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Ballet Shoes

Written by

Noel Streatfeild

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Ballet Shoes

A Story of Three Children on the Stage

NOEL STREATFEILD

Illustrated by Ruth Gervis



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CHAPTER I

Great-Uncle Matthew and His Fossils

THE Fossil sisters lived in the Cromwell Road. At that end of it which is farthest away from the Brompton Road, and yet sufficiently near it to be taken to look at the dolls' houses in the Victoria and Albert every wet day, and if not too wet, expected to 'save the penny and walk'.

Saving the penny and walking was a great feature of their lives.

'Gum,' Pauline, the eldest, would say, 'must have been a very taxi person; he couldn't have ever thought about walking or he'd never have bought a house at the far end of the longest road in London.'

'I expect,' Petrova, the second, would argue, 'he had a motor-car all his own, and he never hired anything.'

G.U.M. was the quick way of saying Great-Uncle Matthew. He was a legendary figure to the children, as he had gone on a voyage, and not come back, before any of them were old enough to remember him clearly. He had, however, been of the utmost importance in their lives.

'He's been,' Pauline once said, 'like the stork in the fairy-tale. He very nearly did bring us in his beak.' Storks in the Fossil children's nursery were always called Gums after that.

Gum had been a very important person. He had collected some of the finest fossils in the world, and though to many people fossils may not seem to be very interesting things to collect, there are others who find them as absorbing as sensible collections, such as stamps. Collecting fossils, he naturally

needed somewhere to put them, and that is how he came to buy the house in the Cromwell Road. It had large rooms, and about six floors, including the basement, and on every floor, and in almost every room, he kept fossils. Naturally a house like that needed somebody to look after it, and he found just the right person. Gum had one nephew, who had died leaving a widow and a little girl. What was more suitable than to invite the widow and her child Sylvia, and Nana her nurse, to live in the house and take care of it for him? Ten years later the widowed niece died, but by then his great-niece Sylvia was sixteen, so she, helped by Nana, took her mother's place and saw that the house and the fossils were all right.

Sometimes when the house got too full Nana would say:

'Now, Miss Sylvia dear, you must tell your uncle not another fossil until a few have gone out of the door.'

Sylvia hated saying this, but she was far too much in awe of Nana to do anything else. Terrible upsets were the result. First Gum said no fossil would leave the house except over his dead body. Then, when he'd toned down a little and realized some had got to go, in spite of his body being anything but dead, he would collect a few small, rather bad specimens and give them away. Then, after a day or two, during which he mooned round the house under Nana's stern eyes and Sylvia's rather sorry ones, a notice would suddenly appear in *The Times*, to say that Professor Matthew Brown had given another generous gift of fossils to a museum. That meant that men would come with packing-cases and take some of the most important (which often meant the largest) fossils away. Then Nana would settle down with a sigh of contentment to cleaning those places where the fossils had stood, and Sylvia would comfort Gum by listening to his descriptions of where he was going to look for some more.

It was while looking for some more that the accident hap-

pened which put an end to Gum's fossil-hunting for ever. He had climbed a mountain after a particular specimen, and he slipped and fell hundreds of feet, and crushed his leg so badly that he had to have it taken off.

You would have thought that a man who lived for nothing but fossils would have felt there was little left to do when he couldn't go and look for them any more, but Gum wasn't that sort of man.

'I have travelled a lot on land, my dear,' he said to Sylvia, 'but very little by sea. Now I shall really see the world. And maybe I'll be finding something interesting to bring back.'

'There's no need to do that, sir,' Nana broke in firmly. 'The house is full enough as it is. We don't want a lot of carved elephants and that about the place.'

'Carved elephants!' Gum gave Nana a scornful look. 'The world is full of entrancements, woman, any of which I might bring home, and you talk to me of carved elephants!'

But Nana held her ground.

'All right, sir; I'm sure I'm pleased you should see these entrancements, as you call them, but you let them bide. We want nothing more in this house.'

The entrancement that Gum actually brought home was Pauline.

The ship on which he was travelling struck an iceberg, and all the passengers had to take to the boats. In the night one of the boats filled with water and the passengers were thrown into the sea. Gum's boat went to the rescue, but by the time it got there everybody was drowned except a baby who was lying cooing happily on a lifebelt. Gum collected the baby and wrapped her in his coat, and when they were at last rescued by a liner and taken to England, tried to find someone to own her. That was the trouble. Nobody knew for sure

whose baby she was; there had been other babies on board, and three were missing. She must go to an orphanage for female orphans, said everybody; but Gum stuck in his toes.



Things he found went to the Cromwell Road. He had meant to bring Sylvia back a present. Now, what could be better than this? He fussed and fumed while the adoption papers were made out, then he tucked the baby into the crook of

his left arm, took his shabby old hold-all in his right, and rather dot and carry one because of his game leg, walked to the railway station, and went home to London and the Cromwell Road.

Gum, to whom time meant very little indeed, was never able to remember that other people might not be expecting him when he turned up without a word of warning after being away for months. This time he opened his front door, put down his hold-all, and looked round for a suitable place to put the baby. Seeing nowhere but the hall table or the umbrella stand, he called rather angrily for Sylvia.

'Hi, Sylvia! Good gracious me, I keep a pack of women in this house and none of them are about when they are wanted.'

Nana and Sylvia were upstairs marking some new sheets. Nana stopped working, her needle held up as though it were a magic wand which could command silence.

'Hark. Isn't that the Professor's voice?'

Sylvia harked, and in a moment was down the stairs with Nana panting behind.

'Darling Gum, why didn't you let me know you were coming?'

Her uncle kissed her.

'Why should I waste a stamp? Look' – he pushed the baby into her arms – 'I've brought you a present.'

Sylvia pulled the shawl back from the bundle he handed her, and then looked round at Nana, and said in a startled but pleased whisper:

'A baby!'

'A baby!' Nana almost jumped the two last stairs and snatched the child from Sylvia. She turned and faced Gum. 'Really, sir, I don't know what you'll be bringing to the house next. Who do you suppose has time to look after a baby?'

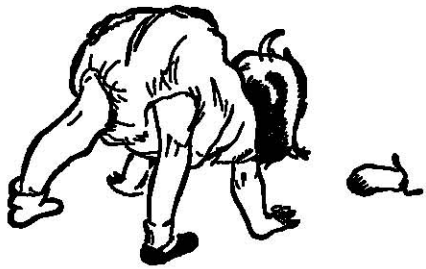
'I thought all women liked babies,' Gum protested.

'That's as maybe.' Nana was pink with rage. 'If Miss Sylvia has any sense she won't take it . . .'

She broke off, because the baby gave a sudden coo which made her look at it for the first time. Her face changed and seemed to melt, and she began to make noises such as everybody makes to babies. Then suddenly she looked up fiercely at Sylvia.

'Which rooms am I to have for my nurseries?'

Nana coming round like that of course settled the baby's fate. She was given Sylvia's old nurseries at the top of the house, and Nana became her slave, and Sylvia loved doing things for her when she was allowed (which wasn't often) as



Nana believed in 'having my nurseries to myself'. Cook and the parlourmaid and housemaid considered the baby a figure of romance. 'Might be anybody, even royalty, saved like that from the ravening waves,' Cook would say at the kitchen meals, and the two other maids would sigh and agree with her.

There was some trouble over calling her Pauline. Sylvia chose the name, as she said Saint Paul was rescued from the

sea, so it was suitable. Gum, however, wanted to call her after one of his pet fossils, but Nana refused to allow it.

'Babies in my nurseries, sir,' she said firmly, 'never have had outlandish names, and they're not starting now. Miss Sylvia has chosen Pauline, and it's a nice sensible name, and called after a blessed saint, and no other name is going to be used, if you will forgive me speaking plain, sir.'

A year later Gum brought Sylvia a second baby. On his travels this time his leg had given him trouble, and he had been landed and put into hospital. There he had made friends with a Russian, a shabby, depressed fellow who yet somehow conveyed the impression that he hadn't always been shabby and depressed, but had once worn gay uniforms and had swung laughing through the snow in his jingling sleigh amidst rows of bowing peasants. This man had left Russia during the revolution, and he and his wife had tried to train themselves to earn a living. They had not been a success as wage-earners, and the wife became ill and died, leaving a small baby. When the man Boris was going to die too, the nurses in the hospital were most concerned.

'What will we do?' they said. 'Because there is his little baby in the children's ward.'

'Don't trouble about that,' Gum had answered airily. 'We have one baby at home that I have adopted. We shall have another.'

Sylvia called this baby Petrova, as she had to have a Russian name, and it sounded a bit like Peter, and Nana thought that if one child were called after an apostle the other should be.

Nana did not even talk about not taking the baby this time. There were the nurseries, and there was Pauline.

'Very nice for Pauline to have a companion,' she said. Then she looked at Petrova, who was a dark, sallow baby, very different from the golden-haired, pink-and-white Pauline.

'Let's hope this one has brains, for it's easy to see who's going to be Miss Plain in my nursery.'

Although Nana was quite pleased to welcome Petrova, she spoke firmly to Gum.

'Now, sir, before you go away again, do get it into your head this house is not a crèche. Two babies in the nursery is right and proper, and such as the best homes have a right to expect, but two is enough. Bring one more and I give notice, and then where'd you be, with you and Miss Sylvia knowing no more of babies than you do of hens?'

Perhaps it was fear of what Nana might say, but the last baby Gum did not deliver himself. He sent her round by district messenger in a basket. With her he sent a pair of ballet shoes and a letter. The letter said:

'Dear Niece,

'Here is yet another Fossil to add to those in my nursery. This is the little daughter of a dancer. The father has just died, and the poor young mother has no time for babies, so I said I would have her. All her mother had to give her child was the little pair of shoes enclosed. I regret not to bring the child myself, but today I ran into a friend with a yacht who is visiting some strange islands. I am joining him, and expect to be away some years. I have arranged for the bank to see after money for you for the next five years, but before then I shall be home.

'Your affectionate uncle,

Matthew.

'P.S. Her name is Posy. Unfortunate, but true.'

The sudden arrival of little Posy caused an upset in the nursery. Nana it was who took in the basket, and when Sylvia

got in and went up to see the baby, she found her crumpled and rather pink, lying face downwards on Nana's flannel-aproned knee. Nana was holding an enormous powder puff, and she looked up as Sylvia came in.

'This is too much, this is,' she said severely.

She shook a spray of fuller's earth over the baby.

Sylvia looked humble.

'I quite agree, Nana. But what are we to do? Here she is.'

Nana looked angrily at Posy.

'It isn't right. Here we are with Pauline rising four, and Petrova sixteen months, and down you pop this little fly-by-night. Two's enough, I've always said. I told the Professor so perfectly plain. Who is she? That's another thing I'd like to know.'

'Well, her name's Posy, and her mother is a dancer.'

'Posy! With the other two called as nice as can be after the Holy Apostles, that's a foolish sort of name.' Nana gave a snort of disgust, and then, in case the baby should feel hurt, added 'Blessed lamb.'

'Right.' Sylvia turned to the door. 'Now I know how you feel, I'll make other arrangements for her, perhaps an orphanage . . .'

'Orphanage!' Nana's eyes positively blazed. She pulled a tiny vest over Posy's unprotesting little head. 'Who's thinking of orphanages? The Professor's taken her, and here she stays. But no more, and that's my last word.'

'Well, I don't suppose there can be any more for a bit,' Sylvia said hopefully. 'He's gone away for some time, perhaps for five years.'

'Better make it ten,' said Nana, giving Posy a quick kiss. 'That'll give us a chance.'

About four months later a box arrived at the house in the Cromwell Road, addressed to 'The Little Fossils.' Inside

were three necklaces: a turquoise one with 'Pauline' on it; a tiny string of seed pearls marked 'Petrova', and a row of coral for Posy.

'Well,' said Nana, fastening the necklaces round the children's necks. 'I expect that's the last we shall hear of him for some time.'

She was quite right.