RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Charlie Moon Collection

Shirley Hughes

HERE COMES CHARLIE MOON

“Come on,” says Charlie hoarsely, dragging her arm and shuffling forward. “You hide up here, behind the curtain over the archway. I’m going to be in the entrance hall.”

“It isn’t worth it, Charlie. Nobody’s here. Nobody’s going to come . . . are they?” her voice trails off into a squeak of fright.

CHARLIE MOON AND THE BIG BONANZA BUST-UP

“Mr Dix is acting fishy. Norman said so,” said Charlie. And he told her what he had already told Norman, about all he had seen through the port-hole of the lighted cabin the night before,

“He was drawing a picture?” said Ariadne. “I thought he was meant to be an art dealer, not an artist.”

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RED FOX

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HERE COMES CHARLIE MOON

1

Charlie Moon's Auntie runs a joke shop at the seaside. It sells things like comic hats, masks, rubber spiders, fake flowers that squirt water at you unexpectedly, and cushions that squeak when you sit down on them. The narrow shop front faces the sea. "JOKES AND CARNIVAL NOVELTIES" it says, and underneath, "Jean Llanechan Jones", which is Charlie's Auntie's name. It's easier to say the middle bit properly if you are Welsh, as she is. You have to spit it out rather than say it.

Charlie himself lives in a big city with his Mum, who is in the hairdressing business. There are no jokes in her shop, only a row of lady customers sitting wired up to domed space-helmet drying machines, cooking slowly to lobster red as they flick through their magazines. Charlie tends to trip over their feet whilst skateboarding through the shop from the back room to the street. They don't like it. It puts them off coming. By the end of the first week of the summer holidays Mum's patience has snapped, and Charlie is off to his Auntie Jean's at Penwyn Bay. He can't take his skateboard because it weighs down the suitcase too much. It's too full already, as Charlie is a smart dresser. He wants to pack four changes of trousers, his T-shirt with Superman on the front, and his red-and-white cap with the big peak. Also his snorkel and mask in case he wants to do some underwater swimming.

"What do you want to pack all that for?" asks Mum, forcing down the suitcase lid by sitting down on it with all her weight. "You can't see anything under water at Penwyn Bay—it's too muddy."

"I might. There might be a big fish or a seal. One of those got washed up on the beach once. I saw a picture of it in the *Penwyn Bay News*."

“You don’t need a mask and a snorkel to look at seals,” Mum tells him, but they get packed all the same. “You’re to help Auntie Jean with the washing-up, and in the shop if she asks you to,” Mum goes on. “And don’t forget to make your bed properly instead of just dragging the covers up as you do here. Ariadne’s going to be there,” she adds.

This is not good news for Charlie. Ariadne is his cousin. She is only two years older than he is but it seems more like five because she is so clever. Not stuck up exactly, but her Dad is a very important man who writes things in the newspapers and she reads a lot of books. Charlie likes a good book too, of course, but his mind often seems somehow to slide off the page and he finds himself doing something else. He once read a book about a cave-man which was great. He’ll read that again all right when he’s got time. Ariadne being at Auntie Jean’s means that she will be sleeping in the best room at the top of the house which looks out to sea, and will be sitting about reading all the time, or saying things that make people feel uncomfortable. She has two favourite words, one is “pathetic” and the other “typical”. (Pretty pathetic and typical to go round with a name like Ariadne, come to that, thinks Charlie privately.)

Still, it isn’t bad at Auntie Jean’s.

The jokes and carnival novelties are all over the place as usual. Rows of rubbery masks are hanging up behind the counter—not the underwater kind, but funny ones of red-nosed clowns, Frankensteins, gorillas and suchlike. In the passage behind the shop are piles and piles of boxes full of crackers, indoor fireworks, magic sets and squeakers that you blow out at people to make them feel jolly. Not even Auntie Jean knows what is inside some of these boxes. In fact, she has a lot of trouble finding things. She often runs out of things to eat, too. This happens on the first afternoon of Charlie’s visit.

“I’ll just be popping out for a loaf and some fish fingers for tea,” she sings out, climbing into her red coat. “And I might just be dropping in at Mrs Goronwy Lewis’s on the way back, just for ten minutes, see. Look after the shop, won’t you? Everything’s priced, and all you’ve got to remember is to give the right change out of the till and to be ever so polite to the customers.”

“I don’t suppose there’ll be any,” says Ariadne, after Auntie’s footsteps have tittupped away up the prom. “There hardly ever are. This shop’s going bankrupt, if you ask me.”

She stretches out on the old sofa in the back room, with a book and Einstein, the old ginger torn cat, on her stomach. From here, with her head propped up, she can see through the open door along the passage to the shop. Charlie has disappeared. All is very still. The afternoon sun lies quietly on the dusty shop floor, and outside the sea washes gently on the stones. Suddenly a strange moaning is heard. It rises to a louder moan, then to a throaty roar. A shuffling creature on all fours advances down the passage, and a monstrous face covered in green hair appears round the arm of the sofa.

Einstein merely twitches one ear.

“You are *pathetic*,” says Ariadne, calmly turning over a page.

Charlie takes off the monster mask which he has borrowed from the shop, and gets up off his hands and knees. He hadn’t really hoped that Ariadne would think he was a proper monster, but at least she could have pretended for a bit. It would be more fun than just lying about with a book and not talking to people. He’s just about to tell her so, too, when the shop door opens with a loud clang, and in come two boys. They are sandy-haired, piggy-eyed and look as though they might be brothers. Both of them are wearing striped jerseys, hooped like barrels around their wide middles.

“Can I help you?” asks Charlie in his best shop-assistant manner, hands spread out on the counter. Ariadne, still reading, wanders out from the back room.

One of the boys starts to finger some false noses and other small items in the show-case by the shop door. The bigger one asks rudely to see some trick card games like the ones in the window. These are kept on the very top shelf behind the counter, so Charlie fetches the little step-ladder and climbs up to get the box. As soon as he has come down the boy says he has changed his mind and wants to try on a Frankenstein mask. This is even higher up behind the counter, but after Charlie has had some trouble reaching it the boy decides that it’s much too expensive and wants to buy some invisible ink instead. Charlie, sighing deeply and trying hard to remember what Auntie Jean said about being polite to the customers, dives under the counter to find the box of invisible inks. It’s dark under there, and a lot of boxes fall out on top of him. Some scuffling and sniggering is going on at the other side of the counter.

“Hey, stop it! Put that back!” shouts Ariadne suddenly.

Charlie pops up his head to receive a jet of water in one eye from a water pistol. As he’s shaking the water out of his face, he sees both the boys helping themselves from the show-case. Ariadne is round the counter in a flash, trying to stop them. The show-case starts to wobble, false noses and moustaches fall on the floor and confetti flies about all over the shop. As she leaps forward to steady the case the two boys are off out of the shop door and away up the prom, stuffing stolen packets of stink-bombs into their pockets. Ariadne rushes out after them on to the pavement, white with rage.

“Thieves! Robbers!” she shouts, and, under her breath, “*Typical!*”

“I’ll get them!” cries Charlie. “I’m the fastest runner in the world! You stay here and mind the shop, Ariadne, while I go after them!”

And he starts off after the boys, legging it like a stag. He can see their striped back-views bobbing up and down in the distance. They're weaving in and out of the shelters, looking back over their shoulders now and again. They know by now that they are being followed. Under the railings, slithering down the sea-wall on to the beach, round the back of the beach-huts, up the steps, back on to the prom again they run. Charlie comes behind, his hair flopping about all over his scarlet face. He really is a good runner, very light and quick. The two boys are not. They are a lot bigger and heavier than Charlie, and they're already getting puffed.

As he runs Charlie starts to wonder what he'll do if he catches them up. He hadn't thought of this before. Now he remembers that there are two of them and only one of him; he's already a long way from the shop. He wishes he had somebody with him. Even Ariadne would be better than nothing. If only he could see a policeman somewhere . . . but they all seem to have gone home for tea.

Now the boys have dodged completely out of sight. Charlie, cautious and puzzled, pants on. Suddenly, both of them pop out from behind a shelter, grinning right in his path. Charlie stops short. They all face one another. Then *. . . . . crack! crack! crack!* Three stink-bombs explode on the ground. Charlie reels back, holding his nose, as the boys disappear up a side road, whistling and jeering. He is left standing there helplessly as the evil-smelling cloud rises about him. At this moment two ladies, one large and the other small, appear as though by magic from the other end of the shelter. They both have handkerchiefs pressed to their noses.

"Whatever's that awful . . . ?" begins one, but the small one starts on Charlie at once.

"You ought to be ashamed! I don't know why boys like you can't find anything better to do than to go about ruining other people's pleasure."

"Oh, come on, Mona, it's getting worse."

“One can’t even admire a lovely view in peace these days. For two pins I’d take you along to the nearest police station and give you in charge for vandalism.”

“It’s putting me off my tea.”

“You’ve got no sense of decency any of you. Letting off a thing like that in a public place. I don’t know what they teach you in schools these days but it certainly isn’t reasonable behaviour. At your age I wouldn’t have dared . . .” and so on and so on.

Charlie says nothing. It doesn’t seem worth it. Angry ladies never want to have things explained to them anyway. Luckily the smell is being borne away by a brisk sea breeze. At last they hurry away up the prom, the small lady still glaring angrily back at him over her handkerchief.

There’s nothing left for Charlie to do but begin the weary trudge home. Rather to his surprise, Ariadne is at the shop door, anxiously looking out for him.

“You O.K., Charlie?”

Charlie tells her the story. He’s too tired to make it a good one, but he can’t resist adding:

“I caught those boys up, anyway, didn’t I? I told you I could run.”

“I hope they don’t come back,” is all Ariadne answers.

2

The next day is bright, with white clouds blowing about the sky like washing escaping from the line. Charlie and Ariadne are sitting on the very end of the pier. Charlie likes to lean right over the rail and watch the sea smashing and crashing against the girders below, but Ariadne doesn't. She tries hard not to look through the cracks between the boards under her feet at the heaving water. The ironwork is all rusty and barnacled and smells of dead fish. It gives her the creeps. Instead she looks back at the Penwyn Bay sea front. The little houses look like toy town, all washed different colours—Auntie Jean's joke shop, the Paradise Fish Saloon, the shop that sells souvenirs and seaside rock, and, at the end of the row, Carlo's Crazy Castle.

This used to be a shop front like all the others, but now it has a false front, painted up to look just like a real castle, with pointed windows and battlements above. A big arched doorway with a portcullis opens on to the pavement. All round it are pictures of kings and queens, skeletons, gypsies, and masked headsmen with axes. Loud notices invite people inside: "SEE INTO THE FUTURE! YOUR FORTUNE TOLD FOR 25p!" "DON'T MISS CARLO'S WORLD-FAMOUS WAXWORKS! SENSATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL!" At the side of the entrance is a little glass pay-box, with a smaller notice saying "Closed".

At this moment the trim figure of Mr Carlo Cornetto himself appears at the pay-box window. He turns round the notice so that it reads "Open". Then he steps out in his shirt-sleeves and stands glancing up and down the prom. At one of the castle windows above his head another face appears, that of Mr Cornetto's old dog, Lordy. He sniffs the air with his large black nose, settles down on to his two front paws, and gazes solemnly out to sea. Nobody is about on the prom, only the wheeling, crying gulls. Far up at the other end of

the front, beyond the shelters, in a windswept garden of its own, stands the Hydro Hotel. This has a large, grand, red-brick frontage with a great many windows, balconies and turrets, and a long glass veranda running down its entire length. Inside it one or two elderly ladies and gentlemen can be seen sitting in basket chairs, sipping cups of coffee. They, too, gaze out to sea, like castaways scanning the horizon for a friendly sail. Further still, down on the beach, the children of St Ethelred's Holiday Home are playing noisily, digging sandcastles and pouring water all over themselves, and one another. The student in charge is crouched in the shelter of a bit of sea-wall, trying to read a newspaper. It is an unequal battle with the wind, which keeps carrying bits of it away. Every few minutes he leaps to his feet to separate squabblers and try to wring the water out of their sopping clothes.

"Not many customers for the shop today," says Ariadne. "Typical, really."

"The coach tours can't park on this side of the bay," says Charlie. "And anyway, they've got really good things over the other side at Penwyn—dodgems and big dippers and fruit machines and all. There's a ghost train too. I wish I had the money to try them. How much money have you got, Ariadne?" he adds hopefully.

"Don't like dodgems much. And I'll bet the ghost train's pathetic," says Ariadne. She doesn't want Charlie to know that she wouldn't dare to go in the ghost train, it's far too scary.

At this moment the joke shop door opens, and Auntie Jean pops out like a cuckoo from a clock, waving them in to lunch. It's fish and chips, Charlie's favourite. This is an extravagance which happens when Auntie Jean forgets to cook anything and has to make a last-minute dash to the Paradise Fish Saloon. They eat in the crowded back sitting-room, at a wobbly green-topped card table which has a cloth put over it at meal-times. Besides an old sofa and a great

many fat armchairs, the room has an old-fashioned coal grate, a treadle sewing-machine on a stand, and a permanent smell of frying. The bold pattern of poppies on the wall-paper is mostly hidden by the various fancy costumes which hang about the room on pegs. These are left over from the time when Auntie Jean worked at the Royalty Theatre. Now it is closed, and the actors and actresses have long since gone away, leaving a good many of their costumes, hats and wigs behind.

"Those boys who stole my stink-bombs have been bothering Mr Cornetto," Auntie Jean tells them as they munch their chips. "He found them trying to get into his place the back way, but old Lordy barked at them, and they ran away. He says they're the two Morgan boys from over at Penwyn. Their Dad runs the Amusement Arcade. No-good boyos, they are. Just let them show their faces here again and I'll give them what for!"

"I don't know what they want to hang about here for," says Ariadne. "They don't need to pinch things from us, when amusement arcades make so much money."

"It's all gambling and razz-me-tazz these days," snorts Auntie Jean. "Penwyn was a very select resort when I first came here—lovely it was. Very high-class hotels, tea dances, band playing every afternoon in the Esplanade Gardens, and shows at the Royalty, of course. Lovely audiences we used to have—packed houses every night."

"Did you act on the stage, Auntie?" asks Charlie.

"Oh no, dear. I was a dresser. Helped the ladies into their clothes, hooked up their corsets, mended their tights, that sort of thing. Mr Cornetto used to go on the stage. He was an acrobat—ever so clever he was."

"I'd like to do that. Or be a conjuror, that'd be even better," says Charlie. "I'd like to put a lady in one of those boxes and pretend to saw her in half."

"Shouldn't think you'd get any lady to let you try," says Ariadne.

At this moment the shop door clangs, and Mr Cornetto himself steps in. He looks downcast. Even his neat black moustache droops at the corners, and his sad brown eyes resemble those of his old spaniel dog, Lordy.

“Cup of tea, Mr Cornetto?” asks Auntie Jean, tea-pot poised.

“Thanks, I won’t say no, since you’re offering, Mrs Llanechan Jones. Just closed my place up again for a long dinner-hour, things are that quiet. Hardly worth opening up at all.” Mr Cornetto is an Italian, but he sounds Welsh, like Auntie Jean, because he learnt English in Penwyn Bay. “Old Lordy’s on guard, looking after things, like. Business has been bad, very bad. My Historical Waxworks, my Hall of Mirrors, people aren’t wanting them as they used to. It’s all roller-coasters and bingo, see. And now I’m going to have to take down my fortune-telling sign, too. Gypsy Queen Rosita has upped and left me without a word of notice. Gone into business on her own account in Llandudno.”

He sups up tea through his moustache and wipes it sadly and carefully on a clean handkerchief.

“*There’s* cheeky for you! I could have told you!” cried Auntie Jean. “Gypsy Queen Rosita, indeed! When we all know quite well that she’s Mrs Bronwen Evans from the dry-cleaner’s in Station Approach! And as for being able to tell the future—why, even old Einstein here could do better.” At the sound of his name Einstein, who is lazily extended like a long ginger scarf along the back of the sofa, twitches the tip of his tail and opens one green slit of an eye. “In fact, a great deal better,” adds Auntie Jean with respect. “No, don’t you mind about *her*, Mr Cornetto. It’s good riddance, if you ask me. And with business not being too bright here at the shop either, I’ll help you out part-time, like, if I can find my crystal ball.”

Auntie Jean is very good at fortune-telling. To prove it, she takes Mr Cornetto’s cup and turns it gently in her hands, peering into the tea-leaves at the bottom.