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Chapter One

Seen BETTER DAYS

Eugenius Birch climbed a ladder once used to service spotlamps, and peered up at the underside of the Circle. Impossible to judge how far the cracks had spread, or whether the nasty downward bulge in the plaster had got worse. But, to an engineer's eye, there was no mistaking the sag in Row C.

'Oh, do take care, Mr Birch!' called Miss Melluish.

'The risk is small, madam,' said Eugenius leaning out from the rungs by one hand. 'What is the worst that can befall me? I do wish those electricals had not been turned off: I can see almost nothing.'

On the stage, Lily Oliver eased the laces in her bodice in readiness for singing. It was a habit she had formed in her days of deep breathing, and she had never bothered to break it, even though she did not (strictly speaking) breathe any more. It seemed to raise the men's spirits to see her loosen her laces and

to know a song was on its way. 'What would you like to hear next, gentlemen? Ladies?'

Mikey the Mod put his jacket over his head and his ankles on the seat in front. Up in the Royal Box, the Twins rested their chins on their fists. Florence Melluish frowned a little, thinking that Mr Birch's worries about the Circle deserved everyone's full attention. Maurice tuned his banjo to the key of A. Lily always started in the key of A.

Lily usually sang a medley of songs before joining her actor husband Roland in a scene from a play. Comedy on Mondays and Fridays; tragedy on Wednesdays; burlesque on Saturdays; in between any script Roland could still remember from his days in repertory.

'Could it truly come tumbling down, Mr Birch?' whimpered Miss Melluish.

'One day it certainly will, dear lady. The works of Man are fleeting . . . But perhaps we shall be spared for a year or two more.'

'Ladies and Gents!' boomed Lord George striding on stage. 'We at The Royal are delighted to bring you your very own songbird—Lily Oliver, singing . . . '

An immense **bang** shook dust from the great decaying curtains.

Eugenius fell off the bottom rung of the ladder; Mikey slid down between seats, and the music died on the songbird's lips. Everyone took it for the Dress Circle finally collapsing, but it was only the slamming open of the side doors. Like some mediaeval siege engine, great slabs of daylight forced their way into the gloomy auditorium. Vandals?

'You'll see the potential at once,' said the man from the Council stepping indoors. 'Nothing to look at on the outside but one

step inside and there's the full glory of it . . . I keep telling the Development Committee: Seashaw *needs* the Arts. The Arts are the key. You've got to have the Arts, or where are you?'

He ushered in his guests: a big man with curly hair and red trousers, a slight woman who moved as if the wind had blown her over the doorsill, and a child who was all eyes and patchwork dungarees. They stepped directly into the theatre from the pavement outside: Mr Letts wanted to show them the auditorium first, rather than the dismal little foyer: first impressions are so important . . .

He had shown others around: developers, photographers, historians, investment consultants, fellow Councillors . . . But he was placing his best hopes in these theatricals. Young though they were, they had a youthful optimism, an energy that he had not seen in any of the others. Living in Seashaw, Mr Letts had almost forgotten there were optimists and dreamers left in the world.

'The whole building seems to be holding its breath!' whispered the woman.

'That'll be the smell,' said the man.



The ghosts let go their pent-up breath. Not vandals, then. Vandals had broken in once, and Miss Melluish had needed her smelling salts afterwards. The Residents had been obliged to watch the yobs jumping up and down on the seats, emptying out the property baskets, letting off the fire extinguishers before brawling their way out again because none of them had remembered to bring a spray can or a decent knife.

These people were not vandals.

'Who are *they*?' said the child, pointing directly at Jim and Joanie up in the Royal Box.

Mr Letts pointed at the selfsame moment. 'The lion and the unicorn, you see,' he said of the gilded mouldings on the front of the box. 'Royal emblems. That's where the queen would have sat. Or the king.'

'Terrible view,' was the man's reaction. 'You look straight into the wings, and you can't see anything happening stage-left.' But he looked around with joy at all the other gilded stucco mouldings decorating the theatre—Greek helmets, angels, harps, swags of flowers, cupids and masks. As he did so he rubbed the top of his curly hair, as if to soothe some inner agitation. 'What happened to the walls?' he asked.

'Skin deep! We've had it looked into,' cheeped Mr Letts, but could not suggest either a reason or a cure for the acne of black mould. It coated every wall and ceiling, and had dyed the curtains a darker red.

'How are the certificates?'

'Oh, early days, early days.' Mr Letts's heart was already sinking. Always 'the mould', always 'the certificates'. Could no one look beyond the problems to the sheer history—the romance—of this noble old building? In all probability, The Royal would end up as an apartment block or a nightclub. But Mr Letts was Seashaw born and bred, and he wished, with a wistful, weary, washed-out longing, that the town's theatre could somehow survive the march of Progress. Throughout its long life it had been

open and closed, open and closed, as one owner after another ran out of money, lost heart, or died of overwork. Only three years ago it had been struggling along, getting by, almost making ends meet. Surely it could reopen one last time? —even stage the kind of shows he remembered seeing there as a boy!

Mr Letts had hoped these young, arty types might share his dream. He had hoped they could forgive The Royal's little imperfections and the jaded, faded town that no longer loved it.

'Any other questions before we press on to the Administration area?' he asked, shuddering at the thought of the dingy foyer.

'Any ghosts?' asked the woman.

'*Ghosts?*' Mr Letts let out an explosive laugh. Mould he had no answer for. Structural decay left him floundering. But ghosts? 'No! No, no! No ghosts! Ha ha. That's one thing we haven't got to worry about!'

Behind them, Roland Oliver had climbed on to a chair, so as to examine the top of the younger man's head for signs of balding.

His wife Lily watched, her organza dress riffling in the breeze from the open doors, and thought how long it had been since audiences had streamed out into the alley at the end of a play, talking about the actors or humming one of her songs.

'So what do you think?' said Mr Letts dejectedly.

'What do we think?' the man in red trousers repeated to his wife. Both hands were in his hair now.

'We'd beggar ourselves doing it up, and have no money to put on shows,' said his wife.

'There are always grants.'

'It will be the death of us,' she countered blithely.

'Yes, but what a way to go!' The whole family laughed.

Taken aback, Mr Letts laughed too, uncertainly, because theatre people are always a bit unnerving. But he so *wanted* them to mean it.

'And Gracie?' said the man.

The girl's mother spoke even before the girl could: 'Gracie's idea in the first place, wasn't it?'

Mr Letts almost skipped for joy. Could it be true that The Royal might yet tuck up her skirts and dodge the bulldozers? That the great curtains might one day swish and swash again, rather than burn in a skip? That the orchestra pit might fill up with music, rather than concrete? He knew he ought to warn them: the dream was impossible. But that's the point of theatre and actors, isn't it? They are the stuff that dreams are made on. The party of visitors shut the side doors and herded out to the foyer; the swing doors clip-clopped to and fro behind them.

'What do you say, fellow incumbents?' asked Eugenius Birch.

'I scent a theatrical,' said Lord George.

'I also.'

'Too young to pull it off,' said the actor decisively.

'Just because he has a full head of hair . . . ' said his wife.

'A man who has not outgrown his hair has not yet grown to wisdom,' said Roland Oliver pompously (and not for the first time).

'Wise man or fool: is he going to save us or sink us?' said the Lifeboatman, his oilskins dripping noisily on to his boots. 'Will he end by wanting to demolish the place, like all those others?'

Miss Melluish began to cry discreetly into a lace handkerchief. Songbird Lily Oliver decided it was time to cheer everyone up with a song. She sang a jaunty little number about charabancs and outings to the seaside, about people putting on their best clothes and leaving the city in favour of sunshine and fun. Maurice played his banjo; the man in the pit ran his fingers over the keys of the silent piano; Jimmy and Joanie clapped in time and, one by one, the assembly was persuaded to join in with the chorus. No risk of the visitors hearing, of course; who can hear ghosts singing? For years and years the occupants of The Royal had been entertaining themselves without a single complaint from the neighbours.

'All aboard for sunny Seashaw
There let us our hearts combine.
Warm upon the limpid lee shore,
I'll be yours if you'll be mine,
In the sunny summertime.
You'll be mine and I'll be yours,
On Seashaw's sandy sunny shores.'

The song fell silent, but the Twins' enthusiastic clapping went on. At least, they took it for the Twins' clapping.

But it was not. The girl in the patchwork dungarees was standing at the brink of the Circle clapping with all her might.

The ghosts drew in breath as one. A pat of mould peeled off the wall and fell with a splat on to the stage.

But of course! The child was not clapping their song: she was simply experimenting—clapping so as to hear the noise of it echo through the big auditorium. It is one of those things people do in a big hollow space, isn't it? Eugenius Birch was the first to realize this and put their minds at rest. Pure coincidence. The child had not heard a note.

'That was lovely!' called Gracie. 'Sing another one!'

Mikey the Mod emerged from under his coat. Roland Oliver dropped his script. Maurice held tight with both hands to the cracked brim of his straw boater. A man in overalls came out from the wings holding a spanner.

'She can see us!' said Joanie.

'I said before, she was pointing at us. I told you,' said her brother. 'Did I not say?'

'*Can* you see us, young lady?' asked Eugenius Birch, uneasily fingering the stud of his wing collar. 'I hardly think . . .'

'Of course I can see you!' said Gracie, beaming.

The ghosts were aghast. They turned to each other, bewildered, panicky.

'*Why?'*

'Is she a new one?'

'Is she one of us?'

but Gracie only hooted with laughter.

From somewhere in the dark recesses of the wings came a weary, wary *uh-oh* . . . Or perhaps it was just a very hollow laugh.