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SHORTLISTED
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Also by Judith Eagle

The Secret Starling
The Pear Affair
The Accidental Stowaway
The Stolen Songbird



THE GREAT THEATRE RESCUE

JUDITH EAGLE

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For Nick
and all that jazz x



London, 1893

It was one of those pale London mornings, the air thin as net curtains, the light feeble as a weak cup of tea. So colourless in fact that when the fellow appeared, dressed in a vibrant array of greens – forest-green frockcoat, sage-green waistcoat, a jaunty emerald-green scarf – he stood out like a single pea in a bowl of porridge.

Off he set, in his typically spritely manner, down Dean Street, through Soho, skirting Covent Garden, and across the bridge to Waterloo. Here he stopped to admire the silvery ribbon of the Thames. Then he turned left, following the streets that wriggled their way along the river, hopping and skipping past

Blackfriars Bridge, then London Bridge, along Pickle Herring Street, all the way to Tower Bridge, and into the twisting streets of Bermondsey.

The morning walk was the fellow in green's habit. It helped to wake him up, clear his head, and order his thoughts for the day.

In the docks, vessels jostled, packed with tea and coffee and all kinds of exotic spices. The Larder of London, it was called. The man took a deep sniff. It smelled of comfort and warmth and, in particular, of bread pudding.

Soon the place would be alive with the dockers and their barrows, ferrying the ships' wares from the wharves to the warehouses. For now though, all was quiet, too early even for this part of the city to have woken up.

At Horsleydown Old Stairs, the fellow in green came to an abrupt stop.

He stared and shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

It wasn't the most hospitable of places: ramshackle buildings leaning all higgledy-piggledy into the river; a cobbled alleyway leading down to the stairs. The stairs themselves were steep and wet, coated with a slick of green slime, the water lapping cold and grey at the bottom.

The man started and stared again.

He *wasn't* imagining it.

By gosh, at the bottom of the stairs there was a basket with a real live baby inside it. Just like Moses, but without the bulrushes. Or Romulus and Remus abandoned in the Tiber. Or Sargon the Great, who had floated all the way down the Euphrates in Ancient Mesopotamia.

Within seconds, the man had skittered down the steps and swooped the baby up.

The blanket the poor thing was swaddled in was rather grimy. But at least it was dry.

The man glanced behind him, back up the steps that he had just trotted down. No one there. Then he turned to scan the murky river. He couldn't see anyone there either.

But someone *was* there. Hidden in the shadows. Deep in the forest of stilts that the ramshackle houses were built on.

A 'someone' who was very, very pale, and very, very small, and very, very frightened.

What was that? A rustle? A gasp?

The man in green cocked an ear; peered into the slimy depths of the under-buildings.

'Anyone there?' he called. His voice rang out, clear as

bells. He was a performer you see, with years and years of experience in the theatre.

But the only reply was the drip, drip of water, the lonely lap of the river; and from the direction of St Saviour's Dock, the flap of sails, the creak of boats, and the tinkle and clink of the halyards as they knocked against each other.

'Just you and me, then,' said the man, looking down at the baby.

The baby blinked and waved its fists in the air. It blew a bubble of spit and smiled.

The man in green's heart melted. An orphan himself, he knew that a child without a name, without a mother or a father, was bound for only one place.

An orphanage or, even worse, the workhouse.

And the man knew what went on there. Thrashings with stinging nettles. Beatings with frying pans.

No love or care.

But what if . . .

The man stood very still. His brain was whirring, the cogs were turning, and an idea – a preposterous one, yes, but an idea nevertheless – was forming.

He had a home. *He* had the money. He could do his bit for society. And besides, it would be nice to have the company.

In a trice, the man popped the baby into its basket, hoisted it on to his shoulder, and set off, back in the direction he had come. As he walked, his mind ticked over. (He was known for telling stories; he had a lively imagination.) And soon he had concocted a grand one for the baby.

There had been a shipwreck! The baby was the sole survivor! An epic journey – across the English Channel, into the Thames, and all the way upriver.

He was so busy thinking he didn't even notice he was being followed.

And as for his story about the baby's origins . . .

It was a good one.

But it was wrong.

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