

Gracie Fairshaw and the Trouble at the Tower

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uclanpublishing



Gracie Fairshaw and the Trouble at the Tower is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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978-1-9129-7959-2

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 1

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Set in 10/17pt Kingfisher.

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

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For Monica



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Chapter One

The Dress Rehearsal

Wednesday 18th December, 1935

Gracie Fairshaw rubbed a large circle on the steamed-up window of the tram as it rattled along the prom. Wintry fog blended sand and sea into a wash of grey. She could barely see Blackpool Tower, but she knew they must be close.

The tram bell dinged twice. 'This is our stop!' cried her younger brother, George.

Gracie smoothed her bobble hat, making sure it covered her ears. Once the tram had halted, she followed George and the other passengers down to the lower deck, taking her time on the winding stairs.

As she stepped on to the promenade, the cold, salty air made her gasp after the warmth of the tram.

She paused for a moment while George tugged a cap over his scruffy blond hair, then she craned her neck to look up at the red brick Tower building. Huge letters across the front announcing, WONDERLAND OF THE WORLD. *It was true,* she thought, gazing at the posters and banners advertising the many attractions inside. No other town could boast of a building with an aquarium, circus, ballroom, menagerie, roof gardens *and* a 518-foot high cast iron tower!

Gracie and George grinned at each other excitedly. She gripped her brother's hand, waited for their tram to move on, then dashed across the tramlines and the road beyond to the Tower entrance.

'We're here for the Children's Ballet dress rehearsal,' she explained to the smartly dressed concierge at the door, passing him a letter of invitation. He checked it over and gave a nod. They sprinted up the grand staircase.

'We're to meet Violet and Tom by the Christmas tree,' said Gracie as she pushed open the doors to the ballroom.

'Wowsers! Look at all those presents!' cried George, running towards the gigantic fir tree in the centre of the dance floor.

Gracie hurried after him.

The Christmas tree was decorated in white, red and green

fairy lights and hundreds of gifts had been carefully balanced on its branches.

Violet and Tom waved as they got closer. It always tickled Gracie how alike they looked, although there was a year between the siblings. Violet at 14, was a bit older and taller than her brother, but they had the same dark red hair and freckles. Violet was wearing her favourite – now paint-splattered – dungarees and a checked shirt. Tom wore a pristine white shirt with matching blue blazer and trousers; everything perfectly ironed. They might look like peas in a pod, but their personalities were very different.

'Glad you could make it,' said Violet, hugging Gracie.

'The Christmas show is always amazing – and, best of all, we're seeing it for free,' said Tom. 'You're in for a real treat!'

'Thanks for inviting us,' said Gracie. 'I can't wait to see the sets you helped make, Violet.'

'It's just a few backdrops,' she replied, blushing.

George was still gawping at the tree. 'Who are all the presents for?'

'They'll be given out by Father Christmas to members of the League of the Shining Star at a special Christmas Eve party,' replied Tom.

'Ooh, that means we can go this year,' said George, eyeing up one of the biggest presents.

'Yes, but remember Ma said Father Christmas only gives

gifts to well-behaved children,' teased Gracie.

'I'm a little angel,' replied George, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

Gracie and her friends laughed.

Violet hooked her arm around Gracie's left arm, which ended just past her elbow. 'Isn't the tree amazing,' she said.

Gracie nodded. 'It's beautiful.'

'Beautiful? Oh, yes, I suppose it is, only I meant the size of it. *The Gazette* says it's fifty-foot high! Mr Chadwick, the caretaker, says they had to cut it in half to get it into the ballroom. Imagine the size of the saw they must've used!'

Gracie grinned. 'Most lasses would be excited about the decorations on the tree, not the lumber skills needed to install it.'

'*Pah*, to most lasses,' replied Violet.

'Remember the last time we were in here?' asked Tom, as they all made their way over to a row of red velvet seats facing the stage.

'I don't think I'll ever forget,' replied Gracie, with a shudder. She and George had befriended Tom and Violet Emberton after Ma disappeared suddenly from the Fairshaw's new boarding house that September. They had helped investigate which of The Majestic guests were responsible and then rescued her.

'I think the Tower Ballroom is my favourite place in Blackpool,' said Tom, as they settled into their seats.

'It is very special. It's like being inside a palace, not that

I've ever been in one!' Gracie beamed as she looked round at the golden balconies, glass skylight, painted ceiling murals and twinkling crystal chandeliers. It was magical.

A tall woman with a stern expression, her black hair pulled back into a tight bun, entered the ballroom from the staff-only door beside the stage. She was dressed all in black with a woollen shawl wrapped around her slender body. She used a cane, as she made her way to a seat directly facing the centre of the stage. She was escorted by a thin man who wore round spectacles and a battered brown suit.

'That's Madame Petrova, the ballet director,' whispered Tom. 'She hasn't been in charge very long.'

There was a man sitting at the piano, in front of the stage, Gracie noticed he looked rather flustered as he flicked through his sheet music.

The stage curtains opened revealing a festive setting. There was a toy box, a lovely rocking horse and Father Christmas's golden sleigh filled with wrapped parcels.

'The backdrops look marvellous, Violet,' whispered Gracie. 'You are clever for making them.'

Violet shrugged. 'The fake windows were pretty straightforward – that toy box was trickier, I spent ages getting those hinges right. Still, Mr Chadwick was pleased in the end. Did I tell you the first lot were accidentally thrown away?'

'Yes, you did,' replied Gracie. 'Lucky for you though.'

'Mr Chadwick was in a right panic!' Violet continued, rolling her eyes. 'He was a bit reluctant to hire a girl, but I was the first to apply for the job and he had a tight deadline to meet. That's one advantage of Pa working for *The Gazette*, I get a sneak preview of any job opportunities! I'm hoping Mr Chadwick will offer me more work now. I could learn loads working alongside him.'

'I need to find a job, now I've left school an' all,' replied Gracie. 'We won't have many guests staying at The Majestic between Christmas and Easter. I don't want Ma to cut Phyllis's hours. If I can earn some wages, it would make a big difference. I don't suppose you've heard of any openings at the Tower?'

Violet shook her head. 'I'll let you know if I do. The problem is, there'll be lots of people in the same situation as you. Most jobs in Blackpool are seasonal. I'll let you know if I see anything in *The Gazette* though.'

* * *

Three ballet dancers walked on to the stage. The youngest was petite with blonde hair and striking blue eyes. Gracie thought she looked a couple of year's younger than herself, maybe around twelve. The other two girls were older, maybe fifteen or sixteen, the shorter girl had raven black hair and pale skin, the other girl looked an outdoorsy type; she was statuesque with brown hair and green eyes. They were all

identically dressed in white leotards and tutus, their hair pulled back in a bun.

Another girl hurried on to the stage, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face.

'Gosh,' said Gracie, 'isn't that Audrey Mosson?'

The gang had befriended Audrey during their search for Ma.

'It is an' all!' said Violet.

'I knew she loved to dance, but I didn't realise she'd gone professional,' said Tom, impressed.

'Audrey!' called George.

'Don't,' hushed Violet. 'The Children's Ballet dancers have to follow a series of strict rules of behaviour. Top of the list is a ban on speaking to Tower staff or visitors.'

'Music,' ordered Madame, pointing her cane.

The pianist began to play a Christmassy tune.

The raven-haired girl completed a series of fast turns, her golden tutu glinted under the spotlights as she leapt forward in a perfect *grand jeté*, feet pointed, fingers stretched out.

'You can see why Natalya is the ballerina,' said Tom.

'Aren't they all ballerinas?' asked Gracie, confused.

'That's a common mistake to make. The other girls are *ballet dancers*,' explained Tom. 'Ballerina is a special title; it is given to the principal dancer. "Natalya is Madame's daughter, but she's clearly been given the role because of her grace and passion for dance.'

Gracie and Tom were enthralled by the girls' skill – George and Violet less so, but at least Violet was a bit more discreet about it. George passed the time by picking his nose and examining the results.

At last, it was Audrey's moment in the spotlight. Gracie smiled as her friend moved gracefully towards the centre of the stage, her arms raised as she began to pirouette.

She circled round and round the stage, but when the dancer reached stage right, Gracie noticed the scenery begin to topple. She jumped up.

'Look out!' she yelled.

It was too late, the scenery fell, knocking Audrey forward.

'*Ow!*' she cried, as she smacked on to the floor.

Gracie gasped.

'Oh no!' gasped Violet.

Gracie felt a cold sensation plunge to the pit of her stomach as she ran up the stage steps after Violet. Tom, George, the pianist and Madame Petrova at their heels. She hoped Audrey hadn't been badly hurt.

She tried to see past the other dancers. The girls looked strange up close; their faces heavy with white powder and painted-in features. There was something menacing about their make-up, like a mask.

'Out of the way, girls,' ordered Madame Petrova.

Gracie had already bent down to lift the scenery off Audrey's

leg. Violet, Tom and George each grabbed a corner. Luckily, it wasn't heavy, only a bit awkward to lift.

Audrey moaned as the wood shifted. She slid her leg out, and they lowered the scenery to one side.

The pianist was calming the youngest girl, who was crying loudly.

'Ruth, compose yourself.' Madame Petrova pointed her cane at the man. 'Don't fuss over her, Mr Linnet. Fetch one of those seats up for Audrey.'

'Of course, Madame,' the pianist replied, adjusting his glasses and dashing down the steps.

'Will she be all right, Madame Petrova?' asked the young blonde dancer, a sob in her throat.

'If you give me some space, I will be able to find out, Ruth.' The ballet director spoke with a strong Russian accent as she brushed the girl away. 'Audrey, do you think you can stand?'

She moaned. 'It hurts, but I think so.'

The older girls looked anxiously at her and helped her up. Audrey leant into the tallest girl as she tried to put weight on her ankle.

Mr Linnet had returned with one of the red velvet chairs.

'Sit down so I can take a closer look,' said Madame Petrova.

'Bet it's broken,' said George.

'Shush,' said Gracie. 'Hopefully it's only a sprain.'

Madame Petrova crouched down, 'I suspect you have

damaged the muscle.' She carefully felt along Audrey's ankle, causing the dancer to grimace. The director stood up. 'Yes, as I suspected. No permanent damage, but you must rest it for at least one week.'

'Oh no,' cried Audrey. 'The show's run will be over by then.'

The other girls gasped.

'What a disaster,' said the girl with brown hair. 'The whole show will have to be rewritten.'

'It cannot be helped, Frances,' said Madame Petrova, with a slight shrug.

'But Madame, Audrey is *first soloist*,' said Ruth.

'One of you will have to replace her.'

The girls all looked at Frances. *They must think Madame Petrova will choose her*, thought Gracie.

The director clapped her hands. Her grey eyes were steely with determination. 'The show will go on. We continue to rehearse.'

'But, Madame, what if this wasn't an accident? What if someone deliberately pushed the scenery over?' asked Ruth, her cheeks pinking.

Gracie knitted her brow. *Why would she be worried about that? It didn't seem very likely.*

'Don't be silly,' replied Madame Petrova. 'This is no one's fault.'

'I have to disagree,' said Mr Linnet, firmly. 'Ruth has a valid

point. That scenery should not have toppled. It must have been badly constructed. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid Mr Chadwick may be to blame.'

Violet paled. Her voice trembled as she spoke, 'But Mr Chadwick isn't responsible. I am!'