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The circus

The long planks set on trestles rose one above the other to a monstrous height and stretched dizzily in a wide oval ring. They were packed with people - «lak fleas on a dog's ear», said Dicey, holding Miranda's hand firmly and looking about her with disapproval. The white billows of enormous canvas sagged overhead, held up by three poles set evenly apart down the center. The family, when seated, occupied almost a whole section on one level.

On one side of them in a long row sat Father, sister Maria, brother Paul, Grandmother ; great-aunt Keziah, cousin Keziah, and second-cousin Keziah, who had just come down from Kentucky on a visit ; uncle Charles Breaux, cousin Charles Breaux, and aunt Marie-Anne Breaux. On the other side sat small cousin Lucie Breaux, big cousin Paul Gay, great-aunt Sally Gay (who took snuff and was therefore a disgrace to the family) ; two strange, extremely handsome young men who might be cousins but who were certainly in love with cousin Miranda Gay ; and cousin Miranda Gay herself, a most dashing young lady with crisp silk skirts, a half dozen of them at once, a lovely perfume and wonderful black curly hair above enormous wild gray eyes, «like a colt's», Father said. Miranda hoped to be exactly like her when she grew up. Hanging to Dicey's arm she leaned out and waved to cousin Miranda, who waved back smiling, and the strange young men waved to her also. Miranda was most fearfully excited. It was her first circus ; it might also be her last because the whole family had combined to persuade Grandmother to allow her to come with them. «Very well, this once,» grandmother said, «since it's a family reunion.»

This once ! This once ! She could not look hard enough at everything. She even peeped down between the wide crevices of piled-up plank seats, where she was astonished to see odd-looking, roughly dressed little boys peeping up from the dust below. They were squatted in little heaps, staring up quietly. She looked squarely into the eyes of one, who returned her a look so peculiar she gazed and

gazed, trying to understand it. It was a bold grinning stare without any kind of friendliness in it. He was a thin, dirty little boy with a floppy old checkerboard cap pulled over crumpled red ears and dust-colored hair. As she gazed he nudged the little boy next to him, whispered, and the second little boy caught her eye. This was too much. Miranda pulled Dicey's sleeve. «Dicey, what are those little boys doing down there ?» «Down there ?» asked Dicey, but she seemed to know already, for she bent over and looked through the crevice, drew her knees together and her skirts around her, and said severely : 'You jus mind yo' own business and stop throwin' yo' legs around that way. Don't you pay any mind. Plenty o' monkeys right here in the show widout you studyin dat kind.»

An enormous brass band seemed to explode right at Miranda's ear. She jumped, quivered, thrilled blindly and almost forgot to breathe as sound and color and smell rushed together and poured through her skin and hair and beat in her head and hands and feet and pit of her stomach. «Oh,» she called out in her panic, closing her eyes and seizing Dicey's hand hard. The flaring lights burned through her lids, a roar of laughter like rage drowned out the steady raging of the drums and horns. She opened her eyes... A creature in a blousy white overall with ruffles at the neck and ankles, with bone-white skull and chalk-white face, with tufted eyebrows far apart in the middle of his forehead, the lids in a black sharp angle, a long scarlet mouth stretching back into sunken cheeks, turned up at the corners in a perpetual bitter grimace of pain, astonishment, not smiling, pranced along a wire stretched down the center of the ring, balancing a long thin pole with little wheels at either end. Miranda thought at first he was walking on air, or flying, and this did not surprise her ; but when she saw the wire, she was terrified. High above their heads the inhuman figure pranced, spinning the little wheels. He paused, slipped, the flapping white leg waved in space ; he staggered, wobbled, slipped sidewise, plunged, and caught the wire with frantic knee, hanging there

upside down, the other leg was feeler above his head ; slipped and caught by one frenzied heel, swung back and forth like a scarf...

The crowd roared with savage shrieks of dreadful laughter like delicious torment.

Miranda shrieked too, with her hands clutching at her stomach with fingers drawn up...The man on the wire, by his foot, turned his head from side to side and blew sneezes from his cruel mouth. The tears covered her eyes and screamed pouring over her cheeks and down her face.

«Take her home,» said her father, «her out of here at once,» but he was not wiped from his face. He glanced at her and back to the crowd. «Take her away, Dicey,» said Grandmother, from under her black crepe veil. Dicey, rebelliously, without taking her gaze from the figure swaying on the wire, the limp, suffering bundle, lumped her way over knees through the crowd, down the scaffolding, across a space of ground, out through a flap of canvas. Miranda was crying steadily, occasional hiccough. A dwarf, sitting in the entrance, wearing a woolly beard, a pointed cap, breeches, long shoes with tufted heels. He carried a thin white wand that almost touched him before he turned her distorted face with its glistening tears almost to him. He leaned forward and peered at her, not-human golden eyes sighted dog : then made a harsh sound at her, imitating her own sobbing. Dicey drew her away from him, not before Miranda had seen suddenly, a look of haughty pleasure, a true grown-up look. It chilled her with fear : she had not believed in human.

«Raincheck, get your raincoat, a very disagreeable-looking man passed. Dicey turned toward her in tears herself. «Mister, c