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Anything Goes

Billy Hopkins

Chapter One

'What's all that white stuff?' young John asked. 'Has someone spilt piles of talcum powder everywhere?'

'That's called snow, stupid,' his brother Mark replied. Mark was eight, two years older than John, but even he had only the vaguest memories of snow whereas John who'd been born in Kenya had never seen the stuff before.

It was December 1963 and Billy Hopkins with his wife and four children had landed at Heathrow. Billy had visited Britain two years earlier but that had been in spring when the weather had been mild. Now when the air stewardess opened the aeroplane doors, they were met by an icy blast that took their breath away.

'It's like walking into a gigantic freezer,' Laura exclaimed, holding the two youngest closer to her.

Billy took one look at the frost and the snow.

'You know,' he gasped, 'I'd completely forgotten how cold the English winter could be. What do you say we book return tickets straight back to Nairobi on the next available flight? And look at the sky, so dull and grey; it's only three o'clock and the lights are switched on everywhere. Everything looks so dull and washed-out like one of those old sepia photo¬graphs.'

'You're right,' Laura said cheerfully. 'After the dazzling Kenya sunshine, it does look totally miserable. And I absolutely love it.'

They wrapped up as well as they could given their tropical outfits. Blue with cold they took the transit bus to the terminal where they collected their luggage from the carousel. No problems getting through Customs and Immigration, a poker-faced officer giving them hardly a second glance as he chalked their suitcases. It was warm inside the airport building but the moment they stepped outside to board the coach

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for Victoria, the winter weather chilled them to the bone and within seconds the shivering and the teeth-chattering began again, lasting all the way into the city centre. The two youngest clung to their mother partly because of the freezing temperature but more because of the suicidal speed and madcap manoeuvres of the bus driver as he fought his tortuous way through the heavy London traffic.

'The world seems to be whirling madly about our ears,' Laura said, clutching Mark and John as the coach skidded round a hairpin bend.

'Reminds me of one of those Mack Sennett silent movies with the action speeded up.' Billy grimaced, tightening his grip on young Lucy's shoulder to prevent her being thrown into the aisle.

'Hey, Dad, maybe we'll get to see the Keystone Kops,' Matthew called out gleefully. At least one of the family was enjoying the hair-raising journey.

'This is definitely the most dangerous part of the trip so far,' Billy said as the coach swerved to avoid a collision with a pantechnicon. 'We'll either be wiped out in one momentous pile-up or freeze to death in this arctic weather.'

'Talking of freezing,' Laura said, 'first chance we get, we buy warmer clothes for everyone.'

'I'm not sure I want anything for myself,' Billy said. 'Remember I mothballed many winter suits in your parents' loft when we went abroad. I can wear those when we get back to Manchester.'

Laura laughed. 'Don't be silly. They're all out of date now. Why, some of them go back to your student days. You're a real hoarder, Billy. Never want to throw anything away in case it comes in handy at some distant date in the future. If we've got the money, we should buy new for everyone.'

'Oh, great, Mum!' Lucy exclaimed. 'Can we go to Carnaby Street and get the latest gear?'

'And how, young madam, do you know about Carnaby Street and the latest gear, may I ask?' Laura said.

'I saw it in a teenage magazine, Mum.'

'You're much too young to be reading such rubbish,' Billy said.

'Oh, Dad. I'm not a baby. I'll be eleven in a few weeks' time.'

'And I'll be a teenager in a few months,' Matthew said proudly.

'A teenager!' Billy exclaimed. 'How do you make that out?'

'I'll be thirteen next birthday.'

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'Sorry, sorry,' Billy laughed. 'I didn't realize I had such grown-up fashion-conscious kids.'

'Anyway,' Laura said, 'we shan't be doing any shopping in Carnaby Street. We'll be buying sensible clothing at Marks and Spencer. We'll have none of this talk about latest gear.'

'I think we can do better than Marks and Sparks now we've got a little money,' Billy said. 'A visit to Chelsea or Oxford Street might be on the cards. And no, I don't mean Mary Quant's,' he added, eyeing the two eldest.

From Victoria, they took a cab that gave them a ride that was madder and more dangerous than that of the bus, if that were possible. The family stared intrigued at the unfolding spectacle. Here was a different scene from the area round the airport. Preparations for Christmas were evident every¬where. The streets were necklaced in bright decorations, and festoons of twinkling coloured lights were reflected in the murky waters of the Thames. London was swinging. Gaily painted Mini-Coopers overflowing with happy-go-lucky youngsters who waved gaily as they whizzed past, and policeman on the beat seemed to be there more as props for tourists' photos than upholders of the law. Laura and the children gazed open-mouthed at the bizarre hairstyles and outlandish dress of both male and female pedestrians: bowler-hatted City gents rubbing shoulders with long-haired cavaliers; and despite the cold weather, mini-skirted models mingling with smartly groomed girls in short PVC raincoats, one or two with Union Jack motifs. From innumerable cafés, there wafted the aroma of roasted coffee beans and mulled wine. There was little chance for Billy to enjoy the scene, however, for his attention was monopolized by their cab driver who had views on everything under the sun and seemed determined to let Billy hear them. He slid back his dividing window and looked round at the family.

'You lot look suntanned for this time of the year. Been on holiday?'

'No,' Billy said. 'Just got back from Kenya. We've been out there for five years.'

The driver gave a whistle of surprise. 'Five years, eh! What were you doing out there?'

'I was teaching in an African secondary school.'

'I'll bet that was a job and a half, eh. Kenya! Isn't that where Kenyatta's the boss?'

'That's right. The country's recently got its independence. Kenyatta's the new President.'

'Wasn't this Kenyatta geezer head of a bunch of terrorists? The Moo-Moo or something.'

'You mean the Mau Mau.'

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'That's what I said. Typical of this country of ours. Next thing you know, this Kenyatta thug will be having dinner with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. We're always doing it. First we put the terrorists in prison then release 'em, make 'em presidents, then wine 'em and dine 'em. Like what they did with that fellah Bishop Maracas in Cyprus and Necrummy in Ghana.'

'You mean Makarios and Nkrumah?'

'Yeah. That's what I said. I tell you this country's going to pot. Earlier this year our Minister of War was caught with his trousers down sleeping with a high-class hooker, Christine Keeler. The other week they gave her nine months in Holloway. I'd have given her nine years if it'd been left to me. Not many women can say they brought down the government, the way she did. But all them big politicians are at it.'

'You think so?'

'I know so. Take that Lord Astor geezer. He said at the trial that he hadn't touched Mandy Rice-Davies. Now she was a stunner and no mistake. Brought the house down when she giggled and said, "Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?" I tell you, the country's gone sex mad. Had to stop a couple doing it in the back of my cab the other night. Could have lost my licence for running a mobile brothel. And now Macmillan's resigned. Says it was prostate trouble but more like prostitute trouble, if you ask me. I reckon it was all due to the scandal; couldn't stand the heat in the kitchen. And now we have that chinless wonder, Douglas-Home, as Prime Minister. Says he doesn't know how to add up and does his sums using matchsticks. Wouldn't be surprised, though, if he was like the rest of 'em, unable to keep his flies zipped up.'

'I'm sure you're right,' Billy said, thinking it was best to agree with this firebrand character.

'And there's another thing . . .' the cab driver said, turning his head to catch Billy's eye.

But Billy didn't hear what this other thing was for they had reached their destination, the Royal Court in Emperor's Gate, Kensington, a small but elegant private hotel.

'My, my,' Laura exclaimed. 'Haven't we gone up in the world!'

'And why not?' Billy said vehemently. 'I think we've earned it. Before we went abroad, we lived from one month to the next always waiting for pay day. Now, after five years of hard saving, it's time to start spending some of it.'

Early next day, they visited Harvey Nichols in Knights¬bridge where Laura bought a beautiful brown woollen coat with mink collar whilst Lucy chose a blue Mary Quant midi coat trimmed with fur. The males of the family were equipped with more traditional suits, Billy having turned down the frilly shirt, the colourful waistcoat and the hipster trousers suggested by the obliging assistant. He rounded off his outfit with a heavy black Crombie and a smart trilby.

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'Now you look like a business tycoon,' Laura said, looking him up and down appreciatively.

In the afternoon, they took a taxi to the Scala Theatre to see a performance of Peter Pan starring the film stars Anne Heywood, Jane Asher and John Gregson. For them this was indeed the high life after their spell living in a small African township fifty miles from Nairobi. The kids were agog at the wonders of the technological wizardry that enabled Wendy to fly through the air with such ease and grace. At five o'clock they emerged from the theatre mesmerized by what they had seen on stage.

Lucy in particular was moved by the play. She said, 'Thank you for taking us, Dad. Watching Wendy and the others fly like that was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen in my whole life.'

'Fine,' Billy said, 'as long as you don't try it at home.'

They had travelled to the theatre by taxi but by popular demand opted to return by underground. It'll be an experi¬ence, they thought.

It was a mistake because they were caught in the rush hour and had to stand most of the way back. At Oxford Street a massive throng boarded the train and it became like the photographs of a Tokyo bullet train they had seen in Picture Post where platform porters physically crammed people into the train. Young John came close to being suffocated down amongst the legs of the jostling crowd and was only saved when Billy, with skilful use of the chin and much elbow-jabbing of his fellow sardines, hoisted him up to give him air. They had learned their lesson early and thenceforth travelled everywhere by taxi.

They spent the next three days strolling open-mouthed around London, taking in the sights – Buckingham Palace, Westminster, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus. Every place they visited had an association either with a song or with the game of Monopoly which they'd played on Saturday evenings in Kenya.

'Look, Dad. It's Mayfair! Best on the set. Rent here's a massive four hundred pounds. And over there is Park Lane, three hundred and fifty pounds.'

As they strolled about the famous landmarks, they found themselves singing unforgettable ditties like 'Goodbye Piccadilly, farewell Leicester Square . . .' or reciting lines from A.A. Milne about changing guards at Buckingham Palace and how Alice was marrying one of the guards.

Soon it was time to return to their beloved Manchester. 'The Athens of the north' Billy called it. How they'd missed the place in the last five years! Shopping on bustling Market Street on a Saturday afternoon; joining the throngs flocking to watch the Derby match between Manchester United and City; rowing on Heaton Park lake or visiting the beautiful gardens at Fletcher Moss.

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At Euston, they were taken aback by the bewildering array of magazines on display in W. H. Smith's – Woman, Woman's Own, John Bull, Practical Householder – the list seemed endless. There were many books on the shelves that hadn't been there when they'd left in 1958: Lolita, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Tropic of Cancer. Billy noticed, too, the way the eye of his soon-to-be-a-teenager son was drawn to the girly magazines, Reveille and Playboy, on the top shelf.

'Matthew's growing up,' he whispered to Laura. 'Here's a magazine more in your line,' he said to Matthew, tapping him on the shoulder and pointing to the Boy's Own Paper.

'Thanks a lot, Dad,' Matthew grinned. 'Boy's Own Paper! I didn't know it was still around.'

For the journey, they bought a wide selection of children's comics: Comic Cuts, Film Fun, The Dandy and The Beano for the young ones, The Eagle, The Rover for Matthew, and Girl, Girl's Crystal and School Friend for Lucy. Laura selected Woman and Woman's Own. Billy bought twenty Kensitas tipped and a copy of Punch and The Times.

'It's so refreshing to read a newspaper on the day of its publication instead of one a fortnight old,' he remarked. 'But I don't know if I can afford to go on smoking here in Britain despite the wonderful prizes the tobacco companies offer for smoking yourself to death. In the gift catalogue I picked up, it tells me that for a Dansette record player I'd need five thousand coupons, for a table tennis or badminton set, six thousand though even if you get them, you'll be too sick to play. And look at the big prize! Wow! Cough, cough. If I smoke a few hundred packs more, I can get a Stowaway bicycle for sixteen thousand five hundred coupons. It says collapsible in forty seconds but it's not clear whether it means you or the bike.'

'I suppose for twenty thousand coupons,' Laura laughed, 'you'd earn an iron lung.'

'Or an invalid bed,' he chuckled. 'But at two and eight for twenty, who can afford to go on smoking?'

'So when will you be giving up again?' Laura smiled.

'Mañana.'

The four-hour journey back to Manchester passed quickly and the four young ones were soon absorbed in the comics which they devoured like addicts deprived of their fix. Billy wondered if he'd done the right thing bringing them back to England. In the short time he'd stayed on his previous visit, he'd been shocked by the materialism, the selfishness, and the 'I'm all right, Jack' attitude he'd found everywhere. As far as he could see, the man in the street's chief preoccupa¬tion had appeared to be what was on telly last night, the perpetual quiz shows and the fortunes that some clerk or shop girl had won or narrowly missed winning. How different life in Kenya was! It was sunshine and the outdoor life for his kids. There they had played in the treehouse in their spacious garden and it was freedom and fresh air all the way. Sure,

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there was drunkenness and shenanigans in the Country Club but nevertheless there was a strong community spirit and people truly cared for each other. Especially so among the Africans. Whole villages would make tremendous sacrifices to give their children an education and to help a neighbour. People were more concerned with basic survival than keeping up with the Joneses and competing with each other. They'd miss their servants, not so much for the work they had performed though that had been considerable, but for the people themselves. A bond of genuine affection had grown up between them and they were regarded as close as family members. Then there was the sport, the glorious holidays at the coast, swimming and surfing in the Indian Ocean, and the drink in the bar afterwards. No drink on earth could taste as good as that. To think they had left all that behind in order to exchange it for this cold, grey English climate. He was having misgivings already. Had he been stupid giving up that wonderful lifestyle? It would have been so easy to have accepted an extension of his contract as his good friends and neighbours, the Sherwoods, had done. His mind was filled with doubt as to whether they'd made the right, the sensible decision. But then, he thought, more important than how he felt, how did his family feel? And most important, how did Laura feel about it? He gazed across at her and his concerns melted away. Her magazines re¬mained unread on her knee as she gazed out at the passing scene, her first sight of the English countryside after so many years. She had a smile on her face and he had never seen her look so happy. That smile said it all.

A few miles beyond Watford, she took both of Billy's hands in her own and with tears sparkling in her eyes said softly, 'It's such bliss to see an English landscape again, Billy, even though it's shrouded in snow at the moment. I've missed dear old England so much. I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am to be back. This is where we all belong. Home.'

'If that's the way you feel, Laura, then so do I,' he murmured. 'Now we can make a fresh start and start life anew. There's so much to be done when we've settled back. First, I need to find a job, then a house. Your folks are kind offering to put us up but, as you know, I'm never comfortable in someone else's home and I hope it's not for too long. We'll waste no time in looking for a house of our own in one of those so-called leafy suburbs of Manchester.'

'Are you sure we can afford it?'

'Of course we can. We're a lot better off now than when we left. After the house business is fixed, next thing is try to get the kids into decent schools.'

'It'll be like a dream come true.'

'It would be wonderful to see them all do well with decent careers one day, maybe the professions, if they've got the brains. That should please your father. He was always going on about the top professions, law, medicine, accountancy.'

'Fine, Billy, but I do hope you don't have ideas of pushing them into jobs against their will. Or, worse, trying to achieve your own ambitions through them.'

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'Nothing like that, Laura. They can do and be whatever they like, even follow in my own father's footsteps and become market porters if that's what they want to do. But I'm sure they'll feel more fulfilled as people if they go for jobs that are of service to others and make full use of whatever talents God has blessed them with.'

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