

The
ACROBATS
of AGRA

Also by Robin Scott-Elliot

The Tzar's Curious Runaways

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of AGRA

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illustrated by Holly Ovenden



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To Torrin

“Prove to me you are the acrobats of Agra
& you will live.”



The Great Romanini had a bird's eye view the night I pushed over general Biddle. I didn't mean to but that doesn't seem to count when it comes to knocking over generals. Especially ones as important as General Biddle.

His long row of medals, their ribbons all colours of the rainbow, tinkled like they'd caught a fit of the giggles as he tried to extract himself from Lady Stout's lap.

And all the time the Great Romanini flew above us and all the time I couldn't take my eyes off him. That's how it happened – because I tipped my head so far back watching the Great Romanini fly. I was spellbound, so spellbound and so tipped back I toppled over.

It was like a mini game of skittles. I fell backwards into General Biddle, who was only a wee man, and he tumbled into Lady Stout. There the game of skittles ended.

“Harrummpphh,” said the general.

“Well I never,” remarked Lady Stout.

“Beatrice Spelling!” exclaimed Aunt Constance.

“Wow!” I said, listening to none of them.

How could I pay attention to anything but the mid-air magic trick being performed above our heads? I’d never seen anything like it and I’m pretty sure the city of Agra hadn’t and, who knows, maybe even the whole of India.

“Roll up, roll up...” the ringmaster had cried as we squeezed sweatily into the makeshift stands beneath the large circus tent. “Come see the daring, the death-defying, the flying Frenchies... Romanini and Juliette.”

I’d seen the red-and-white striped Big Top rise up on the plain outside the city two days before. Even the kite flyers hauled down their paper birds to watch. Posters appeared here, there and everywhere. I bubbled with excitement.



They made us wait to see the death-defiers. The main attraction always comes on last (otherwise everyone would go home as soon as they were done I suppose). It felt like a bit of forever. I'm not good at waiting, especially if I'm supposed to be sitting still. I'm a fidgeter you see. Can't help it, just the way I was born. But no one makes allowances for it. Wiggly Spelling is what Miss Goodenough, my teacher, called me on my first day in my new school.

"Miss Wiggly, sit still," she demanded and I tried and tried but no matter how hard you try, you don't always succeed.



I tried and tried in the Big Top as well; I sat pretty still during the first act, the fire-eater: a giant man with a shiny canon ball of a head who gobbled up flames as if he'd not eaten for a week. He was good but then the sitting-still test really began; through the horse show (loud and dusty), the magician (unconvincing), the world's strongest man (his claim), the bird lady (she sang and a row of green parrots sat on her outstretched arms and squawked along), the snake charmer (slithery) and the clowns (funny). Waiting, waiting. For the acrobats.

It's not that the others were bad – I laughed at the clowns because everyone laughs at clowns, even General Biddle and Lady Stout. It's just that it was the acrobats, and only the acrobats, I wanted to see. I could have happily sat and watched them for hours, WITHOUT MOVING A MUSCLE.

I admit I was getting wriggly when the jugglers, the last act before the acrobats, came into the ring and I could tell Aunt Constance, seated on my left, was getting cross. She dared not make a fuss because fussing wasn't done.

On my right, sitting ramrod straight and tight-lipped as ever, was Cousin Primrose. "Oh, do sit still,

Beatrice for goodness sake,” hissed Primrose (she often hissed because those tight lips never seemed to open wide enough to let words out properly).

And then at long last there they were. My breath caught in my throat. The one and only, the flying wonders of the world, Romanini and Juliette – the ringmaster rolled the R at the start of his name and for good measure popped a handful on to the end of hers so it came out as “Julietterrrr”.

I gulped down everything about them, every last detail. Each wore a white turban, but otherwise were dressed as if performing back home at the Cirque Napoleon in Paris – I’d seen drawings in the newspapers. Romanini wore a loose purple shirt with a large golden star on its back and front and skin-tight trousers tied above the knee. Juliette, her dark hair stacked on top of her head, wore a V-necked top in the same colours but with a golden lining and dark shorts also splashed with gold.

They ran holding hands into the ring in that confident, springy manner those at ease with their bodies seem to have. Not like me, according to Aunt Constance. She says I’m an awkward girl and tells everybody I have ten thumbs and I’m all elbows

and sharp corners. I disagree. She doesn't know me. I disagree with Aunt Constance about lots. I don't try to; I just do.

Romanini and Juliette raised their hands, bowed and separated, moving with simple grace, bare feet skipping across the floor, and each leapt in one fluid motion on to ropes that hung on opposite sides of the ring. The Great Romanini was closest to me and pulled himself quickly up his rope to a swing, a thin wooden bar that hung from the roof of the Big Top.

Across the ring Juliette had done the same. I missed her climb – I decided to concentrate on Romanini because if you tried to watch both you ran the risk of seeing neither and that would be an absolute disaster.

Just below the two swings, a tight white rope stretched across the ring, tied between two of the great poles that kept the Big Top up. From down here the tightrope looked no wider than a single strand of a spider's web.

The small orchestra struck up as Romanini stood on the wooden bar and began to swing. Higher and higher he went until, all of a sudden, he let himself

drop only to reach out and grab the bar in both hands as he fell.

“OOOOOHHH,” said the crowd and me.

He swung again and this time when he let go he flew. That’s what it looked like and that’s why I fell back on to the general. The Great Romanini flew towards the tightrope.

“AAAAHHHH,” said the crowd and me.

“Harrummphhh,” said the general, regaining his seat, his medals still tittering, his face as red as his uniform jacket.

My eyes remained fixed on Romanini as he threw out a hand and caught hold of the tightrope; his other hand missed its attempted grasp and he hung there for a moment or two, drawing another fearful gasp from the audience. Not from me – I didn’t gasp because I had every confidence in Romanini. From the first time I saw a poster in the city I knew he would be remarkable. Of course, I had no idea then just how remarkable he would prove to be and how brave and how... wait, that’s for later.

He swung himself again with just one hand, and wrapped his legs around the tightrope. In the blink of an eye he was standing upright, arms outstretched

holding the pose and bringing a stutter of applause and some cheers from a group of red-coated soldiers clustered at the back of the stand.

There are always soldiers around Agra, but over the last few days more have arrived, marching and shouting here, there and everywhere, and there are more people too. The British settlement is getting ever so busy with families looking for places to stay. One woman arrived sitting on the front of a cart covered in dust, no hat, hair all over the place. I think she was crying. Good job Aunt Constance didn't see her – she would not have approved. Something's going on but that's for another day. Because right now there's only one show in town: the CIRCUS.

The Great Romanini bowed towards Juliette, who had swung on to a tiny wooden platform at her end of the tightrope. Her turn: she lifted her balancing pole and stepped on to the rope, a wobble, another "Ooohhh" from the crowd (and me) and then she steadied herself. She strode out towards Romanini and when she was near him she executed the perfect curtsy. I struggle to curtsy on solid ground let alone standing on a spider's web high above the earth. He bowed again.

Now they tried to pass each other and each waved a leg and arm as if they were on the brink of plunging back to earth.

They scratched their heads. Juliette raised her hand, as if an idea had sprung into her head. She made a series of gestures at Romanini and he nodded back. Juliette's legs started sliding in opposing directions along the tightrope and within moments there she was in the splits, pole held out to keep her balance, perfectly still, as though she were doing this on the front lawn.

"Allezzz hupppp," yelled Romanini, his voice carrying bright and breezy in the stifling heat of the Big Top. He took two careful steps back, sucked in a deep breath and leapt forward, a skip, a jump then he was airborne, twisting into a somersault and flying over Juliette, who remained absolutely, perfectly still. If I had been close enough I would have seen that the French girl did not even blink.

"Huuuuuaaahhhhh," I said and followed it with "Oooooohhhhhhpheew" as Romanini landed back on his feet, safely and securely, as only one of the world's greatest acrobats could.

I leapt to my feet.

“Watch out,” said Lady Stout.

I clapped and clapped and clapped as loudly as I could until my palms stung.

The British soldiers joined in, jumping up and yelling their appreciation, as did the Pathans, tall and tough-looking men in turbans and loose robes with thick beards who come to Agra to sell horses to rich city folk. Sowars, Indian cavalry troopers in blue uniforms with extraordinary moustaches, stomped their booted feet on the wooden stands and whooped and hollered. A polite ripple of applause filtered through the rest of the British crowd.

“Beatrice Spelling, sit down in your seat at once,” ordered Aunt Constance. Everyone, Aunt Constance was fond of pointing out, should know their place and stay in it. Primrose pulled at my arm. I brushed it off.

“Honestly, Beatrice, you are an absolute embarrassment.”

“What will people think?” added Aunt Constance, glancing nervously behind her.

“Harrummpphh,” said the general.

“I am ever so sorry General Biddle – she’s only just come out from home.”

“Dogs, I tell you,” muttered General Biddle, “England’s gone to the damn dogs.”

“I’m from Scotland,” I said because I knew it would annoy Aunt Constance.

“Eh?” said the general, surprised a girl dared to even address him. Children were supposed to be rarely seen and NEVER heard.

“Shhh, Beatrice,” commanded Aunt Constance, pulling me down hard into my seat.

It hurt, but only for a moment, because my eyes were already back in the heavens, which is what the top of the circus tent seemed to me. If only I could be up there with them: the Great Romanini, Juliette and Beatrice the Amazing Acrobat from Ardnamurchan. Maybe not Ardnamurchan – not many people in Great Britain let alone India have heard of the distant peninsula on the wild west coast where I grew up.

Tonight was the first moment I didn’t wish I’d never been sent to India. You see, Mother and Father were sent here and look what happened to them. So I wasn’t at all keen to follow, especially as it meant leaving Grannie.

I’d been taken from Grannie’s only a few months

earlier after it was decided she was too old to look after me. I'd lived with her for six years, just the two of us, ever since Mother, Father and Baby George left for Father's new position...

I screeched. I wasn't sure whether it was the roars of the soldiers or the rush of air and thump of his feet landing on the ground that jerked me from my thoughts, but there HE was right in front of me, the Great Romanini, arms raised, acknowledging the applause for the grand finale of his act. And I'd missed it, missed seeing him fly off the far swing and hurtle through the air, swallow diving on to the rather unsafe-looking safety net.

He leapt up and danced across the net; Juliette copied him on the other side, before both somersaulted down to the ground, the orchestra blaring a triumphant conclusion.

"TAAA-DAAAAAH!"

"Bother," I said, drawing a hiss from Primrose, who was clapping her white-gloved hands so lightly she wouldn't have disturbed a fly.

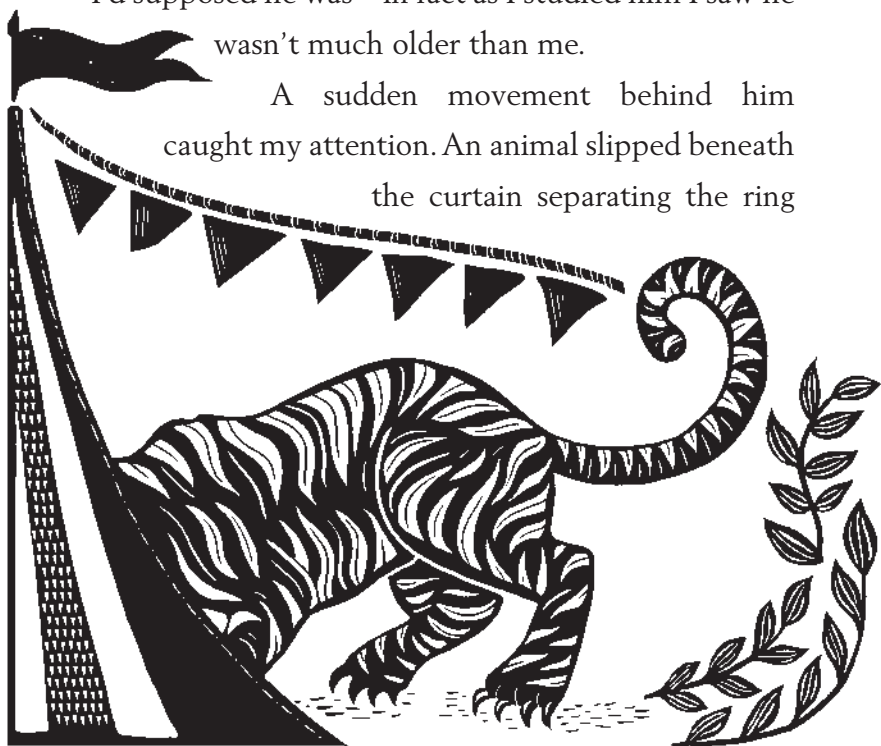
I sat down. I was cross now. Only that morning, in the wake of another scolding from Miss Goodenough, I vowed I would pay more attention and stop

disappearing into distant corners of my mind. I must stop my attention from darting here, there and everywhere like a monkey on a mad, mad mission.

“Bother, damn, bother, damn, bother damn and blast it,” I said.

“Mother...” shrilled Primrose. I ignored her. I was staring at Romanini. Close up he was smaller than he seemed in the air but he looked strong. A lock of pitch black hair flopped over his forehead which he tried to blow away as he kept his arms outstretched to take the applause. It made him look younger than I’d supposed he was – in fact as I studied him I saw he wasn’t much older than me.

A sudden movement behind him caught my attention. An animal slipped beneath the curtain separating the ring



from the backstage area. At first I thought it was a large cat. But as it raced across the ring towards Romanini, pursued by the fire-eater waving his colossal, shiny arms, I realised it was not the sort of cat I thought.

It was a tiger. And Romanini appeared to have no idea the beast was making straight for his back.

“Ohhhhh,” I yelled and leapt once more from my seat, whirling my arms in alarm.

“Oooooftttt,” said General Biddle. Because this time I punched him – by accident and I really was so dreadfully sorry but still a punch and on the chin and I can punch quite hard. He fell back again, once more into the unwelcoming lap of Lady Stout. She shot up in alarm, surprising Mr Slasher, the city accountant standing with his back to the ring as he adjusted his hat in readiness to leave. Mr Slasher waved his arms in the air as if he were balancing on a tightrope but being no acrobat he failed to keep to his feet and toppled backwards on to Lady Stout, who in turn tumbled and buried general Biddle beneath her wide skirts.

“Harrummpphhh-helllllpppp,” arose a muffled cry from the general.

I ignored it all because I had to save the Great Romanini. I hurdled the small fence separating

our seats from the ring. Sometimes I just do things without thinking. I leap before I look.

I hurtled into Romanini, knocking him backwards. We tumbled to the ground just as the tiger arrived and leapt on top of us. Its breath was hot – and a wee bit stinky. I scrunched my eyes as tight shut as I could.

“Ahh, Tonton,” said Romanini and when I opened my eyes again I saw the tiger licking Romanini’s face. “Merci, mon ami, merci.”

Hands grabbed me and pulled me to my feet.

“Damned disgrace,” said a deep voice. It was Theophilus Campbell, the city’s magistrate, one of the most important people in Agra. A typical snooty Campbell, Grannie liked to say of her son-in-law, Aunt Constance’s husband... my uncle. “Absolute damned disgrace.”

It was the most Uncle Theophilus had ever said to me. And it was the most furious I’d ever seen him.

“Oh dear,” I said to no one in particular.