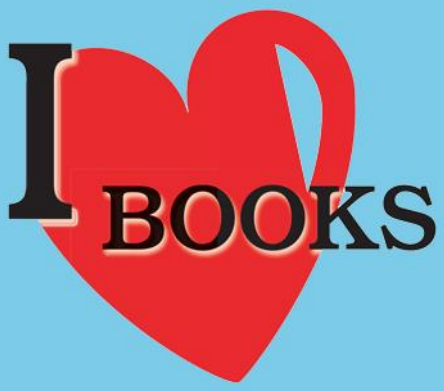


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Opening extract from

Circus of Thieves and the Comeback Caper

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ONE

The mystery of the appearing spoon

CHILLY ISN'T IT?

I know, I know, I shouldn't grumble about the weather, but that wind just cuts right through you, doesn't it? And the rain! All that water, just falling out of the sky for absolutely no reason. What a waste!

And the mud! Just look at it.

Wait! What's that?!

If that was ordinary mud, it wouldn't be moving. It wouldn't be jiggling and wobbling, and it wouldn't . . . it certainly wouldn't . . . What on

earth . . .? It's a hand! A gloopy and muddy hand, just coming up out of the ground holding a . . . could that be . . . a spoon?

Is this evolution starting all over again from the beginning? Is life emerging afresh from the primordial ooze, beginning with four fingers, a thumb and a piece of cutlery?

No – hang on a second – there's some writing on the back of the spoon, in very small letters. I can hardly read it. It seems to say, 'PROPERTY OF HM PRISON GRIMWOOD SCRUBS'.



It's a prison break! In broad daylight, right in front of our very eyes, a criminal spoon is escaping!

Wait! There's something else . . . A hand and a wrist is attached to the spoon. Now a whole arm. It's an accomplice!

I think you can guess what's coming next – unless you have an unusually poor understanding of anatomy, in which case I'll give you a clue. It's not a foot.

Correct! It's a shoulder, then a head. A head so muddy that at first it looks more like an old football. But this isn't a football, since a football would be very unlikely to open a muddy mouth and shout **'F R E E E E E E D O O O O O O O O O M ! WOOHOOOO! WE DONE IT!'**

The evidence is pretty conclusive, now. This escapee is neither spoon nor football, but human. With a wriggle and a squelch, a squerch and a squizzle, this human hauls himself up out of the

ground, wipes the mud from his eyes, and takes a deep, happy breath. Then, displaying the disloyalty and ingratitude that is not uncommon among criminals, he tosses his trusty accomplice, the unfortunate hard-working spoon, into a bush.

Behind him, another dripping form emerges from the muck. Then another.

The three men grab at one another, jumping up and down as they engage in a slimy hug which makes the following noise: *SSHHHLLLLUP-SHHHHLGGG-SHLLLUUUUP-SHHHHLGGGG.*

'WE DONE IT!' escapee number one says again.

'WE DONE IT!' says escapee number two.

'WE DID IT!' says escapee number three. The jumping stops, and the other two stare at him, unimpressed by the way he has corrected their grammar. There is a time for grammatical pickiness, and the middle of a shlurpy filth-encrusted embrace following a daring and successful jailbreak is not it.

'Oi! If you're so posh, how come you's standing here wearing prison uniform, hugging a couple of scumbags like us?' snaps escapee number one.

'This is no time to argue,' says escapee number three, politely pretending that he hasn't heard the word "you's". 'We have to run for it. We have to find Shank.'

So they do. They run for it.

And, yes, you really did hear the dread word: Shank.

But this Shank to which they refer is not the Armitage Shank you know and loathe. Oh, no. This is another Shank entirely. Zachary Shank.

You won't have heard of Zachary Shank, unless you are a mind reader, or come from the future, or are part of the Shank clan, in which case you are fictional yourself, but if you're reading this book and you are a fictional character from the very same book, then that means . . . oh, no, my head

just exploded from an overdose of weirdness.

Where was I? Zachary Shank. Of the Shank clan. With a brother whose name might ring a bell for aficionados of circus thievery.

Yes, Zachary Shank is the brother of Armitage. And not just an ordinary brother, but a twin. And not just an ordinary twin, but an identical twin. And not just an ordinary identical twin but an identical twin of surprisingly identical horribleness to the one you already know.

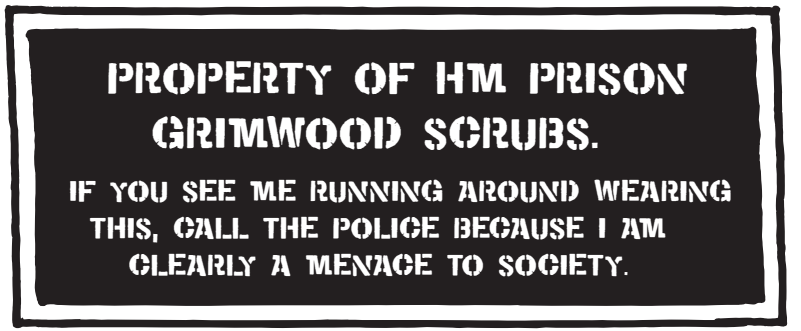
Believe it! There are two of them.

Revolting, I know, but I'm afraid the world can't always be kittens and rainbows and daisies and frolics in summer sunshine. Sometimes it's soggy picnics sitting on cowpats in cold drizzle, wearing shoes that leak and embarrassing trousers you've tried six times to hide in the bin. Because you probably don't need me to tell you that it can't be long before this Zachary Shank character turns up

to besmirch these pages with the kind of hideous behaviour that makes decent people cover their ears and go 'LA LA LA! SORRY, I CAN'T HEAR A SINGLE WORD YOU'RE SAYING.'

This will be the Shankiest book ever written, and for those repulsive Shanks you need a strong stomach, a sturdy liver and a good chunky pair of kidneys. Read on at your peril. Prepare to be Shanked.

Our three grimy escapees ran off through the park, caking themselves in as much mud as they could in order to disguise the fact that under the mud they were wearing stripy uniforms bearing the slogan:



They had already forgotten about their trusty accomplice.

'WHAT ABOUT ME, YOU HORRIBLE, SELFISH SLUG-BUCKETS?!' yelled the spoon from under a bush. 'I THOUGHT I WAS PART OF THE CREW! YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME HERE!'

But they didn't hear him, because they didn't speak Spoon, and because spoons talk at a frequency so high it is inaudible to the human ear.

'I'LL RAT ON YOU!' shouted the angry cutlery.[1] 'I WILL! IF A POLICE SPOON COMES PAST, I'LL TELL HIM EVERYTHING AND YOU'LL BE DONE FOR!'

The three men ran on without a backward glance, slipping away into the maze of city streets, on the trail of that East End legend, the criminal mastermind and massively devious slimeball, Zachary Shank.

[1] Spoons are so squeaky, even forks can't hear them.

TWO

The return of Ernesto Espadrille

EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING, They say.

They are wrong, of course. Clouds don't have linings at all. They are just cloud, right to the edge. Don't these people ever look up? Honestly, what a load of old tosh.

But the sentiment is sometimes useful. If we leave aside our irritation at the wild meteorological inaccuracy, we can perhaps entertain the idea of

Zachary Shank as a dark, looming cloud of nastiness, made a little less dark, looming and nasty by the arrival, here in Chapter Two, of the exceptionally pleasant Ernesto Espadrille.

Ah, that's better. And I have some good news for you. After two years of being unjustly imprisoned, locked away from all contact with his son Billy, and after the near-disaster of yet another false arrest during a robbery at the Oh, Wow! centre just a few months earlier, Ernesto was at last free to practise his trade again. That trade, of course, being the art of circusry.

After so long away from the circus circuit it takes a while to get going again, but Ernesto was so popular, so highly respected, so loved by everyone who had ever worked with him, that things had moved much faster than he was expecting. Already, he was only days away from the biggest night of his professional life: the

relaunch of Ernesto Espadrille as a ringmaster and circus entrepreneur in his own right. Yes, it was Comeback Time.

In just forty-eight hours, Ernesto Espadrille's Extreme Extravaganza would make its debut. The star performer, apart from Ernesto himself, was his twelve-year-old son, Billy Espadrille, who until recently had been performing under the name Billy Shank.

And why would a peachy and fresh Espadrille want to go on stage in the guise of a rancid old Shank? Well, it would take me roughly two whole books to explain that properly, but the short version is this: he had no choice. Long ago, after Billy's mother died in a tragic trapeze accident, Ernesto had slowly lost his mind, then his circus. Eventually he'd simply drifted away, leaving that infamous predator Armitage Shank to 'adopt' not just Billy Espadrille, but the entire Espadrille circus. Billy

had nowhere else to go, no alternative but to become a Shank. At least, he thought he had no alternative, until he met a spirited young girl by the name of Hannah. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Or, in fact, behind ourselves. Sometimes explaining the past[1] is like trying to untangle a plate of spaghetti. Let's just move on.

After weeks of intense rehearsal with his real father, Billy's act had lifted to a whole new level. He still conducted most of his performance while trotting around the ring on the back of Narcissus the camel, and he still performed juggling, archery and sundry acrobatics, but now there was also a magical theme. His pièce de résistance was a magic trick that hadn't been attempted by any magician anywhere. Never in the history of stage illusion had anyone ever successfully sawn a camel in half. Billy was the first, ably assisted by Narcissus (who thought the whole thing was kind of stupid, but

[1] An average portion of spaghetti, fully untangled, is 37 metres long.

co-operated in[2] return for an extra bucket of taramasalata).

As part of his comeback circus, Ernesto had recruited many of his favourite acts from when he'd been at the peak of his fame. All of them remembered him, and answered the call to rejoin the Espadrille troupe. His first recruits were the Franco-Dutch contortionist double act, Delia de la Doolah and Vonda van der Venda, who could fit themselves through a de-stringed badminton racket while knitting a woolly hat in the shape of a toaster, holding one needle each. This was an act that had to be seen to be believed, and then it was still pretty hard to credit, even if you were the lucky audience member chosen to hold the badminton racket or take away the toaster-hat. Ernesto was planning to use his contortionists as the grand opening.

They would be followed by the great Canadian

[2] He didn't *really* cut Narcissus in half. But it did look that way. Which is, officially, an international dromedary-showbiz first.

knife-thrower, Chancey Bris, who could land a knife between the legs of his assistant, blindfolded, from ten metres. He tended to need a new assistant every week or two, since nervous breakdowns were a problem, but Bris himself had nerves of steel.

A quick turn from the prestidigitator, Bellagio Spigot, would follow that, after which came Ernesto's prize recruits, the clowns Hank and Frank, who he had pinched from Armitage Shank. They didn't take much persuading, either. In fact, the call went something like this:

ERNESTO: This is Ernesto Espadrille here. I'm starting my own circus. Would you like to join?

HANK: Oh, yes! We'd love to!

FRANK: Says who?

HANK: Me.

FRANK: What about me?

This is a magician who does clever tricks with his hands. The word comes from the latin 'digit', which means finger, and 'presti', which means, 'blooming 'eck, did you see that?'

HANK: Of course you want to. You whinge all the time about wanting a different boss.

FRANK: That doesn't mean you can answer for me.

HANK: But you want the job.

FRANK: Of course I do.

HANK: So why are you arguing?

FRANK: Why are you arguing?

HANK: Why are you arguing?

FRANK: I'm not arguing.

HANK: Yes, you are.

FRANK: No, I'm not.

HANK: Yes, you are!

FRANK: No, I'm not!

ERNESTO: Ehurghehuchhuch! Guys! Do you want the job?

HANK AND FRANK: Of course we do!

ERNESTO: Er . . . great. When can you start?

FRANK: This week.

This is a cough. There is much dispute in literary circles about how to spell out a cough. This dispute is of no interest, so I shan't go into details. If you really want to know more, you can read *From Hrmph to Tsk: A Guide to Noises You Can Make But Can't Spell* by Xtrpt Pfffffp.

HANK: Next week.

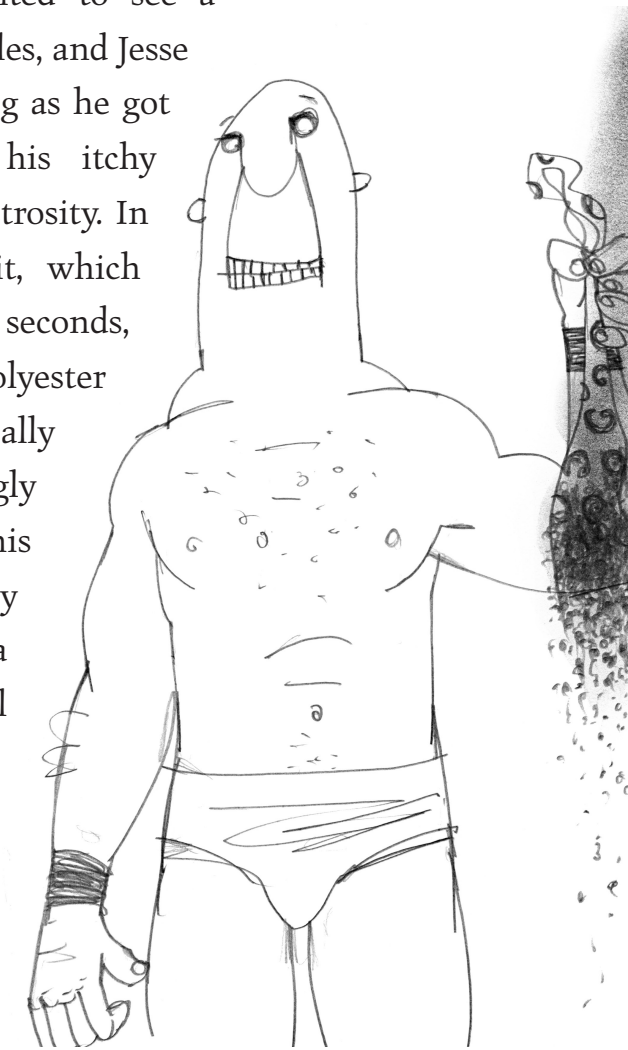
FRANK: This week!

HANK: Next week!

I think we can leave the conversation there. Negotiations took a while, not so much between Ernesto and the clowns as between Hank and Frank, but they got there in the end, and the siblings were installed as the closing act of the first half.

The second half was to kick off with another recruit from Armitage's cast. Jesse was just as easy to enlist, simply by promising him that he wouldn't have to do any more human cannonballing, and that he wouldn't have to wear his polyester leopard-skin leotard any more. For Ernesto, Jesse would simply be the strongman. This wasn't hard for Jesse, since he was a strong man. His new act mainly featured Jesse ripping a car to bits with his

bare hands, wearing an extremely small pair of swimming trunks with the word 'JESSE' written on the bottom. Ernesto was of the opinion that the audience wanted to see a strongman's muscles, and Jesse didn't mind as long as he got to throw away his itchy leopard-skin monstrosity. In fact, he burned it, which took about two seconds, since cheapo polyester leopard-skin is really quite astonishingly flammable. This made Jesse worry that his career as a human cannonball was even more dangerous than



he had feared. A flaming human cannonball would have been spectacular but, health-wise, it was pretty much a one-off stunt.

After Jesse came the Nigerian fire-breather, Halle Tosis (who was rumoured to be a princess), then Mitzi Schnitzel and her performing puppies, who staged a canine dance routine on a tightrope wearing doggie sailor suits, culminating in a barked karaoke rendition of 'I Dreamed a Dream'. This act wasn't to everyone's taste, but Mitzi was an old friend and she needed the work.

For a change of pace, this was to be followed by the Finnish motorbike daredevil Empti Caapaak and his wife Mülti-Störi. Their three children, Shortstaï, Longstaï and Payandisplaï, had a daring role in the finale, which was a human slalom around the sides of a metal cage that filled the whole ring.

In their prime, Empti and Mülti-Störi had been indoor motocross champions, which is a sport

where you ride round and round in circles very fast in front of an audience, but for some reason they found this ultimately unsatisfying, and it was only when they developed a circus routine that they became truly happy. The circus routine also consisted of riding round in circles very fast in front of an audience but, being non-competitive, it was more to their taste. The Caapaaks were old hippies at heart.

Shortstaï and Longstaï were in training to take over the act when they were older, but Payandisplaï wanted to be a marine biologist.

The show would climax in the Espadrille father-and-son double act, which was a unique combination of trapeze artistry, juggling, archery and camel-sawing.

Nobody would leave Ernesto Espadrille's Extreme Extravaganza feeling that they hadn't got their money's worth, that was for sure. If