

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STARRING THE CHIEF!

They bought their tickets and then, as they had about half-an-hour before the show started, they walked around the pier and looked at the stalls. Aunt Fifi bought some more silver chains to hang round her neck - Joe reckoned that if she wore much more she would weigh so much she would go through the wooden deck of the pier! He thought that another reason she didn't fly anywhere on holiday was that if she went through one of the metal detectors at the airport she would set off so many alarms that the police would think an army of knights in full armour was trying to get on a plane! She bought Sarah some silver chain necklaces too. Sarah was rather proud of them and chimed a bit like her Aunt when she moved.

"You better not wear them too much at home," said Aunt Fifi. "Your parents will think I've got too much influence on you!"

Then it was time for the show. Rather surprisingly, there seemed to be fair bit of spare space in the theatre - they had seats near the front despite having bought their tickets late. By no means all the seats were sold, yet the show was pretty good. There were singers, dancers and bright spangly costumes, all the things that a good show should have. There was a juggler who amazed Joe and Sarah really liked the dancers, who first appeared all in silver spangles and kicked their legs in the air as they linked arms across the stage, then later danced in swirling Spanish costumes, clicking castanets in time to the music, and finally danced to electric guitars in a wild whirling frenzy, the girls thrown in the air by their partners, who (luckily) caught them when they came down.

"They're pretty good," whispered Aunt Fifi. "A bit more practice and some better costumes and they could be top class."

"I'd like to do that when I grow up," said Sarah.

"Don't you dare let your dad hear you say that!" giggled Aunt Fifi. "Actually, it was seeing something like this that made me want to become a dancer."

A man in a loud check suit introduced each act and told some jokes. He was pretty good and he introduced himself at the beginning as the manager. He was brash, breezy and confident - until he got towards the end of the show. Then Joe noticed that he was starting to look hot and rather flustered. The idea was that the best came at the end, or so Aunt Fifi said. With an air of desperation, the manager announced Jolly Wiz the Magical Comedian! There was a light spattering of polite applause and the curtain rose.

Joe noticed that the manager walked off into the wings mopping his brow and shaking his head. Jolly Wiz was a rotund, moon-faced man, with a shock of red hair, a fixed grin and a look of panic in his eyes. He wore a shiny gold suit and he introduced a plump lady who only just fitted into

her spangly costume as his assistant, “the Delightful Linda”. His act consisted of magic tricks and jokes - and the problems began almost immediately. He wasn’t a bad magician but his jokes were awful - even Joe had heard them all before - and as each one fell flatter and flatter, with hardly a ripple of laughter, so he got more and more nervous and his tricks went wrong. Pigeons flew out of his pockets when they shouldn’t have done, he dropped things instead of making them disappear and when he shuffled some cards he managed to scatter them all over the stage. The “Delightful Linda” did her best but her expression grew glassy-eyed and her smile became a fixed and rather ghastly grimace. The audience was getting restless and Aunt Fifi was tutting under her breath, both Joe and Sarah were fidgeting and Joe wondered just what Thunder Head was making of all this and where he was. He looked round. It wasn’t a big theatre and there were plenty of spare seats - he could have been anywhere. Then Sarah gasped and pulled at his arm.

“Joe!” she whispered. “Look!”

Joe turned round and looked at the stage - and it was his turn to gasp. The Chief was visible now, standing at the back of the stage, yawning mightily in boredom. Then he put his finger up his nose - and the audience laughed. Jolly was so unused to anyone laughing that he looked startled and dropped a goldfish bowl full of plastic goldfish that he was trying to make disappear on to his toe. He began hopping round in pain and the audience laughed even more. The “Delightful Linda” didn’t know what to do and then Jolly hopped on to her toe and she started hopping around too. The audience howled in delight - it was the first time that they had done so since Jolly’s act began but somehow he didn’t seem very pleased.

Jolly turned round and saw the chief, who was now laughing himself, and shouted “You great oaf! You’ve ruined my act!”

Now it just happened that there was going to be a reception in the theatre for the mayor and councillors who had been attending the charity event. Hidden in the wings at one side of the stage was a table, loaded with the sort of things that civic dignitaries like to nibble when they attend these events, including cheese cakes and cream puffs. Still limping, Jolly stumbled against the table, saw the stuff on it and grabbed the first thing that came to hand - a big, round cheese cake topped with cream. He threw it at the Chief who ducked like a professional and the cake caught the “Delightful Linda” full in the face as she hopped round the stage at the back of the chief. Jolly looked round for something else to throw and the Chief, angry that his full ceremonial head-dress was going to be a target for more cream missiles, whipped out the hatchet he carried in a leather case on his belt.

“Act ruined long before I appear!” he roared, and lunged at Jolly. The magician yelped and dodged out the way. With the audience in fits of laughter, the Chief chased Jolly round the stage. He reached out a long arm and grabbed Jolly’s hair - and it came off in his hand! It was a wig! Jolly put both hands up to his completely bald head with a horrified expression on his face and the Chief looked with delight at the trophy in his hand and began a wild war dance! The audience were now hysterical and Joe had laughed so much that his sides were aching. On the stage, the “Delightful Linda” had wiped the cream and cheesecake from her eyes and, furious, picked up a cream puff from the table and hurled it Jolly, catching him full face. Through the howling laughter and screams of delight from the audience, Joe heard a voice in the wings hissing desperately, “Bring down the curtain! Bring down the curtain!”

Aunt Fifi grabbed the two helpless children and dragged them with her, almost doubled up herself with giggles, through a little door that lead backstage, to see if they could rescue the Chief. As they reached the wings, they saw the manager yelling at Jolly that he was fired and to the Chief that he would have him arrested. The “Delightful Linda” was in tears and Jolly looked like a deflated golden balloon. Only the Chief stood, impassive amidst the mayhem. As the manager stopped and paused for breath Thunder Head said, “You talk cow pats! Listen!” and he held up his hand.

The manager shut his mouth with a snap and Jolly and Linda listened intently because they heard a very unfamiliar sound indeed. Long, sustained clapping, whistling, stamping and laughter and above all, calls for “More! More!”

“You ever heard that before?” asked the Chief.

Jolly shook his head, dumb with amazement. Linda looked flabbergasted and the manager rapidly pulled himself together.

“Right! take a bow!” he ordered, running off into the wings. “Raise the curtain!” he barked.

“Now you talk sense,” nodded the Chief, and he took Jolly and Linda by the hand and lead them to the front of the stage as the curtain rose. A triumphant Thunder Head bowed to thunderous applause and turned and clapped Jolly and Linda himself as the applause grew even louder. An amazed Jolly stood, beaming in the footlights and bowed along with Linda. At the Chief’s prompting they bowed again and again. The curtain came down and still the audience clapped. The Chief whispered instructions to Linda and Jolly - only Linda seemed to really take it in and when at the Chief’s signal the curtain rose again, the pair of them began a wild war dance, whooping up and down the stage. Jolly rapidly caught on and began to dance about himself, making whooping noises and waving his wig, which the chief had returned to him. They threw the wig from one to the other as the audience erupted into laughter and more applause. Then the Chief signalled the manager, the curtain fell, and as the clapping still continued, it rose again, but this time, the Chief had stepped smartly into he wings and left Jolly and Linda to take a bow alone. To continued acclaim, the curtain came down again, and a perspiring Jolly walked off into the wings with a breathless Linda behind him, in tears again, but laughing as well.

The manager greeted them. “That’s the best you’ve ever gone down!” he said to Jolly. “You’ll have to put it in the act.” He turned to the Chief. “I’ll take you on; good wages, contract for the rest of the season. What do you say?”

The Chief shook his head. “One performance only!” he said. “Have weeks engagement at Hackney Empire!”

Jolly suddenly looked deflated again and the manager’s face fell, but the Chief continued, “But maybe we can spice up act a bit. Have much experience on stage. Come, we have pow-wow! Friends here will join us. Madame Fifi also great performer on stage - much acclaimed in Paris.”

They all went to Jolly and Linda’s dressing room, behind the theatre. It was small room, rather dark and there were no windows. The lighting was provided by a bare bulb in the ceiling and a few bulbs around the cracked mirror that was fixed to the wall above a battered dressing table. Jolly’s props were scattered about the room and after the Chief, Linda, Jolly and Aunt Fifi had found chairs, all that was left for the children to sit down on was an old travelling trunk.

“Dressing rooms haven’t changed much,” said Aunt Fifi, looking round. “I played some of the plushiest places in Paris but backstage it was just like this.”

“Me too,” said the Chief. “Perform in front of crowned heads and then have to take make-up off in pigsty!”

“It’s about par for the course,” agreed Jolly. “You don’t mind so much if the act goes well and the pay is reasonable, but to be honest, I was thinking of packing it all in and becoming a bus driver. It’s been a rotten season so far.”

“The manager was right,” sighed Linda. “That’s the best we’ve ever gone anywhere. Everything’s gone wrong!” and she began to sniff again.

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” said Jolly to Thunder Head, passing Linda a tissue. She blew her nose loudly into it.

“Me afraid so,” said the Chief. “Days of performing twice nightly and matinees long gone. But you listen - act not so bad. Tricks good but jokes terrible! They were old when me on stage! Tricks are best thing in act - but make them go wrong! Then make joke! Blame squaw here for tricks going moose-shaped and have big finish like we just did.”

“How do you mean?” asked Jolly, but Linda was quicker on the uptake.

“Like just now,” she said, “Say it’s all my fault and throw something - I could dress as Red Indian and have an axe or whatever that thing is our friends got, and I could go for you and pull your wig off!”

“This tomahawk,” said the chief, taking the hatchet out of its case. “Any old hatchet will do - just paint handle. You getting right idea!” he said to Linda and he turned to Jolly. “You listen to squaw here! She got head screwed on right! Could be basis of good act!”

“How do you know all this,” asked a bemused Jolly. “What did you do in show business?”

“Me with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show!” said the Chief proudly. “Tour all over world. Play before Crowned Heads of Europe and Glasgow Empire. Me star of show once Sitting Bull leave. Me trick-rider, shoot bow, dance, sing and act in big finish. Heap good act!”

Aunt Fifi raised her eyebrows and looked at the children who were wide eyed with wonder. They had no idea the Chief was so famous! “I didn’t know all that!” said Aunt Fifi.

“Where were you in the business?” Linda asked Aunt Fifi.

“I was a dancer in Paris,” she answered. “I was in the Follies and some of the best shows in town.”

“Could you teach me a few steps so I could do a bit of an Indian dance?” asked Linda. “And perhaps suggest a costume for me so I could look like an Indian princess?”

Aunt Fifi agreed and the Chief nodded his head vigorously, “Heap good idea!” he said. “Magic man need to listen to you!”

Jolly sighed. “I’ll try anything,” he said. “I wanted to change the act a while ago - I suggested knife-throwing but Linda here wouldn’t agree.”

“I’m not surprised!” said Aunt Fifi.

“After the way his nerves made the tricks go wrong when the act didn’t go down well, there was no way I was going to trust him with knives!” said Linda.

“Very wise,” nodded the Chief. “After me leave Buffalo Bill me suggest tomahawk-throwing act to Squaw but she say only if she do the throwing!”

“Can I show you some of the tricks and then you can suggest what I ought to do?” asked Jolly.

While Aunt Fifi had a word with Linda in another dressing room, and the Chief took Jolly through his act, Sarah and Joe went off to play on the sands, giggling as they remembered Jolly's act and talking over the Chief's triumphs with Buffalo Bill.

"I wonder how long ago that was," said Joe. "He's been all over the place by the sound of it."

"How on earth did he ever become a spirit guide?" asked Sarah.

"I wonder how he ended up on the Other Side," said Joe. "He said he didn't feel dead. I've been thinking that everyone on the Other Side - all the people Aunt Fifi contacts - are dead. That's why I felt it was so creepy. Now I'm not so sure."

Sarah nodded and said, "And if you remember, old Lief said he had a spirit guide too - Alphonse Hadrian!" She was silent a minute or two and then went on, "We've both been seeing all these strange things. We thought it must be one of us but it looks as if it's both of us that can see them. I wonder if we'll end up with a spirit guide? I hope it's someone a bit less dippy than Alphonse."

"I wonder what the Other Side is like?" said Joe, and then he changed the subject. "Do you think Aunt Fifi and the Chief will be able to help Jolly?"

"I hope so," said Sarah. "I liked him. I felt sorry for him because nothing he did worked."

"Yes," agreed Joe, "so did I. But his jokes were terrible! Even I wouldn't tell them!"

Aunt Fifi arrived. "Time for tea" she said. "The Chief's gone back to the Other Side and we've given Jolly and Linda a few ideas. Tell you what, we could go to the theatre again in a day or two and see how they're going. The manager will give us free tickets if it's going well!"

Joe and Sarah liked the idea of that and they all went off for tea. For the next few days Joe had the best holiday he could remember - and so did Sarah. They played on the beach, sailed their yachts, swam in the sea and built lots of sandcastles. Aunt Fifi had a good time too, relaxing on the beach, reading - something a bit lighter than the massive books she usually read. The weather stayed fine - and the Chief didn't make another appearance. The odd twisted signs in pebbles, seaweed and clouds stopped - somewhat to Joe's relief. As he said, he was beginning to look for signs in his chips and Sarah said she was worried about eating spaghetti - one of her favourites - in case the strands all twisted up into some huge spiral shape.

They looked in on Jolly Wiz towards the end of the holiday. They first had an ice cream on the pier and watched from the railings as a huge flock of birds flew over the sea after a shoal of fish just under the waves. As they admired the birds, swooping up and down as if they were one great creature instead of hundreds of individual seagulls, the flock formed a long line and then as the birds flew in and out in tight formation, the line coiled, twisted and curled in a great animated spiral, bewildering in its speed as the birds flashed here and there. The spiral spun in a mystifying, almost hypnotic way and then just as the entire flock seemed about to hurtle into the cliffs, the birds all turned and once again went in search of the fish, as if they were suddenly reminded of why they had been flying about in the first place.

"Oh dear!" sighed Aunt Fifi. "It's back! I do wish I knew what it all meant. I feel I should know - it seems to be some kind of warning but what on earth we're being warned about, I really don't know!"

Then they went in to the show - and the manager greeted them with a beaming smile and gave them free tickets. It was as well that he did. The place was packed and they would never have been able to buy a ticket because the queue at the ticket office was huge! Suddenly the show was really

popular. They sat at the back, but the view was good, and once they were sat down Joe noticed that, unlike the last time, there was a buzz of expectation in the air. The manager did his introductions, seeming far more relaxed although the show was actually much like it was before. However, this time all the performers seemed to be trying harder and to be dancing better, smiling more widely and generally enjoying themselves.

Finally, and with a huge grin, on his face, the manager proudly announced, "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, our sensational new act, the Clapham Cowboy, Jolly Wiz and his Indian Queen!" and up went the curtain.

Jolly now wore a fantastic cowboy costume, a huge chaps on his legs, a checked shirt with massive, hideous coloured checks that clashed violently with each other, a fringed leather waistcoat and a very tall cowboy hat on his head. Linda was now dressed in a short, fringed buff leather dress, all sewn with beads. The tricks that Jolly did were much as before, but he was deliberately getting them wrong, blaming Linda and making them very funny. His jokes were fewer and better, too. Aunt Fifi whispered that the Chief had passed on to him a few jokes from the old days. "Very old days, too!" she whispered. "But they seem to go down all right!" Occasionally he would come down to the front of the stage and in full view of the audience he would do one of his tricks and get it perfectly right. Finally, he made a toy rabbit disappear and then blew up a red balloon and passed it to his "Indian Queen" who then stood on one side of the stage while Jolly took up position on the other, tossed his hat into the wings and pulled out a pistol from a holster by his side and fired once, twice, three times. On the third shot the balloon in Linda's hand burst and there was the rabbit! Then Linda drank a glass of water and from two tubes hidden in her costume, jets of water spurted out as if she had holes in her from Jolly's shots! Linda whooped with rage, pulled out a brightly decorated tomahawk and ran after Jolly who tore round the stage. She swung at him, missed and grabbed his hair - which came off. The "scalped" Jolly looked aghast and clutched his bald head while Linda did a wild war dance round the stage twirling the "scalp". The audience laughed and cheered and the curtain came down to hoots of laughter. Twice Jolly and Linda took a bow, the second time doing their war dance together. Aunt Fifi, Joe and Sarah clapped and cheered with the rest of them.

"Him not bad," came a deep, familiar voice from behind them. "Act pretty good now. Him not drive buses just yet!"

They turned to see the Chief, arms folded, standing in the shadows behind them, grinning broadly. "Madame Fifi do good job with costume and dance, too," he continued. "Almost good enough for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show!"

Aunt Fifi turned round too. "It's almost like old times," she said. "Although it's odd watching it and not being there on the stage. I quite miss it."

"Who knows?" rumbled the deep voice of the Chief as he faded away to invisibility. "You may go back one day."

"Are you seeing into the future again, Chief?" asked Aunt Fifi.

"Possibly," answered the voice of the Chief from the shadows. "Enjoy rest of holiday . Me go now. Have idea; am going to go and see man of science on Other Side and see if he can explain everything that happen - if he not blown himself up again. Also me got dinner to catch. Farewell!"

And he was gone. The applause died down and everyone began to leave the theatre. Aunt Fifi and the children went backstage to congratulate Jolly and Linda who were both thrilled that the show was going well.

“We’ve got another engagement here next season!” said Jolly.

“And we’ve got a spot on TV tomorrow!” gushed Linda. We can’t thank you enough! Or the Chief. Can we send a message to him?”

“Er, I’ll pass anything on,” said Aunt Fifi. “He’s otherwise engaged now.”

The few days of the rest of the holiday did indeed pass very well and there were no more signs in the sky, sea or air - but Aunt Fifi was determined to get to the bottom of it all, and was making plans for a visit to the Other Side herself.