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Opening extract from

The Girl Who Walked on Air

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Published by

Faber Children's Books

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First published in 2014
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House,
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber & Faber Ltd

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR4 0YY

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–29716–0



2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

CHAPTER 1

The bigger the danger, the bigger the crowd. One look at tonight's punters said it all. With just minutes till show time, the big top was almost full and I was quite ready to burn with excitement. Every last ticket was sold. And still the queue snaked out of the field and down the lane until all you could see were people's hats bobbing above the hedgerows.

First thing this morning, the posters had gone up all over town. 'MORE DARING THAN EVER!' they'd said in blue and gold letters. 'WATCH MONSIEUR MERCURY DEFY GRAVITY ON HIS TRAPEZE!' To me, M. Mercury was good old Jasper, who I lived with in a tiny trailer, and who drank lapsang tea out of dainty cups and let me have first dibs on every piecrust. Which was more than could be said for my mam. When I was just a baby she left me at the circus, the way most people forget an umbrella.

Inside the ticket booth where I worked there wasn't

space to swing a cat. I jiggled from foot to foot, impatient to get finished so I'd be free to watch the show. My dog Pip sensed it too; sat beside me, he watched my every move. At last, the final punters filed past to claim their tickets. They were a noisy bunch, laughing and nattering, their breath like smoke in the evening air. They'd be quiet soon enough. Once they'd squeezed up on a bench inside the big top, they'd look upwards. And what they'd see would leave them speechless.

A little shiver went down my neck. *Imagine if I was about to perform. All those eyes gazing up at me. Just imagine it!*

I came back to earth with a bump. The circus owner, Mr Leo Chipchase, was in the doorway. He'd put on his best tartan waistcoat and was smiling, which made a change.

'Think of all those backsides on seats, Louie,' he said as he squeezed in beside me to count the coins. 'The bigger the danger . . .'

'. . . the bigger the crowd,' I finished for him.

He did have a point. There were grander circuses than ours, with more animals, more curiosities, more sparkle. Backsides on seats mattered. So, what better way to draw the crowds than a thrilling new routine.

And tonight that's exactly what they'd get. Jasper would perform not a double but a TRIPLE somersault from his trapeze. No other circus boasted such a stunt. It was genius.

But it was dangerous too. Now I'd reminded myself of this fact, it grew like a little worm inside my head. Tonight's show had that WHIFF OF DEATH all right. How anyone could hang mid-air for so long I didn't know. Jasper made it look easy. And I thought of Charles Blondin – the GREAT Blondin – who'd crossed Niagara Falls on a *tightrope*. One hundred *thousand* people had turned up to watch him. They placed bets that he'd fall and die. He didn't, of course, but I still felt sick thinking about it.

At last, the queue ended.

'Can I go now?' I asked, unable to stop fidgeting.

If I was quick, I'd get to wish Jasper luck. And be sure of a good viewing spot at the back of the big top.

Mr Chipchase waved me away. 'Go.'

I darted across the showground straight for the big top. Smells of horse sweat and gingerbread filled the air. There was music too, the organ and drums all fast and furious, signalling the show was about to start. It was the bit of circus life I loved best, that moment before the action, when the very air tingled. And

tonight I felt it keenly. How I dreamed of being a showstopper like Jasper. Breathed it. Lived it. But on this subject Mr Chipchase was clear. 'Not a chance, Louie,' he always said. 'You're too young.'

Never mind that Mighty Ned the ringmaster was my age. Or Kitty Quickblade, who threw knives, was only a tiny bit older. But when I'd pointed this out Mr Chipchase went red enough to burst.

So these days I watched from the sidelines. And I kept my dreams to myself.

*

I realised now that Pip wasn't with me. Cupping my hands to my mouth, I yelled his name. He came hurtling towards me like he'd been fired from a cannon, a terrier-sized blur of white with one brown ear.

'You little monkey!' I said as he squirmed at my feet. 'Now stay close.' He had no sense of occasion, this dog of mine.

To reach the big top we had to pass Miss Lilly's fortune-telling tent. She stood in her doorway. ' 'Tis a strange night,' she said as I went by.

'Evening to you too, Miss Lilly,' I said. 'Must dash. I can't miss Jasper's performance.'

'Very wise,' she said. 'A great change is on the way. The cards are predicting it.'

She often came out with this queer stuff. It was fine with her punters as they'd paid for a tarot reading, but I didn't want to hear it. Not tonight.

I rushed on. Behind the big top was a roped-off patch of grass. It was abustle with horses and jugglers and performers limbering up. In the centre of the space, a bonfire blazed, making the dusk seem darker than before. It made me blink. And run smack bang into Kitty Quickblade.

'Watch it, weasel!' she cried.

I hated her calling me that. What she meant was, 'You're not like us, you're not proper circus,' because I had pale skin and green eyes and hair the colour of cinnamon, which no one else here did.

She tossed back her own dark curls, hands on hips. 'What do you say?' she said.

Her tunic glittered in the firelight. It was all my handiwork, for when I wasn't selling tickets I mended costumes. I'd sewn every last silver sequin of this one till my fingertips were raw. It looked magnificent. But I'd never got as much as a smile for my trouble. Or a decent wage.

I gritted my teeth. 'Sorry, Kitty. I didn't mean to.'

Really I wanted to wallop her one. But Kitty was Mr Chipchase's daughter, which meant I had to mind my manners.

Since I'd grovelled enough, she let me past. I ducked inside the tent, Pip at my heels. The space backstage was the size of a small courtyard and brightly lit. Dusty velvet drapes separated us from the main ring. Yet the smell of sawdust was just as sharp, the ooohs and aaahs of the crowd as clear. We might've been out in the ring ourselves. It made the hairs lift on the back of my neck.

In the middle of everyone was Ned the ringmaster. Done up in his top hat and scarlet tailcoat he looked awful smart. Especially since out of costume he was all elbows and giant feet.

'Almost time, showpeople!' he cried, then seeing me he dropped his voice, swaying like he might faint. 'Wish me luck, Louie.'

'You great idiot.' I shoved him hard, for we were like that, Ned and me, always mucking around. Lately I suspected he'd gone soft on me. I hoped he'd snap out of it soon. 'My luck's for Jasper, not you.'

Except I couldn't see past Rosa the bareback rider, or Marco and Paolo the clowns. The place was filling up fast. There was no sign of Jasper. I started to panic.

Time was running out. And I still hadn't wished him good luck.

In the ring the crowd had gone quiet. The drums rolled. Ned stepped through the curtains. 'Ladies and gentlemen . . . girls and boys . . .' he boomed. 'Tonight we have a most marvellous show . . . a show where . . .'

A hand touched my shoulder. I spun round to see Jasper, looking every inch the showstopper. His dark hair was slicked back and his costume sparkled green and red. There was nothing of the WHIFF OF DEATH about him; he was all puffed up strong like a lion.

'Everything all right, Louie?' he said, bending down to stroke Pip, who wagged his tail.

'Just excited for you.' And I was too. My stomach fluttered madly.

Jasper straightened up. 'Here's to good luck, then,' he said, reaching for my hand. He kissed my palm three times, same as we did before every show.

'I'll keep them safe till afterwards,' I said, closing my hand to a fist. Once the performance was over, I'd give him the three kisses back. It was our ritual; it brought us luck. Always.

The curtains parted.

'Tonight . . . defying gravity . . . I give you . . .

Monsieur Mercury!' Mighty Ned cried.

The drums beat faster.

Jasper went up on tiptoe then stepped forward. The curtains closed behind him. I waited for the lights to dip, then peered through a chink in the fabric. Marco let me stand in front of him. He said he'd see fine over the top of my head. Pip sat on my feet, his little body trembling. I hardly dared breathe.

High up in the roof, Jasper flexed his arms. As he waved to the crowd, his tunic flickered in the gaslights. It made me think of dragonflies. Then he put rosin on his hands and gripped the trapeze. As the crowd went completely hushed, my own mouth turned powder-dry.

Jasper started easy. Slow and sure, he swung from one side of the tent to the other, like a clock part. He tucked his knees over the bar, let his arms trail then folded himself over. The drumbeats slowed. It was almost restful. I breathed again.

He went faster.

The music kept pace. He swung this way. That way. Now he was a blur of colour. His legs were stretched out straight. Then he flipped upwards. He let go of the swing and somersaulted twice before grabbing the trapeze again. He did it once more. Then spun

backwards. The crowd gasped. Though I'd seen his routine in practice, I couldn't take my eyes off him. Nothing else mattered. A spell had been cast over us all.

Then Mighty Ned spoke. 'And now ladies and gentlemen, for the triple somersault, the most daring trick of all . . .'

The drum roll seemed to go on and on. Jasper stretched his whole body, swung low and wide, gaining momentum. The magic of it held me fast. He reached high up into the roof. At the very top of the arc he let go. He spun once, twice, three times and seemed to hang in the air. Then he reached for the trapeze.

And missed it.

He fell to the ground like a shot bird.

CHAPTER 2

In an eye blink, it was over. Jasper lay still on the floor. Deep within the crowd the screaming started. The screams became shouts became groans of horror. Mr Chipchase rushed into the ring, with Kitty and Paolo in his wake.

'Don't look,' said Marco, trying to shield me.

But I had to see. The crowd was on its feet, surging for the exit. I tried to squirm free from Marco's grasp. Pip started yapping at my ankles.

'No Louie, stay back!' Marco said.

I clawed at his arm until he loosened his grip. In a flash, I ducked through the curtains.

A huddle of figures stood in the middle of the ring. Just as I reached them, I stopped. Mr Chipchase looked over his shoulder. He saw me and stepped back to let me through. Yet my feet didn't want to move.

I took a deep breath. Shut my eyes for a second and told myself to be brave. My legs shook as I shuffled

forwards. The group of people closed around me. It struck me as strange: here I was in the centre of the ring. Everyone was watching me. In a funny way, I was the star of the show. How I'd hoped for such a moment. How I'd dreamed of it.

Yet never in the world like this.

It was safer to gaze at Mr Chipchase's waistcoat, with his thick golden watch chain and buttons straining. He had an arm around Kitty's shoulders. For once they weren't even bickering.

'I don't know what went wrong,' Mr Chipchase said.

I supposed he was speaking to me.

Eventually, I looked down. There was no blood. Jasper lay on his side like he was sleeping. His eyes were shut, his hand tucked sweetly under his cheek. The only strange thing was the way his feet twisted outwards.

I sank down beside him. A lock of stray hair had fallen across his forehead. I smoothed it tidy; he'd have wanted to look neat, even now. Then I took hold of his hand and, turning it over, gave back his kisses.

One. Two. Three.

Sitting back, I waited for the pain to hit. No one spoke a word. We must have stayed like that quite

some time, for when I looked up, all I saw was a wall of legs. They seemed to press in on me. I found it hard to breathe.

The legs shifted. Hands pulled me to my feet. An arm went around me. It was Rosa the bareback rider, and suddenly I was glad to have someone holding me.

'Should we get a doctor?' I said.

Everyone looked to Mr Chipchase. He'd let go of Kitty and was dabbing his face with a handkerchief.

'Sadly, that won't be necessary,' he said.

The group fell silent. Outside, a horse whinnied. A steady tap tap on the canvas told me it had started to rain.

Suddenly Rosa stiffened. 'I don't believe it!' She was pointing at Jasper. 'He moved!' she cried. 'I swear to you, he's just moved!'

Kneeling at Jasper's side, I seized his hand and leaned in close to his face.

'Jasper? Can you hear me?'

Nothing.

'It's me, Louie.'

Not a flicker.

I didn't have the strength to get up. I held Jasper's hand, imagining all the love draining out of me and flowing into him. It felt stronger than saying it out

loud. I might have been there a minute, an hour, even a whole day. At some point, I felt a tickling against my palm. I thought it was my own fingers moving.

Then I realised it wasn't. Jasper opened his eyes.

*

Paolo was sent to get a doctor from town. The other men lifted Jasper onto a hurdle and carried him back to our wagon. He was properly awake now, and the tiniest movement made him cry out in pain.

Once inside, we got Jasper into his bunk. It wasn't easy since the bed was narrow, and to reach it the men had to turn sideways. There was much gasping and grunting, and even when Jasper was finally safe in his bed the weight of the blankets were too much for him to bear.

The doctor came from town quick enough. His first order was for the crowd outside our wagon to leave. 'Except those responsible for the care of this fellow,' he said.

That left just me and Mr Chipchase, who looked like he'd rather go too. I began to feel nervous myself. The doctor introduced himself as Dr Graves. It wasn't a very cheering name for a person in his line of work,

but everything else about him was purposeful and neat, right down to his well-trimmed whiskers. He ordered me to bring him water to wash his hands in, so I stoked the stove and put a pan on to heat. Then after removing his jacket and hat and cleaning his hands, he began his examination.

'Easy, my good man,' said Dr Graves.

There were many sharp gasps; I winced at each one. Thankfully, it didn't take long for the doctor to reach his conclusions.

'He has a bad fracture to his pelvis. There's a break to his right thighbone too. How exactly did this happen?'

I shivered as Mr Chipchase explained. 'He fell a good sixty feet.'

'And how did he land?' asked Dr Graves.

'On his right-hand side.'

'How long was he unconscious?'

'About fifteen minutes.'

'Hmm . . . did he know you when he came round?'

'He knew Louie here. Didn't let go of her hand.'

They both looked my way. Then the doctor rummaged in his bag, pulling out a little brown glass bottle. He gave it to me.

'Mix this with a cup of warm water. Let's say thirty

drops. It'll take the edge off the pain.' Then, to Mr Chipchase, 'I'll need your help to set the bone in his leg.'

There was a silence.

'Come now,' said Dr Graves. 'It's a two-man procedure. The sooner we get it done the better.'

Mixed with the drops, the water turned a reddish brown and smelled bitter. The doctor took it from me and propped up Jasper's head so he could drink it. Some of it spilled from his mouth but mostly he swallowed it down, eyes tight shut. Soon he was drowsy. The doctor removed the blankets and Jasper's costume without too much flinching.

'Now, sir,' said Dr Graves, turning to Mr Chipchase. 'If you could just step over here . . .'

But Mr Chipchase had gone as pale as raw pastry. He backed towards the door. 'I'll find someone else for you,' he said, and was gone.

The doctor cursed under his breath. He looked at me. 'Will you do it? Before the laudanum wears off?'

I nodded. He bid me stand at Jasper's shoulder. I glimpsed a twisted limb, bulging above the knee. The skin was shiny-tight. It hardly looked like a human leg at all.

'Put both hands around his thigh, and grip it hard,'

said Dr Graves. 'And when I count to three, pull backwards with all your strength.'

There wasn't time to be squeamish. I gripped. Dr Graves took hold of the lower leg in the same way. Jasper groaned, twisting his face into the pillow.

Dr Graves bit his lip. Little drops of sweat had formed on his brow. 'One . . . two . . . three . . .'

I heaved with all my might. The doctor pulled in the opposite direction, turning the leg as he did so. Jasper screamed. There was a grinding noise. Beneath my hands I felt the bone shift. Something creaked.

'Enough!' cried Dr Graves.

I glanced down. Jasper had passed out cold. Yet his leg was now a thing to behold, stretched out straight as a train track.

'Good work,' said the doctor, admiringly.

My face, I supposed, looked astonished, for he then spoke sharply, 'Quickly now, pass me those bandages.'

I did as I was told, though I couldn't help grinning. It was rare that I got the chance to prove I was more than a ticket-selling, costume-mending nobody.

Once Jasper was all bandaged up and sleeping soundly, the doctor made ready to leave.

'You are his daughter, I assume?' he said.

It wasn't a mistake easily made, not with my red

hair, though I did have Jasper's surname of Reynolds. And if anyone asked, I'd say, 'I'm his niece from the country,' which was what I did now. So far it'd kept me safe from the orphanage.

The trailer door swung open. Mr Chipchase's great bulk filled the doorway.

'You're too late,' said the doctor. 'The bone has already been set.'

'Managed by yourself, eh?' said Mr Chipchase, who clearly hadn't found anyone to help and looked relieved to be let off the hook.

'I was most ably assisted by his niece here.'

I felt pleased as punch. Or at least I did until I saw the shock on Mr Chipchase's face.

'What, *Louie*?'

I scowled at him. The doctor hadn't thought me too young to help *him*. There were things I was good at, and not just mending broken legs. If only Mr Chipchase would give me the chance.

The doctor put on his hat. 'We managed well. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients.'

'Wait!' Mr Chipchase seized the doctor's arm. 'Can we move him tomorrow?'

'That wouldn't be wise. He needs complete rest.'

'But we can't stay put! We're a travelling show!'

It was true. We never stayed longer than two nights anywhere.

'Then you'll need to make an exception,' said Dr Graves, removing Mr Chipchase's hand from his arm.

'And if we do stay, will he be back in the ring soon?'

The doctor looked horrified. 'I hardly think so!'

'But Jasper's my star performer. He has to get well. The show won't make money without him,' said Mr Chipchase.

'That man,' Dr Graves said, nodding at Jasper, 'is lucky to be alive. If he walks again – and I mean *if* – I predict he will have a profound limp.'

A limp wasn't much, not really.

Yet Mr Chipchase's face said otherwise. This wasn't good news, not to a circus. Jasper was our showstopper act. Mr Chipchase stroked his side whiskers: this wasn't a good sign either.

'What are you telling me, doctor?' he said.

The wagon seemed suddenly chill.

'I'd start looking for another star performer, Mr Chipchase,' he said. 'Jasper Reynolds's days as an acrobat are over.'

*

Once the doctor was gone, Mr Chipchase cleared his throat. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, making the plates rattle on the shelves.

'What is it, sir?' I said, for I reckoned this was about Jasper.

He stroked his whiskers. 'Louie, we took you in as a baby and now you're a . . . well . . . quite a bit older.'

'Yes,' I said, thinking he'd not win any prizes for observation.

'Jasper was a good earner for this circus. And, as you know, we're not a big venture. Not like . . .'

'Wellbeloved's,' I cut in.

'Exactly.'

Wellbeloved's was a big, flashy circus, and Mr Chipchase's pet hate. He mentioned them when times were tough, and always in the same bitter tone.

'So,' he continued, 'money will be tight. And if Jasper can't work for us, then . . .' He raised his palms.

'What?'

'You'll have to do more around here.'

'I'm game,' I said. 'You know I am.'

But Mr Chipchase frowned. 'Taking you in hasn't made life easy for us. Even to this day there are . . . *issues*.'

I didn't quite follow.

'Speak plainly please, sir.'

He rubbed a hand over his face. 'All these years, I've expected someone . . . to claim you,' he said slowly. 'But they haven't.'

I eyed him nervously: what *someone*? Though I knew from the tightness in my chest exactly who he meant. I hardly needed reminding of how *forgetful* my mam was when it came to me. Still, this new information hurt like a slap.

'My mam won't come back for me, sir,' I said, eyes stinging. 'Ain't any point thinking she will.'

Mr Chipchase looked taken aback. 'Louie, I don't . . .'

'She was glad to get shot of me, sir, truly she was.'

He went tight-lipped. I hoped that meant we were finished, for I'd nothing more to say on the matter.

'We'll care for Jasper as best we can,' he said. 'But the doctor's right . . . what this circus needs now is a new showstopper.'

'Yes sir.'

'And you, young lady will need to earn your keep. *More* than your keep from now on.'

'Yes sir,' I said again, trying not to smile. For surely he'd just solved his own problem.