now, Bessie, old Spartan, hop around and do your stuff! At your orders, you know. What do I do?'

And Jemima smartly saluted. Bessie frowned reprovingly.

'All right. Really, Jimmy, don't fluster me!' she said. 'Wait a minute. Oatmeal —'

'Beg pardon!'

'Oatmeal,' Bessie repeated.

'Certainly! But what's that mean? Is it a conundrum, or is it the usual part of the ceremony of preparing breakfast?' Jemima politely inquired.

'Oh, really, Jimmy, don't be a goose!' Bessie said. 'I mean oatmeal — to cook!'

'Oh, I see! You're going to make poultices?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'And milk,' went on Bessie musingly. 'I shall want milk.'

'Certainly!' Jemima said brightly. 'Condensed, pasteurised, or fresh?'

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Bessie glowered.

‘Look here, who’s cooking this breakfast?’

‘Well, you’re not — at least, not as far as I can see!’ Clara snorted. ‘Get on with it! Don’t stand burbling like a silly duffer finding clues for a crossword puzzle!’

Bessie sniffed.

‘Who’s in charge here?’

‘Well, get on with the washing.’

‘And sugar,’ Bessie decided, with a glare at Clara. ‘I shall want sugar, of course. I say, Babs, pass up the oatmeal, will you? Jimmy, you get some salt. Clara, you fetch the sugar.’

‘Oh, crumbs! Give your orders!’

‘And then a ladle. I shall want a ladle to stir it with, you know,’ Bessie said.

‘Certainly, ma’am! Certainly!’

‘And meantime, Jimmy, you might crack the eggs. Marjorie and Babs, you cut the bread, will you? Babs, old thing, you might help Marjorie to butter it afterwards.’

‘And me — what do I do?’ demanded Clara.

‘You help Jimmy to crack eggs, Clara.’

‘But where are the egg-crackers, Bessie?’ Jemima wanted to know.

Clara laughed.

‘Don’t worry, Bessie. I’ll show Jimmy how to bang them on the edge of a basin.’

‘Doreen can cut the bacon.’

‘Splendid! Now, please may we start, Miss Bunter?’ The cook-in-chief beamed, and the amateur cooks got to work. It was not a bad effort, on the whole. Clara, vigorously wholehearted in everything she did, commenced to crack eggs in fine style, demonstrating the art to Jemima. Babs, anxious to break a record as far as cutting bread was concerned, very effectively succeeded in cutting her finger, and operations were suspended for a short time while Mabs bound it up.

Bessie, of course, was in her element, and though she grumbled freely over her work, she displayed an energy that quite surprised her chums. The porridge she made in the big boiler at one end of the canteen. With an army of frying-pans all working at once on the big surface of the range, she superintended the cooking of the eggs and the frying of the bacon. An appetising smell arose.

‘Smells ripping, doesn’t it?’ Bessie beamed, turning a red face from the fire. ‘I say, this is prime. Don’t splash that fat, Clara, you duffer!’

‘Oh, sorry, Bessie!’

Sheila came in presently, sniffing appreciatively. She laughed.

‘Getting on all right?’

‘Fine, thanks!’

‘That’s the stuff!’ Sheila laughed. ‘I’m on duty at the canteen entrance,’ she said. ‘I’ve hit upon a good wheeze. As the hands come into breakfast I’m making them sign a form, stating whether they are loyal to the circus or not. If not — no brekker!’

‘Oh, good stunt!’ cried Babs.

‘Babs, if you’ve finished, I’ll get you to come along and help me,’ Sheila said.

‘Right you are!’ Babs cried.

And she hurried through her task and joined Sheila at the entrance to the marquee.



Bessie was in her element

There Sheila had installed a table and two chairs. She had a paper on the table in front of her, a pen in her hand. She winked.

‘Now I’ll test ’em!’ she said. ‘Ring the brekker-bell, Babs!’

Babs rang the heavy bell which was near at hand. Its brazen chimes echoed resoundingly through the canvas hall.

‘Breakfast — breakfast!’ she cried. ‘Come to the cookhouse door, folk! Roll up — roll up!’

Outside, there was a chorus of exclamations.

‘Breakfast?’

‘But Radlett said the canteen staff were on strike!’

‘And so they are!’ came Radlett’s furious voice. ‘That’s a bluff. There’s to be no grub for you this morning — not at dinner-time, nor at no other time, until that girl Sheila gives in. She can’t have cooked breakfast herself. It’s bluff, I tell you!’

There was quite a commotion at that. Babs stepped to the door and peered

out.

‘My word!’ she cried.

For, his back towards the entrance, stood Jim Radlett, facing a crowd of circus hands. He had both arms upflung, and he was haranguing them with all the power of his lungs. The crowd paused, looking dubious.

‘It’s a sell!’ Jim Radlett shouted. ‘There ain’t no breakfast. If you want breakfast you’ll have to get it yourselves, ’cause the canteen staff are on strike. There’ll be no more grub in Jordan’s until the strike is broken, I tell you — and that will be when Boss Jordan packs up. So get back — get back — all of you!’

‘No, don’t!’ cried Babs, and jumped up on to a box. ‘Folk, there is breakfast — breakfast for all!’

‘Yes,’ cried Sheila, jumping up beside Babs. ‘Take no notice. Radlett’s doing the bluffing, as he always does. If there’d been no breakfast you would have been warned. The only thing you have to do to get a good feed is to sign a declaration saying that you’ll remain loyal to Jordan’s Circus.’

‘But who’s cooked it?’ somebody shrilled.

‘Never mind! It’s cooked, and ready for you, too, if you’re hungry,’

Sheila went on. ‘We can manage without the canteen staff. We can manage without anybody who doesn’t want to be loyal. So come along!’ There was a pause, a hesitant shuffling. The faces of the onlookers were rather puzzled. But they were hungry.

One man came forward.

‘Well, here goes!’ he cried. ‘I’m not going to starve!’

And he plunged forward.

‘Sign, please!’ Babs said, and pushed the form in front of him.

‘Thank you. I’m sorry there are no waitresses, but if you present yourself at the door of the kitchen you will have your meal served to you. Next, please! Come and eat it while it’s hot!’

The crowd was not proof against that temptation. Quite a stream came forward.

Those behind, straining necks to get a glimpse of the inside, saw them coming away from the kitchen door with steaming platefuls of appetising porridge and eggs and bacon. That decided it.

Eighty-seven, all told, passed through the canvas flap of the big marquee, and the crowd representing the strikers began to look at one another with faces that grew ever more furious, ever more sulphurous. Sheila laughed.

‘Well, that’s that!’ she said. ‘We know who’s on our side now, Babs.’

Close the door. I’ll have a word with these loyals before they leave. Yes?’ she added sternly as a woman pushed her way forward.

The woman was Mrs. Grimes, the erstwhile cook and kitchen staff manageress. She looked shamefaced.

Sheila's eyes narrowed.

'You're on strike, I understand?'

'Well, no — not now.' Mrs. Grimes looked flustered. 'I — I was, you know. Jim Radlett said that if we went on strike he could get us more money, or a better job, so I thought I'd better join the others.'

'I see,' Sheila nodded. 'You thought if the circus had no food, that they would come round to your way of thinking? And you're well paid, aren't you?'

Mrs. Grimes hung her head.

'Yes.'

'And yet you weren't satisfied,' Sheila said. 'But now you see we can manage without you, you're sorry! Not very sporting, was it, Mrs. Grimes?'

The woman flushed.

'All right,' Sheila nodded. 'You want your job back — is that it?'

'Y-yes.'

'And you'll promise, if you get it back, not to strike any more?'

'Yes.'

'And to bring the canteen staff back with you?'

'Yes.'

'Right-ho! Then, sign,' Sheila cried, and pushed the paper under the woman's nose. But, turning, she revealed a face, radiant with triumph, to Babs.

'That's the first of the waverers,' she grinned. 'That's the canteen staff back — thanks to Bessie Bunter and you, Babs!'

CHAPTER XIII **Bessie's Big Idea**

BUT if that first counter-thrust to Jim Radlett's calling of a circus strike had been an unqualified success, it by no means solved all the troubles that beset Jordan's Circus at this moment.

The strike faction was still strong in numbers. It represented, indeed, just over a third of the circus' total personnel, and the absence of those members was seriously felt. Five of the big turns in the show were out. Practically the whole of the tent hands, the grooms, and the cleaners were not working.

Even though the loyals professed themselves eager and willing to do extra work, that would by no means make up for the deficiency in numbers.

'We're keeping our end up,' Sheila jubilantly told the chums after breakfast. 'While the Radlett crowd still finds us carrying on they'll lose

heart, you see. One by one you'll find them trickling back. Now —'

She said that in Babs' caravan. The bunks were now packed back into the window-seat; everything was neat and spick-and-span. Babs nodded.

'But they won't give in without a fight,' Sheila went on, 'and if we break their hearts by carrying on, we've got to look for trouble in other directions. Radlett's a spiteful sort. Ferdinand is sly and cunning. Once they start putting their heads together, then they'll be up to mischief to ruin the show in other ways.'

The chums all nodded seriously.

'So we've got to catch those two — Ferdy and Radlett,' Sheila went on. 'Meantime, we continue to carry on ourselves. Now, forward the utility committee!'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Jemima.

'There's work to be done.'

'More of it?'

'Lot's more!' Sheila laughed. 'First the circus ring. There's a man down there — Mick, we call him — who's responsible for the job of tidying up and raking the tan, and so on. He can't do the whole job himself, so the utility committee will have to help him. Jimmy!'

'Oh, gracious, what a life! Yes?' asked Jemima resignedly.

'You'll go along there with Clara, Marjorie, and Janet and help,' Sheila decided. 'We'll give you a rest later, seeing that you did so well over breakfast. You, Babs, and you, Mabs, and you, Doreen, stay here. You're the entertainments committee, you know, and we've got to fix up the gaps in the performance this afternoon caused by the strike of the other performers. That agreed?'

'Rather!'

'Well, off you go. We'll come down after we've settled things in here, and give you a hand. Now, Babs.'

And the entertainments committee got to work in earnest.

'Well, I'll say that's good progress!' Sheila laughed on a pleased note.

'And thanks, Babs, for the suggestions. That really is a topping idea of yours to let the audience into the show. They'll just love it. And the kiddies, too.'

'But, I say!' expostulated Bessie. 'I say!'

'Well, Bessie?'

'What about my idea?'

'Oh, did you have an idea?' Sheila frowned. 'Now, let me see, what was it? That one about your cooking the dinner? But this is a programme we're trying to fix up, Bessie.'

'And this is an idea for the mouldy old programme,' Bessie said, with a sniff. 'Really, Sheila, I think it's jolly considerate of me to offer you my ideas. You know what a ripping success I was when I gave that turn

yesterday.'

Sheila laughed.

'Oh, you mean about going into the ring with Ting-a-Ling?' she said. She shook her head. 'Can't be done, Bessie. Radlett's got the bow-wow, and Radlett, at the moment, wouldn't part with it. Think of something else. Like the idea of Babs', for instance.' She laughed.

It certainly was a good idea. Its extreme simplicity recommended it at once.

The circus had several donkeys, and it was Babs' idea to use them in the ring, challenging members of the audience to ride in a race called the Jordan Derby.

There was to be a prize for the winner, of course — two pounds for the first home, one pound for the second, and a 'mystery prize' — consisting of a bag of nuts — for the last man home. Sheila, like the good little show-woman she was, had seized upon it at once.

And then there was Babs' second idea — that of giving the children in the audience free rides upon the elephants after the animals had done their turn. And there was Doreen's idea of doing new stunts with Bruno, her St. Bernard, in place of the lion-taming act.

That in itself was a little gem of cleverness, for what Doreen proposed to do was to take Bruno into the ring in the lion's cage and pretend to 'tame' him. Thus three of the missing five acts were successfully replaced.

But Bessie glowered.

'But — oh, really, Sheila! Something ought to be done about my act, you know,' she said. 'After all, you can't just throw away the best turn in the circus because you can't get hold of the dog. This is your circus, isn't it?' 'Well, now that daddy's ill, I suppose it is.'

'Well, why not demand the dog from Jim Radlett?'

Sheila grunted.

'Why not demand the man in the moon?' she replied.

'Wait a minute.' It was Doreen who spoke. She leaned eagerly forward.

'Sheila, are you willing to put Bessie in if Ting-a-Ling can be obtained?'

'Why, of course. But —'

'Bessie, you'd want to rehearse, of course!' Doreen jumped up, her face alight with excitement. 'Now's the chance — you could rehearse in here. Supposing I go and get Ting-a-Ling?'

'But what about Radlett?' Sheila asked.

Doreen's face set.

'I'm not asking Radlett,' she said. 'I've trained Ting-a-Ling; he's as much mine as Jim's. Wait here.'

And she skipped from the caravan.

An eager light was shining in Doreen's eyes now. Doreen liked Bessie; she was grateful to Bessie as she was to the other Cliff House chums.

And Doreen had seen enough, during Bessie's impromptu performance in the ring last night, to prove to her that the fat girl would be a draw.

Bessie really was clever when it came to ventriloquism, and though Bessie's remarks weren't particularly witty or funny, the very fact that Ting-a-Ling answered her back — by means of Bessie's ventriloquism, of course — had convulsed the audience of last night.

And it was a shame really that Bessie should be done out of this chance. Radlett, Doreen knew, would never miss the dog.

Now she was threading her way through the lines of tents. Now she had reached the corral. Nobody was about. Her heart beating a trifle faster than usual, Doreen went forward to the stall in which Ting-a-Ling, the little Pekinese, was kennelled. She stooped down, patting the little dog's head.

'Shush!' she bade, and slipped the chain which held him to the post against which he was lying. She picked him up. Ting-a-Ling licked her face.

Doreen stole towards the door. There was nobody about. She took three quick paces forward and then stopped, a gasp on her lips.

For a voice — the fierce, threatening voice of Jim Radlett — rang out: 'Hi, you! Where are you taking that dog?'

She saw Jim emerge from behind a tent. Then, with Ting-a-Ling still in her arms, she flew on.

'Hi, come back!' Radlett furiously shouted again.

But Doreen did not heed.

Radlett's face flamed.

'See that?' he roared to a crowd that had followed him. 'Look! Doreen! She's pinched one of my dogs! And why? Because she's going to perform with it in the ring. Are we going to stand for that?'

'No!' roared the crowd.

'Then come on!'

And in an excited stream the gang surged forward. But by that time Doreen had breathlessly reached the caravan, was dashing in. Sheila, Babs, Mabs, and Bessie rose.

'Quick, they're after me!' Doreen gasped. 'Jim saw me! Hide Ting-a-Ling!'

'Under here!' Babs said swiftly, and held up the lid of the table.

Doreen nodded gulpingly.

'That's it. In, Ting! Now, quiet. Die, doggie!' she added, shaking a finger at him. 'You mustn't speak until I let you out again. Understand?'

Ting-a-Ling, used to performing with Doreen in the ring, rolled on his back and closed his eyes, his little legs vertical in the air.

'That's an idea for rehearsal!' Bessie said, with glee. 'My hat! Quick, Babs, put the lid down! Oh, crumbs!'

For suddenly there was a thunderous knocking at the caravan door.
 ‘Open this door!’ shouted Jim Radlett furiously.
 Sheila smiled scornfully. She went to the door and opened it. ‘Noisy, aren’t you?’ she chided. ‘What’s the meaning of this fuss?’
 ‘We want that dog!’ Jim Radlett roared.
 ‘What dog?’
 ‘The dog Doreen brought in here.’
 Sheila frowned.
 ‘Doreen? Dog?’ she asked, pretending not to understand. ‘I don’t follow.’
 Radlett spat upon the ground.
 ‘Chuck it, Sheila! You can’t put that over on me,’ he said coarsely. ‘I ain’t standing for it, see?’
 ‘I still don’t understand, Jim. Doreen, did you bring a dog in?’ Sheila asked.
 ‘Dog?’ Doreen’s face was blank. ‘What sort of a dog?’
 ‘You know what sort of dog! That peke, Ting-a-Ling!’ Radlett shouted furiously. ‘And I want it back, see? If you don’t give it back —’
 ‘Well?’
 ‘We’ll wreck the van!’
 Sheila laughed.
 ‘Nice man, aren’t you?’ she asked. ‘If you dare so much as set foot in this caravan I’ll have you locked up! Yes, all of you! I can’t punish you for going on strike, but I can for doing wilful damage, and I will, Jim Radlett!’
 Jim snarled.
 ‘You will, will you?’ he asked. ‘Right-ho, then. If you’ve got a case I’ve got a case, too, and I say you’ve pinched my dog!’
 ‘The dog is under contract.’
 ‘Anyway, bring it out!’
 Bessie Bunter appeared at Sheila’s side. She blinked at the man disapprovingly.
 ‘You know, you ought to know better than kicking up this row out here!’ she said severely. ‘Why, isn’t that your dog — there?’ Bessie cried suddenly, and pointed. ‘Look!’
 Radlett jumped round. His face wore a startled expression. Bessie winked.
 ‘Where?’ Radlett demanded.
 ‘Why, there! Are you blind, or what?’ Bessie asked in surprise. ‘Look!’ she cried again, and from the back of the crowd came a sudden yapping and snapping.
 Radlett looked amazed. The whole crowd turned suddenly, staring at the spot from which the noise had come. Their faces were blank.
 ‘Diablo! Where is it?’

‘You’d better hurry!’ Sheila cried, pointing. ‘The little beggar will probably make for the gates. If you lose him, Jim —’



The whole crowd turned suddenly.

Radlett gave an exclamation. He also looked anxious. Ting-a-Ling was one of his cleverest animals, and to lose him would be a serious matter indeed.

‘But I can’t see it!’ he roared.

‘Bow-wow!’ came a bark from the distance.

And Radlett, with a smothered growl, turned at last, hurrying towards the gates. From the distance came a final, faint, defiant:

‘Bow-wow-wow!’

Sheila closed the door. She laughed heartily.

‘Well, that was neat, Bessie!’ she applauded. ‘Ha, ha, ha! Radlett’s face — did you see it? But now’s our chance. By the time they’ve finished looking for that dog you ought to have finished your rehearsal, Bessie.’

‘But what about afterwards?’ Babs put in. ‘We’ll have to take the dog back, and you can be sure Radlett will see that we don’t get hold of it again.’

Sheila frowned. Then she grinned.

‘I’ve got it!’ she cried. ‘One peke is very much like another —’

‘Well?’

‘And there’s a dog dealer in town,’ Sheila went on, her eyes glimmering.

‘Doreen, you know it. Here are four pounds. Go along and buy another peke just like Ting-a-Ling.’

‘My word!’ Babs’ eyes opened. ‘You mean, Sheila —’

‘I mean we’ll keep Ting-a-Ling and put the new peke in his place in Radlett’s corral,’ Sheila laughed. ‘Exchange, after all, is no robbery, and a little deception won’t hurt. Off you go, Doreen. And mind none of the Radlett crowd see you smuggling it in. And oh, by the way, while I think of it . . .’

‘Yes, Sheila?’

‘I’ve got a new twist for your Bruno turn. Make it a burlesque lion-taming scene. There’s an old lion’s skin knocking around in the prop tent, and you can dress Bruno in that. But come on now, Bessie! Get busy with Ting-a-Ling!’

And Bessie, whilst the bewildered victims of her ventriloquism went searching for a dog which didn’t exist, commenced her rehearsal.

CHAPTER XIV Success for the Show

‘ROLL up! Roll up! This way for the brightest show on earth!’ said Barbara Redfern merrily.

‘Come and win prizes and share all the fun of the circus! Admission sixpence to two shillings! Children half price! Babies in arms free! Roll up, roll up!’

There was a big crowd facing Babs, most of them gazing up at her appreciatively. She stood on the big platform near the entrance to Bigswell Hall, in which the circus was being held.

She was dressed in a tight-fitting riding-suit, a gay red-and-white showman’s hat perched on her pretty, brown curls, and a riding-whip in her hand, with which she whacked her leather-gaitered legs professionally from time to time.

The afternoon performance was due to begin, and, so far, everything had gone without a hitch.

Bessie, of course, was getting ready for her turn. Jemima was helping Doreen, Janet and her sister Sheila. Clara was in charge of the donkeys which were to be used in the race, and Marjorie, in great demand, was rushing round as the assistant of the wardrobe mistress, putting in last-minute stitches to torn costumes, and doing other repairs.

‘Come on! Come on!’ Babs sang. ‘Don’t miss this! All the fun and all the thrills! Come and see Doreen, the girl dog-charmer, in her new and screamingly funny act —’

‘Oh, yeah!’ came a voice from the crowd. ‘We know! Doreen ain’t got no dogs!’

‘So?’ Babs laughed. She sought out the face of the man who had said that, and recognised him immediately as one of the strikers. ‘That’s just where you’ve made a mistake!’ she retorted. ‘The dog turn Doreen is going to do far excels anything she has ever done before. Ladies and gentlemen,’ she added, ‘take no notice. Come and see the show, and if you’re not satisfied afterwards, ask for your money back.’

‘Well, that’s fair, I guess,’ someone said.

‘I might as well tell you,’ Babs went on, ‘that there are alterations in the programme, but they are alterations for the better. There’s a strike of sorts, the strike taking place because Mr. Jordan, the boss, is down with heart attack, and has had to leave affairs in the hands of his daughter Sheila, whom you will see in the flying trapeze act. In spite of the strike, we want Jordan’s Circus to be the success it has always been. So come along, ladies and gentlemen. Give us your good wishes by patronising the show.’

There was a buzz at that. The crowd looked with a new interest at Babs. She had, at one stroke, stricken the Radlett strikers into silence, and she had enlisted the sympathies of the crowd.

It was news to them, of course, that Mr. Jordan was ill. That immediately struck a chord of sympathy in their natures. The tidings that a girl was carrying on during her father’s absence roused all their instincts of sportsmanship.

‘Hey, we’ll roll up right enough, and good luck, missy!’ roared one.

‘That’s it; come along!’ Babs cried. ‘Show starting in ten minutes, ladies and gentlemen. Watch the new turns. They’re really great! Look out for Sheila, the queen of the flying trapeze! Look out for Bessie Bunter, the cleverest ventriloquist on earth! There are no lions, but there’s a lion-taming stunt, just the same. Free elephant rides for the kiddies! And after the show, if you like, you can come and inspect the circus and see how everything goes on. Come now! Come again to-night! Free oranges and nuts for the kiddies to-night. Roll up, roll up!’

The invitation was irresistible. More and more people came forward, anxious now to pay their sixpences, their shillings, their florins to see the show.

And two minutes before the show was booked to commence, Sheila, smiling all over her face, appeared.

‘That’s enough!’ she cried jubilantly. ‘You’ve got ’em! The hall is packed, and we can’t get another one in!’

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From the first it was obvious that the afternoon performance was going to be a great success. The crowd, so thoroughly good-humoured, indeed, were they, that they were in the mood to applaud everything.

Fortunately, Mr. Appleworth, the ringmaster, was not one of the strikers, and his inspiring presence did much to keep the crowd in lively spirits.

He had a gift of impromptu humour which was greatly appreciated by the crowd, and his jokes and witticisms kept them amused during the interval between the turns which normally would have been filled by the activities of the clowns, now to a man on strike.

First came the high-wire wizards — a group of acrobats who did amazing balancing feats with chairs and tables on nothing but a taut wire stretched from one side of the circus roof to the other.

Then came the equestriennes — a glittering troupe of spangled girls, supported by a comic ‘uncle’ who did all sorts of amazingly clever things upon horseback. Then the Chinese jugglers and acrobats, then the performing sea-lions.

How the audience appreciated it all! How they clapped!

‘And now,’ the ringmaster announced, ‘one of the new turns, ladies and gentlemen, Miss Bessie Bunter, in her wonderful ventriloquial act, with Tish-wish, the wonder dog!’

And, smirking all over her face, appeared Bessie, Ting-a-ling, on a long lead, frisking at her heels.

The audience took one look at her and roared.

It was Sheila’s idea to dress her up as a fat baby, and as a fat baby Bessie strutted into the ring. She had her hair tied tightly at the back, with an enormous bow of bright coloured ribbon, and was wearing a diminutive dress of printed gingham. Around her waist was fastened a huge sash, and from her neck hung an enormous baby’s ‘dummy.’

That, combined with the very obvious seriousness with which Bessie took herself, set the audience into roars of laughter at once.

Bessie beamed. She had no doubts about her ability to become a great performer, and this was the applause due to her.

But Bessie was on her mettle. To make a success of this show was as dear to the heart of the fat one as her own personal success. And though the time at her disposal had been short, she had rehearsed her turn until now she knew it off by heart.

Ting-a-Ling, clever little animal that he was, understood, too, just exactly what was required of him. And Ting-a-Ling was fond of Bessie.

She paused now, frowning at Ting-a-Ling frisking at the end of the lead.

She stood in the centre of the ring.

‘Hush! Bad dog, bad dog!’ she chided.

From Ting-a-Ling seemed to come laughing words.

‘Here we go round the mulberry-bush, the mulberry-bush, the mulberry-bush!’ he sang, and ran round and round in a circle about Bessie, so completely tying her up with his lead that Bessie, pretending to make desperate endeavours to extricate herself; sat down with a bump.

The audience howled.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ Bessie cried furiously.

Ting-a-Ling sat down, cocked his head on one side, then he opened his mouth.

‘Ha, ha, ha! Don’t you look funny!’ he laughed.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ echoed the audience.

‘Let me get up!’ yelled Bessie.

For answer Ting-a-Ling rushed at her with a glad yowp, his little tongue frantically licking her face. Bessie, with a splutter, pretending to be bowled over, went flat on her back.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled the audience again.

But they shouted almost hysterically when the little peke, solemnly raising himself on his haunches, held one tiny paw in the air, and apparently began to count:

‘One, two, three, four, five — out!’

There was no doubt that Bessie and Ting-a-Ling had caught on. From that juncture it was only necessary for Bessie to open her mouth to be greeted by a howl of laughter. And Ting-a-Ling, playing his part to the life, made them fairly shriek.

There were many encores when finally Bessie had finished.

‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, we will have the donkey race,’ the ringmaster announced. ‘Six donkeys are available, and the course will be three times round the ring. The prize for the winner is two pounds, one pound for the second home, and a mystery prize for the last. Now, ladies and gentlemen, here’s your chance. Six riders wanted, please!’

The audience clapped. There was a good-humoured rush to volunteer at once. Babs, present in the ring, selected the most unlikely looking ‘jockeys’ among them, and the audience settled with gleeful anticipation in their seats.

The chums watched with interest, enjoying the fun as much as the audience itself. And, to their surprise, they found that time was speeding on. Bessie had been in the ring much longer than her allotted period of ten minutes; the donkey race had taken up the best part of twenty minutes, and it seemed, so far from the programme ending on the short side, that they would require extra time.

Now came Sheila with her flying trapeze thrills. Now the four Splash-wallahs — a really clever comedy argument which ended with the mirthmakers throwing real eggs at each other.

Then came the trick cyclists, the dancing horses, followed by the performing chimpanzees and another clever equestrienne turn by men dressed up as cowboys.

And then Mr. Appleworth again stepped into the ring.

‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, the greatest turn of all,’ he announced.

‘Pretty Doreen, the girl dog-charmer, in a new and sensational act — taming the lion!’

There was a blare of trumpets. Twelve girls dressed in blue stepped into the arena, followed by two enormous elephants, gay in trappings of crimson and gold, towing behind them an enormous lion’s cage on a trolley.

In the centre of the cage, looking as pretty as a picture, a silver wand in her hand, sat Doreen.

A hush of expectancy fell in the huge marquee.

Very majestically the two elephants dragged the cage to the centre of the ring and came to a halt. Doreen rose with a smile upon her face, waving her wand. The audience, not knowing what to expect, sat silent.

And then a howl of laughter went up.

For, from the covered-in part of the cage, bounded a huge tawny shape. It was, to all intents and purposes, a lion; but what a lion!

Its skin sagged, its head wobbled from side to side. And from its mouth came a deep-throated, gruff bark.

'A dog!' shrieked the audience.

'I will now show you, ladies and gentlemen, how I tame lions in the African jungle,' Doreen announced. 'You will see that here I have a particularly ferocious specimen which goes by the name of Bruno. Bruno, I might add, is one of the most original lions of his time.'

And Doreen proceeded to put Bruno through his paces.

Bruno jumped through paper hoops, rolled on his back, died, knelt, sat, danced, performed apparent miracles of arithmetic by moving about wooden blocks, was almost uncanny in answering 'yes' or 'no' to questions, the 'yes' being indicated by a nod of the head, the 'no' by a shake.

The audience loved it.

They rose and cheered and cheered again when finally the turn was over.

'And now,' announced the ringmaster, 'the last turn of all, ladies and gentlemen. Gandisimar and his performing elephants. And after this turn I have much pleasure in inviting all children in the audience to come forward and have a ride on the elephants' backs.'

Meanwhile Doreen jumped into the happy arms of her friends at the other side of the screen, and she was laughing with breathless jubilation. She had returned to the ring in an entirely new act, and had made a stunning success of it. Doreen was pleased.

And so were Babs and Co. and Sheila.

Surely this was the best of all possible answers to the strikers of Jordan's Circus.

But in another part of the hall a girl sat with pouting lips and scowling face as Doreen, amidst the plaudits of the crowd, disappeared.

'The cat! She's got away with it!' she muttered. 'But she shan't go on. That should be my turn. I can handle dogs better than she can. And it shall be my turn!' she muttered to herself. 'To-night, they'll see.'

A fierce gleam came suddenly into Lulu's crafty eyes. A slow, sly smile curved her lips.

'I'll do it!' she muttered. 'I'll do it! And I'll prove to this crowd that I'm

Deleted: 1

cleverer than Doreen. Somehow, by hook or by crook, I'll take Doreen's place in the evening performance!

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In his caravan, Jim was pacing to and fro.

'The girls!' he gritted. 'They've beaten us, Ferdy!'

'You're going to let 'em break the strike, eh?' Ferdinand sneered. 'Fat lot of good the strike's doing!' he sneered. 'They don't miss us. And that brat Doreen, burlesquing my lion-taming turn —' His eyes glowed. 'See here, Jim, we've got to do something. We've got to bust this show so that it'll never get over it again! I've thought of an idea!' Ferdinand clapped one knee and scowled. 'Supposing, for instance, instead of the dog Bruno in that cage to-night, there was a real lion? And supposing the cage door was left open, so that it jumped into the tan? And supposing, just in the nick of time, I came forward and stopped it from running amok? Who'd be the hero of this outfit then?'

Radlett stared.

'Ferdy, it ain't possible.'

The lion-tamer smiled.

'It is — and will be!' he said smoothly. 'Listen here —'

And the two fell-into a deep and earnest conversation.

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Three or four caravans away the lion-tamer's niece sat plucking at a lip. The bad-tempered frown on her face deepened as her thoughts worked furiously.

Then, all at once, her eyes lighted up, her hand banged triumphantly on the table.

'Got it!' she exclaimed. 'Not only will Doreen be ruined, but I — I shall get the limelight. And Jordan's Circus'll be ruined — ruined!'

CHAPTER XV

Lulu Takes a Hand

IT was a happy party which assembled in the canteen after the show — a party made all the more happy by the reassuring news which came from Jonathan Jordan's caravan, telling them that the patient was rapidly recovering.

The afternoon's show had exceeded everybody's wildest expectations. From start to finish the performance had gone through without the slightest hitch of any description, and the receipts had been the best for many matinees over the Christmas season.

There were rumours, too, that the strike faction was beginning to think, that the turns who had been replaced were seriously contemplating coming back into the fold. Sheila was jubilant.

‘Well, we’ve got through!’ she cried. ‘And it’s thanks to you girls from Cliff House.’

‘Cliff House for ever!’ cheered Jemima. ‘I say, Sheila!’

‘Well, Jimmy?’

‘How long will it be, at this rate, before the tent hands come back?’

There was a laugh at that. For Jimmy, affecting to hate hard work, had certainly never worked more willingly in her life than during the day when, as a member of the utility committee, she had polished brass, scrubbed floors, cleaned harness, and done a hundred and one tasks which normally she would have shuddered at.

Sheila laughed now.

‘To-morrow,’ she promised. ‘If the show goes well to-night that’ll settle everything. Jim Radlett and his crowd will come with caps in hand, begging to be taken on again. They’ll realise then that we can carry on without them — that they’re beaten.’

Tea — or dinner-supper, which passed under that name in Jordan’s Circus — was over then, and preparations for the evening show were already going on apace.

It required but an hour until the actual performance would begin, and the circus staff were busy. Everywhere was hustle, bustle, and excitement.

The Jordan faction of the circus shared Sheila’s jubilation. Sheila had been right, they said, when she had prophesied that the Radlett-Ferdinand crowd would cave in. Many of the strikers had decided, in the event of to-night’s show being successful, to go back to-morrow to Sheila and ask for their jobs back.

Several, indeed, had not waited for tomorrow. Ten erstwhile strikers had taken the vow of loyalty and had signed up once more. It seemed that the efforts of Sheila and the Cliff House chums were winning all along the line.

‘Of course, it’s my turn, you know,’ Bessie said importantly. ‘I wouldn’t like to say it, of course, being such a jolly modest girl, but the show wouldn’t have been anything without me. I think I acted jolly well, don’t you, Babs?’

‘Oh, toppingly!’ Babs laughed.

‘You know, I think I’ll be a circus star when I leave school,’ Bessie went on. ‘That is, of course, if they’ll pay me what I’m really worth. What would you think I’m worth, Babs?’

‘Oh, about fourteen stone,’ said Jemima. ‘But, of course, that’s without the heavy coat you’re wearing, Bessie.’

At which there was a general laugh. And Bessie, glaring, ceased to pursue

the subject she had really opened for her own vanity's sake.

Doreen, who was accompanying them out of the canteen, paused.

'I shall have to go,' she said. 'I must see to Bruno. Meet you in the dressing-room later on.'

'Right-ho!' Babs smiled.

And Doreen, detaching herself from the group, ran on towards the solitary kennel where Bruno at the moment was being housed.

Bruno was there. He gave a low growl of glee as his mistress approached, wagging a furry tail with such ecstasy that it beat against the side of the kennel like a drumstick.

'I'm sorry, old boy, but you'll have to do it again, you know,' Doreen said. 'Don't mind, do you? Just once more, tonight, old boy. Now where's the comb and the brushes, so that I can make you feel comfy before you go back into that horrid old cage again.'

And she groped about for comb and brushes, and, finding them, energetically set to work. Bruno stood still as a statue, panting his pleasure.

'There, that will do,' Doreen laughed, at last. 'Oh, goodness, listen to that!' And she paused as, from somewhere near by, a clock struck the hour of half-past seven. 'My goodness, boy, we'll have to fly!' she told the dog. 'The show starts in half an hour, and I'm not ready. Now this old skin.' And she produced that, while Bruno, good as gold, stood like a lamb for it to be put on. 'There! Good old boy, then! Now the headpiece. Hold still, old silly! There! Now, Bruno, back to the cage, and there you can sleep peacefully until I call you. This way!' And tugging at the rope attached to the mask, she towed Bruno over to the cage, threw open the door of the boarded den, and called 'Jump!'

Without a murmur Bruno sprang up.

Doreen shut the door and slipped the bolt. And then she turned, aware of a figure at her elbow.

'Why, Lulu!' she cried, in amazement.

Lulu laughed.

'Now don't get windy,' she said easily. 'I haven't come along to eat you. As a matter of fact, I've come with a message.'

'Message — from whom?'

'Sheila.'

'Sheila? But I thought you —'

'Were on strike,' Lulu laughed. 'No,' she said, 'I've chucked that, Doreen. I can see now that it's just a fool's game, so I've signed on again. But hurry!' she said. 'Sheila's over in the Caravan No. 2 with those Cliff House girls, and she's got some new stunt or something she wants to explain before the show starts. I'll come along with you, shall I?'

Doreen nodded. Her mind suspected nothing. Mention of Sheila's name

and the name of Cliff House had dispelled any suspicion she might have entertained.

If Lulu had deserted the strikers, then Lulu would be in the programme this evening, and in that event, of course, it was very likely that Sheila would allow her to attend her councils. But Caravan No. 2 —

‘You’re sure it’s No. 2?’ she asked.

‘Why, of course.’

‘But that’s at the other end of the circus ground.’

‘Well, that’s all right,’ Lulu cried. ‘Gracious, you believe me, don’t you? Sheila’s selected that caravan simply because it is a bit out of the way, because, in fact, she doesn’t want the Radlett crowd sniffing around. But don’t argue. Time is precious enough as it is. Get on!’

And Doreen, her last doubt satisfied, went on.

Caravan No. 2 was, indeed, a long way away. It was, in fact, a spare caravan, and stood on the very opposite side of the field. But a light gleaming in it reassured Doreen as she approached, and, eager to hear what Sheila had to say, and anxious at the same time to get to her dressing-room to prepare for her act in the ring tonight, she ran lightly up the steps. And then she paused.

For the caravan was empty.

For the first time suspicion flashed upon Doreen. She wheeled round.

‘Lulu!’ she cried. ‘Lu —’ And then stopped as Lulu, behind her, gave her a vigorous push which sent her stumbling into the tiny room.

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Lulu rushed back to her caravan, and for the next half-hour she was busy. And because she was so busy, she never guessed what was happening in the lion’s cage she had so shortly left. She did not see Jim Radlett and Fearless Ferdinand steal up to that cage. She did not see Bruno, unceremoniously hauled out of the den, to come bounding with a cruel thud to the frozen earth.

And she did not see, shortly after that, the other cage which was trundled up to Doreen’s lion cage, nor the tawny form with the bristling mane and the swishing tail which leapt from one cage into the den of the other.

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Had she seen that Lulu might have changed her mind about taking Doreen’s place that night.

Doreen, locked in the caravan at the other side of the ground, shouted and shouted until it felt that her lungs must burst.

Frantically, feverishly, she beat upon the door with her fist. Fiercely she

kicked against the panels. She was red, breathless, and almost utterly worn out when at last she desisted.

But no answer came.

She gazed again with burning eyes at the door. From that to the windows. But those windows had been boarded up on the outside, and the two tiny ones which remained certainly would not admit the passage of even her small body.

And here, at the farther end of the field, she might shout for hours without attracting attention.

‘Oh, help! Let me out!’ she cried again.

But only the dismal echoes of her own voice in the tiny room which now formed her prison answered her.

Doreen gave a groan of despair. At the same moment, faint and far off, a clock chimed the hour of eight.

Her heart missed a beat at that. Eight o’clock! And the show would be commencing. She was due in the ring in twenty minutes’ time, and was not yet even dressed for the show.

And then she started up, her eyes suddenly round.

What was that?

She stared towards the door.

Yes, there it was again. A scraping sound, a muffled whine, followed by a worried growl. Hope flamed suddenly into Doreen’s face.

‘Bruno!’ Doreen cried joyfully.

How Bruno had got out of the cage, how he had tracked her here, she did not know. She did not realise that, having escaped from his captors, Bruno, still in his big lion’s skin, had, despite the handicap of that disguise, trailed her to this caravan.

‘Bruno!’ she cried. ‘You can’t get in here, boy. But, stand — listen! Are you listening, Bruno?’

From outside came a low bark.

‘Bruno, go back!’ Doreen cried. ‘Fetch Babs! Fetch Sheila! Fetch anybody! Fetch friend! You understand? Go back! Fetch, Bruno, fetch!’

‘Wuff!’ Bruno growled again.

‘You understand?’

Bruno did. He knew what ‘fetch’ meant. She heard his padded feet shuffling away, padding over the frozen ground in the darkness, and she breathed thankfully.

Bruno knew. Bruno understood. Perhaps even now she might be rescued in time.

CHAPTER XVI

Bessie Meets Bruno!

‘DOREEN!’

‘Anybody seen Doreen?’

Barbara Redfern asked that question, and she asked it in a very anxious voice indeed as she went up and down the corridor behind the screens which separated the dressing-rooms from the circus ring, looking into each dressing-room as she passed.

The circus performance was in full swing now, and no Doreen had appeared.

Mabs, Clara, and Jemima, as anxious as Babs herself, were following her. ‘She can’t have gone anywhere,’ Babs muttered, ‘and she knew that she’s the third turn on. What has become of the girl? Anybody seen her since we left the canteen?’

There was a shaking of heads.

They had reached Bessie’s dressing-room now, and they pushed open the door to find Bessie, attended by Janet Jordan and Marjorie Hazeldene, admiring herself in the long mirror.

She blinked as Babs came in.

‘Oh! Hallo, Babs, old thing! Come to see how I’m getting on?’ she asked.

‘No. It’s Doreen.’

‘Why, what’s the matter with Doreen?’

‘She’s not turned up.’

‘Oh, crumbs!’ Bessie looked dismayed. ‘Oh, I say, that’s too bad!’ she said. ‘Have you looked in her caravan?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, she might have gone — gone somewhere for a snack, you know,’ Bessie murmured. ‘And she might have come back. Tell you what,’ she added, ‘I’ve got to go along to my caravan. I’ll look in and see if she has come back, shall I?’

Babs started.

‘But what is it you’ve forgotten? You can’t go out like that!’

‘Oh, really, Babs —’

‘Let one of us fetch it.’

Bessie coloured.

‘Well, you see — er — it’s rather important,’ she said, ‘and — and sort of private, you know. I — well, as a matter of fact, I really must go myself. Only — only I know where it is, you know.’

Clara grinned.

‘Then perhaps we can make a guess?’ she asked mischievously. ‘In the cupboard, behind the door, Bessie.’

Bessie blinked.

‘Oh, really, Clara, if you think I want to go across to the caravan just to finish off that pork-pie ——’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Well, I — I am a bit peckish, you know. This acting makes me fearfully peckish and — and I must have a little something just — just to keep my pecker up, you know,’ she added lamely. ‘So you don’t mind, do you? I mean, I won’t be a minute.’

‘All right. But be quick,’ Babs advised. ‘And if you do happen to see Doreen, tell her we’re waiting.’

‘Oh, of course!’ Bessie exclaimed, and scuttled from the room. But she had hardly gone when from up the corridor came a terrified scream.

‘Oh, help, help!’

The chums jumped.

‘Ow! It’s got me! It’s coming for me!’ Bessie howled. ‘Oh, dud-dear! It’s bitten me in thirty-three places! Babs ’

Babs, with a frown, tore the door open. She rushed into the corridor just in time to receive Bessie’s fat, dressed-up form in her embrace.

‘You duffer!’ Babs gasped, and then jumped. For, padding down the corridor towards her was a huge lion!

For a moment Babs, with Bessie still clinging frantically to her neck, stared. And then suddenly she went off into a roar of laughter.

‘It’s Bruno!’

‘What?’

‘Bruno!’ And Bessie, blinking round now, saw what she had failed to see in the first shock of the moment.

‘Bruno?’ she stuttered now. ‘Oh, I say! What a swindle! Babs, are you sure?’

Bruno, a ludicrous figure in the ill-fitting costume, padded towards them. He gave a low wuff.

‘Wait a minute!’ Babs looked thoughtful. She had an idea, and stared very intently at the dog. ‘Perhaps he’s come to take us to Doreen,’ she said. ‘Bruno, where is Doreen?’

‘Wuff!’ Bruno said again, and pawed at his helmet.

‘Take it off,’ advised Mabs.

Babs nodded. She knew how the helmet was fastened, and she approached the huge animal. In a very few seconds the thing was off, and Bruno, his pink tongue lolling, looked up at her with an entreating expression in his brown eyes.

‘He is! He’s trying to tell us,’ Babs said. ‘Doreen’s met with an accident, perhaps. Bruno knows where she is. Come on.’

They followed now, and Bruno, to show his pleasure that they understood at last, shook his body frantically.

‘Bessie, you stop here!’ Babs ordered. ‘Clara, Mabs, Marjorie, come on!’ Unhesitatingly Bruno led them on, frisking in front of them with glad eagerness. Through the lines of tents he went, past the canteen, past the dogs’ corral, past the stables, and out into the open field. A light gleamed

ahead.

‘The old caravan!’ muttered Babs.

They hurried on, following the dog. Very shortly they had reached the caravan, and Babs threw up the bolt. Doreen, trembling all over, reeled towards them.

‘Doreen!’

‘Oh dear! Lulu shut me up in here!’ Doreen panted. ‘Babs — quickly! Am I too late?’

‘We’ll have to hurry,’ Babs said. ‘Lulu —’ Her face darkened. ‘I’ll have a word with her. But come on, Doreen!’

And in frantic haste they hurried back to the circus hall. Sheila stood at the door there. She gave a start at the sight of the little circus waif.

‘Doreen, I thought you had gone on for your turn.’

‘She’s been locked up in a caravan!’ Babs exclaimed. ‘Doreen has? But who’s performing now, then?’ Sheila asked, in amazement.

The chums stood stricken.

‘You mean —’ Doreen breathed.

‘I mean that the lion’s cage has just gone into the ring, and that there’s a girl dressed just like you with a mask on her face,’ Sheila replied. ‘I thought at first it must be you.’

Doreen gulped. The chums looked at one another. Another girl had taken Doreen’s place.

No need to ask who that other was.

Lulu!

CHAPTER XVII **The Plotters’ Mistake**

THE lion’s cage was in the centre of the arena, and the audience, who had heard the ringmaster announce the new turn as that of Doreen’s, was cheering.

All smiles she was beneath her masked face, as she bowed this way and that.

Radlett and Fearless Ferdinand, among the audience in the front seats, nudged one another.

‘There’s Doreen! Nothing spotted!’ Radlett chuckled. ‘Now watch for the fun!’ Through the entrance six amazed Cliff House girls and an utterly astonished Sheila and Doreen were watching, too. They saw Lulu step towards the covered-in part of the lion’s cage. They saw her lift the flap which hid the lion from the rest of the cage. For a moment nothing happened.

‘Bruno!’ Lulu called.

She turned to smile, but now, from the audience preparing to chuckle

went up an amazed gasp. They had all heard of Doreen's clever turn. They all expected to see coming through that opening the obviously disguised head of Bruno.

But what they actually saw set them all staring, made Lulu herself stare with eyes round with fear. For this was no disguised dog which protruded its head into the outer cage, which came out sniffing this way and that with suspicion.

It was a full-grown lion!

Lulu's face went white. She could not, in that horrified moment of panic, even move.

For a moment it seemed that the lion did not see her. It gazed at the audience in puzzlement, sniffed at the air. Then it opened its mouth. A terrific roar bellowed forth.

And then, with a cat-like spring, the huge beast burst into the outer cage. For the first time Lulu opened her mouth. Panic-stricken fear surged swiftly upon her. She gave a scream. She tore the mask from her face.

'Oh, help, help, help!' she cried.

'Lulu!' gasped Ferdinand from his own seat, and his face went white, while Radlett's jaw dropped in utter horror.

'Lulu!' shouted Ferdinand. He stood up. 'Lulu, you fool! That's Jupiter!'

Lulu screamed again. She seemed beside herself with fear. Jupiter, the fiercest of all those untamed beasts her uncle controlled — Jupiter, the man-eater, the terror of the jungle, as he was billed.

Fresh panic came to Lulu. She gave a terrified whimper, and Jupiter, becoming aware of her for the first time, suddenly switched round.

Lulu shrank back to the bars of the cage.

Jupiter growled. From his throat came a menacing rumble. He crouched for a spring. Lulu almost fainted. She shut her eyes, and then a voice — the voice of Ferdinand — came floating to her ears.

'Lulu! Great Scott! Lulu, the cage door! Jump — jump!'

She cast one frightened look at Jupiter; with feverish, desperate hands fumbled for the lock on the cage door. It slipped beneath her fingers. At the same moment Jupiter, baring his fangs, gave a fierce roar.

He sprang.

Lulu shrieked. She groped now. Her body, striking the cage door, sent it flying open, and just as Jupiter reached her, she tumbled, fainting, into the ring. From the audience went up a shout, a hurried rising of spectators in their seats. Babs' face turned white.

'My goodness, the cage door's open!' she cried. 'The lion will get out! Doreen — Doreen!'

But Doreen had seen the danger. She gave a shout, throwing up her arm as she ran as a signal to the audience not to get panicky.

The lion, having hurled himself frantically at the bars, had recoiled, was

gathering himself for a fresh spring through the open door of the cage. He saw Doreen. A roar like the rumble of a volcano left his lips, wreathing to show the sharp, yellow fangs beneath.

He leapt.

Just in the nick of time Doreen shot forward. With all her strength she slammed at the cage door, pushing it to. The door, rushing back into position, caught the lion's snout as it completed its leap, and Jupiter, flattened back, roared terrifyingly. Quick as thought Doreen grasped the bolt and shot it back into place.

But the effort had been too much for Doreen.

Now that the excitement of the moment was over, she turned deathly white.

She reeled. Babs, rushing up, caught her as she fell.

And then a new figure came dashing into the circus ring — a fat, white-faced figure, eyes frantic. It was Ferdinand. He stooped down by the side of Lulu.

'Lulu, Lulu, Lulu!' he cried. 'Lulu, I'm sorry! I never thought that you would do that. Jupiter was intended for Doreen!'

The audience, calmed now, was settling down again. Sheila came on the scene. She was just in time to hear that confession. She frowned.

'So it was you, Ferdy, was it?' she cried. 'You! You scoundrel! You contemptible cad! So you fixed this to help the strike on, did you — to ruin the show?'

The audience, who had heard the words, murmured.

'I didn't!'

'You did! You gave yourself away!' Sheila flashed. 'You deliberately framed this plot, thinking that Doreen would be in the cage. And she would have been if Lulu hadn't tried to bag her turn. Get up — and get out!'

'Yes, throw him out!' shouted the crowd.

'We won't come to this show if he's in it!' they yelled.

Sheila held up her hand. Ferdinand, white, skulking, afraid now, shrank back.

'You can get out!' Sheila cried. 'Go now! I hope,' she added bitterly, 'that the men who backed you up in your strike realise now what sort of man you are. From this moment you are sacked! Come on, Babs! Come on, Doreen!'

And, followed by the applause of the audience, she left the ring.

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But later Doreen, smiling, came back again. She came back in the lion's cage, to be greeted by a tumultuous welcome.

The audience laughed, and cheered and cheered again as she went through her antics with Bruno, dressed once more in his ridiculous lion's costume.

It was minutes, in fact, before, her performance completed, she was allowed to leave the ring. Sheila, meeting her as she came off, smiled. 'You've got them, Doreen!' she said. 'They've made you the idol of the show! Tomorrow, my dear, if the strike is called off, you go back to the top of the bill!'

And the next day Ferdinand, unable to hold up his head in the circus any longer, did go. And the strikers, having received notice that they could resign or quit the show altogether, took the easiest course and signed on again.

And in a few days Mr. Jordan, his old self, was out and about once more, professing himself pleased at the way things had been carried on during his absence.

And Babs and Co. were jubilant. Radlett, though he did not accompany Ferdinand, sang very small indeed during the next few days, and Doreen, to the satisfaction of everybody, was once again installed as the star of the show.

But Babs and Co. were not yet satisfied. One thing they had resolved to do before they left, and in the week remaining to them they meant to do their utmost to accomplish that object: to find Doreen's parents for her.

CHAPTER XVIII

Bessie in Funds

BESSIE Bunter, strolling thoughtfully across the grounds of Jordan's Circus, an enormous bag of peppermint creams in her hand, and a frisking little Pekinese dog at her heels, started violently.

'Gug-good gracious!' she exclaimed. 'What's the matter?'

For, standing near the handsome motor-caravan occupied by Jonathan Jordan, the proprietor of Jordan's Gigantic Circus, Menagerie, and Fun Fair, were six girls. And those six were all gesticulating most urgently.

'Come on, Bessie!' shouted Clara Trevlyn. 'You'll be late!'

'Late? But what —'

'Pay!' Clara sang gaily.

'Eh?'

'Pay! Tinkle - tinkle! Money! You're going to be paid, you know, Bessie!' laughed blue-eyed Barbara Redfern, the leader of the party. Behind the thick, round spectacles perched upon her snub little nose Bessie's eyes glistened with suspicion. Bessie knew Babs. Babs had pulled her leg so often in the past that Bessie could, perhaps, be excused for her suspicion on this occasion. She froze.

‘H’m! Funny, isn’t it?’ she sniffed now. ‘Well, try it on someone else, so there! You can’t take me in, you know. I’m a jolly sight too clever to fall for a silly joke like that!’

‘But it’s not a joke, you dummy!’ hooted Clara Trevlyn.

Bessie smiled disbelievingly.

‘It’s money — real money, Bessie,’ Jemima Carstairs supported, fixing the inevitable monocle in her eye. ‘Fact! I’ve seen it, you know. Pounds, shillings, pence, and all that, what! All done up in an envelope, with the jolly old Bunter monogram written on the outside!’

Bessie paused.

‘For your performances in the ring,’ Janet Jordan chuckled. ‘Come on, Bessie! You didn’t even guess you were on the circus pay-roll, did you? But you are. Having done the work, you’re entitled to the cash. Come along!’

‘Miss Bunter!’ called the voice of Mr. Jordan from the caravan. ‘Oh, my hat! I mean, yes, of course, I’m coming!’ Bessie said, with dignity. ‘You mustn’t hurry a great star, you know. Oh, well, I’ll have to collect the — ah — beastly money, I suppose,’ she added languidly, and, with a leisurely and dignified gait, impressively ascended the steps. ‘Beastly fag, having to sign for my — ah — salary, what! Ow!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled the chums. For Bessie, missing the last step in her dignified amble, came with a bump and a scramble on all fours to the bottom.

‘Miss Bunter!’

‘Oh, blow! Ow, I’m coming!’ Bessie gasped, and this time charged up the steps, arriving red and breathless and with a very undignified smear of mud upon the tip of her snub little nose.

Mr. Jordan, standing behind the table, smiled. Sheila, his eldest daughter — and, incidentally, his circus manager — laughed.

‘Here we are, Bessie. Sign!’

‘Oh, thuth - thanks!’ stuttered Bessie, and took the envelope Mr. Jordan handed to her in one plump, trembling hand, blinking at the book in front of her. ‘Oh, I sus-say! Fuf-five guineas! Is that all for me?’

‘Every penny, Bessie!’ Sheila laughed.

‘That’s ripping! Thuth-thanks, Sheila! And you, Mr. Jordan!’

The showman laughed.

‘Not at all, Bessie! The thanks are on our side. You might tell Doreen to come along, if you see her, will you?’

‘Oh, rather!’

And Bessie, hugging her five guineas delightedly to her, stumbled down the steps again to rejoin her chums.

‘I sus-say, you girls!’ she cried excitedly. ‘Five guineas!’

‘That’s not six thousand, Bessie!’ scoffed Clara.

But Bessie was far too excited even to protest at the sally.

'I say, I've earned it, you know!' Bessie cried incredulously. 'Me! Oh goodness, this is stunning, isn't it? Come on, girls! We'll celebrate! I — I'll stand treat! Come on! Oh, where's Ting-a-Ling?' — looking round for the little dog. 'Ting-a-Ling's entitled to a treat, too. He helped to earn this. Where is he?'

'Here we are!' Babs laughed, and picked up the little Peke, who was busily burrowing beneath the wheels of an adjacent caravan.

'Jolly little chap, isn't he?' Bessie beamed. 'Good little Ting-a-Ling. Oh, I say, Doreen! Here you are, then! Mr. Jordan wants you.'

She stopped, beaming at Doreen who had just arrived on the scene.



'Here we are, Bessie. Sign!'

CHAPTER XIX

A Blow to All Her Hopes

'HE does?' Doreen asked.

'Rather! He's been asking for you,' Bessie said. 'My hat! He's just given me five guineas!'

'Congratulations, Bessie. I — I won't be a minute,' she added. 'Are you going to the canteen?'

'Rather! I'm standing treat, you know,' Bessie said importantly. 'Buck up, and you can join us, too, Doreen. But I say —' And Bessie stopped, blinking. For Doreen, with an eagerness quite new to her, had disappeared into the boss's caravan.

She came out a minute later, holding an envelope, her face dimpling with delight.

'My salary!' she cried. 'My salary, you girls! My very own this time! Twenty pounds!'

Barbara smiled. Mabel laughed. The delight on the face of the little circus star made them share in her joy.

‘Twenty pounds!’ she repeated, and her eyes shone. ‘Oh, my goodness! And all the things I’m going to do with it! Babs, you’ll help me, won’t you?’ she added eagerly. ‘I must have new clothes, you know.’

The chums laughed with her. For Doreen’s rapture was so wholehearted, so genuine. For many months had this slip of a girl earned twenty pounds, but every week she had had to give every penny of it up to the ruffianly Jim Radlett, the man who had called himself her father.

Now, however, Doreen had broken with Jim Radlett for good and all, and from now, henceforward, the money she earned was her very own. No wonder she was delighted!

‘Well, who says the canteen?’ Bessie asked. ‘Come on, everybody! Come on, Doreen! I’m peckish!’

‘Yes, the canteen!’ Doreen cried. ‘I want to stand treat, too — just to show you how pleased I am! Twenty pounds!’ she murmured ecstatically.

‘Oh, Babs!’

Babs laughed.

‘Don’t spend it all at once, you know, Doreen.’

‘Oh, rather not!’ Doreen shook her head. ‘I’m going to save,’ she said.

‘Save ever so hard. Perhaps,’ she added wistfully, ‘if I save enough money all by myself I might come to your lovely school some time, Babs. Would they have me?’

‘Well, of course!’ Babs laughed again. ‘Although,’ she added, ‘you’d be in a different Form from me, you know. You’d probably be in the Third with my younger sister Doris. But Doris would look after you.’

Doreen sighed.

‘Oh, that would be lovely!’ she cried. ‘How much does it cost, Babs?’

Babs shook her head.

‘I don’t know exactly, but it’s quite a lot,’ she said.

‘But if I earn twenty pounds a week for a year that means I could save enough to stop at Cliff House two years!’ Doreen said shrewdly. ‘And, after that, if I were clever enough, I might win a scholarship or something.’

Babs nodded.

‘Well, you might, of course. Doreen, you’re not seriously thinking of that?’

‘It would be lovely!’ Doreen said wistfully. ‘To be at that school. You’ve all been so awfully kind to me that I shall hate to leave you, you know. But supposing I could come to Cliff House, Babs, what about the dogs? It would mean leaving all those, wouldn’t it?’

‘Well, I’m afraid so, yes,’ Babs agreed. ‘You could have one pet, though. Every girl at Cliff House is allowed one or two pets, and there’s a special

pets' house to keep them in. You could bring Bruno, you know.'

'Oh, could I?' And Doreen's face flamed with eagerness. 'I — But, oh, what's the good of talking?' she said suddenly. 'It's just a gorgeous dream — a dream that couldn't possibly come true. But I'd love it, you know! Here's the canteen.'

'Buck up, slow coaches!' Bessie cried. 'I'm famished. Babs, what would you like?'

'No, no!' Doreen objected. 'Bessie, this is my treat!'

'No, mine!' Bessie denied.

'But, please!' And Doreen held up her notes. 'Please let me!' she pleaded. 'I so want to —'

She stopped, a gasp of utter consternation on her lips, as the money was snatched from her hand. And she wheeled swiftly to behold it in the hand of another — it was Jim Radlett, the man who called himself her father.

'That money's mine!' he growled. 'You ain't spending it as you like.'

Babs' face flushed.

'That's not your money, Radlett!' she cried. 'That's Doreen's! She earned it.'

Radlett snarled.

'She has, has she? Well, it's mine,' he growled. 'I'm entitled to it, ain't I? They're my dogs she takes into the ring. And, in any case, I'm her father.'

'You're not!' shrilled Doreen. 'Jim, you're not!'

She paused.

Coolly Radlett stuffed the envelope into his pocket. 'And if I'm not your father, how did I come by this?' Radlett asked contemptuously. And, with a triumphant flourish, he withdrew a slip of paper from his pocket and thrust it under her nose.

Doreen gazed at it. Babs gazed at it. And the hearts of both of them turned suddenly sick with dismay. For there, plainly to be read, and utterly beyond dispute, was Doreen's own birth certificate!

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For a moment Radlett allowed them to look at it, and then, with a slow, scornful smile, folded it up and stowed it away in his pocket again.

Doreen's face was white.

'But, Jim —' She looked at the man. 'Oh, it can't be true — it can't be true!' she exclaimed passionately. 'Jim, listen! The other night I heard you talking to Ferdinand the lion-tamer. You told him then that I was nothing to do with you.'

Radlett laughed hoarsely.

'You dreamed it!' he scoffed.

'But I didn't — I didn't!' Doreen panted. 'You know I didn't. You're

making it up. That's not my birth certificate!

'Prove it!'

'I —' And Doreen shook her head. Her arms dropped to her sides, while Babs, drawing near, put a protecting arm around her.

'Cheer up, Doreen!' Babs muttered.

Radlett laughed. He seemed to enjoy the sight of her suffering. 'Well, just remember it,' he warned. 'No hanky-panky, in the future, Doreen. I'm your father, whether you like it or not, and you give up all the money you earn to me-see? That's the law. You needn't have one penny piece unless I like to give it to you. But still, just for once, I'll show you I've got a father's heart. Take this!'

He handed her a shilling.

Doreen looked at it. And then suddenly a flush ran up in her cheeks, her eyes blazed. She grabbed the shilling, and flung it at him.

But again, Radlett, like the big, inhuman beast he was, merely laughed.

He looked at the coin as it lay in the sawdust at his feet, and then, with a shrug, picked it up and put it into his pocket. Whistling, he strolled out of the canteen.

A compassionate silence fell upon the seven girls. Babs stroked Doreen's head gently.

'Cheer up, old thing!' she muttered anxiously.

Doreen sank into a chair. All the light-hearted gaiety which had been hers but a few short moments ago had gone.

'Oh, Babs! And to think — all those lovely things I was going to buy! All my schemes for saving up to go to your school —'

She wept as though her heart would break.

'Oh, dud-dear!' stuttered Bessie. 'Oh, I say! Doreen, old thing, don't cry, you know. Look here,' Bessie said, and placed the five guineas into Doreen's hand. 'You take that. You buy all the things you wanted to buy with it. Babs will stand treat —'

But Doreen sadly shook her head.

'Thanks, Bessie!' she cried forlornly. 'It — it's sweet of you! Oh, dear! I love you for it, you know, but — but I couldn't take it, Bessie.' She gulped, her lips quivering pitifully. 'Please,' she added insistently, and pressed the money back into the fat duffer's hand.

She turned wretchedly, clutching at Babs' wrists. 'Babs, it's not true, is it?' she cried distractedly. 'Babs, it can't be true, can it? Jim Radlett's not my father! He doesn't love me as a father should, and — and I don't love him. He's never treated me as a daughter — never, never! Babs —'

'Hush, dear — hush!' Babs cried comfortingly.

For a space there was silence.

'Oh-h!' And Doreen, with a long-drawn sigh, gave a last sob and straightened up. She trembled, bravely tried to smile. 'Oh, I — I'm so

sorry!’ she cried. ‘I — I didn’t mean to — to upset everybody. But never mind, I’m all right now. I — I was silly!’ She gulped. ‘I’ll have to carry on. I suppose. I’ll have to go on. But —’ She shrugged. ‘Well, never mind!’

‘Yes, never mind!’ Bessie said comfortingly. ‘Doreen, you’re sure you won’t take this?’

Doreen smiled sadly.

‘Quite sure, Bessie, thanks!’

‘Oh, dear! Well, have a ginger-pop!’ Bessie suggested. ‘And some tarts. What you need, you know, is a good square meal, to — to buck you up. I say, girls, come on, please! I’m standing treat.’

And Bessie at last had her way. She stood treat. But it was a very silent and very sad little treat. Not so quickly could the tenderhearted chums overcome their reactions to that poignant scene.

CHAPTER XX **The Last Clue—Gone!**

BUT by and by, when the emotion of that incident in the canteen had worn itself off, a cooler and more practical counsel asserted itself. Doreen, faced with all the proof in the world, could not get it out of her head that Jim Radlett was not the parent he presumed himself to be. Somewhere in her memory there was a big gap. She had dreams of a father far different from Jim Radlett. She had a feeling sometimes of a big shock, followed by a great darkness.

There were times when her mind vainly sought to probe into the past. She remembered herself as a lisping child in a little gingham dress, kneeling before the knees of a man who looked down upon her with tender solicitude and stroked her hair. But beyond that there was a wall of impenetrable blackness.

Strange that she never associated Radlett with these memories of her infancy.

‘It’s a trick,’ Babs said when, the treat finished at last, they stood in a group outside her caravan door. ‘No father could possibly treat his daughter as Radlett has treated you. Radlett isn’t your father, Doreen; I can’t believe it — no, even in spite of that birth certificate.’ Her brows knitted. ‘I wonder —’

‘Wonder what?’ Doreen asked.

‘Where he got it?’

‘Babs, you — you think it might not be mine?’

Babs shrugged.

‘I think it most probable that it isn’t yours,’ she returned.

But whether the birth certificate was Doreen’s or not, it constituted the

only proof that Jim Radlett required to claim her as his child. And if Doreen was not Jim Radlett's daughter, who was she?

Babs frowned. That was the question which was occupying her mind now — that was the question which, by hook or by crook, she meant to solve.

'But ——' Doreen paused. 'Babs, you saw the certificate! It — it had my name upon it.'

Babs nodded.

'It had the name of Doreen Radlett on it, certainly,' she said. 'But that's not to say that Doreen Radlett is your name. As a matter of fact, if what we think is right, Doreen Radlett, very obviously, is not your name!'

They all fell silent. Every one of them was thinking — thinking hard.

And because they were thinking they never saw the man who, with stick prodding at the ground in front of him, suddenly appeared from behind a caravan — a man who stood for a moment, his face turned in their direction, his eyes staring into space.

He paused for a moment, his head cocked to one side as though trying to catch words.

And then Doreen spoke.

'But, Babs, I've remembered something,' she said excitedly. 'It — it may be a clue — I don't know. But there's something in my caravan — something I've had for years! I seem to remember having it ever since I could remember. A visiting-card, with a name on it. Shall I fetch it?'

The man, who had paused, started. Into his face came a look of sudden intent interest as he heard that voice.

'Yes, do!' Babs cried.

Doreen nodded. She turned quickly, disappearing with silent footsteps over the grass. And then the chums heard the soft tapping of a stick. They saw the man who had paused tapping a hesitant way towards them.

'The blind man!' Babs whispered.

This was not the first time they had seen him, though it was certainly the first time they had beheld him visiting the circus grounds. For the last half-dozen performances they had watched him in the circus.

Always he had sat in the same front seat, staring blindly out in front of him, his fine, pale, sympathetic face wearing an expression of intensity which had caused them to wonder.

The man, they had all felt, was a mystery. Why should he, unable to see, come to the circus at every performance?

They watched him now as he came forward, his stick tapping in front of him, one arm outstretched.

'Fay!' he cried. 'Fay, are you there? Is it really you?'

The man's voice was trembling with anticipation. The Cliff House chums looked round.

'He's missed someone!' Bessie Bunter muttered.

The man took another step or two forward. His groping hand touched Barbara Redfern.

‘Fay!’ he cried. ‘Fay! At last! Tell me, Fay —’

‘I’m sorry!’ Barbara smiled. She looked at the man as he stared at her with those glassy eyes of his, an unaccountable sympathy welling within her. ‘I’m not Fay,’ she replied.



This was not the first time they had seen him.

‘But your voice!’ He stopped again, and then he shook his head. ‘No, I hear you now. You are not Fay — my Fay!’ he said softly. ‘I thought I heard a voice, but I was dreaming, of course. Always I seem to be dreaming of Fay — of Fay. And yet —’ He paused. ‘I wonder if you will be good enough to tell me your name?’ he asked.

Barbara, amazed, told him.

‘And you do not know of Fay — my Fay? Fay Chandler is her name.’

‘No,’ Babs said. ‘But if we can be of any help —’

‘Thank you.’ He shook his head. ‘I appreciate your kindness, but you cannot. You cannot,’ he said. ‘Fay Chandler is the girl I am looking for — sweet, little Fay, whom I always seem to hear without being able to approach. I am sorry I have troubled you; but I shall find her yet — if I am not the fool I expect I am. Your pardon, young lady. As usual, I was but chasing a dream. Good- night!’

And he bowed courteously, and, watched by the wondering Cliff House girls, turned again, and, a silent, forlorn, rather tragic figure, tapped his way back into the darkness.

And at the same moment Doreen appeared. Her lips were quivering.

‘Babs!’ she cried.

Babs wheeled.

‘It’s gone!’ Doreen cried brokenly. ‘It’s disappeared. Jim Radlett must have taken it!’

And in the consternation which succeeded those words, Babs and Co.

forgot all about the blind man. The last clue — the only clue, apparently — to Doreen's early childhood had disappeared!

CHAPTER XXI

Radlett has a Plan

'MR. JORDAN!'

The showman, descending the steps of his caravan the next afternoon, stopped as he heard his name.

'I wonder if—if I might have a word with you?' Babs asked.

'Why, certainly! Come in!' And he retraced his steps, flinging open the caravan door again. 'Nothing serious, I hope?'

'Well, no — and yes,' Babs said enigmatically. 'It's about Doreen.'

She had seated herself now in the collapsible easy-chair by the fire.

'Well?' he asked.

'It's about Jim Radlett, too.' Babs paused. 'I don't want to bother you, Mr. Jordan, but I really do feel, if it is possible, that we ought to do something for Doreen. The man's just a bully — a thief, too. He says he is Doreen's father.'

The showman frowned.

'But he isn't!' Babs burst out. 'Mr. Jordan, he can't be. No man who acts to Doreen as he does could be her father.'

Mr. Jordan shrugged.

'I know,' he said. 'I've questioned it myself Barbara. But what can I do? Jim has the proof. I can't get away from that. But' — he frowned — 'I've always felt that there is something fishy about Jim and that girl,' he added. 'I like the kid, too, and I'd like to do something for her. But I know nothing. They joined my show six months ago, and, under the terms of the contract I gave Doreen, Jim Radlett remains a member of this circus as long as she does. That's why I didn't sack him after Simpson left.'

'But — but ——' Babs paused. 'Mr. Jordan, I don't want to do anything that will upset things in the circus, so if you think I'm asking too much, don't hesitate to tell me. But there's this. It's unfair that Radlett should take every penny Doreen earns. Surely you can do something about that?' Mr. Jordan looked at her keenly.

'I didn't know about that,' he said. 'Yes, I can — and I will — stop that. Under the contract Radlett is supposed to take five pounds a week of Doreen's earnings for the use of his dogs in the ring. As her father he is, of course, entitled to take her earnings, but I wasn't aware that he was taking the lot. I will certainly look into that.'

He rose. He looked at Babs, and then patted her shoulder. 'And thanks, Barbara, for the interest you are taking in her. That kid needs friends. Be

good to her.'

'We will,' Babs said.

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An hour later Doreen burst into Barbara Redfern's caravan, a look of almost dazed gladness on her face.

'Babs!' she cried. 'I've seen the boss. And he says that in future I'm to have fifteen pounds of my salary paid into a bank in my name. He's seen Jim Radlett, and he's told him that in future he's only going to give him the money for the hire of the dogs. Babs, what on earth do you think has made Mr. Jordan take that step?'

But Babs, winking at Bessie and Mabs, who were in the caravan, with her, gravely shook her head.

'Perhaps he found out something,' she suggested happily.

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But in his own caravan Jim Radlett was scowling.

That interview with Jonathan Jordan had been by no means pleasant from Radlett's point of view, and the boss had spoken pretty plainly of what he thought.

He had threatened to turn Radlett out of the circus neck and crop if he insisted upon pocketing Doreen's earnings in the future.

So Radlett, not for the first time in his life, found himself in a cleft stick. And there were many disturbing reflections in Jim Radlett's train of thought. He knew too well the desperate game he was playing.

There was no proof against his claim of parentage, he knew; but the fact that Doreen had commenced to question that he was her father, the fact that she was backed up by those rich 'flashies' from Cliff House School, had a vaguely disturbing effect upon Jim Radlett.

From now on he was to be reduced to five pounds, the rest of the money being put away for Doreen by Jonathan Jordan himself. That did not suit Radlett's book at all. In those circumstances, Doreen no longer became valuable in his eyes.

'By gum, I'll beat her, the little brat! I'll beat her!' he told himself vindictively.

And he put on his cap and strolled out of the caravan, bound for the caravan of Lulu, the absent lion-tamer's niece.

But outside he paused, staring queerly at the man who came slowly towards him.

There was a familiarity about his figure, his face, which struck Radlett all at once. There was something in his attitude which brought back a sudden

vivid memory.

And he stiffened as the sightless figure, still warily tapping the stick, came on. The figure passed within two feet of Jim Radlett and went on, groping a way in front of him.

Radlett's face was white now. His knees shook.

'Roy Chandler!' he whispered to himself. 'What is he doing — here?'

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Lulu was in her caravan.

Lulu was annoyed, for she was a young lady who had an extremely good opinion of herself. But that opinion, unfortunately, was not shared by Mr. Jordan, who, since the departure of her uncle, Fearless Ferdinand, had put her to tasks in the circus which had not suited Lulu at all.

Lulu had assisted Ferdinand in his turn, but now there was no Ferdinand to assist there was not a job in the ring for Lulu. And Lulu had descended to the task of washing dishes in the canteen, or helping the cleaners in the big circus booth.

That did not suit the lion-tamer's niece.

So she was in a furious temper. She flung round like a tigress as a knock came at the door, and Jim Radlett came in.

'Ah, Lulu!' he cried.

Lulu scowled.

'Is that the brightest remark you can think of?' she countered unpleasantly.

'Now, now!' Jim Radlett frowned. 'No high horsey, Lulu — no high horsey! I know you're feeling pretty low and all that, but I've come to talk business. You want to get back on the bill, don't you?'

Lulu sneered.

'Is this another joke?'

'No, honest Injun!' Jim Radlett nodded. 'Lulu, look here, we've got to get together,' he said. 'You can handle those dogs of mine.'

'Well?'

'You'd like to take 'em in the ring again?'

'Oh, talk sense! How can I take 'em in the ring when that little Doreen cat of yours is so high in the boss's favour?' Lulu asked.

'Easy!' Jim grinned. 'Perhaps if you're willing to talk biz with me there won't be no little Doreen in the boss's favour,' he said. 'And if you're going to be sensible, Lulu, the job's yours. But biz first. That job would be worth twenty of the best to you, and out of that twenty pounds deduct five for the use of them dogs. Them's the figures, ain't they?'

'Well?' Lulu paused.

'Well' — Jim rubbed his hands — 'that leaves fifteen for you. Now,

suppose we split that fifteen — seven-ten for you, seven-ten for me. If you'd work on those figures, Lulu, we could get down. to it.'

Lulu paused.

'Seven-ten's a lot of money,' Jim went on.

'Well, it is — especially to me. I'll take it — glad to! But how are you going to get Doreen off the bill?'

'Well, supposing Doreen wasn't there tonight when she was due in the ring?'

Lulu's eyes sparkled. For ten minutes the two whispered together. At the end of that time Lulu laughed.

'Get to it, Jim! I'm with you — every step!'

And Jim Radlett, nodding, rose and ambled off contentedly to the telephone-box.

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'Aha!' said Jemima, watching Radlett as he entered the telephone booth.

'Now, who's Jovial Jimmy 'phoning?'

She stood and watched. It would have been an easy matter at that stage for Jemima to creep unobserved to the back of the booth and listen. But that was not Jemima's way. She waited until Radlett, a triumphant grin upon his features, came out.

He paused as he saw her, recognising one of the hated 'flashes.' His satisfied smirk changed to a sullen scowl.

'What are you doing?' he asked suspiciously.

'Doing?' Jemima's eyes opened in blank surprise. 'Oh, nothing! Just walking, you know. Swallowing gulps of the jolly old fresh air, and all that! Keeps you awfully fit, and makes one wear one's shoes out, you know — thereby helping the unemployed. Considerate — what?' she added brightly.

Radlett snorted.

'You're dippy!' he growled, and tramped on.

'Nice man!' Jemima beamed.

And she walked on herself, but not in the direction Jim Radlett had taken. She walked the opposite way.

She wanted to help little Doreen just as much as her chums did. But Jemima had her own peculiar ideas as to how she could help. And Jemima intended to try out those ideas to the full now.

The fact that Jim Radlett had visited Lulu's caravan, and had gone immediately afterwards to the telephone booth, might not have given rise to any suspicion where Babs and Co. were concerned; but to Jemima, filled with this weird idea of hers, it gave a very strong suspicion indeed.

CHAPTER XXII

Visitors for Doreen

‘HALLO!’

‘Who’s this?’

‘What a nice car!’ Bessie Bunter murmured.

It was, as Bessie had said, quite a nice one — a luxurious saloon, to be precise — and the chums’ interest was occasioned by the fact that it had driven up in the road outside the entrance to the field in which the circus folk lived.

It was not usual for cars to drive up to that entrance unless they had some business with the circus — or unless they belonged to the circus itself.

But the occupants of this car were entirely strangers. At least, the chums of Cliff House had never seen this car before.

It was afternoon at the circus, and since there was no matinee Babs and Co. found time hanging rather heavily upon their hands.

They had strolled down to the gate and then had stopped, discussing which way they should go.

Janet Jordan and Marjorie Hazeldene they had left behind to keep Doreen company.

But the arrival of the saloon had nipped discussion in the bud. They all stared now at the handsome car as a man, accompanied by a woman, stepped down from the driving-seat.

‘Excuse me, can you tell me where I may find — er — Miss Radlett?’

‘Oh!’ gasped Babs, and for a moment felt quite bewildered. This man — this woman — were interested in Doreen!

‘You know her?’ the woman put in.

‘Oh, rather! We’re friends of Doreen’s,’ Babs cried. ‘I don’t think she is expecting you, Mr. —’

‘Stewart is the name!’ the man put in.

Stewart! That was the name of the man who had been making inquiries about Doreen a few days ago.

‘Oh, my goodness!’ she said. ‘Mr. Stewart. Yes, she’ll be pleased to see you — oh, rather! Is — is ——’ She paused, blushing. ‘Excuse me if I seem impertinent, but —but we’re rather interested in Doreen,’ she went on. ‘Is it in connection with — with her father?’

‘It is in that connection,’ he smiled. ‘If she will accompany me, I would like to take her to see him now.’

The Cliff House chums were almost crazy with excitement now. They had all discussed that mysterious Mr. Stewart — had all wondered what the letter he had sent Doreen had meant.

Could it be true that the mystery of her parentage would be cleared up at

last!

‘Oh, dear!’ gasped Babs. ‘Oh, Mr. Stewart, Doreen will be glad to see you. She’s in her caravan now. I’ll take you along right away. Will you come?’

And the man, laughing, nodded, lending a hand to the lady as the Cliff House chums led the way.

But Jemima, peculiarly enough, did not follow. Quite carelessly, as if interested in the car, she stepped up to it and gazed through her monocle at the licence-holder.

Then she looked back.

‘Mr. Stewart, what-ho!’ she murmured. ‘And the name on the plate says “Trufitt”. I may be going dense in my old age, but it doesn’t sound a true fit to me! Might have borrowed the car, of course, but still —’

It was quite a big car, as well as being luxuriously upholstered. A pile of rugs lay on the back seat.

Jemima paused again.

‘Is it worth it? she asked. ‘The rugs would conceal my fairy form, I fancy. Dashed uncomfortable, of course, but still—’ She sighed. ‘Well, it doesn’t seem right to my untutored mind that Mr. Stewart should take Doreen for a ride in Mr. Trufitt’s car. We’ll chance it.’

And Jemima, deliberately climbing into the car, shut the door behind her, threw the rugs from the seat on to the floor and then laid herself on the floor, drawing up the rugs again and piling them on top of herself

Babs and Co., almost as excited as Doreen herself stood beside the car.

They had taken Mr. Stewart and his wife to Doreen’s caravan, and there the good news that her father was found at last had been broken to her.

Radlett had not been present, of course. Jim, for his own purposes, was keeping out of the way. But, in spite of his assertion that he was the little circus-girl’s real father, nobody thought of Radlett.

‘Good luck, Doreen!’ Babs cried.

‘Mind you’re back soon with good news!’

‘Rather!’ Doreen laughed gaily from the window. ‘Give my love to Jim Radlett!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

And the car, thrumming suddenly into action, rolled away.

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Out of the corner of the piled-up rugs Jemima blinked one un-monocled eye, and then snuggled back with a contented sigh. She smiled grimly.

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Perfectly still Doreen sat, an expression of utter ecstasy on her face, as the big car bowled with accelerating speed down the wide road. At last, at last! It seemed too good to be true. She was speeding to meet that dream father of hers — at last, at last!

‘Are you warm, Doreen?’ asked the woman, who called herself Mrs. Stewart, at her side.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Like a rug? There’s plenty in the back of the car, you know.’ She had not noticed it, but there was certainly a chilliness in the atmosphere, and she was so enjoying herself that she wanted to make the most of the experience.

‘Well, perhaps yes,’ she said. ‘No, I’ll get it.’ And she strained over the back of the seat and grabbed the rugs which lay piled up behind her. Mrs. Stewart did not see what happened. But Doreen was so astonished that she almost let out a scream.

For as she put a hand forward, the pile of rugs moved. A face looked out, and one eye closed in a deliberate wink.

‘Oh, my goodness!’ Doreen gasped.

‘Shush!’ warned Jemima, and put a finger to her lips, darting beneath the rugs just in time as the woman turned round.

‘What did you say, Doreen.’

‘Oh, nun-nothing!’ Doreen gasped. ‘I — I was reaching for the rug, you know. It’s all right. I — I’ve got it now.’ And gingerly taking the top one, she eyed the pile of rugs in utter wonder, then turned again.

But now the car was rushing on. It was going at a rattling speed — a good fifty miles an hour. Rather alarmingly it was swaying from side to side as it hurtled down the none too well repaired road, leaving Westhampton, a hummock of smoking chimneys, on its right.

Doreen frowned.

‘Aren’t we going into Westhampton,’ she asked.

‘Shush!’ said the woman.

‘Mrs. Stewart —’

‘Be quiet!’ snapped the woman harshly.

Doreen bit her lip. Quite suddenly she felt uncomfortably glad that Jemima was in the back of the car. Her joy was shattered now; fear, growing upon her, was beginning to make its presence felt.

She looked through the window — at the countryside flashing by. It dawned upon her, unused as she was to riding in cars, that the driver, the man who called himself Mr. Stewart, was picking the worst and the most unfrequented roads.

‘Please —’ Doreen faltered, and half-rose in her seat. The woman, with a sweeping thrust of her arm, flung her back on the seat.

‘Oh!’ Doreen gasped.

Fear had her in its grip now. Had it not been for the comforting knowledge that her unsuspected friend was in the car, she would have screamed. Not, as a matter of fact, that that would have availed her, for Mrs. Stewart, obviously, was quite ready and willing to deal with her should she attempt anything of the sort.

With anxiety, Doreen began to think of the evening performance. Suppose she could not get back in time! Suppose — and her heart missed a beat — suppose that this was simply a plot to keep her away from the circus!

‘Where are you taking me?’ cried Doreen.

‘Be quiet!’ hissed the woman.

But she was looking ahead. The car was beginning to slow down. Now, in the gathering dusk, a lonely house, grim and gaunt, reared against the skyline. The sight of it filled Doreen with a grim foreboding.

The car stopped. The woman grabbed Doreen’s arm.

‘Where is this place?’ Doreen cried.

‘Your home, my dear!’ the woman said mockingly.

‘But it’s not — it’s not!’ Doreen panted. ‘You said we were going to Westhampton!’

‘Will you come?’

And the woman, squeezing Doreen’s arm with painful intensity, forced her out of the car.

‘Take the car into the garage, Ned,’ she said. ‘I’ll take the girl inside! This way, young lady!’

And Doreen, protesting, was led up the drive towards the door.

CHAPTER XXIII

Jemima Goes for a Ride

‘H’M!’ remarked Jemima.

Alighting from the car, she patted her hair into place, polished her monocle, and gazed about her.

Jemima, not daring to reveal herself before, had waited until Ned Trufitt had driven the car into the garage, and then had leisurely climbed out. For what reason they had abducted Doreen in this way, Jemima had not worked out yet, but she connected Jim Radlett with it; and as Jemima’s idea of helping Doreen had been to keep an eye upon Jim Radlett, she felt that Radlett was at the bottom of it.

Still as cool and as unflurried as ever, Jemima walked round the car. She nodded thoughtfully as she looked at the petrol-gauge and saw that there was some petrol in the tank.

‘Nice bus!’ she said to herself. ‘Do sixty at a pinch. May even do seventy. But doubtless we shall have a chance of trying it out.’

She nodded in a friendly way at the car and turned towards the door of the garage, lifting the latch. She found herself peering into a dusky, overgrown garden.

It was nearly dark now. Here and there in the house lights were gleaming. The watch on Jemima's wrist told her that it was half-past four. But she was in no hurry.

She was, in fact, filled with a wondering curiosity. She walked round the house at the back, surveying it critically, and then walked into the road, surveying it from the front. She stood in the road and frowned.

'Jolly old ancestral pile!' she murmured. 'So bleak and lonely, and jolly and ghostly and all that — what? And what's the name?' She peered in the darkness. 'Todmarsh!'

The door opened. Jemima quickly dodged back into the shadows.

'Put her in the back room!' a man's voice growled. 'And stop the kid howling, for goodness' sake! She gets on my nerves!'

The man who had opened the door came down the steps. It was Ned Trufitt, alias Mr. Stewart. He set along the road at a good pace. Jemima smiled.

'Mr. Trufitt's out!' she said. 'This, Jimmy dear, is where you get in — back room!'

Just as unconcernedly as if she were walking in Cliff House quad, she strolled round the side of the house, halting again when she found herself in the back garden.

Once again she stood at a little distance from the house and surveyed it through her monocle. And now her eyes gleamed as she saw, on the second floor, a small window, which had not hitherto been lit up, now fully alight.

The curtains were drawn across, but it was not covered by a blind, and she saw a suggestion of someone moving about inside the room.

'Ahem!' said Jemima.

She waited a moment or two, trying to catch the shadow within the room.

She saw it again — the shadow of one person, not two. If that was Doreen she was alone! Jemima nodded with satisfaction.

She picked up a handful of gravel and flung it upwards. There was a faint rattle as it hit the pane.

A head appeared — a girl's head. Jemima cupped her hands, and breathed a low-voiced yet clearly penetrating 'Coo-ee!'

Very cautiously the window was pushed up. The head of Doreen looked down into the darkness.

'Who's that?'

'Me — Jimmy!' Jemima breathed.

'Oh, thank goodness!' Doreen gulped. 'They — they've caught me! They — they're going to keep me here!'

Jemima chuckled.

‘Don’t you believe it! Hang on there! Don’t go falling out of the window or anything. Shut the old pane for a minute or two, and don’t open it again until I heave another handful of old Mother Earth at it!’

‘You mean —’

‘Shush! Do as your Auntie Jimmy tells you!’ Doreen nodded. Obediently she withdrew, noiselessly closing the window after her.

Not for nothing had Jemima reconnoitred the ground. She knew just how to deal with this situation, and she had seen, alongside the garage, a long ladder. It was with designs upon that ladder that she crept towards the garage now.

But she had to be careful. Lights were going on in the old house, and one of those lights was shining directly towards the garage — was, in fact, shining upon the ladder itself.

She reached the ladder, put her monocle in her eye, and thoughtfully surveyed it. It was long, and, she guessed, weighty. She picked it up by one end, decided it would make too much noise to drag it, and so, stooping, she got one shoulder through the rungs somewhere about the middle.

She straightened up with a jerk. The ladder swung round, swinging her with it and almost unbalancing her. Behind her there was a sudden crash. Jemima turned in surprise to see one end of the ladder sticking through the garage window.

‘Tough luck!’ she murmured. ‘Now the bloodhounds are on my trail!’ And she hurried as she remembered Doreen, for there were sounds of movement inside the house.

Staggering under the ladder, Jemima ambled on. She heard voices from round the corner, the closing of a door. She gazed up at Doreen’s window, and then, squaring her shoulders, commenced a life and death struggle with the ladder before finally she succeeded in upending it and propping it against the wall.

Alas! The ladder was longer even than Jemima had thought, and seeing, in the last stages of the struggle, that she put the base of it upon her trimly shod toe, she let go her hold rather suddenly.

The ladder swept forward, crashing against the window above Doreen. There was a tinkling shower of glass.

Jemima sighed.

‘More holes!’ she muttered resignedly. ‘Dear, dear! Still, it’s an ill wind that gathers no jolly old rolling stones. The glazier will be pleased. All helps the jolly old wheels of industry, what? Doreen, come on.’

But Doreen, startled by the smashing of the pane above her, was already looking out.

‘That you, Jemima?’

‘What-ho !’ Jemima murmured. ‘Smart’s the word, and quick’s the jolly old action. Best leg forward — or downward in this case, forsooth, before they come to collect the pieces from inside! I’ll hold the old beanstalk!’ ‘Thanks!’ Doreen gulped. She clambered out, caught at the ladder, and with a dexterity born of her long circus training, swarmed down it, panting a little as she joined the imperturbable Jemima at the bottom. ‘This way,’ Jemima said coolly, and led the way towards the garage. She took Doreen’s hand, steering a course towards the garage again. From somewhere on the other side of the house a door opened, a shout awakened the echoes. The startled occupants of the place had evidently been investigating the strange noises inside the house before venturing out.

Jemima chuckled.

‘Step on it she advised tersely. ‘Chin up; you know. We’ll do the jolly old villains yet. Into the car!’

‘You mean —’

‘Get in!’

They had reached the garage now, and Jemima was springing into the driving seat of the car. Doreen, whatever doubts she might have had, had no alternative but to obey. She leapt into the front, slamming the door to. Jemima, at the wheel, pressed the self-starter. She slipped in the gear, and the big car moved forward. From behind them came a furious shout. They swept into the open road, almost knocking down a furious Ned Truffitt who stood there, staring as if he could not believe his eyes. ‘Hey! What are you doing with that car?’ he shouted. ‘Driving it!’ Jemima replied blandly, and waved her hand as, with Doreen in the seat behind her, she sped off down the road.

CHAPTER XXIV

Too Late!

‘SIX o’clock!’ said Janet Jordan thoughtfully. ‘The show starts to-night at a quarter to seven. No news yet, Babs?’

Barbara Redfern was in the canteen with Mabs and Bessie, and Clara, and Marjorie, and they were just finishing the huge circus ‘tea’.

Janet, who had been invited to tea in one of the caravans with her old nurse, Wallah, had not had the meal with her chums, but now that Wallah had finished with her, she had looked in.

‘You mean about Doreen?’ Babs asked.

‘Yes. She said that she’d be back by six, you know. And Jimmy! Have you heard or seen Jimmy?’

Babs shook her head again. Jemima’s sudden disappearance was one of the minor mysteries of the circus at the moment, but the Co. were not

worrying unduly. They knew that she was quite capable of looking after herself.

‘I shouldn’t worry,’ Babs advised now. ‘They’re probably killing the old fatted calf for Doreen, and you can’t very well expect her to tear herself away from her new-found family. She knows what time the show is, doesn’t she?’

‘Oh, of course!’

‘Then she’ll be back all right,’ Babs replied with the sureness of one who knew the little circus girl.

And Janet, who had been looking a little worried, looked relieved again. The Cliff House chums were not worrying. But they would have worried considerably had they known that at that moment Jemima and Doreen were stranded ten miles away on a lonely country road, with not the faintest prospect of reaching the circus in time for the evening performance.

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‘Well!’ said Jemima, and jammed her monocle into her eye, surveyed the derelict car again, and shook her head. ‘Or ’is not well, forsooth! What do you think’s happened to it, Doreen?’

Doreen, her face clouded by anxiety, shook her head. She knew less about cars even than Jemima.

And the car certainly looked hopeless now. There were few girls of her age who could drive better than Jemima, but Jemima’s knowledge of automobiles began and ended with her knowledge of driving.

The road was bleak and lonely, and the spot in which they were stranded looked to be miles from anywhere.

Jemima, deftly steering to avoid a flock of sheep which had suddenly appeared, had not seen the ditch until the car had tilted gracefully over on its side, its wheels embedded in twelve inches of mud.

Jemima sighed.

‘Such is fate! she said. ‘Obviously the car is of no further use. Much as I hate the idea, Doreen, it seems that we have got to pad the jolly old hoof. I should say, at a rough guess, that Westhampton is about eight miles from here. That is, of course,’ she added, ‘unless you like to curl up in the car and wait for some fairy princess in another car to pass.’

But Doreen shook her head feverishly.

‘Oh, Jemima, no! The evening performance starts at a quarter to seven.’

Jemima examined her wrist-watch.

‘Then that gives us three-quarters of an hour,’ she said. ‘Ahem! I don’t want to appear pessimistic, old Spartan —’

‘Oh, Jemima, you know I must be in the circus by seven o’clock! I’m

fourth turn on tonight.'

Jemima knew that. She nodded.

'Well, let's put the best leg forward, shall we?' she suggested.

Obviously there was nothing else for it, and Doreen whose disappointment had been succeeded by terrible anxiety, nodded.

Anything, she felt, was better than hanging about in this dreary road.

So consumed by anxiety was she, indeed, that she felt equal to running the whole distance.

She proposed as much to Jemima, and Jemima, who detested violent exercise in any shape or form, agreed. They ran half a mile, but at the end of that even Doreen was forced to call a halt.

'Oh, we shall never get there — never!' she cried distractedly.

'Don't worry, old thing. Chin up. Stiff upper lip, and all that rot! The jolly old age of miracles isn't past yet, you know, and — and something might happen.'

It was not encouraging, and Doreen, almost frantic now, derived no comfort from it. But half a mile farther on they did meet with a stroke of luck.

A car which, like Jemima's, had got stuck in the mud, had just been rescued and was about to start on its journey. There was a woman at the wheel, and she turned as Jemima hailed her.

'Oh, I say!' Jemima gasped. 'I say, excuse me, but could you possibly give us a lift? My friend, you know —' And she rapidly explained the situation.

'Jump in!' the woman said briefly. 'I'll do my best, but I'm afraid I can't guarantee to get you there under twenty minutes.'

And they jumped in. But Jemima, looking at her watch again, gave a sigh of helplessness, for the time now was a quarter-past seven. That meant, at the very earliest, they would not be able to reach the circus until nearly a quarter to eight.

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Half-past seven!

The circus was in full swing, and, as usual, every seat was taken. Babs and Co., peering from behind the screen, saw tier upon tier of faces, heard round after round of applause as the artistes performed their tricks. At that moment, indeed, Bessie was in the ring with Ting-a-Ling, and Bessie was keeping the audience in fits of laughter.

'Bessie's good!' muttered Babs, watching the fat girl — a preposterous caricature of a baby, gambolling in the ring with the little Pekinese. 'But where's Doreen?'

‘She’s next turn on!’ muttered Clara Trevlyn.

‘Hasn’t she turned up yet?’

‘No.’

And the chums withdrew attention from Bessie for a moment to look up and down the corridor. But no Doreen, of course, was to be seen. Doreen at that moment was just arriving in Westhampton, two miles away. Babs frowned. Doreen should have gone into the ring two turns ago, but Mr. Jordan had postponed her act until number seven, which was the next.

He, too, was worried. He was also getting annoyed.

For the general impression, fostered by Jim Radlett, was that Doreen, in her joyousness at being reunited with her parents — parents whom Jim took good care to add were bogus — had just forgotten the circus.

Even Babs and Co. half believed that. The event which had happened that afternoon was certainly one of the biggest things which had ever come into Doreen’s life, but Doreen had given her word to be back in time for the show, and Babs had implicit faith in the circus girl.

She had an uneasy feeling that some accident had hampered her return.

She was beginning to feel puzzled, too, concerning Jemima’s continued absence. Where were the two of them?

A shout of laughter from the ring made her peer forward again. Ting-a-Ling, sitting very pathetically upon his haunches in the centre of the ring, his tiny forepaws hanging in front of him, his little purple tongue lolling, was gazing up at Bessie with a cheeky impudence that was funny in itself. And Bessie, with one fat forefinger admonishing him, said:

‘Now say this after me — twice two are four.’

‘Twice four are two,’ answered Ting-a-Ling cheekily.

‘No, that’s not right,’ corrected Bessie.

‘Oh, yeah? Are you telling me?’ came in drawling accents from Ting-a-Ling.

‘You’re a naughty boy,’ said Bessie reprovingly. ‘A bad boy. You don’t deserve to have a nice, pretty teacher like me.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled the audience; and Bessie blinked. She had not intended to make them laugh at that particular part.

‘Now, for the last time,’ Bessie said severely, glaring at the diminutive dog. ‘Are you going to be good?’

‘No, no!’ said Ting-a-Ling, in high falsetto.

‘Do you want to grow up a perfect idiot?’ Bessie roared.

‘What, like you?’ And Ting-a-Ling dropped to all fours, his tongue still lolling, giving him for all the world the appearance of laughing. ‘Oh, come on, let’s chuck this!’ he appeared to say disgustedly. ‘I’m fed up. At least, I would have been fed up if you hadn’t pinched that bone they gave me for my dinner.’

The audience giggled hysterically.

'Come here,' said Bessie.

'Rats!' Ting-a-Ling answered cheekily.

'Have I got to come and fetch you?'

'You can't run!'

'Oh, we'll see!'

And Bessie, snorting wrath, lumbered in pursuit of the little animal as he started to race round and round the ring.

Round and round, scattering the tan, they went, Ting-a-Ling making cheeky remarks as he was chased. Finally, allowing himself to be caught, he announced that he was dead by rolling on his back and holding all four feet in the air.

The audience clapped and clapped again.

But Babs, watching, did not clap. Her attention had become arrested suddenly by the sight of someone sitting in one of the front seats. It was a man, smartly dressed, carrying a stick across his knees. His eyes, covered today by dark spectacles, stared in Bessie's direction. Babs nudged Mabs. 'Look!' she whispered.

They eyed him with interest. Every performance he occupied that same seat, just sitting there in silence until the various turns were ended.

The man was blind. Obviously, he could see nothing. What interest, therefore, could bring him to the circus so frequently?

Babs felt herself puzzled. The blind man interested, intrigued her. He seemed such a lonely, such a tragic figure, somehow. And yet it was apparent that he was well provided for. Only a man who was well endowed with this world's goods could have worn the obviously expensive clothes he wore.

There was a sudden commotion behind Babs. She turned. Mr. Jordan, biting his lip, a very angry glint in his eyes, was coming towards her.

'Barbara, has Doreen turned up yet?'

'No, Mr. Jordan.'

'Well, I can't keep the crowd waiting any longer!'

'No, I should say not!' exclaimed Radlett, who, with Lulu, had followed him up. 'I tell you she won't turn up, boss. Doreen's crazed. She thinks those flashies are her ma and pa, and she's going to stick to 'em. But I'll see about that,' he added. 'I'm her pa! She's not running out on me. But look here, are you going to hold up the show any longer? Lulu's here — ready to go into the ring. Lulu can handle the dogs, and it's the dogs the public want to see. Take her. But mind,' he added, 'Doreen ain't just walking back into this outfit and taking the job on again after letting the show down. I'm boss where this act's concerned, and you've got to give me a free hand in the matter.'

Mr. Jordan looked worried.

‘Well, I can’t hold up the turn any longer,’ he said.

‘But, Mr. Jordan —’ pleaded Babs.

‘I’m sorry, Barbara. Oh, well, go on, Jim! Let Lulu take them on. You’d better fix things with Doreen when she turns up — if she does turn up!’ he added.

Babs fell back, biting her lip. Doreen had lost her chance! But there was no time to undo the mischief then, Lulu, now in the ring with the dogs, had commenced the turn.

The chums looked at one another. At the same moment there was a commotion behind them. Doreen, with Jemima at her heels, came flying towards them.

‘Babs, what’s happened? Am I —.’

‘Yes, you’re too late. Mr. Jordan held your turn up as long as he could.’

‘And then sent Lulu in!’ Jim Radlett sneered. ‘Lulu’s in there now, and Lulu’s sticking to the job. I’m handling this turn, and you —’ His jaw thrust out pugnaciously. ‘You’re sacked! There’ll be no more going into the ring with them dogs for you, Doreen!’

CHAPTER XXV

A New Idea!

‘BUT what am I to do?’ Doreen asked distractedly, half an hour later, in her dressing-room.

And she looked so pitiful as she said that, that a strained silence fell upon the group of Cliff House girls assembled there.

For by this time, of course, they had heard the whole story, and bitter and deep was their indignation against Jim Radlett.

Mr. Jordan, frankly, was fed-up. First and foremost, Jonathan Jordan was a showman. He put his circus above all personal concerns, and though he was sorry for Doreen when he heard the story she had to tell, there was nothing he could do. The turn, as he said, was Radlett’s property.

‘And that means I’ve lost my job,’ Doreen said tearfully. ‘There’s nothing for me to do.’

Babs’ eyes gleamed.

‘There is. You can do another turn,’ she said. ‘Doreen, what about Bruno? Bruno is yours.’

‘Well?’ Doreen asked wonderingly.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Babs went on. ‘Doreen, you remember the lion-taming act you did with Bruno when the circus was on strike? Why not keep going on that, and while you’re doing it get a fresh string of dogs together?’

The light of hope came into Doreen’s eyes.

‘Oh, Babs, if I could!’

‘Leave it to me. I’ll see Sheila,’ Babs said excitedly, and ran from the dressing-room.

Sheila nodded when Babs explained the circumstances and her idea.

‘That’s certainly a brain-wave, Babs,’ she agreed. ‘Yes, it is a jolly good idea. The crowd likes Doreen, too, apart from the dogs. They were disappointed tonight when she didn’t appear. They were calling for her. I’ll speak to father, although, of course,’ she added, ‘it will mean less wages for Doreen.’

‘Oh, she wouldn’t mind that!’ Babs pleaded. ‘Sheila, give her a chance.’

‘Right-ho! I’ll do my best. I’ll get daddy to pay her seven pounds a week for the turn, if that will satisfy her. You’d better send her along to daddy’s wagon, Babs. I’ll be there.’

‘Oh, thanks, Sheila!’ Babs gulped, and flew back to the dressing-room to impart the good news.

The next afternoon the crowd which arrived at Jordan’s Circus read, to their delight, that Doreen, the wonderful schoolgirl dog star, would appear again in the circus ring, this time with an entirely new act entitled, ‘Taming the Untamed Dog-Lion.’

And among the crowd which surged into the great hall in which the circus was being given next day were Babs, Mabs, and Jemima — Clara, Marjorie, and Janet having stayed behind in the dressing-room to assist Bessie Bunter and Doreen in getting ready for their turn.

To see the show was Babs’ idea, for, curiously enough, neither she nor any of her chums had seen it yet. And Babs also had another object in view. She wanted to get near the blind man who so faithfully turned up at each performance.

Babs felt increasingly curious about that pathetic figure who had inquired about the mysterious Fay Chandler.

And as it happened they got near the blind man — Babs, in fact, sat right next to him. He turned sightless eyes upon her as she dropped into her place, and politely moved up. He smiled.

‘Excuse me,’ he said.

‘Yes?’ Babs asked.

‘It is true, isn’t it? That girl Doreen — they tell me she’s in the programme again.’

‘Oh, yes, rather!’ Babs answered enthusiastically.

‘She speaks?’ he asked eagerly.

Babs gazed at him, surprised by the question.

‘Why, yes. Excuse me,’ she added, ‘but you seem interested in Doreen.’

‘I am,’ he said. ‘I have heard her before. Her voice it — it reminds me of — of someone,’ he added vaguely. ‘I am glad. Last night I came here, you know, and I was disappointed. Doreen was not in the programme.

There was a girl named Lulu who did her act. I am blind, and, being

blind, you know, I have to rely upon my sense of hearing and the noise of the audience to tell me what my eyes cannot see. The girl Lulu — she is not as good as Doreen. The audience did not like her.’

Babs smiled. She knew that.

‘Doreen, of course, is better than Lulu,’ she said; and then sat upright as the first turn was announced. ‘Shush! They’re starting.’

The man nodded. He smiled again, appearing glad to find himself near so charming a companion. A hush fell upon the circus. The audience sat enthralled, amazed and amused. They thoroughly enjoyed every minute of the show.

‘The next turn, ladies and gentlemen, is Doreen, the schoolgirl star, and an old favourite of yours, in her entirely new act:

“Taming the Dog-Lion.”

A roar of applause went up even before Doreen appeared. Excited chatter broke out among the audience. Many of these people had been to Jordan’s Circus before and Doreen had never failed to spellbind them with her charm, with her expert handling of the dogs under her control. There was a deafening clap as Doreen appeared, seated in the centre of the lion’s cage, drawn by two enormous elephants.

Babs watched the blind man. He was sitting bolt upright, staring with eyes that could not see, directly at the cage. A flush of interest had come into his face. She saw him tremble.

‘She’s here?’ he asked in a thrilled voice.

‘Yes.’

‘What does she look like? Would you mind describing her to me, please? She is lovely, isn’t she?’

‘Very lovely,’ Babs smiled. ‘Doreen is one of the prettiest girls I know. She has on a blue ballet dress, with pink silk stockings and blue velvet shoes. She carries a silver stick.’

‘Thank you!’ the blind man said.

Bruno, ‘the almost-human dog,’ as he was billed, was dressed in an ill-fitting lion costume, and what Doreen did was to burlesque, very cleverly, the usual lion-taming turn — now off the circus bills owing to the exclusion of Fearless Ferdinand.

Bruno did everything that a lion in a circus cage should do, and a great many other things that a circus lion would find it impossible to do.

He jumped through paper hoops, performed miracles of mathematics with the aid of wooden blocks, barked in a very un-lionlike way, shook his head, and nodded in answer to questions, and ended up by dancing with Doreen in the cage.

The audience roared. Its applause broke out when Doreen, laughing happily, finally wrenched off the mask that covered Bruno’s frowning head and revealed him to the audience. Bruno, sitting on his haunches,

wagged a tree-stump of a paw in acknowledgment of their applause. 'She is wonderful!' breathed the man. 'Wonderful! And her voice — Tell me! You know Doreen?'

'She is a friend of mine,' Babs replied.

'She lives with her parents?'

'No.' Babs paused. She eyed the man with sudden interest. 'She had only a father — a man named Radlett. But —' She paused, wondering if she should tell this man the circumstances.

'Yes?' he asked eagerly.

'Well, nothing. You see, Doreen doesn't really believe — that — that this man is her father.'

'Oh!' He looked excited suddenly. 'And why?'

Babs shrugged.

'Just because he doesn't treat her as a father would treat his daughter.'

'I see.' And a sudden, fierce frown came into his face. 'Radlett,' he muttered — 'Radlett! No, that is not the name — not the name. Tell me — and forgive me for asking so many questions. But could you describe this man Radlett?'

'Well —' Babs said hesitantly.

'Is he tall?'

'Yes.'

'And broad-shouldered?' His face set. 'Tell me!' he added sharply. 'His head — is it sunk between his shoulders?'

Babs started.

'It is, it is!' His face flamed. 'It is he — Joe Green!' But Babs felt alarmed.

'No, that isn't his name —'

'No, perhaps not. I am sorry. Just for a moment I forgot myself. You see, he answers so nearly to the description of someone I would like to meet again — someone who, in the past, I knew.' He shook his head. 'Tell me, what does he do in the circus?'

Babs smiled.

'Odd jobs,' she said. 'Actually he lives by the dogs which Lulu uses to perform. But everyone in the circus does something, you know, and Radlett cleans up stables and does anything else which may be required.'

'I see.' And he nodded again, very thoughtfully. 'Thank you,' he said, with a smile, and from then until the end of the show he said nothing else, but preserved a rather thoughtful silence.

It was only when Babs, wondering rather uncertainly if somehow she had offended him, rose to go that she felt his hand upon her arm.

'One moment, young lady, please!' he begged. 'I would like to ask you something.'

'Yes?' Babs asked.

‘You would do me a favour?’

‘Why, certainly!’ she replied.

‘Thank you. Then,’ he said quietly, ‘will you please take me to the caravan of this Jim Radlett?’

And Babs, though she had a momentary doubt about doing that, reflected, that, after all, there could be no harm in introducing this man to another whom he imagined he had met. She nodded.

‘Very well,’ she said.

CHAPTER XXVI The Blind Man’s Accusation

IN Radlett’s caravan a light burned. The shadow of Radlett fell upon the curtain. Babs went up to the door and knocked. A surly voice from inside called:

‘Come in!’

‘This way!’ Babs said softly to the blind man.

She opened the door. Radlett, turning from a paper he was reading, wheeled round. For a moment he stared at his visitors, and Babs noticed that his face turned a sickly white.

‘What do you want?’ he asked roughly.

‘I want,’ said the stranger distinctly, ‘Joe Green! And I think,’ he added, gripping his stick, ‘that I have found him at last, after ten years’ search, in you, Jim Radlett! Thank you, young lady. You have done me a service indeed. I want to talk to this man — alone!’

And Babs, though she would have liked to remain behind, had to accept her dismissal. But her pulses were racing as she stepped outside again. What had the blind man meant by calling Jim Radlett Joe Green?

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‘Who are you?’ Radlett cried, in a voice almost hoarse.

‘You know who I am, though I can’t see you,’ the blind man answered.

‘Your voice has changed, Green, but not so much that I would not recognise it — even though it is ten years or more since you did me such an ill turn. I am Roy Chandler — a name you know well, you rogue!’

‘Get out!’ shouted Radlett.

‘I will not get out. I am here to ask for my daughter,’ Chandler answered quietly. ‘I am here at last to get satisfaction, Green. For years I have hunted for you — for years I have searched for you.’

‘I tell you my name’s not Green!’ Radlett hooted.

‘No? Then perhaps that we may prove,’ the blind man answered. ‘Green, I am rich now — rich. I have money. I have power. In the past you stole

not only my money but my daughter as well. You left me blind. Now it is my turn. And I know! This girl Doreen — is she your daughter?’

‘Of course she is!’

‘Where is she?’

‘Mind your own business!’

‘Surely it is my business!’ Roy Chandler said. ‘Listen, Green. For days I have haunted this circus. For days I have listened to the voice of this girl, whom you call Doreen, as she performed in the circus ring. Even though I have lost my sight — and you know how I lost it, Green ! — I have seen her. I have seen her as I imagine her to be. That girl — that voice — she is her dear dead mother come to life once more! I cannot be mistaken!’ he cried, with a memory that shook him.

Radlett was white.

‘I tell you you are making a mistake,’ he stormed. ‘Doreen is my own girl! I can prove it!’

But his hands were shaking. Could the blind man have seen his face he would have read in it the guilt that his affliction hid from him. Radlett looked hunted.

Perhaps there was a mental picture in Jim’s eyes of all that had happened those long ten years ago. Perhaps he saw himself and this man again as they had sat in a train speeding northward — the man with a heavy cash-bag in his hand, his little daughter, Fay, seated at his side.

Joe Green, as he had then been known, had been accompanying Roy Chandler to Scotland to complete a business deal. And Green, as usual, was broke.

Temptation had assailed him. He thought Chandler was asleep. With a heavy stick he had struck him into unconsciousness, had grabbed the bag. The child’s cry as he made for the exit to the compartment had arrested him.

The thought that she might be the means of bringing home his guilt had flashed into his head. He had not thought clearly, not thought properly. He had snatched up the child, and bolted.

And then — the years that had gone by. He remembered the hue and cry. He remembered the scare there had been — of reading in the papers that the very blow which had struck Chandler into unconsciousness had, at the same time, deprived him of his eyesight.

He remembered how he had slunk to the gipsy tribe, taking the little girl with him; how he had changed his name to Radlett, and had forged a birth certificate to show that the child was his own daughter.

Radlett felt desperate. He saw in blind Roy Chandler, despite his sightlessness, that he had a man embittered by ten years of suffering to deal with. He must bluff him! Must convince him! Must get rid of him! But how?

‘I tell you I can prove it!’ he cried again. ‘I can prove it!’ he repeated.

‘She is not your daughter!’

‘Then can I see her?’ Chandler asked.

‘See?’ Radlett started. ‘But you are blind!’

‘Yes; I am blind. But I have senses other than my eyesight. I shall know,’ Roy Chandler replied confidently.

‘It may be,’ he added, ‘that the sight of her, the nearness of her, may return the eyesight which I have lost. I am blind because my optic nerves are paralysed by the shock I sustained when you struck that cowardly blow in the Glasgow train. I have been told that sometime, somehow, my sight may be unexpectedly restored. The presence of Fay may do that.’

And then Jim Radlett stared. The door behind Chandler was opening, revealing the girlish figure of Lulu. A sudden desperate idea came into the man’s mind.

He put his fingers to his lips, signalling frantically with one arm, pointing first to himself and then to the blind man.

Lulu paused, staring at Radlett in amazement; then she understood. She winked one eye, nodding.

The blind man turned; his sightless eyes fastened upon the girl.

Jim Radlett smirked.

‘Oh, come in, Doreen!’ he cried.

‘Doreen?’ The blind man’s face became eager. ‘Doreen? You are Doreen?’

‘Yes, of course,’ she answered, seeing now what was expected of her, and imitating as nearly as she could Doreen’s voice. ‘But who are you?’

‘Doreen, my name is Chandler — Roy Chandler,’ the man said. And he stopped. ‘Doreen, your voice sounds different somehow from when I heard it in the ring —’

Lulu laughed.

‘Does it?’ she said carelessly.

‘Yes. But’ — Chandler gulped — ‘Doreen, I have heard that this man, calling himself Jim Radlett, is your father. He does not treat you well —’

‘Who told you that?’ Lulu asked.

‘A girl,’ Roy Chandler answered — ‘a girl who is a friend of yours —’

‘She must have been pulling your leg,’ Lulu answered. ‘Jim Radlett is my father — yes. And a kinder or more loving father a girl never had.’ And she made a grimace at Jim, who grinned.

Chandler looked dazed.

‘I love him!’ Lulu asserted, assuming indignation. ‘Whoever told you that story about him, Mr. Chandler, has told you a wicked, barefaced fib! He does everything that a father could do. And I wouldn’t leave him — no, not for a thousand other fathers!’

Roy Chandler’s face twisted. He gulped a little, then lowered his head.

‘I see,’ he said, and paused a moment; then repeated heavily:
 ‘I see. I — I’m sorry. I must have made a mistake, after all. But when I heard you in the ring I could have —’ He shook his head.
 ‘But no, it is not to be. Once again I have been just chasing a dream, just deluding myself. Always I wake up to the bitterness of a new disappointment.’
 Jim Radlett, relieved, laughed.
 ‘Oh, that’s all right! We all make mistakes,’ he said jovially. ‘Forget it, Mr. Chandler. But you are satisfied now?’
 The blind man paused; then he nodded.
 ‘Yes, I am satisfied,’ he said heavily. ‘I apologise. I wish you both good-night!’ he added, and bowed.
 And he stumbled down the steps into the grounds of the circus outside — a heartbroken, forlorn figure, tapping his stick on the ground as he went.
 Lulu looked at Radlett and burst into a laugh.
 ‘Well, that’s a scream if you like!’ she said. ‘Tell me all about it afterwards, Jim. But get going now. I came with a message from the boss to tell you to take Rajah, the elephant, back to his pen and feed him. Dear daddy Jim!’ she ended with a peal of laughter.
 But Jim only grinned at that. For once in his life, Radlett felt grateful. Lulu, at least, had saved him from what threatened to be an unpleasant scrape. He was satisfied now that he had banished the blind man for good and all.

CHAPTER XXVII

Catastrophe in the Circus

‘THERE he is!’
 ‘Where?’
 ‘Look, you duffer! Can you see? Near Doreen’s caravan!’ And Barbara Redfern, accompanying her chums through the grounds of Jordan’s Circus, pointed.
 The caravan Babs referred to was one of the old-fashioned gipsy caravans, perched high and insecurely on two wheels. By one of the wheels, however, was a small stool, and on that stool a rather lonely figure was sitting. It was the figure of Roy Chandler, the blind man.
 ‘Poor man!’ Babs said.
 The others nodded. Doreen, who was with them, looked eager. She had heard the story which Babs had had to tell of her meeting with the blind man; she had heard what Babs had said about the blind man’s meeting with Jim Radlett — or Joe Green, as he had called him.
 That was why they were here now. Babs, uneasy at having left the helpless blind man and Jim Radlett together, had had a fear that

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something might happen. They had decided, in case of accidents, to go across to the caravan of Jim Radlett in time to intervene should any trouble crop up.

They had been on the way, when Babs had suddenly spotted the blind man sitting there, head buried in his hands — almost as though he were weeping.

‘Poor man!’ she said again. ‘He — he looks broken up. Doreen, perhaps if you went across and spoke to him —’

Doreen’s eyes shone.

‘Oh, Babs, do you think I might?’

‘Well, why not?’ Clara Trevlyn put in. ‘Or, better still, let’s all go. We may cheer him up between us. Come on, girls!’

And the six, in a group, strolled towards the lonely figure seated in the semi-darkness upon the stool.

That scene in Jim Radlett’s caravan had shattered Roy Chandler’s last illusion.

Every moment of those ten years had he devoted to finding this dear daughter of his; every town, every city in the country had he scoured. But, alas! with the same lack of success. The Joe Green he had known — his little Fay, too — seemed to have been swallowed up.

And then, when he was beginning to despair, had come that message from one of his agents — a man named Stewart. Stewart, working on the resemblance to some photograph that he had had of Roy Chandler’s dead wife at Doreen’s age, had been struck with the little circus star’s resemblance to Mrs. Chandler.

He had made inquiries. Those inquiries had satisfied him that in Doreen he had found the missing Fay. He had written to Doreen, asking her to come and see him, and Roy Chandler himself had been present at the house when Doreen should have appeared.

Why had Doreen not come? Roy Chandler did not know. And, as it happened, on that very same night his agent — Stewart — had met with an accident. So Chandler himself had decided to carry on the investigation. That was why, blind as he was, he had attended the circus performance ever since.

Oh, if only he had eyes to see her! But he had not.

A groan burst from the lips of Roy Chandler. His head sank lower upon his hands. And then he started. For someone was speaking. That voice!

‘Excuse us, but can we do anything for you?’ Doreen asked.

And she and her chums from Cliff House School stared in amazement as the man, trembling violently, rose to his feet.

‘Fay, Fay, Fay!’ he cried brokenly. ‘Then you are here, after all! Fay!’

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‘Diablo!’ hissed Jim Radlett.

He paused. Jim, driving Rajah, the elephant, was taking the road which led past Doreen’s caravan when he saw that scene between Doreen and the blind man.

For a moment the eyes of Jim Radlett blazed up. He fancied he had got rid of Chandler. He had plotted with Lulu to deceive this man. He thought he had succeeded.

The iron prod which Radlett held in his hand shook. His face became suddenly ferocious. Hatred blazed up within him.

With vicious force, and yet hardly knowing he did it, he brought the bar crashing down upon the elephant’s thick hide.

Rajah was not used to that treatment. He gave a half-furious, half-frightened trumpet. His eyes blazed red. Crash! again came the prod, and Rajah, screeching with rage, lumbered forward, his trunk twirling back as he did so.

Radlett, realising too late what his insane outburst of temper was likely to cost, found his craven soul filled with fear. Once let that wildly flaying trunk get at him and he would be hurled up and crashed down again.

He ran, casting wild eyes about him for a retreat. Rajah, in maddened rage now, trumpeted on his track.

The Cliff House chums, hearing the sudden tumult, turned to stare in amazement.

‘My goodness! Look!’

‘It’s Jim Radlett!’

‘The elephant’s chasing him!’

But Radlett, desperate now, saw at last a retreat. The caravan was near him. For a moment he paused to flash a quick glance in that direction. His eyes shone with fear.

‘Bessie — Doreen — Mr. Chandler! Quick—look!’ shrieked Babs. ‘My goodness! He’s going to charge the caravan!’

They all saw. For one petrified moment they remained rooted to the spot.

And in that moment Rajah charged — bellowing with wrath as, a mountainous mass of sinew and rage, he hurled himself against the caravan.

‘Run! Run!’

They ran, casting frightened glances behind them. And then — crash!

The caravan rent and split asunder as the huge bulk of the elephant smote it. It heeled over. For one dizzy second it remained perched upon one wheel. Then it crashed. Babs turned.

‘Look — look!’ she cried. ‘The blind man!’

But it was too late. For even as the blind man, later in moving than the others, ran, the caravan, toppling over, smote him. The side of it hit him across the head as it fell, shooting him forward on to the ground. While

Radlett, scampering up in terror, went chasing away, the elephant on his track.

Radlett escaped before Rajah could reach him; but behind him, on the ground, he left a wrecked caravan and a form spread out, inert and unconscious. Babs, rushing to the side of the fallen man, peered anxiously into his features.

But even as Babs bent down the blind man opened his eyes. He stared about him with wondering amazement. For a moment he seemed not to understand. And then he passed a shaky hand across his forehead.

‘What has happened? What has happened?’ he cried. ‘It is light! I can see — see! I can see, I tell you!’ he added, with a sudden scream, and then his eyes fell upon Doreen. ‘Fay — my daughter! Fay!’

And Doreen, trembling, tottered towards him. She had found her real father at last!

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‘And for all these wonderful blessings,’ said Mr. Chandler, ‘I have you girls from the Cliff House School to thank. For if it had not been for you, your friendship for Fay, whom you knew as Doreen, your interest in her, and, above all, your help to both her and me, I should never have found her.’

The scene was the circus, and it took place a day later. It was, in fact the circus canteen. At the head of the table, next to Mr. Jordan, sat Roy Chandler, happily smiling, his sight magically restored by the accidental blow he had sustained from the wrecked caravan as it had fallen.

Next to him, dressed in a really exquisite frock of silk taffeta, sat Doreen. Gone was that look of sadness from her pretty face. Her eyes sparkled happily; there was a flush of pleasure and excitement in her cheeks.

She gazed at her father with adoring eyes as he made that little speech; and Roy Chandler, gazing back at her, smiled with fond happiness.

The black shadow which had marred his life had gone at last— banished by the action of the same coward who had been responsible for its arrival. Jim Radlett, or Joe Green, was no more, and never again would trouble him. For Green at that moment was behind prison bars, awaiting his trial on a variety of charges ranging from theft to abduction.

‘I am truly grateful,’ Roy Chandler went on, with emotion. ‘I feel that I owe you girls and Mr. Jordan and Sheila here a debt I can never repay. I only hope that the friendship which begins now will continue for many years.’

‘Hear, hear!’ cheered Bessie Bunter. ‘I say, Mabs, pass the lemonade!’

‘And I wish to put on record my undying admiration,’ Mr. Chandler went on. ‘I wish to make known too, a wish which Doreen has expressed to

me. Thanks to the death of a rich aunt some years ago I can afford to indulge my daughter's wishes, and though it will break my heart to lose her again so soon, I feel that it is only just that I should make up to her all she has lost. To-day, girls, I have been in communication with Miss Primrose, the principal of Cliff House School. Miss Primrose will accept my daughter at Cliff House, and she will become a pupil at the school early next term.'

There was a roar at that. Doreen smiled, bowed, smiled again. She was going to Cliff House! Her dreams had been realised at last!

'And Bruno?' questioned Mabs.

'He goes with her — That reminds me,' he added, smiling. 'Since Joe Green, alias Radlett, was sent to prison his dogs have been bought by me. I am presenting them to Mr. Jordan here for use in the circus, with the exception of one. That one is Ting-a-Ling.'

For the first time Bessie Bunter tore her attention from the jam- tarts and concentrated her interest.

'Oh, I say! Ting-a-Ling!'

'I intend,' added Mr. Chandler, with a smile, 'to make a present of Ting-a-Ling to a very dear friend of ours — Miss Bessie Bunter!'

'Oh, I sus-say!' choked Bessie. 'Thanks awfully!'

She looked radiantly pleased. The chums all looked pleased. For, next to Doreen, there were two presences at Cliff House which they would appreciate above all else. And one was Ting-a-Ling, the other was Bruno. And in due course, when they set foot in the old school to commence the new term, they would have all three!

THE END.