



'Behold this angel floating towards our earth!' announces the girl.

But the angel only wails.

'The pole!' This is what he cries. 'The pole, it will not hold!'

The disobliging parrot begins to chant – 'He is a kind of beautiful! He is a kind of beautiful!' – sensing danger, needing to voice it, but lacking the words.

The girl, her focus only on her own demise, her show so carefully crafted descending into chaos, does not see the situation – does not hear it, feel it, know it – for what it truly is.

'Crank the machine more!' she instructs, believing she is able, with the power of language, to make everything come to good.

But the fayre hawker's wife ignores the command. She stands frozen, eyes skyward, swallowing air at the impending horror.

'Lizzy!' the girl snaps. 'Lizzy! Are you listening?!'

She is not.

The next sound they all hear.

CRACK!

The pole gives way. Then comes the terrible scream of an angel descending as he was told to, but too fast, too fast.

‘He is a kind of beautiful! He is a kind of beautiful!’ gabbles the parrot as the angel tumbles through the air in the seemingly stretched-out motion of a dream.

The girl turns, likewise trancelike, to see that the bird’s words are correct. There is a beauty – a certain majesty – to the revolutions the angel makes as he slips through the air, a delicacy to the dance of the silken threads as they tangle his wings, preventing him from making any effort to break his fall.

The green parrot takes flight, to coach his fellow, perhaps, on the magic of flying.

The audience’s faces are upturned, a sea of expectant Os.
Then there is another deafening –
CRACK!

– as a body hits the floor.

Time returns to its usual pace with a wild howl of despair.
The dream ends.

An angel lies broken, bleeding, upon the ground.

ACT I



This is to give Notice to Gentlemen, Ladies and Others

*that in this very Place before Sunset there shall be the Opportunity to see the most
EXTRA-ORDINARY and TALENTED collection of wild Animals, a*

MENAGERIE as follows

Geese, that on hearing a Melody desire to dance the Hornpipe: A Learned Pig, capable of impressive mathematic Feats: A Parrot from the South Americas that will recite the Poets and the Saints with excellent Elocution: A Hare of Giant's proportions that itself is a Sight to astound but will also beat upon a Drum at your very Command.

SECOND, you shall see

THE MOST STARTLING SPECTACLES OF HUMAN BIRTH

A live DWAFF, which is a grown Man with the very dimensions of a Child, who can juggle with Fire: the ONE-ARM'D BOY who does exist most jolly though missing one of his Limbs and can do Feats of Tumbling to astonish and arouse; the NO-LEGG'D BRUTE who will behave as if he is Hercules for your attending Pleasure by the lifting of several full Barrels above his Head.

Many musical Interludes will follow.

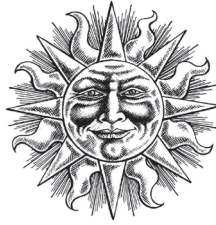
~~THIRD~~, much anticipated and MUCH CELEBRATED, a true Lady, genteel in all Aspects of Voice, Dress and Nobility save for her having the Head of a Swine.
~~It is a Spectacle never to be surpass'd.~~

~~HILDY~~

*All followed by bare-Knuckle Fighting
for your Entertainment and serious Play!!!*

The Proprietor – the most distinguish'd MR F P GRAINGER – wishes it be known that he is willing to dispose of any of these Remarkable Beasts, including those of the human Disposition, if any Lady or Gentlemen is so desirous of purchasing them.

LONG LIVE THE KING!



To begin with, there is the smell.

Of chicken shit and pig.

Of that particular perfume that simmers when the lowest ranks do hoard together.

In this gathering crowd you will catch a sniff of the brewer's armpit, the gelder's feet, the stench of the tallow-chandler's apron. They all mix strong with the fresh sweet scent of spring grass underfoot, and the vapours from the public dunghill that drift like intermittent farts across the whole proceedings.

The butcher, in all his meatiness, has arrived to swell the throng. The tanner, the wabster, the smiddy come too to this field on the outskirts of town, just where the road runs to proper dirt. They do their darndest to wash away the day's work done with the drinking of strong liquor and with the gobbling up of pure entertainment.

The band of performing rogues and vagabonds before them have paid their bribes to the observing parish wardens and so they may begin the evening's jamboree without any officious interruption.

So next comes noise – an earful of pipe-playing. A woman

of certain years and ample chest is behind the tune. She was introduced to us by the fayre hawker without the baggage of a name – she is simply his wife. Working her fingers inexpertly up and down the instrument, cheeks pink at the puffing, she barrels her hips along with a rhythm only she understands. It is a befuddling racket, but a sound not nearly so awful as –
SMACK!

– the impact of knuckles meeting jaw. It's a good sock – a marvellous strike! – and it acts like a conductor to this drunken orchestra of butchers and brewers, their wives and their cubs. (Just as it was supposed to.)

They rouse in unison, men and women, their mugs aloft and they cheer the punch –

ERRAYY!

– before settling into gleeful commiserations for the one who felt the pain.

That 'one' was the eldest of the two boxers – a bear of a man with a thick, bacony jaw. Red spills from the split skin of his chin.

The colour on his opponent's face? None. Only the scarlet bloom of youth and vigour. The boy, the one who dealt the blow, dances from foot to foot in the soil, all bare-chest and breeches, whooping at the sky. He is admirably lean with the beginnings of being tall, but what snags the attentions of this baying crowd is that he is boxing with only the one arm.

The other limb is gone, lost. Ask him for the tale of it, out of earshot of his master, and he will tell you of when he was a tiny infant and a cart could not stop, trapping him against a post. That accident, the subsequent amputation, is the reason

he is here on this March evening, pugilising in a field. His mother gave him up, thinking he would never grow enough for hard work and earn his keep. She sold him to this fayre hawker who knew very well how to make a lad like him put coinage in the pot.

Now he is exhibited (inaccurately) as a 'spectacle of human birth', taught to juggle and tumble at an early age, teaching himself later the skills required to fight. The boy has been nothing but a financial success and, on this eve, one arm or no, he appears every part the winner. For unlike his opponent, the boy has legs. A phrase you are to take literally not metaphorically.

'You, sir!' cries the fayre hawker, our ringleader, an ageing man, an opportunistic sort in a greasy, second-hand periwig.

The crowd turns, seeking the 'sir' amongst them who has been singled out. And there he is — a fat sort by the farmer's gate, emptying his beery guts into the hedge.

'You sir,' the fayre hawker calls to the puker, 'you may be legless only part of the time, but this brute here is legless the whole damn day long!'

The crowd is one again, bellowing with laughter. The fayre hawker adjusts his ill-fitting curls, a little pleased with himself for tickling the audience. The 'No-legg'd Brute', our bear of a boxer, strikes forward in the mud in his wheeled trolley and snarls.

'Legless since he shot free of the womb!' the fayre hawker goes on. 'And though that makes him a lucky fellow in my eyes, never having to bother with the expense of shoes . . .' More laughter. ' . . . it means he is no match for the nimble-footed. Or indeed the any-footed!' The cackling continues, enraging

the subject of this comedy routine. He growls at his audience, showing them his broken teeth, demonstrating how ready he is to eat them all up.

But the collected of the town only coo, pretending scared.

'So, 'tis time,' says the fayre hawker. 'Place your bets! Who will win? The one-arm'd boy or the no-legg'd brute.'

Into this scene comes a man no higher than an ell, a 'dwaff' as the handbill will have you know him, the fayre hawker spelling as he speaks – that is to say, incorrectly. This fellow of limited height entertained earlier with fire tricks and magic, and now he moves about the crowd at his master's command, taking cash and handing out the slips. But this mob ain't biting as eagerly as they should.

'Come on!' prods the fayre hawker. 'Don't be sorry you didn't stick yours in . . . As the abbess said to the fellow in the gospel shop!'

But the mob is muttering amongst itself, no longer in the market for wit. They smell a rat. Doubling your money is never this simple, as they know from bad experience.

The fayre hawker's wife stops her playing abruptly and puts down her pipe. She may not be one for tempo and pitch, but reading the thoughts of an audience is something she has a skill for.

'The brute is strong,' she calls out, throaty and convinced. 'He may have got hit, but I warn you, don't doubt him. I have seen him bend iron with his bare hands. I have seen him bite through china. One wrong step and that kid is the morrow's breakfast!'

The 'no-legg'd brute' revives at hearing his powers being

celebrated. He flexes his biceps, each as big as a loaf of bread. The audience is audibly impressed. The 'one-arm'd boy' momentarily retreats.

'Oh, shut it, woman!' snaps the fayre hawker, watching his carefully managed promotion of the boy slip like sand through the fingers. 'Don't listen to her!'

But 'tis too late; the crowd has turned for the wife. They jabber their agreement, as if they have too, with their own eyes, witnessed the feats of strength recounted in support of the man in the trolley chair. The fayre hawker's wife stands tall, proud of this knockout blow of sorts, revelling in the delivery of her husband's comeuppance.

The fayre hawker explodes with fury. 'You shrew!' he bellows. 'You snake! You grizly old hag!' But his wife only laughs, her new clan laughing with her. 'What?' blusters the fayre hawker, switching his attention to the crowd, spinning in the mud to address them all. 'What! You're going to take the word of a woman when it comes to sport? You're going to hark at this old Jade, this fussock, this mopsey. This truggish old crone with a bee up her chapel!'

The wife snorts, blowing at her husband with her tongue. The man's wig is slipping something awful now and is about to fall south. Because, yes – yes, they will take the word of this woman. The crowd is dead-set on backing the 'brute'.

That is until the boxing boy stops his jiggling for the smallest of moments and bends close to the scavenger man on the front row. Like all those around him, he is craning for the attention of the small man with the ledger, itching to make his wager.

'You know 'tis all a show,' the boy says softly, snatching the scavenger's attention.

‘Eh?’ he replies from a smeary mouth of blisters. ‘Eh? Wozzat you say?’

The boy takes a swift glance at his master, makes sure he is still engrossed in the argument with his wife and has not caught sight of this forbidden conversation.

‘They make like this every time,’ he goes on. ‘’Tis blaggery. They do it so’s that you don’t settle on me. So’s that you don’t get a farthing and neither do I.’

Realisation spreads gradual across the scavenger’s dirty mush.

‘I’m talking as one honest fellow to the next,’ the boy concludes. ‘Don’t you be falling for any of this disgrace.’ And back he goes to his boxer’s bounce while the tip-off spreads through the throng as fast as a dose of the pox.

All money is put on the boy.

The round is called. The fayre hawker, with the ledger returned to him, stares down at the figures and wears the stoop of a beaten man. The crowd clocks it and they clap each other upon the back for a ruse well swerved. The ‘one-arm’d boy’ hops and the ‘no-legg’d brute’ does roar. They huff and they puff, putting on the most satisfying show, peppered with punches that are ‘almosts’ and ‘oh-not-quites’.

And as they bob and jab towards their foregone conclusion, there is much that this mob, engrossed in the spectacle, will fail to see. Much that they will fail to feel.

For starters: the disappointment leaching from the richer folk who have come to this field too, willing to smut their hems and superior shoes. They hide at the back, keeping their distance from the contagious poor, fanning bad smells from the vicinity

of their noses, holding to their fair chests fading hopes of seeing the celebrated 'hog-faced lady', whose fame will grow even larger in their drawing rooms now that she has made no appearance. Their disappointment will grow stronger still when they arrive home to find their purses gone, lifted by the 'dwaff', who is as adept at picking pockets as he is at tossing flames.

The gathered will not notice the anxious sadness rising from the young girl of this travelling group, introduced with the fayre hawker's slippery tongue as his 'girl-exotic'. There she is, in an unbecoming dress, too nice for her standing and too big for her frame. She was the one who led out the geese and the pig and the hare for their performances, and then presented some skits of her own involving a brightly coloured and disobliging parrot. She has since fallen from everyone's memory though. She may be brown-of-skin in a way quite fascinating in a country outpost such as this, but all assembled were in agreement – her recital with the parrot was simply the largest pile of horseshit.

More impressive is her story of how she came to be here. Ask her, out of earshot of her master, and she would tell you how she is the daughter of a duchess. Though not the daughter of a duke. Her father was the lady's black slave brought back from a faraway island by the duke himself – a gift to his wife to decorate her parlour, to hold her train and to offer amusement while he was away on his recurrent voyages. Amusement, yes, but not like that. They fell in love, the gossips say. What is entirely certain is that the baby had to go, and once again our mercenary fayre hawker was in the right place at the right time. He swooped before the parish could intervene and, always

with an eye for a bargain, insisted the chattering parrot came with the girl as part of the deal.

What else will they miss, this giddy throng?

The curiosity of the serious young gentleman in the good-enough frock coat, certainly, for he is trying hard to be invisible. He stands a short distance from the other spectators turning about plans in his head, reinventing them, reorganising them. If anyone was shrewd enough to give him even a casual glance, they would notice the unique way in which he observes this show – as if it were a book to be studied or a lecture most grave, rather than something jolly to pass the time.

And it is undeniable that all here present are too-far inebriated to notice the nod the ‘one-arm’d boy’ gives the ‘no-legg’d brute’, signalling that he may strike him now – use the new sleight they have been practising without end.

The young girl will wail, just as she has been told to, when the boy is seemingly knocked out – though no amateurish dramatics are required, for she feels the blow as if it had been real, as if she had taken the contact herself.

The crowd will then vomit their objections. All will be chaos.

‘Oh, that was unexpected!’ is the fayre hawker’s next line as the boy lolls, apparently dead.

The seasoned old ringleader in the cut-price wig will then toss a wink to his comely wife to congratulate her for a part well played, before readying himself to brush aside the protests of the hoodwinked spectators.

Just as he does every other night of the week. And sometimes twice on the weekend.



MIM

George, you sod! You blighter! You useless pile of green! Zooks, I am so furious I could pluck you feather by feather! You might be named for the King but that ain't gonna stop me.

No! No shuffling away now. No giving me the sad-eye. You know our act inside out and upside in. Why decide on a whim that you don't? To make me look stupid?

You blasted parrot.

You let me down. There shan't be any seeds for you until you get that into your little blue head.

Oh, I am ashamed, in truth, sullied by the feeling of it. My master introduced me strangely and all was disaster from there.

His 'girl-exotic' he calls me now, my signal to get up and perform. That's a new one. A strange one. It's an improvement on 'oi', I suppose, or 'you' or 'shit for brains'. But still – what to make of it? I can only guess from the sauce dripping from his voice, and the *coo-ees* of the crowd, that he was saying it as a means to sell me high.

But then you, you idiot, you messed it all up.

Oh, those blank and silent faces! I reckon I shall never rid myself of the memory. Laughter is what the love of an audience

sounds like, bird, either that or great rounds of cheering. But silence! You are to talk, George. That is your thing. You are to look all unusual and multicoloured, then talk.

My thing? Well, I am still getting a handle upon it. Perhaps 'girl-exotic' is to be my thing, since Grainger has made it my title. Though what that involves as an act, I can't say for sure. The 'One-Arm'd Boy' is a much clearer prospect, though Alex would have it different. He says those words alone don't mean much. 'Tis merely a description, says he, and one of the narrowest kind.

But he can take it with him. That's the measure, ain't it? I'm the goose-wrangler, the hare-botherer, the girl who leads out the pig. I'd be a whole big nothing without them animals. And here I am again, making the same bleeding mistake by relying entirely on you.

But please, help me, George. I cannot stomach any longer the way Alex looks upon me when the audience takes up their sniggering – sniggering done at the terribleness of our act, not the humour of it. His strangled expression now strays beyond the stage, and I will not stand for pity. His eyes go to me and he transforms somehow. Lightness goes, he sinks, and the apple of his throat does a great journey up, then down. When he talks to me, his words crack and stagger, like they did when he said goodbye to his childish voice. He is as embarrassed as I at my hopelessness. Me, with my full arrangement of arms, legs and height, yet no ability to lift, juggle or tumble.

Alex never fails to make the crowd gasp, kicking up each new ball until he has six in the air. He spins upon a toe beneath them, catching them in his mouth, his armpit, the crook of his

foot. That's what you get for a lifetime of training, for wasn't Grainger chucking stuff in his general direction from when we were just little chits, insisting he do not drop it, pick it up, get better. What did I get? Trained to fetch and carry for a selfish woman with a face shaped exactly like a pig. A girl ain't never gonna get a round of applause for that.

So, we must practise, George. We must get this routine exact. I'll start . . .

Grainger gives us our introductions – 'the girl-exotic and her most obliging parrot!' – and I step forward with a flourish – like so – bidding you to come fly upon my shoulder. As I walk about the performance space, I happen to say to one of the crowd, but for all to hear, 'What a fine introduction from such a man of clear distinction. Dost thou know whence my master fetched that excellent wig?'

And that's where you butt in and say . . .

'Skin of a dog. Skin of a dog.'

That's it, George! Yes! Keep this up, my yellow-billed friend and the cup of seeds is yours once more!

Onto my wrist now, let's have this looking proper.

So, I turn to you, giving it some bluster and I say, 'Shut your trap! Hold thy tongue, you feathered fop . . .' etcetera etcetera, until all the laughter has run its course. Then I go, 'Let us speak of the boy juggler instead, the one with the singular arm which we all did just see. He was most impressive, methinks? To what may he owe his wonderful talent?' And you say . . .

'To the gin. To the gin.'

'To the gin, why, you little tell-tale! I am sure he is too young to be quaffing. Well, perhaps just a finger for the purposes of medicine . . .'

'By the pint. By the pint.'

Yes, George! Yes! You clever bird! Why it was so bleeding hard to do this when folks were listening, I'll never know. Don't you dare go silent on me again. Give us a verse of the poem by the Earl and I might just consider the matter done and you forgiven.

'Her father gave her . . .'

You marvellous chuck! What did he give her?

' . . . dildoes six . . .'

Yes, he did!

Whatever they are.

Now, rub your cheek onto mine, dear George, and know that I could never live without ya. If I was made to go, if Grainger sent me packing, I would take you with me. Though he may not be as willing to part with you as surely as he's willing to part with me.

Did you see my serving of slop this evening? The geese got better helpings, the pig too, even though, yet again, it did all

its mathematical feats entirely wrong. What does it matter, is what my master and his wife say, when the people watching can't do the sums themselves. But the fact remains, my worth to them is lower than a sow, less than half a dish of dinner.

'It's cos you're doing half the work you were before,' says my master's wife, 'now that Hildy's upped and gone.' Lizzy is accurate, of course. No more fetching and carrying, no answering Hildy's every whim, no cleaning her shifts and stockings or beating the bugs from her fine frocks.

She left me this dress, whaddya think? A little on the loose side, but I reckon it suits me well.

No more trimming her nails, combing and piling up her endless hair, placing the black spots on her great big cheeks and powdering that massive swine-faced nose.

Where do you reckon she is now, Georgie-boy? The gold streets of London? Got herself a dressing room at Sadler's Wells, I bet. She'll have a painter in there, putting her likeness onto pieces of ivory so they might be sold for three guineas after the show. Or maybe she's on her way to Venice, as that was always her biggest desire. Oh, Venice, George, can you even imagine! Venice – where they'd treat her like the celebrated person she is! Give her a life full of luxuries. There'd be no more rickety cart journeys, no more living cheek by jowl with birds and beasts, or suffering the bellyache of bad tavern food. Riches beyond your young imagination, is how she described it.

'But who'll look after ya, when you go?' I'd say, never thinking she'd actually do it, or at least believing she'd take me with her.

‘My dresser,’ she told me, ‘my coachman, my butler, my cook.’

‘Well, that’s me now, ain’t it!’ I said. ‘I’m all four of them people rolled up into one!’

That set her to laughing – *honk, honk honk*.

Was that the key to her success, d’ya think, George? Her being able to laugh as porkily as she presented?

‘I look after *you*,’ she corrected. ‘I have been the mother you never had.’

I took that to mean she would never leave me behind, that she would always share the spoils. I thought it meant love. Stupid me.

‘Stupid you. Stupid you.’

How easy it is to be wise, George, when all is said and done. Two mothers I’ve had now and I don’t think I’ll be looking for a third, thank you very much. My heart ain’t broken, but I’m starting to think it has a bruise or two.

Now, if I was truly Hildy’s daughter, all would be different. I’d have been born with a hog-face just like hers and Grainger would have had no choice but to prize me too.

‘You were supposed to grow up all big and black and frizzy,’ he is fond of saying, when the takings are low, ‘a mysterious and terrifying beauty, but look at you! You’re not one thing nor the other!’

I hate that man for the things that fall from his mouth. Hate him, yet depend upon him entirely. Don’t think that the contradiction doesn’t rub and cause a sore.

“Tis all fantasy though. My ideas have as many holes as my

stockings. Being Hildy's real daughter would not have saved me. She only looked the way she did because her mother witnessed a terrible coach crash while Hildy was in her belly. The shock turned the baby, that's why she came out the way she did. Looking pig-like ain't a skill you inherit.

'Perhaps it was the same crash what took Alex's arm,' I said when Hildy first told me. I was only little then, of course, all gathered up by the horror of it.

'Oh my dear,' she replied, 'if you'd received an education of the standard my father gave to me, you would find your arithmetic is somewhat deficient.'

It was one of those phrases of Hildy's, one of many, that I needed to take away with me and think about for a moment, untangle all the words to work out what she meant.

'Deficient' means 'lacking', George, in case you were too small-brained to know it.

And, as it was, I could do the sums just fine. I only spoke fast because my mind was whirring. Those sums I learnt from Hildy herself, what with her having so much unused education to spare. Her father, she told me, said she'd never find a husband, having been born grotesque, so she'd better get herself some brains instead. Very proud she was of her intelligence, though I don't see how it helped her any. All that teaching, and she ended up in the exact same place as me. You need the right face to become a lady proper. Hildy taught me an accumulation calculation for that one. Brains times face equals success. But if you multiply anything by nothing you come away empty-handed.

Oh, I miss her, George, and I hope the very best for her.

But also I wish her good riddance. She was a difficult bloody madam and I was tired of her horrible ways.

The skills I picked up looking after her shall not go to waste. I will bestow them upon others who'll appreciate them more. My needlework, made excellent from repairing her frocks, I am gifting now to Old Joe, sewing up his face each night from that awful first punch, the one what swings the crowd. I cannot say I approve in any way. I do not like our gentle Joe having to suffer such violence. I do not like the gulling of poor folk who come only to be cheered-up after a hard day's work. And I certainly cannot bear Alex taking that final blow. It sends a shiver through me, even though I know it's not thrown half as hard as it appears and does not do its promised damage. But I also understand that times are tough now Hildy has done her flit. Money is money, and money is food, however it's gathered.

This evening the sleight was off. Alex got hit harder than he should. His lip split wide, something dreadful.

'Tis but a flea bite,' he reckoned, the corner of his mouth bulging like a plum.

'Sit down!' I said, sticking the three-legged stool by the fire. 'I'll fetch the gin.'

And there it was again, that gaze of his upon me, something soft like sorrow, a gulp in his throat. I looked away, head bowed, and readied my needle. He sat, as if the blood had gone from his legs and he had no choice.

I leant down then and took his cheek in my hand, and – zooks! – did he flinch! Even before I'd touched the wound. When I dabbed the gin-soaked rag to him, he leapt so high I thought he might land on top of the fire.

‘Holy mother, Mim!’ he hissed. ‘I thought you meant the gin to drink!’

‘Yeah, like we need us another brandy face round here,’ I said, and we shared a look that spoke a whole gospel on the antics of our master.

‘You know the swelling will still be there at the next place,’ I told him as I worked – little Xs of thread in a line travelling upwards from the top of his lip. Alex bit down, gripped the stool, sweated away the pain. ‘Won’t it blow the whole trick,’ I asked him, ‘if the next lot see your mush already good and thumped?’

‘Nah,’ says he. ‘Shows ’em I’m happy for it.’

‘And, are ya?’ I wanted to know. ‘Happy for it?’

‘Course I am! You’ve seen the portions I’ve been getting since Hildy’s gone, since me and Joe came up with this whole con.’

‘Your brains’ll leak out one of these nights,’ I muttered. ‘Now keep still. Can’t finish this, can I, if you keep on blabbering.’

I took my time, was more delicate with my fancywork than I am with Joe. I didn’t want there to be any scar. Old Joe’s face is so battered by life it carries every mark it gets, most hidden in the beginnings of his beard. Alex, though, still holds onto his boyish skin. A cut upon his face seems twice as dire.

He watched me out the side of his eye as I stitched, checking, I suppose, that I could be trusted with the needle more than I can with a crowd to entertain.

‘I’ll share with you, Mim,’ he said, once I’d cast off and stood back to admire my handiwork. ‘My servings,’ he went on, ‘I won’t let you go short.’

I nodded, ashamed all over again, that he had noticed the lack of food in my dish telling of what I'm worth – that his pity was coming out like this, in a way not easy to ignore.

But we did not dwell. He was all brightness quick enough.

'Whaddya reckon?' he says. 'Am I still handsome, even though me lip's the same size as a turbot?'

'Not sure how you could be,' I replied, calm as you like, 'when you were such an ugly bugger to begin with!'

Oh, go on, give us one of your laughs, George. Do Lizzy's great cackle for me. I was being funny. Alex thought me so too.

I don't find him ugly at all, you see, that's the joke. I have long thought him handsome. Don't look at me like that! It's nothing I keep secret. If anyone asked me for an opinion upon him I would say it. That freckled skin, the blue of his eyes – he is a kind of beautiful.

Yes, that's it exactly – he is a kind of beautiful.

For lately I do find myself staring at him. Not in the same way he looks at me. Different, I believe. I look at his left arm. Or should I rightly say, the lack of it. The deficiency, if you are wanting a dressy word for something quite everyday. And really it is the opposite, if you think on it. Because Alex is so much more without that arm. Distinctive.

Is it cruel of me to say so? Am I seeing the world as Grainger does?

How can I be? For Alex has been there all my life – all of it that I can remember. Yet it's only now he strikes my interest. Perhaps it's because I have the time, without Hildy to care for, to sit idle every so often and look about me.

If I see Alex at work, my gaze goes to his shoulder where

it curves down and the bone starts but doesn't carry on. It's as though he has tried to grow a new arm but nature has disappointed him, got distracted by something more fascinating, never finished the job. Someone as neat as me with the stitches must have been there when Alex had the accident, because the scar is quite smooth. Not that I would ever dare touch it, but this is how it looks to the eye. I find it sort of lovely. I know people pay to see him do difficult tasks with one hand – juggle those wooden balls and box Old Joe as if he had an arm tied behind his back – but in truth he hardly ever struggles. I watch him haul the ropes, roll the tarpaulin, that small piece of bone moving in the shoulder, trying to do what a whole arm should do, and I can only see him as capable. More capable than me.

Then I think myself bad for staring, just like the crowds in the fields do. Do they come and watch, I wonder, so they might feel better about their own unlucky lot in life? Am I the same? Only staring to pour damp on a raging sadness? It does not feel that way.

He caught me looking this evening, my gaze travelling down from his lip, all tidied up, to his left shoulder.

'What are you staring at, slave girl?!' he snapped.

And I went hot at the idea that he had seen the journey of my eyes, so I countered quickly. I stuck my bottom lip out at him, as if giving his question my serious thought, then with a voice all proper, as I do when performing, I told him, 'I can't say for certain for there is no sign hung upon this particular freak.'

His reply: 'As if you could read it if there were!' He is always doubting my claims that Hildy taught me my letters as well

as my numbers. 'I should smack your brown bum!' he went on. 'I should give you a good hiding!'

Oh, don't look so shocked, George. The whole thing was done with the biggest of smiles. He chased me then, round the fire, though it soon wasn't clear who was doing the running-away.

'Which hand will you be smacking me with?' I teased, 'if you're gonna use the good one for doing the catching?'

And that was when I went over the stool and landed in the muck – serve me right!

'Mercy!' I wailed as he stood over me.

'Mercy! Mercy!'

Yes, George!

'Mercy!'

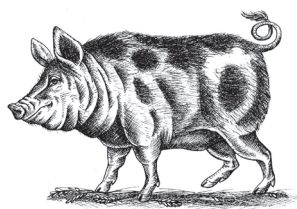
I was an actress in the middle of my death scene.

'Mercy upon me!'

Though I knew I was never in any real danger. We've played this game since we were children. There was a time when he'd have jumped on top of me, pinning my arms down with his knees, threatening to spit, until I flipped him over and did the same. On and on we'd go, tumbling through the grass, laughing like jackdaws.

I think I saw the idea of it cross his mind tonight, to carry on like we used to do, but he soon swept it away. Bit too grown up we are now to be playing like kiddies.

Mercy was granted, of course. He offered me his hand, his good one, excellent enough as it is. And once I was up and dusted down, he scurried away, reminding me of the mice that I disturb in the food store, the ones I catch in the act of nibbling at the bread.



ALEX

I've only gone and done it, pig. And I must speak to you of it, or else I'll hoot at the moon and wake the lot of 'em.

My master has ordered me to talk to you, after all – to smarten you up. They're losing hope that you'll ever get your sums right, let alone be able to play quadrille, or read a lady's mind, or whatever it is you learned pigs are supposed to do. You might wanna take my lead, mate, and get working on your show skills, if you don't fancy a spike up your backside and an apple in your gob. Don't think they won't do it, my master and his wife. They'll put you over the fire and eat you for breakfast, as fast as look at ya, if you ain't putting money in the tin. That's how this life works. And if you can't quite believe it, let this convince ya.

Tonight as Lizzy stirred the pot I overheard her ask my master: 'Oh, what're we to be doing with her now?'

I pricked up my ears at that, leant closer to the tarp so I could hear them on the other side. There is only one 'her' they could be gabbing about, only one 'her' of the human kind in our lot besides Lizzy since Hildy fled. Only one 'her' who ain't bringing in the pennies. She dies a little death in front of the crowd every evening because of that stubborn bloody parrot.

My master, already several gins down the alley, replied to his wife like so: 'Why, we'll sell her on. Put an advert in the paper.'

That alone should have set me to action.

'Sell her to who!' scoffed my mistress. 'It's black boys that are the fashion now. Mop squeezers like her, well, they come for free these days.'

So after a pause, my master offers: 'We'll marry her then.'

'Marry!' squawks Lizzy.

'To be rid of the expense of her, I mean.'

'Marry!' she squawks again. 'You blockhead! You're off the hooks! Men might wanna stare at her a while, all coffee-coloured and interesting, but who's gonna wanna marry a bastard girl like that? We've got no dowry to be offering. She's a debt, not a prize.'

All went quiet, except for the squelch of the slop and the crackle of the fire. I supposed that my master was doing some cooking himself, inside in his own head, thinking up a marvellous plan to save our Mim. Because surely he is fond of her, I thought. How could he not be, having raised her from a baby?

But no.

'She is pretty.' That is what my master murmured in the low-low voice of a devil.

'Pretty?' says Lizzy. 'What's that got to do with the price of . . .' Her voice trailed away.

'And there is another rewarding business, isn't there, dear, to be done with a young girl with a face like that and a cunny not yet been—'

‘All right, Frank! All right! I get the picture!’

Lizzy sighed. There was more stirring of the pot, more squelching.

‘You’ve had me do some terrible deeds over the years,’ said she, ‘but really, have I got the stomach to be that kind of go-between?’

I backed away from my hiding place.

It was as clear as daylight, though the night was black enough to stop me seeing my own hand in front of me face. I was the only one with a marvellous plan for saving Mim, and I would need to get a hurry-on, because it sounded like Lizzy’s morals were loose-fitting and soon to be in the market for haggling.

Once my master and his wife were snoring, I fetched our longest rope and I went in search of two trees. You see, I have been sitting on this grand idea for an age, my mudlark friend, ever since we crossed paths with those amazing Turks in the West Country. But that’s all I have done – sat on it, like a daft chicken warming eggs that have had no help from the cock.

You see, this is the thing about me, pig – I am a boy what waits. I wait until there is absolutely no other bloody choice but to do the thing I rightly must. And tonight was that time.

I had to, so I went and I did.

As soon as I’d got the job done with the rope and the trees, I went and fetched Mim from the animal trailer. She beds down in the straw with the hare and the geese now. No more kipping on tavern room floors since Hildy’s cleared off.

‘It’s late,’ she argued, groggy and soaked in sleep. ‘What the bleeding hell do you want?’

There was the print of stalks on her face and her hair was

wild from the brushing out she does at night, cursing as she goes, but still I could see it – exactly what my master was getting at. She is pretty, pig – very – and it is as though she has all of a sudden become that way. Or I have been blind to it until now. The bones of her cheeks have risen up, her eyes deepened in colour. She stands out so tall, so different, against all those other lasses we see from field to field – them white ewes with their shelves of milky breasts. My mistress compares Mim's skin to coffee, but having never drunk the stuff, I cannot say. Lately I find myself staring at her, when she isn't watching, at her smooth brown skin, trying to work out a way to describe it, like a poet might, though I ain't no sort with words. Is she the colour that leaves turn come September? Like the shine on the soil of a riverbank, or the tawny stuff inside of willow bark? No. Nothing like them. And I feel ridiculous for suggesting it. Should we want any proof that Joe's punches have turned my brain to mush, there it is – me pretending I could ever be some kind of versifier.

'Whaddya want?' Mim crowed, up on her elbows in her straw bed. 'Get that candle away! Or this whole wagon'll go up!'

'I know it's late,' I said, 'but come 'n' look at the moon. The clouds have shifted from earlier and it's glowing huge.'

Light like that don't come often, pig. I was taking it as a sign that my timing was just right. And it convinced her too, for up she got, following me out, wearing just her white shift. The moon made a full shadow of her body through the linen – the whole scene! The lot! – but I didn't make mention of it because I reckoned she would be red-faced to know it.

Mim weren't immediately pleased on sight of the rope,

even though I wasted plenty of breath wowing her with my story of it – how I'd sneaked out unseen, how much trouble I'd gone to to get the thing hanging at just the right slackness.

She nodded with half-heart, asked: 'So what are you going to do with it?' She gave the rope a gentle push, watched it swing all sad in the silver light. And this was when I wished I had a stash of words in my gob like Mim does. Always ready with a fancy word or six, is she. I wanted to describe to her those Turks in their silky trousers and what they did, make her see it as clearly as I had. I wished for the tongue of a hawker like my master, who can sell anything to the first man who comes walking. I wished to be that poet, that versifier, that I so clearly ain't, a man who can describe a girl's particular beauty so it feels as though she is right there with you, close enough to touch, if you dared, if she wanted you to.

But I have always been better with the doing than the saying. So I took a running jump at that rope, hit it at its lowest curve, landed my belly upon it, feet lifted. Using my hand to steady myself, I flew. Just a little.

'We swing on it,' I said, smiling, doing my hardest to put a smile on her face too. 'At first, that is. Like this. And then after that . . .'

Well, I had to step down for the next part. I had to rely on my words, because I don't yet have the bodily knowhow to show her, and I didn't want to shame myself. Falling and cracking my only wrist is my greatest fear. I see the way Mim looks at my shoulder sometimes, at what's missing below. I imagine her pitying thoughts. A split lip will heal but that arm ain't never gonna grow back, so I do everything I can to distract her from

it. I stand at the right angle, act like no task is ever any bother. My master whipped me as a young 'un until I could juggle and tumble for that very reason – to turn all eyes away from what I'm lacking. It's a clever con, just like the boxing trick, just like convincing the crowd that Abel is small and harmless, then having him rob 'em of their money with a hand, furtive-like, into their pocket, or by getting him to challenge 'em to a game of cup and balls that they never can win.

'So yeah, we swing first,' I told her, 'and then when the audience thinks, *oh, is that all they're gonna do, what a bleeding disappointment!* we hop up and lie on the rope, act like it's the easiest thing in the whole world, like we're as comfy as a captain snoozing in his hammock. Then before the crowd has time to put another doubt in their heads we're up on our feet on it.'

'Our feet!' she cried and I made her shush. I didn't want anyone waking. Didn't want the game to be given away. 'But it moves about!' was her protest, quieter now. 'It's nothing like balancing on a log across a stream.'

'I know,' I tells her. 'I know!' She's smart is Mim; she understood the difficulty. 'And ain't that what makes it so impressive! But I've seen it done. Seen it with me own eyes!' And that was when I got so gathered up in my excitement that I grabbed hold of her hand. She looked down at the joining up of our fingers with the strangest of faces, making me snatch mine back, as quick as lightning.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Oh,' she said. 'Are you? What of?'

'Nothing!'

I pulled myself up tall.

What followed was the most awful of silences. I don't go in for them much, big batches of quiet. I might not be good with words, but if there aren't any passing back and forth it can make me right itchy.

'So then what?' she asked, breaking the moment, looking at me straight with those dark brown eyes.

'Then we walk on the rope,' I said. 'And then we dance, and then we do our somersaults which we know are easy upon the ground but we find a way to do 'em up there on the rope . . .'

She made to tell me that she cannot do those things even upon the ground, but I stopped her – shush! Sniv it! – told her she was spoiling the picture I was trying to draw.

'Then we balance all sorts of things on our noses and chins,' I went on, 'without them things or us falling down. And then we juggle and then we sing, and then we might even shift the rope higher if it makes the audience gasp and then . . .'

'And then?' Her eyes were all a-fire; I could see it.

I'd got her!

And then we do a flit, just like Hildy, I could have said. 'One-arm'd boy' or 'girl-exotic', that would be just extra fruit upon the tree if we pulled this off. It's an act that goes with you, I could have said, just like you wanted. We'll head to that Bartholomew Fayre we've heard talk of, cross the seas even, to Paris, Venice, make our own fortune without any master taking the lion's share, us always being the goats and the sheep. But I didn't say that, because it seemed too much to drop into the lap of a girl in the moonlight. I only shrugged.

She nodded a while, grew quiet, wasn't agreeing as such, only considering. Finally she said: 'We?'

One word. Hanging in the sharp air.

It made me scared. Maybe she wanted to do it, but not with me. Maybe she would like my master's idea of marrying out, someone with the full arrangement of arms. Perhaps I should have told her what else they had planned, only to nudge her to my side, but I couldn't. I knew it would make her cry, something she'd done plenty of since Hildy had gone, though she tried her best to hide her tears. She wouldn't understand anyway. For all her fancy words and abilities with the sums, Mim is an innocent. Hildy only taught her ladies' ways. There'd have been no talk of men and their nature. I have bunked with the likes of Abel and Joe all my life, been given a whole different education – Abel always joking about the one part of his body that is most certainly full-size and what he likes to do with it given half the chance. Joe I've caught plenty of times letting a girl have a taste of that bear growl at close quarters, his visitor bouncing on top of him as joyful as the hare at mealtimes. Me and Mim might have been brought up in the same family, if that's anywhere close to the right word for it, but it's not been the same family at all.

After the longest bit of thinking Mim said, 'He'll kill you one day not meaning to.'

'What, Grainger?' I asked.

'No,' she said, 'Old Joe.'

So we were back to my brain spilling. And then I clocked it – she thought I was saving myself with these rope tricks, that I was the one desperate for a new act, not her. I did not set her straight, let her have her pride. All I wanted was her 'yes'.

'And they won't be letting me back on the cart when the slop runs short,' said she.



A tear made its way down her face and I wanted very badly to wipe it away, but of course, I didn't dare.

'Don't cry, Mim,' I said, 'I don't think I can stand it if you . . .'

And that was when Abel's snoring started up, scaring small creatures back into the scrub. I'm telling you, pig, that fellow might be half your size but his snorting is twice the racket.

Perhaps I would have said something kind to Mim if we'd not been interrupted, something nice. I ain't sure what exactly, I just felt it rising up, like a bubble of air ready to burst on the surface of a stream. But we fell to laughing instead. Shaking with it, since we couldn't make any real noise.

'We need to get practising, slave-girl,' I said once the joke had worked its way out of us, 'if we want our names to be writ biggest on our masters' next handbill!'

'Too right, stumpy!' she said, and I should, by rights, have given her a fierce pinch for saying that, and I would have done, if she hadn't taken a run at the lowest curve of the rope, given her whole body to it, lifted her feet in the moonlight, and flown.