

The Case of the VANISHING GRANNY



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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

With illustrations by Sam Usher

Conkers



First published in 2019 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-857-2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



For Ivy Rose





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CHAPTER 1

Meet the Shortbreads

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a circus? Most people visit a circus for the show, stay there until it is finished, and then go home again. But some people – circus people – live there. They go to sleep in their circus caravans and when they wake up they have their breakfast with the circus all around them. If you ask them

whether they enjoy it, don't be surprised if they say something like, "This is by far the best life there is – there's nothing to beat living in a circus."



This is the story of three children who lived in a circus. Their names were Billy, who was the oldest, his sister, Fern, who was the one in the middle, and Joe, who was the youngest. Their father and mother were called Henry and Doris Shortbread, and the circus was called "Shortbreads' Great, Amazing and Wonderful Circus". They were a very happy family, not only because they all liked one another a great deal, but also because they all enjoyed what they did.



"I love being the ringmaster of my circus," said Henry Shortbread. "I love getting dressed up in my red coat and top hat. I love every moment of it."

Doris Shortbread agreed with her husband. "I love being part of the circus too," she said. "I love selling the tickets in



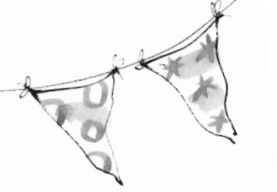
the booth and counting up the money at the end. I love seeing the smiles on people's faces as they leave after the show. I love all that – I really do."

"We love the circus too," said Billy.

"Yes," said Fern. "We do."

"And me too," said Joe. "Don't forget about me. I'm glad I was born a circus boy."

There were many other people who worked in the Shortbreads' Circus, and they all lived in caravans that travelled with the circus as it moved from town to town. The Shortbread family's caravan was the biggest of these, and it always led the others when the time came for everybody to go on the road. This caravan had three bedrooms in it. One of these was for Mr and Mrs Shortbread, one was for Fern, and the other



was for Billy and Joe, who shared. The boys did not mind sharing as long as they both cleared away their dirty socks and did not leave them lying on the floor.

Because they moved when the circus moved, it was hard for the Shortbread children to go to school. In fact, it was impossible. That was all right when they were very small, but as they reached an age when they had to learn to read and write, something had to be done to find a teacher.

Fortunately, Mr Birdcage, a clown who worked in the circus, had been a teacher before he became a clown.

"I always wanted to be a clown," he explained. "I started off being a teacher, but when I discovered that I was rather good at being a



clown, I decided to make the change. And I did, and here I am."

Mr and Mrs Shortbread asked Mr Birdcage whether he would mind teaching their children all the things they needed to learn.



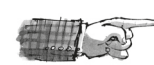
"I would be delighted to do that," said Mr Birdcage.

"You can have a special caravan as their classroom," suggested Mr Shortbread.

"That will be perfect," said Mr Birdcage.

And so that was how the children went to school – to their own school, in its special caravan, with a clown as their teacher. What could be more fun than that?

Circuses used to keep wild animals and train them to do tricks. Some even used to have lions, which they would lock in cages with strong bars. The lions would come into the ring and be made to jump through hoops and sit on upturned barrels. They would snarl at the lion tamers who would



make them do all this, and they were often very unhappy. So, it was decided that in future there would be no wild animals like that in circuses, because it was too cruel. Would you like to be kept in a cage and made to jump through hoops? No? Neither would I, and so you and I both agree that wild animals should not be kept in circuses.

This does not mean that dogs and horses should not be part of a circus. These animals are used to living with people and can be perfectly happy putting on a show. The Shortbreads' Circus had three very beautiful dancing horses, as well as a popular dog act. Dogs love showing off, and these dogs always looked forward to their part in the show.

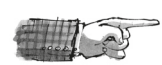


There was also a cat. This cat, whose name was Leo, belonged to the Shortbread family and lived in their caravan. He was a strange-looking cat who often caused people to stop and stare when they saw him.

"There's something odd about that cat," somebody said. "Look at his fur and how long it is around his head – rather like a lion's mane. And look at his handsome long tail and his big claws ..."

"He looks rather like a tiny lion," somebody else observed.

Leo did not have a job in the circus, but he loved to wander into the tent – the big top, as it was called – when the show was in progress. Then, before anybody could stop him, he would leap into the ring and pretend to be a circus lion,



roaring at the top of his voice – not that he could really roar – and making everybody laugh.



"So, this circus has a lion after all," one person said. "They have a very tiny lion."

"But that's just a cat," said another. "A cat who thinks he's a lion!"

Billy would usually retrieve Leo from the ring and take him back to their caravan.

"You stay there," he said, and Leo would open his mouth to roar. But all that ever came out was a mew, and that was not enough to frighten anybody. So, Leo would just curl up on his favourite chair and dream about what it would be like to be a real lion, with a real roar and with big teeth that would scare everybody the moment he opened his mouth. Cats dream about that sort of thing, and it must be a bit disappointing for them when they wake up and discover they are still cats. But Leo, like everybody in the circus, was happy, and so he would not worry too much about all that.

