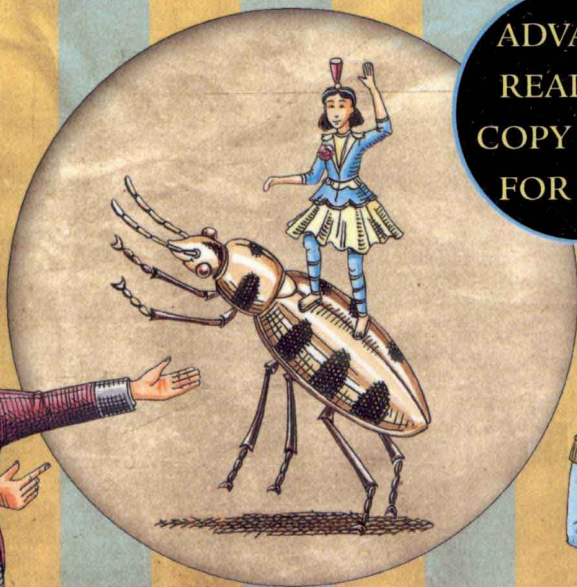


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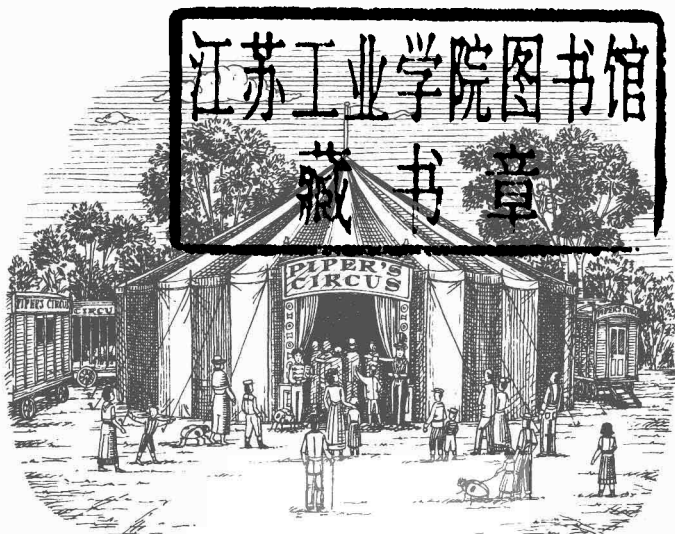


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For Dinkie and Beebop



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I raise the roof and throw my hat in the air as high as I can for Robin for being so enthused by the show that he encouraged me to write this story, be my agent, and find a publisher.

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.....HEATH.....

CHAPTER I

MY TWELFTH BIRTHDAY, IN THE JUNE of that long hot summer, was a day I will never forget. Among the many wondrous presents I received, Daisy gave me a small jewel-framed signaling mirror and from Grimwade the clown came a handwritten booklet entitled *Sharpen Your Skittling Skills, the Grimwade Way*. "I know it's good," he told me proudly, "because I wrote it myself." But the very best gift of all was from my grandfather, the great insect circus ringmaster Sir Henry Piper. He presented me with a beautiful brass spyglass, and I do firmly believe that had he not, my grandfather and I would have met our doom within the week.



“Art,” he said to me in his slow, deep voice, “You look after this here telescopic eyepiece. In former times, it belonged to your great-grandfather, George, the founder of our illustrious traveling circus, and it’s a fine and an ancient instrument. You must use it only for purposes that are to the good, for it would not be wise, and I have not given it to you, to go spying upon your friends and neighbors, as you may see things that could lead you into trouble. Instead, it is for your greater enjoyment of the wonders of the sky at night.”

Well, I was as happy as a bug in butter, for I was fond of staring up into the night sky. I took great pleasure in observing the Milky Way and tracing the constellations with my outstretched finger: the Great Snail; Picus, the Water Beetle; the Nymph; and all the rest. My favorite was the Great Snail as, unlike most boys of my age, I had a great snail of my own to care for. Her name was Sylvia and, as well as dancing nightly in our mighty circus, she pulled our family caravan from town to town to the performance ground that is known in circus circles as the tober.

My bed was high up in the rafters of my family’s

caravan, in the roof space called the mollycroft, and I would often lie awake for hours looking out the little windows at the starry sky. On especially mild nights Daisy and I, with my trusty pet ladybug, Rufus, for company, were allowed to sleep outdoors all tucked up between the caravans and the fire, viewing the stars above.

Daisy was the daughter of Chester Cheyne, the circus bandmaster. She was a most accomplished bareback beetle rider, and her act was one of the highlights of the show. As Sorrel, her trusty steed, raced around the ring, Daisy would balance upon Sorrel's back, skipping and jumping through a hoop.

She was my closest friend, for we had grown up together. When we arrived at a new tober we would arrange to have our caravans parked in view of each other. Daisy slept in the mollycroft of her own family's wagon, and over the years we had devised a system of signaling to each other from our beds using mirrors. We flashed the reflected light of the moon back and forth between us, using an alphabetic code of our own invention.

The night of my birthday party was clear but cold, and since we could not sleep out under the stars we retired to our beds. When I wished Daisy good night, she said to me with a smile, "Now, you're not to go spying on me in my sleep through your new telescope, Art, for that wouldn't be right and proper."

"I never would," I answered her honestly, for it had not even occurred to me to do so.

Up in my bed I signaled a good night to Daisy with the new mirror she had given to me, and she wished me the same in return.

I looked again through all my wonderful presents until I came to the spyglass. It was made of fine brass tubing, and when outstretched it was as long as my arm but when pushed closed it could fit neatly into my pocket. I pulled it open and trained it on the sky above. What sights met my eye! The stars with which I was familiar shone so brightly, I could barely look at them, and thousands upon thousands of new wonders were made visible to me.

As I traced the glittering outline of the Great Snail's shell, a fiery shooting star came into view. Following its

downward trail I saw it drop behind a wood, where, to my surprise, a strange sight lay before me. There at the base of a tall tree, some way down the lane, our Agent in Advance, Seth Midden (as common a fly as you can imagine), was in conversation with another fly and a menacing black and yellow creature. I knew it could be nothing other than a wasp!



Now, a wasp was a creature that I had never seen before, but I had heard many tales of their evil temper and I knew that a sting from one could prove fatal. I also knew that it was unwise to mention wasps in Grandfather's company, as he would fly into a great

rage and cuss, complaining of how they had been the cause of the breakup of the great Piper Family Circus.

So this was a most curious thing: our trusted agent in company with a wasp. I determined to keep a watchful eye on Seth, as I feared that he was up to no good.

With my eye still fixed to my telescope, I looked to see if Daisy was awake, for I wanted to share with her what I had just seen. The walls around her bed were covered with colorful rosettes and pictures of famous circus beetles and their riders, and as I ranged across them Daisy's face suddenly filled the spyglass. She blushed and looked very cross and in an instant pulled her curtains closed.

So, this is how I am ashamed to say that I took to using my spyglass for spying, and Grandfather was most certainly right, for a whole mess of trouble is what I got into.

CHAPTER 2

IT WAS THE AGENT IN ADVANCE'S JOB TO travel ahead of the circus to find tobers and make arrangements for water and provision for the animals and such. He was also responsible for hanging posters around the towns and villages in advertisement of the forthcoming attraction. The success or failure of a touring circus depended on the cunning and skill of its agent.

Since the early days of the traveling insect shows, it has been the practice to employ flies for this purpose. They are active, hardworking creatures, and although they are not sociable apart from with their own kind, they love nothing better than the sights and smells of the circus environment.

As there is an intense rivalry between traveling circuses, so there is between agents. And if rival flies happen upon each other on the road, a bundle is certain to ensue. Therefore, one of Seth's principal jobs was to spy out other circus agents and gain advantage over them by tearing down their posters and replacing them with our own.

Seth was most able at his work, and he had served my grandfather and my great-grandfather before him well over the years. It was through his hard work and diligence that much of my family's success resulted. I think that this very success is what turned him against us, for as our fortunes increased, Seth's remained the same.



It was common for Seth to be away for several days at a time conducting business before reporting to Grandfather, and I decided that I must discover if he was up to mischief while on his travels around the countryside. I would have liked to follow him myself, but I would quickly have been missed and so had to remain in camp. How was I to find out Seth's intent and the reason he was keeping company with a wasp? I wanted to tell Daisy what I had seen, but she didn't see my signals through her closed curtains.

Rufus and I fell to discussing the matter while trying to get to sleep. In the end it was my ladybug friend who came up with a plan.

"We ladybugs all look alike to most people," he said. "And since it's not uncommon to find us roaming free in the countryside, I wouldn't attract attention to myself while in pursuit of our agent. There are lots of ladybugs in our circus, so another could take my place by your side and I'd surely not be missed."

And so we decided that Rufus would follow Seth to keep an ear and eye upon him.

CHAPTER 3

FIRST THING THE NEXT MORNING we went to tell Daisy what I had seen. She was easy to find. Banging an enormous drum, with Queenie, the band bee, humming and drumming alongside, she accompanied the band, who were practicing in full swing.

The blare of brass and scrape of grasshopper were, this early in the day, accompanied by shouts and curses from neighboring caravans. Grandfather, however, was loving it. Standing on the steps of his wagon, dressed in his finest suit, he tapped his cane in time with the music.

Rufus and I joined in. During a break I whispered, “Daisy, I need to talk to you. I wanted to tell you last