For Puck

Published in Great Britain by
Inside Pocket Publishing Limited

First published in Great Britain 2012
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978 0956 7122 9 5

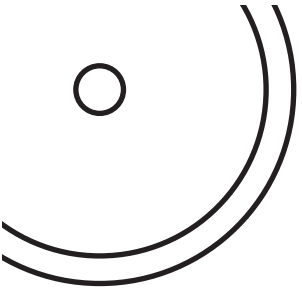
Inside Pocket Publishing Limited Reg. No. 06580097

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon

www.insidepocket.co.uk

THE YOUNGSTARS

Ursula Jones



PROLOGUE

THE WHEEL OF DEATH

Frankfurt, Germany 1928

They were going away on a big ship tomorrow. That's why he had woken up – to see if it was tomorrow yet; but it wasn't. He was still lying under her coat on the cushions in the bright room where she'd put him to bed. His mother must still be at work then, and it must still be the night before they sailed away.

Usually when he woke up it was the next day and he'd find himself where she called 'at home'; but now it was night and exciting, and he lay and wondered what a big ship was. Ships sailed the sea, she'd said. What was the sea like? He would go and ask.

He got up and stood on tiptoe to reach the doorknob. He could just turn it. He knew he shouldn't, but he opened the door. He'd been told never, never to go out of the bright room alone, but he did and he walked down the corridor. He could hear happy music. He shouldn't, he knew, but he climbed up the iron steps towards the sound. The steps were big and tall. His feet caught in his nightshirt so he went up on all fours.

It was dark at the top. There were some people standing around looking at a twinkling, very light place ahead of them. A big voice said, 'Das Todesrad! Ladies and Gentlemen, The Wheel Of Death.' He looked through the people's legs at the light place.

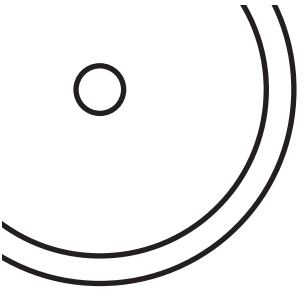
A lady was tied to a huge wheel that was spinning round and she was going round with it. A drum was banging loud and fast. The man was throwing knives at the lady and they didn't hit her, even though she was going round so fast. The knives stuck into the wheel as it spun and each time a knife stuck there was a clashing noise. The knives stuck in close to her, all around her – zoink, zoink, zoink – and the drums banged.

And someone screamed; and then more people that he couldn't see screamed too, and he could hear chairs falling over and lots more screaming. And there was red, like long red ribbons flying out of the wheel: red stuff, but wet. Someone ran to the wheel and stopped it spinning, and the lady on the wheel

was hanging with a knife stuck in her and red stuff coming out.

The lady looked up slowly and said his name. And then he screamed. He screamed for her and he ran to her and held on to her and screamed. Someone said, 'Es ist ihr Kind.' Many people were running to her now, and someone in the crowd said, 'Poor kid! He's only three.'

They laid the wheel flat and tried to untie her. Someone else said to get him away and they tugged his nightshirt, but he wouldn't let go of her because it was her, it was her, it was her.



CHAPTER ONE

SECRET

The Grand Theatre, Bolton, England 1936

Schlerrk! The seat of Grinling's trousers split open with a noise like a whiplash. All six Youngstars were on stage performing their Pie Shop sketch: dancing and tumbling and slinging custard pies at each other.

The audience gasped. But before they could make up their minds that they really were looking at a bare bottom, Ollie, the youngest of the Youngstars, clapped a custard pie on it. The pie hit the mark with a squelch and Grinling sat down quickly in a big basket of fake pastries. And there he had to stay while the rest of the Youngstars finished the sketch with Ollie doing the work of two, filling in for him.

They were trying not to laugh at what had happened, or 'corpse', as it's called, though Ollie could never find out why; and they were praying that their manager was not out front, watching the act. Mr Pigott would not see the funny side.

Make the smallest mistake on stage, and Mr Pigott would shout, 'We're in Show Business, my Babies, and don't you forget it.' He would thrust his face, which was the colour of a wedge of cheese, close to theirs and say quietly, 'I manage a professional juvenile troupe, not a mob of one-legged hoofers. This is Variety and I don't mean the Heinz fifty-seven kind. You are Variety artists, you are...' Then he'd shout, very loudly, 'What are you?'

'The Youngstars,' they would mutter in response. That was how Mr Pigott billed them in the theatre programme: THE YOUNGSTARS – a troupe of stars in a star troupe! He never printed their names. 'What's it to the audience what you're called?' he'd say. 'It's what you do that matters.'

So there they were, six nameless stars. As well as Grinling, who was the comic, and Ollie, who was as solemn as Grinling was not, there was Jessie, the troupe's lead dancer. Jessie had just turned fifteen. She danced like a dream and talked like a mill girl. She talked sense too. For the most part, what Jessie said, the rest of the Youngstars fell in with.

Next in age was Heather, the lanky one. She was all skinny arms and legs, always at the back of the line-up, and so double-jointed she could have packed herself up in her own suitcase.

Then came Silver, who was fair and pretty – pretty enough to knock the breath out of you. At thirteen she was a talented singer and dancer and was definitely going places.

Finally, there was John. A few months younger than Silver, he was dark, tall and slim. John was born to dance. Everyone agreed that.

They also agreed that Mr Pigott did not like things to go wrong in front of the public; and anything Mr Pigott didn't like, you didn't do – unless you'd lost your mind. So, as the Youngstars aimed their pies and held down the laughter that was rising up inside them like gas in a lemonade bottle, they were also praying. They were praying that Mr Pigott was in his usual place early on a Saturday evening: the pub. And no one was praying harder than Ollie.

There wasn't a sign of their manager backstage after the act was over. Grinling disappeared into the boys' dressing room, clutching the seat of his pants, and Jessie went into the girls' room to clean up before the next show in an hour's time. The other four stood outside in the corridor laughing about the trousers.

'I heard a bang,' said Heather, 'and I thought Cripes! We must be off form. The audience is shooting at us.' The Youngstars rocked with laughter. They were smothered in the mixture of talc and Fuller's Earth that they used for flour in the Pie Shop sketch. As they laughed, it fell out of their chef's costumes in circles round their feet on the concrete floor. The cleaners wouldn't thank them!

They knew they'd been lucky. Bare bums on stage were forbidden. Indecency it was called. The police got involved. They'd got away with it this time, thanks to Ollie and his custard pie, but they'd had a scare and it made them laugh even more.

'But I saw it happen.' John's handsome face was screwed up like a squeezed sponge. 'Course I laughed and course I got a custard pie right in the tonsils.' This time the laughter was sympathetic.

It was one of Ollie's jobs before the show to prepare the custard for the pies. He spent ages beating together grated shaving soap and glycerine, turning the handle of a little egg whisk until his arm ached and he was satisfied that the wobbly froth was thick enough. Get a mixture like that in your mouth and you could blow bubbles for a week.

'They'll be saying I've got rabies,' John complained.

They only stopped laughing when Miss Bellamy, their matron, came out of the boys' dressing room. She was slowly shaking her frizzy, greying head over Grinling's ripped trousers. Miss Bellamy did everything for the Youngstars but, whatever it was, she did it slowly; even head shaking.

'They'll need...' she said, but her sentence died. When it came to speaking, Miss Bellamy went from Slow to Dead Slow as if she feared conversational rocks or sandbanks ahead.

'Mending.' Heather kindly inserted the missing word for her. But Miss Bellamy shook her head. That wasn't what she meant.