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opening extract from

The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean

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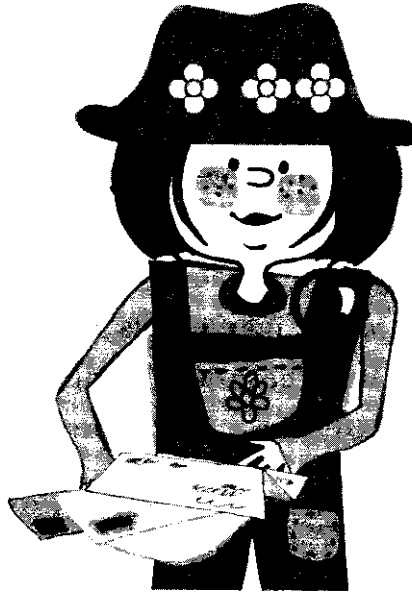


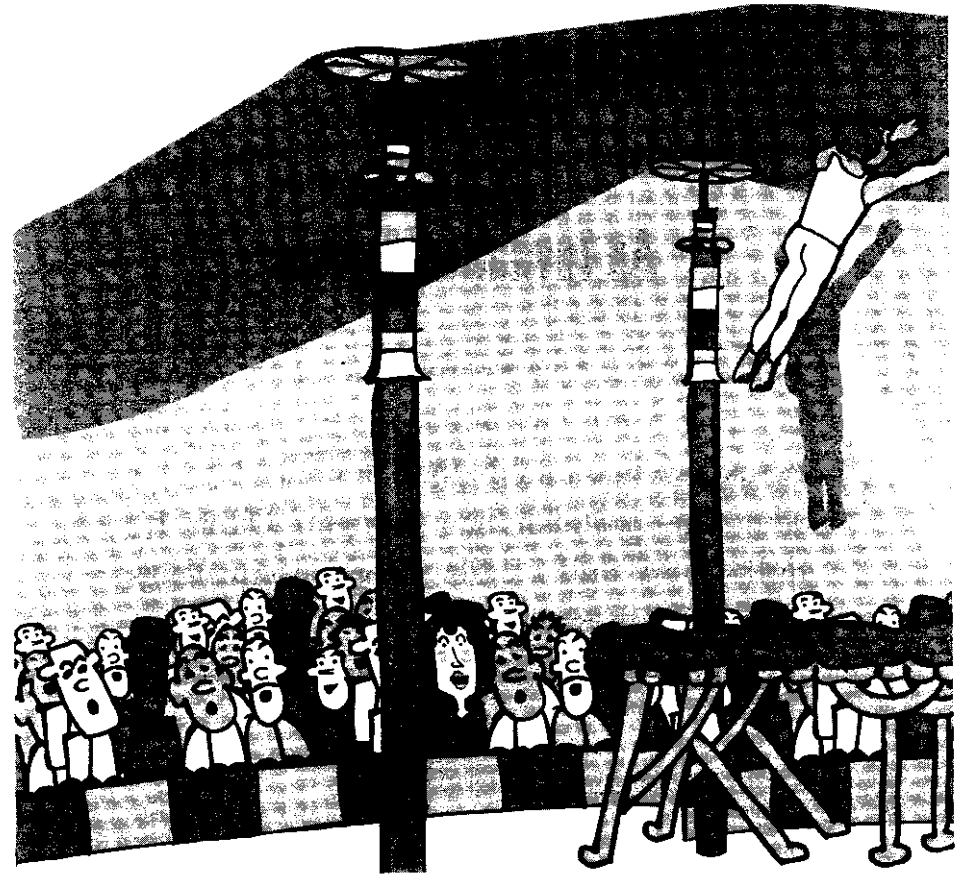
CHAPTER 1

An Invitation Arrives

I like getting letters from my aunts. Every morning, while my father is still having his breakfast, I go into the hall and check to see what the postman has brought. Often it's dull – very dull – bills in brown envelopes or letters to my father about one of his inventions. But sometimes I see an envelope

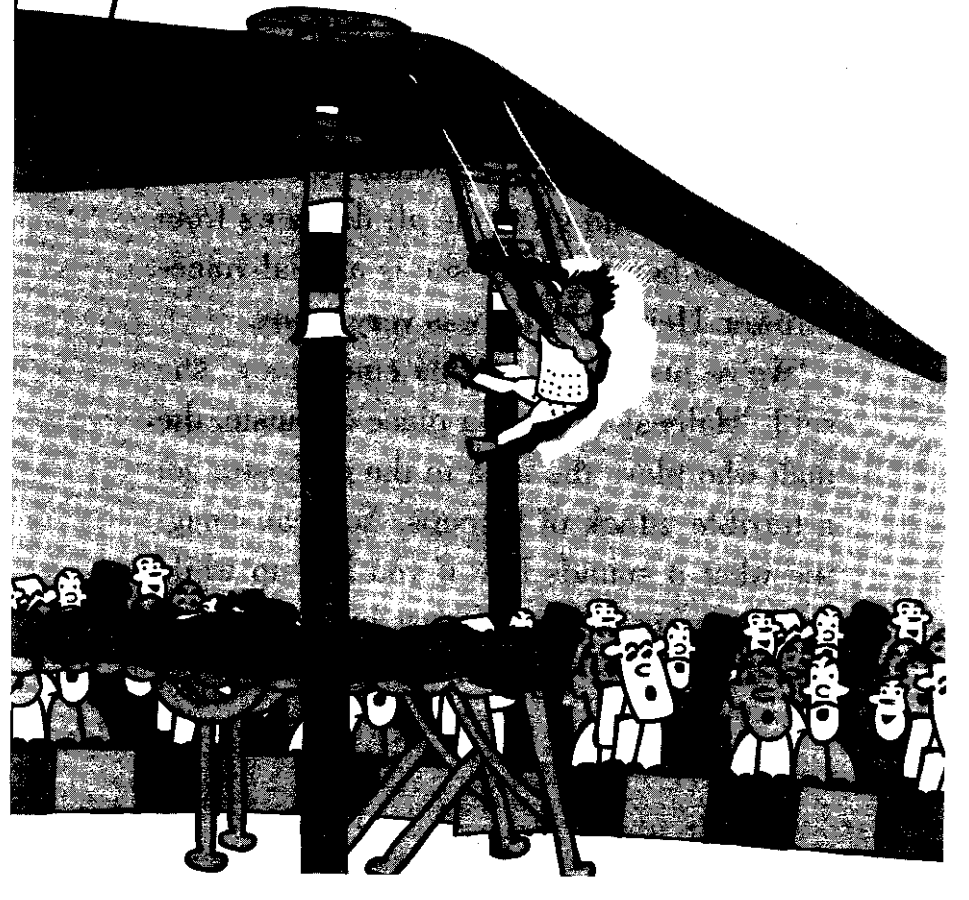
that lifts my spirits straight away. These are the letters from my aunts.

I have five aunts, you see. You may have read all about them before, and, if you have, you'll know all about how they were lost (which was my father's fault) and then found again. And what marvellous aunts they turned out to be! There was Aunt Veronica, the strong lady at the circus; Aunt



Harmonica, the ventriloquist; Aunt Majolica, the bossy one (who really wasn't so bad after all); and finally Aunts Thessalonika and Japonica, the private detectives and mind-readers. Is that all of them? Let me see: Veronica, Harmonica, Majolica, Thessalonika and Japonica. Yes, that makes five.

Just about every week one of my aunts



writes to me. Sometimes it's Aunt Veronica, who tells me where her circus is and what's been happening at it. These letters are very exciting. A few weeks ago, she wrote to me and told me that one of the trapeze artists had fallen off the trapeze while swinging to and fro at the very top of the tent. Fortunately for him, he landed right in the middle of the trampoline which had been set up for the next act and he was bounced right back up to the trapeze again, the right way up. So it all had a happy ending.

Sometimes I get a letter from Aunt Harmonica, who gives me all the news from the opera house, where she is official voice-thrower. Her last letter was very funny.

'We've just had a terrible emergency,' she said. 'Halfway through a piece of music, the man who plays the tuba in the orchestra got a terrible attack of hiccups. You can imagine what it sounds like if you hiccup while you're trying to play a great big instrument like the tuba. He couldn't go on. So I had to

crawl down into the orchestra pit in front of the stage and make a sound like a tuba for the rest of the piece. It wasn't easy, but I did it, and I don't think anybody in the audience realised what was going on!'

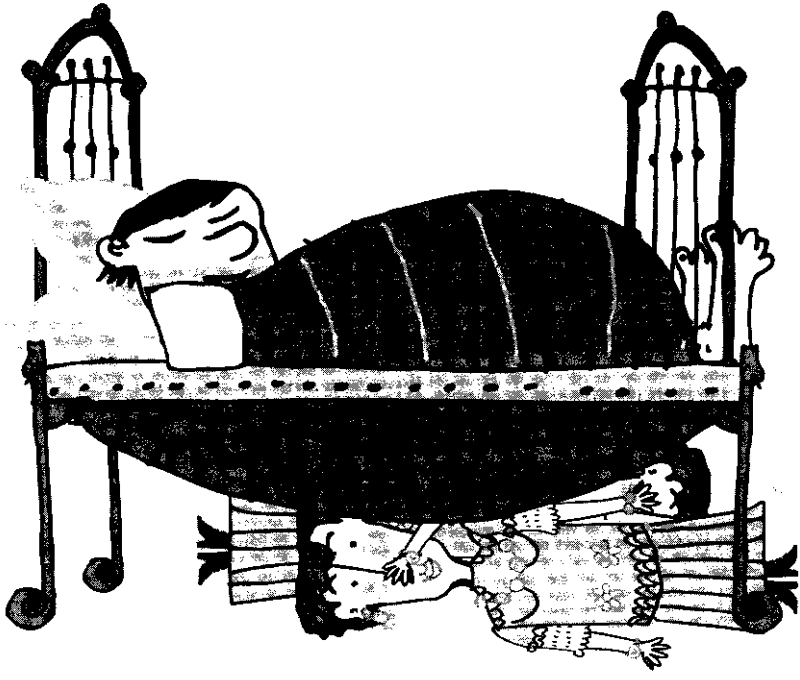
But the letters I most like getting are from my Aunt Thessalonika and Aunt Japonica. They write their letters together, and you never know which words have been written by which aunt! The only time you can tell is when they have different coloured ink in each pen. It's quite easy then.

Their letters are full of the details of their latest case and can make quite scary reading. They often get into all sorts of difficulties, but always seem to get out of them at the end. Last week they had to hide under the bed of a very dangerous criminal when he suddenly returned home while they were searching his house for jewels he had stolen.

'When we heard him at the door,' wrote Aunt Thessalonika, 'we had to find somewhere to hide. And the only place was right

under his bed! So we slid under it and lay there, hoping that he'd go out again soon.

'Unfortunately, he did not go out. Instead, he came straight into the bedroom, changed into his pyjamas and went to bed! You can imagine how we felt. He was quite heavy, and the bed sagged, squashing us rather a lot. At one point, your Aunt Japonica wanted to sneeze, and was only prevented from doing this by your Aunt Thessalonika holding firmly on to her nose.



'At last we heard snoring from above and we started to crawl out. I'm sorry to say, though, that we found ourselves stuck, and the only way we could get out of the house was to make our way out with the bed still on top of us. So we did that, on our hands and knees, with the bed on our backs. And that is how we were when we met the policeman in the street outside.

'At first he accused us of stealing the bed, but when he saw who was tucked up inside it, still fast asleep, he changed his mind.

' "We've been looking for him for a long time!" he exclaimed. "Thank you very much indeed!"

'So we carried the bed all the way down to the police station – with a little bit of help from the policeman, of course – and set it down there.

'You can imagine the surprise the jewel thief had when he woke up and saw where he was. He would not have been pleased!'

There had been many other letters like

that, and I longed to see my two detective aunts again. We had had so much fun solving the mystery of the League of Cheats together, and I hoped that soon they would invite me to help them out with another one of their cases.

I had quite a long wait, but at last it came. It arrived one Saturday morning, a letter from Aunt Thessalonika and Aunt Japonica, inviting me to come on what they called a 'little trip' with them.

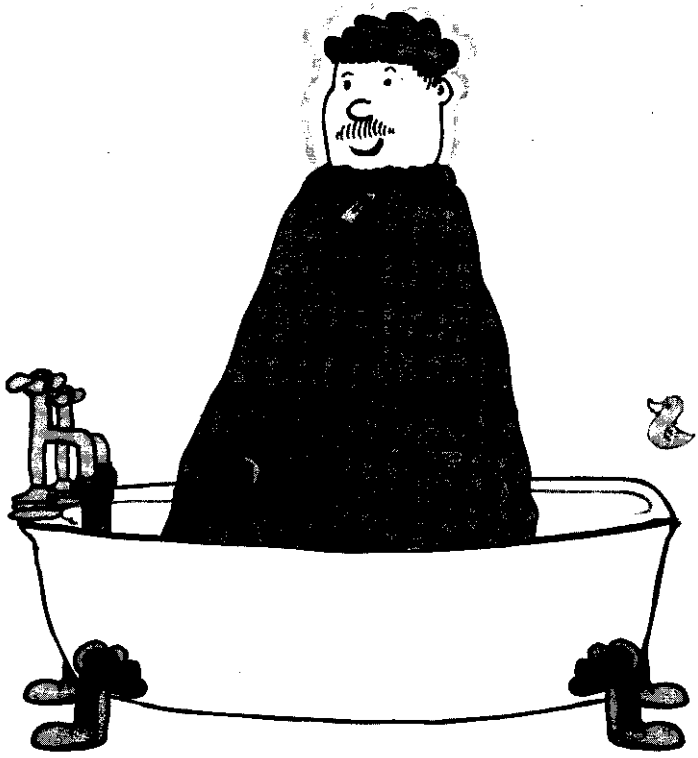
'We are going to America,' they wrote. 'Would you like to come? That is, of course, if you are free and have nothing better to do.'

I could hardly contain my excitement, and showed the letter to my father. As usual, he hardly paid it any attention, as his mind was on one of his ridiculous inventions. He was trying to invent a portable bath for people who went camping. It was a very curious invention. You got into something which looked a bit like a large waterproof sack.

Then you zipped it all the way up to your neck, connected it to a tap with a hose, and let the water in. After that, you jumped up and down and the water went all over you. There was a plug down at the bottom.

When I showed him the letter, he was testing the plug, which did not seem to be working all that well.

'A letter from those aunts of yours?' he



said absent-mindedly. 'Asking you to go on a little trip? How nice. Well, of course you must go.'

'It's all the way to America,' I explained, worried that he would object to my going so far.

'America?' he said. 'Would you be able to get something for me there? You see, I need a special sort of plug. It's a bit bigger than this one, and it has an odd, slidey bit right here. They only make them in America. Could you pick one up for me?'

I was delighted, and promised to get the plug. I wrote back to my aunts immediately and said that I would love to come with them to America and that my father had agreed to take me to the airport the following Saturday, which just happened to be the beginning of the school holidays.

My aunts wrote back the next day.

'We'll see you at the airport,' they said. 'But you may not see us. Don't worry, though. We'll send you your ticket and you

can just get on the plane. We'll see you sooner or later.'

'Sounds rather odd,' said my father, when he read the letter. 'But those two aunts of yours have always been a bit odd, if you ask me. I'm not so sure if going off to America is such a good idea after all.'

'But what about the plug?' I said quickly.

'Ah yes,' he said. 'The plug. Well, perhaps it's not such a bad idea, but please be careful. Those two aunts get into all sorts of trouble, so keep a close eye on them.'

'I shall,' I promised. 'Don't you worry about that!'