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Opening extract from

A Company of Swans

Written by

Eva Ibbotson

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There was no lovelier view in England, Harriet knew this. To her right, the soaring towers of King's College Chapel and the immaculate lawns sloping down to the river's edge; to her left, the blue and gold of the scillas and daffodils splashed in rich abundance between the trees of the Fellows' Gardens. Yet as she leaned over the stone parapet of the bridge on which she stood, her face was pensive and her feet – and this was unusual in the daughter of a professor of classics in the year 1912 – were folded in the fifth position.

She was a thin girl, brown-haired and brown-eyed, whose gravity and gentleness could not always conceal her questing spirit and eagerness for life. Sensibly dressed in a blue caped coat and tam o'shanter bought to last, a leather music case propped against the wall beside her, she was a familiar figure to the passers-by: to ancient Dr Ferguson, tottering across the willow-fringed bridge in inner pursuit of an errant Indo-Germanic verb; to a gardener trimming the edges

of the grass, who raised his cap to her. Professor Morton's clever daughter; Miss Morton's biddable niece.

To grow up in Cambridge was to be fortunate indeed. To be able to look at this marvellous city each day was a blessing of which one should never tire. Harriet, crumbling bread into the water for the world's most blasé ducks, had told herself this again and again. But it is not cities which make the destinies of eighteen-year-old girls, it is people – and as she gazed at the lazy, muddy river and thought of her future and her home, her eyes held an expression which would have better become a little gutter starveling – a bleak and shipwrecked look devoid of happiness and hope.

Professor Morton was already in his forties when, at a reading party in Switzerland, he met an English girl working as a governess to the children of a Swiss industrialist living in an ochre-coloured castle across the lake.

Sophie Brent was enchanting, with big brown eyes, soft dark-gold hair and a beguiling chuckle. She was an orphan, poor and unprotected as only a governess can be and deeply impressed by the attentions of the serious, stern Professor with his firm opinions and cultured voice.

They married and returned to the tall, grey house in Cambridge, where the Professor's elder sister, Louisa – a gaunt and iron-haired spinster who kept house for him – welcomed with outer resignation and inner chagrin the foolish, useless girl who had ensnared her brother.

Number 37 Scroope Terrace, off the Trumpington

Road, was a house where 'Waste Not Want Not' was the motto. Louisa Morton counted the fish-knives on Thursdays and the silver plate on Saturdays and kept in her bedroom a box labelled 'String too short to tie'. Though the Professor had a substantial private income in addition to his salary, she had been heard to upbraid the cook for the unbridled expenditure of three farthings on an ounce of parsley. Invitations to dine with the Mortons were among the most dreaded events in the University calendar.

In this cold, dark house filled with the smell of boiled fish and the sniffs of depressed housemaids, the Professor's pretty young wife wilted and drooped. Sophie saw little of her husband, for the Professor wined, dined and had his being in the comfort of his College, returning to Scroope Terrace only to sleep. Though presumably acquainted with bright-eyed Nausicaa laughing with her maidens on an Aegean shore, with marvellous Sappho and her 'love-loosened limbs' – and indeed with all those gallant girls who had welcomed Jupiter in the guise of Swan or Bull or Shower of Gold – the Merlin Professor of Classical Studies was a dry and narrow-minded pedant. His published work consisted mainly of splenetic articles in which he vilified those who dared to disagree with his view that Odes VI and VII in the *epinikia* of Bacchylides had been incorrectly separated, and his lectures (from which all women were rigorously excluded) were confidently regarded as being not only the most boring in the University, but the most boring in the world.

The Professor's passion for his young wife soon cooled. It was clear that Sophie would be no use to him in his career. Though constantly instructed by himself and Louisa, she seemed quite unable to learn the most basic rules of academic protocol. Again and again her patient husband caught her out in the most appalling lapses: attempting to seat the wife of the Professor of Divinity below the wife of the Professor of Mathematics and once, in a tea-shop, smiling at a young lecturer who was wearing *shorts*. When he was passed over for the Mastership of his College it was Sophie he blamed and Louisa – who had never really relinquished the reins of the household – now gathered them even more firmly into her bony and frugal hands.

It was into this house that Harriet was born.

Babies, as everyone who cares for them knows, come trailing their own particular essence. There are grave, contemplative babies still patently solving some equation of Euclidean geometry begun in another world, scrawny high-powered babies apparently shot into life without the slightest need to eat or sleep, and placid agricultural babies whose only concern is to thrive.

But sometimes . . . just sometimes, there are babies who appear to have swallowed some small private sun, rosy and endlessly obliging babies who explode into laughter long before one's hand has actually touched their stomachs – laughter which has less to do with being tickled than with sharing and being together – and love.

Such a baby was Harriet Jane Morton in the first

two years of her life: a baby who offered you her starfish of a foot, her slobbered rusk . . . a cornucopial life-affirmer from the start.

Then Sophie Morton, whose passion the child had been, caught a chill which turned to pneumonia, and died. Two weeks later, Louisa dismissed the country girl who had been Harriet's nurse.

Within months the plump, rosy baby became a serious, bird-thin and almost silent little girl. As though reflecting a scarcely comprehended grief, her hair darkened, her hazel eyes lost their green and golden lights and settled to a solemn brown. It seemed as if the very skin and bone and muscle of this bewildered little being had changed into a minor key.

Soon, too soon, she taught herself to read and vanished for long hours into her attic with a book, to be discovered by one of the servants shivering with a cold she had been too absorbed to notice. If she spoke now, it was to her invisible playmate – a twin brother, fleet-footed and strong – or to the small creatures she befriended in that loveless house: the sparrows which settled on her window-sill; a squirrel she had called down from the one tree in the raked gravel rectangle which was the Mortons' garden.

Yet it would be wrong to say that Harriet was neglected. If Louisa found it impossible to love this child of the frivolous usurper who had ensnared her brother, she was determined to do her duty. Harriet was conveyed to music lessons and to dancing classes which the family doctor, disconcerted by her pallor and thinness,

recommended. She was regularly aired and exercised, sent on long walks with whatever ancient and grim-faced maid survived Louisa's regime. If her father grew crustier and more bigoted as the years passed, he could still recognise academic excellence and himself taught her Latin and Greek.

And presently she was sent to an excellent day school most highly recommended by the ladies of the Trumpington Tea Circle who ruled Louisa Morton's life.

No child ever loved school as much as Harriet. She was ready to leave with her satchel an hour before it was time to go; she begged for any job, however menial, which would keep her there in the afternoon. Arithmetic lessons, sago pudding, deportment . . . she enjoyed everything because it was shared by others and accompanied by laughter – because there was warmth.

Then a new headmistress came, detected in the vulnerable dark-eyed child a potential scholar, and herself coached her in English and History: lessons that Harriet was to remember all her life. After two terms she sent for Professor Morton in order to discuss Harriet's university career. Did he favour Newnham or Girton, she enquired, pouring tea for him in her charming sitting-room – or would it be sensible to choose an Oxford college so as to give Harriet a fresh environment? Though it was always foolish to prophesy, she would be extremely surprised if Harriet failed to get a scholarship . . .

From the interview which followed both parties

were invalided out in a state of fulminating rage. To the Professor it was genuinely incomprehensible that anybody could have lived in Cambridge for one week and not known his views on 'women in the university'. And, unable to trust his daughter to this suffragette upstart, he took Harriet away from school.

That had been a year ago and Harriet could still not pass the familiar red brick building without a lump in her throat.

Now she threw her last crust of bread, narrowly missing the head of the Provost of St Anne's who appeared suddenly in a punt beneath her, poling his blonde wife and pretty daughters down-river. To have hit the Provost would have been a particular disaster, for he was her father's enemy, having criticised Professor Morton's entry on Ammanius Marcellinus in the Classical Dictionary, and his wife – whose friendly wave Harriet could not help returning – was even worse, for she had been found (while still Secretary of the Association of University Wives) unashamedly reading a book by someone dirty called Sigmund Freud while in a hansom parked outside Peterhouse.

'Poor child!' said the Provost when they were out of earshot.

'Yes, indeed,' agreed his wife grimly, looking back at the forlorn little figure on the bridge. 'How such a charming, sensitive child came to be born into that household of bigoted prigs, I shall never understand. It was a crime to take her away from school. I suppose

they regard it as a perfectly fitting life for her – arranging flowers in a house where there are no flowers, taking the dog out when there isn't any dog.'

'There is a young man, one hears,' murmured the Provost, expertly shooting beneath Clare Bridge, and raised his eyebrows at his wife's most unladylike snort.

The Provost was correct: there *was* a young man. His name was Edward Finch-Dutton; he was a Fellow of the Professor's own College, St Philip's, and though his subject was Zoology – a new and upstart discipline of which it was impossible to approve – the Mortons had permitted him to come to the house. For there had been 'unpleasantness' about the decision to keep Harriet at home. Even the Master of Trinity, who ranked slightly below God, had taken the Professor aside after the University sermon to express surprise.

'After all, you have made quite a little scholar of her yourself,' he said. 'I had a most enjoyable chat with her the other day. She has some highly original views on Heliodoras – and a delightful accent.'

'If I taught Harriet the classics, it was so that she could make herself useful to me at home, not so that she could become an unfeminine hoyden and a disgrace to her sex,' the Professor had replied.

Still, the encounter had rankled. Fortunately, in her dealings with her niece, Louisa had one unfailing source of guidance: the ladies of the Trumpington Tea Circle who had seceded from the Association of University Wives when it became clear that the parent body could no longer be relied upon to uphold etiquette and pro-

tocol. It was these ladies – headed by Mrs Belper, Louisa's special friend – who had suggested that the best solution for Harriet might be an early marriage. Seeing the sense of this, the Mortons, rejecting various men who had shown an interest in Harriet (for unaccountably the child seemed to have the gift of pleasing) had selected Edward Finch-Dutton. He had a First, was sensible and ambitious and was related – albeit distantly – to the Master of St Swithin's, Oxford. Not only that, but his mother – a Featherstonehaugh – had been accustomed to visit Stavely, the district's most beautiful and prestigious home.

It was the long, serious face of this excellent young man that Harriet saw now as she looked into the water; and as always, his image brought a stab of fear.

'Don't let me give in, God,' she begged, tilting back her head, sending the long soft hair cascading down her back as she searched the quiet, dove-grey sky of Cambridge for some portent – Halley's comet; the pointing finger of Isfrael – to indicate deliverance. 'Don't let me marry Edward just to get away from home. Don't let me, God, I beg of you! Show me some other way to live.'

A church clock struck four, and another . . . and suddenly she smiled, the grave little face utterly transformed as she picked up her case. Somehow her dancing lessons had survived; those most precious times were left to her. And abandoning the resolutely silent firmament, she quickly made her way beside the verdant lawns towards King's Parade.

Ten minutes later she entered the tall, shabby building in Fitzwilliam Street which housed the Sonia Lavarre Academy of Dance.

At once she was in a different world. The streets of Cambridge with their bicycles and dons might never have existed and she could be in St Petersburg in the Tsar's Imperial Ballet School in Theatre Street, where Madame Lavarre – then Sonia Zugorsky – had spent eight years of her childhood. A tiled stove, incorrectly installed by a baffled Cambridge plumber, roared in the hallway; the sad Byzantine face of St Demetrius of Rostov stared at her from the icon corner . . .

And everywhere, covering the panelled walls, climbing up the stairway, were daguerrotypes and paintings and photographs . . . of Kchessinskaya, erstwhile mistress of the Tsar, *en pointe* in *Esmerelda* . . . of the graduation class of 1882 with Madame in a white dress and fichu, demure and doe-eyed in the front row . . . of rose-wreathed Taglioni, the first Sylphide of them all, whose ballet slippers had been cooked and eaten by her besotted Russian admirers when she retired.

For it was not genteel ballroom dancing which was taught by Madame – beached-up in Cambridge after a brief marriage to a French lecturer who died – but the painful and manically disciplined art of the ballet.

Harriet hurried upstairs, smiling as she passed the open door of Room 3 from which came the sounds of a Schubert *impromptu*, its rhythm relentlessly stressed to serve the wobbly *pliés* of the beginners with their gap-teeth and perilously slithering chignons. 'My

Pavlova class,' Madame called it, blessing the great ballerina whom she knew and cordially disliked. For these were the children of mothers who on some shopping trip to London had seen Pavlova in *Giselle* or *The Dying Swan* and had come to believe that perhaps ballet was not just something done by girls who were no better than they should be.

There were only four pupils in the advanced class with Harriet and all of them were there before her in the changing-room. At first they had been aloof and unfriendly, rejecting Harriet with her snobbish university background. Phyllis – the pretty one, with her blonde curls – was the daughter of a shopkeeper; she had added ballet to 'stage' and already danced in pantomime. Mabel, conscientious and hardworking and inexorably fat, was the daughter of a railway clerk. Red-haired Lily's mother worked in the Blue Boar. Harriet, with her 'posh' voice, arriving at the beginning with a maid to help her change and skewer up her hair, had been an object of derision and mockery.

But now, survivors of nine years under the whip of Madame's tongue, they were all good friends.

'She's got someone with her,' said Phyllis, tying her shoes. 'A foreigner. Russian, I think. Funny-looking bloke!'

Harriet changed hurriedly. In her white practice dress, her long brown hair scraped back from her face and coiled high under a bandeau, she was transformed in a way which would have disconcerted the ladies of Trumpington. The neat and elegant head; the long,

almost unnaturally slender throat; the delicate arms all signalled an unmistakable message – that here in this place Professor Morton's quiet daughter was where she belonged.

The girls entered, curtseyed to Madame – formidable as always in her black pleated dress, a chiffon bandeau tied round her dyed orange hair – and took their places at the *barre*.

'This is Monsieur Dubrov,' Madame announced. 'He will watch the class.'

She stabbed with her dreaded cane at the cowed accompanist, who began to play a phrase from Delibes. The girls straightened, lifted their heads . . .

'*Demi-plié* . . . *grand plié* . . . *tendu devant* . . . pull up, everybody . . . *dégagé* . . . *demi-plié in fourth* . . . close.'

The relentless, repetitive work began and Harriet, emptying her mind of everything except the need to place her feet perfectly, to stretch her back to its limit, did not even realise that while she worked she was for once completely happy.

Beside the petite and formidable figure of Madame stood Dubrov, his wild grey curls circling a central dome of pinkly shining scalp, his blue eyes alert. He had seen what he wanted to see in the first three minutes; but this portly, slightly absurd man – who had never danced a step – could not resist, even here in this provincial room, tracing one perfect gesture which had its origin in Cecchetti's class of perfection in St Petersburg or – even in the fat girl – the *épaulement* that was

the glory of the Maryinsky. How Sonia had done it with these English amateurs he did not know, but she *had* done it.

'You will work alone now,' ordered Madame after a while. 'The *enchaînment* we practised on Thursday . . .' and led her old friend downstairs. Five minutes later they were installed in her cluttered sitting-room, stirring raspberry jam into glasses of tea.

'Well, you are quite right,' said Dubrov. 'It is the little brown one I want. A lyrical *port de bras*, nice straight knees and, as you say, the *ballon* . . . an intelligent dancer and God knows it's rarely enough one sees a body intelligently used.' But it was more than that, he thought, remembering the way each phrase of the music had seemed literally to pass across the child's rapt, utterly responsive face. 'Of course her technique is still—'

'I've told you, you cannot have her,' interrupted Madame. 'So don't waste my time. Her father is the Merlin Professor of Classical Studies; her aunt comes here as if there was a bad smell in the place. Harriet was not even allowed to take part in a charity performance for the police orphans. Imagine it, the orphans of policemen, is there anything more respectable than that?' She inserted a Balkan Sobranie into a long jet holder and leaned back in her chair. 'The child was so disappointed that I swallowed my pride and went to plead with the aunt. *Mon Dieu*, that house – it was like a grave! After an hour she offered me a glass of water

and a biscuit – one biscuit, completely naked, with little holes in it for drainage.'

Madame had changed into French in order to do justice to the horrors of the Mortons' hospitality. Now she shook her head, seeing through the clouds of smoke she was blowing out of her imperious nose the twelve-year-old Harriet standing in the wings of the draughty, improvised stage of the drill hall, watching the other girls dance. All day Harriet had helped: pinning up Phyllis's butterfly costume, ironing the infants' tarlatans, fixing Lily's headdress for her solo as Princess of Araby . . . And then just stood quietly in the wings and watched. Madame had repeatedly heard Harriet described as 'clever'. In her own view, the girl was something rarer and more interesting: *good*.

'No,' she said now, 'you must absolutely forget my poor Harriet.'

'Surely to travel is part of every young girl's education?' murmured Dubrov.

'They do not seem unduly concerned about Harriet's education,' commented Madame drily. 'She is to marry a young man with an Adam's apple – a cutter-up of dead animals, one understands. But I must say, I myself would hesitate to let a daughter of mine travel up the Amazon in your disreputable *corps de ballet* and endure Simonova's tantrums. What are you after, Sasha; it's a mad idea!'

'No, it isn't.' The blue eyes were dreamy. He passed a pudgy but beautifully manicured hand over his forehead and sighed. Born of a wealthy land-owning family

which had dominion over two thousand serfs somewhere on the Upper Volga, Dubrov might well have led the contented life of his forebears, riding round his estates with his borzois at his heel and seasonally despatching the bears and boars and wolves with which his forests were plentifully stocked. Instead, at the age of fifteen he visited his godmother in St Petersburg and had the misfortune to see the sapphire curtains of the Maryinsky part on the première of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. Carlotta Brianzi had danced Aurora, Maria Petipa was the Lilac Fairy – and that was that. For the last twenty years, first in his homeland and latterly in Europe, Dubrov had served the art that he adored.

That this romantic little man should become obsessed with one of the truly legendary names on the map of the world was inevitable. A thousand miles up the River Amazon, in the midst of impenetrable forest, the wealth of the 'rubber barons' had brought forth a city which was the very stuff of dreams. A Kubla Khan city of spacious squares and rococo mansions, of imposing fountains and mosaic pavements . . . A city with electric light and tramways, and shops whose clothes matched those of Paris and New York. And the crown of this city, which they called Manaus, was its Opera House: the Teatro Amazonas, said to be the most opulent and lovely theatre in the world.

It was to this theatre that Dubrov proposed to bring a visiting ballet company led by the veteran ballerina he had the misfortune to love; it was to recruit young

dancers for the *corps de ballet* that he had visited his old friend Sonia Lavarre.

'Manaus,' murmured Madame. 'Caruso sang there, didn't he?'

'Yes. In ninety-six. And Sarah Bernhardt acted there . . . So what more fitting than that the Dubrov Ballet Company should dance!'

'Hmm. The fee must be good, if Simonova has agreed to go.' But her face belied her words. She had worked with Simonova in Russia and knew her to be an incomparable artist.

He shrugged. 'There is more money in those few hundred miles of the Amazon than in all of Europe put together. They paid Adelina Patti a thousand dollars to appear for *one night*! Everybody who has gone out there and managed to acquire a piece of land has made a killing with the rubber trees; Spaniards, Portuguese, Frenchmen, Germans. The English too. The richest man of all out there is English, so they say.'

'So why do you come to me for dancers? Why are all the young girls not queueing up to go out there with you?'

Dubrov sighed into his glass of tea. 'Diaghilev has all the best dancers. The rest are with Pavlova.' He glanced at her sideways from beneath his Santa Claus eyebrows. 'And of course there are a few who don't like the idea of the insects and the diseases and so on,' he admitted. He threw out a dismissive hand and returned to his present preoccupation. 'I could take the blonde with the curls, I suppose, but I can get girls like that

from an agency. It's the little brown one I want. Let me talk to her myself; perhaps I can persuade her.'

'How obstinate you are, my poor Sasha! Still, it will be interesting for all the girls to hear of your plans. I shall stop the class early and Harriet can listen with the others. It is always instructive to watch Harriet listen.'

So the advanced class was stopped early and the girls came down. Phyllis had removed her bandeau to let her curls tumble round her face, but Harriet came as she was and as she sank on to a footstool, Dubrov nodded, for she had that unteachable thing that nevertheless comes only after years of teaching: that harmonious placing of the limbs and head that they call *line*. And obstinately, unreasonably – for she would be only one of twenty or more girls – he wanted her.

Like all men of his class, Dubrov had had an English governess and spoke the language fluently. Yet beneath his words, as he began to describe the journey he would make, there beat the grave exotic rhythm that enables the Slavs to make poetry even of a laundry list.

'We shall embark at Liverpool,' he said, addressing all the girls yet speaking only to one, 'on a white ship of great comfort and luxury; a ship with salons and recreation rooms and even a library . . . a veritable hotel on which we shall steam westwards across the Atlantic with its white birds and great green waves.'

Here he paused for a moment, recalling that Maximov, his *premier danseur*, had managed to be seasick on a five-minute ferry crossing of the Neva, but rallied to describe the beneficial effects on the Company of the