





## ONE

It was a dew-damp morning, the sky still hazily grey, in late May, already warm, despite the early hour, when Young May Moon trundled into town. The nickname had been given her by her grandfather who'd played the tune on his fiddle at many a jig.



The high red wheels of the trap scraped against the walls of the narrow humpback stone bridge, over which she led the reluctant donkey, Smokey. She glanced over the parapet. The water below was hidden under a shifting mass of evil slime. On the opposite bank of the river were ramshackle wooden shacks, tarred black, with rank weeds growing round the foundations. These old smoking-huts appeared deserted, probably because of the decline in herring fishing.



May shivered involuntarily; fortunately, she thought, they would shortly leave this gloomy place behind, for now the smell of the sea was tantalizingly close.

May was almost sixteen, olive-skinned, dark-eyed, with a great knot of shining blue-black hair crammed under her



father's best straw boater. She was feeling somewhat apprehensive, for this afternoon, on the familiar West Wick sands, she'd be setting up her very first show:

PROFESSOR JAS JOLLEY'S PUNCH & JUDY.

May would keep the legend, in memory of her late father, Jim, the popular Punch and Judy man. 'Professor' was of course an honorary title, but traditional. Smokey plodded on, sensing journey's end, after May climbed back into the driving seat. May and her younger sister Pomona had travelled almost twenty miles from their Aunt Min's home, on the outskirts of Kettle Row, a market town on the borders of Suffolk and Norfolk. Their grandfather had settled with his daughter when he gave up travelling with the show. To Min, who'd been widowed in the Boer War, the Jolleys were her family. Min was responsible for naming her younger niece after Pomona, the Roman goddess of orchards. This was fitting because Min made her living from the apple, pear and plum trees in the smallholding she'd inherited from her in-laws.

Jim and the children stayed on the farm during the winter, when Pomona attended the village school. May's education had ended at fourteen, so she and Jim spent this time refurbishing the puppets, sewing new costumes, painting fresh backcloths, inventing new props.

Sadly, soon after their return from the last summer season, Jim succumbed to chronic congestion of the lungs.





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The condition had plagued him since he was gassed in the trenches during the Great War, the one it was said would end all wars. He had been invalided out of the Army in 1916. During his absence, Carmen, his wife, had left May with Min, while she toured with other dancers to entertain the troops. She'd not been best pleased when she was expected to return home to look after her sick husband, and then a new baby in 1917.

Jim's last words to May were: 'Will you girls carry on with the show?' She'd promised him that they would.

May and Pomona were about to fulfil this pledge. Their mother, Carmen, a volatile Spanish flamenco dancer, who'd left most of the girls' upbringing to their father, had flounced off four summers ago with an itinerant evangelist, after a huge row with Jim right in the middle of the rival entertainments, leaving both audiences gawping on the beach. '*That's* the way to do it!' Punch had cried, as the hymn singing faltered and faded. '*He* never liked her,' Jim muttered to May.

Now, Pomona, a sturdy child, sandy-haired and freckled, eight years old, swayed perilously atop the wooden trunk which housed the precious puppets, hand-carved over a hundred years ago by the first Jas Jolley, their great-grandfather. Quivering, alert, on Pomona's lap was Dog Toby – an elderly but still agile female Toby, for they'd had enough in the past of male Tobys following some irresistible scent, and neglecting their duties. This little dog





had been abandoned by its original owner, and taken in by the Jolleys. In return, she had learned new tricks and was a great asset to the Punch and Judy.

‘Hold tight, Pom,’ May reminded her sister. ‘Why you have to sit up top I don’t know.’

‘Don’t want old Mr Punch bursting out and showing off for nothing,’ Pomona replied, perfectly reasonably. May smiled to herself, for at Pomona’s age, she too had imagined the puppets to have mysterious powers.

They passed the milestone, then the Saxon church. The donkey turned in to the forecourt of the Swan Inn, with its flint-napped walls, red-pantiled roof and small windows.

The proprietor’s wife, Jane Wren, known as Jenny, who at the turn of the century had been a popular artiste in the end-of-the pier shows, was also a theatrical landlady.

Smokey clopped straight towards the old stables, and poked his nose over the open half-door.

‘Smokey never forgets,’ May remarked to Pomona. ‘Hold on tight to Toby.’

Before May could jump down a hand was extended to fondle the donkey’s plushy nose. Smokey’s soft, expressive ears revealed his pleasure. Toby barked, to draw attention to herself.

‘A visitor!’ exclaimed an amused voice. ‘I’m afraid your stable is occupied.’

May looked in at a young fellow, tousle-haired as if roused from sleep. She spotted a makeshift bed of straw





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behind him and a haversack. Was he a vagrant? Then in the shadows she discerned a black motor car, where their trap was usually kept under cover. You didn't see many motor vehicles in this part of Suffolk, she thought, or even electric trams or trolley buses. The horse or ox still drew wagons and ploughs; donkeys drew smaller conveyances. Not a tramp, then!

She was both cross and curious. 'We always stay here, every Whit week, didn't Jenny Wren tell you?' she demanded of the youth, who leaned towards her, smiling. He was around her age, as dark as herself, with curling hair. But his eyes were blue.

'Patrick O'Flaherty, they call me Paddy,' he introduced himself. 'Our family are appearing in a show on the pier. Mrs Wren did tell us that the Punch and Judy man and his family had first claim to the rooms. However, when she heard that he had –' he hesitated, glancing at Pomona, who, with Toby under her arm, was descending by way of the wheel, 'passed away, she thought the show wouldn't come this summer.'

Toby launched herself from Pomona's arms, and Paddy caught the little fox terrier in mid-air. The next thing the girls knew, the warning growl had ceased and Toby was ecstatically licking the boy's face. Toby was usually wary of strangers, except when she was performing.

'I have no objection, you know, to sharing my quarters, with the donkey and the dog,' he said.





Hot tears pricked May's eyes. She blinked them fiercely away. She had coped bravely with the loss of her beloved father a few months ago, for Pomona's sake. He had done the same for them, after Carmen deserted the family. 'We're a team,' he'd said. 'Life goes on – better to be happy than sad.'

She thought now, I wish he hadn't used that expression: *passed away*. While we were travelling here, somehow I felt as if Dad was around still, encouraging us to carry on. That was comforting.

'We must see what Jenny thinks about that,' she said primly. She called to Pomona, 'Run up to the house. I'll follow in the trap.'

Jenny Wren was comfortably plump in her brightly patterned overall, with her fuzzy grey hair carelessly arranged in a top-knot, from which she shed the occasional crinkled hairpin. She saw them through the open kitchen window and let out a delighted shriek. 'Here you are, after all! Young May Moon, you take Smokey out of the shafts and let him in to the little meadow. Percy's in the milking parlour, he'll feed and water him. Smokey can keep the cow and our old horse company in the barn at night. Monty's retired, now Percy's the proud owner of an Austin motor. I made him buy it, I told him: "It's 1925 not 1905, we ought to move with the times . . ."' She drew a breath. 'Leave your bags by the door, for now. You're in time for breakfast, we'll catch up with the news then – do come in, Pom!'



Dodging the great ham dangling from the ceiling hook, Jenny welcomed Pomona with a hug, her face flushed with heat from the stove. Pomona was soon sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a glass of milk, while Jenny scrambled a panful of eggs.

As she opened the back door May became aware that someone had come up behind her. She turned to see Paddy, still with bits of straw clinging to his hair, grinning at her.

‘Room at the inn, I reckon,’ he remarked.

‘I don’t know yet,’ she returned sharply. ‘Why are you following me?’

The blue eyes flashed at her. ‘I’m not! I’m here for my breakfast. I chose to sleep in the stable partly because I fancied it would be an adventure, rather like camping out, as we’ve done in the past when times were hard, but mainly because I didn’t want to share a room with Danny, my kid brother. He’s very annoying at times. Ten years old, and thinks he knows it all.’

May almost admitted, ‘I feel that way about my sister sometimes.’ However, she didn’t want to prolong the conversation.

She went into the kitchen and closed the door, while he continued along the passage to the dining room, from which emanated the cheerful voices of his family.

Jenny gave May a cuddle. ‘I thought we wouldn’t see you this summer. Your poor father, not unexpected, I suppose, with that weak chest . . . No, I thought, our Young



May Moon will be looking for a steady job. When the O'Flahertys enquired – you can guess their roots of course, with a name like that, their grandparents came over here in the last century, during the potato famine in Ireland – I explained matters to them.' Jenny added: 'There's what used to be the snug, the room over the stairs – folks seem to prefer the bar now – would you mind sharing a bed? I would only charge five shillings a week for the two of you – though it's not the quietest room in the house; you'll hear me playing the piano below in the bar most nights.'

'Oh, we don't mind that!' May assured her. Jenny was a virtuoso on the piano, she thought, accompanying many a temperamental songstress during her summer seasons on the pier. Jenny possessed a powerful singing voice herself. She didn't need a microphone. She understood the idiosyncrasies of performers, being one herself.

'Well, let's join the troubadours. Will you help carry the trays? They're nice people, they've been here a week already. I'm not sure how long they're staying. What about you?'

'Oh, Whit week, of course,' May told her. 'Then Pom must return to school. But, if it goes well this week, we'll be back for all of August, as usual.'

'You can't manage the rest of the summer, I gather, without dear Jim?'

May shook her head. 'I'm not too sure how we'll cope this week by ourselves . . . this afternoon will be a real test.'







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‘Paddy’s at a loose end during the day, as they are in the evening show. He might like to help you out.’

*Mmm . . .* May thought, we’ve clashed already, so I imagine he *wouldn’t*!

Paddy’s father, Brendan, sprang to his feet and welcomed the girls with a firm handshake. ‘It’s good you decided to come!’ He had the same striking looks as his elder son.

‘I’m glad Jenny could find room for all of us,’ said Brigid O’Flaherty. ‘It will be nice for Danny to have a friend.’

‘Where’s your dog?’ Danny, a skinny boy with bright red hair, like his mother, asked Pomona, who was seated next to him. He spoke with his mouth full, spraying crumbs, but Brigid didn’t reprimand him.

Pomona eyed him with distaste. Aunt Min was insistent on good table manners. ‘In the kitchen,’ she said shortly.

Percy, a short, stocky man with a shining bald head, joined the company. Jenny poured the tea and passed the cups.

After the meal May asked Jenny: ‘May we go to our room? We must get on, we have the bills to hand out before the first performance this afternoon.’

‘You’ll want an early light lunch,’ Jenny said, familiar with their ways; knowing May couldn’t perform on a full stomach.

May sensed, with satisfaction, that Paddy had gone quietly away.





S H E I L A   N E W B E R R Y

‘Oh look,’ Pomona said, when they opened the snug door, ‘Paddy’s fetched our bags up for us!’

He’d placed a copper jug of steaming water on the washstand, too. There was no bathroom in the inn. Water still came from the pump in the yard and was heated on the stove. The chamberpot was discreetly stowed away in the washstand cupboard.


May felt a guilty pang. He’d been kind without making a song and dance about it. Maybe, she thought, with a wry smile, this is a hint we need a good wash!






## TWO

MAY took a deep breath, glancing down at the smart, striped blazer which, she hoped, concealed her curves, at the narrow trousers which she'd had to turn up twice, and at the elastic-sided boots, their toes stuffed with newspaper to fit her. Was she a credible Jas Jolley IV?



Down the hill, towards the sparkling sea they went, at a walking pace, because Smokey knew the routine, past the busy shops, with their wares flowing on to the cobbled pavement. Pomona, in her eagerness, let the handwritten bills flutter down to all and sundry; to the whistling errand boys, wobbling on sturdy bicycles with goods piled in baskets attached to handlebars; to young mothers in low-waisted frocks, with shingled hair under neat cloche hats, clutching firmly at sticky, small hands. 'See you at three!' May called. 'Usual spot beside the pier!'



Along the promenade above the silver sand Smokey plodded, past the new wooden beach huts, which had superseded the old bathing huts, now that women were more liberated. These were painted in contrasting colours, with



names like *Mon Repos*, and had towels hanging out to dry on porch rails. Fisherfolk were emptying crab and lobster pots; they saw a couple of beached boats, and children in sagging, hand-knitted wool bathers frolicking in the foam as the tide obligingly receded. In the hired striped deckchairs fathers slumbered peacefully, still clad in suits, starched collars, ties and laced black shoes, with knotted handkerchiefs round their perspiring heads. Mothers knitted busily, guarding their children's clothes and a large, ribbed bottle of calamine lotion for sunburn, watching them in the water.

May struggled to assemble the portable booth, with its red-and-white striped canvas, while Pomona unpacked the puppets and hung them in position on the wire that stretched round the sides of the little theatre. May fixed the canvas sling into place below the stage. Here the puppets were dropped, when they had played their parts. She pinned into place the cloth backdrop, depicting an old English street scene.

A curious, expectant crowd was gathering. Heart thumping, and feeling rather sick, May checked, as her father had done, that all was ready: the props were on their shelf, the puppets, Punch, his wife Judy, the baby Marmaduke, the doctor, the clergyman, the Beadle, the policeman and crocodile, in order, and most important, the swazzle which produced Punch's shrill, excitable voice. She poured water from a bottle into a dish, and dampened the swazzle before placing it between her lips. She had been practising





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ever since she'd made up her mind to carry on with the show, but this would be her debut as Punch.

'Roll up, roll up, for Jas Jolley's Punch and Judy!' Pomona was in her element. She would drum up the crowd, playing a tune or two on the penny whistle, and later act as bottler, taking round the battered ancient leather bottle with the coin slot, as Mr Punchinello and Company took their final bows. Toby danced about beside her, as deckchairs were dragged into position. In the front row, they spotted two now familiar faces.

'Hello, Paddy, Danny,' Pomona exclaimed cheerfully. 'Nice of you to come.'

'Oh, we wouldn't have missed seeing the Punch and Judy lady in action,' Paddy replied.

'You mustn't let on she's a *lady*,' Pomona hissed in his ear. He winked at her. 'Mum's – oh, sorry, Pomona's – the word.'

The magic of the play began. The curtains swished apart and bold Mr Punch, splendid in scarlet, green and gold, great curved nose almost resting on his chin, duly appeared and, with aplomb, bowed three times to the audience, right, left and centre stage.

Praying fervently that she wouldn't swallow the swazle, May was glad that her father had adapted the familiar story over the years, that he had toned down the more violent aspects. But Punch, of course, began in benevolent mood.





SHEILA NEWBERRY

*Boys and girls, pray how do you do?  
If you are all happy, then I'm happy too.  
Let's have some hush, now, for my little play,  
If I make you laugh, mind, I expect you to pay . . .*

As Punch ducked from view on May's right hand, up popped the policeman on her left. He strutted up and down the stage, waving his truncheon.

*I am the village bobby.  
And I have quite a hunch,  
That there will soon be trouble,  
With that scoundrel, Mr Punch.  
He has a spouse named Judy,  
And a little baby, too –  
A saucy dog called Toby –  
Who now comes into view . . .*

'Don't panic,' May said to herself, as she divested herself of the bobby, dropped him in to the bag, and fitted Judy in his place.

Meanwhile, Toby, resplendent in her ruff, leapt on to the stage and pirouetted round and round, to warm applause. May continued, gathering confidence from scene to scene, and when the audience cheered or booed in all the right places, she knew Jim would have been proud of her.

They were a generous crowd, and Pomona did her bit with the bottle. Then the front curtain opened slightly



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and Paddy peeped in at May, smiling broadly. 'Well done, Punch and Judy lady!' he congratulated her. 'Need any help with all this?'

'No thank you,' she said crossly, biting back: *mind your own business!*

'We've two more shows to do before we pack up,' Pomona said.

As the curtains fell back into place, May realized that she had been ungracious. She came out to apologize, but Paddy and Danny had gone. Smokey, tethered in a shady spot, was being petted by a family of children. Pomona too had disappeared. May felt panic rising inside; Pomona – and the bottle full of coins! Then her sister emerged from the ice cream tent, licking a cornet, Toby at her heels.

'Pomona! You bad girl, spending our money on ice cream.'

'Sorry,' Pomona said, breaking off the end of the cone for the dog. 'But I didn't buy it. Paddy gave me sixpence. Said I'd earned a prize for my good work. So I bought two cornets and gave one to Danny. He collected some of the money for us, in a bucket.'

'Well . . .' May began. She took off her boater to stuff her hair under it more securely. Offhandedness had ruled out an ice for her.

'Look, Mum, the Punch and Judy man's a *girl!*' came an excited voice. May ducked hastily back into the booth.

Jenny had to hear all about it. 'Reckon you've done well,' she congratulated them both. There was cold rabbit



pie for supper. They were joined by the boys. May ignored Paddy's smile.

'Their parents prefer to eat after the show,' Jenny explained.

'Eating doesn't affect *my* singing,' Paddy said complacently. 'I can't hit the right notes since my voice broke, so I whistle instead.'

'Doesn't make any difference to me,' his brother put in. 'I'm *always* hungry!'

May observed that Jenny looked tired. 'I'll help dish up,' she offered.

'I'll wash up the plates,' Pomona said eagerly, hoping to postpone bedtime.

'That leaves me to open up the bar, to draw a pint or two to keep 'em quiet till Percy appears. He's down the cellar, rolling out the barrel,' Jenny said, adding gratefully, 'You're a lovely lot you are, like family.'

A whistling noise down the speaking tube in the wall made them all jump. 'Boys,' – it was Brendan's voice – 'Time to go. We're the opening act tonight, at 7.30 . . .'

'Don't forget to ask your parents if they can get tickets for May and Pomona for the show next week,' Jenny reminded the boys.

It was a squeeze, sharing a single bed, the girls discovered. Pomona insisted on being next to the wall. 'I might roll out on to the floor if I'm on the outside,' she insisted. May





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took more after their mother in looks, but Pomona could be autocratic, like Carmen Jolley.

‘So might I.’ May sighed, but she gave in, thinking, *don’t I always?* She placed a couple of cushions next to the bed as a precaution to soften any landing. As tomorrow is a special day, she yawned to herself, even if no one else is aware of it, I’ll make sure we change places tomorrow night!

Despite their apprehension they were both soon asleep. It had been a long day, after all.

May suddenly jerked awake when she heard singing. Jenny was rendering an old favourite from her music hall days.

*Just a song at twilight,  
When the lights are low  
And the twinkling shadows  
Softly come and go  
Tho’ the heart be weary  
And the days be long –  
Just a song at twilight,  
Comes love’s old sweet song  
Comes love’s old sweet song*

May recalled her friend telling them that it had been sung: ‘not by me, dearie, but I was tickling the ivories, the night Percy and me met. It’s been *our* song ever since.’

That’s so romantic, May thought dreamily, before she succumbed once more to sleep, despite the discomfort of their sleeping arrangements.

## THREE

THEY awoke to a tintinnabulation – they’d overslept and the church bells were ringing to proclaim the Sabbath and herald the morning service. Most of the bedclothes appeared to be wound round Pomona, and her muffled voice said apologetically: ‘Happy birthday, May!’ It was Whit Sunday, 31 May, and now May was not ‘almost’ but actually sixteen.

There was a scraping noise. Something was being pushed under the door. An envelope. May waited for a few seconds, listening for descending footsteps on the stairs before she jumped out of bed and retrieved it.

Inside the envelope was a handmade card, with a pencil sketch of a Punch and Judy booth. Punch was front stage, and a bubble from his mouth proclaimed, HAPPY BIRTHDAY YOUNG MAY MOON! Inside was written, *Best wishes from Paddy and Danny.*

Her face flushed as she said, ‘Cheek! I didn’t say *they* could call me that . . .’

A tap on the door. ‘May I come in?’ asked Jenny. ‘I heard you talking. Awake at last, eh? You must have been tired out.’

She was wearing her Sunday hat with a yellow silk rose fastened to a wide band, matching her shiny satin blouse.

‘Here’s your hot-water jug and two mugs of fresh tea! I’ll pop the tray on the washstand. The bells have just stopped ringing, I must dash, or I’ll be late for church. Oh,’ she turned at the door, ‘many happy returns, May! I didn’t forget! There’s a bowl of fresh eggs in the pantry, if you fancy ’em boiled for breakfast. We had ours hours ago! The roast is already in the oven . . . ’Bye, my dears!’

Brigid was in the kitchen, peeling potatoes and dropping them with a splash into a large pan of water on the stove. ‘I must wish you a happy birthday, May! I thought our busy landlady might be glad of a hand with the spuds . . . Paddy and his dad are helping Percy. Danny took Toby for a run in the meadow, I hope you don’t mind?’

‘Thank you, of course not,’ May replied. What else could she say? ‘It’s very kind of you all,’ she added.

‘Can I go outside until breakfast is ready?’ Pomona wheedled.

‘Put your shoes on, then. The grass will be damp, even though it’s looking to be a fine day,’ her sister said.

‘We’re all enjoying a day off – even Smokey! I’ll make sure he’s been fed and watered,’ Pomona said, as she wriggled her feet into her sandals without undoing the buckles.

Danny was kicking a ball in the air and Toby leapt up to catch it.



‘She’s an old dog, you know,’ Pomona reminded Danny when she joined them in the meadow.

‘She can still do a backflip in the air,’ he said cheerfully.

‘So can I!’ Pomona promptly demonstrated, ending up with her skirt around her ears. Fortunately May was not there to remonstrate with her; she could be quite prim at times, Pomona thought, Mum was the one who was outrageous in our family. She’d only been four when Carmen went off, but she still missed her mother, quick temper and all.

‘You and Toby ought to be in the circus, I reckon.’ Danny pulled up a long blade of grass and demonstrated how to make an ear-splitting noise by blowing over it. ‘You can both do tricks. Your talents are wasted in the Punch and Judy.’

‘I play an important part, May says,’ she flared.

‘Paddy says May is jolly good, but she’s watered the story down! Punch is a real villain. He whacks his wife and baby and chucks them out of a window. He gets hanged for his sins. But at least you had the crocodile in it!’

‘Don’t be so critical! My dad didn’t like violence. He said enough shouting went on with my mother!’

‘So that’s where you get it from,’ Danny said unwisely, before he scooted off to the house with Pomona in hot pursuit.

May was already dipping into her egg. ‘I called you, Pom, but you didn’t hear me, and I was hungry, so . . .’ She was





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sitting at the kitchen table. Paddy was there, too, drinking a cup of tea.

There were cards on the mantelshelf. The china dogs that Jenny had won at a fair long ago propped them up. There was one with roses on it from Jenny and Percy, a shiny card with deckled edges with a picture of a box of chocolates from Grandpa and Aunt Min, which May had brought with her, and another home-made card with a moonface with a wide grin, rather hastily made by Pomona, alongside the better-executed card by the boys.

‘I thought we’d go for a stroll down to the sea before lunch,’ May said to her sister. ‘You could ride Smokey, eh?’

Pomona nodded, as Danny put in: ‘I fancy doing that, too!’

‘Who asked you?’ Pomona retorted.

May looked from one to the other. She realized Pomona follows my example, she’s too quick to snap back.

‘You can take it in turns,’ she said equably. ‘Bareback riding, Danny – we don’t have a saddle. I guess I’m left minding the dog!’

‘Get up a nice appetite for your Sunday dinner.’ Brigid smiled. ‘What about you, Paddy – are you going, too?’

Paddy rose from the table, took his cup to the sink. ‘I’ve something I want to finish making, in the barn. See you later.’

‘Well, at least he’s in the right place for his woodcarving,’ Brigid observed. ‘Percy cleaned off an old work bench for





his use.' Seeing the look of interest on May's face, she added: 'My father makes walking-sticks, May. It was a family trade back in Ireland. He carves the most amazing handles, to suit gentlemen about town. I can always spot his sticks in society pictures in the newspapers.

'They were more in demand before the war, but he still has a steady flow of orders. He's passed his enthusiasm down to his grandson, it seems. I'm not sure that it would be a good livelihood nowadays. Not that our profession is secure either, particularly since all the strikes and unemployment over the country mean many folk won't be able to afford holidays, or entertainment.'

'How do you manage Danny's schooling?' May asked.

'If we get a long unbroken run somewhere he enrolls at the local school. Otherwise, Brendan tutors him. He was a teacher before we took to the road with our family act. He is a trained musician. I learned the harp at my mother's knee, so I'm told.'

'Maybe, if this week goes well, and Aunt Min agrees, Pom could go to school here, too, until August.'

'Oh, yes, please!' Pomona obviously liked the idea.

'It would depend on what Jenny thinks, of course.'

As if on cue, Jenny appeared, back from church. 'Well, how is the roast doing? Who would like to lay the table?'

'I will,' Brigid offered. 'They're going down to the beach.'

'One o'clock lunch,' Jenny said, 'Try to be back on time!'



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The entertainments were not permitted on a Sunday, the slot machines on the pier were idle, no *What the Butler Saw*, nor the crane which let prizes slip from its jaws but sometimes yielded up bright green sweets which tasted as if they had been in the machine since the year dot; no messages from Madame Zora the clairvoyant, with her chipped plaster nose and bright-red fingernails, but the young people watched the midday paddle steamer arrive and passengers disembarking on the pier. This was a favourite destination for Londoners. The little café on the promenade did a roaring trade in cups of tea with slabs of yellow fruitcake, and sold picture postcards and sticks of bright-pink mint rock. In the afternoon there would be a brass band in the bandstand on the green, beside the cannon, which still pointed out to sea to deter any invaders.

Sometimes there were guided tours round the historic little town, where the colourful painted ships' figureheads in the gardens were a focus of interest. Pomona always giggled at the carved wooden bosoms on display. May found them embarrassing and averted her eyes.

May, Pomona and Danny walked a fair distance along the beach. The sand was damp and rippled from the receding tide. Toby carried a long frond of seaweed in her mouth, and Smokey plodded along, pausing only to be petted by the holidaymakers. There was a pleasant breeze and puffy white clouds scudded along in a blue sky.



Danny presented May with a giant stick of rock. 'Happy birthday!'

May was suitably impressed. 'Thanks, Danny! We'll share it after lunch. We'll have to ask Percy to break it up with a hammer!'

This was not her only surprise gift. When they arrived back at the Swan, Paddy emerged from his den. 'Thought you might be glad of this,' he said gruffly. He held out a slapstick – one of Mr Punch's special props. This always made the shocked audience jump, when Punch wielded it, due to the explosive *crack!* 'Pomona told me you'd mislaid yours. It's made to her specifications,' he added disarmingly.

'Thank you, that's thoughtful of you.' May was embarrassed, but also impressed. She'd not been exactly friendly to him, she thought. Dad would have told her off. 'I'm sorry, you know – I haven't been very nice to you.'

'I can guess why,' he said quietly. 'Your first birthday without your father.'

She nodded. 'Come on, or we'll be late for lunch!'

Jenny was a superb cook, unlike Aunt Min, who had a heavy hand with suet dumplings and lumpy gravy. They ate thinly sliced succulent roast beef, perfectly browned crisp potatoes, buttered parsnips, mashed potatoes and lightly cooked shredded cabbage – the vegetables all grown by Percy in the garden.

To follow, there was apple pie in the softest of light pastry, dusted with sugar, with custard which poured from the





jug and didn't need cutting with a knife, like Min's. Cream, too, from the house cow.

They could hardly move after leaving plates so clean. Pomona declared, 'They don't need washing up!' Her plate certainly didn't, after she'd chased every morsel with a hunk of homemade bread.

'Oh dear,' Jenny sighed, glancing at the clock, 'Time to pull the first pint. Needs must when the devil drives, as they say.'

'I hope you're not referring to *me*,' Percy said, with a grin. 'On a Sunday, too!'

Brendan settled down in the parlour with the newspaper. Pomona and Danny went outside again with Toby, Paddy retired to the stable, while May and Brigid cleared the table and made a pot of tea.

Brigid was easy to talk to, and later the two of them joined a dozing Brendan and sat beside him on the sofa, sipping their tea.

'Do you ever hear from your mother?' Brigid asked tentatively.

'No. It upset me a lot at first, but I knew it was worse for Dad. Aunt Min is very kind, but she has Grandpa to care for, too – his memory is not what it was, and sometimes he goes wandering, and then we have to go looking for him . . . poor old chap hasn't really taken it in, that Dad is gone.'

'Have *you*?' Brigid said softly.

'Not quite,' May admitted.

Then they were silent, apart from a gentle snore from Brendan.

‘Your mother doesn’t know how lucky she is, to have two lovely girls like you,’ Brigid said at last. ‘You are bringing up your little sister – doing her job for her. Surely she must think of you?’

‘She’s not like you – you’re a *real* mum!’ May told her. ‘And Brendan is a good dad, I can tell. *My* dad was like that . . .’ She wiped a tear from her eye. ‘I’m doing what I can for Pom. I know that’s what he wished.’

Brigid gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. ‘Is the life of a Punch and Judy lady what you really want, I wonder? You know, I ran away from home at your age to be with Brendan. He persuaded me to go back to my parents until I had finished at school. I’m so glad I did. He waited for me to grow up, and then we married, as you see! Wouldn’t you like to further your own education?’

‘I promised Dad I’d carry on the business.’

‘You could maybe do the summer season and study the rest of the year. Think about it,’ Brigid advised.

She knew it was an illusion, but May seemed to hear an echo: ‘Better to be happy than sad.’