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The Fabulous Foursome

Nothing much ever happened in Bugsville, at least nothing exciting. Each day was the same as any other; and, although it was pretty boring, people who lived there were quite happy with it. At a particular time in the year, however, that all changed; and the time had arrived at last. The Roach sisters brought news of it, declaring breathlessly: "It's coming! The circus is coming to town!"

Everyone waited eagerly for the string of caravans and carts to appear over the top of the hill; then it began to snake its way towards Bugsville. People lined the street and cheered the procession on. Stylish it certainly was, with tumblers doing cartwheels behind the band which played so loudly that it even drowned out the cheering of the crowd. And when the last caravan had passed them, the town folk fell in to march behind, following the circus train to the paddock where the big tent was always set up.

"Don't you really wish you could be a performer in the circus?" Roland the dung beetle asked his friend.

"When I was young," replied Slats the wood louse, "I thought of running away to join the circus. Trouble was, I've never been able to run, so I kind-of gave up on the idea."

"Running's not everything," said Roland. "I can't exactly run either, but I can do other things. Maybe we could think of something neat that you could do; then we could both go and join."

So, the two friends set off across the paddock in search of the Ringmaster. He was the one who ran the circus and might hopefully give them a job. They found him calling instructions to the crew putting up the big tent, and asked if he needed two new acts. "Always looking for special talent," he said, then broke off to shout: "No, no! The pole goes over there." He brought his attention back to the two bugs and said: "As you can see, I'm a bit busy right now. Why don't you come back later?"

As they made their way out of the busy paddock, Slats sounded disappointed, saying: "I knew it would be a waste of time."

"Not at all," Roland assured him. "He did say to come back later, so he must be interested..." He broke off and ducked when he caught sight of something flying through the air. When it landed right next to him, he recognised Myrtle the grasshopper. "I do

wish you would watch where you're leaping," Roland grumbled, "You almost flattened me then."

"Sorry, Roland," Myrtle apologised in her raspy voice, "I didn't notice you. I was looking for the Ringmaster. I'm going to see him about joining the circus."

"He's busy," mumbled Slats, "And he told us to come back later."

"Oh, are you going to join the circus as well?" Myrtle wanted to know.

"That's the general idea," said Slats, "Always assuming we can come up with some acts the Ringmaster likes."

Later that day, the circus had set up and the three friends were standing by the entrance to the big top. That was what the main tent was called, and it was easy to see why - it was huge, especially for people as small as they were. "What do you think it means?" queried Roland as he puzzled a message on the sign-board beside the entrance.

"I have no idea," replied Slats, "It says "New Acts" which I guess is us; but "Come in and Try Out" makes no sense. When you're already "out", why would you come in only to go out again?"

"Because that's exactly what you three will be doing." The voice was very familiar and they all groaned on hearing it. Clarissa the spider was always so full of herself and nobody liked her. She was even less likeable when she added: "You have absolutely no chance of being hired. What can you do, I ask myself, and I answer: practically nothing apart from grubbing around in the dirt. Whereas I can do absolutely lots of amazing things."

"Oh, yes, like what?" rasped Myrtle, making a clicking sound as she rubbed her legs together, something she did out of habit.

"I do wish you wouldn't do that," complained Clarissa, "It's most annoying. As for what I can do, what can't I? I can see myself now - swinging around, high in the big top, jumping from one web to another, all created by myself in just moments. The crowd will absolutely love me."

"Of course they will," grumbled Roland, "Absolutely."

He was the first to be called in. When asked by the Ringmaster what he could do, he said: "I roll this," and he indicated a large round ball of brown stuff, "And not only do I roll it really fast, but I do it backwards."

The Ringmaster frowned, then shrugged. "Okay, show me."

While Roland was pushing his ball of brown stuff around the arena, his friends waited outside, hoping he would be good enough to get a job in the circus. It was clear from the look on his face when he came out that he hadn't. "The Ringmaster said I was

too ordinary," Roland said dismally, "But he did say to come back if I had something different and special to show him."

Slats went in next, but all he could do was crawl around things, and under things. Even crawling up the see-saw, then forming himself in a ball and rolling down again failed to impress. Myrtle certainly had more to offer with her springing and leaping; but she too came out with a glum look on her face. "He didn't want me," she said simply.

Until then, Clarissa had stayed quiet, but she could contain herself no longer. "Of course he didn't. You have absolutely no class. Stand aside amateurs. Let an expert show you how it's done." With that, she strutted through the entrance into the big top, head held high and full of confidence. She was out in less than five minutes. "I can't believe it," moaned Clarissa, "He said he had silk worms who could perform better than me. I'm absolutely devastated. And I'll never go to a circus ever again. Let's see how Mister high-and-mighty Ringmaster likes those apples!"

The three friends hadn't seen Clarissa like this before, and it was quite sad really; so much so that they all felt sorry for her. "I don't care what the Ringmaster said, Clarissa," said Myrtle, "I think you're very clever."

"And entertaining," added Slats.

Then Roland said: "And I've had an idea - if we could come up with a group act that we all did together, that would be different." He paused to look into Clarissa's many eyes. "That's always assuming you wouldn't mind working with amateurs."

"Absolutely not," replied Clarissa, and she sounded truly genuine. "In fact, I believe we can come up with an act that puts the professionals to shame. All we need to do is figure out what to do."

"And we'll have to practise a lot to get it right," put in Slats.

"Let's start straight away," said Clarissa, "And we should have a name, something like Clarissa and the Three Bugs." Noticing the looks of disapproval, she said: "Okay, how about Clarissa's Captivating Company?"

Realising that the circus would not be in town for long, the three friends and Clarissa worked hard on their act. During this time, the spider became less bossy and full of herself. "Do you know," Slats said to Roland, "Clarissa's not too bad when you get to know her. In fact, I'm kind-of starting to like her."

"Best not tell her," said Roland, "We don't want her getting cocky. She has the hardest job in the act, and if she loses concentration at the wrong time, it will be a disaster."

"You're absolutely right," said Slats, "I'll keep quiet." He had another thought: "What do you reckon about her name for the act?"

"I'd say it has a definite ring to it," replied Roland, "If we can pull off our act well, I'd say we'll deserve to be known as The Fabulous Foursome; absolutely we will."

The try-out in the big top went really well. Roland started out rolling his ball of brown stuff while Slats crawled casually around, singing as he went: "Newny, newny, new..." as if he hadn't a care in the world. Next, Myrtle bounced and sprang over to Roland and kicked his brown stuff away, which prompted the dung beetle to scuttle over to Slats, nudge him so that he curled into a ball which he rolled towards the see-saw in the centre of the arena. At the lowest part of the see-saw, Roland pushed Slats onto the bottom of the plank.

Myrtle was a way off and had started rubbing her legs together, making more and more noise. At the signal from Roland: "Hup!" Myrtle sprang into the air and landed on the high end of the plank, pushing it down with her weight. Up went the other end of the plank with Slats on it; and he flew right into the top of the big tent where Clarissa was waiting to catch him. As soon as she had, she slid gracefully down on a strand of spider's web, lowering them both to the ground where they grouped together with the others and bowed to the Ringmaster.

Very different to the way he had been before, he was delighted and actually clapped. "That was truly fantastic, amazing. It's just what I need." His eye went up and gazed into the big top, then he spread his hands as if he was showing a display poster. "I can see it now: Trundles Circus presents The Fabulous Foursome." Then he calmed down and added: "Better go and rest up. Your first performance starts tonight."

The Fabulous Foursome were so excited on the way home that all they could talk about were their various parts of the performance, and how this or that had almost gone wrong. "But nothing went wrong," Clarissa reminded them, "And as long as we do everything absolutely the same, nothing will go wrong tonight."

Not that any of them were convinced of this, but they all tried to relax in preparation for their first public performance. Waiting behind the scenes wasn't easy. Although they were unable to see what was happening in the big top, they could hear the ooohs and aaahs of the crowd, and the band blaring out all the tunes that are played at circuses. "I'm a bit worried about that," said Myrtle, "The band, I mean. We didn't have one when we performed for the Ringmaster."

"It's just a noise," explained Clarissa, "What does it matter?"

"That's the point," explained Myrtle, "There's likely to be so much of it that I won't be able to hear the sound from my legs as I wind up for my jump." She paused, then added something else: "And I'm a bit worried about the weight thing. When I landed on the end of the see-saw before, Slats didn't fly as fast as we thought he would and Clarissa almost missed catching him."

"Okay," said Roland, "How about this - before you jump, I'll climb onto your back for the extra weight."

"Yes, yes!" put in Clarissa excitedly, "That would look like you are riding Myrtle - the black knight on his trusty steed jumping for victory!"

"A bit over-dramatic, don't you think," droned Slats.

There was no time to debate the matter further. The Ringmaster could be heard making an announcement: "Ladies and Gentlemen. Trundles Circus is proud to present a new act brought to you at great expense for your total enjoyment. The Fabulous Foursome will now perform their never-before-seen, death-defying stunt of bravery and supreme skill. But," he added, and signalled to the drummer in the band to beat out a short drum-roll, "As soon as you hear the drum-roll stop, I beg you to stay very quiet. What you will see after is extremely dangerous and requires the complete concentration of the performers."

Hearing this, the crowd had gone silent. It was exactly what the Ringmaster had hoped for as he threw out a hand towards the entrance to the arena and bellowed: "The... Fabulous..... Foursome!!!"

The band struck up. Surprisingly - and this was how they had planned it - Slats came into the arena first, followed by Roland with his ball of brown stuff; then, after she had enough spare space behind the other two to land, Myrtle bounced in. Although they had never seen The Fabulous Foursome before, the crowd went wild, whooping and whistling, cheering and clapping. The noise died down somewhat when the audience realised that there were only three of the foursome in the arena. What's happened, they were wondering? Where's the fourth one? Then she entered. Clarissa strode in, waving one leg, then another at the crowd as if she was a queen and they her subjects; and, at that moment, they were just that. Clarissa loved it, and so did the crowd.

With the band still playing, Roland began rolling his ball of brown stuff. As he did, bits broke off making it difficult to keep a straight line, so he had to weave his way round the arena, skittering first left, then right. For the crowd, this was great and very amusing. Next came Myrtle's turn to spring in and kick the ball of brown stuff out from under Roland, only she mistimed it and kicked Roland instead, sending him bouncing onto the see-saw, up the plank, and over the top-end to lay sprawled on the ground beneath.

Slats was now too far away to be nudged, so he newny-newed over to Roland, curled into a ball and waited for the dung beetle to push him onto the lower part of the see-saw. This was, perhaps, the only part of the performance that went right. After that, it was a shambles. Having decided it was the best option, Roland climbed on Myrtle's back to add the extra weight, and as soon as the band-leader saw this, he stopped the

music. The only sound now was the drum-roll which got gradually louder and louder. The crowd continued roaring until it stopped. A deathly silence fell over the big top.

Myrtle should have been pleased, but the sudden silence made her nervous. All she could hear was the sound from her legs rubbing together and she lost count. When she made her spring, it was a lot higher than it should have been. With Roland on her back, they sailed up high and came crashing down on the end of the see-saw. Slats knew something was wrong when he was flung through the air much faster than in their practice.

Clarissa was waiting. It was clear from her position in the big top that things hadn't gone quite to plan; but her part was to be the crowning glory and she wasn't about to make a mess of it. Unfortunately, just as she was watching Slats flying towards her, a gust of wind blew into the tent and she found herself spinning. She knew Slats had at last arrived, because he hit her on the back of her head. Dizzy from the blow, she began zooming down her strand of spider's web to the arena below. Slats made it to the ground far quicker than Clarissa. He landed on one of Myrtle's legs which, because of the sudden knock, kicked backwards in the exact spot where Roland was. This sent him flying across the arena and straight into the band where he bounced off the big drum.

Very used to these kinds of hiccups, the band-leader raised his baton and started up the tune that was usually played at the end of a circus act. Not knowing that The Fabulous Foursome had made a total mess of things, the crowd clapped and cheered, and whistled. For them, they had never seen anything as amazing and thrilling before.

After the show, the Ringmaster called The Fabulous Foursome together. "I don't know how you did it, but that was absolutely the best performance I've ever seen. If you can keep coming up with acts like that, we are going to make a fortune."

Clarissa looked around the faces of the other three who had now become her friends and replied: "Sorry, Mister Ringmaster, but I think we've all had enough of the circus."

"Surely not," spluttered the Ringmaster, "It's exciting, absolutely wonderful! Why would you want to stay here where nothing ever happens?"

"Just because nothing ever happens," said Clarissa. "And," she added as an after-thought, "Please stop saying "absolutely" - that's my word."