

Carnival

Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold

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Phryne Fisher, daringly elegant in a peach and black bloused top and a pair of palpable, scandalous trousers, mostly regretted that she had ever met Bobby Ferguson, but she had come with him because she loved all circuses and carnivals. And here it was.

The hot wind crackled through the dry grass alongside Williamstown Road. It carried not only the usual city messages—A Far Too Male Cat Has Been Here and Watch Out for the Van—but also Turkey lolly and toffee apples, animal dung, machine oil and frying grease. She sniffed an appreciative sniff.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘I love carnivals. Not your sort of place, I wouldn’t have thought.’

Bobby did not reply. Phryne headed up the dusty path towards the lights, where the wheezing of a calliope was enchanting the night. It was playing ‘Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do’, in just the wrong key. What was the matter with the spoiled rotten son of a major banking house now? He complained about the car, her treasured Hispano-Suiza. He complained about her driving. He complained about the heat. No one had ever stopped Bobby from having anything he had set his heart on but no one else was going to drive Phryne’s car while she had breath in her body.

She decided that a little light ignoring might cure his sulks and pressed on. She was just producing her sixpence when she heard a faint scream from behind her and was in time to see Bobby transfixed with horror as something frightful rose from the ground, giving vent to a bubbling whine like a monster from a nightmare. Phryne bore Bobby up on one shoulder and grabbed a trailing rope.

‘It’s only a camel,’ she said soothingly. ‘I rode them in Arabia. I admit that this is an unusually revolting specimen of an unattractive species. Still, I believe that there are people who love them. Hello,’ she said to the woman at the gate, who still held Phryne’s sixpence. ‘Two tickets, please. And is this your camel?’

The woman tore off two tickets and, instead of replying, shrieked, ‘Bill! Them bloody camels is out!’ Then she smiled and took the tether. ‘You’re good with camels,’ she commented in a harsh rasp. ‘You in the trade, maybe? One of Wirth’s dancers?’



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Tell 'em on the merry-go-round that Mama said you was to 'ave a free go.'

'Thank you,' replied Phryne, delighted.

She passed through the gate, taking Bobby and leaving the camel, though the camel might have proved better company.

'What is the matter with you, old bean?' she asked.

'The heat. I hate the heat,' said Bobby.

'In that case you should have stayed in a nice cool hotel and drunk nice cool beer,' said Phryne. 'It's as hot as a furnace in the north, where this wind comes from.'

'And I've just realised that I've forgotten to have mother's pearl bracelet fixed. I've got it in my pocket.' Bobby, a pink young man with slicked down hair, patted his pocket, just in case any passing thief hadn't deduced where he might have put it. 'It's very valuable. Anyone could steal it.'

'Then put it in another pocket and stop talking so loudly,' advised Phryne absently. She was looking for the carousel.

'But all these people are thieves,' protested Bobby.

A slim young man in greasy overalls paused in bolting together a collection of iron pipes and scowled. The light caught his hair. It had the same blue sheen as a cock's feather. His face was all angles, sharp and defined in the harsh electric glare.

'Nonsense,' said Phryne briskly. 'A carnival has the exact same proportion of thieves as anywhere else, and I am not excepting your bank.'



The young man gave Phryne an astonished and vulnerable smile, packed up his spanner and vanished into the darkness between the lights.

The merry-go-round was old and a little tired. Phryne chose a rearing Lipizzaner stallion called Prancer and swung herself aboard. She told the attendant about Mama and he grinned.

‘Come on, Bobby!’ she called.

‘I’ll watch you,’ said Bobby, fanning himself with his straw boater.

Phryne dismissed him as the carousel creaked into life and she was off through patches of coloured and flavoured light: green and wet canvas, blue and engine oil, yellow and fairy floss, red and chips frying. She stayed on, paying a penny for the extra ride, through another set of circuits. Delicious. The moving air was almost cool.

As she descended she heard thunder. A nice drop of rain would be reviving but she hoped it would hold off for a few hours. Wet carnivals were sad.

She led Bobby along the shaky row of sideshows. ‘The Wild Man from Borneo!’ announced a man attired in frock coat and someone’s top hat. His voice was rich and fruity with an undertone of cigar and an overtone of port.

‘The missing link!’ he bellowed. ‘Captured in the jungles of Malaya!’

Phryne paid and entered the booth. There was a crouched human figure, gnawing conscientiously at a haunch bone which could have come from a dinosaur. He was wearing a scanty and rather moth-

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eaten animal skin. His tangled hair straggled to his shoulders. He looked up at Phryne and bared his teeth. They were all filed to a point.

‘Very nice,’ said Phryne. ‘We should introduce you to Sailor, though he might teach you bad habits.’

She was referring to the zoo’s large and extremely male chimpanzee, who had been known to surprise the delicately nurtured by proving it. The wild man grinned again.

Bobby pulled at Phryne’s arm. ‘You don’t want to see this disgusting exhibition, do you? And the next one has snakes! I hate snakes!’

Phryne thought that the Wild Man looked rather hurt. She took Bobby out of the tent.

‘I do, and the next one is ...?’

‘The Princess of the Amazon!’ bellowed the shill, tipping his top hat to the lady. ‘Brought at Great Expense from the Jungles for the Edification of the Multitudes!’

This ability to speak in capitals must have been valuable, Phryne reflected, examining her change and buying admission. The lady might not have been royal but she was extensively blacked-up and her snake was magnificent.

Phryne turned to find that Bobby had been replaced by the young mechanic. She considered that the night was suddenly improving.

‘Go on, Doreen, show the lady the snake,’ he encouraged.

The Amazon Princess looped a few yards of boa around her

comely shoulders and moved forward. The huge blunt head of the snake rose, tongue flicking.

‘My name’s Alan Lee,’ said the mechanic. ‘This is Doreen, and that’s Cleopatra.’

‘Pleased to meet you all. I apologise for my escort.’

‘Him? Been after Anna,’ said Doreen. ‘Mopes about like a sick cat. Been here every night.’

‘See, Miss, we don’t like strangers going after our girls,’ explained the young man. He had eyes as black as ebony. It was hard to guess what he was thinking. He had shaken Phryne’s hand cautiously, conscious of the grease on his own. ‘The townies think they’re whores. They ain’t. Anna’s my sister. She’s going to marry Samson, our strongman. Can you take your bloke away? He might get damaged.’

‘My dear Mr Lee,’ said Phryne, ‘Bobby isn’t mine. I expect he’s gone off to eat worms. I’m going to enjoy my evening. I love carnivals.’

Alan Lee smiled. ‘We can tell. You want to stroke Cleopatra? Go on. She won’t hurt you.’

Phryne stroked Cleopatra, who felt like a good snakeskin shoe. Not knowing the terrible thought in Phryne’s mind, the snake rose a little under her hand.

‘If she’d been a cat, she would have purred,’ commented Alan.

The pressure to do something about Bobby was



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still there. Phryne sighed. ‘All right, I’ll try and remove Bobby—but only if you swear I can come back another night.’

His red lips parted over teeth as white as seeds. His black eyes held the promise of dark delights. If there were angels, this was a midnight one. Phryne shivered pleasantly. She gave the young man a highly combustible look and left the booth, searching for Bobby.

No great detective ability was required to locate the pink-faced pest. He was standing in the middle of the patch, next to the shooting gallery, screaming at the top of his voice, ‘I’ve been robbed!’

‘That bloody bracelet,’ muttered Phryne to herself. ‘I should have taken it from him. He was telegraphing “Steal This Trinket!” on all frequencies. Oh dear.’ She pushed through the gathering crowd and asked crisply, ‘What’s the matter, Bobby?’

‘Mother’s pearl bracelet—it’s gone!’ he screamed.

‘Will you shut up,’ demanded Phryne. ‘You’re making a scene. Have you searched all your pockets?’

Around her she could sense the growing dismay of the carnival folk. This was real trouble. No one trusted carnival people. No one was likely to believe them when they swore their innocence. Everyone knew that the gypsies stole chickens and washing. And spoke a strange language and probably didn’t wash and did you



see the state of that woman's fingernails? Good name ruined, permits refused ... This was a disaster. Phryne was incensed.

Phryne searched Bobby's pockets. No bracelet. He opened the black velvet case and showed it was empty. He was just about to bellow again when Phryne grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

'Will you stop yelling! When did you miss the bracelet?'

'I don't know. Just now. I got out some coins for the shooting gallery and found the case empty. It's gone!'

'All right, now, I'll find it, be quiet. Show's over,' she said to the gaping crowd. 'Nothing more to see. The gentleman has mislaid something. Alan, start the calliope again. Off you go,' said Phryne, and such was the force of her personality that most of the onlookers lost interest and wandered away.

The one who didn't was the policeman. 'Something been stolen, sir?' he asked, getting out his official notebook. He was a blond, blue-eyed guardian of the people. He had never trusted carnivals since he had failed to win the stuffed parrot on which he had set his heart at the age of eight, and later had found out about fixed fairground guns. 'Missed something? Silly of you to bring anything valuable into a carnival! We all know what carnies are like. And they are nasty, dirty places. They wouldn't be allowed if I had my way.'

'I'm Phryne Fisher,' said Phryne, holding out her hand. She had just a few moments before that detestable oaf started writing in his notebook. She had also just caught sight, for the first time, of Samson the strongman, who must have been seven feet tall and was inhaling as though he had asthma.

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‘I’m a private investigator. Shall I give my good friend Detective Inspector Robinson your regards? I don’t believe we need to waste your valuable time on my escort’s lost property.’

She gave him a full-beam three hundred watt dazzling smile, which usually worked its magic on the recipient. Not this time, though. The policeman did not take her hand. He said mulishly, ‘Gentleman says he’s been robbed. I heard him.’

‘The gentleman hasn’t the brain of a peahen.’

Bobby felt that he was being ignored. ‘I had it in my pocket! And there’s the case, empty! What will Mother say? It’s worth four hundred pounds!’

The carnies paled and the policeman stood to attention in the presence of money. Damn. Now it was official. Phryne walked away into the dark between two stalls and Alan Lee came to her side.

‘It looks bad!’ he exclaimed. ‘Who could have robbed him? I ain’t seen any of the local dips. We always gets Samson to see ’em off. They’re bad for business.’

Samson rippled a few muscles and looked down modestly. A slim, elegant girl sat on the shooting gallery bench, scowling at Bobby.

‘That’s Anna,’ said Alan.

The shooting gallery shone. Not very new rifles were laid out on the counter. Targets wobbled across the back: tin ducks. On a board were the prizes—kewpie dolls, Chinese porcelain fresh from Abbotsford, glass rings and Woolworths pearls, hanging singly on hooks. Why was Bobby making this scene? Something jarred on Phryne. What thief took the jewel and left the case? Of course. This

was Bobby's own doing. He had staged this scene: just take out the bracelet, distract Anna, and hang it on a hook. And either blackmail Anna or ruin the carnival. Simple. Phryne reflected that merchant banking really was bad for the soul.

'I'm afraid,' said Phryne, 'that even from here, amongst those trinkets, I can see a sheen only produced by irritating an oyster.'

'Not Anna,' said Alan Lee. 'She's no thief.'

'I don't believe it either,' said Phryne. 'Now we need a diversion.'

'What if I just break his neck?' asked Samson reasonably. 'I could do it easy. Like snapping a daffodil.'

'Thanks anyway, Samson. Not with that cop there taking notes,' replied Alan.

'Go get the Wild Man,' said Phryne. 'Er ... does he speak English?'

'Tom? He's from Footscray.'

'And ask the Princess of the Amazon if Cleopatra would like an outing. Bobby,' said Phryne vengefully, 'hates snakes.'

The policeman was still taking notes. Anna Lee, frightened and disdainful, was sitting on the shooting gallery bench, affecting not to notice.

'I felt in my pocket for a penny to give a child—'

'Could the child have picked your pocket, sir?'

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‘It was only a small child,’ said Bobby.

‘Might have been a midget. You never know in a carnival. Hells bells!’ he exclaimed. ‘What’s that?’

Hooting and leaping through the crowd came the Wild Man, Alan Lee in close pursuit. Tom bounced and gibbered with aplomb, turned a neat somersault and leapt into the shooting gallery where he tried to groom Anna’s hair. She pushed him away and he bounced down again, snarling now, menacing Bobby and the policeman. They backed away. So did Phryne. She almost had her hands on the bracelet when they turned to face her again. Phryne cursed under her breath.

Alan Lee, stockwhip in hand, cracked it. The Wild Man uttered a shriek and ran back to his nice safe booth with the gypsy behind him. The crowd stirred and muttered. This was turning out to be a more interesting evening than they had expected.

‘The camels are out!’ shouted Phryne, losing patience. Both Bobby and the policeman looked away. In a second she had the little bundle of beads in hand. When they looked back, Phryne Fisher had slid away into the darkness.

The constable decided to arrange a search. Phryne heard Bobby say to Anna, ‘I’ve got you now, girl. Me or jail,’ he said. ‘Now you have to come with me when I snap my fingers.’

‘Snap, then,’ replied Anna, voice dripping with scorn.

‘By God, I will! Constable!’

The policeman was not having a good evening. Finding witnesses was harder than he thought. He returned.

‘I’ve found the bracelet!’ Bobby exclaimed. Phryne thought how unattractive he was, red with frustrated passion and dripping with sweat. ‘I wondered where someone might hide it and I thought, what about the prize board? This girl stole them,’ he said, unhooking without looking at his object. ‘See? Mother’s pearls!’

‘No, they ain’t,’ said the policeman. ‘They ain’t worth tuppence.’

Bobby stared at the Woolworths pearls. ‘Then where are Mother’s pearls?’ he cried.

‘Here,’ said Phryne Fisher, fervently hoping that it was true. She put the string into his hot hand. ‘You dropped them near the carousel. You really are careless, Bobby. Now shall we just tell this nice policeman what you have really been up to?’

‘No,’ said Alan Lee, laying a hand on Phryne’s arm. ‘No trouble, lady.’

‘Then we will allow him to carry on with his very useful task of keeping the world safe from carnivals,’ agreed Phryne.

The disgusted constable moved away. Samson lifted Bobby off his feet by his collar with no apparent effort.

‘You horrible little insect,’ said Phryne dispassionately. ‘Still, I suppose it is educational to find out that you can’t have everything you want. And just in case you want to cause any more trouble,’ she told Bobby, ‘we are going to lock you up, just for a while, while I enjoy the carnival. I won’t say that Doreen might



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leave one of her snakes in the booth,' she said, with quiet venom. 'I'll just let you find out for yourself.'

Doreen was walking through the crowd, carrying Cleopatra, who was pleased to be out of her tent. Bobby fell to his knees. Phryne took pity on him.

'Or perhaps you would prefer to give them all the money in your pockets, a promise never to return, and flee the scene?'

Bobby shed three pound notes, a folded ten-pound note, seven shillings, three pence and two farthings and ran for his life. As he ran, Anna reached out a hand and snapped her fingers in his face.

Phryne was cool at last. Supper was over, the others had gone back to their caravans. Tom had turned out to be a cheery man who



had been shipwrecked in Borneo, which gave him a new career. Doreen had inherited her snakes from her mum, who had married a grocer in Tumbarumba. Phryne had patted one snake and scotched another. A day full of incident.

The lights were out. Across the huddle of booths the rain sluiced, washing away the stains of anger and appetite and fear. Camels hooted and bubbled, surprising local owls. Alan Lee was behind her and she leaned back into his salty, soapy scent. She could feel every defined muscle in his chest.

‘You could stay the night,’ he stated. Phryne laughed and turned into his embrace, kissing the strong throat and the hollow of the collarbone. His hands slid down her sides.

‘I think I might,’ she said softly. ‘I have always ... loved ... the carnival.’