
Opening Extract from...

An Awfully Big Adventure

Written by Beryl Bainbridge

Published by Abacus

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For Yolanta and Derwent May

An *Abacus* Book

First published in Great Britain by Duckworth in 1989
Published with minor revisions by Penguin Books in 1991
This edition published by Abacus in 2003

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Special Trustees of the Hospitals for Sick Children for their permission to quote from J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*; to Faber & Faber Ltd for kind permission to reprint four lines from 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' from *Collected Poems 1909–1962* by T. S. Eliot; and to Peters Fraser and Dunlop for permission to reprint a quotation from *Dangerous Corner* by J. B. Priestley.

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

ISBN 0 349 11615 6

Typeset in Palatino by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Abacus
An imprint of
Time Warner Books UK
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

www.TimeWarnerBooks.co.uk

SLIGHTLY: (*Examining the fallen Wendy more minutely*) This is no bird; I think it must be a lady.

NIBS: (*Who would have preferred it to be a bird*) And Tootles has killed her.

CURLY: Now I see. Peter was bringing her to us. (*They wonder for what object*).

OMNES: (*Though everyone of them had wanted to take a shot at her*) Oh, Tootles!

TOOTLES: (*Gulping*) I did it. When ladies used to come to me in dreams I said: 'Pretty mother', but when she really came I shot her.

James Barrie, *Peter Pan*, Act Two.

An Awfully Big Adventure

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When the fire curtain had been lowered and the doors were at last closed, Meredith thought he heard a child crying. He switched on the house lights, but of course there was no one there. Some unfortunate had left a teddy-bear perched on the tip-up seat in the third row.

The girl was waiting for him in the property room. At his approach she stepped backwards, as though afraid he would strike her. He didn't look at her; he simply told her, in that particular tone of voice which in the past he had always used for other people, that he wasn't interested in excuses and that in any case there were none that would fit the bill.

'I was upset,' she protested. 'Anybody would be. It will never happen again.'

They both heard a door opening on the floor above, and footsteps as Rose clumped along the passage.

'If it was up to me,' he said, lowering his voice, 'you wouldn't get the chance.'

'You're wrong,' the girl persisted. 'He was happy. He kept saying "Well done". I'm not old enough to shoulder the blame. Not all of it. I'm not the only one at fault.'

'Get out of my sight,' he said, and pushing past her strode up the corridor to waylay Rose.

'I was encouraged,' she shouted after him. 'Don't you forget that!'

He slashed the air with his hook.

'You don't want to be too hard on her,' Rose said. 'She's young.'

He followed her through the pass door and across the dark stage into the auditorium. When Rose saw the teddy-bear she picked it up by one ear and walked on with it dangling against the skirt of her black frock.

'Did you get through to the wife?' asked Meredith.

'I did,' Rose said. 'She's coming up on the milk train.'

He climbed the stone steps after her, ducking his head beneath the singing gas mantles until they reached the top floor and the round window overlooking the square. Only the fireman and the rat-catcher came this far.

'The note,' he enquired. 'Did it shed any illumination?'

'Who can tell?' she said. 'Bunny saw fit to put a match to it.'

At this hour the square was empty. The flower-sellers had long since gone home, leaving the orange boxes piled up beside the urinals. Between the jagged buildings the lights of ships jumped like sparks above the river.

They stood in silence, looking down into the darkness as though waiting for a curtain to rise. There was a sudden seep of orange light as the door of Brown's Café opened and the slattern in the gumboots staggered out to sling washing-up slops into the gutter.

Then the girl appeared from out of the side street and

began to run in the direction of the telephone box on the corner. Once she looked back and up at the window as though she knew she was observed. At this distance her face was a pale blur. A man with a white muffler wound about his throat rolled from the black shadows of Ice Warehouse and the girl stopped and spoke to him.

He fumbled in his pockets and handed her something. He was holding a bouquet of flowers in a twist of paper.

'The Board won't like it,' Meredith said. 'Rushworth is bound to kick up rough.'

'I'm a match for him,' said Rose. She was holding the teddy-bear to her sequinned breast, circling with the pad of her finger the cold button of its eye.

'I don't suppose,' Meredith asked her, 'that we can keep it out of the newspapers.'

'I could,' Rose told him, 'but I won't. The orphanage has rung twice already. God forgive us, but it'll be good for business.'

Directly below, where the branches of the lime trees bounced in the wind, sending the lamplight skeetering across the cobblestones, the man in the muffler stood relieving himself within the wrought-iron enclosure of the public urinal, one arm fastidiously raised above his head. They could see his boots, glossy under the street lamp, and that bedraggled fistful of winter daffodils . . .

1

At first it had been Uncle Vernon's ambition, not Stella's. He thought he understood her; from the moment she could toddle he had watched her lurching towards the limelight. Stella herself had shown more caution. 'I'll not chase moonbeams,' she told him.

Still, she went along with the idea and for two years, on a Friday after school, she ran down the hill to Hanover Street and rode the lift in Crane Hall, up through the showrooms of polished pianofortes where the blind men fingered scales, until she reached the top floor and Mrs Ackerley whose puckered mouth spat out 'How now brown cow' behind the smokescreen of her Russian cigarettes.

She came home and shut herself in her bedroom off the scullery and spouted speeches. She sat at the tea table and dropped her cup to the saucer, spotting the good cloth with tannic acid, wailing that it might be a poison that the Friar Lawrence had administered. When Uncle Vernon shouted at her she said she wasn't old enough to control either her reflexes or her emotions. She had always had a precise notion of what could be expected of her.

Lily had imagined that the girl was merely learning to speak properly and was dismayed to hear it was called

Dramatic Art. She fretted lest Stella build up hopes only to have them dashed.

Then Stella failed her mock school certificate and her teachers decided it wasn't worth while entering her for the real thing. Uncle Vernon went off to the school prepared to bluster, and returned convinced. They'd agreed she had the brains but not the application.

'That's good enough for me,' he told Lily. 'We both know it's useless reasoning with her.'

He made enquiries and pulled strings. After the letter came Stella spent four extra Saturday mornings at Crane Hall being coached by Mrs Ackerley in the telephone scene from the *Bill of Divorcement*. Mrs Ackerley, dubious about her accent, had thought a Lancashire drama more suitable, preferably a comedy; the girl was something of a clown.

Stella would have none of it. She was a mimic, she said, and sure enough she took off Mrs Ackerley's own smoky tone of voice to perfection. Admittedly she was a little young for the part, but, as she shrewdly observed, this would only stress her versatility. The audition was fixed for the third Monday in September.

Ten days before, over breakfast, she told Uncle Vernon she was having second thoughts.

'Get away with you,' he said. 'It's too late to change things now.' He wrote out a shopping list and gave her a ten-shilling note. Half an hour later when he came up into the dark hall, jingling the loose coppers in his pocket, he found her huddled on the stairs, one plump knee wedged between the banister rails. He was annoyed

because she knew she wasn't supposed to hang about this part of the house, not unless she was in her good school uniform. She was staring at the damp patch that splodged the leaf-patterned wallpaper above the telephone.

He switched on the light and demanded to know what she was playing at. At this rate there'd be nothing left on Paddy's vegetable barrow but a bunch of mouldy carrots. Did she think this was any way to conduct a business?

She was in one of her moods and pretended to be lost in thought. He could have hit her. There was nothing of her mother in her face, save perhaps for the freckles on her cheek-bones.

'Carry on like this,' he said, not for the first time, 'and you'll end up behind the counter at Woolworth's.' It was foolish of him to goad her. It was not beyond her to run towards such employment in order to spite him.

'You push me too hard,' she said. 'You want reflected glory.'

He raised his arm then, but when she pushed past him with swimming eyes his world was drowned in tears.

He telephoned Harcourt and sought reassurance, in a round-about way. 'Three bottles of disinfectant,' he said, reading from the list in front of him. 'Four pounds of carbolic soap . . . one dozen candles . . . two dozen toilet rolls . . . George Lipman's put in a word with his sister. On Stella's behalf.'

''Fraid I can only manage a dozen,' Harcourt said. 'And they're shop-soiled.'

'Am I doing the right thing, I ask myself?'

'I don't see what else is open to her,' said Harcourt. 'Not if the school won't have her back.'

'Not *won't*,' corrected Vernon. 'It's more that they don't feel she'll gain any benefit from staying on. And you know Stella. Once her mind's made up . . .'

'Indeed I do,' said Harcourt. Although he had never met the girl he often remarked to his wife that he could take an exam on the subject, if pushed. His extensive knowledge of Stella was based on the regular progress reports provided by Vernon when making his monthly order for bathroom and wash-house supplies.

'She caused an uproar the other week,' confided Vernon, 'over the hoteliers' dinner dance: Lily got her hands on some parachute silk and took her to that dressmaker in Duke Street to be fitted for a frock. Come the night, with the damn thing hanging up on the back door to get rid of the creases, she refused to wear it. She was adamant. In the end none of us went. I expect you all wondered where we were.'

'We did,' lied Harcourt.

'She took exception to the sleeves. According to her they were too puffy. She said she wasn't going out looking as if her arms belonged to an all-in wrestler. I never saw her in it, but Lily said she was a picture. She's burgeoning, you know.'

'Is she?' Harcourt said, and thought briefly of his own daughter who, in comparison with Stella, often seemed an imitation of the real thing. He had no idea whether his daughter was burgeoning or not; night and day she

walked with rounded shoulders, clutching a handbag to her chest. 'And how's the cough?' he asked. He listened to the faint scratching of Vernon's moustache as it brushed against the mouthpiece.

'No problem at all,' Vernon said. 'Absolutely none. Kind of you to ask. I'm much obliged to you,' and he ordered a new bucket and a tin of bath scourer before replacing the receiver.

He told Lily that Harcourt believed they were doing the best thing. She was chopping up a rabbit in the scullery. 'Harcourt thinks she was born for it,' he said.

Lily was unconvinced. 'People like us don't go to plays,' she said. 'Let alone act in them.'

'But she's not one of us, is she?' he retorted, and what answer was there to that?

They came down the steps as though walking a tightrope, Stella pointing her toes in borrowed shoes, Uncle Vernon leaning backwards, purple waistcoat bulging above the waistband of his trousers, one hand under her elbow, the other holding aloft a black umbrella against the rain.

It was a terrible waistcoat, made out of pieces of untrimmed felt that Lily had bought at a salvage sale with the purpose of jollying up the cushions in the residents' lounge. She had meant to sew triangles, squares and stars on to the covers, only she hadn't got round to it.

'Leave me alone,' the girl said, shaking herself free. 'You're embarrassing me.'

'So,' Uncle Vernon said, 'what's new?' But his tone was good-humoured.

The three o'clock aeroplane, the one that climbed from Speke and circled the city on five-minute trips, had just bumped overhead. Alarmed at its passage the pigeons still swam above the cobblestones; all, that is, save the one-legged bird who hopped in the gutter, beak pecking at the rear mudguard of the taxi. It was such a dark day that the neon sign above the lintel of the door had been flashing on and off since breakfast; the puddles winked crimson. Later, after he had visited the house, Meredith said that only brothels went in for red lights.

Spat upon by the rain, Stella covered her head with her hands; she knew she was watched from an upstairs window. Earlier that morning Lily had sat her down at the kitchen table and subjected her to the curling tongs. The tongs, fading in mid-air from rust to dull blue, had snapped at the locks of her hair and furled them up tight against her skull. Then, released in fits and starts, the singed curls, sausage-shaped, flopped upon the tacked-on collar of her velvet frock.

'In the grave,' Stella had said, 'my hair and nails will continue to grow.'

Lily had pulled a face, although later she intended to repeat the remark for the benefit of the commercial traveller with the skin grafts. He, more than most, even if it was a bit close to the bone, would appreciate the observation. To her way of thinking it was yet another indication of the girl's cleverness, a further example, should one be needed, of her ferocious, if morbid, imagination.

Uncle Vernon paid off the cab right away. The arrangement had been struck the night before after a turbulent discussion in which Stella had declared she'd prefer to die rather than tip the driver. 'I'll go on the tram instead,' she said.

'It'll rain,' Uncle Vernon told her. 'You'll arrive messed up.'

She said she didn't care. There was something inside her, she intimated, that would become irretrievably sullied if she got involved with the business of tipping.

'You just give him sixpence,' Uncle Vernon had argued. 'Ninepence at the most. I can't see your difficulty.'

To which Stella had retorted that she found the whole transaction degrading. In her opinion it damaged the giver quite as much as the receiver.

'Well, don't tip him, you fool,' Uncle Vernon had countered. 'Just chuck the exact amount through the window and make a run for it.'

Debating anything with the girl was a lost cause. She constantly played to the gallery. No one was denying she could have had a better start in life, but then she wasn't unique in that respect and it was no excuse for wringing the last drop of drama out of the smallest incident. Emotions weren't like washing. There was no call to peg them out for all the world to view.

Mostly her behaviour smacked of manipulation, of opportunism. He'd known people like her in the army, people from working-class backgrounds, who'd read a few books and turned soft. If she had been a boy he'd

have taken his belt to her, or at least the back of his hand.

All that costly nonsense of keeping the landing light burning into the small hours. Lily said it was because she remembered that business of the night lights – for God's sake, the child had been nine months old. He put it down to that poetry she was so fond of, all those rhymes and rhythms, those couplets of melancholy and madness that inflamed her imagination. Nor was he altogether sure she was afraid of the dark. Why, during the blackout, when the whole city was drowned in black ink, she had often gone out into the backyard and stood for an hour at a time, keening under the alderbush. And what about the time he had come home on leave and she had somehow slipped out of the shelter and he and the air-raid warden had found her crouched against the railings of the cemetery, clapping her hands together as the sugar warehouses on the Dock Road burst like paper bags and the sparks snapped like fire crackers against the sky?

She had always been perverse, had always, in regard to little things – things which normal people took in their stride – exhibited a degree of opposition that was downright absurd. He hadn't forgotten her histrionics following the removal of the half-basin on the landing. She had accused him of mutilating her past, of ripping out her memories. He'd had to bite on his tongue to stop himself from blurting out that in her case this was all to the good. There were worse things than the disappearance of basins. It had brought home to him how unreliable history was, in that the story, by definition, was always one-sided.

Nor would he forgive in a hurry the slap-stick scene resulting from the felling of the alder bush in the dismal back yard, when she had run from the basement door like a madwoman and flung herself between axe and bush. Ma Tang from next door, believing he was murdering the girl, had shied seed potatoes at him from the wash-house roof. Ma Tang's father, who was put out to roost at dawn with his scant hair done up in a pigtail, had sent his grandson for the police.

The basin had been a liability. More than one lodger, returning late at night and caught short, had utilised it for a purpose not intended. As for the alder bush, a poor sick thing with blighted leaves, it was interfering with the drains. On both occasions, and there had been many others, Stella's face had betrayed an emotion so inappropriate, assumed an expression of such false sensibility, that it was almost comic. Perhaps it wasn't entirely assumed; there had been moments when he could have sworn she felt something.

For her part, Lily had tried to wheedle Stella into letting Uncle Vernon accompany her to the theatre. She implied it was no more than his due. If he hadn't known Rose Lipman's brother when they were boys growing up rough together in Everton, Stella wouldn't have got a look-in. And it wasn't as though he would be intrusive. He was a sensitive man; even that butcher in Hardman Street, who had palmed him off with the horsemeat, had recognised as much. He would just slope off up the road and wait for her, meekly, in Brown's Café.

'Meekly,' Stella had repeated, and given one of her laughs. She'd threatened to lock herself in her room if he insisted on going with her. Her door didn't boast such a thing as a lock, but her resolution was plain enough. She said she would rather pass up her chance altogether than go hand in hand towards it with Uncle Vernon. 'I'm not play-acting,' she assured him.

Stung, though she hadn't allowed him her hand for donkey's years, not since he had walked her backwards and forwards from the infant school on Mount Pleasant, he had rocked sideways in his wicker chair beside the kitchen range and proclaimed her selfish. A sufferer from the cold, even in summertime, he habitually parked himself so close to the fire that one leg of the chair was charred black. Lily said he had enough diamond patterns on his shins to go without socks. The moment would come, she warned him, when the chair would give up the ghost under his jiggling irritation and pitch him onto the coals.

'Keep calm,' she advised, 'it's her age.'

'I'm forced to believe in heredity,' he fumed. 'She's a carbon copy of bloody Renée.' It wasn't true; the girl didn't resemble anyone they knew.

When he shoved Stella into the cab he hesitated before slamming the door. He was dressed in his good clothes and there was still time for her to undergo a change of heart. She stared straight ahead, looking righteous.

All the same, when the taxi, girdled by pigeons, swooshed from the curb she couldn't resist peeking out of the rear window to catch a last glimpse of him. He

stood there under the mushroom of his gamp, exaggeratedly waving his hand to show he wished her well, and too late she blew him a grudging unseen kiss as the cab turned the corner and skidded across the tramlines into Catherine Street. She had got her own way but she didn't feel right. There's a price to pay for everything, she thought.

Uncle Vernon went back indoors and began to hammer a large cup hook into the scullery door. Hearing the racket, Lily came running, demanding to know what he was doing. He was still wearing his tank beret and his best trousers. 'It's to hang things from, woman,' he said, viciously hammering the screw deeper into the wood, careless of the paint he was chipping off the door.

'Like what?' she said.

'Like tea towels,' he said. 'What did you think? Would you prefer it if I hung myself?'

Lily told him he needed his head examining.