



**THE
GREAT
THEATRE
RESCUE**



JUDITH EAGLE

faber

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*For Nick
and all that jazz x*



London, 1893

It was one of those pale London mornings, the air thin as net curtains, the light feeble as a weak cup of tea. So colourless in fact that when the fellow appeared, dressed in a vibrant array of greens – forest-green frockcoat, sage-green waistcoat, a jaunty emerald-green scarf – he stood out like a single pea in a bowl of porridge.

Off he set, in his typically spritely manner, down Dean Street, through Soho, skirting Covent Garden, and across the bridge to Waterloo. Here he stopped to admire the silvery ribbon of the Thames. Then he turned left, following the streets that wriggled their way along the river, hopping and skipping past

Blackfriars Bridge, then London Bridge, along Pickle Herring Street, all the way to Tower Bridge, and into the twisting streets of Bermondsey.

The morning walk was the fellow in green's habit. It helped to wake him up, clear his head, and order his thoughts for the day.

In the docks, vessels jostled, packed with tea and coffee and all kinds of exotic spices. The Larder of London, it was called. The man took a deep sniff. It smelled of comfort and warmth and, in particular, of bread pudding.

Soon the place would be alive with the dockers and their barrows, ferrying the ships' wares from the wharves to the warehouses. For now though, all was quiet, too early even for this part of the city to have woken up.

At Horsleydown Old Stairs, the fellow in green came to an abrupt stop.

He stared and shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

It wasn't the most hospitable of places: ramshackle buildings leaning all higgledy-piggledy into the river; a cobbled alleyway leading down to the stairs. The stairs themselves were steep and wet, coated with a slick of green slime, the water lapping cold and grey at the bottom.

The man started and stared again.

He *wasn't* imagining it.

By gosh, at the bottom of the stairs there was a basket with a real live baby inside it. Just like Moses, but without the bulrushes. Or Romulus and Remus abandoned in the Tiber. Or Sargon the Great, who had floated all the way down the Euphrates in Ancient Mesopotamia.

Within seconds, the man had skittered down the steps and swooped the baby up.

The blanket the poor thing was swaddled in was rather grimy. But at least it was dry.

The man glanced behind him, back up the steps that he had just trotted down. No one there. Then he turned to scan the murky river. He couldn't see anyone there either.

But someone *was* there. Hidden in the shadows. Deep in the forest of stilts that the ramshackle houses were built on.

A 'someone' who was very, very pale, and very, very small, and very, very frightened.

What was that? A rustle? A gasp?

The man in green cocked an ear; peered into the slimy depths of the under-buildings.

'Anyone there?' he called. His voice rang out, clear as

bells. He was a performer you see, with years and years of experience in the theatre.

But the only reply was the drip, drip of water, the lonely lap of the river; and from the direction of St Saviour's Dock, the flap of sails, the creak of boats, and the tinkle and clink of the halyards as they knocked against each other.

'Just you and me, then,' said the man, looking down at the baby.

The baby blinked and waved its fists in the air. It blew a bubble of spit and smiled.

The man in green's heart melted. An orphan himself, he knew that a child without a name, without a mother or a father, was bound for only one place.

An orphanage or, even worse, the workhouse.


And the man knew what went on there. Thrashings with stinging nettles. Beatings with frying pans.

No love or care.

But what if . . .

The man stood very still. His brain was whirring, the cogs were turning, and an idea – a preposterous one, yes, but an idea nevertheless – was forming.

He had a home. *He* had the money. He could do his bit for society. And besides, it would be nice to have the company.



In a trice, the man popped the baby into its basket, hoisted it on to his shoulder, and set off, back in the direction he had come. As he walked, his mind ticked over. (He was known for telling stories; he had a lively imagination.) And soon he had concocted a grand one for the baby.

There had been a shipwreck! The baby was the sole survivor! An epic journey – across the English Channel, into the Thames, and all the way upriver.

He was so busy thinking he didn't even notice he was being followed.

And as for his story about the baby's origins . . .

It was a good one.

But it was wrong.

THE WREN THEATRE

SATURDAY MAY 13TH 1933

Your trusted impresario Toby Wren presents:

The Little Big Band

*Bobby B on drums; Kingsley Dare on saxophone;
Gus Martin on trombone; Stan Maxwell on piano;
Red Peters on double bass and
Toby Wren on trumpet!*

The Skip Sisters

Soho's very own answer to Fred and Adele Astaire!

The Tumbling Twins

Astonishing acrobatics all the way from Naples!

Violet 'the voice' Nightingale

Tears guaranteed. Listen and swoon!

Wilbert Heaven

The trumpeting genius directly from Harlem!

AND FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY:

**A special performance by the irrepressible
Charley Wren!**

Curtain-up: 7.30 p.m.

Tickets available from the box office in advance,
Or (if you're lucky) on the door.



Chapter One

By day it looked nothing out of the ordinary. By night it was something special. Ablaze with twinkling lights spelling out

The Wren

in glamorous swirling letters. It was the smallest theatre in Soho but also one of the best.

‘*Bijou*,’ Charley’s dad Toby liked to call it: the miniature foyer; the minute box office (more of a cupboard really); the concealed door leading downstairs to three teeny dressing rooms; the narrow flight of stairs twisting up to the theatre; the ten

rows of seats covered in rich brown velvet; the stage framed with swishy crimson curtains; the gilt-framed mirrors glinting light and shadow on the walls; the chandelier – with real candles in it – hovering regally above it all.

It *was* like a jewel, and quite perfect in Charley's opinion. And tonight . . . tonight! She was performing there for the very first time.

A dream come true. Because just like acting had been in her mother's blood, dancing was in Charley's actual *bones*. There was nothing she loved more than dancing. Dad said she could dance practically before she could walk! She knew all the latest dance crazes that had whizzed their way across the Atlantic: the Charleston, the Shimmy, even the Lindy Hop.

She genuinely *lived* to move.

Clutching her tap shoes, Charley raced down Dean Street. The tap shoes were special. The most precious things she'd ever owned. For years and years they had been wrapped in layers of rustly pink tissue paper and stored in a box on top of the wardrobe. Then on Charley's twelfth birthday, Dad had got the box down. The shoes were sublime: bright red leather with satin-ribbon ties, and silver taps at the toe and heel.

'Try them!' Dad had said. It had been a moment

of pure magic. The shoes had belonged to Charley's mother, and now they fitted Charley perfectly.

Quick, quick. The show was due to start in less than an hour. Silly Mrs Bloom *had* insisted Charley finish all her tea ('how can you dance if you don't have your strength *mein Liebling?*'), watching her until she'd chomped down every last crumb of sardines on toast, followed by a large helping of chocolate cherry cake.

In the rush, Charley had forgotten to grab her raincoat, and specks of early summer rain settled on her nose and in her hair. Mrs Bloom would say, 'You'll catch your death,' but she knew she wouldn't. She'd be inside soon, and anyway, just the excitement, the anticipation of the night ahead, was giving her a warm glow.

If all went well tonight, her dad had hinted that she might become a regular fixture at The Wren – not during the week, of course, when there was school – but in the holidays or at the weekends.

'Break a leg, Charley!'

Charley stopped and spun around. Mrs Bloom had followed her out on to the street, still wearing the flower-sprigged apron that smelled of cardamon and cinnamon, busily pushing back the stray wave of snowy white hair that had a habit of escaping the thick plait she always wore coiled into a bun.

Mrs Bloom lived in the rooms below Dad and Charley, in their tall, slightly wiggly house a few doors down from the theatre. Long, long ago, when Mrs Bloom was a little girl, she had travelled all the way to London from Germany. She was a kind, bustling sort of person, and since her children had grown up and moved away, she had been like a mother to Dad and a grandmother to Charley.

She'd been a dancer herself once, and as Charley's dad liked to say, she knew 'the lingo'.

'Break a leg' meant good luck.

'Thanks, Mrs Bloom!' yelled Charley and she blew her a kiss, just like Violet-the-voice-Nightingale, who was one of the headline acts at The Wren and the most glamorous person Charley knew. Not only because she had the best style, the best voice and the best hair in town (gloriously long, wavy and auburn, not at all like Charley's carrot-staw plaits), Violet was also funny and kind and generous, and Charley hoped fervently that she would share her dressing room with her tonight.

Outside the theatre people were already milling about: some of them holding newspapers over their heads to ward off the rain, most of them chatting and occasionally shrieking with laughter.

‘Scuse me,’ said Charley squeezing past the suits, the satins, the feathers and the furs.

‘Let her through,’ they called to each other in high spirits. ‘It’s Toby’s little one!’

At The Wren, everyone was welcome: shopgirls, clerks, dukes and contessas; French, Italian, Russian and Caribbean. In Soho, it wasn’t who you were or where you came from that mattered, it was how much you loved dance and music; and the thing that everyone wanted: to have a good time.

‘There you are,’ said Dad as Charley burst into the foyer in a swirl of excitement and raindrops. He looked dapper, as usual, in his trademark blue shirt and red braces. ‘Thirty minutes ’til curtain-up.’

He and Max were squashed into the box office, doing a roaring trade in last-minute tickets.

‘All seats sold out. Standing room only!’ Dad hollered in the general direction of the crowd outside.

‘Hello, Max,’ said Charley, reaching into the cubby hole to scratch the dog behind the ears.

No one knew where Max had come from, or what sort of upbringing he’d had. But one day, when Charley had been quite small, he had just turned up, wandering along Dean Street, looking this way and that, and when he got to The Wren he had stopped.

‘Liked what he saw and stayed,’ said Dad.

Charley and Dad had liked what they saw too and welcomed him into their home with open arms. He was a funny old thing: short with stumpy legs, floppy ears and eyes that looked sad even when he was happy. He was clever too, and after ‘the acts’, Charley and Dad liked to joke that Max was their prize asset. If Dad had to pop out to the shops or fiddle with the lights or do any of the other million-and-one things he was responsible for at the theatre, it was always Max who took charge of the box office.

He did it splendidly and had developed an array of barks to signal ‘Hello’, ‘Goodbye’, and ‘How do you do?’ Now Max dipped his head in hello to Charley in a typically theatrical manner.

And then he growled.

Well, *that* was unusual. Max was known for being extremely even-tempered. In fact, he was just the sort of wonderful dog who wouldn’t hurt a fly.

‘Ticket for one, please, Sir.’

Charley and Toby turned to inspect the man who had pushed his way into the foyer behind her.

He was a striking-looking fellow, with a thick mop of black-and-white striped hair and a weather-beaten complexion. He was large, which had the effect of

making the foyer look even smaller than it was. His brown-gold eyes roamed around hungrily, like a wolf's. Or – what with the black-and-white striped hair – a giant badger's.

He wore a long red coat with a straggly fur trim. The sort of outfit, thought Charley, that could have belonged in a pantomime.

'Nice place you got here,' said the badger man throatily. His voice sounded like it had been bathed in gravel. 'Busy.'

'Thank you,' said Dad politely. 'You're right about busy. I'm afraid there's standing room only left now.'

Which was a good job, thought Charley. She didn't want to be rude but the badger man looked like he might have trouble squishing his sizeable frame into the brown velvet seats.

Max growled again, even more low and threatening-sounding this time, and the man raised a large black-and-white bushy eyebrow.

'Max!' said Charley and Dad together. 'What's got into you?'

Charley rested her hand on top of the dog's head and she felt him relax a little.

'Sorry,' she said. 'He's not usually like this.'

The badger man was standing so close she could feel

his hot breath on her skin. It smelled like the cockle-and-winkle stall in Berwick Street market – both fishy and vinegary at the same time.

‘He doesn’t a-fear me,’ said the man. Then he held out his huge hand to take his ticket from Dad. His knuckles were extraordinarily large, each one at least the size of a half-crown.

‘Violet’s already downstairs,’ Dad said to me as the man thumped away up the stairs to the theatre. ‘She says you can share her dressing room with her. Better go and get changed.’

Charley grinned. This was exactly what she had hoped for. The Tumbling Twins had one dressing room, the Skip Sisters had another. The third belonged to Violet and in Charley’s opinion it was the best, awash with sequins and satins, smelling of greasepaint and perfume, and crammed with glinting glass vases full of the heavily scented flowers sent by her many admirers.

Not that Violet-the-voice cared a jot about any of her admirers. She only had eyes for one man. And that man was her beau, Wilbert Heaven, who was wandering in just now.

‘It’s your big night, kid!’ he said to Charley in his New York drawl. In Charley’s eyes, Wilbert Heaven

was a god. Not only had he played all the best clubs in Harlem, he had met all ‘the greats’ and had actually *seen* the famous tap-dancing Nicholas Brothers performing first hand. Tall, dark and incredibly handsome, tonight Wilbert was dressed in his very best powder-blue suit, a bright white shirt, and his fawn-coloured trilby tipped at just the right angle over one eye.

‘You’re on after the Skip Sisters in the second half, right?’

Charley nodded. She didn’t need reminding. She knew the line-up – just as she knew the audience would be at peak excitement when it came to her turn to perform.

‘All set then?’ Dad said.

‘Yes,’ said Charley, trying hard to sound confident but suddenly feeling a nervous fluttering inside her chest. She had taught herself to dance by watching the Skip Sisters. It was from them she learned her bomberslays, her buffalo steps, her five-, six-, and seven-beat riffs. And it was from them that she had learned how the taps on her shoes could match the speed of the music, then double it and triple it. And how the rhythm – when it really took hold of you – could make your feet flip, flap and fly.

The Skip Sisters had told her dad she was ready.
And she *was* ready, she was sure of it.
She would never let The Wren down.

By seven-thirty the place was jammed: every seat filled and at the back, a whole crowd squashed in like sardines in a can. From her spot in the wings, Charley surveyed the scene. It was where she was allowed to stand every Friday and Saturday night. It was the highlight of her week and she always loved it.

But tonight was different.

Tonight she was taking part!

Tonight she was going to wear a brand new red-and-white spotted jumpsuit with flippy shorts and puffed sleeves. And instead of just *watching*, she was *waiting*. And while she was waiting, her heart was doing the strangest things, thumping and bumping, and she couldn't work out if it was because she was feeling utter terror, or rabid joy.

The lights dimmed. The chatter faded to nothing. A hush – you could've heard a pin drop – and Charley knew that every single person in the audience had focused their attention on the stage.

Charley held her breath . . .

The curtains swished open.

And – bam! – the glorious rush of music filled the air.

It was amazing. It was *always* amazing. As if the whole place was jumping, and every nerve and cell of every single person was alive and tingling.

The music played. The crowd roared. Dad spun on his heel and waved his baton in the air and . . .

‘Ladies and Gentleman,’ cried Toby, ‘I present to you . . . the Skip Sisters!’

Charley watched as the Skip Sisters – identical blonde curls, blue satin shorts, red bow ties – burst on to the stage, tapping in perfect harmony. Hot on their heels came the Tumbling Twins – ‘*Ciao ciao!*’ – all wiry limbs and big smiles, performing their astonishing feats, defying gravity. Then Violet-the-voice, gleaming auburn hair, shimmering silver sequins, sashaying into the spotlight, mesmerising everyone as she sang ‘Mood Indigo’. And last but not least, Wilbert Heaven – ‘Hot from Harlem!’ yelled Toby – cooler than cool in his beautifully cut suit, trumpet soaring and swooping, the sound so pure it brought the house down.

Charley, as usual, was in heaven.

Then came the interval, and it passed in a blur: Violet helping Charley into her costume; Charley frantically

practising her steps in the wings; Wilbert saying ‘Chin up, kid!’ and punching her gently on the arm; the Skip Sisters dancing a quick shim sham with her as a warm-up; Dad calling out, ‘You’re going to smash it, Charley!’

And then . . .

The boom of a stomping ragtime; Dad joining Stan at the piano because two pairs of hands were better than one; the Skip Sisters back on stage, spinning and twirling, stamping and swinging.

‘It’s time Charley!’

Violet behind her. The Tumbling Twins to the left of her. Wilbert to the right of her. Dad grinning. The band playing. The audience waiting.

All she had to do was return the nod. Jump out of the wings. Start dancing.

Instead, she froze.

And a jolt of sheer terror struck her, out of nowhere.

A terror so fierce it felt like it had knocked her sideways.

And she found she was shaking her head, ‘No.’

No?

What did she mean, *no*?

What was happening to her? The terror was paralysing her. Her legs had turned to useless jelly.

‘It’s OK, Charley!’

It was Violet-the-voice, shimmering in her dress of liquid silver, taking her hand.

‘You can do it, Charley! Close your eyes ... see yourself fly ... one tap, then another, then ...’

Charley nodded, clutched Violet’s hand as if she would never let it go, squeezed her eyes tight shut.

Saw herself soar through the air. Glimpsed the magic: the cramp rolls; the crazy pick-up steps. The double spins. The triple steps. The knee drops.

Opened her eyes again.

A sharp blade of panic whipped all the way up her spine.

The Skip Sisters were still tapping furiously, still counting her in, still smiling encouragingly.

Violet was still squeezing her shoulder. ‘Go!’

But the invisible messaging system – the wires that connected the music to her feet to her brain – felt like they had been snipped to pieces.

She couldn’t remember a thing! Not the moves. Not the steps.

She couldn’t *feel* a thing.

Except fear.

She could see the surprise in the Skip Sisters’ eyes.

She didn’t dare look at her dad.

‘Charley?’ Violet again. ‘Take a deep breath ...’

‘I can’t!’ she said. The words barely made a sound. Her entire body felt like it was shutting down.

And then she *was* moving. Not on to the stage. But away from it. Running down the stairs into Violet’s dressing room, and collapsing in a sobbing heap on the floor.

Even through a torrent of noisy tears she could still hear the orchestra playing, and the whoops of the audience as the Skip Sisters continued to dance.

In theatreland there is a saying, *The show must go on*. But for Charley, it felt as if the show was over for ever.