

THE SINGING BIRD

by Anna Wylde

THE morning was nearly over by the time they reached the Showgrounds, and already family groups were unpacking picnic baskets under the trees. The attendant at the Parking Ground put his cap on again as they came to the gate, and motioned them languidly through. Aunt Edith changed down grindingly, and in the back seat Gran clutched the strap as they bumped over the hard ground. Kathy, beside her, sitting obediently well back on the seat, felt the leather hot and sticky under her legs, and was glad they'd arrived. When Janet was in the back too they had to sit one forward and one back, and then each had a turn at sitting on the edge of the seat and looking out of the window. But today Janet was in the front, and Kathy and Gran and the lunch basket and the rugs and the coats had been packed into the back by Doris the maid with something very like relief after a trying morning.

It was very hot, and the car was stuffy with Gran's faint familiar smell of mothballs and her Catarrhal Ready Relief. The Parking Attendant removed his hat again and mopped his brow, taking no further interest in them. Aunt Edith said, dithering, "Here, do you think, mother, or over by the fence?" and at last edged the car nervously in between a dusty truck and the railing fence.

THEY were almost opposite the grandstand, and in spite of their late arrival had a good view of the show ring. Now with the engine stopped they could hear the thump and blare of a merry-go-round away on the left, and quite near them on the other side of the fence a stall was selling bright singing

birds to twirl on sticks, and spangled fairy dolls.

Kathy sat forward, feeling for the first time a faint excitement. Aunt Edith opened her door and got out stiffly, as it had been a long journey. She wore the thick tweed skirt and brogues that she considered suitable for the Show whatever the weather, and she looked very hot. Kathy hopped out of the car and opened Janet's door. "The birds!" she said. "Look at the birds!" They both watched as a small boy paid his sixpence, chose without hesitation a brilliant cerise one, and ran off twirling the bird above his head until the air was full of its shrilling. Kathy was enchanted. "Would you have chosen that one?" she asked. "The yellow's lovely, too, isn't it?" Janet said. "Look at the fairy dolls, all glitter on their hair, like fairy queens. I'd like one of those."

But Kathy wanted a singing bird. She turned to Gran, knowing better than to ask, but longing. The old lady still sat in the car holding on to the strap, the fingers of her other hand twitching in the black stuff of her dress. Aunt Edith said, "Katherine, don't swing the door, dear. Mother, where shall we have lunch? It's quite shady here." Kathy said, "Gran, do look at the birds. You swing them in the air and they sing. It says sixpence, Auntie."



But Aunt Edith was spreading rugs, pulling baskets from under Gran's feet, putting out cups and plates. Her face had the tight-lipped, pre-occupied look that the children had learnt to associate with the preparation and serving of food, even picnics, as if it were an unpleasant, even slightly indecent, duty—certainly never to be regarded with pleasure. She opened a tin of sandwiches with a faint air of distaste, and put them down on the rug by Janet, then hard-boiled eggs and tomatoes in a nest of lettuce leaves as if she hated the sight of them. At last, with the food unpacked and displayed to the world in all its vulgarity, she poured out tea from a thermos flask, handed a cup to the old lady, and settled down on the rug with her back against the wheel and her eyes closed to sip her tea. The children sat neatly on the edge of the rug, looking at the food and waiting, till Gran said, "Well, chicks, aren't you hungry?" and Aunt Edith opened her eyes and said, "For goodness sake, children, get on and

have your lunch," and they each took a sandwich hurriedly.

But after that it was better. The lunch was good, and there were people passing to watch all the time, some who smiled and nodded and were bowed to by Gran and Aunt Edith and, in unconscious imitation, by the children. In the show ring men were arranging hurdles for the jumping. Gran, revived by her tea, tsk-tsked at the high brush fence, and talked about the days when she had ridden side-saddle, and the spills

she had seen. Presently Aunt Edith took a digestive tablet and some more tea and began to pack things away, urging them to finish up as if she wanted to remove all evidence of their having eaten, as quickly as possible.

EVEN under the tree it was hot and still. Gran was nodding a little in the car, and Aunt Edith said, "The jumping won't begin for a while yet, mother, would you like to go to the Ladies' Room?" The children, questioned, said no thank you, they didn't want to, no, quite sure, thank you, and Kathy, watching Gran gather up the soft black wrinkled leather bag that seemed almost part of her, said in a rush, "Gran, the little birds, they're only sixpence. But Janet likes the fairy dolls, too."

Gran's black shoe, very pointed at the toe, but broad and comfy across the bunions, was already on the running board, but stopped, eyes smiling at the little girl, "Well, well," she said, "only sixpence. Let's see if poor old Gran has any money left." And she delved in the camphor-scented recesses of the bag and found a shilling, which she passed to the elder girl over the excited Kathy's head. "One each, Janet," she said; "don't lose it," and ducking her head began again the difficult descent to the ground. "No farther than the stall. And come straight back to the car," said Aunt Edith. She opened a sunshade over the old lady and they began the slow journey round the ringside to the Members' Stand.

Janet took Kathy's hand and together they ducked under the fence and across to the stall. The crowd were several deep round it, and for a while they stood there, pushed this way and that, gazing at the gaudy emerald and canary yellow, the excitement of streamers and spangles and waving sticks, and all the time the high, sweet trilling of the little birds. For a moment in her absorption Kathy almost forgot they'd really come to buy one. Then suddenly she became aware of Janet's fingers digging into her arm. "I've got a better idea, a much better idea," she was saying. "Let's have a ride on the merry-go-round! It's sixpence, too!"

This took a moment or two to penetrate. Kathy, enthralled by the birds, had taken little notice of the strident merry-go-round. But they were closer to it now, and as she watched the music began, and the painted horses began to bob sedately, revolving slowly but as if champing to throw off restraint and whirl madly into their dance. As they gathered speed Janet's fingers tightened on her arm. "Come on, we must. You don't really want a bird." A bird! Kathy swung round again. "Oh, but I do, I do, Janet!" Flaunting cerise and emerald and royal blue, they were still there. "You're a baby," said Janet. "Scared of the horses. Anyway, Gran gave me the money. Come on, we'll get on the next time it stops." And pulling Kathy by the hand, Janet led the way towards the beautiful, terrifying horses.

The crowd there was even bigger, and though a big red-faced man with a booming voice calling that there was room for everyone, and not to push, please, nobody but Janet and Kathy seemed to take much notice. The first time the merry-go-round stopped the children were a long way from the front row, and in the scramble for places only just managed to hold their position. But they were used to waiting, and stood patiently craning to see the horses, a little bewildered by the noise and the

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(Solution to No. 731)



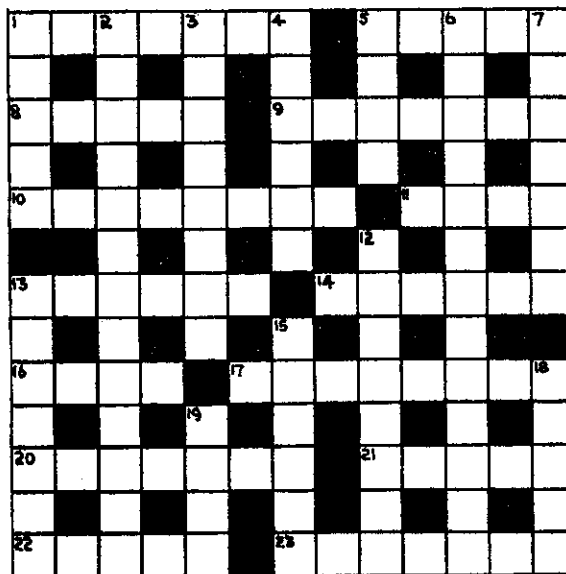
Clues Across

- This Mariner had a "long grey beard and glittering eye."
- Proverbially, they have ears.
- The Irishman leads the way along the tracks.
- Could a hurt pig stand thus?
- I tell Gay (anag.).
- Part of a spaceman's target?
- Inferiate.
- Most of us have two, but a teacher usually has quite a number.
- It helps you not to hurt people's feelings.
- Five-sided figure.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- If I go from the espalier and turn it back to front it may have one.
- "The — that infest the day Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs, And as silently steal away" (Longfellow).
- Faithful form of alloy?
- Dwells in desires?
- Captivate.
- Remote sort of shooting star?
- "They haven't got no —, The fallen sons of Eve" (Ches-terton, "The Song of Quoodle").
- Hopalong Cassidy hides this stone.

No. 732 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Clues Down

- Dismay.
- Unconditionally.
- Age lines (anag.).
- Faithful, but if be-headed, apparently rather out of practice.
- Draw back.
- Rather inclined to be "a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles," and certainly not heavy-handed about it, either.
- A sister may be the author of these.
- Merely ice-creams on the bench?