

The Children of Circus Sinclair!

Book 1

Lee joins the family

Those of you who met the Sinclair family last year in *Circus Runaway Home* will remember that David and Jacky Sinclair, after never before being allowed to visit a circus in their whole lives, accidentally stowed away in a circus lorry. With the help of Paul Williams, the son of the circus' animal trainer, they pretended to be local children and camped on the circus ground. Their adventure finally ended with them joining the circus for good, when they were reunited with their mother and found that the circus owner was their own long lost father.

This second story tells how the Sinclair family take on a new member, who turns out to be much more valuable than she seems at first sight.

Chapter 1

AN UNWELCOME SURPRISE

It's not fair, Dad! I thought it was Mother's idea for us to go away to boarding school, not yours!"

Jacky Sinclair, dressed in the ornate gold coloured costume of an Indian elephant boy, looked and sounded upset. He was standing in his family's circus ring in what had at one time been a bus garage in the London suburbs. Jacky was still holding the jewelled turban that had been covering his very fair hair but had pushed his bare feet into a warm pair of slippers. Just two minutes ago, he had come back into the warm hall from the freezing cold yard outside, where he had been taking Tessa the elephant home to her heated wagon, when his father had broken the latest news to him and his brother. Jacky looked most defiant today, with his hands on his hips and a glare on his usually happy face as he stared at his father in disbelief. David, Jacky's older brother, twelve years old and dressed in the red tailcoat and black trousers of a traditional ringmaster, had stopped collecting discarded programmes from under the tiered seating as their father spoke. He was still standing still and looking across the ring at his father. "I want to talk to you two about boarding school." Was all that Commander Sinclair had said, his voice echoing around the canvas festooned roof, but it had been enough for both boys. The protest that Jacky had spoken aloud was exactly what David felt about it, too.

It was only a few minutes since the end of their three o'clock show at the Christmas Circus. The whole family and all the other acts from their summer season had been performing before satisfyingly full houses every afternoon and evening since Boxing Day and it was hard work. This afternoon's last customers had only just finished trickling out of the exits after the pony rides. Janine Sinclair, the boys' mother, had just gone through the curtains to take the ponies back to the stables, and just then Commander Sinclair had called to his two sons.

Once he was sure that nobody was going to escape, he started again.

"Look, you two, you remember that Mother and I had a long session with your new headmaster on the last day of term?" He asked. "We actually talked about this boarding school business again. I know you've only been going to his school since we pulled in to winter quarters, but he thinks you're both a lot better than average."

He sat down on the ring fence and looked warily at the boys as they came across the ring to him. He was thinking that he knew exactly what was coming but, to his surprise, they didn't interrupt him as they had done once before, so he continued.

"We'll be on the road again at Easter and we all think that going to any old school for a day here and a day there isn't really enough for two brainy kids like you."

Both boys knew, already, just what was coming! They had heard the idea of boarding school from Mother, since long before they joined the circus, but they had never heard it from their father. Surprised, almost shocked, they had both stopped what they had been doing and were now standing close to him and were just staring.

"I've phoned my old school, and I want you to go there. The term starts in two weeks. But I'm not forcing it on you. You both have to agree!"

As they were both looking at him with faces that showed their feelings about the idea.

He still expected resistance. He wasn't disappointed.

"We're not going!" Stated Jacky, as if there was no question of it.

"Will you blame Mother if I say it's still her idea, but that I'm starting to agree with her?" Father asked.

"But why?" Asked David, a little more reasonably now. He was wondering what had made his father think that way. Half a year with the circus had taught him to be prepared to listen.

It was nearly half an hour later when Jan' came to look for her husband and her two sons. She had changed from the red-indian costume that she had worn for the finale and was back in her working jeans and sweater. As her family hadn't come into their living wagon for their meal, she had brought out the sandwiches and four big mugs of tea on their old tin tray. Her husband and the two boys were sitting together on the ring fence, still in the costumes they had worn for the finale, but she was very relieved to hear them talking happily together.

She set the tray on the top of the ring fence between Jacky and David and picked up her drink. She listened as her husband finished telling one of his old stories about his own schooldays, then coughed to catch their attention.

He nodded his head to her, almost imperceptibly.

"Am I still hated?" She asked.

Jacky jumped up and kissed her.

"Obviously, not so much as before," She said, putting her arm around her younger son and looking down at her husband and her other boy on the ring fence. "How did you restore my good name, Peter?"

Her husband grinned.

"Don't ask me, Jan', ask David!"

David glanced at his father by his side and looked up to grin at her too.

"He promised us that if we start now, we can leave again before the summer season if it doesn't work out." He explained.

You probably know already¹, that the two boys had only been living and working on their father's circus since the middle of last June. Despite their late start in the business they had both taken to it as if they had been in it all their lives. They were becoming quite capable performers and were enjoying the responsibilities as well as the excitement of being circus children.

I must tell you that it isn't quite accurate to say "all their lives" about the boys. It is true that Jacky had missed being born on the circus, but only by a few months. It wouldn't be fair to his brother not to say he was circus born. David had actually come into the world in the same old circus wagon where they now lived.

The brothers certainly fitted in to the little circus community. Paul Williams, whose mother was the best high school rider the boys had ever seen and whose father showed the lion and the bears, had remarked on it a long while ago. Almost the first time that they met Michael and Patrick, the stablemaster's two sons, the red haired boys had said that they would never have guessed that David and Jacky hadn't been circus children all their lives.

"It's sort of born into you," Mary was the daughter of Alli, the circus acrobat and she too had thought they had always been in the circus.

When David first asked her "why?" she had answered that "It comes out in the way that

¹ From the book *Circus Runaway Home*.

you do things and how you treat people and animals.”

You could trust those opinions because Mary and the Irish boys were all children whose families had been in circus for many generations.

Mother had brought up the idea of boarding school the day after the circus had pulled in to the winter quarters at the end of the summer season. It was Guy Fawkes Night and they'd been busy in case the animals became frightened, so Commander Sinclair had invited everyone to a special late meal as the bangs and flashes had finally finished.

“School on Monday!” Paul had said, with a big grin at the two boys. “I bet you two have forgotten what it's like!”

“Will they be coming down the village with us? Or going on the bus?” Mary had asked. Jan' had looked guiltily at her husband.

“It's too late to think of anything different.”

That had led the conversation round to going away to school. It had still seemed to David and Jacky that, as the other circus children managed without it, then they could stay at home too. On the other hand, Mother had always been keen on them going to a boarding school, even before they all returned to the circus.

Alli the Arab acrobat had agreed straight away. “It doesn't hurt to have a good education.”

Even Mr Williams, who had been to a grammar school before his parents sent him to be a miner, and Mr Paddy, who had only been taught reading and writing in his grandparent's circus, had seemed to think it was a good idea to get educated.

That hadn't changed things at all, and they had enjoyed the few weeks that were left of the autumn term.

Now it had all come up again, but this time Father, once the boy's only ally, had convinced them that they should try his old school for at least the next one or two terms. But, all the same, he and Mother were still reassuring them as they led the way back to their big living wagon in the cold car park outside.

There was time to have another mug of tea each, and then they'd have to change costumes for the start of the evening show.

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The fateful morning had to come, all too soon. After more than seven months as circus children David and Jacky were going to have to be very ordinary schoolboys again!

Yesterday, the day after packing up the Christmas show, the convoy of blue and yellow painted lorries and trailers had made the long journey back to their winter quarters near Aldermaston. That's on the borders between Hampshire and Berkshire, but not really in any of the villages. It was already late in the evening when the big blue horsebox with Mr Paddy's caravan had been the last load to roll up the rutted track and turn into the old farmyard where the circus had its stores and winter parking.

But, tired or not, Commander Sinclair's old aunt had invited everyone into the big kitchen of her bungalow for a party, both for a celebration and a farewell.

Last night's eating and talking had gone on until long after midnight and it wasn't surprising that everyone had slept late today. This morning, after a massive breakfast, the boys had just an hour to look around their winter home before the whole Sinclair family had piled into Mr Paddy's big American car for the long ride to their school.

Their two big trunks, two new tuck boxes with sweets and biscuits and two small overnight cases were all loaded into the capacious boot, and Father was ready to set off on the road toward East Anglia. The boys were happy after last night's fun, but at the same time unhappy to be leaving.

“Don't worry, we'll see you back in winter quarters before we pull out at Easter.” Alli the acrobat told them as he handed each of them a small package wrapped in shiny gift paper.

Everyone else had come out to see them off, too.

Paul and his parents came out from the open fronted barn where the animal wagons were parked out of the weather. The two Irish boys stood holding the ponies that they were leading from the stables to the drinking trough beside the barn, and their father arrived with a lorry load of clean straw just as the car was ready to leave the farm.

The brothers were still shaking hands with their friends through the open windows as their father started the engine and put the engine into gear. The car bumped down the muddy track to the always open gate at the bottom of the field, turned right on to the metalled road leading into the village, and they were on their way.

It was going to be a long journey for the family by circus standards. First they had to get round Reading to the main road at the other side of the town and then across country up toward Aylesbury. As always, Jacky was by far the best at using maps and he navigated them on across the Downs and the Fens to Cambridge and then on towards the market town where they were to go to school.

The journey wasn't as boring, though, as the boys had feared because Father and Mother kept remembering circus grounds, and stories about the grounds and the towns they passed on the way.

Father remembered that this was the town where once their elephant truck broke down and their elephant stayed the night in the middle of the high street in front of Barclay's Bank.

“The manager drove out from his house in the middle of the night in case we were planning to break in, but we convinced him that she was a better guard than all the policemen in Hertfordshire.”

Half an hour later Mother pointed down a side road and told them how their tractor had jammed its trailers under a railway bridge and they'd had to walk the elephant, the same one, over the line to pull a wagon load of tigers backwards out from the arch.

“A goods train came along as we waited to walk her across. The engine driver nearly had a heart attack when he saw her!”

Another big village, where they stopped at traffic lights by a tall towered church and turned off into a side road, was where the family circus had its winter farm for two winters just after the war.

“That was where we first met Alli.” Jan' remembered. “Mary's mother was on the show. He came down to see us and asked if he could travel with us for a whole season. You could see they liked each other from the start!”

“And he never wanted to leave after meeting her!” Commander Sinclair added.

Then, a big green on the corner of a crossroads in the middle of a country town was the place where father first worked as a ringmaster.

There was always something new.

The stories went on and on until, without warning, Commander Sinclair swung off the road and stopped on the car park of a café. They were just outside Newmarket and there was time to spare.

Jan' led the way to the door.

“Better **munjari the chavvis!*” Said Commander Sinclair loudly as they went in, and the waitress looked at him in a most peculiar way as he led the family to a window table.

The young woman stood holding her little order pad but not speaking as they each read on of the menu cards. She certainly looked most relieved when David ordered sausages and chips with pancakes and maple syrup to follow, and he actually spoke in English! Jacky and his father both preferred mixed grills and Jan' had just an egg with her chips. “Order your sweets too. It'll save time.” Suggested Jan', And Jacky's choice of pancakes and ice cream started the waitress writing again.

“That makes one pancakes and maple syrup, one with ice-cream, two apple pie and cream to follow, and four cola's to drink?” asked the waitress, still scribbling the other's orders as she turned away.

“What was in those parcels that Alli gave to you?” asked Jan', as the waitress went across the room to the kitchen area with their orders.

“I completely forgot about mine!” exclaimed David, standing up and reaching over his father to the coat stand so he could get his parcel from his coat pocket. “I'll look!”

Jacky was quicker at looking because his coat was hanging on his chair back. He only had to wriggle his hand down at his side and grab the parcel. Even before David had removed his first wrapper, Jacky had pulled out his own long slim white cardboard box. He opened it to reveal two more, smaller, boxes inside.

“Looks like one of Alli's clown puzzles,” He commented as he started to unwrap them. “I expect there'll be two more boxes inside this one!”

The boys packages were identical and, to nobody's surprise, there were two more boxes inside Jacky's first one! But he, and a moment later David too, were pleased to find that the bigger of their boxes contained a matching set of a fountain pen and a propelling pencil. Jacky's were a wine red colour and David's were blue.

“I didn't think about you needing those!” Mother commented, “Good thing Alli thought of it. What does the note say?”

David was the first to unwrap the note around his second pack but he didn't read it, yet, because the transparent lidded plastic box that it was wrapped around contained a wristwatch. He looked at it carefully and compared it with the clock behind the counter before putting it on.

Jacky put his watch around his own wrist and started to read his note aloud.

“Knowing how organised your folks are, here are the three things they are most likely to have forgotten. If you can't guess what they're for, then you should be going to a kindergarten and not to a grammar school...”

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The boys arrived at their new school an hour later.

Father had driven through the narrow streets of the town, past two big churches, to a

wide sloping market place. Without hesitating, he followed the road round past what looked like a city wall.

After the car had crossed a narrow bridge at the end of the wall he turned the car across the busy traffic into a sloping winding drive and past a one time gatekeepers cottage. In front was an iron farm gate and there, just beyond it, they stopped, at last, turning into a parking place between two other cars.

Inside the gate was an old red brick building with four floors. It was built high on the slopes of the one time vineyards above the abbey grounds that adjoined the town. Jacky, who was leaning out of his window to see better, almost fell out as the car stopped.

This side of the building, beyond another gate, was a school playground where other parents were unloading children and luggage.

“We have to see the Head first, that's why we aren't driving right in.” Explained Commander Sinclair, switching off the engine and looking round at his boys who were already getting out.

The others climbed out of the car too, and the boys stacked their cases by the gate where a middle aged teacher organised some boys to take them inside. The four crossed over to the impressive front door. The boys stood back to allow their parents to go up the steps in front of them.

A starched uniformed maid opened the door to their father's first ring. Mother told her the family name and the girl almost curtsied.

“Yes Ma'am. You're expected. Please follow me.”

The four of them followed her along a dark passage and were all shown into the headmaster's study.

“Please wait. I'll tell him you're here.”

The headmaster, Doctor Elliam, turned out to be a lot younger than the boys had expected him to be. Also, to their surprise, he seemed to be on first name terms with their father who greeted him as an old friend.

In turn the headmaster was introduced to Jan' and he asked about the circus business and inquired after the health of the boy's great aunt.

He finished his polite words with their parents and started to talk to the boys about their previous schools. He really impressed Jacky by not calling him Jacques, although at that moment he was explaining that the boys were to be called only by their family names anyway.

All in all, though, it did sound as though this school might not be so bad as they had feared.

Then came the moment when the boys were to be taken off by two second year boarders, and they had to say goodbye. They were a little worried that mother would treat them as little children and want to kiss them, but father had warned her already and their mother made do with hugs all round after he had shaken hands with them.

The four boys went into the corridor one way, through a green baize covered door that led from the wing with the headmasters house into the larger school wing and Dr Elliam went the other way, out to the car with their parents who had to travel back home.

“Don't forget to write!” called Mother as the boys went through the door into the school proper.

The brothers told the two older boarders their names, and looked expectantly at them.

“I’m Tim,” the bigger boy, ginger haired and freckled, introduced himself. “And this is Walt.”

“We both come from Ipswich,” said Walt, short and curly haired “His dad works for the railway, but my dad has his own radio and television shop. What do your people do?” It was the moment of truth!

Jacky looked at David. Father had said last night that it was very important to children at a boarding school that their parents had the right sort of job.

“It gives them a starting point to know what to expect from you,” He had explained.

Yet Father had left it up to them. They could tell people what they thought was right.

Alli had told them to be brave, but not to exaggerate.

Mr Williams had suggested “say they’re in show business.”

Jacky was leaving it up to his brother!

“They own a circus!” said David.

By tea time, when all the boarders filed into the dining room on the first floor, every single one of the boarders knew that David and Jacky were the boys from the circus. Walt had wanted to know which circus, although he was a lot less impressed when he found he'd never heard of it.

As they sat at the junior’s table with nine other boys, under the watchful eyes of one of the four prefects, Tim asked Jacky why their circus was called Sinclair *Brothers* if it belonged to their mother and father.

“It’s silly! Your Mum and Dad aren’t brothers, are they?”

“We’re brothers, aren’t we? And it will be ours one day!” Was David’s immediate answer.

Jacky explained the name, and it seemed to add to their status.

“Our great-great grandfather was the son of a Scottish laird who ran away with a circus and married the wirewalker. His two sons were the first Sinclair Brothers and our grandfather and his brother were the next.”

Walt was counting.

“Great-grandfather, grandfather, father, then you two. That makes you the fourth generation of your circus!”

“Actually the wirewalker, our great-great grandmother Gertrud, was already third generation.” David was taking advantage of Walt’s awe. “That makes us the sixth, not the fourth!”

Two small boys across the table kept asking David to do some tricks. He refused and, each time they asked, Jacky said they weren’t performing dogs, to which David nodded agreement.

“You’ll have to wait until our circus visits your town in the holidays!”

“Can we have free tickets then?”

“Of course, everyone who helps us get the show ready gets a ticket, but our friends get better seats.”

During the evening they got to know quite a few of the other boys, and found that being different wasn’t as bad as they had feared. A lot of the other boys were different too!

They talked to the twin sons of a radio newsreader, the youngest boy of a film producer, and the children of all sorts of businessmen.

“I think it must be worst if you’re like him. His father has a big house with a swimming pool and tennis courts and things, so everyone will suck up to him to try and get invited for the holidays.” Jacky whispered as they left a group around another of the six new

boys, a small unhappy looking child who's father owned a shipping line.

The boys did have a chance to show off a little bit, after all, but not until they were getting ready for bed. Tim was doing handstands against the wall by the door of the twenty bed dormitory, challenging any of the other boys to do better, and several were trying. None had done better than he had.

He looked at Jacky, who he had claimed as his personal friend, as if to ask for support. Jacky couldn't resist the temptation of dropping backward into a handstand where he stood. Walt had been trying handstands too, without much success, and fell back down to his knees. He walked over to watch Jacky, who was now walking on his hands.

"How far can you walk like that?" The dormitory Prefect was watching as Jacky finished a trip round the washstands, and wanted to know.

"Not far," Jacky answered, still upside down. "Perhaps twenty feet or so. I need a fair bit of practice yet, I only learnt a couple of months ago."

As Jacky turned back to his feet he grinned at his brother, as if to say, "it's your turn now."

David placed one hand on the back of his bedside chair, the other on its front edge and rolled very slowly up into a handstand.

"Time for bed!" The duty teacher was calling from outside the door and David rolled back down and put the chair away.

By the time the teacher came inside every boy was in bed. He walked around the washbasins in the middle of the room and back to the door.

He switched off the lights.

"Good night, Boys!"

"Good night, Sir!"

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"Good morning boys!" Called the headmaster, coming into the dining room as the forty five boarders finished eating their breakfast at the five long tables.

"A few of you have to do or re-do the common entrance exam this morning. They will stay here with me. The others can go to classes."

He called out half a dozen names including "Sinclair - one, Sinclair - two," and then commanded "Dismiss!"

The six selected boys followed him out of the door and into the first classroom outside the dining room door, where he directed them to sit down at the old fashioned wooden desks. They were placed at alternate desks like a serious exam which, in a way, it really was. He handed out papers and pencils and told them to start.

Neither David nor Jacky found the questions particularly hard, although some of the other boys seemed to look rather grim. To their pleasure, David and Jacky found that they had done most of the subjects already. Jacky glanced at his brother across the room from time to time, and saw David smile back. To both boys' relief they finished the last question before the end of the period, though they had both tried to plan their time with the help of their new watches. It had certainly made it easier

There was to be a second paper in the next hour, after a break for milk. So, after finishing the first hour, the boys all went down the stairs and out into the cold to fetch the icy bottled drink. There wasn't much else to do and, after a few minutes, they all went in again.

"I wish I was at home. I'll freeze to death if we have to come out here at break times!" Complained the biggest of the boys.

This next test was a little longer than the first, and a little more difficult for Jacky and David, because this time they hadn't done all the work at their old schools. Jacky even had to guess a lot of the answers, although it made him feel a little guilty.

Most of the boys were still writing as the master collected the papers.

"You are free now. You may play quietly outside or, if you prefer, you may chose library books to read until lunch."

The big house had a long high schoolroom downstairs, the width of the whole building, where one class had plenty of room for their lessons and all the boys could go for assembly every morning. The boarders would do their homework there too, in the evenings.

When David and Jacky went to explore outside they found that the level of the playground, which Walt had called the *Quad*, was a complete floor higher on that side than on the garden side, because the school was built on the steep slope above the river. There were several windows on the ground level of the *Quad*, which were high up on the inside wall of that side of the schoolroom. As the boys walked past they looked in at the class down below, and then walked round the corner and down the slope at the end of the building, past the science labs and the gymnasium, to look down the path that led to the first form classroom below the dining room.

"That should be my room," commented David, and then he pointed the other way to a small house at the end of a path that led off between the fives courts and the science labs.

"That must be the Prep School. I wish you weren't going into a different class, Jacky!"

After the midday meal, at which the six boys were allowed to sit together at the same table, and where they compared their test answers, they were left together in the same classroom. It was some time until the headmaster came in with the sheaf of marked papers and sat down. The boys looked expectantly to the front.

"I'm sure you want to know, for which forms you have qualified," He announced.

"You will join your classes in the morning. It's too late for today."

He read out the first two names.

"Well done! You two will join the prep-school class," he said. "You may go out now, and play outside again until tea."

As the door closed behind the two smallest boys, he read out two more names.

"You two did exceptionally well, and you will join the second form."

The headmaster got up and closed the door behind them as they went out. He walked to the front of their desk and looked solemnly down at the two brothers.

Jacky looked scared, and looked even more scared when Dr Elliam called what he now recognised as his school name.

"Sinclair - two," he repeated. "Well, Jacky, young man, you have created a problem for me."

David looked shocked, and Jacky went ice cold for a moment. Could he really be that bad?

"You had the best marks of the whole six, and you are the youngest of all the new boys."

He smiled.

"By age, you might have to be in the prep-school class, but you did better than the two

that are going in the second form. I'm going to give you the chance to be in the first form with your brother. Don't let me down!"

As the boys ran upstairs, toward the junior common room, David put his arm on his brother's shoulder and squeezed it very hard.

"Well done! We won't be separated after all! "

Chapter 3

ANOTHER SORT OF SURPRISE!

It was a particularly wet and stormy Tuesday evening in mid January, and the interval in the theatre's Pantomime program had just started. Veronique, the trapeze artist who had been written into the story as Aladdin's sister, was sitting in front of her dressing room mirror. She was already changed for her speciality act in the second half and was busily copying dates from a contract paper into her new diary when there was a disturbance in the passage that led from the street outside.

Veronique looked up as the dressing room door flew open to let in a girl of about eleven. A small slim girl, who was wearing a thick blue duffel coat and thick winter tights. Her face was flushed from running as well as from the cold outside. Her long mid brown hair was escaping from under the hood and she sounded a little out of breath.

The new arrival stopped so suddenly, in the deep shadow just inside the door, that her older, but not much bigger, companion almost ran into her.

“Hello Lee. You're in a hurry tonight!”

“It's not fair!” complained the first girl, her pleasant voice sounding unhappy as she faced into the room without appearing to look at anything. The trapeze artist walked over, took her hand and looked into sightless green eyes.

“What's not fair, Lee?”

“Everything, Mummy! It's all too unfair! All my best friends went away to school last year, except for Petra and Violet. Now they're going too. I won't have anyone left after the Christmas holidays. Ask Ginny!”

Lee's mother looked at the older girl, a chunky thirteen year old in jeans and warm looking overcoat, who nodded.

“She's right. I went to fetch her from the party at the Day Centre, and they were all talking about it. Most of her class left when they got places after the summer, and now her two best friends will be going to boarding school in a few days.”

“Then I'll have no one at all,” Lee complained.

Veronique led Lee to the chair in front of the mirror, and looked at the reflection of her daughter by the light of the unshaded bulbs. She certainly seemed desolated, sitting hunched up in her thick coat with her feet tucked under her, looking very unhappy indeed.

“Boarding school? I thought you were happy here with me?”

Although Lee had kept it to herself, until now, she had missed her old friends terribly. Like the others left behind in her school class she had looked forward to the infrequent letters from them, which the teachers always read out.

The old girls were always describing the new things they were doing and learning and saying how much they were enjoying it. But now Lee's other friends were leaving to go away to school and she wanted to go too. After all, even if she couldn't go to the same one that the other girls were writing from, after their glowing accounts she was sure that it would be marvellous at any school.

“I *am* happy, with us living together again, *when* you're there. But you always get the best work in the holidays when I'm home all day and then you aren't there. It gets boring, now I can't come to the theatre with you. I want some friends to play with.”

It was true! Veronique had taken her baby with her in the days when she was trying to get started in the theatre, and she had done her best to give Lee a proper childhood. Considering everything, she had done well.

Luckily they had a home, the house in Cambridge that had once belonged to Lee's grandparents and, by saving every penny, Veronique could furnish it and pay the expenses of keeping it up. Now she needed to earn good money if they were going to spend time there together. Since Lee couldn't go to just any school, because she needed the special equipment, the Day Centre school had been a blessing. But it was also a big problem for her and her mother because it had tied them to the city where they lived.

As Lee had rightly said, Veronique working in the theatre meant that they couldn't be together all the time as they had been before, since her main bookings were summer shows and pantomimes. She couldn't afford to refuse work and that meant that she was home in term time but away when Lee needed her most, when the Centre had its holidays.

Worse, though, was a second problem? It was one that they might have expected but had never considered before. It was because Veronique worked so hard and kept her act in the top class that it was getting known and was being asked for by agents and management. She was going to be away even more in future. It was time for a decision, but she hadn't been able to make one, yet.

Veronique looked thoughtful for a moment. How convenient that Lee wanted to go away to school! Just before her daughter arrived she had been wondering how to tell her the latest news, that she had let herself be talked into travelling for the whole summer tour.

This wish of Lee's would solve the immediate problem. The dates fitted exactly. The tour would start just after the school term started, and go on to finish with a summer variety. There would be nearly five months of one week stands in Europe as well as in Britain. Of course there was the Easter holiday, but that was a three months away and she knew she could make some arrangement for that.

Having already committed herself it would be a great relief for someone to take the responsibility for Lee, and a school was something that Veronique had never dared to consider.

Until now.

"Look Lee, I was going to tell you when I got home tonight," she told her daughter. "I've got some news for you. I just signed up to work with the theatre company until September."

She was watching Lee's face for a reaction.

"Eight full months work. We would have to ask if you could stay with Ginny's mum until then, so you could get to the Centre. I never thought you'd like to go away to school. That would make it all different!"

Lee brightened up, visibly.

"Could I? Would you *honestly* let me go to a boarding school?" she asked.

"If you really *honestly* want to. But they might not have any more places at this time of the year. I'll try and find out tomorrow morning," promised her mother. "You did have that chance of going last summer. Maybe we can still get you in!"

She kissed her daughter.

"Now get out of that coat and come into the wings. I'm due on the stage again in five minutes."

+ + +

It was soon fixed up. Just as soon as the school secretary arrived for work. Mother had made a couple of phone calls after an earlier than usual breakfast the very next morning, and found out that there was a place for her daughter. Lee could still go to the school! It was not far away in Suffolk, a new and quite small school especially for blind children and it did have a place free. Not just that but, because her school reports were so good, they had suggested that they could get her an extra grant of money which would pay for her to board!

Mother had made a lot more phone calls that week, and they spent several mornings shopping together before everything was fixed.

Lee was getting quite excited by the end of the week!

Mother and daughter got up very early on the day after the pantomime ended so that they could finish their packing. Lee fingered one of the big sewn in nametags in her new uniform gym slip with a big grin on her face.

“I’ve been able to dress myself for years, without these flags. I wonder what the other girls are going to be like if they need that sort of help?”

Her mother smiled to herself.

“I don’t think they’re for you to feel. I think it might be something to do with the women who work in the laundry,” Veronique had spoken to the Headmistress, and heard that they had disabled staff in the school. “But in an hour or so, you’ll be finding out!”

Lee raced around their little house like a whirlwind, remembering little things that she would need. The two of them had their trunks in their own bedrooms and they called back and forward as they thought of things.

“Does it say anything about swimming things in the list, Mummy? I think I’ve grown out of mine.”

“Not this term, it doesn’t”

“Have you used up all the toothpaste again, Lee?”

“I put it in back the bathroom cabinet.”

At last everything was packed and old Mr Smith from across the road helped Veronique to carry their three cases and the big trunk down to the hall and load them with her prop and costume cases into the boot of his big old shooting brake.

“Come on then, girls,” he said. “You’d better get on your way. I’ll pick up my car at Yarmouth at the weekend, so don’t worry about it.”

+ + +

Just before lunch that day, the borrowed car rolled up to the big old country house that was now converted into a school. Lee’s mother always gave a running commentary as she drove and she tried to describe the picturesque village, the old trees along the drive and the big white house itself. Lee was so excited that she was barely listening to her any more by the time that they stopped in front of the door.

“Are there any girls there yet? Are they wearing school uniform too?”

“Well, there are two getting out of two cars by the door, but I can’t really see. They’re wearing winter overcoats like you are.”

After the nearly freezing weather outside it was warm in the hall and there were children and parents milling about all over the place. Veronique grabbed a man who looked like a gardener from the old clothes he was wearing and the string tied around his trouser legs.

“Can someone help us in with the cases?”

“New Girl? Pleasure, Love! Let the young lady go to the Head Teacher’s office over there, and I’ll give you a hand.”

He showed Lee to the office door, knocked, and went off with her mother to get the trunk and overnight bag out of the car.

The head mistress sounded quite young. Lee liked her from the very first moment that she heard her voice and liked her firm handshake.

“You’ll like the girls, I’ve put you in with May and Amy in one of the bigger rooms. You can come and see me if you have any problems, but I don’t think you’ll have many. We’re pretty easy going!”

May was about twelve and Amy was much older, maybe fourteen or fifteen and had a faint Scottish accent when she greeted the new girl. The head sent her off with them to look around the classrooms, but they managed to be at the bottom of the stairs as her mother came out of the Head’s room. They took Lee out through the big front door to see her mother off.

“Promise me you’ll look after her?” asked Veronique.

“Of course! Everyone will!”

After the car had driven off, Lee put home out of her mind.

“Will you take me round, to see everything?”

“Come on then! What hobbies do you have? What sweets have you brought with you for the night?”

The three girls went back into the warm front hall and off, up the stairs in the house, to look at the room where Lee was going to sleep.

Chapter 4

THE PROJECT WEEK

The boy's school had a project week every second year, and this year was to take place just a fortnight after the spring half term.

David and Jacky came back from the holiday weekend, they'd been in France for four days where their parents were doing a full month's theatre work, they found everyone talking about the week's activities. It was to start on the Monday and to end on Friday with an all day exhibition of the hobby projects. The entertainment by the performing projects would be shown in the late afternoon.

Everyone in the school, even the very youngest in the prep-school, had the chance of taking part in one or other of about a dozen separate projects ranging from sport and art to crafts and hobbies. All the boys were discussing the possibilities and made their choices, long before the lists were closed.

To the obvious dismay of the Gym Instructor, neither David nor Jacky had chosen to put their names down to be in the circus project that he wanted to run.

David was sure he didn't want to do it. He had been going out with Jacky every Tuesday afternoon instead of joining the army cadets or the scouts, or even doing normal sports. This term they would have played hockey and it was quite a relief to walk to the nearby housing estate to practise gymnastics in the warm living room at the house of a retired friend of Alli's. He was an Arab, short and brown skinned and losing his white hair. David thought he was the oldest man he'd ever seen! The old man made them do all the exercises they had learnt and a few more acrobatics tricks that they'd never seen before.

David thought he'd had enough of circus that wasn't circus and, anyway, he was sure that something arranged by a teacher would be a let down! Besides that, he was finding other things he liked doing too and wasn't missing his home quite as much as his brother did.

Jacky, on the other hand, was still rather homesick, especially as they had just been home, and he was quite enthusiastic at first. He thought he would have liked to do the project, but David kept showing him the other interesting things he could do. So he decided not to put his name down after all, and decided to do radio and electrics instead, but only at the last minute.

Luckily for the gym teacher, though, the circus project turned out to be very popular. The list was so long that he had to draw names from a hat to see who would do it! Although the circus boys suspected that it might have been thought up because of them, they didn't think they'd be missed after all!

When the project week was about to start, it turned out that the other hobby project groups were going to help the theatre and the circus projects too. David was in the photography team and was very proud of the pictures he'd taken at the rehearsals and which he had developed and enlarged himself to put on home made posters to advertise the two shows. Jacky worked hard in the radio and electric's group, but had ended up in charge of fitting up the lights and amplifier for the circus performance in the gym.

Then, as it had turned out, Jacky and David couldn't escape from it after all. Late on the Monday afternoon, the day of the start, Dr Elliam had called them both into his study. "I'm going to ask you to do a bit more work this week. If I have judged you right you'll be able to do it without much effort and without missing your own projects!" He had asked them to help the circus group to plan their acts, and to do one of their own for it as well.

"Mr Smith came to see me just now. He's found several good performers, but he's not sure about making them into a proper show. It would help him a lot if you would give him some help! We've got acts, yes, and lots of enthusiasm, but you two can help make it into a show."

They had agreed. Dr Elliam was quite convincing when he wanted to be. They went back to the common room afterwards and had a lot of fun thinking up a western act for themselves. They remembered Paul Williams' act from last summer and tried to think of some way to get the props they would need.

Because there was no homework this week, they'd been teaching tricks to two volunteer clowns in the evenings. It was strange telling a teacher what to do, but he was their favourite anyway. He was very keen and they had several long sessions with him and the staff room blackboard before he was satisfied with the planning.

The forty minute show was timed to be in the gymnasium at half past three on Friday and at a quarter past the room was suddenly crowded with parents and children, who arrived in a big rush from the performance of the one act play in the big schoolroom and took their place in the seats around the ring. It was so crowded that the ushers had to run out and fetch the high stools from the science labs next door for the overflow.

The woodworking group had fashioned a low narrow ring fence out of hardboard and had hung the white walling from the cadet corps tents around the back walls. With a big blue curtain rigged over the changing room door, they had made it as much like a real circus as they could. Jacky said it was quite good enough to make him feel homesick again!

David had phoned his great aunt from the headmasters study on Tuesday morning and she had managed to get Frank the tentman to pack his Ringmaster's jacket and top hat and bring them to the post office. After school on Wednesday they took special² *exeats* to go down town to get all the props they needed for their own act. They had practised all Thursday afternoon and evening and hoped they were ready for Friday. Everything was as ready for them as it would ever be.

+ + +

Jacky was in charge of the music and started the record of the fanfare at exactly half past three as David stepped through the curtains to announce the trampoline. Their show was on!

After the first act, as David and Jacky turned into ring grooms and rolled the big trampoline from the ring, their clowns came in. They were brothers, too. One was their dormitory prefect from the sixth form and had a big mouth organ; the younger one from the third form carried a tin drum. They stood side by side on one side of the ring,

² *Exeat* - from the Latin - "to go out." Written permission to leave the school area.

playing *the saints come marching in*.

David came through the curtains and they stopped playing as he tapped the nearest one on the shoulder, the bigger of the two. They both stood grinning at their friends in the audience.

“You can't do that here!” He told the clowns.

“Are you sure we can't? I just heard us,” answered the taller one.

“I mean you can't *play music* here. It's not allowed.” David was polite and patient.

“Sorry, Mr Sinclair!” said the clown. “We won't play music *here*.”

David went out between the curtains.

“We'll play it *there!*” the clown told his partner, and they just walked over to the opposite side of the ring and started to play their tune again.

David came back.

“I thought I told you that you couldn't play music here?” he asked.

“No!” replied the clown pointing across the ring. “You said we couldn't play *there* and we aren't. We're playing *here!*”

He made pointing motions towards his own feet.

David was still polite.

“Not here *or* there. Neither one *nor* the other.”

“Sorry!” said the clown, and David left again.

“Wait there!” Said the clown to his brother and walked across to the other side of the ring. He turned round to find that he had been followed and, taking his brother's ear between his fingers, led him back to his starting point.

“Wait,” he repeated. “There!”

Unfortunately for his younger brother, who again followed him, he stopped after a few paces and turned to give him a withering glance.

The younger clown took hold of his own ear with the fingers of his hand, the arm stretched over his head, and led himself back.

They now started to play again, one on each side of the ring.

David came back and walked over to the drummer, who stopped and pointed at his brother.

David walked across the ring and stood in front of the mouth organ player. He had stopped and the drummer was playing again.

He walked to the drummer, stretched out his hand, and took the instrument away. Then he walked back to the bigger clown and snatched the mouth organ as he was in full blast. The clowns continued to play silently with empty hands as David held the instruments at arms length as if they were dirty and carried them outside behind the curtains.

The bigger clown reached inside his coat and brought out a new musical instrument, a triangle and its little brass hammer, which he gave to his partner with a gigantic flourish. He turned his trouser pockets inside out, and back again, turned his breast pocket inside out and found a miniature eight note mouth organ, which he showed to the audience with a movement like a magician producing a rabbit out of a hat.

They started to play again.

David appeared after the first few notes and walked over to tap them on their shoulders.

“Really!” he said. “It's not that I don't like your music. It's just not allowed. They have some very funny rules round here!”

The boys from the school roared with laughter, and David looked at the audience in faked surprise which turned real when he saw that the masters were laughing too.

He took the new instruments away as he had before and laid them with the others on the table outside and stood behind the curtains, looking out at his clowns.

The bigger boy stood facing the curtains, blowing a referees whistle and making silly faces. David came back. The clown stood still whilst David came as if to fetch it, but at the last moment he turned and pretended to hide it behind the ring fence.

Whilst David looked for it at the feet of the front row of the audience, the clown showed it to everyone before throwing it to his partner, who blew it and pretended to hide it at the other side of the ring.

David turned round sharply, seeming not to notice that the whistle was passed back again, and ran across and looked for it there.

The bigger clown blew the whistle again whilst David was looking by the feet of the head master who was sitting in the front row of the audience.

“Where is it?” asked David, going across to where the smaller clown was pulling his pockets inside out.

But the whistle was on a cord, and the cord had a spring clothes peg tied to the end. The big clown crept up and hooked the whistle to the cloth at the back of David's jacket, and blew a long loud blast.

As David turned round, the whistle went round too, and the other clown could blow it. They turned faster and faster, with David appearing not to see the whistle, until he suddenly turned half round and then back to catch the smaller clown with the whistle in his hand. The clowns ran, David chased them, and in front of the curtain they all turned and bowed.

The clowns went out, and David waited for the clapping to stop.

Jacky lowered the rings on their ropes, David announced the next act, and the boy who was doing the act ran in.

Outside the gym in the changing rooms the two clowns were sweating.

“It's hard work!” exclaimed the prefect. “I'll have a bit more understanding when I watch a circus in future. How did we do?”

“Not bad,” said David. “You can try it with us in the holidays and see if you'd like to do it for a living!”

“I think I'll give it a miss, all the same.” He grinned back.

Chapter 5

A THOUGHTLESS SCHOOLGIRL

“Does anyone know where Lee has gone?”

The heads of fourteen girls turned toward the sound of their class teacher’s voice as she continued to speak.

“That child is a menace!” she complained, quite loudly so that everyone heard.

Miss Morris pressed her right hand into the palm of her left and twisted it nervously. She looked out of the schoolroom window with an extremely worried expression on her face. The teacher continued to mutter to herself as she looked outside for any sign of movement in the school grounds. There was nothing. Everything was quiet and still and she had no idea where the missing girl might be.

Today was a warm spring Sunday, two hours or so after lunch. The boarding girls in the blind school were supposed to be taking turns at the two old fashioned typewriters in the common room to write their letters home, but most of them were sitting around in small groups discussing what they should say or what they had said.

That is, all except for Lee. As usual, she had managed to be first in the room and had succeeded in getting to the better of the two machines before anyone else, so she could dash off her two pages in double quick time. She never had much to tell her mother these days, anyway, and she wasn't even sure that her letters would reach her on tour to be read, so she didn't put much thought into the task.

As soon as she had finished typing a few words on her second side, and had addressed an envelope, she had folded the paper inside and sealed it. Then she had put it on the teacher’s desk and let herself quietly out of the schoolroom.

She had gone outside, somewhere.

It wasn't the first time Lee had crept out of school and, just as had happened before, the teacher hadn't missed her for quite some while. Today, Lee wasn't missed until Miss Morris came to collect the letters. By then, Lee had been gone for a very long while and was nowhere to be found.

“Amy! You are in charge. Nobody goes out until I get back.”

“Yes, Miss!” answered the tall fifteen year old who was sitting at the oldest machine and struggling with her letter.

The teacher walked down the passage way, wishing that her partner the head teacher wasn't away for the day, wondering if any of the kitchen staff were around to help her search and knowing that they would all be out making the best of the sunny day.

“Drat that girl!” she said aloud as she went out into the warm bright afternoon. “Where can she be!”

Where do you look for a blind girl on a warm spring afternoon? Lee had been gone for nearly an hour and it wasn't the first time. In the three months since she'd started there, the staff had needed to search for her so often that Miss Morris and her partner were starting to lose count.

The teacher tried to remember. Where had the head teacher said that the girl was found the last time that she went missing, just two weeks ago? She had an idea it wouldn't be the same place again and in her mind she ticked off the places where she did know that Lee had been found before.

One time it was the village post office, but today is a Sunday and it's closed.
The children's playground by the village primary school, maybe.
The riverside walk?
She shuddered at that last thought as she reached the front gate, and extended her search outside of the school.

The teacher had checked everywhere in the school gardens. She had walked a little way down the footpath that led toward the village church, and come back across the field that led to the river. It had all seemed very quiet. Too quiet. There were no children there.

At last, something made her walk up the long straight gravel driveway that led toward the main road. It was a good choice too because she saw some figures by the last of the tall trees, opposite the disused porters lodge. Two small boys called to someone in the branches and ran away into the lodge garden as the teacher came closer, and she broke into a run as she caught a glance of something blue in the tallest oak.

"Lee!" she called, and then stopped, looking up in horror at the small girl perched on a branch high above her.

"It's all right Miss Morris. I changed out of my Sunday dress before I came out." Lee's a happy voice sounded strangely far away.

The teacher choked back a sob of fear, and tried to think what she had learnt. After all, her partner in the school was the trained blind therapist and she was just an ordinary school teacher. Nothing she had ever learnt, not even her several months of experience in their school, seemed to answer the problem in front of her.

"Don't move," she commanded, hoping to get some time to put her thoughts in order.

"I'm just coming down," came an answer from above her.

"No!" She almost screamed. "I'll send for the fire brigade. They'll get you down."

Somebody behind her giggled, and she spun round to see that one of the village boys had come back. A child of about eight. He was looking at her with a very amused face.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You," said the boy. "She climbs better than any of us, even better than my big brother Joe. He's never been up the Royal Oak in the village square. She has!"

He pointed upwards.

"Did you know she's blind?" he confided.

Miss Morris snorted and looked back up, because there was a rustling noise above her, and she was in time to see white plimsolls and bare legs coming down the thick trunk. She watched with her heart in her mouth as the slim figure reached the last branch and the girl let herself drop to arm's length before releasing her grip and landing upright by the trunk of the tree.

"Where are you?" asked Lee, shaking her waist length brown hair back over her shoulders, and waiting patiently.

"You bad girl!" scolded the teacher. "You could have been killed!"

"It's quite easy, Miss Morris, really."

Now she could hear a voice, Lee could turn to face her.

"An oak tree is as safe as houses. You just have to feel for the hand and foot holds going up, and remember where they are on the way down. I've been up this one before."

Miss Morris shuddered.

“Then it's the last time you go up it. If you want to climb, do it on the ropes with us in the gym.”

She wanted to add, “You're blind you know,” but something told her that it wouldn't matter to Lee.

She led the girl back to the big house, Lee's hand on her bent arm like any other well behaved student.

“Go up and change,” she ordered as they entered the cool hall, and she watched the figure in neat blue gym shorts and chunky white sweater running up the stairs, almost like a sighted child. She shook her head.

“That's one girl I'll never understand.”

+ + +

Later that evening the two partners were discussing the latest escapade of their problem child.

It was the quiet half hour when the girls had gone up to get ready for bed, but the teachers' night lights were still on in the dormitories. Miss Morris was still upset by her experience this afternoon and her partner was trying to settle her mind.

“You know, yourself, that there are always some children who keep getting into scrapes. Especially when they are very active or very intelligent children. They just can't help it. It just happens that this child is both active and intelligent, and blind as well.”

“But she takes awful risks.” Miss Morris complained.

The head teacher shook her head.

“I'm not so sure that's true. When you think about it, she doesn't take all that many risks at all. She knows every inch of the school. Better than you or I do. That gift of hers is our cross to bear, but we shouldn't deny it to her.”

They were both thinking of Lee's gift, as they called it, the ability to remember anything after hearing it or feeling it once. The gift of total recall, which put her marks level with most of the older children in all her school work and made her so quick to learn so many other things.

The head teacher changed the subject.

“Have you thought any more about the *Beauty in Movement* contest?” She asked.

Miss Morris had been thinking about the competition in almost every spare moment, since the evening when her partner had come back from the inter school sports committee meeting in the county town and told her that she'd entered their girls in the junior age group.

She had been trying to train a group of girls for a month now and last week she'd chosen the best possible ten of them. These were the ones from which they would have to select the team of six girls, to take part in the contest on the day.

“You haven't seen them in the gym, have you?”

Her partner hadn't.

“The team's coming on nicely, at last, but I'm still nowhere in looking for a solo performer. It's just beyond most of them. I've tried to describe what I want, but maybe if you could try? Otherwise I'm just going to have to take the best two or three, and try to get one good enough.”

She gathered her books together.

“You come and see the group tomorrow. The ‘C’ class have gym the last two periods before lunch.”

The clock chimed the hour and the two partners went up to see the girls settled down in the three big bedrooms.

Chapter 6

ONE LAST TRICK

David looked at Jacky's watch as the last act but one went into the ring in the gymnasium. The project week circus was running well, but it was running a little too fast. One boy, out of the group of four who were to do the last act, was nowhere near ready. Their trainee clowns had run out of rehearsed tricks, too. The teacher looked at his experts for guidance.

Jacky was still wearing his jeans and western shirt, and David was dressed as Ringmaster again. They were all waiting outside behind the curtains and up to now the teacher had simply stood back and let David run the whole show, almost as if the boys were at home.

Now he looked from one to the other.

“What can we do?”

The boys stared at each other for a few moments.

“Dad's shirt trick!” exclaimed David, unclipping his bow tie, stripping off his jacket and starting to unbutton his shirt.

It was work of a few moments to hang the shirt over his back, do up the top button round his neck and secure the sleeves at the wrists. Jacky helped him put his jacket on top and pull the shirt up a bit more to get another few buttons done up.

“How does it look?” asked David, clipping on his bow tie, putting on his top hat again and adjusting the shirt cuffs.

“You'll do!”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls,” said David, coming into the ring and flourishing his hat. “There will have to be a short pause....”

“Oy!” interrupted Jacky, following him through the curtains. He had snatched the rainbow coloured jacket from the smaller clown and put on the boys red Ping-Pong ball nose.

“Oy!” he repeated. “I can take your shirt off for you.”

“I can take my own shirt off myself, thank you Jacko. I do every night before I go to bed.”

Jacky made faces at two very small children who were sitting with their parents in the front row of the audience and got grins from both of them.

“I can take it off without you having to take off your jacket. You can't do that, can you?” he said.

“I'll bet you can't do it either!” said David.

As the two circus boys pretended to argue, Jacky saw the leader of the last act wave to them from the curtains and give him a thumbs up sign.

“Then I'll prove it!” said Jacky.

He held up each of David's arms in turn, making a show of unbuttoning the cuffs. He pulled off his brother's bow tie and undid the front top button, counting “two, three, five,” as he stood between him and the audience. He stood back.

David stood up straight and swept off his hat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls. The great shirt trick! Clown Jacko will *attempt* to remove your ringmasters shirt, through that persons body.”
He didn't sound all that convinced as he pointed to his brother.

“Clown Jacko!”

As David bowed forward, Jacky grabbed his brother's shirt collar at the back of the neck and in a single sweep pulled the whole shirt clear. He waved it happily, and held his hand towards his brother.

They took their bow, and a shirtless David announced the final performers and went out to dress again. The master in charge of the group was waiting for them behind the curtains and was bubbling with enthusiasm.

“I know you didn't want to do this project, but that last thing made up my mind. The headmaster wants us to repeat the show at both the local hospitals. Will you do it for us?”

The boys looked at each other and Jacky gave a stifled giggle.

“Of course we will,” said David. “We'd love to.”

He didn't add that they'd had fun doing the projects that they'd chosen, as well as enjoying this one, and more shows would be more time off school!

Chapter 7

A DISCOVERY

Lee knew that someone was looking at her in class this afternoon, because she had that funny *being watched* feeling that everyone gets from time to time. She guessed it must be the head teacher, who was supposed to be teaching them mathematics, but she didn't know why.

She'd had a long talk in the heads study this morning, right after breakfast, and it had left Lee very confused. She had been expecting to be punished for leaving the school buildings yesterday, as she had been all the other times. But today the head had only talked about her school work and her friends and, in the end, she had only asked her not to frighten Miss Morris again.

It wasn't at all *proper*, to Lee's way of thinking. She should have been punished, at least a little bit, she thought. She tried to concentrate on what the teacher was saying.

As the bell rang, and the 'C' class of ten and eleven year olds started off for the changing rooms to get ready for the practice, the head teacher left them and went into the 'A' classroom next door where the fourteen and fifteen year olds were waiting for her.

At the end of the period, as the older girls were supposed to change from maths to literature, the head teacher stood up and went to the classroom door.

"Amy! You are in charge," she said to the senior girl by the door. "You are all to study your reading books until I come back in twenty minutes or so. Then I'll give you a test." The girls lifted their heavy books onto the tables in front of them and searched for the correct page. The teacher waited to see if they had any problems and walked to the still open door. She closed it quietly behind her and went down the corridor to where she could hear faint music.

"Take your starting positions," ordered Miss Morris, and the class of fifteen younger girls lined up across the gym as she started the gramophone.

Of course you've all seen the music and movement exercises that they teach in schools. Simple basic bending and stretching in time with the beat and perhaps a cartwheel and a supported handstand or two.

These girls started with more enthusiasm than real expertise, and Miss Morris dashed about correcting them. Some of the girls seemed to be better than the others and the head teacher thought she could see which girls were going to be the team.

The teachers had entered the junior class in the inter-school competition this year, but with the idea of giving them experience rather than in any hope of winning. Yet Miss Morris' team was going to give the other schools a close run, they both knew that. The best six girls had certainly got the idea and they looked very good, already. The trouble was that without a solo performer there was no real chance of success. Solo and group were going to be equally marked to make the total score.

So the head teacher watched the group, at least the nucleus that was up to the standard they'd need, and applauded as they took their bows.

"What do you think?" asked Miss Morris as all the girls went back to sit on the wooden

forms at the sides of the room.

“Very good,” called the head teacher, loudly so the children could hear her. “With a bit more work you'll give the other schools a good run.”

“But what are you going to do for the solo?” she continued, much more quietly so that only Miss Morris would hear.

The teacher smiled.

“It's solved! I'm going to surprise you with something that I hadn't expected to see,” she explained, very quietly. “I had tried all but the last few girls this morning. I was sure there wasn't anyone with a spark of individuality.”

The head teacher looked at the group. She knew her pupils and agreed with her partner.

“There were three girls left. The ones who I hadn't bothered to try, because I thought they didn't have any interest.”

The head teacher looked at the girls, who were talking quietly in twos and threes, and thought she knew who it was that Miss Morris had meant.

She guessed wrong!

“I found our solo performer ten minutes ago. The one girl in the class who can do all the tricks in the programme, but wasn't really keen enough to try for the team.” She whispered. “I asked her to try, and she took me by surprise. Watch!”

“Lee!” she called. Another time please, for the Head?”

Lee came forward to the padded mat and located the corner with her bare foot before stepping into its centre and standing to attention. She turned her head toward the teachers at the gramophone and waited.

Miss Morris started the record and Lee started her solo routine again.

The head teacher could not conceal her surprise as Lee improvised her way through two minutes of music. It wasn't expert, not even particularly good, but Lee's mother had started her daughter on the right road before she started school at five years old and it was quite easy to see that Lee could be good. Not just good, but with some training, very good.

Once, a long time ago, Lee's mother hadn't had so much work and had often been home, so she had plenty of time to teach Lee the simplest acrobatics. Then later, at a time when they had travelled together from town to town and theatre to theatre, she had thought of having Lee in an act with her. They had worked out a short routine of simple acrobatics and practised together.

But Veronique had started to get more work and Lee had started to do well at school, and they had never put it in a show. Although it was nearly two years since Lee had practised seriously, her mother often got her to do the small acrobatics tricks when they were together.

The routine wasn't anything out of the ordinary, just the most basic of tricks, and it was easy enough for Lee to do. Not unnaturally, the other schools she had been to had not done much in the gym at all and she wasn't all that interested in games anyway. But then, she and her body hadn't forgotten her early training, either.

As she had found out that morning on the mat, she could still bend backwards or forwards to put her hands on the ground, and she could push herself up into a handstand. Just as she had been taught, almost without thinking, she dropped into the splits. Then this time, as she improvised for the head teacher, she found that she could still bend her legs over her back to touch her head as her mother had taught her.

Lee had never seen a solo, of course, but Miss Morris had described it to the class when she'd started to try them all and Lee had done her best to do what her teacher had described.

She succeeded.

The head teacher applauded as the record finished, and ran over to hug her partner's discovery.

"Well done Lee!" She said, enthusiastically.

"Well, Margaret, I think we're going to have a chance in the contest, after all."

Lee stood on the mat as the head teacher hugged her. She hadn't been interested at first, but being in the group wasn't like doing a solo. That was between her and the music. Perhaps it would be fun to take part in the competition and maybe even win it!

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The head teacher knew someone who knew someone with a dancing school, and that dancing teacher was the daughter of a retired circus acrobat so she had a good idea what was needed. Lee volunteered to have extra lessons with her every Wednesday for the next few weeks.

She turned out to be a friendly middle aged woman with a happy laugh. After school she came to the gym and they worked an hour together to build on the routine, until Lee really knew every tiny part.

"It's marvellous what she can do," the instructor told the teachers every time she saw them.

She wasn't quite as glowing to Lee, but then Lee had discovered that she really did like doing it after all. She was performing it for herself now, so she didn't need more than an occasional "well done". Even in the dormitory at night she was practising, and getting more and more satisfaction.

Preparing for the great day!

Chapter 8

BACK TO WORK

It was the summer half term at last! Jacky and David had been in the house sports and each had done well in their events. Jacky had almost won the junior cross country last term and did well over the longer distances today with a second and a third in the half mile and the mile. David, who was a little older and rather taller than the other first formers, found that he was good at high jump and actually managed to finish in first place for his age.

Commander Sinclair had missed seeing all that and had turned up at a quarter past five, just in time to watch his boys come to the finishing line of the half mile handicap which finished the sports. Every boy in the school took part, running a longer or shorter distance according to their age and size.

The handicapping wasn't very fair because David overtook Jacky near the finish line and they still finished thirtieth and thirty first!

"No prizes to collect today?" Commander Sinclair asked as he met them at the finish line.

He had waited and talked with some other parents whilst their boys had changed and fetched their overnight cases. Instead of going in to the school Dining Room for free refreshments with some of the others, he been in quite a hurry to get David and Jacky out to the car park in the lane.

They piled into the old blue and yellow van with its circus signwriting. Father drove them out of the school yard, past the expensive limousines waiting for the other children, and rushed them off to a small village only ten miles away.

"We've got a surprise for you two," said Commander Sinclair as they drove out of the town. "Mother told me you wanted a bit more room!"

David knew what that meant.

"You got us a new trailer to live in? Just for us? What is it like?"

"Really? Asked Jacky. "Is it big?"

Commander Sinclair looked across at David beside him and glanced in the mirror at Jacky's excited face.

"Well, it's not new, and it's not all that big. One of the big shows had a family living in it last year, and I got it for next to nothing. But it's sound enough. As for size, your mother has packed all your clothes and costumes in it and there's a little bit of room left for both of you."

When they arrived on the village green, where their family show was built up, everything looked just as it always did. Not quite, but the boys didn't have time to look closely as their father drove all the way round the outside of the old one pole tent to where their new trailer was parked by the big brown living wagon. It was newly painted in the same two blues and yellow as the rest of the circus vehicles, and signwritten with the circus name.

David and Jacky were pleased to see that, from the outside at least, it was quite big after all.

But their trailer wasn't what the boys were looking at. They could see that something else was different with their show. Very different.

"Where's Alli's wagon?" asked David, looking around as he got out of the van by their parents big living wagon.

"It's not there. Why isn't Mr Paddy's trailer there, either," asked Jacky, who had got out and closed the gate in the circus fences and had looked down the other side of the tent toward the long horse tent as he ran behind the car.

"Where's everyone gone?"

Their mother came out at that moment, and heard the questions. She looked at her husband.

"Didn't you tell them?" she asked.

When he shook his head, she nodded.

"I guessed you wouldn't. Come on boys, we've got to get ready for the show. He'll tell you about it whilst we eat some sandwiches and get changed."

Between ham sandwiches and tea in the big wagon and sorting out their costumes from the wardrobe in their own trailer, the boys learnt that business had been unbelievably bad so far this year. So bad that they often took less money than they had to pay for the ground.

"Your Dad even had to draw his naval pension when we first went out," Jan' told them, and the boys knew that things couldn't be worse than that.

"Luckily for us there had been an agent calling the show all spring, looking for good acts, and one day he turned up and offered Alli and Mary a contract abroad." She explained.

"You know what your Dad is like! He heard about it and insisted that they at least must go and earn themselves some money. So the two of them are working in Germany for this year and the whole of next summer."

"What about Michael and Patrick?" David wanted to know, wondering if his friends were in Germany as well.

They weren't.

"Do you remember Mac? The old man with the little zoo park in Scotland?" Asked their father. "He drove past on his way home last weekend and dropped in to see us. He just mentioned that he had been let down by the stablemaster and horse acts for their resident show."

"So Dad convinced Mac that Mr Paddy and his family would be ideal and they went off on Monday!" added Jan'.

Commander Sinclair saw the boy's faces.

"They only took the half trained new liberty ponies and the old High School Horse," he said hurriedly, "and of course the geese are Michael's own property anyway."

"They didn't take my ring horse?" asked David who was looking at the ponies tied to stakes in the field and not seeing old Red, who he had claimed as his own.

"No. You two will be working your Madam Spangaletti act today. I hope you didn't forget how to ride while you were away?" asked his father.

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The seven o'clock show started, just as it had at last year and at Christmas, with David and his father on the high stilts introducing the show to around forty customers. David was slightly out of breath as he came back into the ring doors, just remembering to jump

aside as the ponies ran in.

“One of them will catch you, one day,” laughed Jacky, helping him down. “Good job mother knows where you stand!”

It was hard work with only the two families, Paul Williams and his parents and their own four with one tent man to help. To the boys’ surprise, Frank the tentman was doing some clowning and wasn't making a bad job of it either!

“He learnt it from you!” Said Paul.

The people in the audience, mainly children, really seemed to be enjoying themselves. “Better show than last years,” said the ³*tober omey*, the ground owner, as he collected the rent during the interval. “But where are the young ladies?”

David explained that Mary was abroad and that there were just the three boys now.

“You should have a couple of young girls in the show,” criticised the man as he folded the banknotes into his wallet. “Audiences like to see it. My daughter always wants to be like them after seeing a show!”

“We'll work on it!” Agreed Jan', shaking his hand before he went back to his seat.

As the show ended and Paul started to sell pony rides, the boys started to organise their new trailer. It was divided into three, with single bunks one above the other in the first end room by the door. It was a little like their old room in the big wagon and had wardrobes for costumes in both sides of the partition just as the old one had, but this one had one difference. It had a little washbasin in the corner of the bedroom, complete with electric tap.

Jacky was looking at the other bedroom at the towbar end. This one had a narrow double bed and another folded up bunk in the wall above it.

“It's a bit narrow, the top bunk. Perhaps it's for a small child?” David suggested, looking in the door. “Do you want this room or the other one?”

Jacky investigated the other room with David and decided that he would make do with the sink in the main room and David could have the two bunk room with the washbasin if he wanted it. They unpacked and made up their beds as they waited for their new kettle to boil on the little gas stove opposite the door.

“Are we invited to a housewarming?” asked Commander Sinclair, opening the door and passing in a bottle of milk and a packet of biscuits. “You've got everything you need in the cupboards and the 'frig.”

“Refrigerator?” asked Jacky, coming out of his new room looking more at home in his favourite leather shorts and a tee shirt.

David found the little gas refrigerator, under the cooker instead of an oven. He put the milk inside and went to put the biscuits in the cupboard over the top of the window. His father pointed to the end of the shelf.

“That should be the tin your mother got for them!”

“It is! Come across in a quarter of an hour? Cocoa and biscuits to celebrate?” David invited.

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It was fun, being back on the show for a few days.

David took charge of their horses and spent hours getting their ring harnesses back the

³ *Tober Omey* - Parlari, circus language, The owner or agent for the circus ground.

way he liked them, clean and shining. He even managed to sort out a problem with the liberty ponies, which had been causing problems for his mother for weeks. He saw why they were going wrong and put it right for her, simply by reversing the second and third pony! His mother was full of pride.

Jacky was happy to be wearing his 'proper' clothes again, and to be with Tessa the elephant, but he enjoyed the move on the Sunday and the build up a lot more than he had ever done before. His father had let him do the marking out for the tent and, with Paul's help, to put up the king pole.

"Not bad for a beginner!" his mother had said as the tent was ready. "When are you expecting us to retire?"

"Not for ages and ages. I want it to go on like this for ever and ever." he answered.

"Preferably with a bit more money, though," David added.

At last the half term holiday was over and, although they had special permission to stay for the evening show, it was soon time to go back to school.

Jacky very nearly refused to leave Tessa after the show.

"Come on Son. I know how you feel, but it's only a few weeks before the summer. She'll be waiting for you."

Commander Sinclair led him back to the trailer where David was waiting, ready dressed in his grey flannel trousers and a white shirt and black tie.

"Come on Jacky! I'm ready to go. You'd better get changed," said David, picking up his blazer as Jacky came in. He carried his case outside and waited for his brother.

The circus tent with its bright lamps hung along the guyropes looked cheerful and prosperous as the van drove off the field.

"Don't worry. It'll soon be back to normal!" said David, looking out of the back windows.

Chapter 9

THE COMPETITION

At last, it was the day of the girls *Beauty in Movement* competition, and the school team and the other boarders travelled by bus to the big gymnasium of the school where they were to meet the other competitors.

The blind school, or rather Lee's hand as solo performer, had drawn the lowest number from the hat so their team was to be the last to perform. During the long wait as the others went through their routines, the six girls of the team sat close to Miss Morris on a long wooden form on the gym floor and she tried to describe what the others were doing. They wanted to know how they were dressed, what they did, and how good they were. "Were they better than us?" the girls kept on asking as each team finished, and Miss Morris kept trying to reassure them.

She tried hard to believe that her team would be as good as the others, but it was getting difficult as she saw the standard of their performances.

Several girls were sitting with their parents, but the rest of the boarders sat together with the very few day girls, high on the tiers of seating, where the head teacher was in the middle of the group and faced the same questions and the same problem.

The standard was certainly good this year. The head mistress had already walked down to comment that she thought the teams were far better than they had been last time. Miss Morris was beginning to doubt their chances of being anything but last, but she had to pretend for her team's sake.

The two teachers became less and less confident of getting a place, any place at all other than last, as each set of points went up on the big blackboard. They already faced scores of 63 for team and a 71 for solo, and the favourites hadn't been on yet.

"We'll do it!" Lee whispered in her teacher's ear as last years winners from the county school were announced as the last but one contestants. But this was a very good team, too, and their six girl team earned the highest score yet, 69. It looked very bleak for the newcomers.

Until the solo.

The county school's solo girl was quite clever and had several unusual tricks in her routine, including springing repeatedly between standing upright and a handstand and back. She was doing well until she lost her balance with a one hand cartwheel and fell heavily on her shoulder. She seemed rather dazed and the music was stopped while she collected herself.

She carried on, but she seemed to have lost heart. You could hear the groans from her school friends as her score went up. Only 55.

The girl ran back to her seat behind Lee and reached out to touch Lee's bare arm.

"Best of Luck," she said.

Lee half turned.

"You're the one who's doing your school's solo, aren't you?" said the girl. "I said, best of luck. I flunked mine."

Lee reached for the girl's hand.

“You should wish people ‘break a leg,’ not good luck. You did try your best, though, didn’t you?”

The girl grinned ruefully.

“Perhaps I didn’t try my best. Break a leg then!”

The blind school was announced, and the girls were pleased to hear that the school was called by name. No mention that they were different in any way.

Miss Morris had worked out how to get her girls into place. She led them out, each holding hands with her neighbour to keep their distance.

As the music started she went off to the record players at the far end of the room. Her job was finished and now it was up to her team.

There was polite applause as the team, five small girls in blue leotards with a yellow stripe and the slightly taller Lee in yellow with blue, took up their positions. The introduction ended and their music changed to the proper dance rhythm. Miss Morris walked a few steps to the side to get a better view.

Their long weeks of practice paid off, even if the head teacher thought that the timing was still a little off at times, and the score of 58 was announced to shrieks of pleasure from the school boarders in their corner above.

The team sat where they finished, in a row across the room and waved their arms in pleasure at the news.

Now it was time for the solo.

Miss Morris had previously asked permission to go out and lead Lee from her place in the middle of the row to take her to the mat for the solo event and the judges had grudgingly agreed.

The record player was at the far end of the hall and Miss Morris had been standing next to it and talking to the gym teacher from the county school after the team routine. She looked up in horror as Lee’s name was called. She had completely forgotten about leading her out. But Lee was already standing and had taken the two paces forward toward the mat before her teacher could move.

Lee turned half left and took several short paces until she met the edge. Miss Morris could see the enormous happy smile on the girl’s face and stayed where she was. It was too late now, to run out to help her on. She was there on her own!

Lee stepped on to the mat and felt around with her left foot to orient herself. She stood upright, hands at her sides and head raised, and waited for her music.

Miss Morris shook her head. There was no way a blind girl was going to get them the 77 points they needed to win.

The new music started, and the talking in the room was almost stilled as Lee started her routine with on the spot cartwheels. By the time she dropped back into a crab and twisted round so as to lower herself to her front the rustling in the audience had stopped completely.

As Lee started the trick where she would balance on her bent arms and bring her feet back to touch her head, someone started to clap. She could hear it above the music and she smiled to herself.

“Someone likes it,” she thought.

She was enjoying herself now and concentrating on the music, humming the tune to herself to keep the time.

At first she had thought she wasn’t quite in time with the music but the humming helped

and she knew it was getting better as it went on.

At the very end, when Miss Morris began to think that they could perhaps make third place or even second, Lee produced the high spot that she'd thought up and practised secretly with the dancing teacher.

Lee jumped round with her back to the judges and look over her shoulder toward them as she produced a large silk handkerchief from somewhere inside her costume. She wound the corners round her fingers and dropped over backwards until her hands reached the ground.

There was a gasp from somewhere as she continued to bend until she could feel the material with her nose, and then could pick it up in her mouth.

She grabbed it between her lips.

As the tempo of the music changed for its final burst, Lee returned smoothly to her standing position, took the handkerchief in her hand again and turned forward to drop into the splits, exactly as the music stopped.

The first person to reach Lee's side was the solo girl from the county school, who grabbed her hand and jerked the arm in the air like a boxing referee does to show the winner.

"Well done! You've done it, you know, don't you? Your school *must* have got first place."

Soon others were crowding round Lee and wanting to shake her hand or pat her on the back. The judges had to have a whistle blown to get attention as they wrote up the score. There was a colossal cheer, and she was carried back to her place by two of their rivals. She sat down as the others were helped back too. "But how many marks did I get?" she asked.

She didn't get an answer, though, because the Judges were calling for the winners and Miss Morris had to take her to collect the cup from the judge's table.

"Well done," said the Chief Judge, "You've earned your trophy. Your school must be proud of you."

They finally told Lee here score as she dressed after the show.

Eighty five! The highest solo marks in the five years the competition had been running. "I'll do better still next year!" she said, as she pulled on her shoes. "We'll all do better."

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The children were getting ready for bed after the excitement and the two resident teachers were having a celebration in the head mistresses study. Nobody was bothering too much about the time.

"Well. At last we found something to burn up some of young Lee's energy!" Commented the head teacher. "She hasn't been in trouble once since the day she went tree climbing last term. But I wonder if there's anything we can do to keep it that way?" Someone knocked on the study door and Miss Morris opened it to see the subject of their discussion.

"Amy said to run down and tell you. Our Mary feels very hot to touch and her skin feels all wrong, sort of dry and rough."

The two teachers were soon agreed that Mary had measles, and had her moved into the sickroom next to Miss Morris' flat. The head teacher went back to the room which Mary

and Lee shared with the big girl and switched on the light to see what they were doing. "Amy. You and Lee had better not mix with the other girls until we're certain you haven't got it too. I'll bring your breakfast up to you tomorrow morning."

The big girl nodded.

"Don't go out until the Doctor has been to see you." Miss Morris reminded them. "Good night."

"Good night," echoed the girls. The teachers went out and switched off the light again.

"I hope it doesn't get to everyone," said Amy, snuggling down into her bed. "It happened with mumps the year I started school, when I was quite little. We all went home."

"It would be nice to go home, just once," said Lee, sitting up. "My mother is working in a theatre at the seaside this summer, and I'd like to be there with her for a while."

"I only see my family at Christmas and when they take me on summer holidays with them." Amy told her. "Do you see yours those times?"

Lee laid back down on her pillows.

"Not those times. Not as much as I'd like, neither. There's only my mother any way. She does the trapeze. In theatres, in all sorts of places, and I can only go home when she's not working. She's usually only free in term time."

She remembered the old days, when she had learnt her acrobatics.

"When I was very little I went everywhere with her. It was fun. Then she got more work and tried having people look after me when she went away. Now she works nearly all the time in the holidays. So when she isn't home I'll have to stay here."

Amy made a sympathetic noise.

"She even got married at Easter, but it didn't help." Said Lee as she smiled a private little smile.

"I still didn't get to stay home. He works in the theatre with her, too."

It was measles and, the very next day, Amy went sick with it. Then in the next few days other boarders started to get it too. The doctor was there every day and the two teachers were run off their feet nursing the children.

Finally the head teacher called the last of the girls together after breakfast one morning. "You five girls have had measles before, and you won't get it again. I telephoned your parents and each are coming to pick you up. We will close the school a month early and we'll keep it closed until September."

Lee was surprised that the teacher had called her up to the study with the others. But this time it was true, she wasn't going to have to stay here for the summer. The head told her that they had phoned her mother, too, and she was going to be collected today, just like the others.

Most of the girls parents were to come early this morning, the first pair came almost as soon as the girls cases had been packed and were waiting in the big hallway. To Lee's great surprise, her mother was one of the next to come, and after a hug and a kiss she led Lee out to a hired car in the drive.

She dropped the cases on to the back seat and settled Lee into the passenger seat.

"Ready? Let's go then!" called Mother, starting the engine.

Lee enjoyed the ride. As usual her mother let her sit beside her on car journeys and it had always been one of the few chances they had to talk undisturbed. Today, there was the entire story about the competition and Mother had to keep Lee up to date with sights

and the traffic throughout the journey too.

After Lee had finished her story she had to ask all her questions about mothers new husband and about the summer show. Everything was going well until Lee mentioned that she was looking forward to staying at the seaside too.

“I don't know about that. It depends on what job Freddie can get.”

Freddie was her new husband, Lee's stepfather.

Lee was surprised.

“I thought he was going to work with your theatre?” she asked.

“So did we,” answered mother, “but they gave the job to someone else. They said Freddie wasn't good enough to be promoted from handyman to property master. He's at home in Cambridge looking for another job. I'm sorry, Lee. You'll be staying with him.”

Chapter 10

HOME

Lee was, without doubt, the sort of girl you'd like your children to know. Right from your first impressions. Certainly, she never had lacked friends before. On a warm day like today she would have been outside playing with the ones she knew well, and maybe even leading the group.

That is, she would have been if she was still away at school, but she had come home yesterday and none of her old friends would be home from their schools for weeks. She didn't know anyone here to play with.

Today, since her lunch at midday, she had been alone in the warm sun, dressed in a sun suit and sitting on an old blanket in the middle of the scrubby lawn behind the slightly tired looking terrace house that had once belonged to her grandparents.

An hour or more ago she had propped herself on one elbow with her long brown hair cascading over her bare shoulders. She was so still that you might have thought she was asleep, but, if you looked carefully behind the sunglasses, you would have seen that her wide open green eyes were looking unseeing into space. Far from being asleep, she was concentrating, the fingers of her right hand moving steadily across the big brown book beside her. She turned the page from time to time, that too without moving her head.

There were children playing in the garden next door, a very young child and another boy and girl about Lee's age by the sound of their voices, and when the bigger girl knocked their ball into the high hedge the boy lifted his little sister to fetch it down. As she dropped the ball back into the garden she whispered to her brother and the three of them broke off their game to look across the fence to see what she was doing.

But Lee didn't look up, despite their giggles, so they lost interest and went back to their game.

"Lee! Come in and have your tea and then get changed. I've got to be at the railway station in three quarters of an hour."

Lee stood up, sweeping her book closed with one hand and gripping it under one arm as she jumped to her feet. Facing straight to her front, she felt for the edge of the garden path with her bare foot, took one more cautious step and walked confidently toward the house with her left arm held in front of her.

"French Window's open into the dining room," called her mother. "Don't forget the step!"

"Come on, Mummy! I do live here, sometimes!"

Lee was laughing as she stepped up into the room and slid her heavy book on to the sideboard.

"What's this you're reading?" asked Fred, turning it round and trying to decipher the faded words on the typed label. By the time they had finished the meal, Lee had told them both Enid Blyton's story of Galliano's Circus as far as she had read it. Fred looked in amazement as she told the tale, it was almost as if she had the book in front of her.

That was Lee's gift again. She only had to read a book once, and she had it stored away, a valuable thing when you can't keep looking things up. But the gift was not just a

blessing, it was the start of a long lasting problem for Lee, because she would never be satisfied to be just a housewife or a telephone operator or something simple. She would have to be something different and challenging, but she didn't know what.

It wasn't far to the station and they all rode there in mother's taxi. Fred carried the luggage to the platform and stood while Lee kissed her mother goodbye.

The train came in. He loaded the last of her luggage into the compartment, luckily her props had gone on with the show, and was in time to jump down and kiss his wife as the whistle blew and the train started to move off.

"Come on little girl!" he said, taking Lee's hand in his. "Let's go home and get organised."

They walked the few streets home.

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The morning sun streamed in through the open curtained bedroom window and warmed Lee's cheek. She wriggled in comfort and reached out to feel the hands on the bedside clock.

It was past nine, and she wondered if Fred was up and about. But she was a theatre child and she knew theatre peoples habits, and she very much doubted it. After all, Mother would have still been asleep if she'd been home instead of gone away to work.

Lee didn't really know Fred, although he had known her and her mother for years. He had married Veronique at the end of the Easter holiday and they'd gone straight off on tour after the ceremony, the day that Lee went back to school.

Lee was rarely home now, so how could she know much about Fred? He had worked as handyman in the theatre and looked after her mother's props. They were getting a lot more work abroad since Lee went away so, like her mother, he would have almost no contact with her.

Even on the few days this term when mother had visited the school she had been on her own. Fred was a stranger!

It was just Fred's luck that, after working through with his wife until last month, he hadn't got the summer season job after all and now he was at home with nothing to do. It was good in one way, because he could look after Lee, but he would certainly have to find some work, very soon!

Half an hour after getting up this morning, after Lee had washed in the bathroom and then sat on her bed and brushed her hair, she tried to imagine what the next days might bring. At first, when the head teacher had told them that they would all be going home, she had hoped that mother would take her to the south coast resort where she was working. Then on the journey home, when mother said it wasn't possible, she thought it might be nice to stay here with Fred, to get to know their home again and find some friends in this town.

Now mother had gone back, Fred was probably fast asleep and there were weeks and weeks before school started again.

Lee had heard the neighbour's children yesterday, and had wanted to play, but she had a sensible respect for complete strangers and their habit of treating blind people as somehow disabled. But today, when it was so quiet inside and outside, she wished she

hadn't ignored those children. After living in a room with three other girls, and being in a class with a dozen others, it was getting lonely with no one to talk to. As for Fred, she wasn't going to walk into the big bedroom to see if he was there, just in case he was and didn't like visitors!

But Fred wasn't at home after all. He had got up and gone out before Lee woke up. She was in the kitchen, trying to find something to drink in the refrigerator, when he came in, whistling.

"Had breakfast? Good," he greeted her, moving a chair with a squeak and sitting down. Lee poured milk carefully into a glass and took it to the table. She didn't say that she hadn't found the bread yet, but sat down to listen. "If you put some proper clothes on, you can come with me. I've been on the phone and they've got me an interview for a job. Maybe you'll bring me luck!"

She drained her glass and went upstairs to pull on a summer dress over the woollen trunks she'd been wearing, buckle on some sandals and come down again.

"I'm ready," she said as she opened the kitchen door.

Lee certainly seemed to bring Fred the luck he was looking for, but not until much later that morning. First there was the bus trip from the top of the road into the town, followed by a nightmare walk from the bus station through the narrow streets to the market place. It was all made much worse because Fred had no idea how to guide her. After pushing through the crowds between the market stalls, they dashed across a road into a cool hall and up a winding stairway into a smoky smelling office.

"Oh poor child!" exclaimed a woman's voice as they came in. Lee decided she must be the secretary.

Lee was right. It was the secretary speaking, and she wasn't as bad as Lee had expected from the greeting. At least she didn't come and fuss over her as some people did.

Lee listened to the coming and going and the quiet conversations of the other people. But mostly she listened to the sound of the office's electric typewriter, which was so different to that of the old ones at school.

Fred was the last to be interviewed and the secretary came over to Lee after showing him into the office.

"Don't worry, they don't take long over each interview," the young woman told her, and then whispered into her ear. "I've put a good word in for him!"

Despite that, there was going to be quite a wait, after all, and the secretary finished her work and switched off the typewriter long before he came back.

The secretary offered Lee a soft centred chocolate, and Lee worked up enough courage to ask what the job was. It sounded interesting, especially when the secretary told her that they wanted a caretaker for their seaside caravan site, and that they preferred someone with children.

"The first man had four, but no experience! The other one didn't have any children at all! Keep your fingers crossed for your Dad," she said. "He's got you, and lots of experience, so he has the best chance."

Fred was in the office longer than any of the others had been. It was so long that Lee was on her third chocolate before the secretary fetched her across to the roller chair at the desk.

She let Lee sit at the electric typewriter, and put in a sheet of paper so she could see how fast she could use the keys. Although she had never heard of a full electric machine before, she soon got the idea of using it.

"It's nice," she said. "That you don't have to find the keys again after moving the sheet back across at the end of a line. I wish I had one like this at home. In fact any typewriter."

"Play your cards right. Save your money, and maybe you'll get one." said Fred, coming out of the office. "What would you do with a typewriter?"

Another voice answered for her. A man's voice, a friendly voice.

"He doesn't understand, does he? It's the easiest way to write when you can't see the paper."

The man stroked her long hair.

"Perhaps your father will let you use the one in the office on the camp site."

He turned to Fred and shook hands with him.

"So you'll go down by train as we agreed and they'll be expecting you. I'll see you there at the end of the month."

To Lee's surprise, the man shook hands with her as well.

"Enjoy your holiday!" he said.

Chapter 11

GETTING READY

It was only a few days to wait before Fred and Lee were to travel to the seaside, but it seemed a lot longer because Fred had no idea how to help Lee in the little things that were difficult for her.

It had started on the evening of the interview. As they had a late tea, Lee had asked for the tub of margarine that she had for her bread.

“Best Butter,” Fred had answered, taking his knife to the slab. “We’re celebrating with the real thing.”

Lee had tried her best, but the hard slippery butter slid about on the dish and then when she got some on her knife it was too hard to spread and the bread broke into pieces. She had to give up and ask for help.

“Please?” she asked in frustration.

“I thought they taught you everything at your expensive school” grumbled Fred as he spread her bread for her. “From what I see you’d do as well at home, and there’d be money left for other things.”

Lee kept quiet. It was the safest thing to do.

It wasn’t that Fred was really bad in any way. It was just that Lee found him, as she described such people, *unthinking*. He was naturally good natured and very easy going and he usually did his best. He just didn’t understand Lee, and she didn’t know how to explain what was wrong.

She frequently fell over things he’d left on the bathroom or hall floors. Worse still, he had a disastrous habit of leaving doors half open. After running into the kitchen door for the third time, and cracking her head quite hard on the edge, she had to try and remember to stop and walk instead of running around the house. On top of it all, although Fred was a marvellous cook and his dinners and his cakes tasted delicious, more often than not he cooked things that were difficult for her to manage.

By the fourth morning at home, and soft fried eggs and crispy bacon for breakfast, she was getting desperate.

“Get dressed! We’re going shopping.” Fred called up the stairs.

It was just before lunch time and Lee had been listening to music on the big old radio in the master bedroom since she had dressed after breakfast. She came downstairs to where he was waiting by the front door and grabbed his arm tightly.

“I’m ready,” she said.

This time the streets were full of people and it was worse than before. Lee nearly lost her grip of Fred’s arm twice before they got into the quiet of the big department store. She stood for a moment getting her breath back, whilst Fred talked to the saleslady.

“We’re going to the seaside for ten weeks,” he was telling her, “and Lee needs proper summer clothes.”

Lee got proper summer clothes, too. Two summer dresses but, to her pleasure, also a jeans skirt she’d wanted for a long while, a pair of shorts and several tee shirts.

Fred looked surprised when Lee turned down one tee shirt because she couldn’t feel the

label in the neck and was even more surprised when the saleslady understood.
“Don't worry about him, young lady, he doesn't know as much as we do!”

As she packed the purchases, the saleslady asked again.

“Is there anything else you need? How about a bathing costume? It's going to be a good summer this year.”

Fred chose one for her, and Lee tried it on. It had two separate pieces, which seemed to be more strings than material, but both Fred and the saleslady said it suited her and it felt very light and comfortable. She thought it might do so as she stretched up and leant back a little as if the sun was shining in her face. It did feel right.

“If you think it looks all right?”

“The colour is exactly right for you,” she commented as she helped Lee take it off again.
“I tell you what, I'll leave it tied for you, so you can put it on easily.”

After Fred had shopped for himself at another place across the road, and had filled two more carrier bags, he took Lee into a fish and chip shop and sat her down by the door whilst he stood in the queue. She asked for a Saveloy sausage and chips, and they were soon eating out of paper bags in newspaper as they stood in the sun outside the shop. It was a good meal, one she always enjoyed, and everything was easy to find and hold. They tidied the paper into the waste bin and picked up their parcels. “That's about it!” said Fred. “Unless I think of anything else before we get home.”

As they went on their way, with Lee clutching her shopping in its carrier bag in one hand and gripping Fred's elbow with the other, she almost excused him for pushing her instead of leading her. Because of the load of bags, Fred was even keeping his arm still for a change.

All the same he made her jump when he suddenly grabbed her free arm and pulled her into another shop. She didn't quite know what was going on, especially when he left her standing by the door with a grunted “don't go away.”

She sniffed and listened. There seemed to be a clothes smell but there were metal sounds. She wondered if it might be the camping shop and wondered what he would be buying there.

He came back after a while and took her arm again.

“That's really the lot, now,” he told her. “Now we have everything we could possibly need.”

She didn't find out what the last purchase was until they got back to the terrace house. As Fred unpacked their purchases he passed her a rough feeling canvas bag. She investigated it further and found it had a pocket on the front, loops of webbing on the back and a leather strap on top. Lee lifted it up by the loops, and knew that she had been right in her guess at that last shop.

“It's a rucksack, isn't it? Is it for me?” she asked.

Fred nodded, and remembering she couldn't see, grunted a reply.

“Much more practical than your school cases,” he said.

Lee thought for a moment.

“Of course! You don't need any hands to carry it, and it folds flat when it's empty,” she thought aloud. “It's just right for a caravan holiday.”

+ + +

Fred went out again, to shop for food. Lee wandered out into the garden, listening to the children next door.

“Do you want to play ball with us?” The big boy was looking over the hedge, and Lee turned to face his voice.

“Yes please!” she said in his general direction.

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “You can't see. You can't play.”

Lee grinned at him.

“I can play, actually, but you'd have to use my ball,” she said. “If you come in to my garden, I'll fetch it and you can see.”

When she came back with her ball, the boy and his little sister were waiting for her on the lawn.

“I'm Sammy, and this is Maisie,” he told her. “We moved here last month. Who are you?”

“I'm Lee,” she explained. “I live here with my mother, but she's often away so I usually go away to school, but the other girls all had measles, so I'm home until we go to the seaside.”

Maisie was shaking the ball by her ear and listening to the bell inside. It tinkled even when she moved it the tiniest amount.

“Throw it toward my hand,” Lee asked.

Maisie threw it, and Lee caught it easily.

“Sammy?” she called.

“Yes?” he answered, and Lee threw the ball towards the sound. He almost dropped it in surprise, it was so easy to catch.

Soon the children had the idea. First you shook the ball and threw it to Lee, and then you called her name as she caught it. Because you called, she knew where you were and she threw it back.

So long as the ball was in reach, Lee caught it every time. Maisie dropped it nearly every time when Sammy threw it, but only dropped when she forgot to call out when Lee had her turn.

“Did you ought to be in that garden, Sammy?” asked his mother, looking over the hedge. Then she saw Lee, who had just caught the ball from little Maisie.

“Oh! Hello, I didn't realise you had made friends with my terrors. Do you want to come over and have some lemonade?” she invited.

Sammy helped Lee through the gap in the hedge, and to the kitchen door. She drank their sweet lemonade and then nibbled a jam tart that was offered to her.

“You wouldn't think she couldn't see, would you?” Sammy asked his mother.

She looked at Lee, with a funny expression. She hadn't noticed!

Chapter 12

LEE'S JOURNEY

They left quite early in the morning on the day that they went to Wales. Not so early that there was nobody else about, but still very much earlier than Lee was used to seeing Fred about.

Lee had dressed herself in her new shorts and a clean all white tee shirt, with her favourite warm white sweater pulled on top to keep snug until it warmed up outside. All her new summer things were folded neatly in her rucksack with her washing things and hairbrush on top.

Fred was wearing shorts, too, long khaki ones, and a fisherman's navy blue sweater. His rucksack was bulging despite being much bigger than Lee's. She knew it was big and heavy because she had tried its weight after she had fallen over it on the landing outside her bedroom door.

They came downstairs together and Lee waited whilst he checked all the doors and windows. They went outside and he locked the front door.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

The postman came as they still stood at their door with Sammy's mother from next door, giving her the keys and saying goodbyes. Sammy was just saying that he'd like to be coming too.

"So you are just going off on your holiday then?" Asked the postman, holding out a large brown packet. "I took a chance you'd still be here. It looks important."

Fred took the parcel and looked at it in disgust.

"It's one of your books, Lee!" He complained. "I thought they'd all gone back. What's this one?"

Lee held out her hand, but Fred slid the book out of its sleeve.

"*Hurrah for the Circus?*" He read the label, aloud.

"Oh good!" said Lee. "That's the next one after the one I finished last week. Now I'll have something to do on the journey."

"Then you'll have to carry the thing. Why do they have to be so heavy?"

It was a long journey to Wales. Fred had been down to the travel agents and they had recommended a cross country coach that went nearly all the way, saying it was better than going down to London on the train and then all the way back up.

"What with crossing from one side of the city on the Underground and all that!" The man had told him. "You'll save hours going by bus."

Lee chose a seat by the window, so nobody would knock her, and as the driver came to collect the tickets he saw her book.

"What's the story about?" he asked.

"Circus," she answered. "There's three books and this is the middle one."

"I like circuses, too," said the driver. "What's happening so far?"

Lee explained that she had only just got the book, and hadn't started it yet.

The driver nodded.

"If you're going to read it, then you can let me know what happens then, can't you!"

Lee settled down as soon as the coach started, and read her book most of the time. Fred

didn't talk to her, he slept mostly, except when the bus stopped for a meal or a tea break. Each time the bus stopped, the driver came back to see his 'little friend' and to ask how the story was going. Lee looked forward to him asking. It was getting more and more interesting each time he came along and she was enjoying telling him about the bears and the little girl getting her own pony.

"I bet you'd like a pony!" said the driver.

"Not very sensible!" grunted Fred, "We only live in a terrace house."

He started to look for the apples in his rucksack.

When they finally got out at the coach terminus in Aberystwyth, and had to change to the local bus for the last few miles, there were only a few pages left to read.

"We haven't found out what happened. The little girl's mother and father aren't back yet. Do you want me to look at the ending for you?" Lee offered, when the bus driver came to say goodbye.

He grinned from ear to ear, and patted her arm. "Don't spoil it for yourself. If I could read your dot's I'd read it without telling you."

He slapped his fist loudly into his other hand.

"I'm a fool!" he exclaimed, winking at Fred. "I know what I'll do. I'll borrow the printed book from the library and read it from that. Look after yourself!"

Lee finished the book and closed it with satisfaction as the local bus drove along the low coast road below the castle. It had all turned out right for everyone in the story, just as it should.

Fred was looking out of the window, and trying to decide how much further it was, when the bus stopped and the conductor called out to them.

"This is your stop. Your campsite is down the lane, over there!"

Lee stepped down to the road and waited while Fred fetched her rucksack from under the stairs and helped her put it on. The conductor passed Fred's luggage down and rang the bell.

"Enjoy your visit to Wales," he called as the bus rattled off.

It was late evening, and they walked slowly toward the gate at the end of the very short lane. They were both tired but Fred was so tired that he didn't move his arms and Lee could let him lead her.

It was a great relief.

Someone came out of the wooden office building by the gate and waited for them to come closer.

"They said you'd be able to make the last bus, just," said the woman when they were within a few yards. "My man and I have got our car ready loaded and we're waiting to go. I'll show you your caravan and then we'll be off."

The couple led them along a dried earth track, and Lee heard the sound of a bunch of keys as they turned a corner. Fred opened the caravan door and helped Lee up the step. The couple repeated their farewell and went off, talking, and the journey was finished.

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It was a nice caravan, quite big and clean inside, and quite modern too. There was a big box of groceries on the table and a kettle was ready on the stove. Lee investigated the inside of the caravan whilst Fred lit the gas and started to unpack the box.

“I like this place.” Lee was in the bedroom, running her hands over the fitted furniture and looking happy. “The inside doors slide, and there's nothing to get in the way. Where are we going to sleep?”

Lee found out about sleeping, after the kettle had boiled and Fred had made them some sandwiches. She didn't object to Fred doing it all, she was almost asleep anyway. It turned out that the end bedroom was to be for Fred. He put his rucksack inside and then came out to help Lee unpack her things into a pair of drawers near the other end of the trailer. Finally, he pulled up the back of the settee where Lee was sitting, the one across below the big end windows, and the seat slid further out beneath it. There was a bed already made up inside that only needed unrolling to be ready. She undressed and folded her clothes carefully on the top of the drawers so that she could find them quickly when she wanted to dress again in the morning, climbed between the cool sheets, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

+ + +

Fred was kept busy with his new job, right from the very first morning, and Lee couldn't always follow him around outside. But she could help in the office by answering the phone and that meant she could use the typewriter to write down the messages. She also used it to compose several long letters to her mother, until she had no more news to write.

She was less help in the shop where Fred worked on the girl's day off although, to Fred's amazement, she could sort and count the money much faster than he could when they were cashing up at the end of the afternoon. But that wasn't enough to keep her busy for long.

There are two problems you face if you are the one child who lives on a holiday campsite all the time. Most of your playmates go home at the end of a week, at the most after a fortnight, so that you have to make new friends from every group. Then you have to know everything about everything when the newcomers ask their endless questions.

The second bit was the easiest. Lee knew where everything was within the first full day. The site was long and narrow and divided into two narrower halves by the sandy track from the gate to the beach. On one side there were seven short paths, each with two holiday caravans, and on the other the tent places divided by scraggy hedges. Then there were toilets and showers opposite the fourth row of caravans and the office and shop were opposite each other by the gate, and that was that.

As for things outside, the beach and the small town, the girl who sold things in the shop told Lee all about them when they sat behind the counter and waited for customers.

It wasn't until the Wednesday of her second week that Lee found her first proper friend. Several of the visitors older children had wanted to mother her, rather than play with her, and when she'd objected they'd simply gone off. Lee didn't really mind that happening, but she would have liked someone different to talk to.

She had been helping in the shop this morning, by counting bread rolls out of the carton into bags, and as she finished and went back round the gangway to the counter, she nearly fell over a boy where he was squatting down looking at something on the bottom shelf.

He apologised.

“That's okay,” she replied. “It's my fault. I should be more careful.”
“No!” he replied standing up and taking her hand. “It's not okay. I knew you were there. I should have watched out. I'm Martin. Who are you?”

It turned out that he was seven years old and his mother was blind too, so Lee was quite normal to him.

For the next few days the two of them and his parents had a marvellous time dreaming up things to make things easier for Lee. One of the most useful thing they did together was to borrow Fred's toolbox and knock nails into the wooden boundary posts on each side of the track. Now Lee could read the number of the row, in Braille letters, by running her hand over the top of the post.

Another thing that she found was that she wasn't afraid of water. Martin's father took them to the swimming pool in the next big town and Lee really swam for the first time in the year since she learnt at day school. She enjoyed every minute and would have liked to have gone there every day.

It was real fun on the beach, too, and Lee showed how fast she could run. Usually she fell over as soon as she got ahead, but sometimes when someone was calling her on she could manage to beat Martin by a long way. She was happy and everyone could see it. Then, after their two weeks were over, her friends went home. It was nearly another week before she found another friend.

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By the Wednesday evening, the fourth day after Martin and his parents went home, Lee was feeling fenced in by the campsite. By now she could find her way from their caravan to the office or the shop at a run and could find her back home from every corner that Fred might have a job to do. It would have been a welcome change to have gone out for a day.

She had overcome her usual reserve too, out of her need to have contact, and now she tried to get to know people quickly, as soon as they came almost. There were quite a few nice grownups this week, but there didn't seem to be any children to play with.

Lee was towelling herself after having a shower very early on Thursday morning. She came to the bath house every day before breakfast, just after it had been cleaned. It was partly so she could get the end cubicle but, mostly, because this early there was nothing left lying about for her fall over.

She was dismayed when she accidentally knocked her bar of soap flying. She pulled on her bathing things, dropped her towel against the wall and started feeling around with her feet.

“Lost something?” asked a girls voice, a very educated sounding young voice it was too!

Lee started. She hadn't heard anyone come in, but the outer door had been open today so there was nothing to hear.

“You're the blind girl, aren't you?” the voice went on. “Did you drop something?”

Lee explained, and the girl searched everywhere with Lee, chattering as they looked. They learnt each other's names, the girl was called Diana and was a year older than Lee, and they found out, too, that their homes were on opposite sides of the same city.

Lee found the soap, much to Diana's surprise, because she reasoned that if Diana

couldn't see it, it wasn't in the middle of the floor! So she started off feeling round the walls.

It was behind the empty rubbish bin in the corner.

"How did you find that, Lee?" asked the girl.

She explained as she put it back in her plastic sponge bag, looped the pull string around her wrist and picked up her towel.

"How clever! I wish I'd thought of that!" said Diana.

Diana knocked on the caravan door an hour later, as Fred and Lee were finishing breakfast. Fred broke off from his long complaining story of the problems of the day before, leant over and opened the door.

"Would Lee like to come riding with me? My mother has given me the money for a horse for her too!"

Normally Fred would have protested and handed over some money, but today he only grunted.

"Look after her then." he said, and went back to his coffee.

Lee went to her clothes drawer and pulled on a tee shirt and her shorts over her swimming costume.

"What about shoes?" she asked, standing up.

"What you've got on, I think. I've got my sandals on too. Come on. Let's go!"

They went. Lee took hold of Diana's elbow as they left the caravan and Diana looked down at it. She saw what Lee was doing, and managed to keep her arm still as they went off together.

The riding stable was on the far side of the coast road, several hundred yards down on the landward side, and it took them ten minutes to get there. As they came into the yard the man came over, a big smile on his face.

"Your mother phoned," he said, "I've got two horses ready, perfect for you. Jet here's for you, and Brownie is used to looking after people who can't see."

The horses really were perfect, too. Lee had been riding once before, they'd had a one week course at her old school, but she needed a steady reliable mount. Diana wasn't all that experienced either, but her horse looked lively so she was happy. As they trotted off, the man looked surprised because of the two girls Lee looked more like a rider.

Diana didn't notice, mainly because she thought she was in charge.

Lee just enjoyed the feeling of freedom that riding gave her.

The girls rode across the coast road and took the track to the beach. It was quiet at the water's edge and Diana led Lee in a race along the tide line.

"Stop Lee! Don't go too far!" Diana called as the other horse dashed past.

At last Lee heard and pulled up.

"Your horse is better than mine," Diana complained, pouting, not wanting to admit that Lee was the better rider. "Where did you learn to ride?"

"We did a course at school," Lee admitted. "But the horses weren't half as good as this one."

They rode back along the beach toward the track that led on to the road, and stopped where a little stream ran down across the beach. Lee could hear Diana and her horse moving about, so she stood up in the stirrups and half turned to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I wondered if this horse could dance," answered Diana, to Lee's surprise.

"How dance?" she asked.

Diana explained what she was trying, to get the horse to move sideways.

"I saw it on television. At the Spanish riding school. They do all sorts of things. I want it to go sideways."

Lee sat back into her saddle and tried to make her horse do the trick. She guessed the secret might be to hold her leg back against its side so she could use her foot and knee together, and at the same time hold it with the reins to stop it moving off. That way she could try to make it move to one side. She felt the back move and pressed with her knee. To her surprise the front legs moved to that side for her.

She repeated the two moves and the horse did it again.

"Like this?" She asked.

"That's not fair!" said Diana sulkily, urging her horse to trot off down the beach.

Lee patted her horse and let it follow.

By the time they got back to the main road, Diana was speaking to Lee again, which was a good thing because there was suddenly a lot of traffic and they had to stop.

"It's a circus!" Diana shouted over the sound of the engine of a passing lorry. "There's an elephant in that trailer!"

Diana counted the lorries that were in the field and counted the others coming in along the road.

"If that's all, then it's only a little circus," she said as a big lorry like a furniture van drove in and a fair haired boy of their age, barefoot and wearing nothing but short brown shorts, jumped out and pulled the gate closed behind its trailer.

"It won't be worth seeing, not like the big ones."

"It might be good," argued Lee as they crossed over the road. "I've been reading books about circuses, and all the people in a small show can do lots of different acts."

"Have you ever been to a circus?"

Lee shook her head.

"There you are then!" said Diana, with a toss of her head. "You don't have to believe what you read in books."

They might have gone and looked at it though, if there'd been time. There wasn't. Diana looked at her watch and led the way across the road.

"It's too late. We should have been back ten minutes ago!"

The stable owner was waiting at the gate when they arrived back.

"Thought you'd got lost," he joked, helping Lee to the ground and taking both horses.

"How was it?"

"It was lovely," she answered, and wriggled a little where she was getting a bit sore from so much sitting. "Brownie is a very nice horse."

The man laughed.

"The best. Come back and ride her again Your seat will get used to it after a few times."

Chapter 13

FIRST SHOW IN WALES

There were just a handful of people waiting for their first evening show at the seaside and it was almost due to start. David and Jacky both expected it to be cancelled. It was a firm rule that there had to be twenty customers either in the queue or already booked before mother would open the ticket office.

Their father had told them that things were still bad. It had been the first thing that David had asked when they had arrived by train at Towyn, late enough last night to miss the pulldown, and today's queue of about six people was even worse than they had expected to see.

It was David's job to blow the five minute whistle, and he stood on the steps of his parents' caravan waiting for his father to say that the show was off. But he didn't say that today. Instead, he came out and stood by his son.

"Shall I tell them it's off?" David asked.

Commander Sinclair shook his head and looked across the ground, past the sixteen or so waiting customers.

"Give it a minute."

At that moment a green painted minibus turned into the gate, followed by a second one.

"Whistle!" said Commander Sinclair, walking over to meet the people who were climbing out.

It was one of those very different shows tonight, the special sort that happen a few times a year and really make up for the sameness of the regular shows. For a start, Jan' sold tickets to the few people waiting at the paybox, and then followed them into the tent where the thirty passengers from the minibuses were taking their seats. Frank had been told what was happening, because he made sure that all the customers were seated as near as possible to the ringside.

There were two more customers, little girls from the camp site next door, who arrived at the very last moment and gave him their money. He gave them the two seats in the last empty box next to the ring doors and then, as there were no more customers coming, he went to lace up the entrance flaps from outside.

There was a long blast on David's whistle from behind the curtains, the opening music started and the show was on.

"Who are all these kids?" asked Jacky, as he helped David take off his stilts after the opening.

"Dad says it's a children's home from London. They're having a camping holiday down the coast a bit." Said David as he rolled over and stood up.

"We'd better give them a good show, then," answered Jacky, picking up the props for his first run in as a clown, and waiting by the curtains for the ponies to finish their routine and come out.

It was Paul Williams who first noticed Lee, who noticed her as a person rather than just as one of the audience. He and David were in the ring with the *Pony that won't jump*, where he was doing what was normally Jacky's job, holding a wooden rod for the black

pony to jump over.

He was squatting down, looking out across the ring fence to the front row customers, when he saw her. She puzzled him at first, because she was sitting in the front row of the box looking at nothing. Then he realised that she was listening intently.

“Watch out for a girl sitting alone in the end box. I think she must be blind because she's not looking at anything,” he told David when they came out. “If she is, then she's missing the best of the show.”

The boys ran off in opposite directions to change.

In this summer's show, Jacky was to be carrying one or other of the big snakes around the audience, to bridge over the time it took Frank and David to carry in the knife throwers board and set up the stand with the ropes and whips for the Williams' western act. When Paul came back after changing, he found Jacky already waiting beside the curtains for David and Jan' to come out with the fire pony.

Paul told him to look out for the girl.

“See what you think!”

As Jacky walked round behind the box seats with their largest and heaviest snake around his shoulders, he saw Lee straight away. She was still sitting in the same seat in the front corner of the very first box, with empty seats behind and next to her. The other children in the boxes were all turned round in their seats to see him, but she was facing out into the ring and listening to Commander Sinclair's voice describing the snakes over the loudspeakers.

Jacky knew for certain that she was blind when she only half turned her head as he walked in between the seats and sat down beside her.

“You don't have to be afraid of snakes” he told Lee, quietly. “I've got our biggest boa constrictor around my neck. You needn't touch him unless you want to, but he's nice and warm. I'll put your hand on him if you like.”

“Are you from the Circus?” Lee asked, turning to face him. Jacky nodded, remembered that she couldn't see, and held out his hand to touch her arm.

“It's my Dad's circus,” he said, taking her hand and putting it on the snake's back.

She felt the snake's smooth skin and its fat warm body. Jacky put her hands under a loop of the body and helped her feel the weight.

“How long is it, is he?” she asked.

“Nearly nine feet,” he told her, and started to get up.

“Sorry! I've got to show him to some of the other customers now,” he said. “But I'll see you again.”

Jacky did see her again. He kept looking at her, every time he went into the ring, but he wasn't close enough to speak to her again until nearly the end of the second half.

David was selecting children from the audience to come into the ring for the *educated pony*. He glanced at Jacky and grinned widely at him as he made a point of choosing her as one of the four children to have their ages guessed by the pony.

Jan' gave the sign that she was ready for the first child and David held out his bent arm to walk her from the line of volunteers to where Jacky was waiting for her.

“Hello! What's your name?” called Jan', standing by the pony's head.

“Lee,” she said, quite loudly, holding tightly on to Jacky's arm.

Jacky's mother turned to the pony.

“Goldie! How old do you think Lee is?” she asked.

The pony was trained to kick against a wooden board, one kick for each count, and the audience counted along with the pony. She stopped at eleven, and everyone looked at Lee.

“Our pony thinks you are eleven years old, Lee. Is she right?”

Lee clapped her hands, and nodded. Jacky took her to pat the pony, and helped her back to her seat.

“Come to the zoo after the finale. I'll take you to see the other animals,” he invited her and then corrected himself. “To meet the animals.”

Paul and David were in the ring doors as he came out of the ring with the pony, and David ruffled his younger brother's hair with his hand.

“Who's got a girl friend then?”

“You're one to talk” Jacky snorted. “What's wrong with talking to a girl? It doesn't mean anything. Look at you two! You're all over Michelle every time she comes visiting, and Paul's moping because Mary's abroad....”

“Boys!” commented Commander Sinclair, lighting his fire torches and watching the three as they turned round to face him. “You're too young to be a teenager, yet, Jacky!” He turned to Paul as David took the pony from Jacky and ran outside with it. He grinned.

“Don't get too involved with girls,” he advised. “Or you'll end up like me. Marrying one long before either of you are old enough, and then having sons like these two.”

“Get off and get changed for the finale, Junior!” he told Jacky.

Out in front of the curtains, Jan' finished the announcement of the fire act, and Paul switched off the lights. Commander Sinclair ran into the ring.

+ + +

Jacky was supposed to be taking money at the entrance to the zoo. It was nearly ten minutes after the show had finished, and he hadn't had much to do since there were so few people who had to pay. The children from the home had come in free and there were only two or three more who wanted to see the animals.

Lee was the last person to arrive. If it hadn't been for David she wouldn't have arrived at all. He came in from outside the front door of the tent and saw her still sitting alone in her box, so he brought her along with him.

Jacky left his post and gave her his arm. As he went off with her, David took over the place at the zoo entrance.

“Where did you two learn how to lead a blind person?” asked Paul, who was picking up horse harnesses and whips in the ring doors.

“I didn't know how to do it. It just seemed to feel right. Ask Jacky!”

Jacky took Lee around everything in the zoo, helping her touch everything that could be touched. She liked the horses, and was a bit wary of the lioness, but Tessa the elephant was her favourite and they spent quite a while inside the safety railings with the big animal who seemed to know that this little girl was somehow special.

As Jacky brought Lee back from the zoo to the ring doors he looked around the tent.

“Who did you come with?” he asked. “Not on your own, surely?”

Lee looked more than a little worried. She had been so interested in everything that she

had forgotten about going home.

“I don't know who's with me. I live on the caravan site next door. I wasn't really coming, but one of the campers kids asked if I wanted to come with her, so I did.”

Jacky looked at the closed flaps of the tent and the empty zoo.

“Well, there doesn't seem to be anyone looking for you,” he said. “She must have gone back on her own. Come on, I'll take you instead. It's not far, but we'd better go now. I've got jobs to do before supper.”

Lee and Jacky went together to the gate of the caravan site, and she stopped by the office, letting go of his arm and putting her hand on the gatepost.

“I can get home now,” she whispered. “Perhaps Fred won't have missed me!”

But he had.

He was waiting at the office door and he saw her as she turned the corner. He bellowed at her, and Jacky stood open mouthed as she ran to the man. They ignored him as they walked down the gravel path, but Jacky watched until they disappeared into their caravan.

Then he went home to his tasks.

Chapter 14

BAD TO WORSE

Things had started to get a bit strained between Fred and Lee last night, just as soon as she had got back from the Circus. She had only been missing for a bit over two hours, but Fred had started to look for her almost as soon as she'd gone.

When she had still not come back by half past eight, he had been worried sick and had been out along the road and down to the beach without success.

By half past nine, Fred had decided that he must phone the police, and that was why he was opening the office as Lee came in the gate. Since she had returned so late, and yet she had only been a hundred yards down the road, he was as annoyed with himself as with her.

His frustration had bubbled over and he said more than he should have. A lot more. Fred wasn't a nasty person and he was too much of a gentleman to hurt someone physically, but his words had been so bitter that she wished she had somewhere private to cry.

He had gone to get a drink and Lee had crept into bed.

+ + +

If anything, they both felt more miserable at breakfast this morning than they had last night. They sat opposite each other while Lee tried to eat fried egg and bacon and Fred criticised everything she did. Today was cool and rainy, too. Not the sort of day for doing anything outside, so there was nowhere to go and almost nothing for her to do.

She didn't even have a book to read since Fred had sent "Circus Days Again" back to the library, and that was days ago. She half suspected that he hadn't ordered the new one, because he hadn't seemed all that interested in writing her choice on the card. She remembered now that he had put it in his pocket to post later.

Worse, Lee hadn't found anyone to play with this week. There didn't seem to be any children around, not even the girl who had left her at the circus yesterday. She had even gone to see if she could do anything in the shop, but there didn't seem to be any customers and she soon got tired of listening to the young welsh girl who was helping out this week. It might not have been too bad but the girl was only really interested in boys and would only talk about them and clothes and makeup.

Lee was soon bored with that, and went out again.

Lee fetched the spare key from its hook behind their caravan door and waited on her own in the camp office until nearly two in the afternoon, practising on the typewriter, writing a long and rather unhappy letter to her mother and listening to boring music on the radio. At last, just as she was thinking of going into the shop for the stamp, Fred came back with the pickup truck full of gas cylinders and took her back to the trailer.

For lunch today he served up sliced ham and squishy tomatoes with boiled potato. Fred's most and Lee's least favourite meal, her second difficult meal in one day and the one where she could always guarantee to make a mess!

Lee followed Fred round all afternoon and evening, getting in his way rather than

helping, which didn't improve matters between them. He became more and more irritated, and she began to wish she was back at school.
"It can't get any worse," she thought.

But in the end it did!

It was after ten in the evening and Lee had been sitting outside in the rain, on the wooden post at the corner of their plot, since Fred had gone off to the Pub half an hour ago. It hadn't quite come to blows this evening, but it was the nearest they had been to it yet.

Neither of them would remember later what the argument was about but Lee had screamed back at Fred when he shouted at her and he had just shouted louder. Each had said in no uncertain terms what they thought of the other, both at the same time and without listening.

Lee had finally stamped her bare foot hard on the floor and flung herself out of the door.

She had been standing slumped with her hot forehead against the cool damp aluminium side of the trailer, when Fred had come out, slammed the door shut behind him and gone off toward the gateway.

"I'm going out for a lot of drink," he shouted back at her. "You can stay there until you decide to act normally."

+ + +

The three circus boys were on the way back from the beach after enjoying a half hours swimming. It had stopped raining for a few minutes as the evening show ended and they had stripped down to swimming trunks and gone down to the water.

Now it was starting to drizzle again, but relaxed and happy, they were taking a short cut back through the caravan site to the circus ground.

Paul saw Lee by the dim light from the caravan window, and stopped.

"Jacky!" he whispered. "Look who it is."

Lee lifted her head, and turned toward them.

Jacky saw the sparkle of light reflected from her tear stained face as he squatted down beside her.

"What's wrong, Lee?"

She poured out all her troubles. She was so upset that the boys could hardly keep up with her jumbled story.

Paul tried the caravan door and found it locked and David went round the windows, which were all, fastened tight.

"She can't stop here, she'll get ill. Bring her back to our trailer," suggested David.

"I'm getting cold and she's soaked through. I'll bet she's absolutely freezing." Paul agreed.

Jacky helped her up, and led her with him away from her seat. At first she was stiff and stumbled, but as they passed the office and turned toward the circus field she was starting to feel better.

Lee felt better still after David and Jacky had helped her out of her saturated jeans skirt and her pullover and dried her off with one of their big beach towels. They found her Jacky's spare pair of leather shorts and a warm sweater to put on and, soon after, she was eating chocolate biscuits out of the boy's tin and sipping hot sweet cocoa.

It was warm and snug in their little caravan after the gas cooker had been burning, and she was telling the boys about her mother and her school and hearing about their school. Her frustration and loneliness was completely forgotten for the moment and she was as happy as if she had known them all her life.

“What sort of name is Lee?” asked Paul, coming back in to the trailer and dipping his hand into the nearly empty biscuit tin. “It sounds like a boy’s name.”

“It’s what everyone calls me,” she answered. “What sort of name is Jacky, then? It sounds like a girls name!”

Jacky went red, but explained to her that his name was really *Jacques*. “I’m named after my Dad’s favourite Uncle. He was a famous clown, but I never met him.”

He patted her hand and she hugged him.

“Sorry, Jacky. I like your name and I didn’t mean to be rude. My name is really Elizabeth Mary Lambert.” She pronounced it Lam-bear. “But Mother says I could only say *Lee-ser* when I was little, and it stuck.”

“Aren’t you two in bed yet?” asked a voice at the door, and Paul opened it to let Commander Sinclair come in.

He saw Lee, noticed her still slightly red and puffy eyes and saw Jacky’s clothes on her. He waited for an explanation.

David got up, and started to go out.

“Dad! I’m glad you’re there. I wanted to show you something in the horse tent before we go to bed.”

The two of them went into the zoo, with the circus owner taking a glance over his shoulder as Paul closed the door again.

“Tell me the story,” he ordered.

By the time he came back to the caravan, Commander Sinclair had heard the whole story as far as David had understood it, and David had understood it very well. Paul was watching at the door and let them in.

“Paul. Be useful and ask my wife to get dressed and come across,” asked Commander Sinclair, and Paul ran off round the tent.

“Now, young lady, we’d better see what we can do for you. I’ll go round and see this stepfather of yours and see what he has to say.”

He suddenly changed the subject, and with it his tone of voice.

“I hear that Lee can ride better than her friend Diana!” he said.

Lee turned toward him with a surprised expression on her face.

“Diana can ride, I didn’t hear she does it wrong.”

“She looks like a sack of potatoes. The riding school ⁴*omey* says you look like a professional”

“Who looks like a professional?” asked the owner’s wife putting her head in the door.

“Lee. This is her, here. You remember her Jan’?” The eleven year old you met in the educated pony last night. She visiting our boys.”

Jacky and his parents went off to the caravan site, leaving Paul and David to look after the visitor. Fred wasn’t back yet, so they stood at the gate waiting and talking. Jacky thought Lee should just come and live with them, and they should leave a note for Fred.

⁴ *Omey* - Parlari, circus language. Man

His mother was standing behind him and laughed as she hugged him to her. She ruffled his hair.

“Let's hear the man's point of view first. He has rights too,” she reminded him.

Fred wasn't drunk when he came home, in fact he had only had time for two quick glasses of beer before the bar closed. Now he felt even more miserable than he had done when he went out.

“I know you,” said Commander Sinclair as he saw him. “You were at the Regency Theatre back in November, weren't you?”

Fred recognised his visitors, too, and led the way to his caravan. As he turned the key in the door, he looked about for his stepdaughter.

Captain Sinclair shook his head.

“Lee's all right. My boys are looking after her across the way. Would you be offended if we talked about her?”

Fred needed to talk, and he felt that these were people he knew. He talked for a long while, with no interruptions.

“Is she still feeling bad?” he asked, at last.

“Nothing that an hour or two with our boys won't have put right,” confirmed Mrs Sinclair.

They talked for a long while, about Lee, about her mother, and on to reminiscences about circus and theatre. It went on so long that, although Jacky was interested in the stories, he finally fell asleep leaning on his father. He didn't even hear when Fred and his mother went out to the telephone.

By the time that he did wake again it was after one o'clock. Fred was collecting empty cups that had held strong coffee and was looking at him and smiling.

“Had a good sleep?” he asked. “Hadn't you better be going home to bed?”

Jacky looked about him, blinking in the bright electric light.

“Yes, you go off to bed and make sure that David got Lee settled down,” his mother agreed.

He got up and, half asleep, went back to the circus and his own caravan.

Their gas light was burning brightly as he opened their door. Although he tried to shut it quietly, David was awake.

“Is that you, Jacky?” he whispered. “Don't wake her. Lee's asleep in your bed. I put the spare sleeping bag out for you.”

“Thanks!”

“Goodnight!”

+ + +

Jacky overslept. By the time that he had wriggled out of the sleeping bag, slid down from the small top bunk above his usual big bed and walked quietly to the gas cooker to put the kettle on again, the water in it was nearly cold. He looked guiltily at the clock and guessed that David had been up and working for nearly two hours already. He felt a little guilty at missing his morning chores.

He lit the gas again and went back to sit at the foot of the bottom bunk. He looked at their visitor sleeping peacefully, her long hair spread over the pillow. She stirred, as if she could feel him looking at her, and sat up.

“Hello, Lee!” he said.

“Hello, Jacky. Am I still in your caravan?” she asked.

He took her hand in his.

“Yes, and I think you might be going to stay on with us. My Dad was talking to your Fred last night and he and Mother went out to the telephone. I'm making us a drink, then we'll get up and go and ask her. What would you like? Tea, cocoa?”

Less than a quarter of an hour later two barefoot children went up the steps to the big wagon, looking almost like twins. Jacky was guiding Lee, who was again dressed in his spare shorts and sweater and had her long hair tidied as well as the two of them could manage with David's hairbrush.

Jacky's mother opened the door to them.

“Haven't you got things to do, Jacky?” she asked. “Come on in Lee. If you're going to help us, you'd better start learning something to do in the show.”

Jacky was happy to hear that. He knew that he had been right and that Lee was going to stay. He went to look for his father, and found him in the zoo scrubbing at the thick skin of Tessa the elephant with a hose in one hand and a long handled brush in the other. Commander Sinclair sent his son about his business, too, and gave him several jobs to keep him busy.

It wasn't until nearly lunch time when Paul and David came back from distributing handbills in the town that he heard more.

Paul took the pony back to the stable tent and Jacky helped David take off his stilts.

“Mum says that Lee's staying with us until it's time for us all to go back to school. They phoned her mother last night.” David told him. “Dad thinks she could help you with the snakes for a start, if you'll let her. Mother was already starting to make her a costume when we got up.”

Jacky went to see his mother in the big wagon. Lee was dressed as an Indian princess, with long loose trousers and a mini sun top. With her hair washed and brushed properly by a woman's hand for the first time in weeks and her sun browned skin she looked the part, perfectly.

“Run and put your costume on, too, Jacky.” said Mother as he opened the door. “Dad wants to take a photograph of you together to send to Lee's mother.”

Jan' had found some more of the same material that she had used for Jacky's costume, so they matched properly like a brother and sister, as Jacky explained to Lee. They stood in front of the lions and bears wagon with the two boa constrictors on their bare shoulders and posed for the photograph, and then went back to the boy's trailer and changed back into shorts and sweaters for lunch.

“Come on, *little sister*,” said Jacky as they left the caravan. “Since you have the costume, you'd better learn how to do the act.”

He put his arm out for her and led her back to the big wagon and their midday meal.

Lee learnt just as fast as she always did, and it was easier still because she had been taught some of it by the dancing teacher at school. Paul and David sat on the ring fence and criticised as Jacky tried to teach her the way he thought she should *sell* the act. How to stand, how to bow and how to show you want applause. But they soon decided that she had got it right, after all, and as they applauded someone behind them clapped loudly too.

“Paul's turn in the ring next, with his father,” said the boy's mother. “Leave Lee with

me and see what the boss has for you.”

As the boys went out to look for their father she held out her arm to Lee.

“Come on then. I've heard rumours that you can ride. Let's see what you're really like on a horse!”

They went out through the zoo, talking together.

+ + +

By the first whistle for the next Monday's afternoon show, Lee was running around the circus field as if she'd lived there all her life. Jan had to check her constantly as she dashed past on her way to somewhere:

“Mind the horses ropes.”

“Keep in against the walling when you go round the tent, or you'll run into the side ropes.”

“Not in the zoo please. Lee!”

“Put something on your feet if you're going in the stables!”

She could understand why Fred was so frustrated.

There were barely two hours to go before Lee's first appearance in the five o'clock show. Jacky had taken her for several practices in the ring over the weekend, but it was Jan who had discovered Lee's acrobatic act, at two o'clock that very afternoon.

It was purely by chance that Lee suddenly did a series of on the spot cartwheels out of sheer joy. Jan' Sinclair was astonished.

“That was good. Lee! Very good. Where did you learn to do that?”

After Lee had explained, Jan had asked her do her routine once through as she'd done it at school, and immediately afterwards sent her off with Paul and Jacky to see if they had her music amongst their records.

“Peter!” she said to her husband as he came into their wagon to change for the show.

“Lee will explode if we don't put her in the ring. I've never seen anyone so excited in all my life!”

The circus owner grinned.

“She's certainly concentrated energy. No wonder her stepfather was going mad. I hope doing the snakes will do for today, or will Mrs Williams risk taking her in as decoration for the high school riding?”

Jan shook her head.

“I've got a surprise for you. She's got her own speciality act already, and it's not bad at all. It's a bit short, that's all. Will you put it in this afternoon?”

“If you think she's good enough, I'll take your word for it. What is it and where do you want her spot?”

Jan had made the extra briefs for Lee's costume on the first day, so that she already had something to change into for her own act. They had known that perhaps Lee might be going to do something else, but nobody had known that she would be needing them so soon.

Lee wore her new costume with the loose trousers over the briefs and, after she had come out with Jacky and the snakes, he took her snake too and left her to change and then wait in the ringdoors until Paul and David finished a long clown entrée.

Mrs Sinclair introduced Lee as the boys came out.

“Continuing the introduction of the younger generation of our family. For the first time in this or any other circus ring, a special applause for our youngest performer. Miss Lee Sinclair!”

Lee ran in, taking Mrs Sinclair’s hand and allowing her to lead her to the low table where she was to perform.

When a new act performs for the first time, everyone who can manage it will come and watch. They were all clustered behind the curtains as Lee went into the solo routine that she had performed just those few weeks ago, back at school.

Jacky had found the same music that she had used before, and Lee enjoyed doing the act.

It showed.

“She's jolly good!” said David.

“She's a bit ragged,” commented the circus owner, “but she's certainly good enough to stay in the show.”

He walked off out of the tent as Jan' Sinclair helped Lee out to applause and congratulations from everyone.

“How was she?” asked Commander Sinclair, coming back in from the zoo, just as if he hadn't been watching at all. “Is she good enough to keep her in the show?”

They all said she was.

“She can stay in then, at least until I have a chance to see her perform. Who's supposed to be clowning now?”

Jacky grabbed his butterfly prop and rushed into the ring.

“Lee. You did it!” said Jan', hugging their new artiste to her. “You've earned your place in the circus!”

Chapter 15

MOVING ON

Every seaside season comes to an end, and as usual, this one was going to end just as everyone was getting settled.

One afternoon, as Commander Sinclair and his wife came back from a trip up the coast, they called Jacky and Mr Williams to the big wagon. The two of them were going round the tent tightening side ropes and stopped and looked up at the urgency in his voice.

“Can you come over to the big wagon? Please!”

Lee and the other two boys came back from the town an hour later. David was on stilts and Paul was in clown costume leading Lee as a cowgirl in full costume on Red, the old ring horse. By that time, Jacky was already working hard with a bucket and sheets of hardboard by the shows little blue van.

“You can see we're moving on this weekend, at last, by the way Jacky's working,” said Jan', helping Lee to dismount and going off with her toward the ring doors.

David slid down off the bonnet of the horsebox where he'd sat to remove his stilts, and took the pony from Paul, leading it off toward the stable tent. Paul went over to see what Jacky was doing.

“Did you know we're going to move on Sunday?” he asked, finding that Jacky was sorting out posters. “Did your dad say where we're going?”

Then he realised that Jacky had been writing something on the white panel.

“Where's that?” he asked, trying to pronounce it.

“Pen-rrr-hin-dee-oodra-eth?”

Jacky corrected the pronunciation.

“Pen h-rin dai drai-th.”

David nodded.

“Yes. But *where*?”

“Up the coast a bit” Jacky answered, starting to write *Penrhydeudraeth* again on his next poster.

“Three days there. Thursday off. Then two more days at a village that's so small that we only have afternoon shows. I've got to do the daybills for there next. Then we do a jump over the hills to Welshpool and back into England.”

+ + +

Any circus looks as it has taken root after three weeks in one place, but it still packs up into the wagons and only leaves a few shallow scars and a patch of sawdust on the grass to show that it was ever there at all. Sinclair Brothers Circus was no exception when it pulled out at five o'clock on Sunday morning.

By the time that Jan' drove the little blue van on to the road and walked back to close the gate behind her, the circus field looked like an empty meadow again.

Fred had come out to the road and walked along to the gate of the circus ground to see them go. Lee was holding his hand tightly through the open passenger window.

“Good luck, little Lady,” said Fred at last, as Jan' came back from closing the gate of the empty field. “I'll miss you.”

Lee blew a kiss as the van started off, and settled back in her seat. “He isn't all that bad.

I do like him, really," she confided, and then asked, "Where are we going? Will you tell me what's happening outside?"

Everyone has a job to do when the circus arrives on a new ground, so that they can get the tent built up and every thing set up inside as quickly as possible.

David and Paul followed Commander Sinclair as he paced round with a rope tied to a stake and pointed to the places for them to drop the metal stakes which Mr Williams and Frank would knock into the ground. Four bigger stakes were set further out than the others, making the fixings for the king pole.

As David went to the back of the show by the zoo and started to unroll the big coils of the wire guyropes, the others went to help put the two parts of the king pole together and push it up to lean it against the back of the tractor.

Commander Sinclair checked all the wires on the pole and inspected the three stakes which were already tied off before Paul tied the pull up rope to the towbar of the little van and started its engine.

With David driving the big tractor, pushing the pole up against its cab, and Paul pulling it with the van in reverse gear, it rose into an upright position in just a few seconds.

Mr Williams untied the pull up rope from the front bumper of the van and went to secure it to the big stake as the boys drove the tractor and van to their parking positions outside the ring of stakes.

"Leave it, now," called Commander Sinclair. "Let's eat and then we'll go down to Port and see what's on at the pictures."

+ + +

Lee and Jan' went down to the village early in the morning, and were doing two jobs at once. Buying food for lunch and putting up a few more posters. Lee listened intently to the small children as they waited in the general store for Jan's turn to be served. She'd learnt quite a lot of Welsh words from the caravan cleaners and from the girls in the shop in her time at Harlech, and now there were two boys beside her talking rapidly together.

Lee knew more than enough of the language to know who they were talking about. She turned and looked straight at them.

"You shouldn't talk about people in your language," she said, quietly, and added in Welsh, "someone might understand you!"

The boys stopped talking.

"Are you really from the circus?" asked one of them in English. "Have you got any free tickets?"

Lee started to laugh, but Jan put her hand out to stop her.

"Of course, but only if you help. We've got to get ready for the show before five o'clock," she said. "Do you want to come and give a hand?"

The boys certainly wanted to help and they came back to the Circus, one each side of Lee and Jan', asking about the show. Both boys wanted to know what Lee could do, but she shook her head and put her finger across her lips.

"Lee's our youngest star," said Jan'. "She'll be really famous one day. You can come and see her in our show this afternoon, and you won't have to pay if you work hard."

The three circus boys and the two village boys, helped by some other children who came along later, made easy work of pulling up the canvas and setting up the seating.

Lee was allowed into the tent as soon as the ring fence was in place, and was soon chattering to her two friends from the village and trying to learn more of their language. They were more interested in what she could do but, by the time that David blew the half hour whistle and Paul cleared the tent, she had learnt more about the boys than the boys had about her.

Jacky fetched her some free tickets for their help and went with Lee to the front entrance to see them out.

“We'll applaud for you.” Promised the younger one, looking back in through the entrance.

“Come on, Lee, we've got to eat before we go to change.” Warned Jacky.

+ + +

Today's five o'clock show was a very good one. There were a good few customers and the change from the seaside to the village at the bottom of the hill was enough to drive off any feeling of staleness. Even the animals seemed to perform better.

After Tessa left the ring at the end of her act everyone one came back in for the Grand Finale. Usually it was Jan's job to make the final announcement but, today, Lee held out her hand for the microphone.

To the surprise of everyone, except for Jacky who had taught her and his father who had suggested it, she had memorised the words of the poem called *the circus farewell*. She recited it perfectly. Her light clear voice was just right for the poem that starts “*that was our spangled circus world.*” It went down well with the welsh audience with their love of music and poetry and everyone applauded as she finished.

But Lee added something afterwards. She thanked the audience in their own language, before wishing everyone good night in welsh and then in English!

A man with a church minister's collar came round with one of the boys from the shop, to the ring door curtains where Lee was helping Jacky take the money for the zoo.

“Where did you learn welsh?” he asked. He spoke in Welsh and then he repeated it in English as she looked confused and muttered, in welsh, that she couldn't understand him. He took her bare arm, and burst out laughing.

“You did all right!” he confirmed. “Did you just learn that one sentence then?”

Lee nodded. “A bit more than that, really, but I thought it was polite to learn to say *Diolch yn fawr*. We're visitors here, aren't we? We should be able to say *thank you very much!*” she explained.

The reverend patted her on the back.

“Keep it up, young lady. You've done a good advertisement for your show today. All the landladies will tell their visitors and they'll all come and see your circus. Perhaps my Dafydd here will teach you some more welsh, if you'll let him hang around?”

Chapter 16

ON THE ROAD

After the good houses at the seaside, they had expected a lot less customers at each performance as they went back inland. They were pleasantly surprised when more people came to each of their shows on the next two days than they'd seen at any show at Harlech. To Jacky's dismay, and David's amusement, Lee had become the heroine of the village children, and a flock of them followed her around the ground whenever she appeared. They even fought to lead the ring horse when Jacky and David took her to advertise in the village.

"I wish I could travel with a circus, like you do." Dafydd was dressed in one of Jacky's clown suits and had been in the ring with Paul and Jacky to do the honey bee gag. Now he was waiting with Lee for the finale of the last show in the village.

"Write to us in the spring, when we know our route for next year, and maybe you can meet us earlier," Jan suggested.

Dafydd was satisfied and ran in with the others as Commander Sinclair ran out with his fire torches.

When the pulldown started, and the circus children were back in casual clothes, Dafydd proved his keenness by helping. However keen the village children had been before, they excelled now and long before their parents came to look for them the show was packed away.

Still it was nearly eleven before the reverend came to fetch his son.

Jan' and Lee were talking to a news reporter, and Dafydd had been adding enthusiastic comments. When his father arrived, Lee was arguing with Dafydd that she could do clowning as well as any of the boys.

"She's never tried," Jan' admitted, "but she certainly knows the patter for all the gags, much better than I do. My husband has promised that she can do the white face clown, soon"

"What's a white face clown?" Dafydd wanted to know.

"Why not an August?" asked the reporter.

It was the reporter who explained to Dafydd that the *white faced clown* is the clever one in the smart silver and white suit who can do all the tricks and the *August*, the fool or tramp, was the one who comes off worst in the tricks. He was the one got the custard pie in his face, or got wet, or fell flat on his face.

That was before Jan' told them why Lee would never be that sort of clown. It was because Commander Sinclair had decided that, if she was, then people would think the others were taking advantage of her blindness. Both Dafydd and Lee said it didn't matter, but the others said that he was right.

The reporter closed his notebook.

"Don't worry, young lady. I know you'd do just perfect. You wait until Friday's paper and see what I say about you,"

+ + +

Thursday's move was a lot easier than Mondays. For a start there was no show to worry about until Friday and then it wasn't very far to travel. Jan' and Lee spent quite a lot of time in the big wagon with the sewing machine whilst the others got on with the buildup.

All the same, they had their show all up and ready by tea time. Mr Williams took the boys to the cinema in Blaenau and Jan', Lee and Mrs Williams were left to look after the show. They didn't waste their evening and when the others came back with still warm fish and chips they were very satisfied with their work.

The three were off together again in the morning. Jan' had talked her husband into finding chores for the three boys so that that Lee and Mrs Williams went off together mid morning on horseback. Jan' met them outside the village school. It should have been closed for the summer but, to their surprise, there were quite a few children running around in the playground and a teacher seemed to be in charge.

To their further surprise, he came over and invited them to come inside.

"You'll be wondering what we are doing, here, then?" He asked them, and Jan' admitted it wasn't quite what they were expecting.

"We're having an activity week, you see, and we were talking about circus before we came to see you this afternoon. You were in the newspaper this morning, you know!"

"Then why don't you all come down after dinner?" invited Jan' on the spur of the moment. "Come at half past two, and perhaps you could bring sandwiches if you want to?"

Commander Sinclair didn't seem in the slightest bit surprised when they came back and told him what Jan' had arranged. He even said it was a good idea. Lee was still holding her folded newspaper in one hand, waiting for someone to read it to her.

He lifted her down from Red's saddle and handed the horse over to David, who led the horse off to the stable tent.

"Will you read the paper for me?" she asked, putting it into Commander Sinclair's hand. He found the article straight away and, holding his hand on her shoulder, read it out to everyone.

It was a good article.

It didn't say much, it wasn't long enough for that, and it said that Lee was David and Jacky's sister, which she didn't mind. It certainly made up for its length by having three good photographs beside it.

There was Lee doing her own act, next to it was Mr Williams with the lioness and on the opposite page the whole family at the finale. They all agreed it was a good article, and David promised to stick it in a new Scrap Album for Lee.

It turned out to be a good idea of Jan's to invite the village's school children. The boy's father had known that the village was small when he booked it for the stopover so, rather than a one day stand, they had billed it for two days with one show a day. The five o'clock show. But even that might have been optimistic. Today there had been far less people about than they'd expected and there wasn't a single advance booking.

The first children arrived at two, and half an hour later the teacher was there in time to rescue Lee and David who were showing them around the zoo.

"Shall we start?"

The circus family were dressed in casual summer clothes and Commander Sinclair was

letting the circus children introduce themselves to the visitors. Each came forward from places on the ringfence in turn.

David was wearing jeans and a cowboy shirt and stood up first.

“I’m David Sinclair. I do stilt walking and trick riding and look after the horses.”

Paul Williams, wearing khaki shorts and a safari jacket, explained that he was the chief clown and that he helped with the bears and was in the western act.

Jacky and Lee, once again in identical leather shorts and short sleeve shirts and looking more like brother and sister than ever, came forward together. Lee spoke for both of them, and was quite glowing about Jacky and his part as a clown and elephant trainer.

The teacher introduced the village children, by now fourteen of them, and then Commander Sinclair and Mr Williams started handing out props. He had a lot more in the big lorry than even his own children had seen, and he knew how to use them.

By half past four, the visitors were really enjoying themselves. Two of the girls were quite good at juggling with the coloured tennis balls and one of the boys was so good at acrobatics that Jan' had taken him off with Lee to practice in a corner.

Mr Williams had found two girls who showed promise with the liberty ponies and Mrs Williams was showing high school to another two who had riding ponies of their own.

Jacky and Paul had the biggest group. They were trying to teach four boys and two girls how to do six different clown gags. It says something for their patience that they were managing it quite well. David wasn't half as successful. He had found a boy who wanted to try the stilts. But it's one thing to know that you can walk with your feet a foot above the ground, holding the top of a pole in each hand, and quite another to be four feet in the air with the stilts strapped to your legs. At last, after his father had rigged a rope between two trees, David was starting to get somewhere with his pupil.

The visitors were eating their sandwiches and drinking the circus's orange squash out of paper cups when their parents and the other customers started to arrive. Jan' was the only one who was changed, and went off to the cash box as the others tried to fix costumes and makeup for the visitors.

The show was ten minutes late starting, but thanks to Jan's invitation the seats were full of people who had paid to see their children or their brothers and sisters or their friends.

David had succeeded with his pupil, at last, and the two of them opened the show on stilts. Lee was dressed in David's ringmaster costume and did the announcements, and then the village girls took turns at working the liberty ponies. Each time a clown act was due, one or two of the visitors came in with the boys and they did the trick under expert supervision.

By the interval most of the visitors had been in the ring at least once. The only one who hadn't done anything was the one who had been practising with Lee. The other children had been running in and out to their parents, too, and his mother had wondered why he hadn't done a thing. She even feared that he might not have been good enough.

She realised her mistake when, after a brief “Hello” to her at the beginning of the interval, he reappeared a quarter of an hour later to perform with Lee.

Lee was dressed in her usual costume, but the boy was dressed in a costume that had been made for Jacky to do acrobatics, and which he had refused to wear. It wasn't quite her usual act, although she ended with that. First they took turns at doing each trick.

With Jan' standing by to keep her in place, Lee did a forward handspring at one side of the ring, and the boy did his across the other side. Then in turn they did a flik flak and then they both did back rolls across the ring.

The show ended very late, it was nearly half past seven, but nobody seemed to mind. Mrs Williams had sold out of popcorn and biscuits and tins of drink, but that hadn't worried her either.

It was quite a while longer before Jacky and Paul had finished selling pony rides and the last customers had left the zoo. Paul and his parents took the ponies out to the their stakes in the field and the others all packed into the big wagon where Jan' was making pancakes which were disappearing as fast as she could cook them.

They ran out of lemon, and then of golden syrup, and were well into a pot of strawberry jam before everyone was satisfied.

“By the way,” asked Commander Sinclair, sitting back into his comfortable chair. “How did we do at the paybox?”

He knew they'd done well, but Jan's answer still surprised him.

“On the one show, and counting the refreshments, above the average for a whole day!”

“Let's do it again!” Lee suggested. “It was fun!”

“Glutton for punishment, aren't you! Yes, it was fun, but it's hard work too. When you think of it, you kids were working for six hours today instead of two, and I was a bit worried that I'd given you too much to do.” Jan' sounded apologetic. “There were rather a lot of them, weren't there!”

“Perhaps we *will* try it again. Maybe we could run a show completely on that idea one year. But it's a waste of all the animals on the show we've got now.” Her husband agreed. “But I'll bet you they all come again tomorrow to see our real show, so you'd better all get to bed or you'll be too tired to work,”

He sounded fierce, but the children knew he was only joking. All the same, they went off reluctantly to their own trailer.

+ + +

The next afternoon show was just as successful as Commander Sinclair had predicted that it would be. The whole village turned out to see the show with the animals and acts as it was normally, but it still wasn't a normal show after all.

Jan' had convinced her husband that everyone had seen the children doing their normal acts and they should do something different, so they all did the acts they had wanted to do.

Lee opened the show as ringmaster again, wearing David's black trousers and red jacket, made to fit with the help of several hidden safety pins. She was using the big microphone, standing proudly to the side of the curtains and making a good job of it too.

David showed the ponies today, instead of walking stilts. His mother watched as he worked them and pulled Commander Sinclair to the gap in the curtains with a whispered exclamation. “Look at that!”

He looked and saw what she meant.

“He's got Grandfather Oskar's touch, hasn't he!” he whispered back. “We've got someone other than you who can show horses again! I thought he was pretty good at Easter when you started him, but it's almost as if he knows naturally what to do. What a

good job you suggested he tried.”

Paul and Jacky did their favourite clown gags, but instead of Jan' or Commander Sinclair as *animateur* their new young Ringmaster was in charge. Lee was enjoying every moment as she led the boys through *the echo*, *the ghost* and *one hand* as clown gags between the other acts.

After Paul had been allowed to work the bears on his own, with his father and David standing by to hold the leads of the bears on the stools, Lee came in with the *educated pony*.

Commander Sinclair hadn't believed it was possible for Lee to work Goldie until the children had shown him that morning. Paul had found a leather strap with little bells on it. They'd bought two of them in a second hand shop, part of a Morris Dancers costume, but never found a use for them until today. By strapping one around the pony's leg and another to her head harness, Lee could hear the horses movements.

All the usual counting tricks and the answers came off as usual, but when it came to guessing ages Commander Sinclair got a great surprise.

“Are you ready, Lee? This is Mary.” Jacky asked.

Lee asked Goldie, who thought the girl was six.

She was right.

“Ready? This boy is called Maurice.”

Goldie thought Maurice was only five. Right again.

“Is that pony guessing on its own?” Asked Commander Sinclair.

“I don't know. Lee said we'd be surprised.”

“Lee said it? Then I guess there's a trick in it!”

He was convinced there was a trick when the pony correctly guessed a girl to be eleven and the last boy to be eight.

“Own up!” Jan' took hold of Lee's arm as she came out after announcing the interval and the men and boys went in to put up the lionesses performing cage.

Lee grinned widely.

“We fooled you as well, didn't we!”

“So? We? I thought as much! You couldn't see how big they were and guess their ages like I do. I know Goldie doesn't know how old they are. It must have been you and Jacky?” Asked Jan'.

Lee nodded.

“If you promise to let me do it with you one day, I'll tell you!”

“I promise. It makes the act even better,” answered Jan'. “We guessed there was some sort of trick.”

“A very easy one.”

Lee explained it, and Commander Sinclair burst out laughing as he came past and heard it.

“*Okay* is worth eight. *Are You* with the *Ready* is worth four. *Lee* is two. *girl* or *boy* is worth one. Jacky tells me, and I just add them up!”

Jan smiled too.

“Maybe that is a better way of doing it.” said Commander Sinclair, and went to fetch the last section of cage.

Paul had wanted to work the Lioness, but Commander Sinclair had vetoed that one before the show. Mr Williams did it on his own as usual and Jacky covered the pull

down of the cage with Lee and the snakes. As soon as they had finished they ran back to their trailer to change. Mr Williams saw them go.

"In a hurry for something!" he said to his wife as he went to change in his own wagon.

He found out what the hurry was as he and Paul came out after their western act in which Paul had been allowed to do the whips and the shooting. Three clowns were waiting. Jacky and Lee were in very similar costumes, Jacky's spare fitted her perfectly. You could have thought they were brothers except that Lee had her hair loose again. They went into the tent carrying the aluminium step ladder, Jacky in front with the feet and Lee carrying the top end. They set it up near the front of the ring and Jacky produced a big red funnel and put it in her hand.

"It's a plastic funnel," said Lee, holding it up and feeling its shape. "Like you use to pour petrol into the lorries in the morning."

"Aaah!" Jacky exclaimed. "It might look like a funnel, and feel like a funnel, but it's not. It's a *Can you soap your ears.*"

Lee giggled.

"You mean it's a *Cornucopia!* A Horn Of Plenty?"

"That's what I said it was, but I can't say *cornucopia.*"

"But you just said it!"

"Then it must have slipped out when I wasn't looking"

Jacky explained that, if Lee held the funnel above her head and counted to six, it would fill up with something cool and refreshing. Lee said it sounded good and let him steer her until she was standing beside the ladder with the spout of the funnel above her face. "Now count, everyone!"

As Lee led the audience in counting slowly to six, Jacky ran to the curtains and fetched a bucket. He ran back across the ring and up the steps in time for the count of six.

He poured an ample supply of water into the funnel, and it poured over Lee's face.

She shook it off and licked her lips.

"I liked that! Can I have some more?"

Jacky suggested that she should catch someone else, instead, and at that moment David came into the ring dressed in his father's clown costume. He was waving a feather duster and started to use it to clean off the customers in the front seats. Lee and Jacky waited patiently whilst he cleaned the spectacles of a woman, but when he pretended to capture a flea from a fat man in the royal box, Jacky tapped Lee's arm.

"David! Have you ever seen a Cornucopia?" She called.

David stopped dusting and came over to her. She held out the funnel at arms length. He looked through it like a telescope, held it to his ear and then blew it like a trumpet. He looked at his partners.

"It's a *can you soap your ears?*" he said

"Yes! We know that!" chorused Jacky and Lee.

Jacky tapped Lee's arm again.

"You've got it right! It's a Horn of Plenty." She explained, just as Jacky had done. "You hold it over your head, count slowly to six, and it fills up with something cool and refreshing."

"Like ice cream!" exclaimed David.

Unfortunately, It didn't work out the same as before. Firstly, Jacky organised Lee half

way up the ladder and went to fetch the bucket, but he fell over on the way back and poured it all over himself.

David reached his six.

“There's nothing in it!” He complained, examining the funnel again.

Jacky apologised and got David and the audience counting again as he went out for the bucket.

This time he fell over once again, but it went all over the audience. Luckily it was different bucket and contained confetti, not water, or there would have been trouble.

David seemed to be getting puzzled, but Lee explained that he had to *believe* in the magic for it to work.

They set him up for the third time.

This time there didn't seem to be any problem. Jacky fetched the bucket and guided Lee's hands as she poured the funnel full of water.

But there was a problem after all! No water came out because David had his thumb pressed hard on the hole at the end of the spout.

Lee came down the ladder and walked round with Jacky. They felt David's dry face.

“You're supposed to be all wet! Where's the water?” asked Lee.

“Here!” answered David, holding the funnel over Lee's head. He took his finger from the hole in the spout and let the water run over her face.

The audience gasped, but applauded as the three took their bow.

Lee took the microphone.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” she said. “I've always wanted to do that, but until today they wouldn't let me! It's fun, isn't it? Now it's your turn to have fun. Paul will let you be circus stars when you try to ride his unrideable mule!”

Paul ran in with the mule and Jacky led Lee out to find a towel to dry her face and hair.

Paul had been pressing Commander Sinclair since lunch time, either to let him show the lioness or to do the fire eating act. Having refused to let him in the cage, it looked as if Paul was the only one who wouldn't do his favourite act.

As he rode the unrideable mule from the ring, she bucked and he finally slid off as she left the tent. He picked himself up as Commander Sinclair called his name.

“Paul!” he said.

“Yes, Uncle Peter.”

“Come here a minute!”

Almost at the end of the show, just before the elephant act, Paul reappeared in the ring doors. Sometime since last year he had got someone to make him some red silky trousers like those Commander Sinclair wore for the fire act. He was carrying his own set of fire torches that he'd made last year and a small pot of paraffin. Commander Sinclair, dressed ready for the elephant act, pointed at his sack of broken glass.

“I guess you won't want that?”

Paul looked at it, and at the others standing around.

“Of course I will. I've never done it, but mother won't mind. Can I start now?”

The White Yoga glass act is nothing but concentration, and Paul knew it. As Commander Sinclair had told them all, plenty of times, it is no problem for an ordinary person to pick up a piece of a broken bottle from the floor. To do the act, Paul would just have to concentrate that much more. He had to be able to deal with about thirty pieces, the top layer of the heap.

Today, he managed to handle the glass, stand on it and even to support David on his chest as he lay on it.

His back was glistening as he stood up and David removed a few splinters that were stuck to his skin, but it was sweat not glass that caught the light.

After the glass, the fire act was easy. He'd been practising the breath control for eighteen months or more and could do it very well indeed. It was almost the same as the show's usual fire act and he finished by holding the burning end of a torch between his teeth.

Commander Sinclair patted him on the shoulder as he came out.

“Keep at it, Paul. I might let you take over in a year or two!”

After the end of the show, when Jacky had succeeded in showing Tessa completely alone, came the anticlimax. The pull down. They all changed into working clothes and got on with packing the show. Lee and Jan were nowhere to be seen until the last of the canvas had been thrown into its place in its lorry and the job was done.

“Party Everyone!” Called Commander Sinclair instead of his usual cry of “Thanks Everyone.” And they all crowded into the big wagon for a special meal and celebration.

“Well done, People!” Said Jan' as she started to hand out the plates of food that she and Mrs Williams had prepared with Lee's help. “That was pretty good show!”

Chapter 17

IT'LL SOON BE OVER

School was looming on the horizon for three of the family as the long summer holiday came toward its close. Lee's mother had written to Commander Sinclair asking him to arrange for Lee to travel back to her school, and they had discovered for the first time that it was in a small village only a few miles outside the town where David and Jacky had to go, so it would only need one journey to take all three children.

"I'm sorry, but we came out through the grounds in Suffolk," he told Lee as they talked about schools, standing together with Jacky in the elephant wagon after an evening show. "Otherwise we might have been able to book our way to the village where your school is."

But he did phone both schools the next morning and then Lee's mother after lunch, and they made some plans.

There was only one night of the holidays to go by the time they had moved across Hertfordshire and turned towards Essex. They had booked what was definitely the smallest ground that the boys had ever seen. Not only that, it was triangular and they had to put the living wagons together at one corner with the tent close to the farm buildings on the other side.

There wasn't going to be a show until Wednesday when the Irish boys and their parents would be back. Paul and both his parents were off in the little van, billing the next town, and there wasn't much happening at all today, which was for the best as the boys and their parents had time to be together.

Jacky was particularly worried about Lee, who looked a little sad today, so he went to look for his father after lunch. Commander Sinclair had the bonnet of the horsebox open and was busy cleaning sparking plugs with a wire brush.

"Dad!" Jacky hitched himself up on to the front wing, picked up one of the two cleaned plugs and looked at it critically.

"Dad, Lee says she only came to us while her mother was working and her mother will be back home soon?"

"Something like that."

"Can she come back in the next holidays?"

"Would you like her to?"

"We all would!"

"We'll have to see then, won't we?"

The tent was built up, but empty, as the children went to bed for the last night of the season. It was past midnight and they were all tired as they undressed and climbed into their beds. It was no wonder that, when Commander Sinclair opened their door and looked in, they were all asleep.

It was just after half past two when Lee woke up and started to shake Jacky's shoulder. He opened one eye and yawned.

"What's wrong?"

"I can smell burning. Will you come with me and look?"

Jacky groaned.

“Probably just a bonfire that somebody forgot.” He mumbled, but he reached out and found his shorts and pulled them on. Lee was putting on her shorts too as Jacky opened the door and the two of them stepped outside and stopped by the tent.

“Are you sure you can smell something?” Jacky asked, sniffing and looking around. “I can't smell a thing.”

Lee said she was sure and, running her hand along the canvas side walls of the tent as she went along, led the way past the zoo cages. She stopped as they reached the laced up artists entrance and sniffed again. This time, Jacky thought he could smell it too. Just a woody sort of smell like a bonfire.

Lee started off again, counting side poles as she went and, just before the next lacing, she turned back and retraced her steps.

“It's in front of us, here,” she said, pointing away from the tent.

“That's just the barn wall, flints stuck in mortar. Are you sure? There's nothing there!”

“Can't you see anything?”

Jacky couldn't. He walked to the barn wall and touched it. It was warm! He moved his hands about until his hand touched a metal bolt. It was hot!

“Ow! It *is* the barn. This wall is burning hot. You go on round and call everyone, I'm going across the road to the phone box. Tell Dad I'm phoning 999.”

Lee turned and ran in the tunnel between the wall and the side ropes toward the show front as Jacky raced along by the wall and jumped over the fence into the road. She passed the front entrance, counted five side poles and reached out to see if she could feel the piece of cloth that Commander Sinclair had woven into the side rope at shoulder level to show her the big wagon's parking place.

It was there, and she let out her breath in relief as she took two paces more away from the tent and felt for the handrail of the wagon steps.

A moment later she had the front door open and was knocking at the bedroom door.

“Jacky thinks the barn is on fire,” she gasped, grabbing Commander Sinclair's wrist as he opened the door. “He's gone to call the fire brigade.”

“Sit down here and we'll look after it,” he said, and went back into his bedroom to find his clothes.

By the time that he and Jan' came out of the bedroom and went to the wagon door, Lee was gone. He ran toward the barn as Jan' went to call the Williams' family. They were already getting up. Lee was standing at their door explaining it to Paul, who was out on the steps and calling to his parents inside.

“Go inside one of the wagons, Lee. Come in ours if you like. If it's a fire that close, then they're going to have to drop the canvas.” Mrs Williams warned her, and then she too was off down the steps and into the tent.

It was a fire. The barn wall was so warm when Commander Sinclair touched it that he took one look up at its roof and then burrowed under the walling into the tent. Paul and David were already inside, releasing the ropes on the quarter poles and letting the poles fall as if they were cutting trees. Mr and Mrs Williams were ripping out side poles and throwing them on the ground. Dodging two dropping poles on the way, Commander Sinclair grabbed the pull up rope on the king pole and started to lay it out so it wouldn't tangle.

“I wish we'd got some light.”

Mr Williams was beside him, getting ready to release the knot and was having trouble

in seeing it.

"No time," Commander Sinclair answered and then, as if he was making an announcement, "Everyone out. She's coming down!"

As the canvas started to fall, there was the sound of fire engines in the distance. But they weren't the only sound. With its usual grinding noise, the big diesel generator turned over and burst into life. The spotlights on the top of the pole and in the zoo came on, and everyone started rolling and jumping on the canvas to drive out the air to make it lay flat.

"Look! It's alright!"

Jacky was the nearest to the barn as flames licked out from under the eaves and started to work up the roof. He was opening the lacing that joined the quarters of the tent on that side as Paul and David were undoing side ropes ready to pull the canvas clear. Two firemen jumped the fence from the road and ran in with a hose. They started to spray the wall and the burning roof. The tent was going to be saved.

It wasn't long before the fire was under control. Barely an hour after Jacky had phoned, the fire chief came round to the circus side of the brick wall.

"Thanks for calling us," he said. "I gather it was one of your boys who discovered it?" Everyone looked at Jacky, but he shook his head.

"It wasn't me. If Lee hadn't smelt burning and woken me up it would have been alright before anyone saw it."

"Lee certainly saved our tent, then. If the barn had gone up before we got the canvas down we'd have lost it for certain," Jan' agreed, and then she looked round. "But where is she, anyway?"

The children scattered to look for her. She wasn't in any of the three living wagons. Jacky went to the brightly lit zoo to see if she was there. The animals were wide awake but alone. David completed a tour of the ponies and came back to the little group at the front of the show as the other two came the other way.

Lee was missing!

"I've looked in all the lorries and vans," Paul reported.

"I went round the ponies," said David.

"She's not in any of the wagons, or in the zoo. I even went into Tessa to see if she was there." Jacky sounded worried as he came back.

"She can't have gone far," Jan thought aloud. "At least she isn't under the canvas, we'd be able to see the bulge with all the light."

"Light!"

Commander Sinclair looked round at everyone.

"Who started the generator?"

They looked at each other, but none of them could have done it. He led the way at a run.

Lee was sitting on the floor of the generator wagon, leaning against the vibrating control box, but fast asleep.

As Jan' pushed Lee's hair out of her oil smudged face, she awoke and a tremendous smile lit up her face. Jacky pulled the stop lever and the engine coughed to a stop as his father lifted her into his arms.

"Did I do all right?" She asked. "I knew you would need light, but I didn't think I could

find my way back to our trailer without the walling to follow, so I waited for you to come. You were a long time.”

Everyone told Lee how clever she was, but she was asleep again and didn't even wake when she was put back into her bed.

“Good night, Dad!” called David.

“Good night, Dad!” Echoed Jacky who was just climbing into bed. “Can Lee be one of the family now?”

Commander Sinclair was laughing, quietly.

“You think she has earned it, don't you?”

Jacky left the bed and flung his arms around his father's neck.

“You're going to say yes!”

“If her mother says it's all right and if she wants to.”

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It took Lee quite a while to get washed and dressed next morning. There were so many smudges of oil on her face and in her hair that Jacky put on both the kettle and a saucepan for hot water and fetched the large bottle of shampoo from the big wagon. She was dressed in school uniform and David was helping brush her nearly dry hair when Jan' came to see how she was getting on.

“My, you look pretty! I'd forgotten how you looked in a dress!”

Lee sat still. David stopped brushing.

“I'm glad we don't have hair like hers,” he remarked, putting her brush back into her overnight case. “It's hard work.”

“You wouldn't like to keep her as a sister, then?” Jan' asked him.

David looked shocked, and then puzzled, and then put his arm round Lee.

“I'd never thought of that. But she feels like a sister.”

He looked at Lee's face, which had suddenly lit up.

“You feel like brothers, especially Jacky.”

She realised what she had said, and went red.

“I don't mean that you don't, only Jacky, sort of...”

David squeezed her arm and grinned.

“Mum! What have you and Dad been arranging?”

“Lee's mother is coming with us to be in our Christmas circus this year, Dad has booked her act, and she says Lee can come to us every holiday. But only if Lee wants to.”

Lee jumped up.

“Of course I want to! Come on David! Let's go and find Jacky and tell him.”

Jan' watched as the two children dashed round past the zoo to where Jacky and his father were with their elephant and smiled with pleasure as her husband scooped Lee into his arms. The family was going to stay complete.

She turned back into the trailer and started to collect all the childrens' holiday clothes together to pack them away until Christmas.

Lee's as well as her own boys' things.