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opening extract from

Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats

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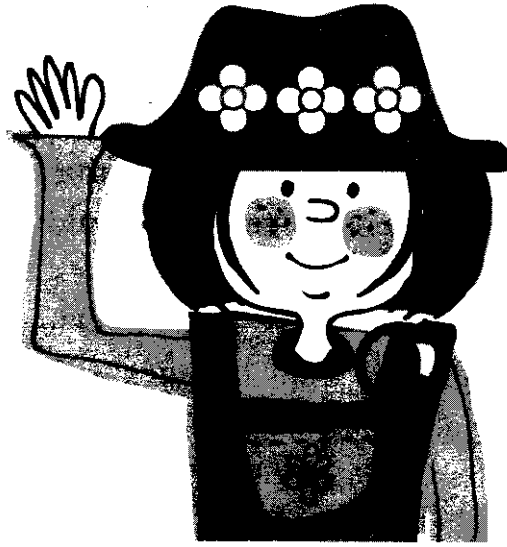
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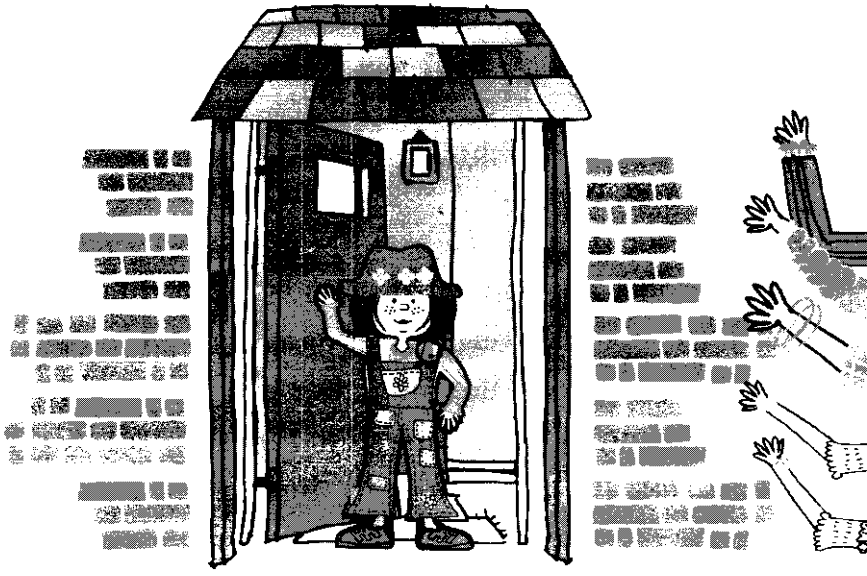


CHAPTER 1

A Call for Help

Do you remember who I am? My name is Harriet Bean and I was the person who had five lost aunts. Yes! It sounds quite ridiculous – perhaps even a bit careless – to have five lost aunts, but my father had never told me about them, and I had to find them all by myself. It was quite hard, but finally I had

found every last one of them. There was Aunt Veronica, who was a strong lady in a circus. There was Aunt Majolica, who was a terribly bossy teacher, but really quite nice in spite of it. There was Aunt Harmonica, who was an opera singer who could also throw her voice into all sorts of places. And last of all, hidden away in their detective agency, there were Aunt Japonica and Aunt Thessalonika. They were very curious aunts, with all sorts of extraordinary tricks up their sleeves, and they could also read what was



going on in other people's minds. What a marvellous collection of aunts!

When I said goodbye to my aunts after that wonderful reunion party, I knew that I was going to have adventures with them. It was a funny feeling – the sort of feeling that you have in your bones that something is going to happen. I had it the day they left, and the day afterwards, and the day after that too. Then it happened, and because I had been expecting it, I was not in the least surprised.

The telephone rang early that morning. I think it was a Wednesday, because that was the day my father's magazine arrived through the post. He read *Inventors' Weekly*, which was all about the latest inventions, with tips for inventors, which is what he was. He wouldn't speak to me for hours after *Inventors' Weekly* arrived; he just sat in his chair, his nose buried in the magazine, giving the occasional snort. Sometimes I heard him say something like,

'That would never work!' or 'The screw's in the wrong place there!' or, very rarely he might say, 'What a splendid idea – I wish I had thought of that first!'

I knew that my father would never answer the telephone while he was reading his magazine, so I did so myself. And there, at the other end of the line, was Aunt Japonica.

'Harriet?' she said, in her rather high, squeaky voice.

'Aunt Japonica,' I said. 'I'm glad it's you.'

'Yes,' said Aunt Japonica, in a business-like way. 'You may well be. And I certainly am glad it's you. We need your help.'

My heart gave a leap of excitement. So this is what the thing was – the thing that I had known was going to happen.

Aunt Japonica did not talk for long. She asked me around to the detective agency (where they also lived), to arrive, if possible, within the hour. I put my hand over the receiver and shouted out to my father, to ask him whether I could go.

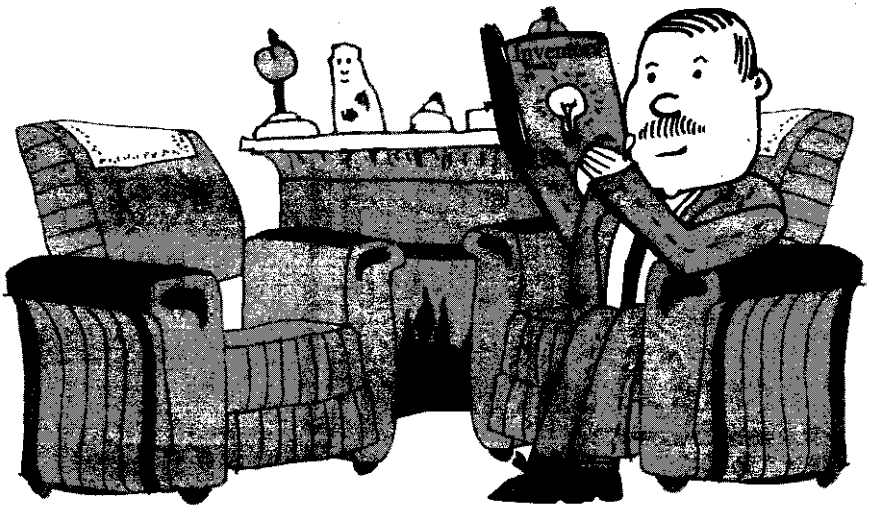
'Hmm!' he said, from behind *Inventors' Weekly*. 'Another no-tears onion peeler! I invented that years ago!'

'Can I go round to see Aunt Japonica?' I shouted.

'Japanese?' he snorted. 'Did you say Japanese? Yes, of course. Terribly good at inventing things, the Japanese.'

'I think he says yes,' I explained to Aunt Japonica.

'Good,' she said. 'We shall see you very soon. And do hurry. There is something very, very odd going on.'



Aunt Japonica and Aunt Thessalonika lived in a large studio at the top of a long flight of stairs. On the door there was a sign which simply said, PRIVATE DETECTIVES, and underneath that was a bell. I pressed the button and heard, a long way off, a bell ringing.

Several minutes passed. Then the door opened slowly and I saw an old man peering out at me. He seemed very ancient and very bent, and he had a walking stick in each hand.



'I'm so sorry,' he said in a very old, cracked voice. 'No, there's nobody in today. They've all gone away. Quite gone away. All of them.'

My mouth dropped open.

'But,' I stuttered. 'But they knew I was coming. I spoke to them . . .'

The old man peered at me, and shook his head. Then, with a sudden cackle of laughter, he jumped up in the air and clicked his heels together. For a moment or so I was too surprised to think anything, but then I realised what was happening.

'Aunt Thessalonika!' I exclaimed. 'I had no idea it was you.'

'Of course you didn't, my dear,' said Aunt Thessalonika, taking my arm in hers and leading me down the corridor. 'Sometimes I even fool myself. Do you know, the other day I was heavily disguised and I saw myself in the mirror. And I said to myself, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" And of course, the person in the mirror said exactly

the same thing, and so I replied, "But I'm Thessalonika and I *live* here!" And it's only when I heard the person in the mirror saying that she was Thessalonika that I realised what was happening.'

As she spoke, Aunt Thessalonika removed layer after layer of disguise. Off came the grey beard. Off came the lines and wrinkles, wiped quite clear, and there, underneath it all, was my aunt.

Aunt Japonica now appeared. At least she looked the same as she had the last time I saw her.

'Thank you for coming, Harriet,' she said immediately. 'And I see that you have been writing up your diary'

Once again, my mouth fell wide open with astonishment. She was quite right – I had been writing up my diary when she telephoned to invite me over. But how did she know?

Aunt Japonica gave a little laugh. 'If you look at your right hand,' she said, 'you will

see that there is an ink stain on the forefinger. Now that shows that you have been writing. And what are you likely to have been writing? It's the school holidays, is it not, so you will not be doing school work. You could be writing letters, but then when I telephoned you answered the telephone immediately. People who are writing letters never like to leave what they're saying until they've finished the sentence. Why is that? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? People feel it's a bit rude to cut off halfway through a sentence when you're writing to somebody. Don't ask me why, but that's the way it is. Diaries are different. It's not rude to stop talking to yourself halfway through, is it?'

'No,' I said, still astonished at how my detective aunts managed to work such things out. That's what made them good detectives, I imagined,

We sat down for tea, and while Aunt Thessalonika cut the cake, Aunt Japonica explained why they wanted to see me.

'We could tell that you were interested in detective work,' she explained.

'We could tell that from the moment we met you,' chipped in Aunt Thessalonika.

'Yes,' said Aunt Japonica, and then, from the side of her mouth, 'Please concentrate on what you're doing, Thessalonika. Cutting cake is not an easy task.'

Aunt Japonica turned back to me and fixed me with her gaze. 'You see,' she went on, 'a case has cropped up which we thought you might help us to solve. After all, you are not as old as Aunt Thessalonika and I are. And you are somewhat smaller too. You can go where we can't go. You can, I imagine, run faster than we can, and your eyes might be a little better when it comes to detecting very fast movements.'

'In other words,' interrupted Aunt Thessalonika, 'you might be able to catch these wicked cheats!'