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Opening extract from

Circus of Thieves and the Raffle of Doom

Written by

William Sutcliffe

Illustrated by

David Tazzyman

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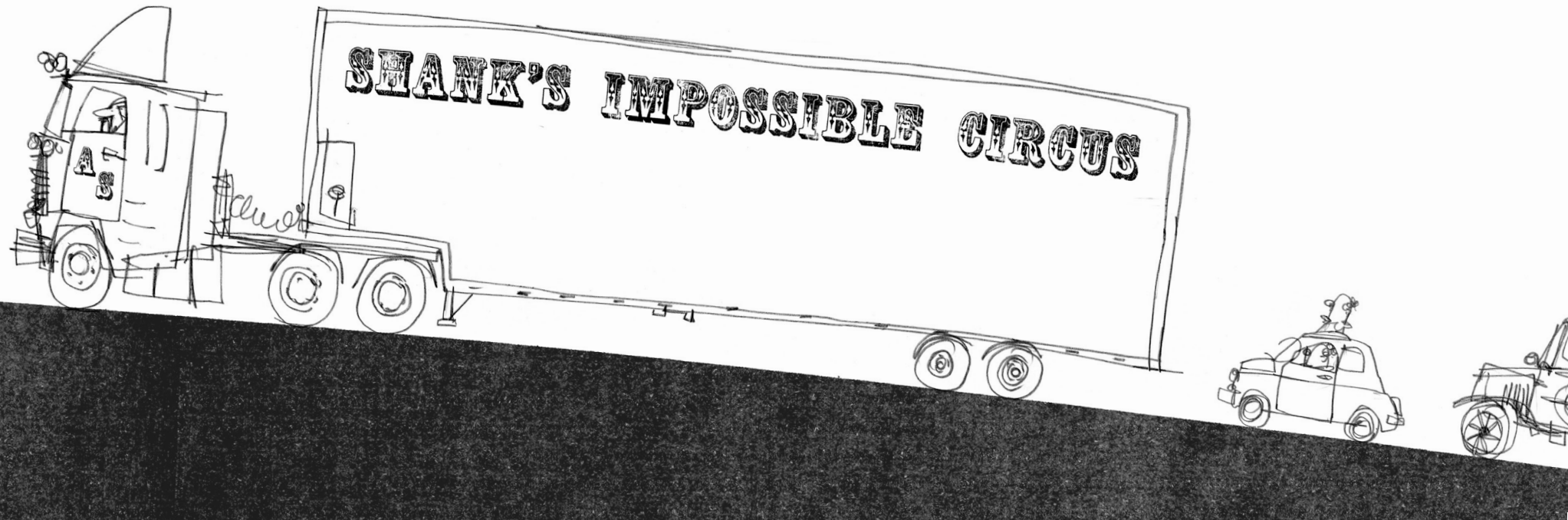
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ONE

A boy on a camel

IT STARTED WITH A RUMBLE and a clatter and a faint trembling of the air. At first, only the animals noticed.

Fluffypants McBain, the tabby cat from the Post Office, moved one ear towards the noise, thought for a second, and having established that the sound did not indicate the arrival of food, went back to sleep. Magnificat, the far-too-pleased-with-himself Bengal from the pub, who had stolen all of Fluffypants' territory except for half a windowsill,

turned his head towards the unusual noise and immediately calculated that it was being made by a large group of humans travelling in unusually shaped vehicles. The real puzzle was a faint clip-clopping, to the rhythm of hooves, but without the hardness of a horse or a cow. This was something else. Something loping and tall. Magnificat raised his tail in a look-how-beautiful-I-am way and looked around, to see if anyone else had noticed or interpreted the sounds wafting into town.

Of course they hadn't. It really was tedious to live in a place where everyone else was so much less intelligent (not to mention less beautiful) than oneself.

He yawned and stretched – for a second feeling the urge for a doze, a meal, a cuddle and a fight, all at once – then prowled on down the high street, in search of something else to do. This large, mysteriously-hooved creature, he decided, was probably best avoided.

Fizzer was the next to notice. Fizzer ought to have been an astronomer or a nuclear physicist or at the very least a university professor, but unfortunately these career paths hadn't opened up to him, so he had to settle for being a dog. He knew something big and important was arriving, and he suspected it might change the whole town forever, but at this moment there were several trees on his morning walk that he'd not yet sniffed, and this vital task simply had to be finished before he could set about researching the identity of the intruders. It's amazing what you can find out from sniffing a tree, specially if you happen to be Fizzer. He considered himself to be the town's unofficial police dog, and the trees of the high street were his private CCTV network. Just half an hour of careful sniffing, and Fizzer knew exactly who had been where and when (and what they'd eaten for breakfast).

Hannah was the first human to notice that

something was up. She was busy doing an experiment with flying fish (not real ones, paper ones) to see whether big ones or small ones fly furthest when you drop them out of your bedroom window,[☺] when she felt the trembling of the air and heard the clatter and rumble that had twitched Fluffypants' ear, raised Magnificat's tail and diverted Fizzer from his tree sniffing. Hannah, being just a human, didn't have any idea what this sound might indicate, but being a human in possession of an unusually perceptive and curious brain, she knew it was her task to find out. She also knew this job was urgent, far too urgent to leave time for such boring things as breakfast and getting dressed.

She ran downstairs in her pyjamas, jumped into a pair of wellies, shouted to her Mum something along the lines of, 'Mumble mumble mumble shop mumble mumble BACK SOON BYEEE!' and darted out of the front door.

☺Answer: small ones.

Almost immediately, she passed Fizzer, who looked up from a particularly rich and fascinating tree trunk, noticed Hannah's speed and unusual outfit, and gave her a quizzical but knowing look which seemed to say, "Are you going to check out that noise?"

She paused and scratched him between the ears,[🐕] a gesture which Fizzer took to mean, 'Yes. Do you want to come, or are you too busy reading your pee-mails?'



🐕 Note to non-dog people: this is friendly. Dogs like it. Note to non-human people: humans don't like it. Scratching humans between the ears is not considered friendly and shouldn't be attempted without asking permission first.

Fizzer raised his head, reluctantly withdrawing his nostrils from the quite exquisite odour left by Princess (the precious, prancing, primped poodle who presided over her prized pack of panicky puppies in a palatial parlour on Privet Place) and shook his bottom, which in Fizzer's language meant, 'Why not?' or, more specifically, 'I wasn't going to bother, but I like a spot of company, so let's go.'

They headed off together, along the high street, through the rows of small red-brick houses that circled the town, then out into open fields, with Hannah running as fast as she could and Fizzer walking as slowly as he was able without feeling like he was going backwards.

Fizzer often felt sorry for humans. It must be incredibly frustrating to have to do everything *so slowly*, and to be practically blind, nose-wise, not to mention half deaf and totally ignorant about everything of any real importance. If it wasn't for their ability to open tins of dog food, humans would be almost completely useless. He liked Hannah, though. She was much less dumb than the rest of them.

Just past the level crossing, Hannah and Fizzer saw something that made them stop dead, almost



as if they had both crashed into an invisible glass wall. Weaving down a narrow, rutted road that was normally only used by tractors, rabbits and lost hikers was the strangest and most extraordinary procession of vehicles and animals either of them had ever come across.

At the front was a camel. On top of the camel was a boy dressed from head to toe in purple velvet, singing at the top of his voice. Behind the camel was an elephant, which was being ridden by a man who was lying on his back, fast asleep. Behind that was a camper van with two deck chairs on the roof, containing a man in a leotard who seemed to be waxing his moustache, and a woman wearing what was either three thimbles tied together with string, or a very skimpy bikini. The camper van was towing a caravan, which was towing another caravan, which was towing another caravan. It was, you could say, a caravan of

caravans. Behind that was a huge articulated lorry,[1] painted with rainbows and butterflies and flowers and ice cream and smiley faces and shooting stars and dancing puppies. Emblazoned on the side in chunky 3D letters were the words

SHANK'S IMPOSSIBLE CIRCUS.

'It's the circus!' cried Hannah.

'*Мунии*,' replied Fizzer, sarcastically, meaning, 'Thanks for explaining.'

Hannah spun round on the heel of her wellies and began to run back towards town, shouting, 'It's the circus! It's the circus! It's the circus!'

Fizzer stayed put, knowing she was about to change her mind.

Hannah stopped. An amazing, incredible thought had just popped into her brain. The camel! The boy! One camel, one boy, *two* humps. She could ask for a lift! OK, so the pyjama and welly combo wasn't exactly ideal for hitchhiking, but the boy

[1] This does not mean a lorry that talks posh. That would be an articulate lorry, which is another matter altogether. An articulated lorry is one that bends in the middle, which has no bearing on the vehicle's verbal skills. All humans bend in the middle, as you probably know, yet some are far more articulate than others. Penguins do not bend in the middle, and are also strikingly inarticulate, but their lack of bendiness is probably not to blame.

was basically dressed in a pair of curtains, so she didn't think he'd be too bothered. And as for the rest of the town, who on earth would notice your clothes when you were riding a camel?

She turned and ran back to tell Fizzer about her fantastic idea, but saw immediately in his eyes and the tilt of his head that he'd figured it all out already. Hannah didn't like feeling patronised by a dog so, as they stood and waited for the camel, she decided to make up a fact designed to impress him.

'Circuses are famous for picking up hitch-hikers,' she said in a school-teachery voice. 'It's an ancient custom of the circus community.'

Fizzer raised one eyebrow. He was unconvinced.

'It's true,' said Hannah. 'I read a book about it.'

Fizzer lowered the other eyebrow. It was almost impossible to impress Fizzer with anything, least of all with made-up facts, which his

encyclopaedically intelligent nose seemed to sniff out with unerring accuracy.

'Here's the camel!' said Hannah, who had realised it was time to change the subject.

As the procession approached, three things became clear. First, that the boy's song was about an ant from Antarctica, a cat from Catalonia and a phoenix from Phoenix; second, that his singing voice was so loud and out-of-tune and lacking in any sense of rhythm that it was enough to make nearby plants wilt in horror; and third, that despite the plant-wilting tunelessness of his melody, this boy sang with all the joy and gusto of an operatic maestro performing to a thousand adoring fans. As a result, there was something weirdly, uglily♫ beautiful about it.

Only when the boy was directly in front of Hannah and Fizzer did he stop singing, much to the relief of the local plant life, which quickly

♫ Uglily isn't a word. You know that. I know that. Let's just move on.

pinged back upwards towards the sun.

'Ho, there!' he said to his camel, pulling the reins, halting his big beige bulbous beast. The boy looked Hannah up and down slowly, starting with her wellies and working his eyes upwards. 'Nice pyjamas,' he said, eventually.

'Thanks,' replied Hannah. 'Nice camel.'

'He's called Narcissus,' said the boy. 'And if I made a list of a hundred words to describe him, I reckon "nice" would be at the bottom.'

Narcissus raised his droopy lips, showing a murky keyboard of long yellow teeth, and spat out a blob of camel goo which landed with a splat on Hannah's left welly.

'See?' said the boy. 'But that doesn't mean I don't love him. Why be nice when you can be a camel?' He patted its hairy neck and the camel farted appreciatively. At that moment, like a strange echo, the enormous lorry let out an enormous honk.

'That's my dad,' said the boy. 'Driving that lorry turns him into a total . . . oop.' The lorry's second honk drowned out a mysterious cluster of syllables, but it was pretty clear to Hannah that the boy wasn't complimenting his dad's driving.

'Do you want a lift?' the boy asked.

'Yes, please,' said Hannah. 'How do I get on?'

'Willpower, strength and good luck,' he replied, from his high perch.

'Oh, I've got all of those,' said Hannah. 'Watch this.'

With that, she turned, ran a few steps, climbed the nearest tree and edged along a branch that overhung the road. 'You step forward, I'll jump on,' she instructed.

'That's not how we usually do it,' the boy said, hesitantly, 'but I'll try anything once.'

Fizzer raised one eyebrow again and stepped back, away from the fall-out zone.

Narcissus yawned as Billy edged him into position. It took a lot to surprise Narcissus. A girl dressed in pyjamas and wellies was about to jump out of a tree and use him as a landing mat – so what? Even if this was the most ill-advised, badly-planned and likeliest-to-end-in-injury attempt to mount a camel that he had ever encountered – big deal.

While Hannah prepared herself for the jump, Narcissus drifted off again, back to his favourite daydream, which was, as always, about taramasalata.

'Ready?' said Hannah. '3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .'



The exact thing Hannah wanted to be more than anything else in the world

THE MANOEUVRE didn't exactly go to plan, what with Hannah landing backwards on top of the boy's head, flattening him and wedging his face into a camel hump with her bum on his right ear. As Hannah tried to squirm herself into position, she heard a muffled voice say, 'The thing you're sitting on isn't a saddle. It's my head.'

Eventually, she got herself up onto the rear hump and the boy, looking only slightly squashed-faced, congratulated her on her inventiveness.