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Opening extract from

Frozen Billy

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Published by

Corgi Childrens

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The First Notebook

I *hated* Frozen Billy. I hated everything about him. I hated him even more than Will did, if that's possible. I hated his painted staring wooden eyes and the way his eyelids clicked when Uncle Len pulled the string inside his back, to make them blink. I hated his long thin legs, like dangling rods. I hated his bright red wooden mouth, clacked shut or gaping open as square and wide as the opening in a pillar box.

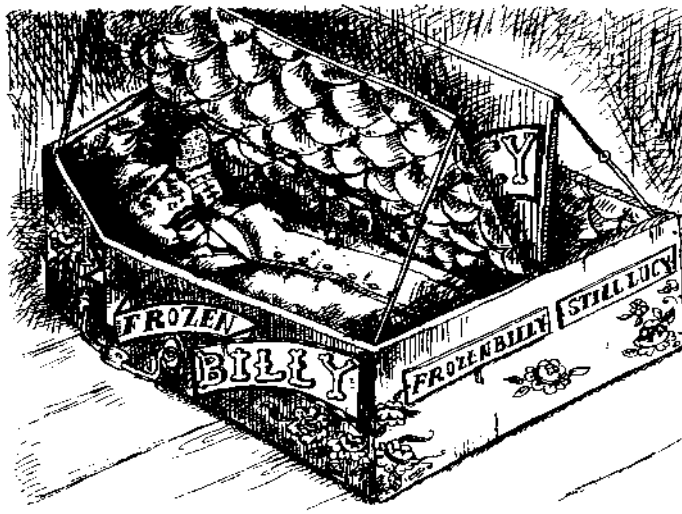
But most of all, I suppose, I hated his chirpy, over-confident voice.

You think that sounds mad, I expect. Hate a doll's voice? A wooden doll can't speak.

But Uncle Len is a ventriloquist. Oh, you never see his lips move, but that's because you're too busy staring at Billy sitting on his knee, blinking, and opening and shutting his mouth, and chatting, chatting – forever chatting.

I never minded him when I was little. I'm teased about the time I dared stamp my foot and scowl at Uncle Len. 'Make Wooden Billy speak!'

'Not Wooden Billy,' Uncle Len corrected me. He tapped the rusty tin label screwed along one side of the carrying box. 'See? It



says here. His name is Frozen Billy.'

Will pointed to the label on the other side. 'And Still Lucy?'

'Yes.' Uncle Len ran a fingertip over the matching strip of tin on which STILL LUCY was painted in tiny white letters. He sighed. 'And if she'd been hanging on the same hook as Frozen Billy on the back of that Curiosity Shop door, I'd have a double act to send me straight to the Top of the Bill.'

He must have said it dozens of times over the years – usually when he was inspecting

a fresh hole in his boot or counting his last few pennies. 'If I could only find Still Lucy, I'd be set fair for fortune.'

Mother would scold him. 'Come, now! You know as well as I do, Len, a man makes his own fortune.'

We all knew she was thinking of our father. He's in Australia, on his most important job yet, surveying a road through the outback, and saving every farthing (if they have farthings in Australia) to pay for our passages, longing for us to join him.

A brand new life! he wrote to us, the first week he was there. *You won't believe the wonders of this country. Mary, you'll be so happy. And Clarrie and Will will be in seventh heaven. Wallabies. Jacaranda trees. And heat, and sun, and huge wide skies, and everyone – everyone – building a brave new country.*

'All right for Charles,' Uncle Len muttered sourly. 'He always was the lucky one.' But after a moment, his natural good spirits returned. 'I'll just think myself lucky in his place while he's away, and eat his supper – if I'm invited, Mary.'

And Mother softened, of course, and let him stay. She can't help but be fond of Uncle Len, for all I used to hear her and my father whispering together about his faults. Uncle Len is a natural showman, with charm enough to fetch the ducks off water. That's why he works in music hall – luckily for him, because that meant he was usually still in his lodging house when Mother came home from serving in Mrs Trimble and Miss Foy's shop and, poking her head into the cupboard under the sink, called to me over her clattering of pots and pans.

'Clarrie, run along and ask Uncle Len if he would like to join us.'

I'd slam my schoolbook shut and run down to the alley. A few doors along, I'd push at his creaking boarding-house door and hurry up the stairs. 'Mother says there'll be plenty. Will you come?'

'Will I *come*?' He'd spin me round, even though, now I'm older, I'm no feather to lift. 'Will I choose to eat good food in fine company, rather than stone soup alone? Praise the day my dear brother married an angel!'

Uncle Len adores Mother. But, then again,

he really loves his brother, too. I've sometimes thought he misses him almost as much as we do – like the night he reached for the cocoa tin and turned the picture of the girl on the front to face us.

'See her?' he said, nodding.

I didn't need to look. I spend hours gazing at her. She has the roundest face I've ever seen, all black and shiny, and she's all smile.



He tapped his finger against her perfect little teeth. 'Well,' he said, 'when Charles has earned his pile, and all our family is together again, we'll every one of us have a smile like hers.'

He heard me say something under my breath and looked up. 'What was that, Clarrie?'

I wasn't going to repeat the words I whisper to myself every night, and the hope to which I rise every morning: 'Let it be *soon*.'

I simply shook my head and I said nothing.

But we were happy enough – not as happy as the girl on the cocoa tin, but happy enough – until the day the telegram boy doffed his cap at my mother, and handed her a black-edged envelope.

Suddenly there was a flurry of tears and packing, and Mother was off to Ireland for Grandmother's funeral.

'Be good.' She hugged us tightly. 'Take care of one another. Uncle Len will look after you.'

We were expecting her back in a few days. ('Friday,' she'd said. 'Though, if the boat makes good time, you might even see me on Thursday.')

But, though we stayed up late, there was no clatter on the stair or rattle at the door. Friday passed, worried and silent. Saturday and Sunday, too.

'We'll send a telegram,' Uncle Len declared on Monday, though, since he had no idea who we should send it to, nothing at all came of that. But on Tuesday, as he was talking of going to the docks to get advice,

there was a knock on the door, a hurried spell of whispering on the stair, and suddenly Uncle Len was a man full of plans.

'We'll move Will back to his own bed, and I'll put my stuff in your mother's room.'

'But surely Mother will be back any day – tomorrow even.'

He let the silence drip. I thought I ought to add, 'Won't she?' but Will was there first.

'Why? Why are you shifting things round? What's happened?'

'Nothing,' he told us.

'So what was all that whispering?'

'Nothing.'

It took an age to worm it out of him. He really didn't want to tell us. Something had happened in Dublin. Either Mother was wandering round in a daze after the funeral, or there had been some awful mistake. But she was suddenly 'under arrest', and then 'hauled up in front of the magistrate'. And now, it seemed, she was in gaol.

'In *gaol*?' Will's eyes turned as huge and staring, his face as pale, as Frozen Billy's. 'How can she be in *gaol*?'

Uncle Len shook his head. 'They say she stole a basket full of food.'

'A basket of food? They must know Mother never stole a thing in her life – not even a length of silk ribbon from Mrs Trimble and Miss Foy!'

I bit my lip. 'They don't know anything at all about Mother,' I reminded him. 'There's no one there to speak for her. Now Grandmother's gone, there's nobody left in Ireland who knows her well enough.' I turned to Uncle Len. 'How long will she be away?'

He said he didn't know. 'Not long, I hope. A few weeks? Surely not long at all!' Will's eyes so spilled with tears he can't have seen the way Uncle Len's gaze swept round the room, avoiding mine. But even through my dry-eyed shock, I guessed my uncle suspected it might be a good while longer.

Later, when Will had cried himself into the deepest sleep, Uncle Len took me aside.

'You must write to your father tomorrow, Clarrie.'

Next day, I sent Will off to school, unwilling and alone. ('Mother would *want* it, Will.') Then I put on my best Sunday bonnet and went down to the corner shop. I pleaded with Mrs Trimble and Miss Foy until they

agreed that I could take my mother's place at the counter to earn our rent until our father could get back to rescue us (though they said they would have to pay me less, because I was younger and had no experience).

Then I sat down at the table to write my letter. It was so hard to throw this black, black blanket over my father's shining dreams. It took all day. But when Will trudged home from school to see the envelope propped on the mantelpiece, he asked at once:

'A letter to Father? What have you told him?'

He saw the answer in my face and flew into a fury. 'You mustn't send it! I won't let you send it. No!'

'But, Will—'

'No!' Snatching it up, he ripped it in two. 'No! Father has to finish his job. If you tell him Mother's in gaol, he'll spend every penny he's earned on the first passage home. He'll end up spending it all. He might even have to borrow, and end up back with us worse off than he started – even deep in debt – just as Mother comes home again.'

How could I tell Will that, even coming from Australia, our father's ship might reach the docks long before Mother's? I just stood looking doubtful. But everything Will said to try to convince me was lifting his own spirits. 'Mother will understand! It's only a silly little basket of food she's supposed to have stolen. They can't keep her *for ever*. It can't be long, and Uncle Len won't mind. Each week he stays with us, he'll save on his own rent.'

Better this new, determined Will than the distraught brother of the night before. But I had another worry.

'How *can* Uncle Len keep this secret? Father is his *brother*.'

'How can he *tell* him?' Will countered fiercely. 'Uncle Len isn't going to *write*, is he?'

And it was true. Father has always said that one of the reasons Uncle Len slid into the music-hall world is because he found reading and writing so difficult. He would never ever manage a letter to Australia.

Sure enough, when he came home from the afternoon matinée, Uncle Len drew

me aside. 'Clarrie, have you sent the letter to your father?'

I couldn't lie, so I admitted, 'No.'

'Very well,' he said. 'But your handwriting's a whole lot better than mine. So set down this.'

Back I went to the table and sat obediently. 'Don't worry, Charles,' he made me write. 'As long as your little chickens are with me, they'll be kept warm, safe and fed.' And there was a whole lot more besides, because Uncle Len worships his brother. (I've heard Mother tease: 'If Charles told you to leap off a cliff, you would do it.')

I wrote everything he said down, as neatly and carefully as I could. We sealed the letter in an envelope and I addressed it, giving Will money for the stamp we both knew he wouldn't buy. Then Will took the letter straight past the post office down to the docks, where he tore it in pieces and dropped them in the harbour.

'I watched till the ink swam,' he whispered to me later.

So the only letter posted that week was the one Will sent to Mother, begging her not to let our father know that things were any different.

Please, please, he wrote, *don't worry about Clarissa and me. We will be strong and brave, and Uncle Len will look after us, I promise. And when it's all over, all of us can go together and start our brand new life, forgetting all of this.*

That last bit was so clever. I could as good as see Mother in the gaol, showing the letter to all the tough women round her, and them all taking Will's side.

'Got brains and sense, that boy.'

'What wouldn't I give for a chance of a new life?'

'Go on, Mary. Trust him. What have you got to lose?'

Somehow they managed to persuade her. So she kept writing her ever-loving letters to our father, making it all up about walks in the country, and people she'd chatted to in the shop. She slipped the letters inside ones she sent to us, and I kept back some of the money I earned to buy stamps to send them on to Australia along with the letters we wrote to Father.

And Father wrote back, full of excitement and love, with hundreds of plans. Will read

the letters aloud, using his quick way with words to chop and change the bits that might lead Uncle Len to guess that the letter he made me write had never arrived there.

After, Will handed the thin sheets of paper to me, to send on to Mother. Sometimes I kept them one more night, to read the real words alone. Perhaps I shouldn't have done that, but I did. I think it was a sort of tax I charged for being brave, and hanging on, while we waited for the strange time of lying to be over.