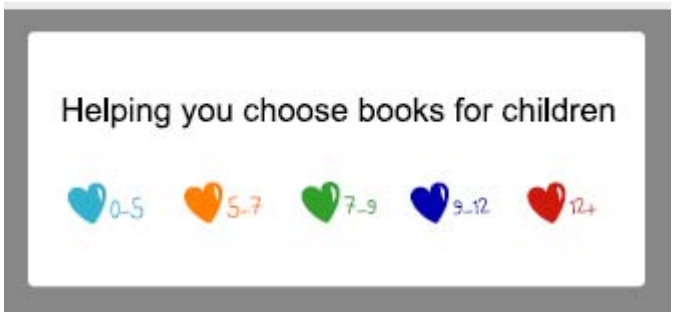
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opening extract from

Snatched!

written by

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published by

Usborne

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PROLOGUE

SMITHFIELD, LONDON
SEPTEMBER 2ND 1843

The night's storm was over, as quick and angry as a torrential late-summer downpour can sometimes be. It had left the air cooler and smelling like a wet dog, the ground waterlogged. The ragged encampment slowly came back to life, caravan doors opening, spilling out flickering lamplight and tired voices; no one in Hubble's Circus had slept well, the hammering rain, the lightning and the thunder that sounded like the world was coming to an end had seen to that.

Animals clawed nervously at their cages and a lone dog set up a howl at the moon that had appeared through the ragged, scudding clouds; soaked canvas flapped and mud tried to suck the boots from the feet of the sleepy riggers who'd roused themselves to check the ill-lit site for any damage, now that it was no longer raining.

In the calm, the sound of a crying baby stopped everyone in their tracks.

The tiny voice bleated again, echoing in the silence. There were no babies in Hubble's Circus, a fair few children but no babies; there were no women, married or not, ready to give birth, and the crying infant – for it couldn't be anything else – grabbed everyone's attention.

Men checking ropes strained to work out where it came from, people opened caravan windows and others came out onto rickety wooden steps to listen, waiting to see if their ears had fooled them. Had they really heard a baby cry?

Seconds later there was no doubt they had.

"Find it quick!" someone called out. "If the mite's bin out in that weather it might not last much longer!"

From all across the jumble of tents, cages and caravans, people yelled to each other as they searched, the flickering yellow light from oil lanterns casting huge, staggering shadows as they moved.

The door of the largest, but by no means best-kept caravan swung open. "Damnation!" A huge, burly man appeared, rubbing his eyes and squinting out into the darkness. "What gives now – is one of the beasts loose?"

A young boy, standing nearby in a flickering pool of candlelight, pushed his lank hair out of his eyes. "No sir, Mr. Hubble, sir."

"What then?"

"Me mam says there's a baby and we got to find it...case it dies, Mr. Hubble, sir."

"A baby?" Hubble lumbered down his steps. "Whose?"

"Dunno, sir," the boy sniffed, wiping his nose on one of his sleeves. "Not mine..."

"My life I should 'ope not!" Hubble cuffed the boy lightly. "Don't just stand there – get looking!"

Grunting to himself, Hubble watched the boy go. He stood for a moment, wondering in which direction he should set off, or whether he should just go back up into his caravan and let those who cared enough do the looking. What was it to him if there was some child left crying on a night that would make Noah break into a sweat? He had bigger things to worry about, such as running a circus, which was like being in charge of a small village on wheels – with all the troublesomeness and palaver and hair tearing that could bring.

Hubble looked down at his boots, now as muddy as you'd like, and sighed. If he went back into his caravan now, he'd take the filth with him and have achieved nothing except to get his piece of carpet dirty. Shrugging his big, solid shoulders and scratching the hair under his slightly battered top hat, Hubble sighed again and trudged off into the gloom to see what was what and who this fuss was all about.

As he made his way round the site, a pack of small boys raced past him, covered in mud and obviously more involved in a running battle with friends than a search. They swerved round Hubble and disappeared off into the gathering dawn as a second group, this one armed with handfuls of sticky clay, helter-skeltered round the guy ropes of a tent and nearly ran straight into him.

"So this is how you search for a lost 'un, is it?" Hubble stared down at the urchins. "Well, is it?"

The ringleader, or at least the one pushed furthest forward, put his mud-filled hands behind his back. "No sir, Mr. Hubble, sir."

"Get on with it then."

"What, Mr. Hubble, sir?"

"Anything, as long as it don't mean covering me in mud."

Without waiting to be told a second time, the rabble

filed past Hubble and then darted off in search of their friends. He carried on walking, wondering – if it really was a child everyone was looking for and not some cat – why would anyone choose here and now to abandon it? Mustn't want it dead, or they'd've left it where it'd never be found, but for certain they didn't want it to stay in this neck of the woods. If there was one thing you could bet a sure wager on, it was that a circus always moved on.

All around him he could hear evidence of a disorganized, chaotic search in progress: the shouts and curses of men, the anxious calls of women and the playful shrieks of assorted children. Hubble took out his pocket watch, opening it and holding its scratched glass closer to his face: quarter to four, give or take. He'd wanted an early start today, what with the circus moving on, and it looked like he'd surely got one as it was well before dawn. His train of thought was broken when a cry went up – Billy Jiggs, he was pretty sure – saying that he'd found something.

"Where, Billy?" Hubble bellowed.

"By the lion!" came the shouted reply.

Rounding the corner of a tent and passing between two shuttered wagons, Hubble came to a sudden halt, almost slipping over in the mud. In front of him was the lion's cage, with fading gilt lettering running along the

top which read: *"LEO – MIGHTY KING OF ANIMALS"*. It was a proud, if inaccurate, boast, but as few, if any, of their patrons had ever seen a lion before, Hubble knew that even the mangy sod slumped at the back on some straw would amaze them. Then he noticed, in the wavering, smoky lamplight, that the slatted wooden side of the cage was propped open.

"What gives here, Billy?" Hubble walked towards the loose circle of people gathered round his chief rigger, who was the man in charge of putting up and taking down the tent. The crowd parted to let him through.

"It's a child, Mr. Hubble, sir...a boy," Billy looked down.

That was when Hubble noticed the rigger was holding what looked like a small bundle of cloth in his arms...a small bundle of cloth from which he could just make out that a tiny hand was poking.

"Not more'n hours old, by the looks of him, sir." Billy parted the white cotton to show the scrunched and wrinkled face beneath it.

"Was almost Leo's dinner, an' all, poor little tiny," said a slightly hunched figure, whose bald head shone dully in the lamplight.

"What's that, Comus?" Hubble turned to look at the man.



"It's a child, Mr. Hubble, sir...a boy."

"He was *in* the cage, Bruise, all wrapped up like a plum pudden." Comus shook his head; the old clown was the only person in the circus allowed to use James Hubble's nickname – gained from his time spent as a bare-knuckle fighter – straight to his battered face.

"In the cage – how so?" Hubble looked accusingly at the crowd, as if to say it must be the fault of at least one of them.

"You know yourself there's been no proper lock on that cage for months, Bruise." Comus walked over, tapping the loose chain with his clay pipe. He'd known Hubble for too long to be scared, like the others, by his gruff manner. "Someone must've come up here in the middle of that rain burst and snuck the child in the cage – though Lord knows why...or who they were."

"Lucky the cat's not long been fed," said the woman who'd moved to stand next to Billy.

"Luckier he ain't got all his teeth!" added a voice from the crowd, to general amusement.

"You take 'im, Hannah." Billy handed the bundle to his wife. "What's to 'appen to him, sir – will he go to the workhouse in the morning?"

"Never that, man!" Hubble frowned, his battle-scarred face creased with anger. "Damn me, but I'd kill

before crossing the threshold of another of those blasted holes ever again!"

Mr. Hubble's temper was legendary, his bark and his bite known to be equally as bad as each other, and as water dripped off canvas and wood, the crowd waited and watched.

Hubble stood stock-still, thinking. Truth be told, he'd not really thought there was a child to be found and hadn't given a second's consideration to what would happen if somebody turned one up. But sending even his worst enemy off to the Hell on Earth that was the workhouse...he could never, as long as he had breath in his body, do that. He'd been there, still bore the scars on his back and the pain in his very soul; he spat on the ground, as if to get the taste of the memories out of his mouth. "He'll go nowhere but with us..."

There was an audible sigh of relief from the gathering. Hubble's gravelly voice sank to almost a whisper, so low some of the people didn't hear what he said. "This is my circus and he'll be our child – no damn workhouse lackey will ever lay a finger on him!"

"Our child, Bruise?" Comus raised his eyebrows as he carefully refilled his pipe, the white clay yellowed with age and use.

Everyone looked from the clown to Hubble and held their breath. Even the baby, who hadn't cried since

he'd been found, seemed to be waiting to see what would happen.

Hubble beckoned to Billy Jiggs's wife: "Hannah, c'mere...I want a word."

"Me, sir?"

"You ain't done nothin' wrong, woman," Hubble said, "I just want a favour."

Hannah walked over to him, clutching the bundle of cloths to her. The crowd of riggers and gangers, acrobats, riders, clowns and sleepy-eyed children watched.

"The child needs a mother, Hannah, and there's no way in Heaven nor on Earth I can be that." Hubble wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "If you'll do the job, I'll pay for his keep...give him my name an' all...what d'you say?"

"You knew my answer before you asked, Mr. Hubble," Hannah smiled up at him; "course I will...my last one's bin gone six months and I still feel it like yesterday; I'll make good and sure this one don't die, I promise. What kind of person could've put the poor little thing in Leo's cage anyway? No mother, I'm certain of that!"

"Like as not we'll never know, Hannah." Hubble patted her shoulder. "Now get the both of you home – and Billy, come and see me before we move off, I'll settle some money on you."

"Right." Billy pulled a lock of hair that hung over his forehead; he knew that, even if there'd been no offer of money, Hannah would've taken the child. The death of little Esther – taken by scarlet fever just the last February, and only a year old – had hit her very hard.

"Comus?" Hubble turned to the old clown. "Fancy a drink and a hand of cards?"

"It'd be my pleasure, Bruise."

The two men set off back to Hubble's caravan, one stout and barrel-like, with a back like a ramrod, the other a gnarled, wiry figure. They looked quite comic, the pair of them; not that anyone in the circus would have dared to laugh.

"D'you think we'll make it onto the roads in good time today, Bruise?" Comus tapped his pipe out on a wheel as they walked.

"No doubt."

"Even with the rains making the ground like a bog?"

"Even with that, Comus." Hubble took his hat off and scratched his head. "We've seen worse, you an' I..."

"Thinking about the child?"

"More about who'd do such a thing." Hubble stopped and looked over to check the eastern horizon for any signs that a salmon-pink dawn might be leaking upwards from it. "That looked like good Egyptian cotton he was wrapped in...he didn't come from no

poor family, Comus, mark my words. But why put him in that cage?"

"It was open, Bruise, and probably looked safer than leaving him on a step. In that storm they probably didn't stop to look," nodded Comus. "The child was lucky that Leo can't hardly make mincemeat out of mincemeat."

"Got to wonder why, though, haven't you?" Hubble shook his tangle-haired head.

"As you told Hannah – like as not, we'll never know." Comus started walking again. "So what're you going to call the waif?"

"Only one name that'll do." Hubble let his friend go up the steps into his caravan first.

"And what might that be?"

"What else but Daniel?" Hubble smiled. "Daniel from the lion's den."