



The Girl on the Beach

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Prologue

Summer 1926

‘Where is that dratted girl? Julie Monday, come here at once or we shall go without you.’

The last thing Julie wanted was to be left behind. The Foundling Hospital’s outings were few and far between and this one promised to be the best yet. They were going to the seaside for a whole day and the weather was glorious. Breaking all the rules, she dashed down the stairs and ran pell-mell along the corridor to join her excited peers who were standing in line to board the fleet of motor charabancs that were to take them to Southend, girls and boys separately of course, each bus being looked after by a member of staff.

‘Sorry, Miss Paterson.’

Grace Paterson, thin and stiff as a rake and with a back to match, had scraped-back grey hair and a severe expression, but all the children knew she was soft as butter inside and loved her, in as far as they were capable of understanding what love was. Few of them had known such a thing outside the orphanage or had any idea what a

family home was like, although, to give them their due, the administrators, teachers and household staff did their best. The children all knew, because it was hammered into them every day of their lives, that they were the objects of charity and needed to be suitably grateful.

Julie, being eight years old, was aware of this but it could not subdue her natural exuberance. How someone who had been in the institution since birth had come to have such an independent spirit and capacity for mischief, neither Miss Paterson nor any of the other members of staff understood. According to the meticulous notes made on her admission, she had been found on the doorstep by one of the kitchen staff arriving for work at six o'clock one morning in July 1918. Wrapped in a thin blanket she was very underweight even for a newborn baby, and this one, according to the doctor who examined her, was about a week old. There had been a note pinned to the blanket. 'Husband killed in France. Can't cope no more.' A woman, who had recently given birth, had been pulled from the Thames that night and it had been conjectured that this had been Julie's mother, though there was no proof.

And so she had become one of hundreds of orphan children, the majority of them born of unmarried mothers, looked after by the home. Discipline was strict and punishment harsh, but the children were adequately clothed and fed and given the rudiments of an education. Besides the three Rs and religious instruction, they learnt a little of history and geography and, as they progressed, the boys learnt a trade and the girls learnt to be domestic servants. As soon as they were big enough to understand what was expected of them, they were given their allotted tasks: making their own beds, dusting, sweeping the floor,

polishing, laundry work and helping in the kitchen. The bigger ones helped look after the smaller ones and so they became self-reliant at an early age, but at the same time remaining ignorant of matters the ordinary slum child grew up knowing: about having babies and learning to survive.

Julie was constantly being made to stand in the corner of the classroom or being sent to the governor for some misdemeanour or other, where she was either caned or locked in a cupboard for a few hours. Even though it hurt, she preferred the cane; the darkness and silence of the cupboard terrified her – she would do anything not to have to endure that punishment but somehow never managed to escape it. Ever since the news of the outing had broken two weeks before, she had been a model of rectitude, determined nothing would stop her from going. She had so nearly spoilt it all at the last minute by going to the sickroom to see her friend, Elsie, who was too ill to make the trip. ‘I’ll tell you all about it when I come back,’ she had promised.

Miss Paterson ushered her onto the last coach, where the girls were crammed three to a seat intended for two, found her own seat near the driver, and the vehicle rolled away through the gates and onto the road. It was really happening. They were really going to the seaside. Some began to eat the small packet of sandwiches they had been given for their dinner, others were sick into the brown paper bags thoughtfully provided for them. Julie looked out of the window at the busy streets. There were shoppers hurrying along with baskets on their arms, children skipping, a dog tied to a lamp post, a gentleman alighting from a cab. A black cat sunned itself on a window ledge, which she took to be a sign of good luck. After a time the streets were left behind and they were in the open country.

Trees, fields, farm buildings, villages, cows, pigs and horses passed before her enchanted gaze, and then they were in a town again and there was the sea. A huge cheer went up from the occupants of the bus as it drew to a stop behind the rest of the fleet.

Julie had never seen the sea before. Grey and greeny-blue in patches, it was vast, stretching away in the distance to join up with the sky. There was a ship on the horizon, its two funnels belching smoke. It hardly seemed to be moving but she supposed it was going somewhere. It was not until she tumbled out with everyone else and was herded along the road that she saw the beach. Here was golden sand and hundreds of people enjoying themselves. There were donkeys being trotted up and down with children on their backs and kiosks selling ice cream. There were pools of water in which tiny children paddled. Bigger children were playing cricket or simply throwing a ball from hand to hand. Adults and children alike walked along the water's edge, laughing as it whooshed up to cover their feet and then was sucked back again. Further out heads bobbed up and down.

Julie stood and gaped, while those about her argued about what they wanted to do first. The older ones were all for going on the pier, where they hoped the threepenny piece they had been given to spend could be changed into pennies which would be multiplied in the slot machines. Miss Paterson remonstrated that this was gambling and wicked and she could not allow it, much to their disappointment. Others wanted an ice cream cornet and hurried to buy one from a man standing beside a tricycle with a large container on the front of which was written 'Stop me and buy one' in flowery script. Nearby was a tall, narrow, tent-like structure surrounded by an audience

of children all agape at the antics of a puppet show. ‘It’s Punch and Judy,’ Johnny Easter said. He had not been in the orphanage long and knew these things. Julie’s group settled down on the sand to watch it.

She was soon bored with that and the sea was inviting her, so she wandered off on her own, right down to the water’s edge. The first thing she did was to take off the starched white cap she wore and stuff it into her skirt pocket, the second was to sit down and remove her black button shoes and stockings. She carried them with her as she gingerly stepped into the water and felt the wet sand oozing between her toes. It tickled and she laughed aloud. A larger-than-usual wave rolled up and she had to run backwards to keep her dress dry. Other girls had tucked their skirts into their knickers and were venturing in up to their knees, and, greatly daring, Julie did the same with her brown cotton uniform. The water struck cold but she soon became used to it and turned to paddle along the shoreline, dodging the bigger waves as she went. So absorbed was she, she did not notice she had left the crowded part of the beach behind and was almost alone. Alone except for a boy who came up out of the sea like Neptune, dripping water, although she was sure Neptune was never dressed in a blue-and-white-striped bathing costume that clung ever so closely to his body.

‘Hallo,’ he said.

‘Hallo,’ she answered.

‘Are you lost?’

‘No. Just walking.’

‘Where to?’ He had dark auburn hair and soft amber eyes. She guessed he was about the same age as Johnny Easter and that was twelve, and though he was by no means fat, he had more flesh on him than Johnny.

‘Nowhere. I just felt like it. The sea’s lovely, isn’t it?’

‘Grand.’ He walked up the beach a little way to where he had left a towel and a pile of clothes and sat down to rub his hair which sprang into little curls as it dried. She went and stood over him.

‘What’s over there?’ She nodded across the water.

‘Belgium and Holland, I should think.’ He was vigorously towelling himself.

‘Oh.’

‘Haven’t you got a towel to dry your feet?’

‘No.’

‘You can borrow mine if you like.’

‘Thank you kindly.’ She sat down beside him and took the towel he offered.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Julie Monday.’

He laughed. ‘Monday. You mean like the day of the week?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s a strange name.’

‘It’s on account of I was taken in at the hospital on a Monday in July, so I’m Julie Monday.’

‘What hospital?’

‘The Coram Foundling Hospital.’

‘Never heard of it. Where is it?’

‘In Bloomsbury, but we’re going to move to the country soon.’

‘Will you like that?’

She shrugged. ‘Dunno, do I? It’ll still be the Foundling Hospital, still an orphanage.’

‘Are you an orphan?’

‘I think so.’

‘You only think so. Don’t you know for sure?’

‘I was left on the doorstep when I was a baby. They told me my father died in the war and my mother threw herself in the river and was drowned.’

The information had been imparted to her in a matter-of-fact way one day when she had had the temerity to ask why she didn’t have a mother and father and she had accepted it philosophically. None of the other children had mothers and fathers, or if they did, they had no contact with them.

‘How old are you now?’

‘Eight.’

‘My sister’s eight but she’s bigger than you.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Harold Walker – most people call me Harry.’

‘Do you live here by the sea?’

‘No, we’re down for the week, staying in a boarding house. We live in Islington.’

‘Who’s “we”?’

‘Me, my dad and mum, my brother Roland, who’s ten, and my little sister, Mildred.’

‘It must be nice to have a mother and father,’ she said a little wistfully.

‘Yes, I suppose it is. I never thought of it before.’

‘And a brother and a sister.’

He laughed. ‘Sometimes it is, but sometimes they are a pest, particularly Millie, that’s why I like to come down here and swim by myself.’ He paused. ‘How about you? What brought you here?’

‘We came in a lot of charabancs with our teachers. They were paid for by Sir Bertram Chalfont. We had thruppence to spend too.’

‘Sir Bertram!’ he exclaimed. ‘I know him. My father is production manager at his factory in Southwark.’

‘I saw him once, when he came to inspect us. He had bushy ginger whiskers and grey hair. He smiled a lot.’

‘That’s him.’ He was putting a shirt and trousers on over his costume as he spoke.

‘I suppose I had better be going back,’ she said, standing up and pulling her skirt out of her drawers and shaking it out. It was sadly crumpled and, in spite of her care, stained with seawater.

He picked up his shoes and socks. ‘I’ll walk with you.’

They strolled along the water’s edge in no hurry. He stopped and picked up a round flat stone and skimmed it over the water, making it bounce several times before it disappeared.

‘That’s clever,’ she said. ‘How do you do it?’

‘It’s a knack.’ He selected another pebble and handed it to her. ‘Here, you try. Keep the angle low.’

Her missile failed completely and disappeared under the waves. He showed her again, with the same result, and thus they proceeded back towards the town, skimming pebbles as they went. She was happy as a sandboy and did not notice the beach was emptying until they returned to where the Punch and Judy had been. The little tent had gone and so had her classmates.

‘Where is everyone?’ she asked, looking about her in dismay.

‘I expect they’ve gone for their tea.’

‘Nobody said anything about having tea.’ She crammed her cap back on her head and scrambled into her stockings and shoes, though her feet were covered with sand, and began running up and down looking for someone she

knew, growing more and more panicky. He followed and stopped her by taking hold of her arm.

‘Don’t go off half-cock. Stand still and think. Were you told where to meet if you became separated?’

‘No. We weren’t supposed to be separated. They’ve been and gone home without me. Oh, what am I to do?’ She was very frightened but determined not to cry in front of him. Crying was frowned on by her teachers and, according to them, was a sign of weakness and achieved nothing. ‘I can’t walk all that way.’

‘Don’t be silly, of course you can’t. Can you remember where the coaches were parked?’

‘Up there somewhere.’ She pointed to the promenade. ‘They were in a long line.’

‘I don’t think they are allowed to stay there all day. I’ve seen coaches parked on a field on the edge of town. That’s where they’ll be. Come on.’ He took her hand and obediently she went.

He was right. The field was full of charabancs, both motorised and horse-drawn, some of them crowded with noisy children. He led her from one to the next until she spotted Miss Paterson standing by the vehicle in which they had arrived and looking about her with a mixture of worry and exasperation. When she saw Julie the exasperation took over from the worry. ‘Where have you been, Julie Monday?’ she demanded, grabbing her by the shoulder and propelling her towards the coach. ‘I was about to report you missing to the police and what a to-do that would have caused. Get in your seat and let us be off.’

Half in, half out, Julie screwed herself round to look back at Harry. ‘Goodbye,’ she called. ‘Thank you.’

He lifted his hand in salute and turned away. Julie was

found a seat right next to Miss Paterson. The bus lurched and bumped over the uneven field and they were on their way, back to the city and the routine of life in the orphanage. And as far as Julie was concerned, back to her punishment.

‘Who was that boy?’ Miss Paterson demanded.

‘He said his name was Harry. I forget his other name.’

‘Where and how did you meet him?’

‘Down on the beach. He was swimming. I couldn’t find you. He helped me.’

‘You foolish girl. Don’t you know better than to talk to strange boys?’

‘Why not?’

‘Anything could have happened. You do not know him. He could be wicked, degenerate . . .’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Someone who knows nothing of decency and proper behaviour, an evil person.’

‘He’s not evil. He was kind to me and helped me when I was lost. He lent me his towel to dry my feet.’

‘Merciful heaven! What have you been up to?’

‘Nothing, Miss Paterson. I went paddling and my feet were wet and there was sand between my toes.’

‘Do you mean to tell me you removed your stockings?’

‘I wanted to paddle and I couldn’t do that with my stockings on, could I?’

‘Don’t be cheeky, miserable rebellious girl. You were expressly told not to wander off. Have you learnt nothing of obedience? You will have to be punished. What a sorry end to what could have been a lovely day.’

‘It was a lovely day,’ she said, aware that everyone else on the coach was looking at her, goggle-eyed at her temerity. ‘I made a new friend.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t suppose you will ever see that boy again. And a good thing too.’

‘I know,’ was said with a resigned sigh.

‘I shall have to report your disgraceful behaviour to Mr Carruthers.’

‘Oh no, please, Miss Paterson. He’ll make me go in the cupboard . . .’

‘You should have thought of that before. Now be silent. I have had enough of you for one day.’

Julie lapsed into silence, but it was not a silence of shame or remorse, it was a silence of happy recollections. Nothing they could do to her could stifle those.

‘I met a girl on the beach today,’ Harry said, after the waitress had served them all with roast chicken, stuffing and several dishes of vegetables, and left them to their meal.

‘Don’t you think you are a little young to be picking up girls, son?’ his father queried with a smile, one eyebrow raised.

‘She was lost.’

‘Oh, you mean a little girl,’ he said with relief. ‘What did you do?’

‘I helped her find her party. She’d come down in a charabanc from the Coram Foundling Hospital. I thought hospitals were for ill people.’

‘So they are, but originally the word had a wider meaning and the Foundling Hospital is a very old institution.’

‘She said she had been left on the doorstep when she was a baby. They told her that her father was killed in the war and her mother threw herself into the river. The hospital called her Julie Monday because she arrived on a Monday in July.’

‘Poor child,’ his mother murmured. ‘How dreadful for her.’

‘She didn’t seem unhappy.’

‘No, I believe the children are well looked after and she would not have known any other kind of life, would she?’ his father said, frowning at Roly and Millie who had paused with mouths agape to look from one to the other in curiosity.

‘No, I suppose not. The funny thing was she said the outing had been paid for by Sir Bertram.’

‘I am not surprised. Sir Bertram is a good man. I believe he has recently been appointed to the Board of Governors of the hospital. It is a testing time for the institution. The present building has been sold and they are looking for new premises.’

‘She said they were going to move to the country.’

‘You seem to have had quite a long conversation with her,’ his mother said. ‘I am surprised a little girl like that was so articulate.’

‘She wasn’t that little. She said she was eight. She had walked the whole length of the beach and could not find her way back.’ That was stretching the truth, he knew, but it sounded better than saying he had simply offered to walk with her. And he had helped her to find her charabanc.

‘Your good deed for the day, eh?’ his father said.

Harry grinned and attacked his roast chicken with gusto. Swimming always gave him a good appetite and their landlady was an exceptionally good cook. He found himself wondering what Julie was having for her supper and if she had been punished. The teacher, or whatever she was, had grabbed her a bit roughly and almost lifted her off the ground when she pushed her into the charabanc. She was a lively girl, full of curiosity, and not a bit sorry for herself; he had no doubt she would survive.