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Opening extract from

The Unrivalled Spangles

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Published by

Simon and Schuster Ltd

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One

Ellen Spangle sat on her horse's back and waited for the musicians to finish their introduction. It was always the same. The music played on until the audience were just about frantic. On the horse beside her, Lucy suddenly scrambled to her feet. "Let's go in standing!" she cried.

"No!" cried Ellen firmly. "We'll do what we rehearsed!" She looked at her sister's flushed face. Even though they had waited in the wings a hundred times before, the music always had the same effect on Lucy as it did on the audience. By the time they went into the ring, she was on the verge of losing control. "You'll put out the band and Father will be furious."

"Who cares about Father?" Now Lucy was standing up. She was fourteen and thought she knew everything

"I do," said Ellen, who was sixteen and more cautious than her sister. "And so do you, when you bother to think about it." She grabbed Lucy's arm and yanked her down. "You go first!"

Lucy fixed her sister with her bright green eyes.

"Are you sure? I went first last time."

"Of course," said Ellen. The first great roar of the crowd didn't matter to her. But it mattered desperately to Lucy. For Ellen the challenge of performing was doing it well. For Lucy it was the thrill of being adored.

A trumpet played a single note. A second trumpet joined, followed by a third. Together the notes sounded like the rhythmic pounding of horses' hooves. It was the cue for their act.

Lucy slipped back into the saddle and blew her sister a kiss. Then she threw back her head and galloped into the ring.

Ellen took a deep breath. The air was hot and smelled of horse dung, orange peel and sweat. From the wings she saw the huge gas chandelier blazing with hundreds of glowing jets. She heard men, women and children shouting at the tops of their voices. She felt the wooden floor of the theatre shudder with the banging of heavy black boots.

Ellen urged her horse forward. It was always the same. There was a jolt of nerves and excitement as she plunged into the crowded, brightly-lit theatre.

Fred Spangle strode across the sawdust. He was a short, powerfully-built man in a scarlet ringmaster's tail coat with a glossy black top hat. He snapped his whip in the air. "Ladies and gemmen!" he cried in his rich, booming voice. "All the way from the palaces of Italy – the pride of kings and the wonder of princes – I give you THE AMAZING SCARLETTA SISTERS!"

Ellen watched as Lucy cantered around the ring. Her frothy

sequined skirt fell over Chestnut's glossy haunches like a golden waterfall. She gathered her reins in one hand and held her other arm up in the air. The band changed their tune. Ellen fell in behind her sister. Twice they cantered around the ring, then Ellen moved up beside Lucy and they swung themselves on to their knees and up on to the backs of their horses. The gold of their skirts picked up the gold braid on their tight satin jackets. In one smooth movement they took each other's right and left hands. Below them the horses had fallen into exactly the same stride.

Together, they jumped over poles streaming with ribbons. It was as if they were joined at the hip. Then Ellen slipped back into a seated position. A second later Lucy did the same. Now they followed each other through fiery hoops with one stride between each jump. When they had circled the ring twice they pulled up their horses and bowed.

A huge smile was fixed on Ellen's face. She waved her arms in the air. She turned and bowed. The crowd roared as the two sisters curtseyed together. Ellen smiled wider but inside she was screaming. Lucy *was* Seraphina Scarletta. Ellen would never be Sapphire Scarletta.

Early the next morning, Fred Spangle walked across the frosty mud of Fender's Field near Whitechapel in the East End of London. It was only just dawn. Behind him a row of show wagons huddled in the shelter of the broken brick wall that separated the field from a muddy lane and a row of grimy,

tumbledown cottages. On the other side of the field there was a cluster of wooden shacks and a circle of the heavy carts and drays that held the animal cages above the damp of the winter mud.

Fred stopped and smelled the sharp whiff of ammonia that wafted from the cages and mixed with the peat smoke from the first of the morning's fires. In the cold weather, he always wore a long, thick seal-skin coat and high, black leather boots. He looked more like a general inspecting his troops than a showman patrolling his circus.

Around him, wagon doors creaked open and men and women stumbled into the pale dawn light. They stretched stiff limbs and rubbed their hands over crumpled faces. Women hung kettles over smoking fires as if they were walking in their sleep.

Everyone saw Fred but no one called out greetings. Most of them had been with Spangle's Circus for as long as they cared to remember. It was a hard life, but the only one they would ever choose to live. Fred Spangle was a fair employer but a tough one. There was work to get on with, and Fred's temper in the morning was well known.

Somewhere in the murk on the far side of the field, a hyena screamed and a lion growled. It was feeding time. A man's voice cursed as a tin pail rattled against the bars of a cage. Fred carried on walking but grunted approvingly. Animals came first in his circus.

Across from the field on the other side of the muddy lane, a

girl stood wrapped in a grey blanket. "Buns! 'Ot and tasty! Three for a penny!"

Judy Currant they called her. Her pitch was on the top steps of the crumbling theatre where Spangle's Circus performed in the winter. Fred quickened his step and felt for a penny in his pocket. For some reason he hadn't slept well after last night's performance. Now he was particularly hungry.

Five minutes later he climbed up the steep steps to his own showman's wagon and pushed open the brightly-painted door. A single paraffin lamp swung from a hook on the low ceiling. The floor was covered with a worn woven rug and two large frying pans hung above a cast-iron stove. In the far corner of the wagon, he saw his eldest daughter bent over some sewing. Unlike her sister, Ellen was an early riser. Fred's coat made him so wide he had to turn sideways to get through the narrow doorway.

"Blimey," he muttered, half to himself. "That lion of ours got a bigger cage than we have."

A woman looked up and smiled. She was handsome rather than pretty and her glossy black hair was pulled into a loose roll. Norah Spangle tipped a saucepan of steaming cider into a tin mug and took the buns he held out to her.

"Maybe he does but I doubt you'd prefer his breakfast." She sipped her own mug of tea. "Has his cough improved?"

Fred sat down on a bench along the wall. He dunked his bun in the hot cider. "Ludwig says so."

As he spoke, he pulled a face, half from the cider that burned

his tongue and half from the memory of his animal keeper just before dawn that morning. He had been standing outside Claudius's cage playing a violin. He stank of the brandy kept for the animals' colic attacks.

The lion seemed soothed by the music – indeed he looked as if he was listening to it. But Fred knew as well as any circus man that a drunken keeper was a danger to himself and the animals in his charge. If Ludwig Klemper hadn't been the best animal trainer in England, Fred would have sent him packing ages ago. It was only a matter of time before Claudius chewed off his arm instead of listening to his violin.

Norah looked up at the outline of her husband's face against the only window in the wagon. He had barely changed in the eighteen years she'd been married to him. His hair was still the colour of amber and his eyes were the greenest she had ever seen on a man.

Fred held out his mug and gave his wife a sideways look.

"Will Lorinda the Lion Lady go on tonight?"

Ellen Spangle looked up from the net skirt she was darning. "Is your ankle strong enough, Ma?"

It was not a question her father would think to ask. It wasn't his way. If you fell off your horse, Fred made you get back in the saddle. If you took a bad tumble, Fred made you do it again until you got it right. If you turned your ankle like her mother had done, you hobbled through your act.

That was circus life.

Norah Spangle knew that her husband was worried about

takings. Although last night the theatre had been full, circuses usually made almost all of their money when they toured the countryside in the summer. In the winter, they had to live on what acts they could cobble together. Ellen and Lucy as Sapphire and Seraphina Scarletta were a big draw. But a lady lion tamer was always a crowd pleaser, and Norah Spangle was the best in the business.

"Your liniment has worked wonders, dear." Norah patted her daughter's hand.

"Adder fat's best for sprains," said Ellen. She smiled. "I'll never know why."

"If *you* don't know, no one else will." The hot cider had softened Fred's face. "You're a clever lass. It was a good act last night."

Ellen looked down. It wasn't often that her father called her clever or complimented her on her riding. If he did, it was usually said with a sneer. If Fred had had his way, neither she nor her younger sister and brother would have been taught to read or write. In his view, you didn't need learning in the sawdust ring.

Ellen had heard his bad-tempered views on education a hundred times. *Only leads to bad words chalked up on every gatepost. Got so a decent woman can't venture out of doors.*

Luckily for Ellen, her mother had other views.

"Who pays the suppliers?" Norah would shout. "Who writes the orders? Not you! My life would be a damned sight easier if I could keep proper accounts and say what I mean on paper." Then there would be the bang of a saucepan on the table and

a clatter of cutlery. "My children are not going to have to pay a clerk if they want a decent letter written!"

In the end, even though Fred sulked and shouted by turns, Norah arranged for a tutor to teach her children first thing in the morning before they practised their acts and groomed their horses.

The problem was that the only child who had really *wanted* to learn was Ellen. Lucy, who was barely eighteen months younger, had resented every moment. But then Lucy was her father's daughter. She had Fred's amber hair and green eyes and the same views on education. What was the point? Better to spend the time perfecting her riding skills or learning how to juggle with the Indian clubs that Fred had bought for her last birthday. They had come all the way from Bombay. Lucy loved breathing in the spicy smell of the painted wood. So, as soon as she was thirteen, Lucy had talked her mother into letting her give up the lessons. Now only their youngest brother, Sam, who was just ten, still took them. But Sam always had other things on his mind. His pig Curly was almost ready to show. His two teams of white mice had learned how to pull their coaches in a circle in opposite directions. Ellen was teaching him to train small animals to live together in a "Happy Families" cage without eating each other. People in the street couldn't get enough of them. For a penny, they would stand and gawp at a cat, a rat, a ferret and three canaries all in one cage, watching each other as if their lives depended on it. Which, of course, they did.

Sometimes Ellen wondered if she had the same blood in her veins as her brother and sister. For Lucy and Sam, it was enough to be called Spangle and to spend the rest of their lives with the circus. It wasn't enough for Ellen. Her father could sense her dissatisfaction, but couldn't make head nor tail of it which infuriated him. Ellen was a natural performer. More than any of his children, she had inherited her mother's extraordinary talent with animals. Fred reckoned it was because Ellen had shared a straw-filled box with a pair of orphaned lion cubs when she was a baby. It had been a bitterly cold winter and the cubs' box had been the warmest place to be.

"Sam says you've tamed that ferret of his." Fred Spangle patted his stomach. "No more rabbit pies for me now, I suppose."

Ellen stared stupidly at her father. She was so lost in her own thoughts she couldn't think what he was talking about.

"Sam's Happy Families Cage," said Norah quickly. It wasn't often that her husband and her eldest daughter had a conversation that lasted more than two minutes. She wanted to do anything she could to encourage it.

Ellen smiled ruefully. "It took five rabbits, two canaries, a sharp pin and a noose."

"Sounds about right to me."

"I'd say that ferret will behave himself now," she said.

She and her father were both smiling.

From her place by the stove, Norah felt a pleasure she hadn't known for months. It was a terrible thing in a circus family

when a father and daughter battled each other all the time. But it seemed to Norah that for some reason things were better – and she didn't know why.

Ellen decided to take advantage of her father's good humour. After a week of grey days, this morning was turning out brighter. She would be able to sell as many pots of liniment as she could carry in her basket. More importantly, she could pay her tutor Alfred Montmorency what she owed him for her last lesson.

When Ellen was fourteen and her lessons finished, Fred had immediately tried to blot out all the things she had learned. He made her practise twice as long so there was no time left in her day to read. If he saw a book in her hand, he threw it in the fire.

But Ellen had inherited his stubbornness. Nothing was going to stop her from learning. In the summer, she toured with the circus, and collected plants and powders for her potions and liniments. When the circus came back to Fender's Field for the winter, she sold her medicines and used the money to pay for lessons from Alfred Montmorency. For the past two years, she had secretly learned Latin, Greek, English Literature and had been given an introduction to the natural sciences. Now this winter would be her last. After the spring she would be old enough to apply for a job as a teacher or a governess.

Neither Fred nor Norah had any idea of this arrangement, but Ellen couldn't hide it from Lucy. The two sisters shared a room in lodgings near the theatre, so there could be no secrets between them.

"It would be a shame for a hard-working showman to go hungry," said Ellen as she wrapped her paisley shawl around her shoulders. "And it's a fine day for selling." She picked up her bonnet and slid her arm under the handle of her basket. "I shall buy you a steak and oyster pie from Minnie's."

Norah looked up. "Would you buy me a card of pearl buttons and three yards of red satin for Lucy's costume?"

Ellen's face fell. Now she wouldn't be able to pay Alfred Montmorency.

Norah looked at her daughter's disappointed face.

"I'll make it up from the takings, dear," she said in a puzzled voice.

Ellen told herself to be more careful. Her mother missed nothing. "Anything else, Ma?" she asked quickly.

Norah shook her head and picked up the skirt that Ellen had been mending.

A moment later Ellen was walking through the narrow alleyway past the Spangle's theatre and into the crowded cobbled street. Even though it was still early in the morning, costermongers and flower ladies were hurrying to their pitches.

"Where are you going in your new shawl?"

It was Lucy. Her cheeks were pink from the cold air and her crinkled auburn hair fluttered about her face.

"You're up early!" said Ellen.

"I bought some red satin for my costume," said Lucy. "I promised Mother weeks ago I would but I've been too busy

practising," she twirled daintily on the balls of her feet. "Where are *you* going?"

Ellen nodded at her basket. "What do you think?"

"You'll be selling your liniment, then settling with Alfred Montmorency."

"That's clever of you," said Ellen lightly. Now that Lucy had bought her own satin, she could pay off her debt. "Perhaps you should take up mind-reading."

The two sisters stared at each other. Lucy didn't approve of Ellen's lessons. She couldn't understand how Ellen could possibly want a life outside the circus.

"You're cracked!" Lucy would shout. "Who's going to employ a circus girl to teach their children? You'll be sweeping the grate and blacking the steps, more like."

Last summer the circus had visited Cambridge during a hiring fair. Lucy had heard all the stories from the country girls looking for jobs.

"Mop fairs, they call 'em, Ellen," she sneered. "'Cos that's what you have in yer hand, all day and half the night. Not a book! Governess! Pah!" Lucy would grab Ellen's arm and stare at her with her mad green eyes. "Stay with me! We'll be famous! We'll go anywhere you want!"

Then Ellen would pull back and try to explain to her sister yet again that she wanted her life to be different. Being part of a circus separated you from the real world. Only a fellow performer understood that there was nothing glamorous about riding bareback around a brightly-lit ring in front of hundreds

of people. It was hard work and harder than most. But the real reason why circus folk tended to stick together was because they knew how to live with their different identities. People on the outside would never understand that Ellen Spangle was not Sapphire Scarletta and that made Ellen feel like a freak. Worse, she knew that no one was even interested in Ellen Spangle. They only wanted Sapphire Scarletta. But Lucy never listened. "You've got the circus in your blood, Ellen," she whispered. "You're just too stubborn to admit it."

Now Lucy grabbed Ellen's hand and began to speak quickly. "Come with me! I want to show you what I've been practising. No one's done it yet. I could teach you, too."

Ellen's heart sank. "Lucy," she said gently. "You're already a sensation. Everyone adores you." Ellen set down her basket. She knew exactly what Lucy was practising. It was true that no one had done it before, but for good reason. A forward somersault on a galloping horse was almost impossible and extremely dangerous. Everyone had warned Lucy not to try it.

Everyone, that is, except Fred Spangle.

"Lucy," began Ellen. She put her hand on her sister's arm. "I beg of you—"

"Don't beg," snapped Lucy. "It doesn't suit you."

Before Ellen could reply, Lucy ran off, holding her hands out on either side as if they were wings. Ellen picked up her basket. It felt heavier than before.

"Zat one," said voice beside her. "If she was my horse, she would get no more oats."

It was Ludwig Kempler, the animal keeper. "*Comment allez-vous, Mademoiselle?*"

Ellen smiled at Ludwig's dark, lined face. He had an enormous moustache that was waxed into perfect twirls at either end. "*Très bien, merci, Monsieur. Et vous?*"

"Bah!" spluttered Ludwig suddenly. "*Ça marche. C'est tout.*" His breath reeked of brandy.

Ellen rolled her eyes. "You've been drinking again, Ludwig."

The wiry animal trainer stared hard at Ellen. He was trying to make the two Ellens he could see merge into one. "It's ze elephants," he cried. "Colic. A whole bottle." He sighed. "It is hard to keep elephants happy."

"We don't have any elephants."

Ludwig bowed in front of the two lovely young women standing in front of him. "*Vous êtes très gentille, Mademoiselle Ellen. Les elephants vous remercient.*"

Ellen watched Ludwig stumble away, using the crumbling brick wall of the theatre as a guide. She shook her head. There was no understanding Ludwig sometimes, though he was the cleverest man she knew. She remembered the time she had watched him train a kangaroo.

It was when her lessons had finished and her father had taken her books away. Afterwards Fred had gone to an animal fair to buy two broad-backed horses. In the circus they were known as roisin-backs because of the powdered resin that was sprinkled on their haunches. It was one of the tricks riders like Ellen and Lucy used to keep their grip when they stood up in

their leather-soled slippers. When the deal was agreed, the horse-trader's cunning eye had noticed a sovereign left over in Fred's hand.

"Want a hopping boxer? He's sick, so you could have him cheap."

Fred Spangle had never owned a performing kangaroo. But he knew they were a good draw. "How sick?"

"I ain't a doctor." The horse-trader jerked his head sideways. "'E's in the sack there."

Two hours later, Fred and Ludwig heaved the sick kangaroo out of its sack on to the summer grass.

"Whatchya think?" asked Fred.

Ludwig looked down at the animal's miserable hunched body. Its heavy-fringed eyes were dull and blank. Ludwig ran his hand down the kangaroo's back. The fur was thin and sticky and the ribs stuck out like fish bones. The kangaroo didn't even twitch, let alone try and defend itself.

"Too early to tell."

"Do what you can. I'm a sovereign down."

Three weeks later, the kangaroo was called Lord Rowley and was hopping about tethered on the end of a long rope, grazing happily in the field. He was glossy, fit and lazy.

It was then that Fred Spangle began to get impatient. "When's that kangaroo going to box for me?" he asked Ludwig every other day.

And every other day, Ludwig said the same thing. "He'll box when he's ready."

"Either that animal boxes or he's lion food," hollered Fred one morning.

Ludwig had turned to Lord Rowley and looked into his bright brown eyes. "That animal means what he says," he said.

Lord Rowley looked back. *Why should I bother?*

"Bother or you're in bits," said Ludwig.

Ellen had been standing in the empty tent when Ludwig led Lord Rowley into the ring. They both wore boxing gloves. She watched in amazement as Ludwig sidled up to the kangaroo and punched him on the nose.

The kangaroo was outraged. He jerked upright and began making stabbing movements with his forelegs, which looked as if he was boxing because of the leather mitts tied to the ends. Ludwig hopped around him, aiming punches but making sure not to hit him. The more punches Ludwig aimed, the more Lord Rowley tried to punch back.

"So you can box after all, my Lord Rowley!" cried Ludwig. "Congratulations! The lion will be disappointed!" As he spoke he pulled out a large handful of fresh grass from his pocket and waved it in front of the kangaroo's nose.

After a moment's hesitation, Lord Rowley ate it.

Ellen stepped out of the shadows. "How did you know he would eat the grass?"

"Because he thinks he's won!" Ludwig bowed to the kangaroo and fed it more grass. "He thinks I'm paying him a tribute." For a split second Ludwig looked into Ellen's face. "What he *thinks* is the important thing."

*

Now, as Ellen stood on the cobbled street and watched a coalman's cart rumble noisily past her, she thought of what she had learned that day. Ludwig always said there was nothing much to choose between people and animals. They all had their funny habits. The trick was to find out what they were and turn them to use.

The next day Ellen had engaged the services of Alfred Montmorency.

As for Fred Spangle, he thought he saw a new acceptance in his daughter's manner and was sure he had done the right thing by burning her books.