

**ROAD TO  
ADVENTURE**

**MARY GRANT BRUCE**

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STORIES BY  
**MARY GRANT BRUCE**

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“Mrs. Bruce has a story to tell and she sets about doing it in her own straightforward way, without resort to padding. Her style is never laboured, it matches its subject in its naturalness. Smiles and tears, humour and pathos, blend in her books as they do in life itself.”

—*The Queen.*

JIM AND WALLY  
NORA OF BILLABONG  
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND  
GRAY'S HOLLOW  
GLEN EYRE  
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON  
A LITTLE BUSH MAID  
'POSSUM  
DICK  
CAPTAIN JIM  
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG  
BACK TO BILLABONG  
THE STONE AXE OF BURKAMUKK  
THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS  
BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER  
MATES AT BILLABONG  
THE HOUSES OF THE EAGLE  
THE TOWER ROOMS  
BILLABONG ADVENTURERS  
GOLDEN FIDDLES  
THE HAPPY TRAVELLER  
BILL OF BILLABONG

# ROAD TO ADVENTURE

BY  
MARY GRANT BRUCE

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# Road to Adventure

## CHAPTER I

### PETERSON'S CIRCUS

THE performance was over. Out of the great tent streamed the audience, chattering, laughing, discussing the points of the show. Boys swung down from the high benches, darting round to the back of the tent for a last glimpse of the sleepy lions in their caravan—to be roughly thrust aside by the tamer, who displayed now little of the smiling carelessness that he had shown a little earlier in the ring. “Off out o’ that!”—and the boys fled, to rejoin anxious parents who were seeking them unavailingly in the gloom that seemed darker from the flaring naphtha lights.

The dusty road leading to the township echoed under many feet. From the fences horses were untied, and riders cantered off into the night—every bush youngster firmly resolved to turn himself and his pony into Circus performers before the end of the week. Buggies and spring-carts, packed to overflowing, followed more slowly. It was still the day of the horse: motors were vaguely talked of in the cities, but the country folk who had driven long miles to the Circus—who would have come twice as far at the mere hint of a Circus—sniffed contemptuously at the idea of carriages that could go without horses; declaring they would believe it when they saw it. Now, a good light buggy with a decent pair—that was ambition high enough for any man. They faced the weary homeward journey light-heartedly, heedless of the drizzling rain that was beginning to patter softly. Rain was welcome at almost any time, even in an uncovered cart: and after a Circus there was enough talk for a dozen journeys. The yellow flicker of lamps and hurricane-lanterns gleamed fitfully among the trees long after the last hoof-beats had died away.

But at the Circus itself there was hurry and activity. No sleep for the folk of the roads, with two full marches ahead before the next township, and grim bush tracks for the heavy caravans. In waggons and lesser tents performers

were hurriedly changing into the clothes of every day: here and there a baby cried angrily, disturbed by a father or mother casting aside spangled tights and gaudy jackets of cheap silk, snatching mouthfuls of food during the process. The gay trappings of the big tent, the red carpet that covered the best seats, the flags draping the musicians' box, were rolled up almost before the last spectator was clear of the entrance. Blue poles came down: the benches were carried out, to be stacked in a waggon. Every man had his place and his job; all worked like parts of a machine, under the eye of the Boss—big Dan Peterson, who was known to be able to see in six directions at once, and had, when necessary, a tongue that could flay a rhinoceros. Under its lash even the lion-tamer had been known to quail.

Big Dan did not work. He watched: still resplendent in his ring-master's outfit of dress-clothes and top-hat, a curious contrast to the sweating, panting men in shirts and trousers. No smallest detail escaped his roving, watchful glance. He knew by the sounds just when one laden waggon moved off, another taking its place. His ears, that served him as well as another man's eyes, noted that the restless growls and roarings in the menagerie lines had died down to satisfied murmurs that signified that all the big cats were fed: that the elephants were pushing the great wheeled cages into place, ready to move: that the horses were being watered and rubbed down. Every sound carried its message of well-drilled activity.

But his eyes were for the heart of the Circus—the huge performing tent, known as the Big Top. He watched until it was empty. One flaring torch, all that was left of the many that had seemed an illumination indeed to the bush audience, revealed a trodden expanse of grass, the sawdust-sprinkled ring faintly showing in the gloom. Big Dan walked round it slowly, his glance keen for a chance broken bottle that might cut the precious canvas when it was lowered. Nothing. The men had scattered to the ropes outside. He took down the torch from the centre-pole and followed them.

“All ready?” he thundered.

There was an answering shout, rippling round the tent—“Ay, ay, sir!”

“Let-'er-go!”

At the “go” every man gripped his rope. The heavy central ring slid earthwards: and slowly the great mass of canvas shuddered down until it lay on the grass, a vast blot. The men flung themselves upon it, casting it off from the pole, wrestling with the weight of its mighty folds; their fingers slipping on the wet surface: a big task for giants, it seemed, in the darkness, but each could have worked blindfold. Big Dan muttered angrily at the rain, and went with long strides to his caravan, returning in an old coat and hat. The canvas was

loaded on a lorry: then the mighty centre-pole was lowered and disjointed—there was a moment when The Boss had to leap forward to a rope that threatened danger when a man slid helplessly on the wet grass. The man, a lightly-built fellow, glanced nervously at his master as he regained his footing.

Big Dan, however, was in good humour. He said, “Better learn to dig y’r heels in, Jeff; can’t afford to slip when we’re playin’ about with the big stick.” Jeff breathed freely again. He had seen a man knocked down for a less serious mistake.

It was all done at last: the ground searched for stray tent-pegs, the litter cleared up and burned—Big Dan was proud of his reputation for leaving a camping-ground neat. Already the caravans and cages were on the road strung out behind a man who waited to lead them, carrying a hurricane lantern. He stood beside his horse, eating the supper—tea and rough sandwiches—handed him from the leading waggon. There was a halt of ten minutes while the riders snatched some food: all others fed as they bumped over the uneven track. Then Big Dan gave the signal. It was taken up along the line. The leader gulped down his tea, handed back the tin mug, and swung into the saddle still eating. Wheels ground slowly into the dust: the last lorry lurched from the grass into the road. Peterson’s Circus was under way: a long string of ghost-like vehicles following a swaying ghost-light into the bush-walled gloom.

The blue-and-gold caravan that was Dan Peterson’s only home brought up the rear. It was a perfect home, he thought. To-night, as he climbed up the steps, ducking his tall head as he entered, and closing the door behind him, it seemed to him that it had never looked more inviting.

Everything within was bright: clean paint, polished brass, gay yellow curtains drawn over the little windows. The swinging lamp cast a cheerful glow over all. It was divided into two compartments. The front one, known as the cabin, held two large bunks and a smaller one.

It was curtained off from the rear: and Big Dan’s first action was to put his head through the curtains and look at the occupant of the Little bunk, who, being very fast asleep, was unconscious of this attention on his part. All that Big Dan could see was a part of a rosy cheek, and a mop of long black curly hair. It seemed to satisfy him. He turned back, smiling.

“She’s pretty sound.” He hung his glistening coat behind the door and sank happily on the leather bench that ran along one side of the compartment. “My word, old girl, that smells good!”

The little woman who stood by the oil-stove, diligently stirring the contents of a saucepan, returned his smile.

“Well, you ought to be ready for it: I know I am,” she returned. “I gave

Nita hers as soon as she came out of the ring and she was asleep ten minutes after.”

“I should just about say I *was* ready.” He glanced contentedly round the compartment. The table, screwed to the floor, bore a yellow, checked cloth, spread ready for supper. There were shelves everywhere, with cross-bars to prevent their contents sliding out: cupboards were fitted wherever possible, some with mirror-fronted doors that reflected the gay colours. The whole place was a miracle of contrivance and comfort. And the most heartsome sight in it was little Mrs. Dan, in her yellow overall, bending over the stove that was the pride of her heart, since nothing more complete had ever been designed for a caravan. Big Dan had had it made to his own plan, and had installed it in triumph, declaring that it was “as handy as a pocket in a shirt.” Mrs. Dan saw no reason to give it lesser praise. And if, at the moment, the prevailing odour of the caravan was that of fried onions—well, that merely added the final note of perfection for Big Dan.

“Can you wait till I peel off these things?” He glanced at his ring costume with disfavour. “A man can’t eat comfortable in a stiff shirt.”

“Well, don’t be long.” It was a needless warning, for Big Dan never was long. He disappeared behind the curtain, moving as softly as a cat, and presently reappeared in a huge blue dressing-gown and soft slippers. Supper smoked upon the table. They attacked it with an enjoyment that was not lessened by being compelled to guard against the antics of their plates when the caravan jolted and rocked like a ship in a heavy sea.

“Silly of me to eat so much; it’ll come against me if ever I go back to the ring,” remarked Mrs. Dan. “But I never could say No to a fried onion!”

“You don’t need to. You’ll never go back to the ring, my girl,” declared her husband, scraping out the saucepan. “Plenty for you to do without that.”

“Oh, I dunno. I often hanker for it, you know, Dan. When I stand behind and see the girls ride in, all in the old get-up, and smell the smell of it all, and hear the clapping and the cheers—well, it gets me, you know. I feel sort of sad to be out of it.”

“‘M,” said Dan, with his mouth full. “All very well for an odd hanker, Polly. But it’s another pair of shoes when it means goin’ into the ring afternoon an’ evening, ill or well, hot or cold, good houses or bad. Not so much fun then, and you know it well enough! Besides, it don’t do for the Boss’s wife to be a performer. I’m dead against it.”

“What you’re dead against,” said Mrs. Dan, shrewdly, “is the chance of me getting hurt. Me, that never was slung off a horse yet!”

“Oh, well——” said Big Dan; and became absorbed in mopping up the last

remnant of gravy with a piece of bread. “Anyhow, it’s enough on my mind to let Nita take to it. But it stops in a few years, Polly, you mark my words. Off she goes to boarding-school then—one of the real slap-up ones. I’m not going to have my girl grow up in the ring.”

“Like her mother did,” added Mrs. Dan, wickedly.

“You grew up in it ’cause you had to. And you grew up like—like a flower,” said her husband, with a touch of sentiment that would have greatly startled his men. “Nothing could touch you that wasn’t clean and good. But just because you and I know what the life is we’ll take Nita out of it, I reckon.”

“If she’ll go,” said Nita’s mother.

“Go? I’ll say she’ll go!” thundered the other parent. “What—that kid to think she’s got any say in the matter? I’ll precious quick teach her if——”

“What *are* you making such a noise for, Daddy?” demanded a sleepy voice from the other side of the curtain.

Big Dan was up with one of the quick, lithe movements that had helped, in his youth, to make him a notable lion-tamer. He bent over the little bunk.

“There, you drop off again, Daddy’s precious,” he said, softly. “Don’t you worry; we’re all on the road, nice and comfortable.”

“Well, you roared,” said Nita, drowsily.

“Did I wake my girl, then?” Big Dan’s voice was penitent. “I was just telling Mummy a yarn. You go off to sleep.” He patted her gently until her eyelids closed, and then went back, on tiptoe, avoiding his wife’s glance as he got out his pipe. Mrs. Dan, having stowed away the supper things, was knitting busily. A dimple lurked near her mouth.

“Well, she knocked ’em in the ring to-day, didn’t she?” he said. “Both houses—specially the evening, of course. She does handle that new pony pretty, don’t she? I wish there was another youngster in the Circus nearer her size: I could fix up a good act for a pair.”

“Eddie Pratt’s too big, I s’pose?”

“Too big, and not class enough. He’ll never have good hands if he lives to be a hundred. Don’t like that boy. Thinks too much of himself, and he’s too free with his tongue. Always very meek and mild when I’m about, but I hear him cheeking other people. I’m not keen on him being much with Nita.”

“It isn’t easy to keep them apart,” said Mrs. Dan. “They’re the only children, you see. And he’s not a bad youngster, Dan.”

“Oh, you’d never admit that anyone wasn’t a whitened sepulchre,” said Dan, obscurely. “Anyhow, he’s not good enough for our girl, and I’ll keep my eye on him.” He put up his feet on the couch and smoked luxuriously. “Best

day we've had this tour, Polly: pretty well full both times. You'll be getting that gold watch I promised you if it goes on like this."

"O-oh!" said little Mrs. Dan.

"I was a bit afraid I was paying that new tamer more'n the show could stand," said Dan. "But he's worth it. That chap can do anything with the cats. Even old Nabob respects him, and he's the worst-tempered lion I ever set eyes on. There's no doubt, Polly, a good lion act does pay. Queer how these bush chaps like to see anything with a bit of danger to a man in it. Two or three told me to-day they'd come in twenty miles just because they'd heard about Pazo and his cats—and they stayed for both houses."

"I hate 'em!" said Mrs. Dan, vehemently. "Nasty brutes, I call 'em. Thank goodness you don't go in for that business now, Dan."

"Well—you can't, when you're boss of the show. But I liked it well enough. And if I'd never been a tamer you'd never have had a circus-owner for a husband, old girl." He yawned, hugely. "Jove, I'm tired! Thank goodness we've a lazy Sunday ahead. It's a bit hard on everyone to get on the road at the end of a long day, but it's worth it, to have twenty-four hours quiet before we start again."

"Gives me a chance to do a bit of washing," said Mrs. Dan—"and every other woman. Do you know where you'll camp, Dan?"

"First chance we get after dawn. I've told Crowe to come back an' wake me whenever he sees a likely-looking place. It'll have to be a paddock where we can get water, of course, and it isn't everyone that'll let a Circus in. But my luck's in this trip: we'll get some place all right. Hope there won't be any nervous horses about; we'd be unpopular if they took it into their heads to drop dead at the sight of the elephants, like that old moke in Conandrah."

"Don't remind me of it!" said his wife, screwing up her face. "I never saw such annoyed people!"

## CHAPTER II

### HUGH

THE boy sitting on the gate-post looked lonely. To be perched upon a gate-post is in the nature of things a solitary occupation, unless there is someone on the other post: and in this case not only was the second post untenanted, but no living thing was in sight. Behind him was a small house, half-hidden in a scrubby orchard where stunted apples clung among yellowing leaves. In front the road ran east and west: a bush road, very wide, the ribbon of rutty track winding snake-like among low gum-trees that hid the wire fence on the further side. Like everything else, the track was lonely.

The apple-orchard clothed the ridge on which the house stood—if so dreary a little orchard could be said to clothe anything. Beyond it the ground sloped gently down to a valley where a slender creek trickled among boulders. At one place it had been laboriously widened to catch water enough to make a drinking-spot for cattle, since in summer the creek was apt to trickle away altogether. But no cattle were visible, although there were tracks in the soft mud near the hole. Bush homesteads have usually fowls pecking about the sheds and yards: but not this homestead. So quiet was it, so lifeless, that it seemed as though it had driven the boy out as far as possible—to the gate beyond which he might not go.

He was a slender-limbed boy of nine, with well-cut features and dark, anxious eyes beneath a crop of yellow curls. The curls badly needed cutting, and their owner hated them heartily. They had earned him many nicknames, only less repugnant to him than the admiring epithets bestowed on him by effusive ladies. Most of the fights in which Hugh Russell had taken part—and they were many—had been connected with his curls. He regarded them, not without good reason, as unseemly growths for a boy. It was some offset to such a handicap in life that his father had taught him a good deal about using his fists and developing his muscles.

Father did not, Hugh knew, care for curls. It was mother who had been proud of them. Hugh remembered that, among many other things, although he was only six when mother had died. He knew—somehow, for they did not talk about it—that it was because of mother that father did not cut them as close to the scalp as Hugh wished. And lately father had not bothered to cut them at all. He was too busy thinking.

There had been a great deal to think about since they came to live at the house in the orchard, more than a year ago. At that time they had been very

hopeful. There was more money then, and Hugh had had his pony to ride to school: and father had expected to make a good living out of apples: having failed to make one at several other things. They planned to grow vegetables, too, and to keep bees; there were great talks about all they would do as Hugh grew bigger.

But the man who sold the orchard to them was a better business man than father. Father saw trees white and pink with blossom, and in the simplicity of his heart he thought that where there was such beautiful blossom there would be beautiful apples. This does not follow, however. The apples were a poor kind, unmarketable. The soil of the little farm was hopeless for vegetables—or anything else. Even the bees caught a bee-disease, and died: and the hives had to be burned. And little by little the money in the bank vanished.

Other things went when, in the second season, codlin-moth spoiled the poor crop. The buggy went: most of the furniture: and then Hugh's pony. Nobody could tell how cruelly that hurt. Hugh had to practise not thinking about Tinker—as he practised not thinking about mother. Then the calf was sold, and all the fowls and ducks. And that day father had ridden off early, driving the cow, which was the only thing left to sell—unless you counted old Nugget, the scraggy bay horse. Hugh did not see how they really could sell Nugget, for he was their only link with the outer world.

He could not now go to school, for it was too far to walk. When father went to the township he had to remain alone: not very cheerful for a boy of nine, with only the magpies and kookaburras for company. Father always came back as quickly as possible. But to-day, because of driving the cow, he had been a very long time: and towards dusk Hugh could bear the silence of the house no longer, and had come to sit on the gate-post and watch the road. It was really listening more than watching: straining his ears to catch, through the trees, the first faint hoof-beats. He would have picked out old Nugget's canter among a hundred horses.

If he had anything to do it would not have been so bad. But there were no jobs. Even father had scarcely any now. There was enough firewood to last a month, for it had only to be picked up under the trees on the road. The table was ready for the evening meal, but as there was nothing in the house to eat except half a loaf of stale bread and the scrapings of a pot of jam, that did not take long. Hugh had finished the lessons father had set—doing them with a thoroughness possible only to a small boy with nothing whatever to occupy him. He had read all his story books, over and over again, so that they no longer tempted him. There were no neighbours within three miles. So he had “mooched about” until his legs were tired, wandering in the scrub, climbing trees, practising the gymnastics father had taught him on low, smooth

branches. After these things failed there seemed only the gate-post left. There, at least, was a chance of seeing someone. It might be a bullock-driver, plodding along in the dust beside his crawling team, or the cart from the store in the township, delivering goods to bush homesteads; sometimes a jinker, with a good pony in the shafts. Hugh hoped for that, for he had an eye for a horse.

This afternoon, as if to help him, there were several riders on good horses; quite an unusual number. It puzzled him, until one man, pulling up near him to fill his pipe, offered the information that he was going to see a Circus in a township miles and miles away. "Long ride," he said, "but I hear it's worth it. Anyhow, I'd go a long way to see any sort of a Circus."

Hugh agreed emphatically to that. Always, since he was a tiny boy, a Circus had been his dream of bliss. He had seen a good many, when times were better, for father shared his love of horses; and the Circuses of those days were often small, but their horses were always good, especially in a country like Australia, where nearly everyone was a keen judge of a horse. Hugh had taught Tinker several of the tricks he had seen in the good old days that seemed so far back to his nine-year-old mind now. Tinker was quick and intelligent; it had made it all the harder to part with him, especially as Joe Clarke's father had bought him, and Joe, as he knew well, had no hands and thought a bridle was for keeping you on your pony. Hugh had visions of Tinker's tender mouth, sore under Joe's handling, and he was glad he had not to go to school to see it.

When he heard that Daisy, the cow, was to be sold, a great and beautiful idea had come to him. Perhaps, if she fetched a lot of money, father would be able to buy Tinker back! He hugged the dream to him for several days before he ventured to speak to father about it; in fact, it had been only that morning that he had timidly brought out the words. And then he wished he hadn't. Father had looked at him with a kind of amazed anger, and said, "Buy the pony back?—why, you little ass, we've got to *eat* her!"

Hugh had shrunk back, puzzled—with visions of Daisy as he had seen cows in the butcher's shop, hung up; of father and himself eating steadily at great joints of beef. Father had laughed in a sorry way that didn't sound like laughing, and explained that all the money Daisy brought must go into dull things like oatmeal and flour and jam; and Hugh had felt worse than ever, because he saw that father was dreadfully worried, and that he hadn't meant to be unkind. Father never was unkind: only nowadays he generally seemed to live in a world ever so far away, where Hugh could not go. Not a happy world, judging by father's eyes.

The early morning talk had stayed with him all day. It had left a nasty cold

feeling round his heart. For if Daisy were so necessary to buy things like oatmeal, what would they do when Daisy was eaten up? There was no other cow. He tried to put it from him by believing that she would bring a great deal of money; but that was not convincing, for he knew enough about cows to realise that Daisy was not a valuable specimen. It took such a very little while to milk her, and her bones stuck out.

He was thinking about this when at last the sound for which he had been longing fell on his ears: a hoof-beat on a stony part of the road. It was quite near, and he knew that it was father coming, although he was not, as usual, cantering. But something within him told him it was father, and he jumped down from the post and opened the gate, straining his eyes to pierce the tree-shrouded dusk.

Father and Nugget loomed up out of the gloom and turned in at the gate.

“Thanks, Hugh,” said Father. He dismounted stiffly, handling the tucker-bag with care. “You can let him go. Been all right?”

“Oh, yes. Did you get a lot of money for Daisy, Father?”

“There wasn’t any rush for her,” father said, grimly. “But I got something. Hurry up, Hugh: I’m hungry. I’ve had nothing to eat since I left.”

“Didn’t you get dinner in the township?” Hugh asked, wide-eyed.

“No.”

“Oh, Father—you should! Why——”

“Oh, cut along,” said the man, wearily.

Hugh unsaddled Nugget and let him go as quickly as possible. When you did this for Tinker you talked to him all the time, and Tinker almost talked back: but Nugget was not a sympathetic horse. He did not appreciate conversation; all he wanted to do was to get away and roll. Hugh left him rolling, looking very ridiculous with his long, knobby legs in the air, and hurried in to the house.

The kettle was already purring on the hob: he had filled it long ago. Father was washing his hands. Hugh unpacked the tucker-bag, which was always his job. Bread, butter, tea, flour, jam and a wet, clammy parcel that turned out to be corned-beef. No sweets: he looked very carefully in the corners of the bag, where there was nearly always a little twisted-up package of bull’s-eyes. There were none to-night. And there was another thing missing. His small voice piped up.

“Didn’t you get tobacco, Father?”

“No.”

“But you’re right out!”

“Oh, I’m going to knock off smoking,” said father, quietly.

Hugh stared at him. This was rather terrifying. He knew what father’s pipe meant to him: how often he had said that he’d rather go hungry than without a smoke. But there was something in father’s face that held back the words that leaped to his tongue. He put away the groceries and made the tea.

They ate bread and jam. Hugh had hoped for bacon, but that was another of the things that hadn’t come out of the tucker-bag. Having had bread and jam for breakfast and dinner he was not very hungry for it now: and tea without milk was, he thought privately, horrid, though it was no use to say anything—he would have to get used to it.

Father was very silent, lost in thought. He roused himself once or twice to talk about the cattle-sale and the townships, and he listened when Hugh told him about the man who was going to the Circus. But these efforts at entertainment died away very quickly; and as soon as father had finished—he did not eat much, in spite of being so hungry—he got up and walked out into the darkness.

Hugh cleared the table and washed up slowly. Then he stood on the verandah, listening to father’s slow footfalls, up and down, on the track to the shed. On an ordinary evening he would have run out to join him. But this was not an ordinary evening. There was something dreadful about it.

He went to bed, at last, as there seemed nothing else to do, and sleep might take away the dreadful feeling. Father came in after he was in bed. He saw the tall form in the doorway, and a wild hope sprang up within him that he had come to say that everything was really all right.

But father couldn’t: Hugh felt that. He said, “Hullo, old man—turned in?” and came to tuck him up and kiss him: and Hugh hugged him very hard, without saying anything.

Father lit the lamp in the living-room, and Hugh heard the scrape of his chair as he drew it up to the table. He lay for a long time watching the dim light that came into his room. Then he dropped off to sleep.

He woke with a start. It seemed much later, for he was cold, and he pulled up a blanket. The light was still showing: and presently he heard father’s voice, low, with a kind of entreaty in it.

“He’s talking to someone!” said Hugh to himself. “Wonder who it is?”

He slipped out of bed and went softly on his bare feet down the passage. There was no one with father, who was sitting at the table with his head in his hands, staring at a letter that lay before him. As Hugh peeped at him in bewilderment, he spoke again.

“If I only could! What on earth am I going to do!”

Hugh had a sudden feeling that he was looking at something he was not meant to see. He turned and crept away, trembling. Back in bed, he pulled the blanket over his head to shut out the voice, and said a quivering little prayer, over and over: “Oh God, please don’t let father be worried!” He was still saying it when he fell asleep.

## CHAPTER III

### THE WONDERFUL SUNDAY

**H**UGH opened his eyes in the early morning. The sun was just getting up: it looked at him through his open window, sending a ray of light across his bed, as if to tell him that last night's trouble had all vanished. Starlings were chattering among the apple-trees; which would have been an unwelcome sound if the apples had been any good, but as it was, Hugh merely hoped they liked codlin-moth grubs.

It was too good a morning to remain in bed. He peeped into his father's room, seeing him fast asleep: so he dressed quietly, cleared out the fireplace and laid a new fire, and tidied the room. Then there was nothing more to do, so he went outside.

On the verandah he halted in amazement. There was a sound of creaking wheels and slow hoofs; and through the trees he could catch glimpses of strange things on the road—flashes of red and blue and yellow, in a long procession, toiling up the road beyond the eastern fence of the orchard. He caught his breath. The Circus! Then he dashed to the gate.

It was still some distance away. He climbed the gate-post, hugging himself with joy. To think it was actually going to pass his very door! This made up for weeks of dullness. The lions would be hidden in their cages, he knew, but they couldn't hide the horses and ponies. Then a vast bulk showed for an instant in a gap in the trees, and he gave a shout of ecstasy. An elephant!

Never had any small boy waited with such trembling eagerness for Peterson's Circus. A man on a big black horse came into view first, riding in front of a red caravan: a man who looked as though he might tumble out of the saddle at any moment, so sleepy was he. As for the driver of the caravan, he had ceased to make any effort to remain awake: his head had fallen sideways, his mouth was open. He still held the reins, and the pair of dapple-greys that drew the caravan plodded along in the rear of the black horse, half asleep themselves, but always road-wise. They came on slowly. And then Adventure suddenly flashed into Hugh Russell's life, for the man in the lead caught sight of him, became wide awake, and cantered forward.

"H'lo, son! You're up early—wish I wasn't. Any chance of a camp here?"

"Here!" Hugh gasped. "Not—not all of you?"

"It's all or none, son. Got a paddock to spare?"

"There's a paddock the other side of the orchard."

“Anything in it?”

“No. Daisy’s sold.”

“Good luck to Daisy!” said the man. “Well, where’s your Dad?”

“He’s asleep. Oh—do wait—I’ll get him.”

He was down from the gate-post in a flash. The man’s hand went up, and the red caravan stopped. All along the procession ran the unspoken signal; every weary beast came to a halt. Hugh was shouting as he ran.

“Father! Father! Wake up—there’s a Circus!”

John Russell’s head appeared at his window.

“What on earth——?”

“Circus!” Hugh panted. “They want to camp—in our paddock! Oh, do let them, Father!”

“Well, it won’t hurt us,” Russell said. “Tell them they can, Hugh. I’ll come out as soon as I get some clothes on.”

“Father says you can!” Hugh was racing back to the gate, shouting as he ran.

“Then he’s a good sort,” said the man on the black horse, thankfully. “What about water, sonny?”

“Oh, there’s a creek. I’ll go and let down the slip-rails.”

“You wait till I get my Boss,” said the man. “He likes to see where he’s goin’ to camp.” He cantered back, along the motionless procession, while Hugh danced with impatience in the gateway.

He had only a few moments to wait. The black horse reappeared, this time with a new rider: a huge man, bare-headed, in shirt and trousers. His head was a tousled black mass: his dark face, with its long black moustache, was, to Hugh, exactly what the face of a Circus Boss or a pirate chief should be. Hugh thrilled to think that it was he who had to greet such a man.

“Father’s coming!” he piped. “But it’s all right. You can stay!”

“Father hasn’t seen the size of my show—nor I haven’t seen the size of his paddock!” returned Big Dan.

“I’ll take you!” Hugh offered. He ran down the road, looking over his shoulder anxiously to make sure that he was followed. But the big man came, smiling under his moustache at his eager guide. Hugh stopped at the slip-rails.

“Will it do? There’s a creek—and we’ve got a water-hole in the orchard.”

“First-rate,” approved Big Dan. “We don’t often get a camp with that much shade. Have you got any stock, nipper?”

“Only one horse. He’s in the orchard.”

“If he’s never seen an elephant you’d better put him in the stable. I’ll give you some feed for him if you’re short.”

“I think Nugget ’ud like to see an elephant,” said Hugh, protesting. “He doesn’t get much fun.”

“Might be too much fun for him. Some horses get heart-failure.”

“I had a canary once that died of heart-failure,” Hugh told him. “But I’m sure Nugget’s not that kind of horse. Oh—here’s father!”

The men exchanged greetings, and the matter was quickly arranged. Russell went off to guard Nugget against any shock to his nerves, but finding him peacefully inspecting the elephants from the orchard corner, decided that nerves were unknown to him. Hugh, secretly relieved at being left unhampered, perched on the fence in a simmer of excitement to watch the procession file in.

It was a long-drawn-out delight. Caravan after caravan turned from the road, lurching across the grass. Their gaudy colours, the twinkling brass harness-mounts, turned the drab little paddock into a place of enchantment. And the great horses paced by as gently as though they never galloped round a circus-ring to please a shouting crowd, with beautiful ladies pirouetting on their broad backs. Then came the elephants, drawing the huge wheeled cages that made Hugh thrill with shuddery excitement, even though no lions were visible, and only a few muffled growls could be heard from behind the shutters. Best of all, though, were the special performing horses and ponies, ridden and led: well-bred, most of them, of every size and colour; beautiful, despite being covered with the dust of their long night journey. There were eight blacks, so alike that Hugh did not see how anyone could ever tell them apart: to see them made him almost ache with happiness. The men and boys who rode them, gipsy-looking fellows most of them, brought the strange mysterious feeling of the Circus; but Hugh could only glance at them when the horses were there to be looked at.

It was all a marvel of drill and organisation. Each caravan, each lorry, knew exactly where to go: they fell into orderly lines in the little paddock, taking up their places like men on a chess-board. Where there was not sufficient space to manœuvre a van, the elephants came to the rescue, pushing with their great heads, six inches at a time, never making a mistake, always patient and gentle. The caravans were ranged along one fence, lorries and cages along another: the horses were picketed under shady trees; and when all their work was done the three elephants rolled away, in the wake of their keeper, to the creek.

Hugh trotted after them. The creek was too narrow to allow them all the wallowing space they would have loved, but they made the most of what water there was. They waded into it, scooping it up with huge enjoyment: squirting it over themselves and each other, while Hugh and the keeper came in for an occasional shower of drops. The keeper, a friendly man, told Hugh their names, adding that they were worth all the horses in the show. He had no opinion of horses; which Hugh considered a pity. Elephants, he said, had brains and sense: his “bulls” could do anything but talk, and he wasn’t sure that they wouldn’t break out in speech some day.

“What language would they talk?” asked Hugh, much impressed.

“Oh—Injun, of course. Unless it was oddments they’ve picked up from me. If African parrots can talk good English I don’t see why a bull couldn’t.”

Hugh liked the elephant-man. He was so sleepy that he yawned all the time, but he would not hurry his “bulls.” He waited until they had bathed as much as they wished, and let them stand in the water while the hot sun dried them. Then he gave a queer, low whistle, and immediately they obeyed it, splashing out to the bank.

“Would they like apples?” Hugh asked.

“Wouldn’t they!”

“Even with codlin-moth grubs?”

“They won’t notice no grubs,” said the elephant-man. “Got any handy?”

The orchard fence was near. Hugh was through it in a flash, returning with his shirt stuffed with apples. He became instantly popular with the elephants. They disposed of the apples as fast as he could hand them out—the smallest actually followed his hand into his shirt with his trunk, so swiftly and deftly that Hugh had no time to be afraid before it withdrew, an apple in its clutch. The keeper laughed.

“He won’t hurt you, sonny. Wouldn’t do that if he didn’t like you. Let him try agin.”

Hugh stood his ground manfully while the snaky trunk slipped within his shirt again: glad that he found the apple quickly. He buttoned up the shirt, as a hint that there were no more—a hint at once accepted by the elephant.

“Well, that’s a treat for ’em,” said the keeper. “Feed and bed now, I reckon, boys. Like a ride up, son?”

“On an elephant?” Hugh gasped.

“That’s all the mount I can offer you; but any of ’em are up to your weight, I guess. You ain’t scared, are you?”

“N-not if you say it’s all right,” Hugh stammered.

“Wouldn’t give you the chance if it weren’t. Bless you, they wouldn’t hurt a butterfly. Let little Ali pick you up.”

He whistled to the smallest elephant. Hugh had hardly time to feel afraid. A soft black rope suddenly curved round his waist, and he was off his feet, checking his first impulse to struggle. Then he found himself sitting just behind the great ears, higher than he had ever been mounted in his life. The keeper grinned up at him.

“I’ll take you down if you say so, son. But it’s all right. Like to stay?”

“Y-yes.” He didn’t want to stay at all, but something in him would not let him say so.

“Well, hold on to his ears if you feel like slipping. I’ll keep close to you—not as there’s any need. Ali ’ud look after a year-old baby an’ give it its bottle, he’s that motherly. Come on, boys.”

The clumsy bulk beneath Hugh swayed forward with a lurch that almost disposed of the rider. But the elephant-man’s hand was tight on his ankle in a flash, and he gripped an ear that felt like old dry leather. Then he found he did not need it. His natural sense of balance was good: he grew used to the swaying motion, letting his body become flexible, once the first stiffness of fear had left him. The hand on his ankle was withdrawn, and he was glad. A feeling of power, of delight, came to him. He gave a little, excited laugh.

“I—I like it!”

“’Course you do,” said the keeper. “Any sensible chap would. An’ you just bet Ali knows you like it. If you trust a bull he’ll always be your friend, but he knows in a flash if you’re scared of him, no matter how deep down you hide it. They got more sense than ’uman beings, they have.”

John Russell, talking to Big Dan Peterson near the blue caravan, heard a shrill voice from its open window. A head covered with long dark curls was framed in it, the rosy face muffled in a big towel. Nita had seen something that interrupted her in the midst of dressing.

“Daddy! Daddy! There’s a boy riding Ali!”

The men’s eyes followed the tiny pointing finger. Over the crest of the hill surged slowly three elephants: high on the leader John Russell saw his son, eager, laughing, his face scarlet with excitement. He took a quick step forward.

“By Jove! Is he all right?”

“Right as rain, with George there: or without him, either, if he’s made friends with the elephants. And I guess George wouldn’t have put him up if he hadn’t. Your nipper’s got pluck, right enough. Jolly kid—wasn’t he anxious for us to camp here!”

“It’s a great day for him,” Russell said. “Poor youngster, he doesn’t get much fun. I’m glad you struck us, if only for Hugh.”

“Well, I’m glad for my outfit,” Big Dan said. “It’s a real good camp for a tired crowd to spend Sunday in. We needn’t move on until ten o’clock tomorrow: Coinbar’s only good for a night performance, and we can get there in five hours. So your boy can get acquainted with us. He’s got sense enough not to try any tricks with the animals, hasn’t he?”

“Oh yes. Hugh isn’t a fool.”

“Doesn’t look like one. But it ’ud fair astonish you to see how we’ve got to watch round for the youngsters in most of the townships. They hang round the horses and worry ’em no end. It doesn’t seem to occur to ’em that a Circus horse wants rest an’ peace when he’s out of the ring, if he’s to do his turn without any nerves; they get queer and nervy enough, most of ’em. It’s an unnatural life for a horse—lights and excited crowds and the menagerie always handy. They don’t like the cats. And always being tied up. It’s a real holiday to a Circus horse not to be tied to anything.”

“Well, you can let any of them loose in the orchard.”

“What about your fruit trees?”

“They can’t hurt them. The apples are no good and most of the trees are only fit to be chopped down and burned. It’s a worthless hole; it has ruined me, so it might as well give your horses a good day if you care to turn them into it. I’ll put my old screw into the yard, in case they don’t agree; you can’t afford to risk one of yours getting a kick.”

“That’s so. Well, I take it real kind of you, Mr. Russell. Of course, I’ll pay you for the camp. Pound a night’s what I generally pay.”

John Russell flushed.

“Well, I can’t afford to refuse, though you’re welcome enough. I’m dead broke. We’ll have to clear out of here presently, though goodness knows what we’re going to do. Sorry I can’t offer you a meal, either. But Mrs. Peterson is welcome to use the house in any way she likes.”

“Thanks,” said Big Dan, avoiding looking at his host’s haggard eyes. “I reckon my wife’d think it a real luxury to sit on your verandah this afternoon an’ pretend she had a home that didn’t run about on wheels. Look at that nipper of yours now!”

John Russell repressed a start of alarm. Hugh, held in the circle of the largest elephant’s trunk, was swinging cheerfully to and fro, his boots waving, his yellow curls all on end. He shouted gleefully as the great trunk flung him upwards: then he was sitting enthroned behind a head that was like a table

before him. The keeper grinned up at him from the ground.

“You’re sure he’s safe?” Russell asked, anxiously.

“Safe as houses. Fear is the only thing that ’ud make him unsafe, an’ it’s easy seen fear don’t trouble him. George knows every blink of that old bull’s eye. They’re funny: some people they hate like poison, no matter how they try to make friends, and others they take to from the jump. Now that boy of yours could lie down and let old Ram Singh there put his foot on his chest, and Ram wouldn’t let him feel a featherweight!”

“Thank you,” said Hugh’s parent, hastily: “I hope he won’t try!”

“We won’t suggest it,” said Big Dan, chuckling. “But he’d be all right. There he comes, now!”

Ram Singh offered his trunk, at a word from the keeper. Hugh found a more or less unsteady footing on what looked rather like a smoke-grey cable, and George swung him to the ground. The game was over. The elephants were foot-picketed and Hugh flung himself into the work of feeding them, staggering from the waggon near with bundles of hay that hid his small form. He divided his attentions equally between the trio, and the elephants looked at him benevolently.

“Tiger for a job, ain’t he?” commented Big Dan. “Mightn’t last, though, if he had it every day. Ah, here’s my girl!”

His heavy face lit up as his little daughter flung open the caravan door and raced down the steps.

“Daddy! Can that boy come to breakfast?”

“Mind your manners, Nita,” said Big Dan, ceremoniously. “Say how-do nicely to Mr. Russell.”

Nita flashed a smile and offered a hand with the ease of a public favourite. But it was clear that her interest did not lie with Hugh’s father.

“*Can* he, Daddy? Mummy says so.”

“Why, you’ve got to ask Mr. Russell about that. He may want Hugh himself. We’d like to have him, if he can spare him.” It was on the tip of Dan’s tongue to extend the invitation to the father, but something held him back. Instinctively he knew that this man would not eat with Circus-folk in a caravan. “Proud as a high-school horse,” he thought. “An’ hungry, too, I’ll bet, poor beggar.”

Nita had no scruples.

“You come too,” she said, turning great brown eyes on Russell. “There’s lots of liver-an’-bacon!”

“Sorry,” Russell said hastily. “I’m rather busy this morning, Nita. But Hugh may go, if it isn’t too much trouble for your mother.”

“She’d like him,” said Nita. “She’d come an’ tell you herself, only her hair isn’t done yet!”

A faint exclamation was heard from the caravan. Big Dan gave a great shout of laughter.

“Then that’s settled,” he said. “Come along, Nita, and get introduced to Hugh.”

## CHAPTER IV

### CARAVAN TOWN

TO the end of his life Hugh Russell was to remember that wonderful Sunday as though it were a dream that had begun in a miracle and gradually unfolded, delight succeeding delight, until the whole pattern was of a beauty that stamped itself for ever on his heart.

Perhaps there was something in the sharp contrast of the bleak desolation of the day before, ending in a bewilderment of dread at some terrible prospect that was beyond his understanding. Just as in after years he loved to travel in memory through every moment of the dream-Sunday, so he could never bear to recall his father's face as he had seen it on Saturday night, stamped with fear and despair. No hurt that came later was ever quite so bad as that. Never again was he to know the suffering of complete helplessness as he had felt it when he crept away to hide himself under his blanket.

He was only a little boy, and sleep had restored him, ending with the golden morning that brought the miracle of the Circus to his very touch. Small wonder that yesterday's trouble was swept from his mind from the moment that the gay caravans came rocking through the trees. How could a boy remember such a thing as money—on a day filled to overflowing with wonder and movement and gay human companionship? It was his day: perhaps given him in compensation, and to strengthen him for what lay ahead.

He liked Nita from the moment that she came dancing over the grass beside her tall father. There was something of quicksilver in Nita's elf-like body. She scarcely ever walked like ordinary children; always she seemed to move on springs, as if some hidden source of vitality carried her along. Her curls were always dancing, her eyes bright and bird-like, her speech quick and eager. Hugh felt slow and heavy beside her, but she was like a magnet to him, giving him something of her own gay energy. She laughed a great deal, which was probably the secret of her charm for a boy who had known little laughter. And yet, baby as she was, there was in her a vein of shrewd common-sense. The daughter of a Circus, caravan-reared, soon acquires that.

"Hullo, Hugh! You're coming to breakfast with us," was her greeting.

Hugh, dusty and covered with loose straws, looked at her blankly: a vivid little figure about his own size, in scarlet jersey and brief blue skirt.

"Me?"

"Yes—in our waggon. Your Daddy says so."

“If Hugh likes to, you might add, Nita,” put in Big Dan, smiling at the boy.

“I—I’d like to,” stammered Hugh, bashfully. “Did father say I could?”

“He did. We asked him, too, but he said he was busy.”

Hugh wondered vaguely what was to make father busy; but the question did not trouble him long. The prospect of breakfast in a real caravan was too entrancing. He glanced at his grimy hands.

“I’ll have to get clean first,” he said. “Have I got time?”

“Plenty if you hurry,” said Big Dan. “But I smell bacon, so skip lively.”

Hugh was off like a shot. Father was not to be seen about the house; he was rather glad, since it saved the necessity of asking if he ought to put on a coat. Being very hot, he decided not to do so. He brushed his shirt and trousers vigorously, groomed his hair, and sluiced his face and hands. His boots made him hesitate: it was certain that they needed polish, but—had not his host said that he smelt bacon? The boots were forgotten, and Hugh fled.

Nita was waiting for him, perched on the top step of the caravan.

“Come along. Mummy’s ready.”

He followed her shyly into the interior, the splendours of which made him blink. The yellow curtains were drawn back, so that sunshine flooded in, and the gleam of brass and mirrors was almost overwhelming. Mrs. Dan, wearing a cap which imperfectly concealed the fact that her hair was still in curling-pins, greeted him as though he were an old friend; and in a moment he was beside Nita at the table, with a plateful of liver and bacon smoking before him, together with a mug of cocoa—a sufficiently exciting vision to a boy whose usual breakfast was porridge.

“Well, this chap has earned his tucker, Polly,” asserted Big Dan. “He’s a great man.”

“I seen him,” said Mrs. Dan. “Working like an ’ero, he was, and riding Ali. How do you like a Circus, sonny?”

“I think it’s wonderful,” said Hugh solemnly. “I wish father had one like yours.”

“Might wish himself out of it, when things go wrong,” said Big Dan, with his deep chuckle. “There’s times when I’d rather run a—a fish-shop!”

“Ah, go on, now, Dan,” scorned his wife. “I think I see you inside four walls, running anything—even if it was Govinment House!”

“Well, they won’t put me there, so I suppose I’ll just have to stick to the old show,” Big Dan said. “What do you think, Nita? the horses are going to have a real picnic. Mr. Russell says we can turn them all loose in his orchard.”

“O-o-oh!” said Nita, round-eyed. “All of them? Can Merrylegs go?”

“Sure he can. All of ’em can go, except the kickers. Can’t let them loose among the others: they’ll have to look on and learn what comes from having bad manners. You can take Merrylegs in when he’s had his oats.”

“Can I help to take them in?” asked Hugh.

“If you’re as steady with horses as you are with elephants, you can.”

“I can ride.”

“You don’t need to ride. We’ll lead ’em in. But most of our ponies want careful handling, even to lead. They get queer tempers, travelling round—can’t stand having their heads pulled about.”

“You got a pony, Hugh?” demanded Nita.

The boy’s face fell.

“Not now. I had, until lately, but he’s sold now. He was a beauty, too.”

“They’re all that—till you buy ’em,” said Big Dan, as one who knows.

“Oh, but Tinker was. A real beauty. He’d do anything for me.”

“Lie down an’ die, an’ dance, an’ jump through hoops?” demanded Nita, all in a breath.

“Oh—well!” Hugh protested.

“Merrylegs can, anyhow. With me on him!”

“But he’s a real Circus pony. Tinker wasn’t, of course. But he’d rear when I told him, and pick up a handkerchief in his teeth, and go over jumps alone.”

“That so?” Big Dan looked interested. “Pity you sold him.”

“I didn’t want to, but father had to. We got too poor, you see,” said Hugh, innocently.

“Who taught him his tricks?”

“I did. I’ve seen four Circuses,” said Hugh, as if the fact explained much.

“H’m. What colour was he, and how old?”

Hugh felt himself the centre of interest. He did not realise that to Circus-folk a clever pony means a chance not to be lost.

“Black—all over. He didn’t have one white hair on him. And he was three.”

“Wants looking into,” said Big Dan. “Who bought him, sonny?”

“Joe Clarke’s father. He lives over the hill there.” He pointed vaguely northwards. “’Bout three miles away.” Suddenly light flashed upon him. He pushed his plate back excitedly.

“Oh, do you think you could buy him? Oh, I wish you could! He’d make a ripping Circus pony—Father often said so. And I just can’t stand Joe Clarke having him!”

“What—you an’ Joe bad friends?”

“Oh, it isn’t that. But he rides all over the saddle, and he always gives a pony a sore back—and he hangs on by the bridle. And Tinker’s got a mouth like silk—I could ride him with a bit of string—didn’t need a bridle at all. You don’t let a pony’s mouth get hurt in the Circus, do you?”

“Not if I’m handy in the neighbourhood of the chap that’s doing it,” Big Dan made grim answer. “Joe had him long enough to spoil him?”

“Three months—but they turned him out at first ’cause he’d got so poor. I don’t think he’s been ridden much. Oh, do buy him!”

“Look here,” said little Mrs. Dan, firmly. “You just eat your breakfast, Hugh. There’s no sense in letting good food get cold. Mr. Peterson’ll think about it just as well while you’re eating.” And Hugh recollected that he was very hungry, and did as he was told.

“But you will buy Tinker, won’t you, Daddy?” Nita begged.

“Oh, you’re at me, too, are you?” Big Dan did his best to look like a harassed man. “There’s several things to be considered. First I mightn’t like the pony. Second, I might like him, but he mightn’t be the right cut for the ring. And third, Joe Clarke’s dad might want too much for him. Or he mightn’t sell him at all. Quite a lot of mights and mightn’ts; and you nippers talk as if it was as easy as buying a pound of butter!”

“When you talk like that,” said his daughter, “I know you mean to try!” And Hugh’s eyes danced.

“Oh, well, I could do with another pony,” said Big Dan. “I’ll have a yarn to Mr. Russell about him, anyway. But I don’t see where you come in, Hugh. You’ll never see Tinker again if I buy him.”

“No,” said Hugh, quietly. “But I’ll know that Joe Clarke isn’t giving him sore backs and girth-galls and things.”

“And that’s a pretty big thing when you care for a pony,” put in Mrs. Dan. “He’ll have a good time if he comes here, Hugh: the ponies get the best of it. More bacon, sonny? Well, have some jam, then.” She filled up his mug with cocoa. “Ain’t it a treat to be eating breakfast all lazy and comfortable, without having to hold on to one’s plate and mug at the same time! You’d just laugh, Hugh, to see what a game it is to eat when the old waggon’s bumping over a rough track.”

“I think it’s jolly to live in a caravan,” Hugh said. “Yours is lovely.”

“Well, it’s pretty ship-shape. Got to keep it tidy, of course, or you wouldn’t know where you were. I like it best on a nice cool day in spring when I can sit near the door and watch all the country slipping by.”

“I like it on a rainy night,” said Nita. “All snuggled up in bed, and the rain pelting down. An’ thunder! Oh, I do love thunder!”

“Fair silly she gets in a thunderstorm,” said Mrs. Dan. “Can’t keep her still—not that she’s much on keeping still at any time, unless she’s asleep. But when there’s a storm on she’s like a bee in a bottle. Nasty things, I think. I can’t bear thunderstorms.”

“Can’t say I like ’em,” remarked Big Dan. “But that’s mostly on account of the animals. The horses are bad enough, but you can’t ever tell how the elephants and the lions are going to take a storm. Got to watch the lot of ’em.” He felt for his pipe. “Everyone finished? Well I’ll light up.”

“An’ what did your mummy say to you comin’ off to breakfast with us, Hugh?” asked Mrs. Dan, lazily—and was sorry as soon as the words had escaped her. The boy flushed, and looked at her dumbly.

“Ah, poor old chap!” she said, and jumped up. “Look here, Hugh—I bet you never saw as many cupboards in a small house as we’ve got here!” She flung open one door after another, revealing all the family possessions of the Petersons. Then Hugh had to inspect the cabins, and climb to the driver’s seat in front, where, whip in hand, he imagined himself driving the pair of bays he had seen hauling the caravan earlier in the morning. With Mrs. Dan and Nita chattering in chorus, and Big Dan putting in a word now and then, there was no chance to be anything but merry. Finally Mrs. Dan declared she must get tidy, and sent the children off, refusing Hugh’s offer to help wash up.

“Nice kid,” she said, decidedly. “Put my foot in it, didn’t I, Dan? Lor, I was sorry!”

“My fault,” Big Dan answered. “I ought to have warned you. I asked Russell if his wife ’ud object to a lot of Circus people, and he said she was dead. Said it was a good thing for her she was, ’cause he’s broke. I’d say that feller was in a pretty bad hole.”

“He looks miserable enough,” said his wife. “And the boy’s half-starved. I bet he hasn’t seen a decent breakfast this good while. Say we let him feed with us to-day, Dan?”

“Suits me,” said he. “Nita’s enjoyin’ his comp’ny. There they go—she’s showin’ him round.”

Nita was doing the honours of the Circus. It had to be a quiet business, for most of the men were asleep. Women were stirring in the caravans, the majority seizing the moment to wash clothes—already a queer assortment of

garments could be seen drying on the wire fence of the orchard: but they worked noiselessly, so that the tired men could rest. Two tents, hurriedly pitched, were full of sleeping forms: others were rolled in blankets under the lorries, a steady snoring filling the air. George, the “bull-man” lay near his elephants, which, having finished their ration, now swayed drowsily from side to side, their little eyes half-closed.

“Don’t they ever keep still?” Hugh whispered. The elephants fascinated him.

“No—they always rock like that. I don’t like them as much as horses. But I like the cats.”

“The lions? Oh, can I see them?” They raced across to the great wheeled cages, drawn up so that the sun could shine full upon their occupants. There were five; two lions and three lionesses, all in good condition for menagerie animals. They also were asleep, save the largest lion. He lay with his muzzle against the bars, looking fixedly out across the sunlit paddock—thinking, perhaps, long thoughts of freedom and great spaces. Even when the children came close to the cage he did not favour them with a glance.

“That’s Nabob,” Nita said. “O-oh, he’s a cross old lion! We haven’t had him long. He hurt a man in his last Circus—clawed him something awful!”

Hugh experienced a shivery feeling as though something cold crawled up his spine. The big, still beast held terrible possibilities.

“He didn’t kill him, did he?”

“No. Nearly, though. Dad got him cheap ’cause of that: they couldn’t get another tamer to train him. Our man could, though,” she added proudly. “Pazo could train any cat that ever was.”

“He’s got a funny name.”

“Pazo? Oh, it’s not his true name. He’s a Spaniard, and his real name’s too hard for anyone to say. He’s an awful man. One of the tent-hands called him ‘Dago,’ and he hit him, and they did have a fight! I liked it. But Mummy wouldn’t let me stay,” she finished sadly. “Mummy’s funny about things. Anyhow, I peeked out of the window—only Daddy came an’ stopped them.” She sighed, pondering on the strange ways of parents.

“Where’s he now?” asked Hugh, curious to see the “awful” man.

“Pazo? Oh, he’s asleep somewhere. He’s like the cats—he can just lie down on the ground and go to sleep, as comfortable as if he was in bed. Says he learned it from the cats. Doesn’t make a hole for his hip, or anything. Want to see me make Nabob look at us?” She twirled on one foot.

“Rather!” said Hugh. “But he didn’t.”

“Oh, that wasn’t it. He wouldn’t look for that, not if I twirl all day. But you just watch.”

She gave a low clear whistle, ending with a little trill. The lion stirred not a muscle. But his great yellow eyes turned slowly until they rested upon her, holding her in an intense stare. The child thrust her head a little forward and gave back a look as steady, her whole body tense. It was a duel of eyes: and again Hugh felt the cold creep along his spine—as though at any moment the crouching beast might spring forward and make matchwood of his bars.

But Nita won. Presently Nabob’s eyelids blinked, and he gave a little angry twitch of his head. Then he looked past her again, settling down to apparent unconsciousness of her presence.

“Beat you! Beat you!” Nita snapped her fingers, prancing in front of the cage.

“Ugh! Come away. I don’t like it,” Hugh said—though even with the words he was aware of a queer excitement that was half fear, half delight. “Aren’t you ever scared that he’ll get out and eat you? He looked as if he’d like to!”

“Cats don’t get out of *our* cages,” said Nita, scornfully. “My Daddy taught me to do that. He was the best tamer that was ever in the whole world! He said I’d got to be able to show a lion who was boss!” At which Hugh was incautious enough to laugh—when immediately the daughter of the Circus became a vision of fury, stamping her tiny foot and hurling a volley of angry words that left him breathless. He stared at her in such bewilderment that her wrath passed as swiftly as it had come, and she stood with downcast face, a finger in her mouth, an absurd baby.

“Well, you *are* funny!” said the boy.

“Shouldn’t have laughed at me—*won’t* be laughed at!” came a voice with a hint of tears.

“I didn’t mean to make you scotty.”

“Then you mustn’t never laugh at me again. Promise you won’t!”

Hugh pondered. To him a promise was a serious matter.

“Well, I’ll try not to. But I won’t promise, ’cause I might forget.”

“Oh, all right.” She beamed on him suddenly, and tucked a hand into his arm. “’S a mercy Mummy didn’t see me—she said she’d whack me next time I lost my hair! Don’t you tell her, will you, Hughie?”

“Not me.” Hugh felt that this mixture of lion-tamer and guilty urchin was rather beyond him. “Come and show me the horses.”

They ran down the paddock hand in hand. From a window of the house

John Russell, looking out wearily, saw the little, happy figures, and sighed. It seemed to him a long while since Hugh had played with anyone. Once, he knew, he would have recoiled angrily from the idea of his boy's playing with a Circus child. To-day he was conscious only of relief at hearing him laugh.

The horses, picketed in a long line, had almost emptied their canvas troughs. Nita went straight to a pony that whinnied eagerly as she came. He was snow-white; a beautifully-shaped little fellow with long mane and tail: and he carried himself proudly, arching his neck and beating on the ground with one dainty fore-foot.

"That's my Merrylegs," she said, "and he's the best pony that ever went into a ring! I bet your old Tinker can't beat him!"

"Yes, he can, then," was Hugh's sturdy answer. "Tinker wasn't trained like him, of course; he was just a working pony. But he's every bit as good!"

Nita's eyes flashed storm-signals again. But she restrained herself; possibly because she was in full view of the blue caravan.

"P'f!" she said, scornfully. "We know better, don't we, Merry, old chap?" She felt in the pocket of her jersey for a lump of sugar; the pony's soft muzzle caressed her palm as he took it.

"Do you ride him in the Circus?"

"Why, of course I do! That's my job. I'm 'Little Carmenita, the World's Best Juvenile Bareback Equestrienne!' " She rolled out the long words with a slow relish. "I'll show you us on one of the posters, if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you all right," Hugh hastened to assure her. He was somewhat awed by such glory. "What do you do?"

"I ride in, an' gallop round, an' jump off an' on, an' stand on him, an' jump through hoops, an' go over jumps, an' make him put his fore-feet up on tubs, an' kneel down with me on him—oh, lots of tricks. Daddy's always teaching him new ones. I could do lots of things the men do," she boasted, "only Daddy won't let me—yet. But I bet I will. Mummy used to be a 'World-Famous' too, only she doesn't go into the ring now; Daddy says she mustn't, 'cause she's the Owner's wife; but I know she'd like to."

"My word!" Hugh was greatly impressed. He had thought Mrs. Dan a beautiful lady, but it was a new thing to him that a mother could really be a Circus-rider. "Does your father ride, too?"

"In the ring? Well, you *are* a silly! Owners don't ride, not after they get to be owners. Daddy's the Boss Ringmaster. He gives everyone orders, and don't they just jump, too! They're all frightened of Daddy, 'cept me."

Hugh pondered this. Mr. Peterson had seemed to him a mild man.

“He doesn’t look cross,” he said.

“You wait till you see Daddy getting things done in a hurry. Specially pitching camp. *Then* you’ll know!” quoth Nita, darkly.

Hugh decided that he did not very much want to know. Big Dan might have the possibilities of fury that certainly existed in his daughter.

“Come and see the other horses,” he suggested.

They went down the line, and he feasted his eyes. Horses of every colour; bay, black, dappled, brown, piebald. There were four creams, so perfectly matched that he did not see how anyone could tell them apart: tall, upstanding beauties, with rippling manes and tails.

“They’re Daddy’s liberty four,” volunteered Nita.

“What’s that mean?”

“Horses that do tricks in the ring without any harness on—just plumes on their heads. They’re awfully clever. Daddy says they’re the best four in Australia. Some day he’s going to have four blacks to act with them, but he’s only got two good enough now—there they are. He’s training them, but they aren’t ring-perfect yet.”

Hugh’s opinion of his guide grew rapidly. She was so small, but she knew so much: there was a crisp clearness in her voice, when she spoke of the horses, that impressed him greatly. He felt very young and ignorant beside her—which undoubtedly he was. They went from one horse to another, and she had stories of each. It was an enchanted hour to Hugh.

Big Dan came across the paddock, several men following him.

“Hullo—learned all their names yet, sonny? Like to give us a hand now to put them into the orchard?”

Hugh stammered an eager assent.

“Well, take ’em quietly an’ don’t jerk their heads about. You take those two piebalds: they’re steady old chaps an’ won’t give you any trouble. Here, Nita, you lead Merrylegs and Quondong. Where’s that boy Eddie?”

He looked round sharply. A boy of twelve, dark and heavily-built, came from the caravans, breaking into a run as he saw the glance.

“Better learn to look slippy when I call you, Eddie.” Big Dan’s tone was curt. The boy muttered indistinctly and went forward to the horses, looking sullen.

He did not interest Hugh. There was room for no other thought than the one which possessed him—that he, Hugh Russell, was actually handling Circus horses! That they were a sleepy pair of gigantic build did not matter. He

knew what they were: they belonged to the noble army that cantered round the ring with tossing manes and tails while beautiful ladies and intrepid men performed, on their broad backs, feats of incredible agility and daring. He saw it in his mind's eye as he led the piebalds up the paddock; thrilled to think that these mighty public performers were obeying the lightest touch of his small hand. Little Mrs. Dan, looking from her caravan, saw the intent, grave face, and recognised all he was feeling. "Poor kid!" she murmured, over her saucepans.

The piebalds were turned loose in the orchard, and Hugh raced back for another pair, taking the shortest cut. Big Dan grinned, watching his methods: the slow progress in front of the horses, a hand gripping each halter; the careful passage through the gateway, lest a shining side should jostle a post; the march along the road to the second gateway with equal care; the lingering over slipping off the halters, caressing each great head. Then a rush—dodging between apple-trees, slipping eel-wise through the wires of the fence, taking the shortest possible track to the next pair of horses, arriving panting, red-faced, eager. Big Dan did not know how many horses his new helper managed to lead. But Hugh could have told him each one.

The creams were the last: he was permitted to lead only one of those, but it was the final touch of joy. He stood with Nita and her father, watching the delight of the horses at finding themselves free. Many were rolling: Merrylegs struggled to his feet after a prolonged roll, his shining coat matted with dust and fallen leaves, and trotted down the hill to the water-hole, wading in knee-deep beside a bay mare who greeted him with a whinny that plainly said, "What a day we're having!" The piebalds were exchanging notes over the yard fence with Nugget, who was stirred out of his usual calm to utter loud neighs of greeting to the newcomers. All over the orchard wandered the Circus horses, brushing under the boughs, sometimes stretching up to nibble the stunted apples: all free, all happy.

"Jolly good sight!" said Big Dan, looking as satisfied as they. "I think I'll put a rope round the gate, though, Hugh: some of our lot are cunning enough to open any ordinary catch. Then I'll have a yarn to your Dad about this wonderful Tinker of yours. He might ride over with me after dinner to see the man who bought him."

The Circus people were waking up. At the tucker-waggon the cook was busy over his stove: savoury smells began to drift towards the house. A cauldron of potatoes was bubbling over a fire on the ground. Some of the women cooked in the caravans, like Mrs. Dan; but most of the performers, as well as all the tent-men and grooms, drew their rations from the waggon. The "stars" were beginning to appear; Nita pointed them out to the awestruck

Hugh. There was first Mrs. Brown, the “high-school” rider, whom the posters called Signora di Tutti—“she’s got the crossest baby you ever saw!” There was Pazo, the tamer, a big, dark fellow, seamed on one cheek from a long-ago encounter with a lion. That very tall man with a melancholy face was Joey, the chief clown; there were two others, one being Toby, who was a dwarf—“but Toby never gets up until he’s hungry.” The lean, agile-looking men with bright handkerchiefs knotted round their necks, were the Italian trapeze artists. Those girls laughing down by the creek, smoking cigarettes, were riders and tumblers: Hugh regarded them with amazement, for in those days very few women smoked. That tall, dark man was Mr. Crowe, Daddy’s second-in-command: the lad with him rode the bucking bullock and went over the high jump. He could ride the worst horse anyone ever put a bridle on.

“What does that boy do?” asked Hugh, pointing.

“Eddie Pratt? Oh, he rides, and he hands things for the jugglers, and does odd jobs. He’s not as good as he thinks he is. Daddy wouldn’t have him only Mr. Pratt does all the business part, and Mrs. Pratt’s wardrobe-mistress.” She had to explain what this meant. Hugh learned that to keep performers smart was a busy job for a needlewoman.

“I play with Eddie, gen’lly,” remarked Nita. “When there’s time. But he won’t come near me to-day: he’s wild, ’cause I’ve got you.” She favoured him with a smile. “I like you better’n Eddie. He thinks he’s nearly grown-up—he smokes on the sly. I did too, once, but I was awful sick, an’ Mummy whacked me. Mummy *can* whack, too!” She screwed up her face at the memory of the painful moment.

“Where’s the bucking bullock?” asked Hugh, cutting short these confidences. He, too, liked Nita: it was pleasant to hear that she preferred him to Eddie. But no girl had a chance in his mind beside a Circus.

“Oh, he died on us. I think he bucked too hard, and it didn’t agree with him. Daddy’s looking out for another, ’cause they always make the crowd laugh. There’s Jeff. H’lo, Jeff!” She waved vigorously to a lad some distance away, who responded gravely.

“Who’s he?”

“He’s pretty new. He’s only a tentman, but Mr. Crowe’s teaching him ring-work. I like Jeff. He always grooms Merrylegs if he can, and he does things for Mummy. There’s the dinner-bell!”

The cook had come to the door of his waggon, beating with an iron spoon on a tin dish. At the sound all the Circus people turned and drifted to the waggon, where the cook’s mates served out food in enamel plates to the rank and file, while lads carried covered tins to the caravans. Each man filled his

own mug with tea from a great boiler on the ground. A table on trestles had been set up near the waggon: Hugh beheld enormous loaves of bread cut up with a swiftness that amazed him.

“Nita! Hugh! Come along!”

“There’s Mummy calling.” Nita dashed off. Hugh looked uncertainly after her, and turned towards the house with lagging feet. It had suddenly become a very drab little place to him.

Big Dan met him, however, and his voice was kind.

“Here, sonny, you’re havin’ dinner with us. I asked your Dad, and he says it’s all right. Not often Nita has a mate.” And simultaneously Nita came racing back with, “Hugh, Mummy says you’re to come to dinner!” And the world turned rainbow-coloured again to Hugh.

It was a wonderful dinner—almost a waste, since any food would have been delicious, eaten in a caravan. But there was pork, with crackling done to an unbelievable crispness, and baked potatoes as crisp: followed by such a pudding, smothered in custard, as fairies might eat. Only there were no fairy-appetites round the Petersons’ table.

The afternoon went by on wings. John Russell saddled Nugget and rode off, with Big Dan on a black horse. Mrs. Dan settled herself on the verandah of the house with a book, declaring that she felt a perfect lady. But as soon as the men had gone she broke all rules of etiquette by inspecting the four rooms of the house, her face growing more and more unhappy as its miserable poverty was revealed to her. She poked into the meat-safe, where the grey slab of corned-beef lay in solitary state: she made herself acquainted with the contents of the store-room—and it did not take her long.

“Well!” she uttered, under her breath. “And he’s a gentleman! Wish I could do something.” She endeavoured to console herself by making the beds anew, remarking that they looked as if a cyclone had made ’em.

Hugh knew nothing of this. With Nita always at his side he was wandering among the folk of the circus. They were kindly people in the main: they talked to him and told him stories of the ring and of the life of the roads—“tenting,” they called it. Hugh hung on their words. Pazo, the tamer, took him to see his “cats,” and played with them through the bars. The lionesses rolled in the straw, making soft little dabs at the Spaniard’s hand, and letting him pull their ears. But the big lion would have nothing to do with him: he stared past him in the fashion Hugh found so disconcerting. Pazo laughed, snapping his fingers at him.

“To-day ’e think. Why not? To-day is Sunday for ’im too. ’E ’ave long thoughts, of ’is country, per’aps. Like me: I think of Spain an’ the sunshine—

better than your hard Australian sun. To-morrow we do our tricks, 'im an' I."

"Does he like you?" Hugh asked.

"I think 'e 'ate me. But 'e do 'is tricks, for all that. Well, we will leave 'im to 'is think." He strolled off, laughing. Hugh decided that he was rather like his "cats."

When there seemed no more stories to be told him, and the Circus people had strolled away into the bush or up the creek, or had gone to sleep again, Nita demanded a new amusement.

"What do you do with yourself when you haven't got anyone to play with?"

"Oh—I just fool round. Climb trees, sometimes."

"O-oh! Let's go and climb one."

Hugh's best climbing tree grew on the track, a hundred yards from the house. He led the way to it; and for the first time found something at which he could beat his companion. Nita's opportunities of tree-climbing had been limited. She had natural agility and a trained sense of balance, so that she could scramble round in a fairly creditable way for a small girl. But Hugh in a tree was like a monkey. Nita sat on a wide limb, open-mouthed, as he went up the tall tree swiftly, not pausing until he was almost lost to sight among the leafy top-branches. Then he came down far more rapidly, swinging from bough to bough, with never a slip or a bungled foot-hold, until he was beside her, laughing.

"My word, you can climb!" uttered Nita. "Do it again!"

Hugh was quite willing. He took a different route this time; there was no branch on that tree that he had not made his own. He ended his descent on the low horizontal limb, smooth and slender, where he always practised the gymnastics John Russell had taught him: and there went through all he knew. This was something that Nita understood: she eyed him keenly as he "showed off" in not unnatural delight at being able to impress her for the first time. He finished with a neat somersault to the ground, and she clapped him enthusiastically.

Other eyes were upon him. Unnoticed, his father and Big Dan Peterson had pulled up their horses twenty yards away, and sat looking at the children. Russell liked the picture they made in the spreading gum-tree: the vivid little girl in the scarlet jersey held his eye more than did his own boy. The Circus man's attention was entirely upon Hugh. Not a movement of the lithe body escaped his keen watchfulness.

"Handy kid," he commented briefly as Hugh reached the ground.

“Oh, Hugh’s a monkey,” Russell said. “He spends most of his time in the trees.”

Hugh turned at his voice. He saw the two men—but he saw something else. Beside Peterson, led by a halter, was a small black pony: and a cry that was half a sob broke from the boy as he dashed forward.

“Oh, you’ve got him. Oh—*Tinker!*”

The pony pricked his ears and neighed sharply. Then Hugh’s arms were round his neck, and he was rubbing his head against the yellow one he loved. Big Dan dropped the halter: Hugh caught it, and with a quick leap was on the pony’s back, and Tinker was prancing with the joy of being home.

“Oh, can I take him down the road a bit?”

“Off you go!” grinned Big Dan.

It had never been necessary to explain to Tinker what Hugh wanted—he felt it. Three months’ absence had not lessened their comradeship: the pony was off in a flash. The drumming of the hoofs echoed along the track after the trees hid them.

They came back in a few moments, Hugh’s face glowing and Tinker eager for more. Nita clamoured for a ride.

“Let me try him!”

Hugh slipped to the ground, some of the joy dying out of his face. Just for a moment he had forgotten that Tinker was not his: could never be his any more. But he knew he could bear it better now. At least Nita was not Joe Clarke. There would be no sore backs for him to think about in bed at night, when the loneliness was worst.

He saw him taken to the horse-lines and was allowed to feed him; and that helped. Then came a joyful time of catching all the free horses in the orchard and taking them back to the paddock. Most of them did not want to be caught: it was tremendous fun. Hugh was very hot and happy when it was all over. Big Dan informed him that he was a white man, and let him ride Merrylegs round the paddock. Hugh thought him very inferior to Tinker: but it was something to think that he had ridden a Circus pony.

He had supper in the blue caravan, making the most of his last meal in that place of splendour. Mrs. Dan was motherly and kind: she patted his head as she got up from the table to get the kettle. It was a very tousled head by now, but in this glorious day no one had seemed to notice so small a thing.

“Good night, Hugh. See you in the morning.”

The friendly voices followed him as he walked away from the caravan in the dusk; very tired, but with a kind of inner glow that remained with him even

after he was back at the house. Father was in his own room. He came out at the sound of Hugh's step.

"Well—had a good day?"

"Oh, gorgeous!" Just for a moment his heart smote him. Father looked so tired, so anxious. "Did I stay away too long, Father? They asked me."

"No, not a bit. You like Circus people?"

"Oh, they're splendid! They were just awfully good to me."

"Well—I'm glad you made friends," said John Russell, slowly. "Better get off to bed, old chap. I'll come in."

He came when Hugh was in bed, and tucked him up very carefully. When he kissed him he held him tightly for a moment; almost too tightly to be comfortable.

"Good night, little son."

"Good night, Father."

Father stood up, looking at him. For a moment Hugh thought he was going to speak again; but he turned with a sharp movement and went out. The wonderful day was over. Yet not quite. For as Hugh's eyelids drooped there came an unfamiliar sound—it made him start before he remembered. A long coughing roar: Nabob had finished his "long thoughts" and was putting his homesickness into his voice. It echoed round the hills. Hugh seemed to carry the sound into his dreams.

## CHAPTER V

### MONDAY

THE sun was well up when Hugh opened his eyes. He jumped out of bed in a hurry, annoyed with himself, for he had meant to be out before the Circus was astir. There was no sound in the house. Father must be still asleep. He hurried over his dressing and ran out.

“I’d better call him,” he thought.

Father’s door stood open, and Hugh noticed, mildly surprised, that he had already made his bed. Then, looking more closely, he realised that he had not gone to bed at all. The blue quilt was dented, the pillow crumpled beneath it: he seemed to have thrown himself down on it, just as it was.

“Queer,” commented Hugh. “Must have been jolly cold.”

He was too anxious to get out to the Circus to think twice about father’s peculiar conduct. So he hurried into the living-room, hoping that the fire was alight.

But there were only grey ashes on the hearth, and the room seemed strangely desolate. Heaps of ashes. Father must have burned an awful lot of paper. It would be a messy job to clear it out. Well, he’d better get at it, and light the fire. Father liked to have his tea in good time. He turned to get the bundle of twigs that served as a hearthbrush.

Then he saw the letters. They lay on the bare table, and from the moment he caught sight of them they seemed in some curious way, terrible—like a silent threat. He stared at them stupidly. One was addressed to “Mr. Peterson.” The other bore his own name, “Hugh Russell.”

It was the first time in his life that he had seen a letter addressed to himself, and for a moment he did not know what to do with it. He took it up, turning it over and over as if it might be expected to reveal its secret without being opened. The touch of it seemed to make him afraid. He knew that he did not want to open it. But that was silly. He tore the envelope slowly.

The writing within was made very plain for a boy of nine. It had taken a long while to write, but there was not a great deal of it.

“Hugh, old chap, I have to go away. It’s rough on you to leave you, but I can’t see any way out of it. There is no money left—only enough to take me to a place where I can get work. I can’t take you with me, but as soon as I can I will come back for you.

“I have written asking Mr. Peterson to look after you. Give him the letter. I am sure he will be kind. You must make yourself as useful to him as you can. I’m relying on you to be a man, and very plucky.

“Good-bye, little son. I will come as soon as I can.

“Your loving Father.”

Hugh read it over three times. He did not in the least realise what it meant. Father had gone off to get work, and of course, if he had asked Mr. Peterson to look after him, Mr. Peterson would do it like a shot. That—why, that meant he would go with the Circus!

“Golly!” he said. “Why—I’ll be going with Tinker!” A great wave of joy swept over him. He dropped his letter, picked up the other envelope, and tore out of the house.

“Mr. Peterson! Mr. Peterson!”

Big Dan was busy. Always, when on the move, a hundred details claimed his attention, and this morning several things had gone wrong. A loose tyre on a lorry, which should have been detected by the Circus blacksmith the day before, had to be dealt with: the smith, smarting under his employer’s comments, was hurriedly lighting a fire. One of the grooms had been caught in the act of smoking as he handled the hay for the morning feed—a thing strictly forbidden: Big Dan had used his hand as well as his tongue in dealing with it. The cook was late with breakfast, and grumbled at the distance his mate had to carry water from the creek: and the largest elephant had amused himself by breaking a panel of the paddock-fence. Since an elephant could not be argued with Dan had “taken it out of” George, the keeper: which annoyed him, for George was a good man. He was striding back from this mishap when he heard his name, in a shrill boyish voice, and saw Hugh running towards him, waving a letter.

“Well, sonny, what’s up?” he asked impatiently.

“Father’s gone away!” Hugh panted. “He left this for you.”

Hugh stood smiling, with dancing eyes, as the man tore open the envelope. All his most beautiful dreams were coming true. To go with a Circus! and with these people, who had proved themselves so wonderfully kind. He would live in the blue caravan, he knew: life would be a succession of such days as the marvellous Sunday. He would have Nita to play with. And oh! he would have Tinker. “Golly, I hope Father’ll stay away a good while!” he whispered to himself.

Then he saw Big Dan’s face. First the bushy eyebrows went up in angry amazement, as he read, and then met in a frown that grew deeper. So black, so

forbidding, grew his look that the child before him shrank back, even before the harsh voice came.

“Well, your Dad’s got a nerve! Does he think I’m an orphan-asylum, I wonder? Cleared out, an’ left me his kid! He’s got a hope! As if I hadn’t enough worries of my own, without taking on another man’s cast-offs! Better go after him, that’s all I can advise you. Out of my way, you little rat!”

His heavy hand brushed Hugh like a fly from his path. As the boy stumbled away he heard the angry voice shouting furiously at a groom, telling him to hurry up with his work. The brief episode of Hugh was over.

It seemed a long way back to the empty house. Hugh felt as if all eyes were upon him as he slipped between the waggons and through the wire fence. He would not cry while they were looking at him, though the ache in his throat grew worse and worse, so that he could scarcely breathe. Through the orchard trees he ran wildly, knocking into one or two in his blind bewilderment: across the verandah, the desolate living-room, until he gained his own room. He flung himself face-downward upon his bed, shaking with sobs.

For a time he could think of nothing but the shattering of his dream. There would be no Circus; no gay life on the roads, seeing new places, new people, living among the horses he loved. It had been so beautiful a dream, even though so short-lived, that it hurt terribly to let it go. It was dreadful, too, to think that Mr. Peterson, who had been so kind, so friendly, had turned into someone black and savage—someone who all of a sudden hated him. Hugh had never before seen a man’s anger. He shivered at the memory.

Then, drifting across the broken dream, came the realisation of what it meant to him. He was alone. Father had gone, quite believing that he would be cared-for by the Circus. It never occurred to him to blame Father. But—what did a boy do who hadn’t anybody?

He did not know. Neighbours were few and far-off; and they had made no friends. Father didn’t like the people. He had not wished Hugh to make friends with other boys when he went to school. They had lived their lonely existence on the useless little farm, seeing scarcely anyone. Hugh had rarely been into the township, since it was miles beyond the bush school. Father had visited it alone, and he didn’t think he had a single friend there.

*What would he do?*

There was food for a few days in the house, he knew. But when it was gone there would be nothing but the grub-infested apples, and he doubted whether they would keep him alive. And to stay in the house alone, even in daylight, had been dreadful: he shuddered to think what it would be at night, with only the dreary calling of the mopokes for company. Yet he must stay

there, because there was nowhere else to go.

He knelt on his bed, looking out of the window. All the Circus people were eating breakfast. He smelt bacon and chops: hungry smells, that made him feel more desperate than ever. There were gay sounds of laughter and happy voices; everyone was in good spirits after the long day's rest. And beyond the waggons he could see a little black shape: Tinker, busy at the unusual luxury of a breakfast of chaff. Hugh could not bear the sight. He buried his face again in the pillow.

Big Dan took the ladder of his caravan in two steps that morning, still simmering with wrath. Mrs. Dan, brushing Nita's hair in the cabin, heard, and knew that it would be well to feed her lord quickly.

"You finish yourself, ducky," she told Nita. "I'll give Daddy his breakfast."

It was ready; she piled his plate, and filled his mug with coffee, taking her own place, since he did not like to eat alone. Dan kept silence for a few moments, frowning as he ate.

"Nice little game that feller Russell's tried to play on me!" he burst out. "He's a proper waster! Coolest cheek I ever struck, all the years I've been on the road."

"Why, what's he done, dear?"

"Cleared out—that's what he's done. Gone off on his own—says he's got a job, not that I believe it. An' he calmly presents me with his kid!"

Mrs. Dan's jaw dropped.

"What—little Hugh?"

"Only one he's got, I hope. Gives him to me, like a pound of tea. Says he's a useful boy that could earn his keep in a Circus. I'd like to have five minutes with me fine gentleman! I'd teach him a thing or two! Got any more bacon, Polly?"

Mrs. Dan produced it quickly.

"You didn't see him?"

"He knew too much for that. No—the night-watchman saw him riding off on his old screw before dawn. Left me a letter, telling me his mild requests. Kid came over with it, quite excited. Reckon I rather squashed his excitement."

"What did you tell him, Dan?"

"Tell him? I don't know exactly what I said, but I didn't leave him under any misunderstanding. Said I wasn't no orphan-asylum, and he'd better get out of my way. Anyhow, he got. There's his precious Dad's letter." He tossed it to

her.

Mrs. Dan read it slowly: the desperate letter of a desperate man. John Russell told of his hopeless position, almost penniless, owning no relations who could help him or Hugh.

“And on Saturday,” she read aloud, “came a letter from a man I knew, offering me a job, on a ship. A good job—if I had not the boy. It’s a last-minute chance, owing to an accident to the man who held it: I’ve barely time to get to Sydney, if I’m to take it.

“I watched you all yesterday. You and your wife were very good to Hugh. You said yourself he was a handy youngster. He would earn his keep with you, I believe. For God’s sake, take him with you, and be kind to him. He’ll only starve if I don’t take this job. He doesn’t need much, but even that I can’t give him.

“If you will not, then hand him over to the police in the next town. They will send him to an Orphanage or some such place: they can’t if he has a father with him. I’ll find him as soon as I can make a home for him. I wouldn’t throw him on your mercy if I were not at my wits’ end. I’ve packed what clothes he has—of course, you’re welcome to anything in the house your people can use.

“You have a child of your own—be good to my boy.”

Little Mrs. Dan folded the letter slowly. Nita had come out of the cabin, and was standing beside her, wide-eyed.

“Poor beggar!” said Mrs. Dan, softly.

“Poor beggar? That’s just like you, Polly. I know all about that sort of waster—though I never before came across one that ’ud desert his own kid. It’s the calm cheek of him that knocks me. I’m real sorry I can’t have that few quiet minutes with him.”

“Where’s Hugh now?”

“How should I know?” asked Big Dan angrily. “He was off like a shot rabbit when I’d done talking to him. Reckon, I scared him into fits. I wasn’t feeling too polite, I can tell you, my girl.”

“But, Dan—what are you going to do about him?”

“Do? Do nothin’. It’s not my business if a man I’ve never set eyes on chooses to make tracks. The kid can find his own way to the police—or to Timbuctoo, for all I care. I’ve got no time to go hunting for police-stations and answering forty thousand questions. This is a Circus, not a lost-dogs’ home!” He scowled. “More coffee.”

“Dan—you can’t leave him alone here!”

“Can’t? My girl, you’ve got a bit to learn yet. You never knew me soft

over my business, and I'm not goin' to begin now. Besides, it's the nerve of the feller that's got me properly wild. Let him see to his own kid."

"Oh, I'm not thinking of him. He's gone. It's the child. You can't leave him."

"Can't I?" Big Dan said, grimly. "Where's that coffee, Polly. I got no time to talk."

"We could keep him easily enough—for a time, at any rate. He could——"

"Will you hold your silly tongue, woman? Give me my coffee, I tell you! If I hear another word——"

"But I want him, Daddy!"

"You!" said Big Dan, looking at his daughter in amazed wrath. "You keep out of what don't concern you, Miss. When I want your opinion——"

"I want him!" shrieked Nita. "He's a nice boy—you told Mummy you wished Eddie was as good as him with horses."

"There, now, you be quiet, Nita," said her father. "Makin' all that row about a strange boy—I'm ashamed of you!"

"He isn't a strange boy. He can ride, an' he can work, an' you said he'd make a tumbler if he was trained a bit. I want him to stay with us." She dropped her voice suddenly, and flung herself on Big Dan, encircling his neck in a bear-like hug. "Daddy, you will keep him, won't you? Say you will, Daddy, darling!"

"I will not," said the big man firmly.

"Then I'll yell!"

She yelled. Nothing more thorough than Nita's efforts in that direction could possibly be imagined. She shed no tears; all her energies were devoted to the production of sound. Still clinging, limpet-wise, to her father, she rent the air with shriek after shriek, her whole body quivering, her limbs stiffened. Mrs. Dan attempted to remove her—in vain. Big Dan threatened, pleaded, coaxed; and the screams grew louder. Finally she collapsed under her own efforts, slipped to the floor and began to sob helplessly.

"There, now!" Mrs. Dan looked severely at her husband. "She'll be sick for days, like she was last time."

"Aw, Nita—Daddy's little girl!" said the big man anxiously. "You let Daddy lay you down on your own bed." He picked her up, a limp, tear-drenched bundle. "Stop now—how're you ever goin' into the ring to-night if you make yourself ill like this?"

"Let him stay!" came between sobs and hiccoughs.

Husband and wife exchanged glances.

“Oh—keep the boy a few days, Dan,” pleaded Polly. “That’ll give you time to decide—it don’t tie you down for ever, you know.”

Big Dan struggled with himself.

“Oh, well—have it your own way,” he submitted, sourly. “You can go an’ get him, though: I got no time. All right, Nita—you can have him for a bit, ’s long as he keeps out of my way.” He put her down. She stood with downcast eyes, still catching her breath painfully, her hair a wild black tangle about her face: and at the sight Big Dan became as pulp. He gathered her up in his arms again.

“Now, don’t you worry, Daddy’s little darlin’,” he said, anxiously.

“You—you’re cross!”

“Not me! You just let Daddy wash your face, an’ then you’ll have your breakfast.”

He washed her as gently as a woman, while Nita submitted listlessly.

“Now you’re all right. Got her bacon ready, Mummy?”

“All ready. What about your coffee, Dan?”

“Ain’t got time,” said Big Dan, and vanished. Mother and daughter looked at each other.

“I *did* have to yell, didn’t I?” remarked her daughter, cheerfully. “Let’s go an’ find Hugh, Mummy darling!”

“H’m,” said Mrs. Dan. “You stay where you are, Miss, or I’ll let you feel the back of my ’airbrush.” She banged a plate on the table. “There’s your breakfast; you eat it, quick an’ lively.” The door closed behind her.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESCUE

HUGH was still face-downward on his bed. There was nothing to get up for. The dread of meeting Big Dan again was too strong for him to leave the shelter of the house; even the thrill of seeing the Circus on the move was lost in that over-mastering fear. His mind seemed to turn round and round, a helplessly-revolving wheel of thought. And no thought led anywhere that could help: only to deeper bewilderment. What was he to do? Where could he go?

Then a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he sprang aside in terror. But it was Mrs. Dan this time, and she, at least, was still kind. He looked at her dumbly.

“Poor old chap!” she said. “You come along with me.”

He shivered.

“Mr. Peterson——” he stammered.

“He says you can. Did you know your Dad was goin’ away, Hugh?”

“No. He never told me. He—he left a letter for me.”

“Did he say where he was off to?”

“No. Gone to get work.”

“Well, it’s rough on you, but you can stay with us for a bit. Keep out of Mr. Peterson’s way, though, ’cause he’s always busy on moving days. Had any breakfast?”

“No. I—I don’t want any.”

“Oh, that’s bosh. You’ll feel better when you’ve had some.” Her voice was brisk and determined. “Nita hasn’t had hers yet, so you can keep her company.”

Hugh came unwillingly, trembling lest he should encounter Big Dan. But that gentleman was at the further side of the paddock, roaring at the tent-men, so he breathed more freely. Nita, eating her breakfast with a surprising air of meekness, greeted him cheerfully, and in a moment Mrs. Dan had some bacon sizzling in the pan for him.

“Now, you hurry up and eat that,” she said. “Then you and Nita tidy up things. Don’t go out of the waggon. I’ll be back presently.”

She shut the door, and stood for a moment on the top step, thinking. Mrs.

Dan was not a woman to waste an opportunity. The wretched little house did not seem to hold much, but what there was she meant to have. And she did not at all want to incur any comment from her husband on taking up a man's time.

A young man, on a lorry almost packed, caught her eye. She beckoned to him, and he came running.

"Finished, Jeff?"

"Just about ready, Mrs. Peterson."

"Well, you come with me. I got a job for you."

With Jeff at her heels she went swiftly through the house. Hugh's clothes she found neatly packed in a battered portmanteau: John Russell had done the best he could there. A few ancient garments hung in the other bedroom.

"Get all those bed-clothes folded up and stow 'em on your lorry, Jeff. You can have any clothes that'll fit you. Russell's cleared out, and we're going to look after his boy for him. Bring a box back for the crockery. I'll fetch anything I want out on the verandah."

They stripped the house of all but the furniture. Even the poor mattresses were stowed on top of the lorry. Only Hugh's books were discarded; Mrs. Dan remarking that she had no use for a library.

It was a very desolate little house when they had finished. Mrs. Dan looked round the dismantled rooms, glad to have finished her task. Already a heavy silence seemed to brood in each; as though life had gone out of them for ever.

"Ugh!" she said. "Nasty little place!" She caught up a blackened kettle and hurried after Jeff.

The Circus was moving. Ahead, on the road, went the riders, making the most of their start to escape the dust of the heavy vehicles. On a day march the caravans went next, Big Dan's blue monster in the lead; but he himself rode for most of the way, waiting until all the procession had left the camping-ground. Crowe, already mounted, was holding his black mare. Big Dan met his wife as she neared the caravan.

"Ready? Where's that boy?"

"Well, I put him in our waggon for the present, Dan."

"He needn't think he's goin' to stay there. Doesn't matter for this morning, but he'll have to shift when we camp. That lad has got to learn where he belongs now. Well, hop in, Polly—time we were off."

His words were carried clearly to the children inside the caravan. Hugh's scared face moved Mrs. Dan to pity as she entered.

"Well, we're off, Hugh," she said, briskly. "Nita, you take him to look out

of the window.”

The two children knelt on the seat below the window, and for a little while Hugh forgot his anxieties. It was a scene that became familiar enough to him afterwards, yet it never lost all its fascination in his eyes. All the vehicles were ready, their horses in the shafts, the elephants harnessed to the wild-beast cages. Every driver was in his seat, waiting for the word to start. It was like a little fleet that floated about the world on wheels, pausing to drop anchor here and there, but never finding a real home port. And the caravans were like ships that swayed and rocked on the green billows of the uneven paddock: tall wooden ships, gaily-painted, and carrying a strange cargo. Big Dan, the Admiral of the Fleet, huge and dark-faced, with his sweeping black moustache, was no trim sailor, certainly. But he needed only a scarlet handkerchief knotted about his head and a sash stuck with cutlasses and pistols to make him the most magnificent of pirate chiefs. Hugh had no difficulty in seeing him make prisoners walk the plank.

The Pirate Chief swung into his saddle and blew a whistle. At the sound the blue caravan moved off, lurching so that Hugh and Nita bumped their heads together and Mrs. Dan, still clutching the black kettle, sat down abruptly on the table. They led the way to the road: behind them the other caravans fell into line, keeping a regular interval. Mrs. Dan put the children on the floor near the door, which she hooked back, so that they could see the long procession file out. She herself watched with a critical eye, hoping that no hitch would occur as a further tax upon the patience of her husband. Big Dan's stock of patience was not great—except in training an animal—and it had already been sorely tried that morning. The order of his procession was very dear to him. He knew its value in impressing the inhabitants of the little bush townships on the line of march.

Nothing went wrong, happily. The Circus moved with the precision of long drill. Caravans, waggons, lorries, and last of all the elephants; they were kept to the rear so that the country folk should have a thrill to the very last when Peterson's Circus went by. The waggon immediately behind the last caravan was a big affair with open sides under a high roof: it held the band, the members of which were busily polishing their instruments. Men were asprawl everywhere on the lorry loads, smoking, basking in the morning sunshine. The rays, filtered through the overhanging gum-trees, made chequered patterns on the horses' shining coats and turned the brass harness-mounts to gleaming points of gold. It was so brave a sight that little Hugh Russell forgot all his sorrows. It did not even occur to him that he was leaving the only home he knew, never to see it again.

Something of his fear came back to him presently. Big Dan and Crowe,

having shepherded the Circus out of the paddock and put up the slip-rails, came cantering along the side of the track, having no mind to ride in the dust of the vehicles. Their beautiful horses so enchanted Hugh that he forgot altogether that his friend of yesterday had turned into an enemy. He clutched Nita, leaning forward. "Oh, look—aren't they splendid!" he uttered.

Big Dan had begun to smile at his little daughter. Then he saw the eager face beside her in the doorway and the smile turned to a heavy frown. He rode past with no word, and Hugh shrank back under his scowl.

Where Hugh was concerned Big Dan was in an evil temper. He had been worsted that morning, and he knew it: and he was accustomed to boast that no man ever got the better of Dan Peterson. It was rankling sharply. John Russell, whom he had classed from the first moment as a "waster," since he was obviously a beaten man, had managed to beat him: he had vanished, bequeathing his son to him, and he had been forced to accept the legacy. Russell alone could not have managed it: he had been defeated by his own wife and child. Dan knew that Polly had been glad to beat him, with Nita's unlooked-for aid: that she had thought him hard and cruel. That rankled, too. He gave such short answers to his companion's remarks that Crowe, well aware of how the land lay, ceased to offer any, and they rode in heavy silence.

Someone else had watched the Circus go. John Russell had staked a good deal on a last throw, but it had never been his intention to leave his son without making sure of the result. He had ridden away before sunrise, but only as far as a lonely bush paddock where it was easy to take down a rail and leave Nugget well hidden in the scrub. Then he returned on foot across country, keeping well away from the road until he was opposite his house. He climbed a tree, standing in the middle of a clump, and worked round it until he had a view of the cottage and part of the paddock. There he waited, well screened from any casual glance.

He saw the Circus wake up, roused by the sleepy night-watchman, who had seen him ride away. Then his eyes never left the house, looking intently for Hugh's first appearance. At length the little figure darted out; Russell heard the shrill voice, saw him run eagerly to Peterson, waving his letter. He gripped the branch he held savagely, in anxiety that changed to blind fury as he saw Big Dan's fierce reception of his plea. Then Hugh dodged from the man's upraised arm and fled back to the cottage, away from the angry voice.

Whatever were his failings, John Russell paid for them in that hour. His first impulse was to swing himself down from the tree, hurrying to his boy's rescue. Only the bitter knowledge of his own helplessness held him back. He clenched his teeth on the words that sprang to his lips. He must wait. Peterson's anger might die down, giving place to pity: Russell could not

believe that he would leave a child alone in a deserted house. If he did—well, there was time enough then to go back to Hugh.

But the knowledge of what the boy must be enduring was an agony to him as he crouched among the boughs. He had never made a companion, a mate, of Hugh during their lonely life together: always his own gloom and anxiety had been a wall between them. Yet he loved his son: was proud of his strength and quickness and manly ways, and had looked forward to better times when Hugh, grown to manhood, should work with him in a home of which they could be proud. To think of him now, spurned contemptuously by the man on whose charity he had flung him, cowering in bewildered misery in the empty house, cut him to the quick. Incoherent mutterings were wrung from him: words of mingled pity and anger and despair. He longed for the Circus to be gone, that he might be free to go to his boy.

Mrs. Dan remained his only real hope. He had watched her silently the day before, realising her strength, her shrewdness, the kindness that had shown itself in her dealings with Hugh. The little incident of the re-made beds had not been lost on him. No woman, he thought, could treat a child badly: certainly not a woman like Peterson's wife. Had it not been for Mrs. Dan and Nita he could never have brought himself to do what he had done. Now he waited, schooling himself to patience, and prayed that she might be strong enough to plead successfully for Hugh.

The shrieks that came from the blue caravan after Big Dan had disappeared within it made his heart sink lower. To him it was evident that Nita had required chastisement and was getting it with a severity that gave little hope that Nita's father had experienced any change of heart. He reflected anxiously that Peterson must indeed be in a furious mood to bring such cries from the child whom he evidently worshipped. Hugh's chances became more and more remote: they vanished in his mind altogether when he saw the Circus-owner fling angrily out of the caravan and stride away with a lowering face.

"Oh, Lord—I wish they'd all clear out!" he muttered.

Then his heart leaped again as Mrs. Dan came out and hurried across to the house. The brisk figure disappeared: he peered anxiously through the leaves, shaking with suspense. Would she never end it! What was she saying to Hugh?

A great sigh of relief broke from him when at length he saw her again, and Hugh with her. She was holding his hand: his straining eyes took in every line of the boy's dejected figure—but he could bear that now. The heaviest part of his burden fell from him when the blue caravan received his child.

He watched the work of dismantling the cottage. That in itself was reassuring. They must be going to keep Hugh with them: had they intended to

hand him over to the police they would certainly not have taken anything Russell owned. That was another load off his mind: Hugh would not be a ward of the State; an inmate of a Home for Destitute Children, or any such grim institution.

The Circus life might be rough, but at least it was a free, open-air life where he would grow strong and manly. It would be to the Petersons' own advantage to look after him. And—please God, the luck had turned with this new job. It might not be long before he was able to claim him again.

The Circus was almost ready to start. Russell became nervously anxious lest he should be seen by any of the quick-eyed people as they turned towards his tree in coming out to the road. He slipped to the ground and made his way through the paddock, keeping a hundred yards from the fence, well shielded by the undergrowth.

A sudden longing came to him to see Hugh again. He knew a place where a dense belt of low-growing tea-tree in a hollow came up to the fence of the road, and he broke into a run, making for it. It was perfect shelter; he wormed his way through it until he was only a yard from the fence, and there stood still, holding the bushy twigs apart so that they gave him a peep-hole.

The riders came by first, talking and laughing. They led the spare horses and ponies: he saw Tinker jogging contentedly beside a grey mare, and blessed the thought that had made Peterson buy Hugh's friend. Then, after an interval, came the slow beat of hoofs again, and the creaking of wheels. The blue caravan was close to him, passing him slowly. His eyes were strained upon the doorway, where Hugh sat, his little face happy and excited as he pointed to two cantering riders who passed on the other side. The trees hid them as the next caravan lurched into view.

It was that memory of Hugh that John Russell bore away with him in the time that followed: an eager, laughing face. It was, perhaps, as well that he had not seen Big Dan Peterson's.

## CHAPTER VII

### CIRCUS-HAND

“HUGH, I want to speak to you.”

Hugh scrambled up from the floor of the caravan obediently. He faced Mrs. Dan, who sat on the leather seat beneath the window. Her face, that yesterday had been so merry, was grave now.

“First of all—this is yours.”

She handed him his father’s letter, which she had found where he had dropped it in the cottage. No finer scruples had prevented Mrs. Dan from reading it, and it had not changed her opinion of John Russell. She would have welcomed with enthusiasm the chance of giving him a piece of her mind.

Mrs. Dan was sorry for Hugh, but her main emotion was that the whole thing was an uncommon nuisance. It had landed her Dan in “a proper temper,” to begin with: to restore him to normal serenity would require all her tact. Then, she was by no means satisfied with the means Nita had adopted to conquer him, even though she had wanted him conquered. The adjective Mrs. Dan mentally applied to her daughter was “artful.” She intended that Nita should realise that in gaining her ends she had by no means gained all she wanted. And as Mrs. Dan was the one person in the world whom Nita regarded with a wholesome awe, she had no doubt of accomplishing this.

Hugh took the letter unwillingly, stuffing it into his pocket. He didn’t want it: it brought back too vividly the horror of the morning. That was past: the Circus had adopted him, and he was quite ready to be the son of the Circus, if Mr. Peterson were kind. Nita had whispered to him that it was all right, that Daddy was never cross for long. So he had begun to feel confident again.

But Mrs. Dan’s face was grave—even a little stern. Her voice was not quite the voice with which she had spoken to him yesterday.

“Your father’s left you on our hands, and it isn’t your fault. But you’d better understand that no one can be in a Circus who doesn’t earn his keep. I don’t know yet how much you can do, but you’d better be ready to do it on the jump, if you want Mr. Peterson to keep you.”

Hugh looked at her steadily. His heart thumped under his grey shirt, but he answered without hesitation.

“I’ll work as hard as ever I can.”

“Goodness knows what jobs we can give you, but we’ll find some, I

expect. Your father said we could hand you over to the police, but I don't want to do that."

"But—but I haven't done anything!" The words were a cry.

"Of course you haven't, you little duffer. The police would only send you to a Boys' Home. It's their job, when a boy's got no belongings. You've got a father, but he don't belong—not at the moment, anyhow."

"Daddy said——" broke in Nita excitedly.

"You sit right down on the floor again and hold your tongue, young lady!" snapped Mrs. Dan. "I've had all I want of your tantrums this morning—you're going to find out all about that presently."

Nita sat down promptly. Her lip quivered.

"I don't *want* any castor-oil, Mummy!"

"Little girls that don't want castor-oil had better learn to behave as such," said Mrs. Dan, darkly. "I'll see to you in good time. Did you hear me, Carmenita?"

Nita heard. She was silent.

"Well, I'm not keen on letting you go to a Home," Mrs. Dan said, turning to Hugh. "I'll do my best to persuade Mr. Peterson. But you mustn't run away with the idea that you're a fine gentleman now. Not here. You're just one of the hands—if we keep you: doin' what you're told, an' doin' it quick. See?"

"Y—yes," said Hugh.

"An' you won't be in our waggon, of course. Hands don't come hanging round the Owner's waggon, an' Mr. Peterson wouldn't allow it for a moment. You'll get your meals at the tucker-waggon, an' I'll arrange some place for you to sleep: it won't be a comfortable bed like you're used to, but you'll learn to put up with that. You won't find that Circus life is a picnic. It's anything but. You'll have to live rough an' eat rough, and run odd jobs for everyone, an' never whimper when you're tired. Now I've put it plain an' straight to you, an' if you don't like the idea, there's always the Home. Which do you say?"

Hugh did not hesitate. He was quite unable to picture Circus life as anything but joyful, even if it did include odd jobs and "eating rough." The thing that loomed huge and terrifying was the idea of being given over to the police, who were only connected in his mind with handcuffs and prisons. The words tumbled from his mouth.

"Oh, don't give me to the police! I'll work like fury. And I don't eat much!"

Mrs. Dan's heart smote her, but she had her own reasons for remaining stern.

“Lor!” she said, “you can eat as much as you get time to eat, an’ that ain’t always much. Well, now you understand how things are. I’ll try an’ get you room to travel on Jeff Poole’s lorry: he’s a decent young fellow, an’ he’ll teach you the ropes. Keep away from the horses unless you’re told to go near them, an’ never go near the cats. An’ remember, you’re only on trial, an’ I can’t make any promises for Mr. Peterson. Whether he keeps you or not depends on how useful you are. Now you can go an’ sit down again.”

Hugh turned the situation over as the caravan crawled along the bush road. He was not at all dismayed at the prospect Mrs. Dan had drawn. At least it meant that he had not to solve for himself the awful problem of where to go, lacking a father. But the thing that made his heart sink was the sudden unfriendliness that had surrounded him. Yesterday he had felt like a prince: Big Dan and Mrs. Dan had been wonderful to him, Nita had been his shadow; all the people of the Circus seemed to take him to their hearts. To-day he felt an outcast, although he was just the same Hugh Russell. He wondered miserably why he seemed so different in their eyes since father had gone away: and could find no answer.

Then a small brown hand slipped into his, and Nita drew close to him.

“I’ll be nice to you, Hughie,” she whispered. “Even if I *do* get castor-oil. An’ Jeff’s nice. You work hard, an’ Daddy won’t be wild with you.”

It was a very comforting little whisper. Hugh squeezed the brown paw gratefully, and began to feel better. He put his face near her ear.

“D’you think I’ll ever be let ride Tinker?”

“Not yet. But there’s never no knowing.”

Mrs. Dan’s brisk voice cut in.

“Come and wash potatoes, Hugh.”

He was beside her in a moment. The potatoes were in a basket: she gave him a small stiff brush and a tin bowl of water.

“Make them clean, mind. Put them into this pot when they’re done.”

“Won’t I peel them?” he asked.

“Oh, we know better than to peel potatoes, when we boil them. Wastes the best part. Now don’t you make any mess—there’s no room for slopping about in a waggon.”

He did his best, holding each potato very carefully in the middle of the bowl. The water was soon a deep brown: he did not think they could really be clean in so little, but when he suggested more Mrs. Dan told him that in a circus every drop of water was precious. He found a little piece of sacking in the basket, and rubbed them well before washing them, which Mrs. Dan noted

with an approving eye, though she made no comment. The sacking was useful for wiping up the splashes he could not avoid, and for drying his hands when the job was finished. Then Mrs. Dan emptied the basin from the steps, and told him to get busy and rub up the brass-work.

Hugh liked that. His father had taught him to keep his bit and stirrup-irons in good order, and to clean his saddle: he was no stranger to rubbing. He went about his new job methodically, working his rag into all the twirls and crevices of the brass mounts. It was pleasant to see them winking and shining at him in the bright sunlight that flooded the caravan. Nita watched him, perplexed: she hated to be told to rub the brass, and was expert at leaving finger-marks upon it, since that meant that next time Mummy would probably find it more satisfactory to do it herself. It had not occurred to her that any boy could really like such a job. She reflected that most likely he was only trying to get on the soft side of Mummy by pretending to be pleased—which rather restored her opinion of him.

These musings were disagreeably cut short by Mrs. Dan, who gave her a spelling-book and commanded her to learn ten words—a task even more abhorrent than house-work. Hugh looked surprised.

“Does she have school?”

“If you can call it school,” Mrs. Dan answered. “She has to have lessons—of a sort. If an Inspector comes along asking questions it keeps him quiet to find a copy-book and a speller about. But they don’t worry us much. We give ’em a couple of free passes to the best seats, and that soothes them.”

“Will I have to do lessons?”

“Don’t see how you can. Oh, we’ll hide you easy enough—they can’t chase all round the Circus for every hanger-on. Different with the Owner’s child.” There was a note in Mrs. Dan’s voice that brought home more clearly to Hugh the difference that now existed between him and Nita. He could not understand it yet—yesterday he had been the son of the farm Owner, almost an important person. To-day he was a deserted boy, with the terror of the police looming near. There was a gulf slowly widening between him and the child with whom he had played.

When the brass-work was done there were no more jobs. Nita was crouched on the floor, her hair completely hiding her face as she bent over her book, laboriously spelling “g—o—t—e, goat,” which meant nothing whatever to Mrs. Dan, though Hugh marvelled slightly. He kneeled on the window-seat to watch the world go by. The Circus was crawling along a winding road, clear of timber, so that he could see parts of it further back, rounding curves the blue caravan had already passed. There were wide paddocks on both sides of the

road, dotted with sheep and cattle: now and then a bush homestead came into view, and people would rush out into the garden to look at the Circus. Small children climbed the fences, shouting and waving. Hugh knew just how they felt—a few months ago he would have been among the first to run and shout. He pictured their feelings when they should catch sight of the elephants, wishing he could see so far back.

A few miles further on they came to a small township. There, indeed, was excitement for you! Faces at every window, people in the one “general store” rushing out to stare, men holding frightened horses, babies yelling, disregarded by their mothers. The men on the lorries tossed hand-bills into the road, and boys dashed to pick them up. Someone raised a cry of “Elephants!” and there was a rush of people to catch the first glimpse of the great beasts. Then the blue caravan had passed the last house, and beyond were more paddocks and the unbroken silence of the country.

Half an hour later a creek crossed the road, spanned by a high bridge that creaked as the heavy waggons passed over it. Ahead Big Dan was signalling: in response to his gesture the caravans turned aside to a wide, grassy space, and the procession came to a halt. There was instant activity. Men leaped down, filling nose-bags, unharnessing horses, lighting cooking-fires. Faces appeared at caravan doorways: performers began to stroll about, glad to stretch their legs. Mrs. Dan turned to Hugh swiftly.

“You come along with me,” she said. “Stay where you are, Nita.”

Hugh had to run to keep up with her. She hurried to a lorry that had been one of the last to cross the bridge. It was laden with neatly-piled planks, the Circus seats, covered with the great mass of tarpaulin that was a sleeping tent. Men were busy with the horses, unfastening the heavy traces. Mrs. Dan waited until they were released before she called aside the man she wanted.

“Jeff, I wish you’d keep your eye on this boy. He’s coming with us. Let him bunk near you, an’ put him up to things: he’s handy an’ he’ll learn quick.”

“Right-oh, Mrs. Peterson. Is he for the ring?”

“Oh, no. Just an odd-job boy.” She dropped her voice so that Hugh could not hear what followed. “Father’s cleared out an’ left him, an’ the Boss isn’t too keen on having him with us. But I couldn’t leave him alone, so he’s on trial. Make him useful, Jeff, an’ keep him out of the Boss’s sight as much as you can. There’s room for him on your lorry, isn’t there?”

“Oh, stacks. He don’t take up much room,” said Jeff cheerfully, glancing at Hugh. “Got his own blankets, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, and his clothes are in our waggon. You can get them some time.” She raised her voice: “I leave it to you to see he earns his keep, Jeff: he’s to do

whatever you tell him.” She looked at the boy. “Understand, Hugh?”

“Yes,” said Hugh, soberly.

“Well, be a good boy.” She did not smile: possibly because she was well aware that Big Dan, some distance away, was looking at them. Then she was gone, and Hugh’s new master was regarding him gravely.

“Big chap for a rouseabout, aren’t you?” was his comment. “Well, you’ll grow. Catch hold of that nose-bag and look as if you were busy, even if you aren’t.”

There was not much work at the moment. The horses installed with their nose-bags, there was nothing to do but get their own food. Two other men belonged to the lorry: a tall quiet Swede, of giant strength, named Carl, and Micky, a little red-haired Irishman, who was talkative enough for two men. Hugh trotted behind them to the tucker-waggon and was given a hunch of bread and a cold chop, which he ate, like all the others, with his fingers, washing the dry food down with a mug of tea, heavily sweetened, but milkless. The Circus hands, if they deigned to notice him at all, were friendly in an off-hand manner: one small boy more or less made very little difference to them, though Jeff and Micky came in for some mild chaff on being turned into nursery-maids. No one asked Hugh any questions about his father, to his great relief. He kept very close to Jeff.

The halt was not a long one. Very soon the horses were again in the shafts, and again the long procession moved off. Hugh found himself travelling in a very different way to the splendour of the blue caravan. With Jeff’s hand to help, and a lift from Carl, he gained the summit of the high load, making himself a kind of nest in the canvas from which he looked down on the plodding horses and could see the whole line ahead. He thought it glorious: a thousand times better than being shut up within walls, no matter how splendid. The canvas was comfortable: the sun beat down pleasantly: and he loved to see the Circus before him, winding snake-like along the track. By turning round and worming his way a little further back along the load, with due regard for the sprawling legs of Micky and Jeff, he could watch the elephants hauling the cages, whence came now and then a deep growl that gave him a delightful shiver. But best of all he liked to lie in the front and watch the horses: pair after pair, pacing along quietly, knowing their business so well that a driver was scarcely needed.

His spirits rose rapidly. At first he had been afraid of being handed over to the men—afraid of the unknown. Now he seemed to have slipped quietly into his new job, and there was nothing to fear—so long as he did not get in Big Dan’s way, or encounter a policeman. Hugh was very sure that if speed would

save him he would do neither.

Thoughts of his father did not trouble him. Father had gone, and some day he would come back, and then he wouldn't be always silent and miserable. Hugh had so long been lonely in his company that he could not miss him now, in this new, exciting life: he let him slip from his mind. But mother seemed curiously near him, and he found himself happily dwelling on thoughts of her. Not the old, cruel thoughts of mother who had died, the thoughts he had had to choke back for three years, because they hurt so terribly. These were thoughts of a mother who was close to him, although he could not see her. It was as though he felt her, almost touching him, smiling at him, so very glad that he was happy; proud that he was a circus-hand, riding gloriously on a chariot that a prince might envy, with splendid horses filling his new world. He could spare father, now that mother had come back. In that dear sense of her nearness he cuddled down into the hot canvas and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER VIII

### REALITY AND DREAM

“WAKE up, young ’un!”

Hugh came with difficulty out of a dream in which he had been telling his mother excitedly that he had ridden an elephant. She had been as thrilled as he, and as proud: he had been on the point of taking her to make friends with Ali, too. Then a heavy hand was on his shoulder, and the dream fled.

“Hullo!” he said, sleepily. “I went to sleep, I believe.”

“You certainly did,” said Jeff, laughing. “Time to wake up, though: we’re getting near our next pitch. There’s Coinbar.” He jerked his thumb towards a tin-roofed town half-hidden by trees a mile ahead.

Hugh realised that the procession had halted. He sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“What do we do?”

“Well, we don’t do anything. We’re only hands. But the Circus is getting ready to make a good entry. This is only a one-performance pitch, so the show has to wake the people up as it comes in. Hands don’t put on any toggery, but they’ve got to sit up and look lively.”

Hugh jumped to his feet. All along the straight yellow road ahead the Circus was bestirring itself. Flags fluttered from each caravan and covered waggon. The musicians had donned red jackets with yellow facings, and were draping scarlet bunting round their car: he could see their gleaming instruments. Every open caravan doorway showed performers in whatever scraps of finery would catch the eye. Looking back, he saw George and his two assistants flinging crimson and gold cloths over the elephants.

“Golly!” breathed Hugh.

The horses of the ring were coming back. Under Big Dan’s direction a space had been left here and there between the vehicles; a few riders, with led horses, fitted themselves into each space, so that there should be no long dull line of laden cars. Hugh saw Tinker, led by a man on a huge grey mare; beside her the black pony looked like a foal. Then he shouted, for running towards them were three clowns, in full dress, their faces painted white and daubed with red circles and crescents.

“They’re just to sprinkle a bit of colour about,” Jeff told him. “Hullo—we’re to have a passenger!”

The tallest of the clowns, an enormous man with a face made up as a ridiculous baby, stopped beside them.

“Give us a hand, Jeff!”

He came up on the canvas with a spring, almost knocking Hugh over.

“Near late, we was. Crumbs, the Boss is wild to-day! Something’s bit him.”

Hugh had never been at such close quarters with a clown. He gazed at him open-mouthed. He wore a red-and-white striped costume, made all in one, with huge baggy trousers gathered in to form frills round his ankles. There was a fuzzy white ruff about his neck: his hat, tall and peaked, was of white felt with a red pom-pom at its top. The baby face was painted so that he looked as if he were about to cry. A baby’s feeding-bottle was slung about his neck by a scarlet cord. It seemed almost inhuman to hear the deep tones of an angry man coming from that fantastic face.

“Hasn’t been at his brightest all day,” remarked Micky. “There was a word or two he gave meself this morning that I’d not have taken if only he’d been a fut shorter. Was he peevish wid ye, Joey?”

“Peevish!” the clown growled. “You’d have thought the sky was fallin’ ’cause I hadn’t all me make-up on. ’S if it mattered, comin’ through a one-house town like this. Got a cigarette, Micky?”

“Yerra, what good?” said Micky, scornfully. “If he saw ye smokin’ up here in that outfit, he’d tear the face off ye. I’ll give ye one afther.”

“I s’pose you’re right,” said the clown, mournfully. “Who’s this you’ve got?” He indicated Hugh, who was still gazing at him, fascinated.

“Oh, a new hand. Name of Hugh.”

“Well, he’s got a great head of hair,” said Joey; and Hugh turned scarlet. The clown pulled one of his curls in a friendly fashion, laughing at him—which made his face look more astonishing than ever. Hugh wriggled away, embarrassed. Then quick hoofs sounded, and he forgot all about Joey as he caught sight of the riders cantering towards them.

Indeed a pair to catch the eye—Big Dan Peterson and his daughter. The former was on his great black mare; a magnificent figure, wearing a felt hat with an enormous brim and a crimson handkerchief round his throat, flowing in long ends. Nita, riding Merrylegs, was in gold tunic and breeches, with long, shining black boots, and a little gold cap perched on one side of her black curls. She flashed a sideways smile at Hugh as they passed.

“Where are they going?” gasped Hugh.

“Oh, the Boss always rides down to run his eye over everyone and

everything. Not always we're honoured with little Missy, though," said Micky. "Well, often as I've seen them, I don't get tired of lookin' at herself an' that pony. They say in Ireland that the Little People go ridin' at night: I do be thinkin' when I see them two that we've caught one of them unbeknownst!"

Hugh watched with all his eyes. Big Dan pulled up beside the elephants, speaking to Pazo, who, resplendent in Hussar uniform, was beside the leading driver. Then the horses wheeled, and every man became alert as the Boss rode slowly up the line, his eye missing no detail. Hugh retired modestly behind the clown, hoping he was not noticed. They passed on, the white pony, with its gleaming rider, stepping daintily beside the black, tossing his head and arching his neck. Up to the head of the procession they went. A whistle sounded; the band crashed into a lively march. The Circus suddenly became alive, moving on towards the town.

Big Dan had earned a reputation for courtesy by always sending a man ahead to warn people with nervous horses. It served a double purpose, since it advertised their coming. Long before they reached the first houses they were met by boys running to meet them and march in beside the elephants, hoping for a peep at the lions: then came the grown-ups, scarcely less eager, hurrying to the garden fences, every woman exclaiming "Oh, the little darling!" as Nita went by. Right down the long main street where shopmen clustered beside their customers on the footpaths and every house-window was full of heads. The band blared wildly: the antics of the clowns on the lorries sent the crowd into roars of laughter.

"Look at the white pony! He's the one on the posters!"

"Ow—See that clown! He's a dwarf!"

"Them elephants does tricks. Like 'uman beings, they are. Ring bells an' drink beer!"

"There's a lion!"—as Nabob, rising to the occasion, lifted his great head and yawned, displaying delightfully terrifying fangs.

"Ain't that clown a trick! Got up like a baby!"

Joey caught the words, kissing his hand affectionately to the speaker. Then, as luck would have it, his eye fell on Hugh, standing beside him, and a new idea for a laugh came to him. Hugh found himself caught up in his powerful arms and rocked violently up and down. He kicked and struggled, and the crowd howled with joy.

"So restless!" said Joey, pathetically. "Pore little feller—*such* a pain! Lie still, then, ducky—did he want his bottle? There, then!"

The mouthpiece of the feeding-bottle was thrust forcibly into Hugh's mouth and held there despite his struggles. The yells of laughter from the

crowd made even Big Dan look round. People were running, crowding round the lorry: shout after shout of mirth rent the air as Joey soothed and dandled his reluctant infant. Micky and Jeff assisted the effect by pretending to feel the utmost concern for the suffering one. Finally Joey laid him down with an air of despair, placed one foot on him, and wept loudly on Jeff's shoulder. A turn in the street took this moving spectacle from the gaze of the helpless citizens of Coinbar.

"You—you big bully!" gasped Hugh, furiously, struggling to his feet.

Three pairs of eyes were bent upon him in an amazement that puzzled him, even in his anger. Joey, who had been beaming allowed his face to return to its representation of a hurt baby.

"Well, now, how wud he understand?" said Micky. "Sure, he's new."

"There wasn't no time to explain to him," said Joey. "'Twas an inspiration, like. An' just about the best ever I had."

"It sure was," assented Jeff. "They'll mob you to-night all right, Joey."

Hugh looked from one to another, bewildered. "I don't see what you wanted to make a fool of me for," he muttered, fighting back tears.

"See here now, kid," said Jeff. "When you've been with the Circus a bit you'll understand that the one big thing a clown wants to do is to get a laugh. It's his job."

"And a darned tough job, too," put in Joey solemnly.

"But——" protested the boy.

"But—nothing. There isn't hardly a man in the lot of us that wouldn't go out of his way to help Joey here to get a new laugh. If he got a sudden idea to hang Micky or me up by our heels an' make us look like mother's washing out on the line——"

"Now *that's* a notion!" said Joey, eagerly.

"Don't you be so sudden," Jeff retorted. "That's only by way of illustration, like. Well, as I was sayin', Hugh, whatever can make the crowd laugh is good for the whole Circus. Why, a clown's the only man that can make the Boss himself look a fool in the ring an' expect a rise in his wages for it. Once you've got the crowd laughing you can do anything with 'em. Now, you want to be a Circus hand, don't you?"

"Y—yes. But——"

"And you've had the most amazin' bit of luck. All along of Joey's cleverness you've been part of the biggest laugh we've had since we started this tour. All those people"—he waved his hand towards the town—"are splitting their sides yet: an' they'll tumble over themselves to get into the tent

to-night. That's what makes the Boss purr like a pussy-cat. Do you understand now?"

Hugh thought it over. Then he had a sudden vision of himself as he must have appeared to the crowd. He grinned up at Joey.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know, you see."

"'Course you didn't, son. An' if you think it over for a bit you'll realise it was as well you didn't, or you wouldn't have acted half as well. As it was, you were perfect. Question is, could you do it again in the same way now you do know?"

"Kick like I did? You bet!" His face was eager. "Do you—do you mean you want to do it again every time?"

"Clowns try hard not to do the same thing over again every time," said Joey, in a melancholy tone. "Hard scratching it is to ring the changes too, son. But if you an' me can think up a few little details like that we'll do nicely. It seems to me you're about the chap I've been lookin' for. I want someone I can handle easier than that little dwarf—got too many ideas of his own he has, too. Wants all the fat."

"What—to eat?" asked Hugh innocently: a question that drew mirth from his hearers.

"Fat means getting the best for himself—all the smart work an' the laughs. He won't play up to Jimmy and me, Toby won't. I tried young Eddie Pratt, but he's as stiff as a ramrod: can't get a thing out of him. But I believe I could make something of you. I'll have a word to the Boss."

"Best go steady," Jeff warned. "Didn't Mrs. Peterson tell me to keep you out of the Boss's sight, Hugh?"

The boy's face fell. He nodded.

"What's the trouble?"

"He's cross, 'cause my father asked him to take me with him. He doesn't want me."

"Oh, that's how the land lies, is it?" asked Joey. "Well, you leave it to me. I'll watch my chance. I'll put in a good word for you, anyhow, kid: he's sure to want to know what all the row was about, an' I'll tell him you acted up like a good 'un."

"But I didn't!" Hugh said.

"Don't you never let on you didn't," warned Joey, solemnly. "That's where the acting comes in. And don't you forget that when once you've joined a Circus, life's one long act: an' you got to think up laughs when you feel most like cryin'. Well, here we are at the pitch."

The procession had halted. The pitch was a vacant corner just outside the town, and the experienced eyes of the men told them that careful planning would be needed to make the Circus fit into it. They heard Big Dan shouting, and saw men hanging from the vehicles. He was near them in a moment.

“Tumble off! The place looks as if it had been used as a rubbish-tip. Scatter over it and pick up broken glass. Lively, now!”

Jeff was on the ground at the first words. He held up his arms to Hugh.

“Jump! I’ll catch you. Now you get busy; you’re as much use as a man at this job. Pick up all you can—tins or rubbish—and stow it in one corner.”

Hugh remembered the “potato races” at school as he fled. The memory helped him to work on a line, without wasting time by useless running here and there, and he made a potato race of his task. Jeff noted with approval the sturdy, purposeful figure, dashing backwards and forwards, his eyes alert for the smallest piece of broken glass. A battered tin can served him as a receptacle: he filled and emptied it several times before the pitch was pronounced safe for horses. Even then, just as the first caravan turned in, his sharp eyes caught a gleam of metal in a tuft of short grass: he raced forward and retrieved a wicked-looking nail in a splinter of pine, almost under the horses’ forefeet. Dodging backwards with it, he almost collided with Big Dan, who was standing by his horse. Hugh gave one glance of alarm and scuttled like a rabbit.

Big Dan saw, of course, but he gave no sign. Jeff patted Hugh’s head.

“Good work. Now you stand by for the lorry.”

It came in presently, and he was allowed to help Jeff with the horses while Carl and Micky attacked the load. They placed it on the grass, the tent still folded, the seats stacked in regular sizes so that they could be systematically carried into their places when the Big Top was up.

“You can’t do anything in this,” Jeff told him. “Just you stand and watch the whole outfit: every man’s got his job, an’ most of us have six. If you’ve got sense enough to get into your head the idea of how we work you’ll be able to give a hand in lots of little ways. But if you do it without watching you’ll only make mistakes an’ get under peoples’ feet, an’ then you’re liable to get kicked. One ounce of sensible work’s worth a ton of useless scurrying round. So you keep your eyes skinned.”

It was interesting enough to watch. Small as he was, Hugh began to realise the system and discipline that governed the whole organisation of the Circus. The grooms were busy with the horses at first, picketing, rubbing down, stowing away saddles and harness, while the main unloading was done. Then, at a whistle, every man ran to his place to help in the erection of the great

centre-pole and the Big Top, which needed the whole strength of the little army. It was thrilling to see the mighty pole go up: thrilling to watch the enormous canvas rise slowly, each man sweating at his rope, until it took shape and became the tent that was to hold so many people, so many wonderful things. When he had visited a Circus as a part of the audience Hugh had never wasted a thought on the tent. He was to learn to regard it as the heart of everything—something that was almost alive, because it had to be humoured and coaxed in fine weather, cherished like a baby at all times, and fought as a desperate enemy when wind and rain gave it the strength of a thousand fiends. Then it could kill a man in its struggles, or break an arm or leg as easily as he could snap a carrot. There could never be enough men to deal with it, because no one could foretell what new tricks it would play: Micky declared it used to think out fresh ones at every halt. And always there loomed the spectre of its getting damaged, the dread of every Owner and every hand. A regular patrol had to be kept round it during performances, since many a penniless enthusiast, unable to obtain a ticket, had been known to try to get in by the simple method of slitting it with his pocket-knife in the darkness. Fierce it was, and yet so fragile; it was small wonder that the hands hated the Big Top, and that Big Dan fretted over it in his dreams.

To-day it was kind. There was no breath of wind, and it went up easily, straining at the pegs that needed the strongest men for their hammering. The entrance tent, a much smaller affair, followed, and the elephants brought in the menagerie cages, in front of which the country folk would gape and stare before passing on to the ring-side. The supports for the seats came next: then, two by two, the men carried in the long slender planks that bent so alarmingly when stout people stepped on them in climbing to the top tiers. Big Dan and Crowe had marked out the ring with little sticks—no others were permitted to do this. They stood by while the green painted box-edging was laid round the circle, earthed up on either side: watched a trusted man go over every inch of the ring-surface with a fine rake, after each tiny hump or ridge had been stamped down. Sawdust was freely sprinkled over it, and the ring was ready.

Hugh had been told off with Eddie Pratt to carry in some of the stouter planking. It was clear that Eddie regarded him with contempt and dislike. He gave him orders roughly, with all the airs of a superior. Moreover, he was acute in managing the loads so that Hugh had the greater share of the weight, and more than once he manœuvred so that Hugh's end of the plank knocked against a hurrying man, earning him a hearty growl. Hugh's heart grew hot within him, with the unavailing anger of a small boy for another considerably older and stronger. He watched his chance and took it presently, pretending to stumble so that he dropped the plank. It jerked up under Eddie's armpit, and

with a yell he also dropped it—unfortunately, on the foot of a groom.

“Young ass!” sang out the sufferer, dealing Eddie a hearty cuff. He hopped round on one foot, stating his opinion of boys in general. Hugh and Eddie picked up their load hastily and fled, the latter sniffing as he went.

“I’ll take it out of you—you see if I don’t!”

Hugh made no answer, being, indeed, rather horrified at what he had done. It was a relief that Big Dan was safely hidden in the Big Top. Eddie’s threats—not that he disregarded them—were nothing beside the dread of any misdemeanour coming to the ears of the Owner.

They finished their carrying and were set to unrolling the carpet strips that softened the planks in the more highly-priced seats. It was hard work for young muscles; Hugh was panting when it was done. He stood for a moment watching the erection of the musicians’ box. A deep voice fell on his ear, making him jump.

“Got nothing to do?”

For a moment he thought it was Big Dan, and his heart went into his boots. But it was Crowe, second in command, and nearly as big and awe-inspiring as his master.

“N-no, sir.”

“Then you cut over to my waggon an’ get me my pipe. Mrs. Crowe’ll give it to you.”

Hugh had not the slightest idea as to which waggon was Crowe’s, but he preferred to ask someone else. He bolted out of the tent, dodged several busy men, and was finally directed by Joey, who had washed off his baby make-up, but looked almost as melancholy without it.

“Crowe’s waggon? That yellor one.”

The door of the yellow caravan was shut. He went up the steps and knocked timidly.

“Come in,” said a tired voice.

Hugh obeyed. He saw an untidy interior, lacking any of the splendour of Mrs. Dan’s domain. A young woman, heavy-eyed, was sitting by the table, reading. One foot rocked a cradle in which a baby cried restlessly. He made known his message.

“I s’pose it’s in his coat,” said Mrs. Crowe. She found it, looking at him curiously as she gave it to him.

“You’re the new boy?”

“Yes.” He fidgeted, in a hurry to be off.

“Take my advice an’ get out of it as soon’s you can,” she said. “It’s a dog’s life!”

Hugh went off at top speed, glad to get away. This was a side of the Circus he had not imagined, and it was not pleasant; the memory of the squalid cabin lingered with him. But he had no time to dwell on it: already he felt that Crowe would think he had been a long tune. And a new problem awaited him as he ran into the tent, for Crowe had now a companion—and that companion was Big Dan!

He slipped behind him, anxiously trying to catch Crowe’s eye. When he succeeded he was no better off, for the owner of the pipe merely held out his hand for his property and went on talking. Hugh approached delicately, taking cover as long as possible. He handed over the pipe, taking to his heels as he did so, dreading to hear himself called. No voice reached him, and he breathed freely to find himself outside the tent.

“What’s that youngster doing?” Big Dan asked.

“Handy sort o’ kid,” answered Crowe, filling his pipe. “Pretty willing, I sh’d say: he’s been making himself useful.”

“New broom!” growled the Owner.

“Very likely. He an’ Joey had the crowd tickled to death in the main street.”

“Was that what the row was?” Dan asked. “I saw something happening.”

“Pazo told me. They had an act all on their own.” He told the story, and the Boss listened with more interest than he chose to show.

“That youngster might be worth keeping an eye on,” Crowe concluded. “He’s the sort to go down with the crowd—pretty face an’ crop of yeller curls. Good contrast to your little girl.”

“Don’t you put ideas into his head,” said Peterson angrily. “I don’t know that I’m goin’ to keep him—an’ if I do he’s goin’ to work his way up. I’ve seen too many curly-headed angels that got too big for their boots. You keep him working, Crowe, an’ don’t spare him.”

“Trust me,” said the other, indifferently.

Hugh had been found by Jeff, who helped him to stow his mattress and blankets in a corner of the sleeping tent. Few of the men had a mattress: it was pointed out to him that he was in luxury. Jeff took the opportunity to deliver a warning. He had seen the incident of the dropped plank, and was not pleased.

“You did it on purpose.”

“I know I did. He was a beast.”

“That don’t matter. You’ve got to understand that when you’re working you can’t have private quarrels. ’Cause why, you belong to the Circus, an’ it’s the only thing that matters.”

“But——”

“You shut your head an’ listen to me. A boy your size has got to do plenty of listening an’ watching. An’ mighty little talking—if he wants to stay with us, that is. What happened along of you dropping that plank?”

“Eddie got more than he liked,” said Hugh, with a grin.

“He did; an’ it might have made him unable to go into the ring to-night. More than that, a man got hurt; just luck if his foot wasn’t put out of business. There’s two perfectly good Circus hands might have been unfit for work, just because you had a bit of private spite.”

Hugh looked at him, horror-stricken.

“I—I didn’t think of it that way. And I didn’t know the man was so near.”

Jeff’s face was unyielding.

“You never looked. The Owner might just as well have been there, for all you knew: or any performer. You can’t wriggle out of it: you worked off a grudge, an’ you hurt two people.”

Hugh looked at the ground miserably.

“Now you’ve got to soak it, right into what brains you’ve got, that the Circus is the only thing that counts. It’s just the same sort of thing we told you on the lorry when you were about ready to murder Joey. Circus first, last, an’ all the time. No matter about yourself. If you want to make a success you’ve to learn to have no private feelings.”

They were alone in the tent. Jeff’s voice, usually low, had risen a little, and there was in it a ring that held Hugh’s attention, making him forget that he was angry and puzzled. He looked up at him.

“Don’t you ever have any?”

“Private feelings? Tons of ’em. But I’ve learned to stow ’em away, so deep that I’ve near forgotten ever I had ’em out. Look here, son, I’ll tell you something, just for yourself. I’ve got only one big idea in my head, an’ that is that some day I’ll own a Circus. At the present moment it’s just about as likely that I’ll own the moon, but I don’t let that discourage me. I’m going on.”

“O-oh!” said Hugh. “True? Oh—will you give me a job in your Circus, Jeff?”

The young fellow laughed, but the laugh was kind.

“My dream-circus? Well, I might. But we’ve both of us got to learn all we

know in this one first. And my idea is that if a fellow wants to get on, like you an' I do, we've just that one thing to stick to—that we've always got to put the Circus first. We can't have quarrels in Circus time—an' that's all the time there is, pretty near—because if you have a quarrel you're apt to hurt someone, an' that hurts the Circus. We've got to watch our chance for being a shade more useful than the next man—an' that means never grumbling or shirking, no matter whether we're tired, or hungry, or sick, or anything else. We've got to know all the time that it's *our* Circus: an' never do a thing that lets our Circus down."

Hugh nodded vigorously.

"That's something like what Mrs. Peterson says."

"Mrs. Peterson put me up to thinking the way I've been telling you. She's a good friend, an' don't you forget it. Now, if we're goin' to be mates you've got to keep my ideas in your head. Think you can?"

"I'll try."

"That's all I want. Well, I guess it's time we hunted up something to eat."

There was hot stew waiting at the tucker-waggon, with potatoes baked in their jackets. Jeff explained that you cleaned your own plate with grass when you had finished, if you were dainty, as that was all the plate you had for the roly-poly pudding that followed. Hugh thought he had never known so beautiful a meal. The men sat on the ground, thankful for the rest in the cool evening air; and he was among them. One of them, between Micky and Jeff; a real Circus hand. He looked with pity at the boys of the township, who came as near as they dared, staring at the queer Circus-folk.

Yesterday he had been proud that he had ridden an elephant. This evening even that stupendous achievement had faded, for he had a deeper pride. He was no longer just a boy: he had travelled with men, worked with them, eaten with them. One of them, who meant to be a Circus owner, had talked with him, as man to man: and he had made a vow in his inmost heart that he would remember every word he said. He knew that, more than anything, he wanted to be mates with Jeff.

The men had finished, and were smoking and yarning round him. He turned on his back and lay looking up at the evening sky. There were white clouds drifting across it; one, to his fancy, took the shape of a Circus tent. A Big Top. He knew it—that was the Big Top he and Jeff were going to have in their Dream-Circus!

## CHAPTER IX

### THE FIRST NIGHT

“JEFF!”  
“Well?”

“Can I—do you think I can see the Circus?”

“Haven’t you been seeing it all day?” asked Jeff, in some bewilderment.

“Oh, but—you know—to-night.”

“Oh, you mean the show. Well, there isn’t any reason why you shouldn’t, so far as I know—except that you’ve had a long day.”

“I’m not a bit tired,” Hugh assured him, earnestly. “I’d love to see it.”

“Seems a bit queer to think of one of the crew acshally wanting to,” said Jeff, lazily. “It’ll soon wear off, an’ you’ll be glad enough of a full night’s sleep when you can get it—an’ that’s not always, I can tell you.” He thought a moment. “Might be as well if you kept out of the Boss’s way. He seems to be rather queer where you’re concerned.”

“Where will I go?”

“I’ll watch my chance when he’s busy an’ get you into the cheap seats.”

Hugh hugged himself gleefully. Then his face fell.

“But I haven’t got any money.”

“Bless you, that doesn’t matter. You don’t belong to the crowd that pays. An’ this little place won’t fill the tent—there’ll be room for a scrap like you, anyhow.” Jeff glanced at his cheap watch. “Well, it’s about time I got into uniform.”

“I say, do you wear uniform? What do you do, Jeff—ride?”

“Not me. Some day I will, when I get a chance, but I’m only a ring-hand now.” He rose, stretching himself. “You remember, when you’re looking on to-night, to watch carefully.”

“My word, I will!” said Hugh, solemnly.

“Oh, I don’t mean just like one of the crowd. They only see the effects: they haven’t the ghost of a notion what makes it all. All the work, I mean, an’ the thinking-out, and the preparation. But you belong now, an’ you’ve got to watch in a different way. Keep your eye on the clowns, ’specially Joey, an’ see how they work. Put yourself in their place an’ think how you’d do things. An’ notice how people make their entrances, an’ how they go out. Watch their

faces, an' see who's wooden an' who isn't. Lots of good performers miss jobs because they do their work looking as if it hurt 'em."

"I never thought of all that," admitted Hugh.

"Why would you? You didn't have to. But it's different now, an' all you can pick up 'll help you later on. An' you'll find it makes it a lot more interesting if you notice points like that. It wouldn't have entered your head now, would it, that before a clown ambles in with a silly smile he's practised it for hours before a lookin'-glass?"

"Not truly?"

"True as you're alive. Not every day, of course, 'cause he's got it fixed; but he's done the mirror practice before he got to being a good clown. Every bit of fooling, all the lovely expressions of the lady riders, everything we call the 'business'—it's all practice. I've seen the Boss take half a morning sendin' a girl in an' out of the ring until she learned to make a good entrance."

"My word!" said Hugh, deeply impressed.

"The older you are, the harder it is to learn those tricks," Jeff said. "But for a kid it's easy, once he learns not to be stiff. What the crowd likes to see is a kid come in lookin' happy. You watch Nita to-night—she just loves her work, so she darts in as if she was going to a picnic. So she is, for her; so it's no effort to her to look it. But the art is to go in feelin' like a funeral an' still be able to keep up the picnic look. That's what a good many of 'em have to do. Like Mrs. Crowe."

"Does she feel like a funeral?"

"Most times, I guess. She isn't strong, an' she's got a troublesome baby, an' she doesn't get enough sleep. But she's got enough pluck for ten men. You notice her—she rides that big black that the Boss was on to-day. I say, I'll have to cut!"—and he was gone.

Left alone, for all the other men had gone to dress, Hugh's first act was to cast a wary eye round the pitch lest Big Dan should be near: and he was relieved to see him in the act of disappearing into the blue caravan. The grooms were leading the horses used in the ring towards a tent pitched so that it opened towards the Big Top: his heart led him there, and he thought it safe to follow its leading. He slipped into it, making himself as inconspicuous as possible, and feasted his eyes on the horses.

They were all groomed until every hair shone. Manes and tails like silk, forelocks carefully arranged under the coloured brow-bands, hoofs polished until they gleamed. There was little Merrylegs, standing soberly now, though his fine head was always alert. There were the great horses for the bare-back riding, wearing only a broad surcingle with a vaulting-pad: the grooms were

rubbing resin into their backs, to give the riders' feet a better hold—he learned later that their ring name was “rosin-backs.” Blacks, browns, bays, greys: horses piebald and horses skewbald, and a couple of roans with the kind, wise look that so often stamps a roan horse. Hugh had loved to see them all, even when covered with the dust of travel. But here, shining with every art that could make them fit for the ring, with touches of colour that brought out the beauty of the glossy coats, he felt that he could have looked at them for ever.

A groom noticed him, however, and scowlingly told him to “clear out.” He found that the space between the two tents had been closed by tarpaulin curtains, so that no prowling on-looker could come near the horses: his only way out led through the Big Top. It was ready for the show. Men had fixed naphtha flares to the poles, dimly lighting the great expanse so that people could find their way to their seats; others would be lit later on, throwing the ring into full light. A pile of hurdles was behind the musicians' box: near them were the gaily-painted wooden tubs that were used in some of the acts for horses and elephants, and under the tiers of seats lay the sections of iron fencing for the lions' cage. Hugh saw a faint glow near them, coming from a zinc bucket: he investigated it, finding a brazier inside it, with glowing coke. He thought it was merely for warmth, and was rather puzzled, since the evening was not cold; ignorant then that since Big Dan had once seen a lion strike down a tamer there were hot irons ready at every performance in his Circus.

There was a curious pleasure in being alone in the Big Top, as if he were already an Owner, making sure that everything was just as it ought to be. Hugh's Dream-Circus, to be shared with Jeff, seemed very real to him as he stood there, a little hesitating figure in the gloom.

Outside the tent came a sudden crash of music: the band, high up in the open waggon, was beginning to call to the people of the town. Hugh realised that he had better be off, and scuttled to the entrance, near which the menagerie tent was ready for inspection. Already a few first-comers, boys and young men, were there, passing from cage to cage. It was not a large collection: wild animals were costly to buy and to keep, and Big Dan concentrated mainly on his lions. A couple of chimpanzees snuggled together in one cage: in another were three little Malay bears, half asleep, next to two brown Himalayan bears. None of them showed the slightest interest in being inspected. In their larger cages the lions snored peacefully.

Spaces were roped off at the other side of the tent, a pair of fine goats tethered in one; in another four dogs of different mongrel breeds, yapping incessantly. The elephants swayed sleepily, though their little eyes were watchful. Near them a large cage held a dozen monkeys, swinging on their

trapezes, clinging to the bars and begging for nuts. The boys clustered near them; these, at least, were wide-awake and amusing. The Circus hands moved about, watching closely lest any animal should be teased or offered unsuitable food. Hugh hardly recognised them, so transformed were they. No longer dirty, shabby, unkempt wanderers of the roads; he saw them—for this night, at least—smart young men in purple uniforms, faced with yellow, and purple caps, gold-banded. One touched him on the shoulder presently—he looked up and saw that it was Jeff.

“You’d better not stay here, Hugh: the Boss’ll be along any minute. You slip outside and wait near the door—if he does go there he won’t notice you, if you keep well back. I’ll come along presently.”

Hugh obeyed. Outside, everything was gay. A steady stream of people came along the street, heading for the Circus: their feet kept tune instinctively to the march the band was playing. The fences were lined with small boys: buggies discharged their eager passengers. Further up the road a tent-hand rang a large bell incessantly, shouting, “This way to the Circus!” It seemed to Hugh a most unnecessary proceeding—“As if everybody didn’t know!” he muttered.

He had begun to fear that Jeff had forgotten him when he saw him, beckoning. Hugh wormed his way, eel-like, through the people, and they passed the man who was taking the tickets; he seemed unaware of Hugh’s existence as he pressed close to Jeff.

“Now you’re right. The Boss is in the horse-tent. You keep among those boys ahead and get well back in the cheap seats—high up. You’ll see well enough from anywhere. Cut back to the sleeping-tent when the crowd comes out.”

Hugh gave him a grateful look to which Jeff responded with a faint grin. He turned away, and the boy was lost among the jostling crowd. They scrambled up to the high, bare planks, where Hugh found himself between a fat boy and a lean bushman—he felt that his small body would be screened between them. Big Dan would never espy him up here.

Flares sprang up round the ring. The music outside ceased, and in a few moments the bandsmen filed into their box and again began to play. The music was soft now; scarcely heard over the chattering of the crowd. It was a good house: Big Dan’s face was serene as he came in by the performers’ entrance and let his eyes travel round the seats—seeing which, Hugh ducked behind the bushman’s shoulder. The crowd coming in had dwindled to a few late arrivals. Big Dan nodded towards the leader of the band, who, cornet in hand, was watching him.

The soft music changed to a sudden crashing blare. It was answered

instantly by growls and roars from the menagerie tent. Simultaneously, the curtains parted, drawn back by two men, and a great white “rosin-back” cantered into the ring, bearing a slender girl in rose-pink tights, with a gleaming head-dress of silver. Round and round they went, the slender legs swinging backwards and forwards across the horse. She leaped down, bounding as she touched the ground: ran at the horse, landing on her knees, astride, facing either way: stood on his back, kissing her finger-tips to the audience, her pretty face alight with smiles. Big Dan tossed her a silver skipping-rope: she caught it deftly, whirling it round her head in shining loops. The horse’s pace increased to a gallop: she began to skip, faster and faster; and, so skipping, was borne swiftly out of the ring, jumping off just as the curtains opened to admit the horse. She ran back, laughing, to meet the storm of applause: then danced out of sight.

“Gosh!” said the bushman, heavily.

Hugh was all athrill. He wondered who she was: he had not seen anyone so pretty, so young and happy, among the women of the Circus—who had, indeed, appeared to him uninteresting, in the few glimpses he had caught of them. He decided that this exquisite person must have remained hidden in one of the caravans: and then forgot all about her in the roar of joy that greeted Joey, who came solemnly skipping into the ring, using the rider’s silver rope; tripping over it at each jump, and finally falling flat at the ring-master’s feet. Toby, the dwarf, came behind him, a ludicrous figure in draggled black coat, the long tails of which swept the ground: his tiny feet encased in boots with toes nine inches long, pink spats lending a note of colour that was echoed in a flowing tie. He removed his battered top-hat in an exaggerated gesture, and ordered Big Dan, his voice high and squeaky, to leave the ring at once. The crowd yelled with joy at the fooling that followed: and none yelled louder than little Hugh Russell—no longer a Circus hand, but an excited spectator.

There was no moment of the show that he did not enjoy. The horse work was clever and well-finished, from the troop of rosin-backs to the black and cream “sextet” that went through their drill wearing only plumed scarlet headdresses. They moved to the changing music, following Big Dan’s uplifted hand: trotting, cantering, galloping, wheeling round like one animal; manes and tails flying, eyes alight in the flaring rays of the lamps, hoofs a thunder of hollow sound on the beaten turf. They waltzed to his signal, keeping perfect time: broke into a gallop as the music changed, charged into the centre of the ring, and, wheeling, reared up, beating the air with their forelegs, their proud heads tossed high. Then out of the ring, still on their hind legs, until Dan’s hand went down, when they came to earth and stampeded for their tent. It brought the house down: the benches creaked ominously under the stamping

feet. Big Dan was a suave figure, bowing his acknowledgements, one hand on his gleaming shirt-front.

There were the elephants, splendid in coloured trappings, solemn and docile. To the country folk anything that an elephant did was a miracle. They gasped as the great beasts paced along a narrow plank laid on tubs, Ram Singh carrying the keeper in his trunk: they clapped feverishly when Ali rang a bell and an attendant hurried up with bottles from which they drank—the crowd certain that the bottles would follow their contents down the great throats. Joey earned a roar of laughter by springing on Ali's back, to which familiarity the little elephant responded by kneeling down and shaking him off into the sawdust. Joey scrambled to his feet, aimed a kick at Ali from a safe distance, and fled, weeping, pursued at full speed by all three, with George in the rear beseeching them to come back. It was some time before the crowd realised that the turn was over—not, indeed, until a troupe of trapeze artists was already executing swallow-like flights high above their heads.

To Hugh it was one long evening of delight; a confused memory of light and colour, made up of jugglers and tumblers, performing bears, dancing horses, dogs leaping through hoops, lithe-limbed men and women who took risks with a laugh. He thrilled with the crowd throughout the lion act: Nabob was not in a performing humour, and Hugh was certain that each moment would be the tamer's last. But the crown of the whole performance to Hugh was Nita.

She came in at first in a little carriage driving the two goats. Joey, lost in thought, was strolling idly round the ring when the pit-pat of the tiny hoofs sounded behind him: he looked round, uttered a loud cry of terror, and ran frantically. Nita whipped up her steeds, standing in the carriage, her curls flying, her face aglow; the ridiculous chase went on until Joey broke from the ring and fell on Big Dan's neck, begging to be saved—by which time there was no strength left in the delighted crowd. Nita drove off triumphantly. She returned on Merrylegs, at full speed, circling the ring, leaping on and off, waltzing, picking up dropped handkerchiefs; she made him go round with his forefeet on the wooden edging: made him lie down and die for the Queen, while she stood with one tiny foot on his neck. The people loved her—her baby ways, her smiles that came and went, her unconcealed enjoyment in her own performance. They wanted never to let her go—Hugh least of all.

“And to think she's a friend of mine!” he muttered delightedly—forgetting the gulf that lay now between Owner's daughter and Circus hand.

The performance ended in a high-jumping exhibition by a famous grey horse. Big Dan made a little speech, which was lost in the movement of many feet on the planking, and Hugh slipped out with the crowd, and made his way

to the tent. It was all in darkness. He looked in half-fearfully, hearing no sound; decided that he would wait for Jeff. The Big Top was almost empty now: watching it across the pitch he saw the last stragglers emerge, and in a few moments the lights were extinguished, only a glimmer remaining in the horse-tent, and in the smaller one that was used for an office, where Big Dan and Crowe were now counting the evening's takings.

Hugh began to realise that he was very tired. He looked back over the long day—what an age it seemed since he had waked up that morning and found father's letter! He wondered where was father now? what was he doing? With the thought came the knowledge of his own loneliness. He belonged to nobody. And suddenly he was only a very little boy, and afraid.

He sat down on the grass, his mind full of anxious questions. Suppose Big Dan did not keep him? Suppose the police got him, which could mean only a kind of prison, how would father ever find him again? Would the police let him go, if father did come?

They were dreadful questions, for a small boy alone in the darkness. But out of the darkness help came. A quick footfall, a woman's form—and he sprang up to meet Mrs. Dan.

"Anyone there?" she called. "Oh—it's you, Hugh. Whatever are you doing?"

"I was . . . waiting for Jeff."

She heard the break in his voice, and pitied him. Her thoughts went to Nita, tucked-up snugly in the cabin—and last night this child, too, had a home. She put down a burden she was carrying and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Jeff good to you, son?"

"Oh, awful good. He'll be over soon."

"That's all right." Her voice was relieved. "How's everything going with you?"

"I like it," he said. "They gave me jobs. Only——"

"I know. Bit lonesome when night comes. Well, you be a man, Hugh, an' you'll get on well—things always look better in the morning. I brought your things over—Jeff must have forgotten to come for them. And here's a bit of chocolate for you."

The tone meant more than the chocolate. It was the Mrs. Dan of yesterday, and his heart leaped.

"Thanks—but you shouldn't have carried that heavy thing," he said, gratefully.

"Oh, that won't kill me. Now, you do your best an' keep up your pecker.

Mr. Crowe's got his eye on you—he told me you worked like a good 'un."

"Oh—true, Mrs. Peterson?"

"True. Only it's between ourselves, mind. Well, I must go." She patted his head, and hurried away.

Hugh sat down again. All his troubles had vanished—all the loneliness. New hope filled him. Mr. Crowe—that great man—had said he worked well. And—oh, hadn't Mrs. Dan been nice! He ate his chocolate, thinking over what she had said. He'd show her he could work!

Jeff came, swinging a hurricane lantern.

"Hullo, kid—did you think I was never coming?" His eye fell on the bag. "Lor! I forgot all about that. Who brought it?"

"Mrs. Peterson."

"You—don't—say! Well, I wouldn't have had her do that. Was she annoyed?"

"I don't think so," Hugh said. "She was jolly kind."

"I'll eat humble-pie next time I see her. Come along; time you were in bed." He picked up the bag. "Like the show?"

"Like it! It was great!"

He chattered eagerly about it as they undressed. Jeff listened good-naturedly.

"Hope you watched all those points I told you about."

Hugh opened his mouth—and shut it again.

"I never thought about them—not once!"

Jeff grinned.

"Didn't expect you would—not your first night. Never mind—you'll have plenty of chances. Jove, I'm glad to get to bed! Are you all right? Got enough blankets?"

"Yes. It's funny without sheets, though."

"I'd think it funny with 'em. Well, good night."

Hugh lay thinking. Suddenly he remembered something.

"Jeff."

"'M?"—sleepily.

"Who was that girl who rode first—on the white horse? Wasn't she lovely?"

"First turn? Oh, Mrs. Crowe."

“No—a pretty girl. Not a grown-up lady. She wore pink things.”

“Wonderful what grease-paint’ll do,” said the sleepy voice. “It was Mrs. Crowe, right enough, though.”

“Golly!” said Hugh, awestruck. He was still marvelling as he fell asleep.

## CHAPTER X

### THE NEW LIFE

**I**N the weeks that followed Hugh Russell had ample opportunity to revise all his ideas of the romance of Circus life. He buried most of them, indeed, in the first twenty-four hours.

On his father's farm his chief trouble had been loneliness. Now he was to learn what it meant to be never alone; to live every moment, day and night, in the crowded companionship of people of different types and nationalities, people who had among themselves a hundred private grudges and quarrels and jealousies that were put aside only when they became the People of the Show.

It was only natural. They lived under a strict discipline that chafed them, although they knew it could never relax. Performers might have to be coaxed and persuaded when they were difficult, but with the rank and file of the Circus there could be only the short way of the iron hand. Both Big Dan and Crowe were well fitted to use it. If a man were slack, or drank, or "answered back," he ran the risk of being knocked down: if he did not care for that, he could go. There were always plenty to fill his place, among the country lads bitten with the glamour of the Circus. They submitted; working out their grievances upon each other. Only a man with a very even temper and rigid self-control could keep from quarrelling.

The performers—the highly-paid "artists"—helped to jangle nerves always frayed by constant travelling, work done against time, and lack of sleep. Those who were riders burdened the lives of the grooms in a hundred ways. Pazo's men suffered constantly under his ill-temper. They declared him a good match for old Nabob. Trapeze artists, acrobats, slack-wire performers, all demanded rehearsals when the men who attended them hoped to be off duty. All the complex parts of the Circus fitted into each other so closely that the actions of one person necessarily affected those of many.

It was surely a watchful guardian angel who had thrown Hugh into the company of Jeff and Micky—to say nothing of big Carl. Among all the other men they stood out by reason of cheerful good nature and avoidance of disputes. They went their way unconcernedly, always ready to do a good turn for anyone who needed it, taking life with a light-heartedness that might often be assumed, but which rarely failed. They did not drink; and all three loved the animals, and lost no opportunity of being with them. Also, they liked children, so that they did not regard as an unmitigated nuisance the small boy who had been thrust upon them.

There was a great deal from which they could not save him. From the first day he was odd-job boy to the Circus at every camp, liable to be used by anyone. There was rarely time to explain anything to him: he had to use his own wits, which, luckily for him, were not slow. But it was only to be expected that he should make frequent mistakes; doing his best, but only to earn rough words and an occasional blow. From most of the latter he soon learned to save himself by being ready to dodge, having found out that if a man could not reach him at the moment he had no time to follow him. It was hard schooling: a boy who had been brought up more softly could scarcely have stood it. In that, John Russell's determination to make Hugh independent had done him a good turn.

Of Nita he saw little. She was literally a "star", who dwelt apart. When he crossed her path she had always a friendly smile for him, but that was all; and he dared not speak to her. It was the same with Mrs. Dan. When the Circus was at rest they kept to the neighbourhood of the blue caravan, always placed as far as possible from the men's quarters. As for Big Dan, he seemed to ignore Hugh's very existence, and the boy was thankful that it should be so, since the dread of being handed over to the police never left him.

But instinctively he knew that he had in the Owner's wife a friend. The rare smiles he had from her cheered and helped him; and he kept in his mind her brief words of advice, condensing them to "Do your best and never whimper." He was sharp enough to see quickly that a boy who whimpered would have little chance in a Circus. There might be tears sometimes at night, into his pillow—a dreadful, malodorous pillow it was, too. But in daylight he kept the stiff upper lip counselled by Jeff, and learned even to smile when he felt most like crying.

That paid, he found. He had a warning example in Eddie Pratt, a surly youngster whom the men heartily disliked. They commented freely on Eddie's manners, which were bad, and on his acuteness in shirking work, which was colossal. Hugh realised that he could not do better than be as unlike Eddie as possible. If he grinned and said "Sorry" when a man abused him, and took the next opportunity of doing some little turn for him, no comment was made, but he found that man more friendly afterwards. He earned the reputation of being "a good-tempered kid, an' no shirker."

Hugh learned to eat and to sleep whenever and wherever the chance came. Food was good and plentiful: Big Dan never made the mistake of under-feeding his men, though the manner of eating was generally both comfortless and rough. Sleep was snatched whenever possible: on the lorry—or under it;—beneath a bush on a day-halt: all the men had the art of taking dog-naps, ten minutes of which seemed to give them as much energy as the ordinary man

gains from a full night in a comfortable bed. To pitch the sleeping tents was not always a possibility; indeed, in fine weather the men chose to camp under the stars rather than to have the labour of unloading and putting them up. Hugh loved the open-air sleeping. It was then that he felt his mother closest to him: not in the crowded tent, heavy with the smell of unwashed humanity, loud with snores. But out in the open, the stars glimmering faintly through the gum-trees overhead, she seemed very near—comforting, strengthening, always loving. He never wondered at this conviction that had come to him of his mother as a real, living presence. Father had told him she had gone away to be an angel: and everyone knew angels were alive. Why should she not come back to him, now that he had no longer father? He wondered sometimes how she managed her wings, which of course all angels had. Sometimes he fancied they brushed his face.

It was Jeff and Micky who saved him, after the first week or two, from the horrors of the sleeping-tent. Certainly it was no place for a young boy. Big Carl kept discipline there after a fashion, but he could not check the rough talk and horse-play of the hands, who regarded Hugh no more than they would have regarded a stray puppy that had crept in for shelter. Jeff and Micky worried over it between themselves, seeing Hugh's nervous shrinking from the place. Finally they went to Crowe. There was a little tent, a spare one scarcely ever used: could they have it for themselves and the kid?

Crowe had his own reasons for liking Hugh, and he respected Micky and Jeff. He was as curt as Big Dan himself, but he recognised the good sense of what they said, and after a few minutes' thought gave permission—so long as it did not interfere with their own work. "Pitchin' it is an extra job; have it if you like," he said. They accepted joyfully, glad for their own sakes, as well as for Hugh's, to have a place apart. The little tent travelled on the lorry, and Hugh became an expert at putting it up. Micky and Jeff had no reason to regret their move; they found their beds made, their boots cleaned, a basin of water always ready for washing. Hugh would almost have licked the boots, so grateful was he for his new "home."

He had made another friend—two, indeed, though one was very small. It was at a two-night pitch, when work was slack, that in strolling about in the afternoon he beheld the Crowe baby, who had been placed on a rug on the grass near the caravan. Mrs. Crowe had disappeared: the baby had found that the rug was dull, and was crawling briskly away, heading for a paint-pot that seemed to offer joyful prospects. Hugh rescued the explorer, who protested loudly at first and then decided to make friends with this new person. Mrs. Crowe, hurrying from the caravan presently, found him with both fists clutching Hugh's curls. Baby and boy were happy.

“Why, he’ll root your hair out!” she protested. “Let go, Lennie—isn’t he a limb!” She disentangled his fists. The baby objected, and Hugh laughed.

“He didn’t hurt. He’s jolly, isn’t he?”

“You’d call him something else if you had him on your hands all the time,” said his mother wearily. “Two people’s work, that’s what he is. Had me awake nearly all last night, he’s that restless with a new tooth comin’.”

“Don’t they like new teeth?” asked Hugh, politely. Mrs. Crowe explained something of the mysteries of teething, and the baby crawled all over Hugh with every sign of enjoyment. Hugh poked him gently, uncertain as to the possibility of damaging him. The baby chuckled.

“He likes you,” said the mother. “Well, tenting’s a dull life for a baby. He doesn’t get much fun: an’ I’m sure I don’t. My idea of fun’s a real good sleep. Goodness knows, I could do with one now!”

Hugh looked at her tired face. It was still a mystery to him that she could change into the gay, laughing girl who pirouetted every night in the ring in rose-pink tights.

“I say, I could look after him for you,” he offered. “Is it hard? I never knew a baby.”

“Oh, it isn’t fair to let you—you’re kept pretty well on the jump,” she said.

“I haven’t got anything to do now. I like him, too.” The baby had got unsteadily on his feet by means of Hugh’s shoulder, and was again clawing at his hair.

She hesitated.

“I’m that tired out it ’ud be a mercy to get a sleep,” she said. “If you’re certain you don’t mind, sonny?”

“I’d like to—truly. Does he have to get fed or something?”

“No—he won’t need his tea until I come out. Only you won’t let him out of your sight? He’s that quick at getting into mischief, even though he’s only crawling.”

“I promise,” Hugh said. She gave Lennie a pat, told him to be a good boy, and looked at Hugh gratefully.

“You’re a real good kid. I won’t forget it.” She yawned heavily. “Bring him to me if he bothers you.”

Hugh did not find the baby a bother. He found something very pleasant in the clinging of the soft little hands, the gurgles of joy that greeted his hesitating attempts at play—he had little notion of how to amuse a baby, so he adopted some of the methods he had seen Pazo use with the lion-cubs, and found them

remarkably successful. To have a finger poked into his soft side excited emotions of delight in the Crowe baby: to be rolled on his back and tickled threw him into an ecstasy of fat chuckles. "I believe I could train you for the ring, old man," said Hugh, hopefully.

An hour went by happily. Then the baby grew restless and showed signs of departing good-humour.

"Don't you start crying," Hugh warned him. "If you wake your mother \_\_\_\_\_"

The baby grasped the idea immediately. He puckered up his face and bellowed—and Hugh promptly clapped a hand over his mouth. This heroic treatment slightly lessened the sound, but produced symptoms of suffocation in the victim. Hugh doubted its success. So he picked up his charge—who at once ceased to cry, and emitted gurgles of victory—and carried him off.

The Crowe baby was small, light and muscular. To carry him was no great effort for Hugh, if he would only have kept still; but as he desired to look in five places at once, he gave his bearer little repose, either of body or mind. Still, it was a cheerful proceeding: even the fact that Eddie Pratt passed by and jeered at him for being a nurse-girl in no way lessened Hugh's enjoyment. Something that had been starved seemed to have awakened in his heart with the baby touch. When you are very lonely and very young even a baby can help.

He carried him as near the horses as he dared to go, telling him their names carefully—which had a soothing effect on Lennie, who ceased to wriggle, and uttered incoherent things that Hugh interpreted as proving that he was a true child of the Circus, with a natural eye for a horse. He took him to inspect the elephants, which entranced the baby. He even showed him the interior of the Big Top, telling him that was where he would ride some day. The Crowe baby assented heartily, if unintelligibly. It was a very successful tour. Hugh's arms were aching when at length they returned to the rug, but he felt that as a baby-minder he could pass with honours. He sat down thankfully.

It was then that the alarming thing happened. Big Dan, who had been asleep, came out of his caravan, desiring to find a messenger. His roving glance, ignoring the baby, fell on Hugh.

"Hi! You!"

The boy was on his feet in an instant.

"You boy there! Go an' tell Mr. Pazo I want him!"

Hugh gave an agonised glance at the baby. To leave his charge was unthinkable: even more so was to keep the Boss waiting. Even his second of hesitation brought an angry roar from the big man. There was only one thing to

do. He swooped on the baby, gathered him up under one arm, and fled.

The Crowe baby yelled, kicked, and struggled. Never in his short, triumphant life had he been so mishandled. Twice Hugh almost dropped him, saving him by grabbing wildly at his woolly jersey. Big Dan stared blankly for a moment.

Then he gave a deep chuckle.

“Look here, Polly!”

Mrs. Dan came out and gaped.

“Whatever’s he doing? It’s Mrs. Crowe’s kid!”

“He’s doubling two turns,” said her husband, still chuckling. “I sent him for Pazo, an’ he’s evidently on duty with little Crowe. Never saw one of my hands do that before, did you, Polly?”

“I did not. Poor youngster—he looks as if you’d scared him into a fit!”

“Well, I didn’t scare him into forgettin’ the baby, anyhow,” Big Dan said. “Hope Mrs. Crowe won’t see.”

Pazo fortunately came out of the menagerie tent as Hugh neared it. He delivered his message in a shrill cry; the baby gave a final, convulsive wriggle, and they subsided on the grass together. Pazo looked amazed, but went off, and Hugh panted with relief. He felt the baby all over, deciding that nothing was broken.

“Outside, anyhow,” he added, anxiously. “Goodness knows what you’re like inside. You can yell all right.”

“What are you doing with my kid?”

He looked up in horror. Mr. Crowe stood over them. But he was smiling. The baby turned a howl into a chuckle and crawled towards his father rapidly.

“I—I had to run for the Boss,” Hugh explained.

“I saw you. But where did this fellow come in?”

“Mrs. Crowe lent him to me. Couldn’t leave him.”

“That so? Well, you can take him back.”

No other comment was made; Hugh departed, thankful to get off with so little trouble. He returned to the yellow caravan by a roundabout route, keeping as many vehicles as possible between himself and Big Dan. Mrs. Crowe, declaring that she felt ten years younger after her sleep, gave him a slice of cake and an invitation to come to her whenever he wanted a button sewn on.

It was the beginning of a friendship. Life was too busy for Hugh to go very often to the yellow caravan: but he did so when he could, sure always of a welcome. Lennie would greet him with shouts of joy, knowing that his coming

meant an outing and a game. Hugh grew very fond of the merry baby. Mrs. Crowe was grateful for the hours of rest she snatched when he was in Hugh's care. And Crowe observed, saying nothing, but often intervening in hours of rush to save the boy from a task too hard for his strength.

What Big Dan thought concerning Hugh was not known. Even Mrs. Dan did not ask him. It was significant enough that Dan made no further mention of giving him to the care of the police. They had travelled beyond the district in which they had found him: she knew that it would no longer be a simple matter to have him accepted by the authorities. For good or ill, Hugh Russell was a member of Peterson's Circus.

Nearly every night he watched the performance. As a spectacle it soon ceased to have any novelty or thrill, so that to have witnessed it only as a member of the crowd would have been more of a penance than a pleasure. He went for another reason now. Jeff, who was his hero, did not cease to impress upon him the need for studying every detail of the ring-craft. He knew that Jeff watched steadily as he worked; that he would take another man's job so that he could be present at rehearsals or practice. That was because he meant to be a Circus owner one day. It followed that as Hugh was determined to be in Jeff's Circus he must watch too.

Jeff was never weary in telling him the points to observe: the innumerable details, unsuspected by the audience, that went to make the finished performance. Under his guidance Hugh found that the show grew more and more interesting to him. He no longer thrilled at the most exciting horse "turn," but he strained his attention to judge the length of a man's run at a galloping horse, the exact position of his feet as he took off for his leap, the balance of his body as he stood swaying in unison with the horse. Even six inches' miscalculation in the run meant a leap that, instead of being clear and easy, ended in a slip to the knees or a clutch at the vaulting-pad. And that let down the Circus. In Jeff's eyes any sin might be forgiven except letting the Circus down.

Hugh looked back to the days when he had laughed at a clown as an old man might look back to early childhood. Nowadays he studied a clown's every action, from the moment he came through the curtains, noting exactly what he did to get his laughs. He knew now that Joey did not waddle about playing the fool aimlessly, trusting to his idiotic make-up to amuse people; that, on the contrary, everything was studied, and that he watched, cat-like, for a chance to grasp any fun-making situation that came along. Obeying Jeff, Hugh would sometimes spend most of an evening in trying to think himself into Joey's skin, planning just what he would do were he Joey. The huge clown little dreamed that his small critic occasionally writhed at seeing a chance that the

humorists in the ring had missed!

Big Dan must have seen Hugh often in the cheap seats—the yellow head was one not easily hidden—but he made no objection. Probably he had his own ideas concerning the small, grave spectator who so clearly was not there for fun. Hugh dreaded him as much as ever outside the Big Top; but in the ring the Owner seemed quite a different person. He even made a study of his methods, with a view to being himself a ring-master—in the Dream-Circus!

So the weeks went by, until the little home in the orchard grew more and more dream-like and far away, and father a remote person belonging to another life altogether. Mother was much nearer—but not even to Jeff could he talk about that dear unseen presence who never failed him as he drifted into sleep. No other person, he knew, could possibly understand.

He was not unhappy. Life was hard and rough, but it was never dull, and he had good friends. He grew stronger in the open-air existence: muscles that had been flabby became tough. Jeff and Micky taught him “physical jerks” in odd moments, and from the tumblers and clowns he picked up such accomplishments as back somersaults, “flip-flaps,” and hand-walking—his old gymnastics in the trees had been a good preparation. Jeff made him realise his body as his only stock-in-trade—a possession to be kept in hard training and discipline, supple and strong and—so far as was possible—clean. It was, indeed, one of his few complaints against Jeff that he made him wash his shirt every Sunday!

## CHAPTER XI

### TOBY TAKES A TOSS

**H**UGH came into the Big Top late one evening. It was a two-night pitch: the town they were visiting was celebrating its yearly Agricultural Show, so that a double crowd could reasonably be expected: even on this, the first, night the seats were almost full.

It was Hugh's custom to go in early so that he could climb to the rear seats. To-night, however, little Lennie Crowe had been restless, and he had volunteered to look after him while his mother did her opening "turn." He waited until she ran back, a rosy, glittering figure.

"Is he asleep?—oh, good!" she said, relieved. "I thought he'd never go off. Great house to-night, Hughie. They fair yelled at me—you'd have thought I was a star!"

"Well, so you are," said Hugh, loyally.

"Me? Why, I'm an old woman! Off you go, now—thanks awfully, Hughie." She felt under the pillow of the couch for her purse. "Here's sixpence for you—buy yourself some sweets."

"O-oh!" he said. It was the first money he had possessed since he joined the Circus. "Sure you can spare it, Mrs. Crowe?"

"I guess I can. Be off, now—see you next time I go in. Here—your hair's like nothing earthly—let me tidy you." She seized a brush and attacked his curls until they shone. "Now you look something like!"

Hugh kept his hand in the pocket of his jacket, clutching his precious coin, as he ran across to the Big Top. The man at the entrance greeted him in a friendly fashion.

"The cheap seats are full, I believe. You could squeeze into the front row of the shillings: there's room there."

"Think I'd better?" Hugh asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, you're all right. The Boss 'ud rather see no gap there. Slip along—he's not lookin'."

Hugh decided to risk it. He edged into the vacant place, thankful that he had put on a coat. His neighbour was a pleasant-faced woman; she let her attention wander from the acrobats for a moment, glancing at the good-looking boy with the mop of yellow curls. "One of the strangers in for the Show," she thought: and turned back to the ring.

Every performer was keyed up by the full house and the good humour of the crowd. An Agricultural Show brought spectators who were better worth playing to than the ordinary folk of a township. Show exhibitors came from far afield with their cattle and horses: men who had often been to Sydney to see famous Circuses. Peterson's was on its mettle. Turn after turn went with a crisp freshness. Big Dan was beaming. Not for weeks had the Circus had such a house. Other towns would hear of it when the visitors went home: he could not have wished a better advertisement.

In the early part of the programme the clowning was supplied by Joey and Jimmy. Toby, the dwarf, was reserved to add fun to the second half, when his work was chiefly done by bullying Joey, whose make-up as a baby was rendered more ridiculous by his huge size and the contrast with the midget who pestered him.

Like most dwarf performers Toby was difficult to handle. His conceit was out of all proportion to his stature, and his bad temper made him anything but a pleasant partner. It was hard to keep him from drinking: only his value as an attraction had saved him from dismissal many times. Crowe himself was usually his watch dog before a performance to see that he was fit for the ring.

This evening, however, Toby had given Crowe the slip. There was a hotel a hundred yards from the pitch; he had found it crowded with Show visitors, hugely interested in the dwarf and only too anxious to treat him. The result was evident to Big Dan from the moment he came into the ring. He watched him uneasily as he ambled forward.

The crowd suspected nothing. Every silly movement of the manikin meant only part of the fun, and Joey was quick to cover his mistakes. The performance went on calmly for a time.

Disaster came when Toby had to do some clowning with a pony, rushing forward when its rider was on the ground, mounting, and galloping out with his face towards its tail, pursued with, shouts of wrath by the rider and with wailing by Joey. He made his run, but stumbled heavily as he leaped, landing across the pony. There he balanced precariously during the gallop round the ring, clawing feebly at the pony's side, while the crowd rocked with laughter.

There was no laughter for the Circus folk, for they knew it could end in only one way. Their sole hope was that the pony might carry him out of sight; but this was denied them. At the exit from the ring Toby's head went down: he fell heavily, his head striking the wooden edging. The pony fled, and he lay still.

There was a rush of hands to the spot, hiding the dwarf as they carried him out. Big Dan signalled the next turn into the ring: the band played louder. But

the crowd was thrilled and interested. There was something of an uproar: men shouted “Is he hurt?”—there were even a few hisses at the acrobats who were doing their best to secure attention. Big Dan slipped out of the tent quickly: the uproar grew, and the acrobats paused in their turn. Joey stood uncertainly, his weeping-baby face for once expressing his feelings.

Big Dan was back in a moment, holding up a hand. The band ceased playing.

“I am glad to tell you, ladies and gentlemen,” the big voice boomed, “that Mr. Toby is only stunned. He will not be able to amuse you again to-night, but his friends Joey and Jimmy will do their best for you.” There was a little burst of clapping, and the performance recommenced.

But it was apparent to the keen men of the Circus that the accident had caused a “break” in the enjoyment. They knew well that even one hiss is hard to cover. The acrobat turn fell flat: scarcely a clap was heard as it ended. Joey tried manfully to be funny, but Jimmy, thrown out of his stride, was a poor second. A juggling turn excited little interest.

“Can’t you raise a laugh?” Big Dan whispered savagely to Joey. “The whole show’ll be a frost if this goes on!”

Joey found himself bereft of all ideas. He racked his brains, covering his perplexity by waddling round the ring sucking his bottle, trusting that his appearance of complete idiocy would excite at least faint mirth. They were all watching him: he must do something, no matter how foolish—the more foolish, indeed, the better.

Hugh was bursting with anxiety. He knew exactly what was going on—knew that his big friend was faced with inventing new “business” with no support and in a house rapidly growing bored. He leaned forward, his face eager and troubled.

The clown saw him, and his quick wit told him that here was a chance. He left the edging with an ungainly leap that raised a guffaw, and approached Hugh, his sad face puckered as if about to weep.

“Ain’t you sorry me fader’s tumbled off his gee-gee?” he demanded in a squeak.

A laugh ran round the house. People craned forward to see the clown taking a rise out of a spectator.

Hugh was dumbfounded for a moment. Only a moment, however. He was Circus hand enough to know he must not let Joey down.

“Yes!” he piped.

“I knew you was,” blubbered Joey. “Won’t you be a fader to me?”

“I—I’d like to!” It was all he could think to say, and therefore it sounded natural, especially as his nervousness made his voice a high squeak that could be heard all round the tent. There was a roar.

“I knew you looked ki-ind! Well, I always feed my faders when they’re kind—come along, Daddy!” The great arms gathered him up. The mouthpiece of the bottle was thrust between his lips. It was the old business they had practised many a time on the lorry—luckily, not in this town, which they had entered at night. Hugh kicked and struggled manfully as he was borne into the ring, and the crowd shouted itself hoarse.

“Play up, Kid!” Joey whispered. “Dodge when I put you down.”

That was not hard—and he had watched the ring work so often. He managed to shove the bottle into Joey’s mouth, and his wriggle to the ground had all the appearance of a genuine escape. They dodged each other backwards and forwards, Big Dan watching with a benevolent smile that cloaked his inward anxiety. The crowd loved it: they cheered every movement of the curly-haired member of the audience who was proving himself a match for the big clown. Hugh was laughing as he dodged: a quick run took him behind Joey, and he slipped between his legs, taking refuge behind Big Dan. Then he saw the elephants coming in, and knew that he must allow himself to be caught. He managed it neatly, and Joey swung him up astride his shoulders, holding his feet.

“Oh, Fader, you is restless!” he observed reproachfully. “You sit quiet, now, or I’ll let Jumbo eat you!”

Hugh “sat quiet,” laughing. It was a real laugh now of utter happiness. He knew they had saved the situation: he had not failed Joey or the Circus. He was wildly excited—whatever Joey did now, he felt he could follow his lead. The crowd chattered. A few shrewd people said, “Why, he’s one of them”; then a woman uttered loudly, “Oh, the dear little fellow—they ought to let him come back!”—which delighted the ring. Joey turned his infantile gaze on the speaker and remarked, “Let my Fader go back, ma’am?—never!” Under cover of the roar that followed he ran in terror from the elephants, Hugh holding by his ears.

There was always a little clowning with the elephants at the end of their act. Hugh knew every detail of it, and the “bulls” were his friends. He planned the situation in whispers with Joey under cover of the performance: it was easy to exchange a hurried word with the keeper. They kept up the pretence of his wanting to escape. He wriggled unexpectedly from the clown’s grip, slid down his back, and fled, wildly pursued by the lamenting Joey; took refuge with the elephants, turning a double somersault that landed him in front of Ram Singh.

The keeper gave a low whistle, unheard by the benches: the great trunk curved round the boy's body and tossed him up behind the ears. Sitting on Ram Singh's head, shouting defiance at Joey, who leaned on Big Dan's shoulder weeping, Hugh made a triumphant exit from the ring.

The crowd realised that it had been fooled. A shout of laughter rose, followed by a storm of applause that drowned the band. There were cries for him to come back: Big Dan beckoned, and he ran in and bowed at the entrance to the ring. Just as the "stars" did! That astounding thought nerved him to a fresh effort: he turned a back-somersault and left the ring, walking on his hands.

The Liberty horses were coming in, and no clowns were allowed to interfere with the dignity of their turn. Joey joined Hugh in the horse-tent, where several grooms were patting him on the back. The big fellow was beaming.

"Well, you sure saved my life, son. Never thought I'd keep you more than a minute—but you played as if you'd been brought up in the ring. Where'd you learn it?"

"I never learned anything," said Hugh, embarrassed. "Jeff told me to watch every night."

"Then you've watched to some purpose. The Boss wouldn't listen to me when I spoke to him about you awhile ago—but I guess he'll listen now."

"What—do you think he'll let me come on again?" Hugh gasped.

"He'll be a lunatic if he doesn't. Why, they loved you! Give a crowd a kid with curls and a grin, and he goes straight to their stony hearts. We could work it up into a great turn—you an' I'll sit on top of the lorry an' think up business."

"Well, the business you didn't think up was good enough for them tonight." It was Mrs. Crowe, ready for her next turn. She smiled at Hugh in a way that warmed his heart. "You deserve a bit of luck, sonny—many a time you've helped me."

"It was through you I got it," Hugh declared. "If I hadn't been late, because of Lennie, Tom wouldn't have put me in a front seat. I believe it was your sixpence brought me luck." He took it out and looked at it as if it had some magic property. "I say—I'll keep this as long as ever I live; it's a lucky sixpence!"

"I wondered what good fairy put you in that seat," said Joey. "That's what saved me. Jove, it was an awful moment when the house froze! How's Toby, boys?"

The grooms neither knew nor cared. Mrs. Crowe supplied the information.

“Not badly hurt: but he’s given his knee a twist, that’s the worst. Mr. Crowe got a doctor to him. He won’t be in the ring for goodness knows how long.”

“Whew-w!” a groom whistled. Toby was unpopular, but a dwarf clown was an important performer. “What’ll the Boss say?”

“He doesn’t know yet. Then he’ll say plenty. Here come the horses!”

The six “Liberties” dashed into the tent, and the grooms sprang to their heads. Beyond, the “Big Top” was rocking with applause, the Owner bowing again and again. A trapeze act began, and he came striding towards the little group. Hugh edged nearer Joey. The fierce black eyes fell on him.

Big Dan was still seething with the memory of the hissing and the suspense that had followed it. The fact that Hugh had been useful did not soften him.

“Here, you!” he growled. “You’ve no business in the horse-tent. Off you go!”

“Don’t you want him on again sir?” asked Joey.

“When I want suggestions I’ll ask for them!” snapped the Owner, angrily. “Be off, do you hear, boy?”

Hugh escaped by the side flaps. He was hot with anger. They knew—all of them—that he had helped: Big Dan knew more clearly than anyone. He might have been decent to him—given him a kind word. Tears of rage came into his eyes.

Then a hand fell on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Jeff; and in his friend’s face there was a gladness that made him forget everything else for a moment.

“Good lad!” said Jeff. “You played up for the Circus all right, Hugh.”

“Only ’cause you made me learn. Was it truly all right, Jeff?”

“First rate. You’ll do, son.”

“The Boss doesn’t think so. He’s wild with me, Jeff. You ought to have heard him shoot me out of the horse-tent when he came in. I wasn’t doing any harm.”

“Don’t you worry your head about the Boss. He’s just showin’ you he’s Owner. You did the trick, an’ he knows it, only it isn’t his way to fall on anyone’s neck.”

“Well, he needn’t have——”

“None o’ that,” said Jeff, firmly. “You remember what I told you: in a Circus a man takes his gruel smilin’, even if he thinks he’s a right to expect

plum-cake. But there'll be plums in your gruel from this out, or my name's not what it is!"

"True, Jeff?"

"True as life. Now you cut along to our tent an' do your exercises better than you ever did them before. We'll be along presently. You, an' I, an' Micky'll have a jollification in our little hut to-night!"

## CHAPTER XII

### PROMOTION

THE Circus was humming with talk next morning. Everybody knew that the dwarf clown lay in his caravan with a damaged knee, a sore head, and a worse temper than usual. The man who had been told off to look after him reported that lion-taming was a girl's job compared to it. The events of the night before were freely discussed, and there was much speculation as to what could be done to replace Toby. It was not seriously considered that Hugh might be used. He had kept his head last night, but that was more luck than anything else, the hands agreed. The conclusion was that Toby was a person who could not be replaced by anyone: that Joey and Jimmy were likely to have a tough job in consequence: and that the Boss's temper would be of such a nature that anyone who valued life had better keep out of his way.

Hugh heard these discussions as he went about his countless odd jobs, but he followed the advice given him by Jeff and Micky to say as little as possible. Last night he had been excited; but the morning had brought a more sober mood, in which it seemed to him quite impossible that any change could come in his life. Too evident was it that the Owner regarded him as a rather annoying species of worm. The scowl with which he had greeted him that morning, passing by as Hugh was grooming the goats, had spoken more loudly than words.

But if his hopes had faded, he had something certain and comforting. He had not failed his friends, and they were more his friends than ever. Big Carl, who rarely spoke, had given him a few words of encouragement in broken English. Joey had grinned at him from afar with an air of comradeship. And Jeff and Micky had waked him early and put him through such a course of muscle-kneading and physical jerks that he glowed long after. They had not given up their dreams of turning out a ring performer.

Big Dan and his lieutenant went for a walk after breakfast and thrashed out the matter. Crowe's views were definite, the result of an interview with Joey an hour before, to say nothing of pressure brought to bear upon him by his wife.

"Seems to me," he said, "that the boy's just what you want."

"I run a Circus, not a baby-show!" growled the Owner.

"He's older than Nita."

"Nita's born to it. It's in her blood; and she's trained. And here's a raw

youngster, picked up out of nowhere——”

“He’s not so raw. Those two fellows he’s with have been training him all along. Joey has put him up to a lot of tricks; he’s a wiry little chap, an’ they’ve exercised him well—you saw for yourself last night how supple he is. Jeff’s had him every night watching the show, studyin’ the ring-work.”

The Boss stared blankly.

“I’ve always seen him,” he admitted. “Thought he must be mighty struck on it, to turn up every night, but it didn’t worry me. But what’s Jeff’s idea?”

Crowe grinned.

“I’ve an idea Jeff’s got ambitions of his own. He’s a good lad, by the way, Boss: not a more reliable fellow in the whole crowd. He can ride too. He’s worth keeping your eye on. Micky and he are a cut above the rest, they’re keen on the Circus for its own sake. Anyhow, it’s amused them to give young Hugh a bit of training in more ways than one. That was a cute idea, you know; to send him into the seats to study just what a man did an’ why he did it: footwork an’ stance an’ all the rest of it. I’ve heard he’s spent whole evenings never taking his eyes off Joey an’ Toby, watching their methods. And he’s a sharp nipper.”

“H’m,” grunted Big Dan, turning these revelations over in his mind.

“It’s my idea,” said Crowe, “that you could use him in a dozen ways. There’s his appearance: good-looking kid, an’ a perfect contrast to Nita, as fair as she’s dark. They say he can ride: think how they’d take the crowd, him on that black pony and her on Merrylegs. Even if she did most of the work he’d help it out.”

“Nita doesn’t need any helping,” said Nita’s parent, annoyed.

“Well, just as you like. He’d make a good attendant for the jugglers, or in lots of acts; with his looks he’d dress up well. My idea is that he’s wasted as rouseabout. Anyhow, while Toby’s off duty he could help out the clown act like he did last night.”

They had turned back to the Circus. Big Dan walked for a time in silence.

“Pratt’s been at me to put young Eddie on again,” he said.

“Eddie? He’ll spoil any show. You ask Joey what he thinks of working with him.”

“He’s isn’t bright, but Pratt’s a man I don’t like to turn down.”

“Well——” said Crowe, expressively.

“Oh, I’ll think it over.” Big Dan’s tone was impatient, and his second-in-command prudently said no more.

Mrs. Dan, when consulted in the seclusion of the blue caravan, had no hesitations.

“You’re mad if you don’t put him on. Gracious, Dan, wasn’t last night enough for you?”

She paused, looking at him shrewdly.

“The truth is, you’ve got a down on Hugh. Goodness knows why, poor child. What has he ever done to you?”

“A man’s got a right to choose his own hands,” said Big Dan, sullenly. “Not to be landed with strays.”

“He’s not to blame if his father deserted him. For shame, Dan Peterson—an’ you with a child of your own!”

Big Dan shot an amazed glance at his wife, who looked rather like an angry robin. Then he stared at his boots.

“I was bamboozled into takin’ him,” he muttered.

“An’ it’s been ranklin’ ever since: an’ you take it out on Hugh. It isn’t fair. Give him a chance now: it’ll pay you, an’ you know it. An’, Dan—if you put him on, treat him decent, or you’ll get nothing out of him. The boy’s scared if you go within twenty yards of him.”

“Why, I’ve never laid a finger on him!” Peterson defended himself.

“You don’t need to, to scare a child. The way you look at him’s enough. Oh, I’ve watched you! An’ I used to be proud of you!” said little Mrs. Dan, her voice quivering.

“Aw, Polly!” The big fellow looked shamefaced.

“Well, it’s true. An’ he’s a kind little chap. Look at the way he minds that baby of Mrs. Crowe’s. Young Eddie makes his life a burden because he does, but that doesn’t stop Hugh. Why don’t you see these things?”

“Seems to me,” said her husband, “that I’ve enough to do to run my Circus, without watchin’ the kindergarten. All right Polly, old girl: anything for a quiet life. I’ll give your precious kid a chance.”

Polly favoured him with a smile.

“An’ you’ll be gentle with him, Dan?”

“Me? *Gentle?* In the ring!”

Polly laughed. She sat on his knee and arranged his tie.

“Ah, now, you know what I mean. Goodness knows I can’t teach you anything about training. But—well, if you could look less like as if he was a blackbeetle you meant to step on!”

Big Dan chuckled.

"I'll try. Well, I must get busy. Where's Nita?"

"She's with Mrs. Crowe. You might send her to me, Dan."

"I will," said her husband, departing. Nita arrived presently, breathless.

"Mummy! Is Daddy going to let him act?"

Mrs. Dan nodded twice, expressively.

"And did you ask if I could play with him?"

"When you have a husband of your own, my girl," stated her mother, "you'll know that when you get him to do one thing he doesn't want to, it's puttin' your head into the lion's mouth to ask for two."

"Oh!" said Nita, and pondered. "I don't think I'm ever going to keep a husband. They're too much 'sponsibility!"

Hugh, staggering with a bucket of water towards the menagerie tent, heard a voice behind him. He turned with a scared face, almost dropping his load. The Boss towered over him.

"Y—yes, sir?"

"Who's that for?"

"Mr. Pazo, sir."

"Well, take it to him, an' then go an' find Joey. Tell him you'll be on with him in the ring to-night. Same act as last night."

The boy's eyes widened. "*Me*, sir?"

"Yes, you. Think you can do it again?"

Hugh could only nod, for he was speechless. A slow smile twitched the corners of his mouth. Big Dan watched him.

"Like the Circus?"

"Love it," said Hugh, with his whole soul.

"H'm. Well, you an' Joey come to the Big Top in half an hour. I want to see what you can do. Bring Jeff along too. That's all."

All! Hugh stood open-mouthed, staring after the retreating giant. All! Why, it was the world! He was to be in the ring. The Boss wanted to try him out. And—oh, best of all, Jeff was to be in it too! Jeff, who had been so decent to him, would get something out of it. It was beyond belief—only the Boss had said it, and he hadn't scowled once. If it hadn't been so incredible one might almost have thought he looked friendly.

"Oh, where's Jeff?" he uttered, "Hang this bucket!" He seized it and carried it off at a rate that splashed half of it over his legs. Pazo's back was turned: he put it down and ran like a hare, cheeks scarlet, curls flying, to find

his friend.

“Wants *me*?” Jeff uttered, amazed. “What on earth for? I’m no clown.”

“I don’t know. But he isn’t wild, Jeff. He was decent. Not a bit like last night.”

“Well, it beats me.” Jeff pushed back his cap and scratched his head reflectively. “I say, Hugh—go and get Joey now, and we’ll trot over to the Big Top an’ have a rehearsal. It’ll be empty at this hour. Look sharp while I go an’ clean myself up.”

Joey came willingly. The tent was a dim, untenanted space, blue poles and iron pillars against the tiers of seats. In the ring Hugh looked up at his two friends. His slender figure, in grey shirt and shorts, contrasted oddly with the gigantic clown.

“Go through your drill, just to get your muscles free,” Jeff ordered. “After me, now!” He set the pace through a round of exercises; arms, body and footwork. Then followed more advanced tricks: flip-flaps, several kinds of somersaults, and a very fair attempt at the “splits”—sitting down with legs right-angled at either side. Hugh was eager and excited, but his eyes never left his teacher’s, and he was patient in repeating any performance that Jeff declared “muffed.” It was elementary work, but it was cleanly and smartly done.

No point of this was missed by the onlooker—Big Dan, who had come into the horse-tent and immediately stiffened to attention. He stood in the shadow, almost concealed by the curtains, his keen eyes taking in every detail: seeing possibilities of development more than of present achievement. He nodded approval involuntarily when Hugh made the round of the ring walking on his hands. Then Jeff stood aside, and Joey took possession of the boy, throwing him about like a ball, practising a dozen different grips so that he could handle him in any attitude. They planned situations that would catch the crowd when the flaring lights, the ring costume, and the unexpectedness of the turn would lend all their aid. Hugh had suggestions of his own, born of many nights watching: the two men listened gravely, knowing the value of observation from the spectators’ side of the ring, and agreed that there was sense in some of them.

“But you’ll want a heap of practice,” Jeff said. “Once the crowd realize that you’re not just one of them, they’ll expect smart work, an’ you’ve to see that they get it. I could do a heap with you if only I had time—and the chance. If you’d work, that is.”

“Oh, I would, Jeff, I’d work like fury!”

“Well, just keep your head when the Boss comes, an’ don’t muff things.

Forget he's there."

"Not so easy," said Hugh, anxiously.

"Yes, it is, if you remember what I told you at the start—that the Circus is all that counts. You just hang on to that; think that you're doin' your best for the Circus, an' you won't have time to think of the Boss or anyone else. And enjoy yourself—go through it as if it was a lark, like Nita does."

"Huh! He's her father."

"He isn't, when she's in the ring. He's the Owner, same as he is to everyone else. The Boss wouldn't stand slip-shod work, even from Nita."

"He wouldn't. You've got a bit of sense, my lad."

It was Big Dan. They jumped. He had come among them so quietly that they had not realised his presence.

"Will I put him through, sir?" asked Jeff—not a little nervous, for all that his voice was unconcerned.

"You needn't. I've been watching you all through. He's green, but we'll try him. That's all right, boy. Cut along."

Hugh obeyed, greatly relieved. His head was whirling with the new turn of events. A whistle followed him, and he turned, seeing Joey emerge from the tent. He ran back.

"We're to go an' have a heart-to-heart talk over things," said the clown, grinning widely. "Come along, son, an' we'll plan how we'll knock 'em silly to-night."

Jeff had stayed behind, obeying a beckoning nod from the Owner.

"You've been teaching the youngster?"

"Well—he knew a bit before he came, sir. I've just done what I could at odd times."

"Where did you learn how?"

"I was with another Circus—Mellon's."

"Crowd that went smash," assented Big Dan. Jeff nodded, hoping he did not regard him as one of the causes of Mellon's failure.

"What were you with them?"

"Riding: ring-work an' a bit of tumbling."

"Name on the programme?"

"Yes, sir. Not high up though," added Jeff, with a faint grin.

"An' now you're tent-hand. You don't drink, do you?"

"No—got no use for it. There wasn't any chance of a job, except a hand's.

An' I wanted to be with a Circus.”

“H'm.” Big Dan pondered. “Could you teach the boy all you know?”

“Oh, rather! He's as keen as mustard. But if you don't mind my saying it, sir, he's too hard-worked. He's everybody's rouseabout, an' he does things far too hard for his muscles. They'll have to ease off on him if he's to be fresh for the show at night.”

“His job as rouseabout is over. I'll tell Mr. Crowe. Mind you, no turning his head, thinkin' he's a star. We'll see what a month's training does for him. About you—you're on Carl's lorry?”

“Yes, sir: an' if you don't mind I'd like to keep Hugh there. Micky an' Carl like him, an' they're good for him. Micky's helped train him, too. It's—well, sort of peaceful on our lorry.”

“I see. Well, keep him: but I'll tell Mr. Crowe to alter your work, so you'll get time to train him. What about his riding?”

Jeff's face was suddenly eager.

“He's mad keen, sir. I believe he can ride. He looks at that pony that used to belong to him as if he was a baby he'd lost. Could I try him some morning?” He hesitated, then took courage. “Hugh's a good kid, sir, an' he's had a pretty stiff time.”

“There's no sense in coddling a boy, and a stiff time's what he needs at first. If he comes through that, well it shows he's got stuff in him.”

“That's true, sir. An' he has.”

“Well——” Big Dan thought over it: perhaps a memory of little Mrs. Dan softening him. He looked up suddenly. “Fetch him here.”

Jeff was off like a flash. He returned in a moment with a bewildered Hugh at his heels. The great man's eyes held his.

“Ever handled that pony of yours since you came along with us?”

Hugh bit his lip.

“No, sir. I'm not allowed near the led horses.”

“Well, you played up well last night, so I owe you one. Your work's changed. From this out you're Tinker's groom. He's your responsibility, an' see you keep him looking well. Think you can do it?”

“*Think*——!” His eyes danced.

“You're under Jeff's orders: no jobs for the other men. Jeff'll keep you hard-worked enough. Next time we've a morning on a pitch he can try you an' Tinker in the ring. I'm not making any promises, but we'll see what you can do.”

Hugh could only look at him, dumbly. The lifting of his burden of work meant nothing to him at the moment. That was to come later. But Tinker—his little Tinker! To handle him again—not any longer to dodge the eyes that he always believed followed him in puzzled reproach. He found his tongue; words came in a rush.

“Can I—can I go and speak to him now?”

“You can. Careful near the other horses.”

Hugh did not hear the last words. He was off, out into the open, racing across the pitch to the horse-lines, a flying figure of joy. Tinker was at the end of the line. He had finished his feed and was standing patiently, perhaps dreaming of other days, when he heard the racing feet. He looked up, giving a low whinny.

Hugh’s arms were round his neck, his voice, low and eager, saying all that had been pent up for so long. Mrs. Dan, looking from the blue caravan, saw the yellow head against the black, and gave a delighted whistle.

“Well!” she breathed. “Where’s the eggs, Nita? I guess we’ll make Daddy one of his pet omelets!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### WAGE-EARNER

LIFE settled into a new routine for Jeff and Hugh. There was a re-arrangement of work, which meant that a few hands grumbled at having extra jobs—notably Eddie Pratt, who found himself under an iron discipline that admitted of no shirking, and hated Hugh as its indirect cause. Carl and Micky cheerfully shouldered Jeff's work wherever it was possible to do so, leaving him more freedom. They were keenly interested in the new turn of events: anxious that everything should go smoothly while Hugh was on trial. There was no trace of envy in Micky's heart at Jeff's luck. He threw himself even more heartily into helping the training.

It had to be snatched just as chance offered. The top of a piled load was not an ideal spot for exercises, with the lorry bumping over ill-made roads: yet, even there, certain "cat-stretches" and balancing feats could be practiced, and they made the most of them, until their pupil became as sure-footed as a chamois. They would wake him in the dawn to go through his programme on grass wet with the night-dew: Hugh hardly realised how, later on, on the march, they kept silent so that he could have the sleep he needed. They rubbed his limbs with strange-smelling compounds to make them supple; took him to swim whenever there was a halt near a creek or river; drilled deeply into his mind that his body was a responsibility, to be honoured and tended with all the care he could give it. It followed that their own standard insensibly improved. The four on the lorry began to stand out among the teams for their smartness of carriage, their glowing health.

Ring-practice was the most difficult to attain. It was only possible on a two-night pitch, or when they camped early enough to put in a little work before a performance. They lost no chance. Those were Hugh's great moments, for they gave him Tinker.

Grooming was the purest happiness to him. Mrs. Crowe made him her slave by giving him a brush and curry-comb for his own use, so that he might not be kept waiting—she was quick to realise that the boy would stand little chance among the busy grooms. They liked him, but at grooming-time it was every man for himself. Hugh's hours with the black pony were the most joyous of his day.

He learned what grooming meant. There was no scamping in the Circus methods, where thorough attention was necessary for horses herded together in a small space, if they were to be healthy. "You give your Tinker a lick an' a

promise, an' you'll see him go sick!" said a groom: which was threat enough for Hugh.

He watched the grooms at the liberty horses, and practiced what he saw—not only to the last hair on Tinker's tail, but to the last hairs above his little round hoofs. He had his reward one day when Big Dan, in the ring, with an apparently careless movement put back the pony's mane across his neck and inspected the part that it hid.

It shone as brightly as any other inch of Tinker. Big Dan grinned.

Not that Hugh rode Tinker in the practice-ring. Tinker was himself going to school, with Big Dan as his tutor: learning the slow regular canter to music, the obedience to every signal, that were his A B C. Hugh, when he was able to watch, acquired a new view-point of the Owner. With an animal he was no longer the grim Boss of the Circus. Boss he certainly was, but his patience and gentleness were an amazement to the boy. Never was his voice raised: never did he appear more than mildly bored, even when Tinker was as stupid as the veriest dunce that ever sat at the bottom of a form. When the anxious Hugh could have wept for the dullness of his pony, Big Dan stood unmoved, talking in his deep, quiet voice until the puzzled pupil ceased to fret at the lunging-rein and began to understand what was required of him. When Tinker was the scholar Hugh felt that he almost loved Big Dan.

Not so when he himself was under the Owner's eye. Over physical training he was indifferent: there he knew what he could do, and the Boss rarely interfered. But with a horse it was another matter. He had his first lessons on the oldest and staidest of the rosin-backs, a mighty mare with a back like a dining-room table and a canter of such steadiness that the Boss said scornfully that the Crowe baby couldn't tumble off her. Hugh could—and did. His first lessons seemed entirely taken up with learning how to fall, which, after all, is a very necessary part of any rider's knowledge. But Big Dan's comments were scorching.

However, the learning stages succeed one another quickly when one is young and eager, and it was not long before he could stand easily on old Maria as she cantered round the ring. After that his progress was rapid. He had fallen so often that he had no fear of a fall; it was no longer a thing to be dreaded, once he knew how to take it.

Being fearless, he became very sure. Maria's back suddenly appeared to him as an expanse whereon anything might be attempted. He danced on it that day—startling Jeff into a yell of joy.

Meanwhile, his part in the nightly performance went on with ever-increasing smoothness. It was always a surprise to the audience, and so

popular that Joey grumbled that he and Jimmy had to work twice as hard in the first half. They had decorated it: it was a very trim little boy who now took his seat modestly in the front row of the “shillings,” a little boy in a blue suit and a clean collar, with hair that was the envy of every fond mother who saw him. Carefully ordered were his curls nowadays; Mrs. Crowe kept them cut to a seemly length, so that they formed a shining halo round his head, and he had to groom them as thoroughly as he groomed Tinker. Hugh never liked his curls, but he grew to regard them as a useful part of his equipment.

A sweet little boy, the ladies in the audience called him, when he made his first piping response to Joey’s advances, his rosy face upturned in innocent surprise. Even Big Dan confided to his wife that he didn’t know how on earth the kid kept up that air of being just hatched. The ladies used to thrill in sympathy for him when he struggled against the feeding-bottle: there had occasionally been feminine cries of “Shame! Put him down!” They rejoiced—and so did everybody else—when he escaped and outwitted his captor. They frequently screamed when Ram Singh tossed him up on his head. And nowadays the whole audience collapsed, when the gentle child, thus elevated, rose to his feet, after swiftly discarding his shoes: hurled them with excellent aim at Joey: cast from him with incredible speed collar, tie, false shirt-front and blue suit, appearing in scarlet and black tights: in which, transformed into a gleeful imp, he capered on the elephant’s head as he was borne out of the ring.

It was an unfailing triumph: Big Dan privately considered it good enough to show in any big city. To Hugh it was always a huge game. He never grew stale in it: each evening seemed to bring new freshness, to make the whole thing more of a lark. He liked the applause—enjoyed dancing back into the ring to make his bow to the shouting crowd. But it was the game itself that he loved, and his delighted smiles as he dodged Joey round Big Dan were real smiles.

He found life very happy. It was full of work, but such work as he loved. Always there was new interest and excitement in finding his new powers and planning what to do with them, with Jeff and Carl and Micky to see that he remained a common-sense little boy. They were alert for any symptom of “swelled head,” prepared to deal promptly with it. It did not come. Indeed, Hugh’s mental attitude was one of constant astonishment at being a useful member of the band. He could never realise that it was he, Hugh Russell, who was able to make people laugh: and he sometimes wondered if he would wake up in his little bed in the house among the apple-trees and find that it had all been just a queer dream.

Mother did not seem so near him now. He missed her sometimes,

especially when he was just going to sleep, though generally he was too tired to remember. Then it occurred to him that she had only come to look after him when things were hard: now that he was happy he supposed she just went on being an angel. But she would come if he needed her again. He never doubted that.

And he had Nita again. That delightful fact had come after he was established as a performer, no longer a rouseabout. Promotion had re-opened to him the doors of the blue caravan.

It was one afternoon, as he led Tinker out of the Big Top, that Nita came running towards him. She greeted him as though there had never been a break in their companionship.

“Hugh! You finished?”

“Yes. Just got to tie up Tinker.”

“Well, Mummy says you’re to come to tea!”

“Go on!” said the unbelieving Hugh.

“True’s life! She sent me.”

She danced on beside him. It was clearly her intention not to let him out of her sight—she accompanied him to the little tent when he ran off to wash his hands and put on his coat. The tent interested her. Hugh had to repress her firmly from investigating the belongings of Micky and Jeff.

He hung back nervously as they neared the blue caravan. But Mrs. Dan was at the door, smiling in her old way: and there was no sign of the Boss. She talked to him cheerfully through tea, though her keen eyes watched him, wondering if life with the men had roughened him. But Hugh had been well drilled for most of his life. In the rush of a meal at the tucker-waggon he could gnaw a chop-bone with no aid but his fingers as readily as any of the men: here, with a spotless tablecloth and gay crockery, his manners came back to him naturally.

Mrs. Dan had a serious subject to discuss: that of clothes. She questioned Hugh as to his wardrobe, discovered that he badly needed boots and shorts, and arranged to supply any deficiencies in the next town: a great relief to the boy, who had been anxiously asking himself what happened when an unpaid hand found himself in tatters. That he should be paid for his services never occurred to Hugh, though Jeff and Micky, who had been equally worried about his clothes, had their own views on the matter. So, it seemed, had Mrs. Dan. She had a bomb-shell for him.

“Mr. Peterson reckons you’re earning more than your tucker now,” she remarked. “Anyone in the ring has a right to be paid. He says he’ll give you

your clothes an' five shillings a week." At which announcement Hugh opened his eyes and mouth widely, bereft of speech.

"Of course, he won't give you all that money to fool about with," she added; "he'll keep four shillings for you every week an' let you have a shilling to spend as you like. How does that strike you?"

It struck Hugh with such force that words were still denied him. His eyes danced, but he could only gape at her. Mrs. Dan laughed.

"Don't you get it into your head that Mr. Peterson isn't a kind man," she said. "He has to be sharp, but he's just: an' if you try your best you'll find he's a good friend. Here's your first shilling—he gave it to me for you." She laid it by his plate. It gleamed at him—his first earnings. He found his tongue, stammering thanks.

"That's all right," said Mrs. Dan, briskly. "An' Nita's been asking if you an' she can play about together sometimes; an' as you're a performer her father says you can. But mind you, no rough words or rough ways: you were brought up careful, an' you be careful with Nita. She's in your charge when she's with you—don't you forget it."

"He's not goin' to boss me!" announced Nita, resenting this.

"No bossing about it. Hugh knows what I mean. A gent takes care of a lady."

"Huh!—Dad doesn't. You take care of him!" said her daughter—whose experience, indeed, had not shown her that much tenderness was bestowed on the ladies of a Circus.

"Don't you answer me back, Miss," Mrs. Dan retorted. "Now, if you've finished, an' Hugh's got no job on, you can run out."

Hugh was still gazing lovingly at his shilling. He looked up hopefully.

"Could we—could we go an' spend it?"

"O-oh—let's!" cried Nita.

"Well, be off. Mind you behave nice in the township."

That was a wonderful spending. If you have never in your life owned a whole shilling its possibilities at first seem beyond any exhausting, even though Hugh intended at least four presents to come out of it. Close inspection of the windows of the township stores checked his ambitions considerably, but there was lingering joy in poring over their contents and picturing all that a wage-earner and capitalist might do. He had no personal wants: the sweet-shop windows were delirious visions, but his trainers had strictly forbidden sweets, so he ignored them—though Nita flattened her nose against each. The shilling provided studs for Jeff, Carl and Micky, whose habit of losing these aids to

gentility Hugh knew only too well: a penny toy for the Crowe baby; beads for Nita, who accepted them with the air of one conferring a favour, but was secretly uplifted. Hugh looked at a card of bright-coloured pencils.

“Would your mother mind if I bought her one of those?”

“Mind!” said Nita. “Daddy wouldn’t, anyhow—she’s always stealing his!” That settled it: he bought a blue one, after wavering long over the colours.

“You’ve only got tuppence left, an’ you haven’t bought a single thing for yourself,” said Nita, accusingly.

“I’m going to get mine now.” He turned to the grocery counter. “How much loaf-sugar can I have for twopence?”

“O-oh, you greedy! You know Jeff won’t let you!”

“Silly!” said he, loftily. “That’s for Tinker.”

“You said it was for yourself!”

“Well, so it is.” He took the package—the woman behind the counter had made it a heavy one, for the sake of his curls—and carried it as lovingly as he had carried the shilling. “Well, that’s all. I didn’t know a shilling could go so quick. Let’s go back and give the presents.”

It was a great moment. To see his friends’ faces when they unwrapped the studs, each declaring that never had he wanted anything so much. To hear the Crowe baby’s gurgle of joy, and to watch his instant attempt to eat his present. To go to the blue caravan and watch Mrs. Dan’s air of surprise that changed to rapture as the paper twist revealed the pencil—she exclaimed that he had chosen it to match her waggon. And best of all—to race to Tinker and feel his soft nose nuzzling into the hand that held the lump of sugar.

His own earnings!

Life on the pitch was too busy to allow much playing with Nita; still, there were occasional half-hours, and they brought childhood back into Hugh’s heart. Lennie Crowe could not do that, for with Lennie he felt more like a benevolent uncle. Only with Nita, gay, irresponsible, always demanding fun, could he forget that he was a ring-hand with a thousand things to learn. “Sure, it does me heart good to see them two playin’ pranks,” said Micky. “’Twas afraid I was that the boy had forgotten how to be naughty. But ’tis not so, please the pigs!”

Another red-letter day came soon. Hugh was sitting at the entrance of their little tent when he saw Jeff emerge from the Big Top. He looked round, saw Hugh, and came striding across to him. There was a light in his eyes that the boy had never seen before.

“What’s up, Jeff?” he asked quickly.

Jeff dived into the tent.

"I am," he said. "Let me get where I can grin unseen!"

"Jeff! Tell me!"

"That's what I came to do, only I was afraid I'd burst before I got under cover. I've got a rise, old son. I'm for the ring!"

"Golly!" uttered the delighted Hugh. "What? Riding?"

"Partly. I'm to do attendant work an' take a part in Graham's act. Not much to begin with, but the Boss never does give much until he sees how a man shapes. I'll show him I can ride!"

"I bet you will. What about your tent-work?"

"I'm leaving that to any other chap that wants it. No more for me. Hugh, I've got what I was waiting for. Got my foot in the ring at last. You're a mascot, all right. I always knew you'd bring me luck!"

"Me! Why, I didn't have anything to do with it. I'm jolly glad, though."

"It's all through you. I might have gone on being a tent-hand for ages if you hadn't come on like you did. What chance has a hand to get in with the Boss? He didn't know I was alive!"

"Well, I never heard such bosh!" said Hugh. "Where would I have been but for you, I'd like to know? You put me up to things from the very first, or I'd probably have been in a Boys' Home now. You—you——" To Jeff's astonishment his eyes filled with tears. "You were so jolly good to me!" he brought out with difficulty.

"Well, we'll stop tellin' each other what nice chaps we are, an' go an' let Micky hear the big news," Jeff said, gruffly, letting a hand fall on his shoulder. "Tell you what, Hugh, next thing we'll do is to put our backs into gettin' Micky a rise. He's too good for the tent-work. An', anyhow, we can't move on without him."

"Rather not!" Hugh had recovered himself. "Micky could do heaps of things in the ring. He's as funny as Joey when he plays the fool!"

"And that's an idea," Jeff said thoughtfully. "Jimmy's talkin' of going. Says he'd had enough of Circuses an' wants to run a pig-farm."

"An' he might do that, now, afther playin' this long time with Toby," said a cheerful voice, as Micky came in. "Is it to take on his job you're thinkin' of, Jeff?"

"No, but I was thinkin' an Irish clown 'ud be no bad thing."

"Yerra, I've had me dreams of it," said Micky, sitting down on his blankets. "'Tis the only way I'd ever get me own back on the Boss for some of

the merry things he do be sayin' to me when he's excited. D'ye remember the night Joey sat down on his hat? That's a plisant thing to be thinkin' of when the Boss tells you how many kinds of a fool y'are."

"He told Joey all right afterwards," grinned Jeff.

"He did—but 'twasn't me, so it doesn't spoil the memory. An' when I think of the Boss all civil an' gay in the ring, with his hat like a shut concertina, an' himself ragin' inside with fury—well, 'tis meself wishes I was a clown! I was niver afraid of payin' for me moments of glory. But there's not many of them about a Big Top job."

"Jeff's got a rise—and you've got to get one too!" blurted out Hugh.

"D'ye tell me, now?" The little man was on his feet with a quick movement. "What is it, Jeff, lad?" He pumped Jeff's hand as the good news was unfolded to him.

"I knew it 'ud come! Good for our lorry! Two of the four of us in the ring!"

"Well, it's you next, old man," Jeff said. "If Hugh an' I can't edge you under the Boss's eye my name's not Jeff Poole."

"Niver think of it!" said Micky, hastily. "'Tis undher that same eye I've been only too often—don't I spend me days prayin' he'll keep lookin' the other way? Wid you an' Hugh now, it's different, by reason of the natural impudence you have about you!" Tumult followed abruptly, and the three owners of the tent were in a confused heap among the scattered blankets when Nita peeped in. Her delighted chuckles caused a convulsion in the heap. They sat up, looking at her in some dismay.

"Do go on—I like to see you doing it!" she begged.

"'Tis enough—I have them licked entirely," said Micky, calmly. "Were you wantin' any of us, by any chance now, darlin'?"

"I want to tell Hugh something." She was clearly bubbling over with news. "Hugh—you don't know what Daddy says!"

"Is it bad?"

"You just see if it's bad! He says you an' I can ride Tinker an' Merrylegs on the march to-morrow!"

"Not—on the road?"

"Yes. Until we get sick of it, anyhow."

"Sick of it!" gasped Hugh, who had long cast envious glances at the riders in the procession each day. "Sick of it! Golly, isn't this a day!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE DWARF

**T**OBY, the dwarf clown, had good reason to regret the indiscretion that had led to his downfall and to his imprisonment for weeks inside his caravan.

The injury to his head was a minor matter, though memories of it persisted in recurring headaches that made him a difficult person to live with. There were worse things: the doctor had discovered a broken rib, and his knee was the most serious of all, for water formed on it; not only was it painful, but there was danger that it would always be a drawback to him unless long rest effected a complete cure. A dismal prospect to a performer whose living was dependent on his agility: Toby writhed, but submitted with an ill grace.

Nobody took any pains to make his life agreeable. He was in disgrace with Big Dan; only his value as an oddity had saved him from being dismissed, dumped into the nearest hospital. He was informed, in an interview with the Boss that Toby found singularly unpleasant, that he would be looked after, but that his pay would be stopped—a bitter punishment to the dwarf, whose greed for money was a proverb among the Circus folk.

The looking-after that he received was scant. Mrs. Pratt, the wardrobe-mistress, saw to his bandages, remarking later on to her friends that she'd as soon touch a toad. The two men who shared his small caravan gave him a little rough attention; they were trick-riders, off-hand young Australians who had always heartily disliked their queer little companion, with the instinctive feeling of repulsion with which healthy, vigorous young manhood regards anything not "natural." Toby had all the unpleasant characteristics possessed by many dwarfs: meanness, greed, ill-temper, coupled with a bitter tongue and extraordinary conceit. In softer surroundings there might be found pity for the stunted body and warped nature—but softness is rarely found in a Circus.

As time went on, and the rib healed, leaving him able to sit up, Toby found himself even more neglected. Harry and Joe, disliking his peevish company, came to the interior of the caravan only to sleep and dress: they travelled on the driving-seat or on some lorry where the conversation was more cheerful, so that Toby's one real pleasure, a game of cards on the march, was denied him. Moreover, his meals reached him in irregular fashion, and were never more than lukewarm. Rarely had anyone time—or inclination—to buy him the daily paper he loved or to replenish his stock of cigarettes. Mrs. Pratt was the only person who listened to his angry grumblings, and her attention lasted for no

longer than the time occupied in doctoring his knee.

Finally the dwarf demanded to see Big Dan, and made a formal complaint. He was a performer—a star—and he was left like a dog in a kennel, he said bitterly. Big Dan listened, outwardly unmoved, but inwardly with some compunction. He left, saying that he would see what he could arrange.

“He’s a nasty little rat, but he’s got some reason for grumbling,” he told Mrs. Dan. “I don’t quite know what to do. The men won’t bother about him—it ’ud be different if they liked him, but as it is—well!” He pulled at his pipe. “An’ they’re busy enough without running errands for Toby.”

“That’s so,” his wife agreed. “Tell you what, Dan—why not put young Eddie on to the job? He’s up to it, an’ you can spare him better than anyone else.”

The Boss accepted the suggestion gratefully.

“You always have ideas, Polly,” he said. “I’ll talk to Pratt.”

“Well, if you fix it up, give your own orders to Eddie, or Toby won’t be much better off,” she said. “You’re the only one that youngster is afraid of; he’ll shirk orders coming from anyone else.”

“I’ll let him know it’s his funeral if I hear any more grumbling from Toby,” stated Big Dan. “I’ve been thinkin’ a lot about that boy lately: he’s useless in the ring, an’ he certainly doesn’t earn his wages anywhere else. If it wasn’t that he’s the Pratts’ son I wouldn’t keep him a day. A work-shy youngster won’t grow into even a good tent-hand. However, if he keeps Toby quiet he can pass muster a bit longer.” He went off to see Pratt.

The business manager was quite ready to agree. He knew his son’s defects and was anxious about his future. This was an opportunity of pleasing the Owner: he jumped at it. Eddie was summoned to the Presence and commanded to attend Toby at certain hours of every day: to be responsible for taking him his meals and making his purchases. It was strongly hinted to him that on Toby’s contentment depended a whole skin for himself.

The boy listened sulkily, but inwardly he had no objection. It meant light work and being less at the beck and call of the men, with chances of loafing about the towns at which the Circus halted. There would be fewer cuffs, since Toby was not in a position to cuff him, even were he big enough. Altogether, Eddie was pleased with his new job.

It proved more entertaining than he had expected. Toby was so glad of any companionship that he welcomed even a twelve-year-old, and chattered to him like a magpie. He had an inexhaustible stock of stories, all of stage and Circus life. The dwarf was forty, with the body of a child but the head of a man, wizened of feature. Eddie did not like to look at him and avoided his little

cunning eyes; but he enjoyed his stories. Toby offered to teach him to play cards: another attraction, for the manikin was a wizard with cards. There was an awed fascination in watching his claw-like tiny fingers, that moved so swiftly, performing tricks that stupefied Eddie. "Gosh, you make 'em act just as if they was alive!" he uttered. Toby grinned. Praise was meat and drink to him, even from a boy.

He taught him euchre, nap, and a dozen other games. Eddie took to travelling in the caravan by day, relieving his parents of his presence. Mrs. Pratt rejoiced in her new-found peace, which would have been short-lived had she suspected how her son's hours were spent. She thought Toby an unpleasant little being, but harmless enough: and the dwarf had cautioned the boy to hold his tongue. The unsavoury friendship grew apace.

They had one strong feeling in common—dislike of Hugh Russell. Eddie had hated him from the first: for the dwarf, Hugh had had no existence until he learned the boy had taken his place in the ring. Harry and Joe had lost no opportunity of telling him of the success of the turn, finding enjoyment, when Toby was particularly offensive, in hinting broadly that his absence was not missed. "Don't you worry about bein' knocked out," they would say, kindly; "the crowd's not askin' anything better than young Hugh. Why he even makes *us* laugh!"

Toby had squirmed under this, comforting himself by the knowledge that they liked annoying him. Probably it was just one of their yarns—they had many. He asked Eddie eagerly about Hugh's turn, receiving little consolation. Eddie said sourly that the people were dotty about Hugh. "It's them baby curls of his," he added, with scorn. "If he looked like an or'nary boy they'd never take no notice of him!"

Toby asked for every detail of Hugh's work with Joey, and the more he heard, the less he liked it. As an old hand he knew his own value to the Circus, but he was well aware of Big Dan's shrewdness where money was concerned. If he had picked up a youngster with a natural taste for clowning, as Hugh seemed to be, he would have an attraction that would enable him to dispense with a dwarf who demanded heavy pay.

That was bad enough. But beyond the matter of losing his job was something far deeper. He seethed with jealousy. It made him furious to think of this rouseabout boy earning, just by being a boy, laughter that he had never been able to earn by being a dwarf.

No thought of the Circus ever entered his mind. He would have been grimly happy to think that his place left a blank unable to be filled. And it did not matter a bit! He wriggled with almost a physical pain when he thought of

it. He was “Toby, the World’s Greatest Midget Fun-Merchant” on the posters. Now he lay crippled, and his place was filled by a child.

He tortured himself by making Eddie bring him an account of Hugh’s turn every evening. Eddie found a sly delight in making his reports; it amused him to see Toby’s face twist with rage while he listened. On the first night that Hugh undressed on Ram Singh’s head the story brought an unusual thrill, for Toby showed every appearance of taking a fit.

“That black pony of his is gettin’ clever too,” Eddie said, gloomily, when the attack had subsided and it appeared safe to administer further torment. “Joe says he’ll make a great ring-pony. An’ he says Hugh’ll be ridin’ in the first half of the programme before long.”

Toby growled. This did not interest him. He cared nothing for what Hugh might do, so long as he did not clown.

“That’ll spoil the surprise of him in the second half,” he said hopefully.

“No, it won’t. I heard Mother an’ Dad talkin’ about it when I was in bed. They’re goin’ to make him up dark: black wig an’ all. Curls again, I bet,” added Eddie, bitterly. “He’s to be a match for Nita.”

“I’d spoil his beauty for him if I could!” said Toby, with venom.

“An’ Jeff, that’s so keen on him, is goin’ to ride too. Dad says he’s gettin’ real friendly with the Boss. Him!—an’ he’s only a tent-hand. They were sayin’ you’ll most likely be put in the first half when you get well: the Boss’ll never take Hugh’s turn off.”

“I’ll see if he shifts me!” spat Toby. “The second half’s my show, an’ I’ll stay there!”

“Don’t see what you could do if you did. There wouldn’t be no business for you: you’d only be runnin’ round after them.” At which Toby’s features became so alarmingly convulsed that Eddie thought it prudent to be silent.

“Well, I’m gettin’ up to-morrow,” the dwarf announced presently. “Been long enough shut up here. It’ll do me knee good to get a bit of exercise.”

“When d’you think you’ll be able to play?”

“Got to see how I feel. I can’t afford to run risks. But once I get movin’ round again I can see that they don’t get a chance to believe I’m out of the world.”

Toby’s reappearance in the outer life of the Circus was not greeted with any enthusiasm. He hobbled about on crutches, a sullen little figure, always on the alert to watch Hugh. At first he appeared whenever practice was going on; but the sight of the big head, the sallow, watchful face, had an unexpectedly depressing effect on Hugh, and at length Jeff ordered him curtly to keep out of

the way. Toby responded with a venom that, unfortunately for him, attracted Big Dan's attention in passing.

"What's up?" he asked.

Jeff explained briefly. He regarded Toby with pity as one handicapped by fate, and had no wish to hurt his feelings.

"Oh, we reckon practice ought to be private, sir. Hugh gets a bit jumpy bein' stared at all the time."

"What's he doin' with feelings?" snarled Toby. "Ain't he makin' out he's a performer?"

"Not your business if he is," said the Boss, curtly. He had no mind to allow any drawback to the scanty practice-hours, and he possessed a full understanding of the possibilities of jumpy nerves in young animals, whether horses or boys. "You remember, practice is private, an' keep yourself out of the way, Toby. That's all about it." And Toby retreated to his caravan to lick his wounds.

He added Jeff to his list of hates after that. It was bitter to him that he should have been ordered about by a man who had been only a tent-hand a few weeks before. The hate grew rapidly as he reflected that but for Jeff, Hugh would never have crossed his path. He fretted over it in long nights when he lay awake, cursing his aching knee and planning wild schemes of revenge.

He had always been a poor sleeper, and now bad nights became more and more frequent, for his mind would not let him rest. To read was impossible, since Harry and Joe grumbled if there were a light. Toby could only toss and turn, thinking furiously.

His thought was never clear: he had worried until his muddled brain worked in a circle. When he could bear it no longer he would feel in the dark for the sleeping-pills he always kept, and gulp one down. He knew they were not good for him: that next day his head would be heavier than ever. Anything, however, was better than lying awake.

"I'd like to give that bright lad the box-full!" he muttered one night as he snapped down the lid.

Wise men tell us that our minds are machines which do not go to sleep but continue to work over the thoughts which we give them in our last waking moments. Toby awoke next morning with his random thought of dosing Hugh turned already to a full-fledged idea. He brooded over it during the day lovingly. So far as he could see there was no chance of accomplishing it. Hugh rarely came his way, and if he did it was extremely unlikely that he could be induced to take a pill. Toby did not, indeed, try to plan ways and means, nor did he give any thought to the possible consequences of such an act. It was

enough for his bitter mind to cherish the thought of Hugh rendered incapable of taking his place in the ring.

He went so far as to confide his idea to Eddie one morning when the caravan was crawling along a dull road—speaking of it lightly, as rather a good practical joke. Somewhat to his surprise, the boy was inclined to take it seriously.

“Whew-w! You’d never have the pluck to do a thing like that!”

“Wouldn’t I!” Toby’s tone was lofty. “If I saw any way of managin’ it I’d show you whether I had the pluck or not!”

“Well, you are a oner, Tobe!” said Eddie, admiringly. “Why don’t you?”

“Only because I don’t see any way. I can’t hardly hold him down an’ make him swaller one, can I?”

“Might, between us. Only he’d be off to Jeff like a shot, an’ there’d be no end of a row.”

“That’s silly talk. A thing like that has got to be plotted and planned very careful, so he’d never known he’d taken anything. But it’s only an idea that came into my brain. I got a brain that’s always full of ideas, Eddie. That’s how it is I’m a great clown.”

“You’re that, all right. Well, why don’t you make your old brain work over this?”

Toby felt that he was on his mettle. He looked important.

“Oh, I guess the right idea’ll come to me. I’ve only got to think a bit for that. Mind, this is a dead secret between you an’ me. If you ever dared to open your mouth about it——” He looked threatening.

“Me?—not likely,” said Eddie hastily, quailing under the dwarf’s little eyes.

“Well, it ’ud be all to your advantage if it came off,” Toby remarked, cunningly. “If Hugh was out of the ring you’d have to take his place—there wouldn’t be anyone else. An’ I’m sure you could do his silly turn just as well as he does.”

“I bet I could.” Eddie became suddenly interested. “My word, I’d like to! Dad’s been beastly to me lately. He says I’m no good in the Circus. When you don’t need me any more they’re goin’ to send me to my aunt in Sydney to go to school. I’d rather die than go there—I hate my aunt.”

“That’s too bad,” said the dwarf. “Now, if Hugh was out of the way you’d be all right: I’d put you up to lots of ring-tricks. I believe you an’ I could plan a turn together that ’ud knock Joey silly.”

“Oh, I say, Tobe, do plan it!” cried Eddie eagerly. “I know you can, if you only try. I’ll help. Can’t we think of some way together?”

“I do my thinkin’ best alone,” Toby answered with solemnity. “When I’m in bed at night—that’s the time my great ideas come to me.”

“Well, you go to bed early to-night,” begged Eddie.

“That’s no good. It’s when everything’s still an’ silent. Then my brain works—if only Joe didn’t snore like a pig. There’s times when I’d gladly get up an’ kill Joe! But look here, Eddie; if we’re to do anything we’ll have to be very cunning.”

“Rather!” said Eddie. “How?”

“Well, to begin with, we’ve got to be very nice to Hugh. So long as he thinks we’re his enemies we wouldn’t have the ghost of a chance of gettin’ him near us.”

“I don’t want to be nice to the little ass. I can’t stand the sight of him—never could!”

“Oh, hold your silly tongue!” snapped the dwarf. “Don’t I tell you we’ve got to act cunning? That’s the only way we’d ever manage to dose him. Our job is to make him think we’re friendly, so he won’t have any suspicions.”

“Oh!” said Eddie, gloomily. “Blessed if I know how I can.”

“Well, you don’t want to slobber over him. That ’ud make him suspicious first go off—an’ we must be gradual. Just be very civil to him an’ the fellers he’s with: Joey, too. Don’t go out of your way about it, just look at ’em friendly an’ speak nice. After a bit you might get a chance of doin’ some little job for one of ’em.”

“Ugh!” said Eddie, beginning to regret that he was a plotter.

“It’s the only way, I tell you, stupid! I’ll be doin’ the same, as far as I can with this darned knee. An’ all the time I’ll be thinkin’ an’ thinkin’.”

“Can I think too?”

“I never noticed any sign that you could. But there’s no harm in your tryin’.”

## CHAPTER XV

### ELEPHANTS AND TEA

THE Circus came to rest early one afternoon on a pitch half a mile from a fairly large town. It was a two-night camp; Jeff and Micky had mysterious business of their own in the Big Top with the Owner. Hugh was told that he was at liberty. He went in search of Nita, and together they strolled towards the elephants' corner.

Hugh's first friend among the Circus hands had been George, the "bull-man." It was a friendship that had continued and grown stronger.

The keeper's job was a solitary one. Few among the hands had any understanding of the ways of elephants. They liked them for their usefulness, for the patient docility with which they would tackle any job too heavy for men; but it was not a personal liking. Rather was it the feeling with which a later generation of Circus-folk—men as yet unborn—was to regard the steam-tractor which in Peterson's day had not come into being. The "bulls" were machines and beasts of burden, apart from their turn in the ring; and that was a turn that bored the hands exceedingly, since to them elephants were a commonplace matter of life, and their ring tricks were dull and childish. The crowds might hold their breath in awe as the great beasts waltzed clumsily and rang bells. The hands yawned.

But George loved his bulls. Ram Singh, Gunga and Little Ali were vivid personalities to him. He was the son of an elephant-man, brought up from babyhood among them, knowing their ways, almost their thoughts. The twitch of a trunk, the flap of a great ear, every glance of the shrewd little eyes—they all brought messages to George. He knew that—dull mountains of flesh as they seemed—they had their bad times as well as their good: days when the brain hidden in the massive head worked uneasily, perhaps stirred with memories of long ago.

Particularly was this the case with Ram Singh and Gunga. Little Ali had been born in a Zoo, so that he knew no life but that of civilisation. He had no memories: and therefore, to his keeper he was less interesting than his big companions, who could look back to a youth spent in the jungle, to wild beasts and reptiles, to dark-skinned people and the hot, confused smells of Indian cities, blazing with life and colour. George would often feel a pang of sympathy for them, condemned now to the dreary routine of a Circus life, plodding from town to town on dull country roads or bush tracks where the grey-green gum-trees screened vast bare paddocks, devoid of life. He

wondered if they hated it when the people rushed, shouting, to look at them, just because they were elephants.

To some keepers, elephants are simply children. Ram Singh and Gunga were never that to George. They were real people, old as he could never be, full of thoughts and dreams, whom he respected even when he ordered them about like slaves. Like slaves they obeyed him, but he knew that they did it because they were wise with a wisdom beyond his. Their fate of slavery had come upon them; they accepted it patiently, enduring it until the day should come when they might lie down for the last time. George—who had also dreams—used to hope that their next awakening would be in a land of great rivers and tree-covered hills—a land without men who did not understand.

The two lads who helped him to groom and feed his charges were among the men without understanding. They were better than the other hands, because he had taught them what they might, and might not, do with a “bull,” but their work with them was only part of a dull job, from which they escaped as soon as possible. George was almost always near his elephants, for they interested him far more than men. He slept close to them, in a tiny tent just large enough to hold him. When he ate his meals or talked to other people his eyes constantly wandered towards the corner where they swayed gently above their pickets: and before long he would saunter back to them, to sit and smoke his pipe in Ram Singh’s shade, talking to them gently.

The Circus people chaffed George because he talked to his “bulls.” To Hugh it lent a mysterious touch of fascination to them. He felt that the four lived in a little world of their own, apart from the commonplace life of the show. He liked to sit near them, in which case the conversation was three-sided.—George including the elephants in his remarks quite as much as he included Hugh. Nita often came too, for Hugh’s feeling had infected her. Indeed, the only time that Nita kept still was when they visited George and his three companions.

To-day the keeper greeted them with his usual faint smile as they came up. Mrs. Dan had given them some stale buns for the elephants; the long trunks came out to them in welcome, taking the dainties eagerly. George looked at them with approval.

“I’m goin’ to take the bulls for a walk,” he said. “Like to come?”

“Lovely!” said Nita. “But haven’t they had a big walk already?”

“They won’t mind a bit more when it’s for a bath. They’d go anywhere for that.”

“They can’t get it here,” Hugh said. “This creek’s nearly dry.”

“Yes, but I borrowed a horse an’ went scouting. It’s nearly dry all along.

But a mile further down it's wide an' sandy—nice soft sand, just what they like.”

“Well, they can't bathe in sand!”

“Can't they just! It's the next best thing to water, for a bull. They're the cleanest beasts alive—they love any kind of a scrub. You come along an' see. Like to ride?”

Would they! Their faces answered him. George grinned, unshackling the elephants: and in a few moments all three were mounted, Nita on Ali, Hugh on Gunga, and George leading the way on big Ram Singh. Mrs. Dan watched them go, her face placid. She had learned to be very content about Nita when she was with Hugh.

The way led across an open plain covered with tussocks of rough grass, among which the elephants picked their way carefully, as if knowing that in any might lie the possibility of a coiled-up snake. Hugh watched the movements of the great feet.

“I like to see the way they move.”

“They're wonderful noiseless in bush,” George said. “You'd never think big things like them could move so quiet. They pick up their feet clean; then they put them down perfectly straight, an' very gentle, so that anything gets crushed softly. My father told me you could be right up against a herd of 'em feeding in thick jungle, an' never know they were there.”

“Was that in India, George?”

“Yes. There's elephants in Africa, but my father never took any interest in them. 'Cause why, you can't train an African elephant. At least, no one ever I heard of could, though I often wonder if those black kings and chiefs hadn't ways of their own. But they beat white men if they had.”

“Well, Indian elephants are good enough for me,” Hugh remarked. “They're the best in the world, I bet.”

“You bet right, sonny. I'd like to see 'em out in the open, like my father used to. He said their speed was amazin'. A good horse 'ud hardly keep up with a herd gallopin', even in plain country: an' of course, in bush he'd be lost altogether, 'cause they'd crash through timber as if it wasn't there.”

“Could you make them gallop now?” asked Nita, hopefully. She kicked Ali, with as much response as if she had kicked a house.

“Not if I know it. The one thing I don't ever want to see is one of ours gallop. He'd only do it if he was real annoyed, an' an annoyed elephant's a nasty thing. Look at 'em now—they know there's fun ahead.”

The elephants had quickened their pace slightly, their trunks stretched

forward. Just ahead a thick line of timber showed the course of the creek: dry, but wide and sandy. At the edge George halted them with a word: the three trunks came up, unbidden, to let their riders dismount.

“Don’t they know!” said Hugh admiringly. He rubbed Gunga’s trunk: the slender, finger-like tip curled round his wrist. George gave a curt command: the elephants plunged across the sand until they came to a deep hollow. They thrust in their trunks, and in a moment were half-hidden in the cloud of blown sand that covered them.

“Use it just like water,” grinned George. “It’s not *my* idea of enjoyment, to sniff sand up my nose an’ squirt it all over myself, but everyone to his taste. Well, they’ll be happy as long as we let ’em. I guess we’ll take it easy.”

They sat down on the bank, under the shade of a lightwood tree. George drew out his pipe, and felt for something else. He tossed a packet of chocolate to each of his companions.

“O-oh!” said Nita, snatching. She beamed on him. But Hugh looked at his doubtfully.

“It’s all right, son,” George told him. “I asked Jeff. Said you looked a bit poor, an’ choc’late’s nourishin’, an’ he said you could be nourished for once.”

“I say, you *are* a brick, George!” He bit into the chocolate happily.

“This is a party!” said Nita.

“Sure it is. You two an’ me an’ the bulls are all friends. Anyone who likes my bulls is a pal of mine. Nita’s liked ’em since she was a baby, an’ you were their friend, Hugh, from the moment you brought ’em a shirtful of apples. Not that it was only the apples: they knew you felt as if you liked ’em.”

“Well, so I did. I think they’re ripping.”

“Now, that young Eddie’s no good with ’em. He isn’t afraid—I’d be better pleased if he was, an’ then he wouldn’t come near them. Old Ram has had him set since he gave him a thistle-head wrapped up in a paper bag—silly young ass!” said George, wrathfully. “An’ only a week ago he came foolin’ round them with a whip, flickin’ it, when I wasn’t there. Steve saw him, though.”

“He’d never have touched them, would he?” asked Hugh.

“I don’t suppose he meant to—he was only showin’ off, ’cause there were a lot of township boys on the fence. I suppose he thought they’d imagine he was the keeper. But he flicked a bit too careless, an’ caught the corner of Gunga’s eye.”

“Whew-w!” whistled Hugh. “What did Gunga do?”

“Gunga’s got too much sense to do anything he shouldn’t. He’s a gentleman—an’ that’s more than anyone’ll ever be able to say for Eddie. Steve

said he just shook his head as if he was shakin' off a fly. Steve yelled, an' Eddie went for his life, an' the boys on the fence laughed fit to split their sides at him, which he wouldn't like. He didn't like the dressing-down I gave him afterwards, either. For two pins I'd have taken him to the Boss. You needn't tell your Dad this, Nita. Eddie said he was sorry, so that ended it."

"Mummy says never to tell Daddy anything to make him cross, so I don't!" remarked Nita, loftily.

"Your Mummy has judgment. A Circus Boss has enough little oddments to upset his temper. I was cross enough—an' Gunga's eye is sore yet: he knocked the skin off at the corner. A bull's skin is awful easy hurt. It looks as thick as hippo hide, but it's anything but: the least little thing'll chafe it. When you come to examine it, its almost like flesh. Those people that stuff a dead bull have an awful hard time with the skin."

"That's how it is mosquitoes can give them such a bad time," Hugh said. "I was 'stonished when I first saw you light a smoke-fire near them to keep the 'skeeters away."

"Yes, the 'skeeters just torment 'em. I knew a keeper once with another show; he had only one bull, which was lucky for him, 'cause one day when they were camped a swarm of bees came their way. Scissors, it must have been a sight!"

"Oh, how gorgeous!" cried Nita. "What happened?"

George bent a disapproving eye on her.

"Is that what you call it?"

Nita had the grace to blush. She hung her head.

"I didn't mean it. I only meant it would be fun to see what it did."

"Not so much fun," said George drily. "The old bull simply snapped his shackle as if it was cotton and hit out for the open country. He went blind through anything that came his way, an' part of it was a pigsty with a lot of pigs. My friend said that the remarks of the pigs that survived were loud beyond anything he ever heard."

Hugh and Nita giggled. George looked at them, his own eyes twinkling.

"It took 'em three days to get that bull, an' when they found him it was only by his tracks, 'cause he was in a river with only the very end of his trunk above water, coolin' his stings. That's what they do, you know, when they ford a deep river—they'll go through any depth so long as they can keep the tip of the trunk out."

"I don't think humans have got anything so useful as a bull's trunk-tip," said Hugh.

“You’re right enough there. It’s just a mass of nerves, for all they can use it so hard. My father told me that you’ll see ’em in India takin’ soundings when they have to go over rough ground—they tap with the trunk-tip on the ground for stones before putting a foot down. Oh, they’re cute enough. You know how old Ram saved the show from a weak bridge?”

Nita nodded.

“I don’t,” cried Hugh. “Tell me, George.”

“Well, we were on the march one day, an’ the Boss took it into his head to let the bull-vans go first to make a good show comin’ into a township. An’ the queer thing is, he did it that one time an’ never again, ’cause all the rest of the procession was near smothered in their dust, includin’ his own waggon, an’ Mrs. Dan didn’t like it. She told him before the start how it would be, but you know what your Dad is, Nita.”

“Yes—we do,” said Nita.

“Well, it was a mercy he was set on his own way that day, at all events. Off we went, an’ it was a very nice trip for me, ’cause I generally have to eat the dust of the whole procession, but this time I sat up in front like the Queen of the May. An’ it was an unmetalled bush road that about a million sheep had been travellin’ on, an’ the dust was like grey flour, an’ as deep as deep. So we came to this bridge, an’ I never thought anything about it, bein’ half asleep with the heat. But old Ram Singh did my thinkin’ as well as his own.”

“What did he do?” Hugh asked.

“Stopped dead as soon as he put one foot on it. I woke up an’ told him pretty sharply to get on, an’ he just sort of shook his head an’ stayed where he was. All the show pulled up, an’ the Boss came along in a hurry to see what was wrong. He was annoyed. So was I, for that matter, but nothing I said had any effect on Ram. He’d just pick up his foot an’ put it down again an’ move his head about. The Boss made me use the goad; and the poor old chap threw up his trunk an’ trumpeted. That set all the cats roarin’, an’ you never heard such a row!”

“I liked it,” Nita giggled.

“Your Dad didn’t. I said I believed the bridge wasn’t safe, an’ he told me—well, I won’t mention what he told me, ’cause it was sort of personal. He rode over it, an’ came back an’ told me I had to get Ram goin’, an’ I tried again. An’ that’s a thing I’ve been ashamed of ever since, ’cause by that time I knew in my heart that Ram knew more than we did. Anyhow, it was no good: he wouldn’t budge. An’ just then, up comes a man as hard as he could gallop; Shire Engineer he was. He’d heard we’d gone that way, an’ he’d raced to catch us in time. That bridge had just been condemned as unsafe, an’ they hadn’t had

time to put a notice on it.”

“But how did Ram know?” demanded Hugh, wide-eyed.

“Don’t ask me. Just that one foot on it telegraphed something to him. An’ I remembered my father tellin’ me that no elephant would ever cross an unsafe bridge. Well, I’ve thought a lot about that day. Not only Ram knowin’ what he did—but what made the Boss have that mad idea of puttin’ him in the lead, just that one day? I reckon there’s more guardian angels about than most of us reckonise.” George smoked for a few moments in silence, looking at his elephants, now standing motionless and happy in the sand.

“What would you do if they got bogged in there?” Nita asked.

“They won’t get bogged. They know too much about sand. Didn’t you watch the way they went in, tryin’ it every yard? You wouldn’t catch them on dangerous sand—not when they could see it. I’ve heard of bulls gettin’ bogged in a river in India, an’ then they’ll get hold of anything they can an’ put it under their feet. They’ve been known—when they’ve been desperate—to pull the man off their back, an’ use him.”

“What—to stand on! But they’d kill him!” uttered Hugh.

“Well, he wouldn’t survive. I reckon a man ’ud take to swimmin’ fairly quick once he felt his bull was bogged. People generally throw ’em faggots of brushwood, if they can get ’em, an’ they’ll use ’em wonderful. I tell you, there’s mighty little they can’t do. They can go up or down a hill where the slope is too steep for any horse. I’ve always been sorry I never went to India, ’cause I’d like to see one tackle a tiger. My father seen lots—he was years in India.”

“Ram could easy kill a tiger with those long tusks of his,” said Nita.

“He might, though I don’t know so much about it’s bein’ easy. But I believe their favourite way is to get a tiger under them—then they kick him backwards and forwards between the forefeet an’ hindfeet an’ pound him that way until there’s nothin’ left that you could practically call a tiger. A bull’ll do that to a man if one gets in his way if he goes *musth*.”

“What’s that?” demanded Nita and Hugh in chorus.

“*Musth*? It’s a sort of madness comes on a bull sometimes. Only in India—I never heard of it in this country, but you have to watch out for it there. Ever notice those two little holes just near a bull’s eyes? No? Well you ought to notice things. Anyhow, in those little holes is a kind of gland, an’ if a keeper sees a little sort of drip coming from them he starts gettin’ ready for trouble—shackles the bull fore an’ aft with the heaviest tackle he can, an’ keeps him quiet. He gets restless an’ moody an’ savage, an’ no matter how well he’s shackled he sometimes breaks away; an’ then he behaves quite mad, an’ goes

for everybody he sees.”

“Hurts them?”

“Kills ’em, old son. Then he’ll take to the country an’ he’s an awful danger, ’cause he roams everywhere, fightin’-mad. They have to send out a party of hunters to shoot him.”

“Jolly rough on him,” said Hugh, hotly. “He can’t know what he’s doing. Why don’t they run him into a paddock until he’s better?”

“No paddock ’ud hold him. An’ you can’t leave two ton or so of mad bull goin’ about the country killin’ peaceful villagers. It’s hard luck, all right, but there’s no way out of it.”

“Well, I’m glad they don’t go *musth* in Australia,” Nita said. “There’s my good little Ali coming out—he’s had enough sand.” She went to meet him, returning with him proudly, one little arm round his trunk. It was pretty to see the gentleness with which the elephant moved, taking each step with watchful care for the tiny feet so near his mammoth hoofs. George looked at them delightedly.

“Make a nice pair, don’t they? I’d like to see anyone lay a finger on Nita if one of my bulls was handy. I guess he’d get treated like the Indian bulls treat a tiger.”

Nita came running to him.

“George! Teach me the words you say to them.”

George shook his head.

“Can’t do it. Every keeper’s got his own talk, an’ his bulls understand him—but he doesn’t pass it on. Might if your Dad ever took it into his head to make a keeper of you, but I don’t see him doin’ it, exactly. Anyhow, not as long as you’ve got that old crock Merrylegs——”

Further utterance was cut short by Nita’s leaping on him and pounding him with her fists, to which he submitted much as his elephants would have done, laughing at her.

“Look—there’s old Ram comin’, an’ I wouldn’t say that he won’t go *musth* if he sees you hittin’ me. An’ I believe I’ve got some more choc’late somewhere.” Nita changed her attack and dived at his pocket. Peace was restored, and they lay on the bank, watching the elephants enjoying the freedom of the grassy plain.

“Well—time we moved,” George said at last. Suddenly he grinned. “Look at that, now!”

A cow had emerged from a thick clump of tea-tree, grazing quietly. She looked up presently and beheld the elephants near her—standing for a moment

transfixed with astonishment and horror. Then she gave a loud, agonised bellow, wheeled, and fled madly across the plain, head and tail in the air, in a way quite unfitting a staid and respectable cow. The elephants looked on unmoved, and Nita and Hugh shouted with laughter.

“Now, won’t she have something to tell them about at home?” chuckled George. He put his fingers to his mouth and gave a long low whistle. Instantly the elephants turned, marching back to him.

“Had a good time, old man?” He rubbed Ram Singh’s trunk gently. It swung up and rested on his head, the little finger-tip caressing his ear.

“That’s his way of saying ‘Thank you.’ Well, up you get, kids.” He whistled again, the trunks lifted them, and they set off towards the camp, marching in a line, with Ram Singh between his smaller comrades.

“I wonder what the Boss means to do about your turn when Toby comes back to work, Hugh,” remarked George. “Hope he won’t alter it; old Ram quite enjoys his little bit with you. But I don’t see how Toby is goin’ to fit into it. For one thing, the bulls hate him like poison. There isn’t a man in the show they despise like they do Toby—but then, you wouldn’t hardly call him a man. P’raps that’s why.”

“Dad never says—at least not when I’m about,” Nita answered. “But I don’t believe he’d change Hugh’s turn. It’s too poppilar. P’raps Dad’ll make Hugh the World’s Best Midget!”

“Much chance!” said Hugh.

“There’d be wigs on the green with Toby if he did,” remarked George, thoughtfully. “That little rat has got the worst temper ever I see.”

“He’s been quite nice to me lately,” Hugh put in. “He showed me all the bits about himself that he’s got, cut out of newspapers: such a lot. Eddie was there, too. Toby says he’ll teach me some ring-tricks.”

“He could teach you a lot more than ring tricks.” George’s tone was sharp. “Don’t you go makin’ pals of him an’ Eddie, son.”

“Oh, I don’t. They wouldn’t want me, anyhow. But I don’t think they’re as down on me as they used to be. Eddie’s stopped guying me when I play with Lennie Crowe.”

“Time they both had a little manners. I wouldn’t wonder if young Eddie has had some straight talk from his Dad. If he was my son I wouldn’t want him to be so much with Toby. But then, thank goodness, he’s not mine.” He chuckled. “Seems to me this show is goin’ to be a bit over-crowded with clowns. There’s young Eddie pining to get back into the ring, I believe; an’ Steve tells me the Boss has been givin’ Micky a quiet practice with Joey.”

“Oh, I know about *that!*” Nita said, importantly. “Daddy told Mummy he believed Micky could do Jimmy’s turn when he goes. Jimmy’s going on a farm.”

“I’d like real well to see Jimmy at that game,” George grinned. “Can’t you fancy him amblin’ up to the pigs with a tin of feed, an’ squeakin’ to ’em, ’Here we are again!’ Jimmy’ll surprise the farmer he works for, I bet. But he’ll never stick to it; he’ll be lookin’ for a Circus job again in three months. Once a clown, always a clown. You remember that, young Hugh!”

“I’m not going to be a clown at all,” defended Hugh. “I’m going to be a rider.”

“If you get out of Joey’s clutches.”

“Oh, he only wants me ’cause I’m little. When I get a bit bigger he won’t.”

“An’ Dad says he can ride,” piped Nita. “I’m just goin’ to worry Dad’s life out until he gives Hugh an’ me a two-pony turn. He can do half my tricks now on Tinker.”

Hugh looked at her gratefully.

“I can’t come within streets of you, and you know it, Nita.”

“Oh, but you will. I could do most of the work at first. An’ it’ll be twice as much fun to have a mate in the ring. Won’t it, George?”

“I guess so.” He looked benevolently from one eager face to the other. “There’s one thing—I don’t believe either of you would be wantin’ to grab all the best part. An’ *that* ’ud be a new thing in the ring, so I hope the Boss gives in to you, chicken. Well—here we are.”

They swung into the pitch, and Hugh helped George to shackle the elephants while Nita danced off to the blue caravan. It was nearly tea-time; already the hands were drifting towards the tucker-waggon, near which the big cauldron was steaming. Hugh strolled over, aware that he had begun to want his tea.

Eddie Pratt, a black teapot in his hand, gave him a greeting as he passed. It was still Toby’s custom to have his meals in his caravan, and Eddie shared his tea as a reward for buying the extra delicacies the dwarf loved. Toby was like a greedy child where food was concerned: the thick bread and butter served from the tucker-waggon did not tempt him.

Hugh looked round for Jeff or Micky. Neither was visible: and Joey was already supplied with tea and was enjoying it among a group of men at a little distance, under a tree. Hugh decided to wait a few moments in the hope of seeing his friends arrive. He sat down on the grass.

Suddenly he heard his name called.

“Hugh!” It was Eddie, coming towards him with his teapot.

“ ‘M?’ He looked up lazily.

“I say, you might take this over to Toby. He’s waitin’, an’ old Crowe’s just sendin’ me on a message—he’ll be wild if I don’t hurry.”

“Oh, all right.” Hugh got up and took the teapot. “Scissors, it’s hot!”

“Hold it by the handle an’ the spout. Tell Toby it’s no use waitin’ for me, ’cause I don’t know how long Crowe’ll want me. Thanks ever so much.” He turned and ran off behind the waggon.

Hugh carried his hot burden gingerly across to the yellow caravan, some distance away. The door was open. Toby looked up with an instinctive scowl, which he changed hastily to a smile. Hugh delivered the teapot and Eddie’s message.

“Hard luck on him!” remarked the dwarf. He glanced at Hugh sideways. “Well, you’d better take his place—stay an’ have some tea with me. There’s plenty to eat.”

There was certainly plenty. A crumpled newspaper on the folding table bore a remarkable assortment of cakes and sausage-rolls, somewhat battered by travel, but not the less good to the eyes of a hungry boy whose ordinary food was of the plainest. Hugh hesitated.

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll stay, thanks,” he said, shyly. Even if Toby were a dwarf he was still a “star”: and to be asked to tea in any caravan was an event.

“Oh, be a good chap—it’s a lonely game to be always eatin’ by oneself. You can trot off as soon as you’ve had your tea.”

The cakes *did* look good, Hugh decided. And it didn’t seem decent to refuse, when Toby put it that way.

“Well, I will, thanks,” he said. He sat down on the edge of a bunk.

“I’ll get another cup,” the dwarf said, limping hurriedly to a little cupboard set in the wall in a corner. “We won’t use Eddie’s, ’cause he might come along at any minute.” He chuckled: it took him a moment, apparently, to find the cup. “Eddie won’t miss his tea if he can help it—hee-hee! Great boy for cakes, is Eddie. Never mind; you an’ me’ll have first pick, an’ we won’t leave him too much.”

Hugh did not enjoy his meal, in spite of the delicacies. To be at such very close quarters with Toby was rather unpleasant: there was a horrid fascination in watching his dirty, claw-like hands, so much smaller than his own brown paws. And the high, excited voice, with its ceaseless chatter, tried him. He was very thirsty, and gulped down his tea hurriedly, finding it too heavily sweetened, even for him.

“Another cup? There’s plenty in the pot,” Toby squeaked.

“Yes, please. Could I have not so much sugar, please, Toby?”

“Did I give you too much? Sorry: I thought all boys liked sugar. Eddie takes three spoonfuls, an’ I’m nearly as bad—hee-hee!” He filled it carefully. “Now, there’s a nice cup. Have another cake?” He did not press him when Hugh hesitated, but began a story of the ring which made the boy laugh in spite of himself as he drank his tea. He found that it was easy to laugh at Toby if he didn’t look at him. Only, the cunning black eyes were hard to dodge, they watched him so narrowly.

He made his escape as soon as he felt it was polite to go. Toby bade him good-bye pleasantly.

“So glad you came. You must come again lots of times. Well, good luck to the turn to-night. I must come an’ have a look at it—you wouldn’t mind old Toby watching you in the show?” His unpleasant little chuckle lingered in Hugh’s ears as he ran off.

It was like a tonic to find the Crowe baby scrambling on his rug on the grass, and to have a game with him; Lennie was grubby, but he was clean and fresh after Toby. Hugh liked to hear his gurgles of laughter; they took away the echoes of the dwarf’s chuckle. But he found himself, before long, curiously sleepy; he supposed that it was because of the long afternoon in the heat. He was not sorry when Mrs. Crowe came to claim her energetic son.

“He does love a romp with you, Hugh,” she said, gratefully. “He’s not half the bother he generally is, after you’ve had him. I reckon it’s because he’s got tired with laughin’ at you. Had your tea, sonny?”

“Yes, thanks.” He was about to add that he had had it with Toby, but he stopped. Somehow he did not want to tell Mrs. Crowe that he had been with the unsavoury dwarf.

“Well, I’ll get this fellow to bed. See you to-night.”

Hugh went slowly to his tent, yawning as he walked. Nobody was there.

“My word, I’m sleepy,” he muttered. “I think I’ll have a camp, or I’ll go to sleep in the Big Top to-night.”

The little tent was very hot. Soon, too, Jeff and Micky would be hurrying in to dress, when they needed all the scant room there was. He decided to find a cooler spot; ten minutes’ nap under a bush would make him feel quite different. He went out and looked about him.

Just behind the tent was a clump of low bush, with grass growing thickly in a hollow. It called to him. He cuddled down into its softness, his cheek on his arm, and in a moment was asleep.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS

“DID you see where he went?”  
“You bet I did. I’ve been dodgin’ about watchin’, ever since he came out of the waggon.”

“I saw you. I was peekin’ out o’ the window. He played for an age with the Crowe kid, an’ then his little head began to droop—bless him! Hee-hee!”

“Well, it’s took all right. He’s under a bush behind their tent, sleepin’ like a pig. How long’ll it last, Tobe?”

“There won’t be a stir out of him before morning—not if I know my pills.”

“Good business!” Eddie grinned. “I say, Tobe, it won’t poison him, will it?”

“Lor’, no! The Chink I get those from in Sydney said anyone could take ’em.”

“But you gave him as much as you take yourself, an’ he’s a kid.”

“He’ll only sleep all the longer. No sense in givin’ him what would wear off too soon. You trust old Toby!”

“You’re a oner!” said Eddie admiringly. “Was it hard to manage?”

“Not for anyone with my brains. Just needed cleverness an’ quickness. He only thought his first cup was a bit sweet—hee-hee!”

His tone changed to one of curt authority.

“Now, look here, young Eddie. You don’t know anything about him, of course. Some of the men may have noticed him bringin’ my teapot over, but you an’ I’ll swear he only left it, an’ never came in, an’ that we had tea together as usual. Get that?”

Eddie nodded.

“Your job is to be handy when some one is needed to take his place. You can’t go an’ sit in the seats, of course: that ’ud look suspicious. But be where they can get hold of you easy—they’ll be in such a hole they’ll be only too glad to grab you. An’ mind you’re clean.”

“I can’t do that undressin’ on the bull’s head.”

“Of course you can’t. But you can sit there.”

Eddie shivered. “I hate that part. I can’t bear a bull’s trunk touchin’ me.”

“Don’t you be a young idiot. All you’ve got to do is to keep still; the bull knows his business. You’ve watched Hugh often enough to know how he stands. The whole thing’ll be ruined if you funk that part.” The dwarf thrust his face almost into Eddie’s. “An’ if you do, I’ll give the whole show away an’ see that you get all the blame. It wouldn’t be the least trouble for my brain to work that.”

Eddie recoiled, trembling. Toby was very terrible when he chose.

“Oh, I won’t funk it, Tobe—true as life, I won’t.”

“You hadn’t better. Now you clear out—the less we’re seen together the safer we are.” Again his face grew threatening. “I’ll be watchin’ you to-night—remember!”

Jeff and Micky were hurried in their dressing that evening. They had had a long trial and conference in the ring with Big Dan; so long, indeed, that it left them little time to obtain what food they could from the tucker-waggon and to eat it while they dressed. Had they been forced to go without food altogether it would not have troubled them that evening. They were in the highest spirits. Not only had the great man deigned to approve of Jeff’s riding, ending by offering him enough work in the ring to release him from any tent-work—but he had tried Micky out in clowning with Joey, and had actually been moved to laughter more than once at the Irishman’s drollness. Big Dan was quick to recognise anything that made a difference to ordinary performances; it was clear to him that an Irish clown, with his rich brogue and his quaint turns of speech would provide that “something different” for which he was always looking.

“Well, you can have Jimmy’s job when he goes,” he said finally. “I’ll take you on at it for a month on trial. But I reckon you’ll hold it down.”

The two friends went over the afternoon happily as they dressed.

“It’s more than I’d ever dared to hope for,” Jeff said. “I was feeling a bit mean about getting ahead of you, Micky, old man.”

“Yerra, ye’ll need to harden y’r heart before ye get to own a Circus,” answered Micky, cheerfully. “Ye’ll not be able to pull every lame dog after ye up the ladder.”

“Lame dog, your granny! You made the Boss grin on your first day, an’ that’s more than Jimmy has done in all the years he’s been with the show. You see, you haven’t got to act at all, Micky; all you’ve got to do is to be the blithering ass Nature made you!” He dodged a boot, flung with more vigour than skill.

“It’s true, though. Poor old Jimmy works like a cart-horse for every laugh he gets, an’ Joey relies principally on his height an’ his fool get up. But you’ll

make a game of it, like Hugh does.”

“I may—though I’ve visions of meself groanin’ under bushes with me head in me hands, thinkin’ how to be funny. Ye never can tell—the things that make simple lads like you grin may only bring sobs from the bored inhabitants of Woop-Woop. ’Twill be harrd to play wid that wee fellow, Toby—he’ll not make it easy f’r a new man. Anyhow, he won’t be fit f’r the ring this good while, thanks be to the Saints!”

“He’s no loss. Wonder where Hugh is. I want to see the nipper’s face when we tell him.”

“I didn’t see him annywhere about. He’ll be with Nita, I shouldn’t wonder, or playin’ with little Crowe. We’ll tell him when the show’s over.”

“He’ll be as glad as I am—and that’s saying something! Well, come along old man—the band is outside.” They flung on their coats and hurried off.

From time to time in the early part of the evening Jeff’s eyes sought the front seat where Hugh was always to be found, watching quietly. He was vaguely puzzled at his non-appearance, but it did not occur to him to be uneasy. It was not necessary for him to be there until after the interval, and very possibly Mrs. Crowe had impressed him for service with Lennie. Still, her turn was over, and he knew that Hugh recognised that the deception of his being a mere spectator was heightened by his being in his seat all through the performance. When, however, there was no sign of him at the interval, he became a little troubled. He slipped out of the tent, and at its entrance ran into Micky.

“Mick, where’s Hugh? He ought to be here.”

“I wish I knew, then,” answered Micky. “I’ve just been lookin’ f’r him. There’s no sign of him, an’ ’tis not dressed he is, neither—his blue suit’s lyin’ ready. So I wint like smoke to Mrs. Dan’s an’ Mrs. Crowe’s, an’ they’ve none of them seen him.”

“Where on earth——” began Jeff, anxiously. A voice cut him short. It was Pazo, tall and impressive in his Hussar uniform.

“Are you lookin’ for the boy? I ’ave seen ’im asleep be’ind your tent, jus’ before dark—but per’aps ’e is not there still.”

Micky and Jeff were gone in a flash, racing. It was very dark behind the tent: they struck matches, scarcely believing that they would find anything. Jeff uttered a cry.

“It’s him all right. Hugh! Wake up!” Hugh did not stir. Jeff pulled him out gently and put him on his feet, holding him up.

“Hugh, old man—wake up. You’re nearly due in the ring!”

Hugh opened his eyes drowsily. They closed again, and his head fell against Jeff.

Pazo came running with a hurricane lantern—they blessed him for it. He looked keenly at the boy's face.

“ 'E is seek, I t'ink.”

“He *can't* be sick!” Jeff said. “He's only dead asleep. There's a bucket of water in the tent—quick!”

They splashed the water freely over Hugh's face. He blinked feebly, wriggled in a protesting way, and continued to sleep.

“No good,” Jeff said, putting him on his blankets. “And, my goodness! we're due in the Big Top, Mick! Pazo, can you get someone to him?—Mrs. Peterson would come, I know. We'll have to go.”

“You mus' fly, to warn ze Boss—ze boy's turn is oll smashed,” said Pazo. “Run! I vill see to 'im: I 'ave ze time yet. Run!”

They ran, knowing they were already late. Jeff's mind was busy. He loved Hugh, but, as always, with Jeff it was “Circus first,” and at the moment Hugh's turn with Joey was more important than the boy himself. He could think of no substitute but Eddie, who, for all that he knew, was already in bed. Eddie would have to be found.

It seemed to him that luck played into his hands, for at the tent entrance he almost ran into Eddie. Another figure, on crutches, was lurking further back in the shadow, but Jeff saw only the boy he needed. He caught him by the arm.

“Here—Hugh's sick. Can you do his turn with Joey?”

“ 'Course I can,” responded Eddie, with a readiness that surprised Jeff, even in his anxiety.

“Well, slip into the seat he uses an' be ready if you're wanted. Don't you muff it, now!”

“Not me!” said Eddie, importantly. The figure in the shadows chuckled faintly.

In the ring Big Dan was looking like thunder. Two men were absent, and there was no sign of Hugh in his usual place. Under cover of the turn that was going on Jeff approached him.

“Hugh's sick, sir. Found him unconscious.”

Big Dan's jaw dropped. He stared at Jeff blankly.

“I've sent young Eddie into the seats, an' told him to do his best with the turn if you're willing,” Jeff said rapidly.

“Quick work,” said the Boss, with approval. “You've got a head. He'll

muddle through somehow. Is he game to let Ram put him up?”

“I hadn’t time to ask him. We’ve been hunting for Hugh—only found him a few minutes ago.”

“Is he very bad?”

“Can’t say,” Jeff answered, unhappily. “Pazo’s getting Mrs. Peterson to look at him.”

“Well, I’ll send Joey to you. Tell him to make what arrangements he can with Eddie in the ring. I’ll cut out the business with Ram if necessary. It *would* happen when we’ve a big house!” mourned the Boss. He moved off with apparent carelessness to where Joey was standing, gazing with an air of rapture at the performers. A word in his ear, and the clown made a waddling run, as if to secure a better view, that brought him near Jeff.

Joey’s feelings, as he learned the situation, were beyond mere words for expression. He had bitter experience of Eddie in the ring; moreover, it would be necessary to alter much of the turn, since he handled Hugh in a way that would be impossible with his heavy substitute. Still, it had to be faced, and part of a clown’s job was to deal with the unexpected. He grinned to conceal his emotions, secured a laugh by kissing Jeff affectionately on both cheeks, and trotted away.

He needed that laugh, for he got few with Eddie. The scene with the feeding-bottle was devoid of all its usual life: in the ring play that followed Eddie was, as Micky put it, like a calf that had lost its mother. He did his best, but he was anxious and nervous. The dread of Toby was heavy on him. It was small wonder that he looked bovine and moved clumsily. The crowd was only mildly interested. A few men who had seen the show before regretted audibly that they hadn’t the jolly youngster they had last time: Big Dan’s quick ears caught the remark, and his brow grew heavy again.

The elephants came in at last. Joey caught his assistant and hoisted him with difficulty to his shoulders.

“What about Ram?” he whispered, as he waddled to the side of the ring.

“I can let him put me up. I can’t undress, of course.”

“That doesn’t matter—just sit still an’ cheek me. For goodness’ sake try to put a little life into it, like Hugh does.”

The words were bitter to Eddie. He had been quite satisfied with his performance: it seemed to him that he had nothing to learn from Hugh, or, for that matter, from Joey. The business with the elephant was not a pleasant prospect, but he told himself that he would soon get used to it. After all, he had only to keep still and let Ram Singh do the work: and he had often been on an

elephant before. He wondered if Toby were watching him.

When the moment came he slid down from Joey's shoulders and scuttled across the ring, forgetting some of the dodging that usually went on, so that he arrived a little too soon; the elephants had not quite finished their turn. George waved him aside; he obeyed, slightly flurried. Gunga, standing with his forefeet on a tub, ringing a bell, looked at him uneasily. Eddie saw the cut near his eye, and was glad that it was not Gunga he had to mount.

The elephants finished their work amid applause and wheeled into line. It was Eddie's signal: he ran forward to Ram Singh. The great trunk lifted him. He swung upward slowly. As his body became horizontal his feet were near Gunga's head. The elephant backed suddenly, lifting his trunk.

Eddie lost his nerve. To him the movement was one of menace and revenge, and he began to kick and struggle. His foot, heavily booted, shot out and kicked Gunga violently in the eye—the sore one.

Gunga was already restless and uneasy at the nearness of his enemy: the sudden agony of the blow was too much for him. Ram Singh blocked George from his sight. He trumpeted loudly in his pain and dashed towards the exit into the horse-tent.

The men blocked him—unfortunately, but they were taken by surprise. Gunga was in no mood to be stopped, and the opposition made him furious. He swung round, the cries of the startled crowd drowning George's whistle. The main entrance caught his eye: he fled towards it, his trunk upraised. The hands before him scattered like chaff. Women were screaming, men shouting: the uproar added terror to the elephant, desperate to escape from the lights and clamour into the friendly darkness. He thundered through the entrance and disappeared.

Only one obstacle blocked him; a little squat figure on crutches, who could not move quite fast enough. Gunga had no wish to kill, but he was bent on escape. The trunk, swinging down, brushed the obstacle from his path. He galloped over to the corner and came to a halt by his pickets, sweating and trembling.

Within the Big Top Ram Singh and Ali behaved with all the calmness of good breeding. It was so evident to Ram Singh that Eddie did not wish to mount that he lowered the struggling form gently to the ground—whereupon Eddie scuttled away like a rabbit and was lost to sight in the horse-tent. Big Dan smiled benevolently on the excited crowd, with a whispered word to George and a signal to the band. The elephants obeyed the music; they waltzed solemnly round the ring, Joey waltzing before them, softly chanting a lullaby. At the exit Ram Singh gathered him into his trunk, while Ali did the same for

George, bearing them out of sight. Nita dashed in, a gleaming figure, on Merrylegs. Peterson's Circus had not been thrown out of its stride.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LAST TURN

**H**UGH opened his eyes late next morning. At first he was too sleepy to understand anything except that he was evidently still dreaming; so he shut them again, and at once knew he was awake. He experimented several times. It was very curious. The dream was one of splendour: a gorgeous caravan interior, with yellow curtains. That was how he was certain it was a dream, for in just such a caravan did he plan to sleep when Jeff and he owned the Dream-Circus. But with shut eyes all this gorgeousness vanished and he was simply awake in the dark.

A low giggle at this point intruded on his reflections. He opened his eyes quickly. This was even more peculiar, for Nita had come into the dream.

“You do look funny when you blink your eyes like that,” she stated. “Is that how you always wake up?”

“Where am I?” demanded the bewildered Hugh.

“You’re in our caravan.”

“I can’t be!”

“Well, you are, anyhow. You slept here all night.”

Hugh struggled to digest this intelligence. He found it most alarming.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Nita, kindly. “You didn’t know anything about it. Pazo carried you here after you’d gone to sleep.”

“Where’s Jeff?” came swiftly.

“He’s somewhere about. He’s all right, so you needn’t worry.”

“But why did Pazo bring me here?”

“They thought you were sick. You went to sleep under a bush, an’ they couldn’t wake you up. There was an awful fuss,” said Nita, greatly enjoying her position as historian. “They put your head in a bucket, or somefing. That was Jeff an’ Micky.”

Hugh found this altogether beyond his comprehension.

“Are you telling me a whole bundle of crams?”

“No, I’m not. Cross-me-heart-an’-hope-I-may-die, I’m not. You can ask Mummy. She’ll be in d’reckly—minute.”

“What did Jeff and Micky put me in a bucket for, then? I bet they didn’t!”

“Only your head. They couldn’t wake you up, an’ it was nearly time for

your turn. Pazo helped 'em. But it was all no good," she concluded sadly.

Hugh was galvanised suddenly into complete wakefulness. He sat up with a jerk, his eyes wide with horror.

"You—you don't mean to tell me I let the show down!"

"Nobody's cross—not a bit. At least, Daddy's just drefful cross, but not with you. He said 'Poor kid!' when he saw you."

"Oh—*do* tell me what happened! What did Joey do? Was there a frost? Why did I go and sleep like that?"

Nita looked puzzled. "Don't you know anyfing about it?"

"No, of course I don't. I'd think you were just talking rot, only I don't know why I'm here."

"Well, you went to sleep 'cause Toby put some stuff in your tea what made you. An' then all I've been tellin' you all this time happened, an' they couldn't wake you up, an' Eddie took your turn."

"Was it all right?"—swiftly.

"No, it was drefful. An' when Ram Singh picked him up he struggled like mad, an' he kicked Gunga in the eye. So Gunga went *musth*, leastways if it wasn't *musth* I don't know what it was, an' he bolted out of the Big Top by the crowd's door. It was simply lovely! Everybody yelled, an' the crowd nearly broke the seats, an' Gunga trumpeted, an' Eddie howled. Oh, I do wish you hadn't missed it, 'cause I never had such a time! Hugh, it was gor-jus! An' Eddie ran away an' hid, an' George an' Joey made the bulls waltz out, an' I galloped in on Merrylegs, an' they clapped me harder than I ever was clapped!"

"Well—I'm—blessed!" breathed Hugh.

"Oh, an' I forgot to tell you about Toby. He was sneakin' round outside in the dark, 'cause he hoped he'd messed the show all up. An' Gunga met him an' hit him with his trunk awful hard. I specs he felt he had to hit something, an' wasn't it luck it was Toby!" She giggled delightedly.

"He didn't kill him, did he?"

"No, but he hurt him a lot, an' now he's gone to a hospital. An' Dad says he'll never have him in the show again, not if he came to him on his bended knees. I don't know why he would come bending his knees, but that's what Dad said anyhow." She sighed. "Oh, I *do* think it's a pity you missed it all, only, of course, if you hadn't, none of it would have happened!"

Hugh looked at the impish little face.

"Nita, it isn't all a yarn, is it? Why don't I remember going to sleep?"

"I dunno. D'you remember goin' to tea with Toby?"

"Yes, I remember that," he said, slowly. "It was beastly there; I hated it. And didn't I play with Lennie afterwards?—or was that some other day? I'm not sure. Did Toby tell anyone he put stuff in my tea? I didn't taste anything."

"Toby didn't say a word about it. He said a lot of things, but Mummy wouldn't let me stay an' hear them. That was when I was comin' back after my turn, an' he was lyin' on the ground. But Eddie knew all about it. He got awful frightened because of all the fuss. Bellowed, he did! An' he told Mr. Pratt how he an' Toby had fixed it all up to get you to Toby's waggon an' give you the sleepin' stuff. I think I'd have held my tongue if I'd been Eddie," she concluded, reflectively.

"What did they do to him?" breathed Hugh.

"I don't 'zactly know, 'cause it was in their waggon, an' I was in bed. But there was awful roars an' bellows, an' you couldn't tell which was Mr. Pratt an' which was Eddie. Anyhow, there's been rows ever since, an' I b'lieve all the Pratts are goin' away, an' I don't care a bit. But Daddy's awful cross. Oh, an' did I tell you Pazo went an' got a doctor for you?"

"He never!"

"Yes, he did, then. An' when the doctor had finished doctorin' you he had to start on Toby. Wasn't it luck he hadn't gone home! Hugh—d'you know, last night was the most 'citin' night of my—whole—life!" she finished.

Hugh lay back, his head whirling. It was as well for him that a brisk patter of feet on the caravan steps announced the return of Mrs. Dan.

"Awake, are you sonny? How do you feel?"

"A bit queer," he said. "Mrs. Peterson—have I been an awful bother?"

"Bother? Not a bit. What put that into your silly old head?"

"I've been tellin' him everything 'bout last night, Mummy," said her daughter. "I told him very gently, like you said to!"

"H—m!" remarked Mrs. Dan, looking from one to the other. "Well, if she's told you anything to worry you, Hugh, just you forget it, because everything's all right."

"Sure?" he asked, wistfully. "Hadn't I better get up now?"

"Sure as sure. An' you lay quiet, like a good boy, an' I'll make you a cup of tea. Nita, you go off an' play with Lennie Crowe: Hugh's talked long enough, I guess."

Hugh had his tea, and promptly fell asleep again: not waking until hours later. There was no one visible but Jeff, who sat on the floor in the doorway,

smoking peacefully.

The confused wave of anxious memories of Nita's talk that rushed over the boy as he awoke faded as he looked at his friend. Jeff was so calm, so strong; Hugh felt that nothing could be wrong when he sat there, his face serene. He knew that Jeff would always take care of him. And there was someone else there too—the someone he could not see, only feel as a near and happy presence. He shut his eyes, that he might feel her more surely, smiling to himself. That was just the time a mother who was an angel would come—watching, comforting, telling her son that all was well.

When he opened them again Jeff was looking at him.

"Hullo, old chap! You've been smiling in your sleep, so I guess you feel all right."

"So I am. I didn't dream it all, did I, Jeff—about Toby and everything?"

"Sure you didn't. But there's nothing whatever to worry your head over, so don't begin."

"The Boss isn't wild with me?"

"Not he. He's a bit upset about losin' the Pratts—they've decided to go—but that'll work out all right. Mrs. Dan's got one of the other women to be wardrobe-mistress, an' Crowe says he'll take on the business side until they can get another man. Crowe hates figures like poison, but he'll get along somehow. It's really the best thing for the Pratts to clear out at once. Eddie's become so actively unpopular that he'd hardly be safe among the men, I believe. You'd be surprised to know what a lot of friends you've got!"

"But I let the show down, Jeff!"

"Oh, get that silly notion out of your head, son," said Jeff, firmly. "All you did was to drink a cup of tea. Why, it might easily have happened to the Boss himself, let alone a nipper like you. There isn't a soul among the crowd that wasn't sorry for you from the Boss downwards. 'Cause why, they know you're keen: an' between a pair of cheerful little plotters like Toby an' Eddie you hadn't the ghost of a chance. Eddie doesn't count so much: but it's no disgrace to be done in by an old hand like Toby—bless his merry heart!"

Jeff had begun to smile broadly. Hugh looked at him, puzzled.

"But what about the show, Jeff? Isn't it pretty awful to lose Toby?"

"That's the joke," grinned Jeff. "You see, it's this way, son. You're as good a hit with the crowd as Toby has ever been. An' the Boss believes that Micky'll be a real find as a clown. Well, that's all the show wants; an' the Boss is a heap better off, because Jimmy's always been rather an old stick—means well, but I suppose his heart's in pigs. Now he'll have three clowns that'll

work together cheerful an' happy, an' his wage-bill won't be nearly as high—which is very soothin' to the Boss. He's as near bein' gay as I've ever seen him!"

"I say!" Hugh exclaimed. "Do you mean I'll be a regular clown—working out things with Joey and Micky?"

"You will, for a bit, anyhow. But only in one half of the programme." Jeff was suddenly serious. "Because you're never to forget, Hugh, that riding's your real job. That's what you're cut out for. You're goin' to be a rider, not a clown, when I get my Circus!" Their eyes met: in that moment the Dream-Circus seemed very near.

"O—oh!" said Hugh, softly. "I won't forget, Jeff, true. An' you know I'd rather ride than anything."

"You'll ride all right. Oh, things are lookin' up for Micky an' you an' me. We've become too precious to travel on a lorry!"

"How do you mean?"

"We're performers—at least you an' I are, an' Micky nearly is. Performers," stated Jeff with due solemnity, "mustn't be allowed to get wet, like ordinary hands. They got to be cared-for, tucked-up in bed at night an' all that—can't be let sleep in a leaky little tent, even. So you an' Micky an' me are to inherit the Pratts' wagon!"

"Jeff!" Hugh could only stare. This was beyond his dreams.

"Fun, isn't it? It'll be rather jolly to have a house of our own, that doesn't want packin'-up an' unpackin' all the time. An' I guess if any of us ever want a trip on a lorry we won't be refused."

"I'm glad of that," said Hugh. "I love being on top of the lorry—when it's fine."

"Yes—but it's not so funny when it's pourin' cats an' dogs, an' you've got to stifle under the tarpaulin. That's the time one likes a roof overhead, an' a decent place to eat. An' I guess I can get it fixed up for Carl to be our driver, so the four of us won't be separated. We've hung together in bad times, so we'll stick to each other in good."

"That's ripping!" uttered Hugh. "Carl's always been jolly decent to me: I wouldn't like him not to come."

"No—none of us would. I say, how do you feel about playin' to-night? Are you fit?"

"Why, of course, I am. I'm jolly hungry, though!"

"We'll fix that up. Good thing you're fit, 'cause I believe we're goin' to have a great house. All this row has got out, an' the whole place is talkin'

about the Circus. The reporters have been pesterin' the Boss an' everyone they could get hold of—I wouldn't wonder if there wasn't a bit about it in the Sydney papers to-morrow. 'Boy drugged by Vicious Dwarf,' an' all that!"

"They won't!" protested Hugh, much alarmed.

"Won't they, if they can make something out of it! An' it's all to the good for us—great advertisement for the show. The Boss is no end pleased, I'll bet. He'll want to-night's performance to be the best ever, so we'll all be on our toes."

"Then I guess I'd better get up and do all my exercises," said Hugh, firmly. "I feel as if I'd slept for a year!"

He was taken aback at the warmth of the greetings that came to him as they crossed the pitch. Men slapped him on the shoulders: women performers came out of their caravans to call to him to know if he were better. Mrs. Dan met him, patted his head, and ordered him to come back to the blue caravan in a quarter of an hour to be fed. "No scratchin' round the tucker-waggon for you this evening, sonny: soft-boiled eggs are what you want!" Micky and Carl and Joey hailed him joyously; the big clown beamed on hearing he was well enough for the ring. It was all rather embarrassing, if pleasant: he looked at the kindly people shyly, and was glad to dive into the little tent, to strip to the waist and scrub himself. The cool water took away the last heaviness induced by Toby's drug. Jeff rubbed him down thoroughly and he ran back to the blue caravan, fresh and glowing. And was there ever anything so good as Mrs. Dan's brown eggs and fresh bread-and-butter? with Nita chattering like a starling and Mrs. Dan herself gay and motherly.

Big Dan loomed up the steps just as he had finished. Hugh looked at him nervously, but there was only friendliness in the great man's face.

"Well, you look all right, youngster. Joey says you can play. Good business. Got to do your best to-night, for we're goin' to have a crowd. But you won't let 'em down."

That, from the Boss, was astounding. Hugh looked up at him, his eyes grateful.

"I'll try, sir. I—I'm jolly sorry about last night."

"Not your fault. Bigger men than you have been got at. Only don't go drinkin' any stray cups of tea again—I hope you kept your eye on Mrs. Peterson when she was fillin' your cup!"

Of all the remarkable events of that day none equalled this—that the Boss had joked with him! It reduced Jeff and Micky to speechlessness as they exercised him in the little tent: it lingered in Hugh's memory, bracing him, when he slipped into his seat in the Big Top that night, determined to play up

to Joey as never before. For the Circus he would always play his best. But today he had seen a new Boss, a Boss with a twinkle in his eyes who joked with him. One would die for a Boss like that.

He had been ordered not to go into the seats this evening until the second half was about to begin: Big Dan knew that the crowd would be keen-eyed for him, so that it was wiser to keep him out of sight. As it was, heads craned forward at the slight curly-haired figure in the front row of the “shillings.” Someone said, “There’s the boy that was drugged!” The whisper ran round the tent: his neighbours paid him embarrassing attention while he stared fixedly at the ring, wishing his turn would come.

One man, half-way up in the cheap seats, who had watched the first part of the programme listlessly, stiffened to attention as Hugh came in. The ring ceased to exist for him; his eyes did not leave the boy’s face, searching it hungrily. He leaned forward, clenching his hands, when Hugh’s moment came and Joey carried the fighting form into the ring.

Joey was in great humour. All that he most wanted had come true: that he was to be spared Toby for ever was in itself enough to rejoice him—and now he had his chance to make up for the disaster of last night, to show the crowd what a clown could do when he had not a log to play with! His high spirits were infectious; and Hugh was already bubbling over with excitement. They had the thrill, the spur, that come from laughter and applause—the house was shouting from the first moment. The roar of joy that went up when Hugh escaped from his giant captor keyed them to their highest point.

The man in the cheap seats watched breathlessly—the one person in the audience who neither shouted nor laughed. The turn went, in the Circus phrase, “with a bang.” It was so fresh, so happy: the ridiculous towering figure, a melancholy baby mammoth, striving to get the better of the joyous urchin who danced before him, chaffing him, slipping through his legs, eluding him just when capture seemed certain. Never had it been so completely a game to Hugh. He forgot the grinning ring hands, the Boss, the crowd that grew more delighted each moment. There was no one there but himself and Joey—and they were having a lark.

The crowd grew tense as he darted up to Ram Singh: everybody knew of the happenings of the night before. In the cheap seats the silent watcher was rigid, his nails digging into his palms. But Gunga was a subdued elephant, on his best behaviour: and Ram Singh welcomed his small playmate, tossing him up like a feather. So much of the turn the crowd knew—but they were utterly unprepared for the undressing scene, and it had all the success lent by surprise. The black-and-scarlet imp capered out of sight on Ram Singh’s head amid a house that rocked with laughter.

Jeff kept a careful eye upon his charge that night. He told himself that he was foolishly jumpy—Hugh was quite well, and no further danger could be feared from Toby, helpless in the hospital. All the same—there had been something of shock to him, and possibly the excitement of the ring had not been the best treatment for young nerves. He saw him to bed in their tent after the performance was over. Certainly there was nothing wrong with Hugh: he was in the highest spirits, and undressing turned into a frolic that made hay of all the blankets, producing shouts of mirth that echoed beyond the pitch. Jeff left him, finally, threatening to come back and sit on his head if he were not asleep, and went in search of supper.

He came back when it was over. The tent was dark and silent: Hugh was in dreamland. Close by, Micky leaned against a tree, smoking. He gave a low whistle.

“That you, Mick? He’s all right, isn’t he?”

“He is,” said Micky. “I’ve had me eye on him, but he went off peaceful. I’m afther keepin’ tally on a fellow that’s hangin’ round, though. He’s over there, on the road beyant the tent.”

“What’s he there for?”

“I dunno, at all. But it looks to me as if he was afther no good: he’s a stranger. You’d never know what quare friends that wee rat Toby ’ud be havin’. I wouldn’t lave the boy wid him about.”

“I’ll precious quick move him on!” Jeff said, angrily. “Come an’ see what he’s up to: most likely he’ll clear out when he sees us comin’!”

But the man leaning on the fence did not move as they approached him. He looked at them steadily in the moonlight.

“What are you doing here?” Jeff enquired roughly. “Got any business?” The face was vaguely familiar to him: he puzzled as to where he had seen it before. Micky was quicker of memory.

“Begob, it’s the kid’s father!”

Jeff stiffened. There was silence for a moment.

“Well—what are you going to do about him?” Jeff asked.

“I came to see if he were all right,” said Russell, slowly. “My ship got back to Sydney yesterday: I found out from the agents where the Circus was. He’s quite well?”

“Better than he’s ever been, I should say—no thanks to you!”

Russell took the sneer quietly.

“I saw him in the ring. He looked happy. Is that put on for the public?”

“Yerra, man, if ye had eyes at all ye’d have seen it wasn’t,” said Micky, hotly. “Did he look like a boy that’s not treated right?”

They heard him sigh with relief. But Jeff was too anxious to care.

“What are you goin’ to do? Do you want to take him away? It’s a darned shame, if you can’t give him a good home!”

“I’ve no home—only my job on the ship. But I’ve been off my head with anxiety about him. I’d chuck the job and take him if he weren’t all right.” He straightened up, his voice low and eager. “Tell me the truth, man—he’s really happy?”

It was almost a cry. Jeff softened.

“You’ve no call to worry one bit about him. He’s done well—you could see that for yourself. An’ he belongs to Micky an’ me when he’s not in the ring. We look after him. We—well, we’re real fond of him. We’d fight you for him—wouldn’t we, Mick!”

“Wid all me heart,” said Micky, pleasantly. “Now or anny time!”

A shadow loomed up beside them. It was Big Dan.

“What’s this, boys?” Then he saw Russell’s face. “Oh—you!” His voice was hard and suspicious.

“He’s afther comin’ to see if the boy was all right, sir,” said Micky, as Russell did not speak. “ ’Tis the way his mind was onaisy about him. We’ve been tryin’ to set him at rest.”

“Better come over to the office, and we’ll have a word,” said the Boss sharply. He led the way into the tent, and waved Russell into a chair. They faced each other across the table with its flickering hurricane-lamp.

“Well—are you thinkin’ of takin’ him with you? An’ what sort of a trick did you play me?”

Russell told his brief story again.

“I knew you had taken him,” he ended. “I watched you, from the bush. But I knew I’d done an unfair thing to you. A man only does such a thing when he is desperate. I couldn’t know how you would treat him.”

“We’ve treated him all right. An’ what now?”

“I’ve got my job—clerking cargo on a coastal boat. It’s not much, but I’m saving every penny. I thought if he were well and happy I would leave him for a while: only . . . I had to find out.” There was pain in the eyes that met Big Dan’s. “I suppose you think I played you a low-down trick, but I can tell you I’ve paid for it. He’s all I’ve got.”

“An’ he’s a good kid,” said the Boss, his tone more gentle. “Made for a

Circus, he is. You trained him well—I'll say that for you. He's worth money to us: you'd guess that from seein' him in the ring."

"He may be—but I want my boy!"

Big Dan's brain worked swiftly.

"Clerking are you? Like your job?"

"Oh, yes—it suits me well enough. I've had a good business training; and I like the sea. But I'm not going to stick to it a moment longer than I need. I'm trying to get something that will enable me to have the boy with me."

"H'm," said Big Dan, and scratched his chin. "Wouldn't care for a job with the show, I suppose?"

"The Circus?" Russell's tone was startled.

"Yes—I'm needin' a business man. Mine's just leavin' me. Not a very swell job, but you'd have Hugh's pay as well as your own."

"He'll have to go to school."

"Oh, give him a year or two. He's young enough, an' he's gettin' trainin' in responsibility that'll stick to him all his life. Growin' strong too. I daresay you could give him a bit of schoolin' yourself, like my wife gives Nita—you could teach both of 'em, for that matter, odd times," said the Boss, whose ideas on education were vague. "Think it over." He lit his pipe, making a lengthy job of the process. Russell sat at the table, his head in his hands.

"I'd do it," he said at length. "It's good of you, and I'm grateful. But I can't let the ship down: they rely on me for the next voyage."

"Well, I don't think the worse of you for that. When do you come back?"

"In six or seven weeks."

The Boss considered.

"I could manage for that long. You'd take it on then?"

"Yes—I would. And I would do my best for you." He hesitated. "Those young fellows who said Hugh was with them—they seem a good stamp. They \_\_\_\_\_"

Big Dan chuckled.

"Micky an' Jeff look after him like a couple of old hens. You've no call to worry about Hugh. An' my wife keeps her eye on him—to say nothin' of Nita. The boy's got plenty of friends."

Russell stood up.

"Well—I'll be off."

"Aren't you goin' to stay an' see Hugh?"

“I can’t. My train goes at six in the morning, and I must be back. And it wouldn’t be fair to wake him up. It would only unsettle him to see me—better leave him in peace. I can stick it, now that I know he’s happy.”

Big Dan felt a pang of pity. The dark eyes that stared at him were hungry. He thought of Nita, and winced.

“Well—as you like,” he said awkwardly. “Come over to my waggon an’ have a drink.”

“I won’t, thanks. I’d rather get away.” He forced a smile. “It’s not too easy . . . to be so near the boy.”

They shook hands, and Big Dan watched him go. At the entrance to the tent he looked back.

“Better not tell him I came. I’ll write to him.”

He went off, striding heavily, not trusting himself to glance towards the little tent under the trees, near which Jeff and Micky stood on guard. The dusty road leading to the township glimmered faintly before him in the moonlight. Russell’s heart seemed to lift as he went, even though every step led him away from Hugh. At least, Hugh was happy. And there was the promise of dawn.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations were removed from this ebook as the date of death can not be determined for the illustrator, Laurie Tayler.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Road to Adventure* by Mary Grant Bruce]