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opening extract from

The Great Mousical

written by

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published by

Puffin Publishers

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CHAPTER 1

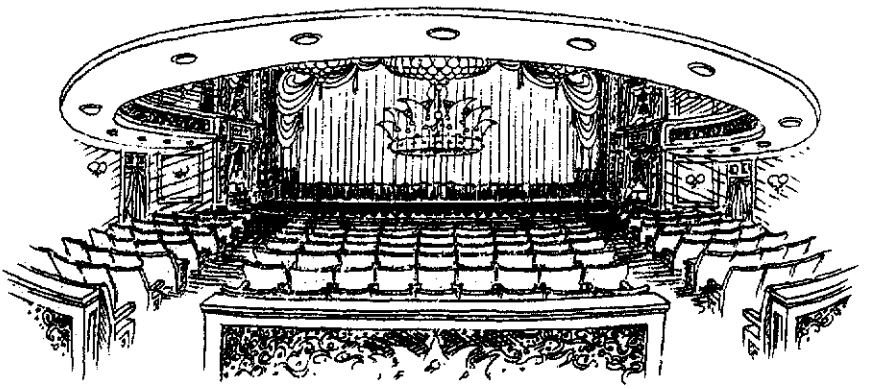


Warm-up

IF YOU COULD stand upon a faraway star and look down at planet Earth on a cloudless evening, you might just notice a glowing pool of light . . . and, chances are, that glow would be New York City. If you could leap from your star and fly down, down, down into the heart of that great metropolis, you would land in the most twinkling, sparkling place of all – Times Square. And, if you walked down any street in that area, you would be in the centre of the theatre district – Broadway, a place where magic happens every single night, and sometimes twice in a day.

The theatre where our story takes place was once very special and quite exquisite, which is why it was named the Sovereign. If you entered the lobby and passed through the swing doors into the chandeliered auditorium, you would feel a sense of wonder at all that had been contained therein: the thrilling music and dances, the words that expressed a thousand ideas, the costumes that rustled, the glowing lights that shone on the evocative scenery . . . You would understand that many lives had been touched here throughout the years.

If you walked down one of the carpeted aisles, out from under the gilt-edged balcony, past the tiers of red velvet seats and the boxed sections on either side of them, you would see the orchestra pit ahead of you,



the square of the proscenium and the gently curving apron of the stage. If by chance your eyes glanced to the right, and if you were *really* paying attention, you would spot a very small and carefully camouflaged door in the skirting board of the beaded wainscot.

On a night in late December, just after Christmas, when our tale begins, this little door was wide open. Leaning against the frame was a portly mouse dressed in corduroy knickerbockers, a faded waistcoat and striped bow tie. The little hair that remained on his head was long and wispy, but in spite of his shabby appearance there was a charisma about him – a certain grandeur, a slight pomposity, but the whole somehow compelling attention. His name was Harold. Behind him, peering around his considerable frame, was another mouse, Pippin – a youngster, clad in jeans, a faded T-shirt and a baseball cap turned backwards on his head. Around his neck was a thin piece of ribbon, to which was attached a small torch.

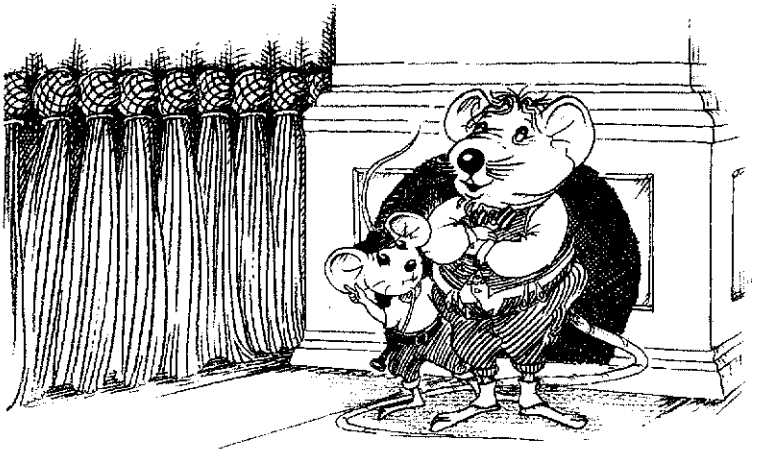
Harold was saying, 'The last night. I *hate* last nights . . . "parting is such sweet sorrow." But this show had a good long run.'

Pippin watched the dancing, tapping feet of the human performers, their shoes sparkling with sequins and bows, the chiffon skirts of the ladies swirling as their male partners twirled them around. The heads of the members of the orchestra were bobbing in rhythm, their shoulders leaning into the task of bringing the final song to a rousing finish. The music swelled, the voices onstage rose to a high note, and with a *whoosh!* the magnificent red velvet curtain swung down, the chains weighting its hem chinking and thudding on the stage, billowing and creating such a breeze that Pippin had to cling tightly to the back of Harold's trousers so as not to be blown away.

The applause from the audience was thunderous and, as he always did, Pippin thrilled to this moment – the music; the lights; the dry, warm smell of dust and make-up and paint – and he thought himself the luckiest mouse in the world to be a small part of it all.

'What happens now, Harold – now that this show has closed?' he asked. 'What's coming in next?'

Harold rubbed his chin. 'It's odd, but I haven't heard,' he replied. 'I've seen so many come and go, and



usually someone tells me what the next production will be –'

He was interrupted as an anxious, bespectacled young mouse dressed in black work clothes came skidding to a halt beside him.

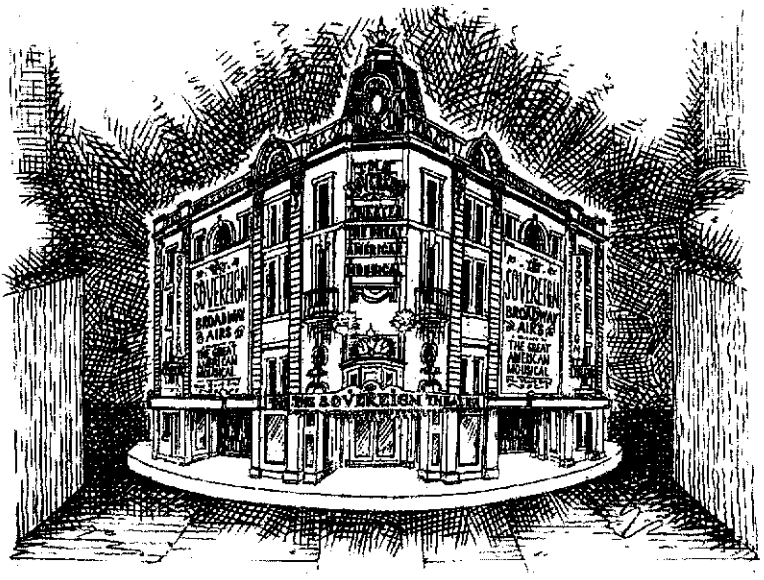
'We've been looking for you everywhere!' he gasped breathlessly. 'Enoch says you have to come right away! Adelaide is at it again. Rehearsals are at a standstill, and you're the only one who can calm her down . . .'

The mice quickly closed the little door tightly behind them and scurried down a long, sloping corridor.

'Sorry, Fritz!' Pippin whispered as they followed Harold's ample frame.

'Really, Pippin! As an apprentice you should know you can't just run off to the human theatre anytime you feel like it. We open in just a few days! We need all paws on deck!'

They rounded a sharp corner and continued on down, into the bowels of the theatre, past the basement and the sub-basement, with its steaming pipes and electrical wires, and down again into the cavernous crawl spaces of the ancient building's very foundation. Nestled there, almost hidden between two towering pillars and long forgotten, was an exquisite miniature replica of the Sovereign Theatre as it once was.



The actual building above had suffered many changes and many colours of paint. Windows had been blocked or boarded up, and its plaster was crumbling, but this little architect's model was pristine in appearance, albeit a trifle dusty, white and resplendent with gilt trim, curlicued mouldings, pillars, and balconies on its elegant facade. Beneath the classic line of the roof, carved cherubs smiled down to welcome all who entered. Large, colourful posters either side of the grand entrance read:

BROADWAY AIRS

A Tribute to the Great American Mousical

One Performance Only – New Year's Eve!

Harold, Pippin, and Fritz hurried through the stage door.

Enoch, the stage manager, was pacing impatiently by the entrance to the wardrobe department. 'Where have you two been!' he exclaimed. 'Of *all* the times to disappear . . .'

'Sorry, sorry,' Harold puffed. 'Couldn't resist a peek at the closing night upstairs. Furthering Pippin's

education, you know. Now, what's up, dear boy?'

Enoch gestured helplessly towards the dressing-room area. A colossal argument could be heard emanating from behind the door marked with a gold star.

'Ah.' Harold nodded in understanding. 'Our leading lady is experiencing her usual pre-opening-night jitters.'

A slender mouse with dark, wavy hair came out from the wardrobe department, a wig in one hand, a brush in the other.

'Ooh la la!' he exclaimed. 'Sounds like our goddess is demanding a sacrifice.'

'Worse than that, Bernardo,' said Enoch with a sigh. 'It was suggested that young Wendy take over the flower-girl song. Now Adelaide's threatening not to go on at all.'

Harold snorted. 'Whose great mind made that poor choice?'

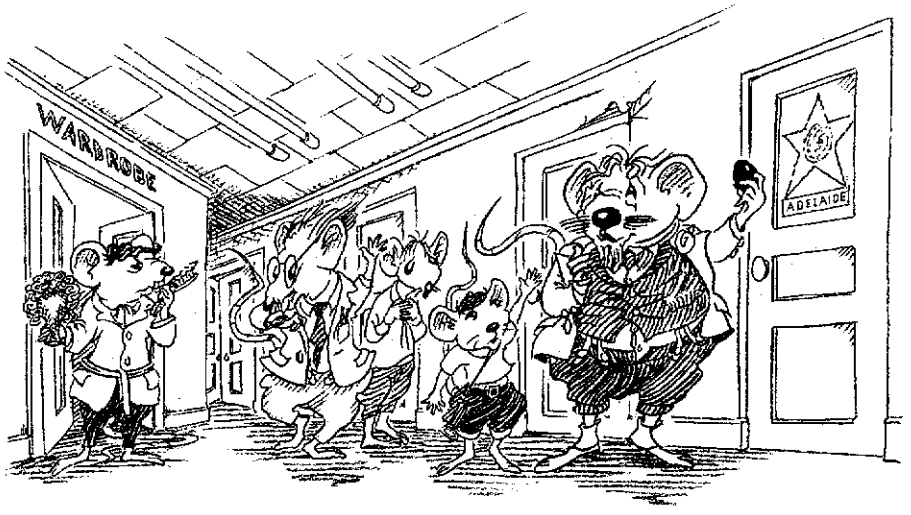
'Our director's, of course.' Enoch jumped as a loud crash came from behind the dressing-room door.

'Well, Emil should know better,' Harold declared. 'One does not replace a legendary star like Adelaide with an ingénue, no matter *how* talented she may be.'

'That's not all,' Fritz chimed in nervously. 'There's a problem with Adelaide's red dress in the staircase number. It's too tight.'

'No surprise.' Bernardo raised an eyebrow. 'She's been eating her way through rehearsals.'

'Well, this will require a little more than my usual bag of tricks,' Harold said. 'Happily, I am always prepared.' He produced a chocolate-covered peanut from his waistcoat pocket and blew a bit of lint off it. Placing his hand on the knob of the dressing-room door, he looked back at his colleagues and grinned. '"Once more unto the breach, dear friends!"' He took a deep breath and, arm extended, the chocolate peanut held high, charged into the dressing room and shut the door behind him.



CHAPTER 2



Rehearsal

'RIGHT! BACK TO work, everyone.' Enoch ushered Pippin, Fritz and Bernardo down the hall. 'We should let the company know what's happening. Get back to the prompt corner, will you, Fritzy?'

They entered the backstage area. Stagehands were pushing scenery into place. There was a babble of voices as twelve enthusiastic young mice dressed in Siamese costumes were being fussed over by concerned parents. Hysterium, the costume-shop manager, was dashing to and fro collecting headdresses