

JACQUELINE WILSON

Illustrated by Rachael Dean



**CAN TESS'S BIG
DREAM HELP TO
SAVE HER FAMILY?**

STAR OF THE SHOW

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OF THE
SHOW

The text is centered and surrounded by decorative elements. There are two roses with leaves on the left side, one above and one below the word 'STAR'. There are two roses with leaves on the right side, one above and one below the word 'SHOW'. Small teardrop-shaped accents are scattered around the text.

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OF THE
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For Vicky Ireland, with much love

This story is set one hundred and fifty years ago –
when Queen Victoria was on the throne.

Chapter One



It started pouring with rain and Tommy and little Ada began bawling their heads off.

‘Shh now. Look, I’ll give you my shawl. Huddle under that,’ I said, tucking it over them in their baby carriage. It wasn’t a proper perambulator. Our big brother, Connor, had fashioned a pram out of an orange box he’d filched from the market and four odd wheels he’d found in a dump. I pulled it along with a fraying piece of rope. It was quite heavy – Ada was only a little scrap but Tommy kept stuffing himself with bread and dripping and was turning into a right lump.

He carried on crying hard and Ada yelled along too.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake. *I’m* not crying,’ I said, though I



was certainly feeling like it. My frock was clinging to me, my feet were squelching in my old boots, and my hands were red raw with pulling the young ones around.

‘Poor little mites,’ said a woman scurrying home, holding her apron over her head. She looked at me reproachfully, as if I was deliberately soaking them.

I felt *I* was a poor little mite too. I glared at her resentfully. She tutted her tongue at me.

‘What would your ma say if she saw you giving me that look?’ she hissed.

I felt as if she’d stabbed me. I stuck my tongue out as far as it would go, and then ran like crazy, lugging the carriage along, scared she might give me a whack for cheek. I didn’t stop running until I was safe in Oak Tree Park, my favourite place in all of London.

The sudden run had stunned Tommy and Ada and they’d actually stopped shrieking, though their mouths were still hanging open. I leaned against one of the big oaks, my heart thumping. Each beat was like a word. *Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma!*

Ma died a few weeks after Ada was born. She’d lain in bed after the birth, getting weaker and whiter every day. Maggie



tried to get her to eat but she could only manage a spoonful of broth. She sponged her down and kept her decent but couldn't make her better. I ran for Mrs Marcy, the midwife, and had to pay her the lucky sixpence we kept in our best teapot, but all she did was shake her head.

'She's a goner,' she said, loud enough for Ma to hear.

Ma used up her last drop of energy telling Maggie she must scald the milk and add a teaspoon of sugar to Ada's bottle. Then she closed her eyes and we lined up to kiss her in age order: Maggie, Connor, me, Tommy. Maggie held Ada up so that her pursed lips brushed against Ma's thin cheek.

Pa didn't get a chance to kiss her. He was out drowning his sorrows at the Soldiers' Arms public house. We kept out of his way when he came staggering back, because he had a vile temper when he'd been drinking. I couldn't abide my pa.

I know they taught us at the Ragged School that we must Honour our Father and Mother. It was one of the Ten Commandments in the Bible. A man called Moses got this message straight from God. Perhaps it was wicked to think this, but I thought it depended what sort of father you had.

I loved Ma though. I loved her so much. I could never



decide who I loved most, Ma or my older brother, Connor. Then I loved Ada, because she was so small and helpless, though she had such a piercing scream. I loved my older sister, Maggie, too, but she was always bossing me around and telling me what to do. My younger brother, Tommy, came next to last. We were always fighting. I was very small for my age and he was a huge, hulking boy for *his* age, and he didn't fight fairly either. He sometimes won, which was very humiliating.

Pa came last, last, last.

I sank down to the big roots of the tree and sat down, though I knew I'd be soaking my frock. It was wet through already, so what did it matter? Tommy managed to free himself from his chariot, though I thought I'd tied him in tightly. He came over to me and peered right in my face.

'What's matter, Tess?' he asked. He said it as if he really cared, and I felt guilty for putting him so low down on my love list.

'I'm just missing Ma,' I mumbled.

'Me too,' said Tommy, looking sad. He sighed. 'She gave me raisins. Maggie won't!'

'Oh, Tommy, you're such a greedy-guts,' I said, poking him in his tummy.



‘Ma said I’m a growing boy. I’m going to grow and grow and grow, bigger than Pa. And I’ll beat him hard!’ said Tommy.

He wasn’t any good at honouring his father either, but it wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t old enough for the Ragged School yet.

Ma sent me, Maggie and Connor there because she wanted us to read and write, which she’d never learned to do. She hated it being called a *Ragged* School though.

‘I don’t let you out the house with a single tear in your clothes,’ she’d say indignantly. ‘You don’t have a hem hanging down anywhere and every button is in its place. We may be poor, but you look like little ladies and gentlemen.’

I didn’t think we did, especially not Tommy. He was forever ripping his jacket and wearing out the seat of his trousers, so that he was more patch than material, but Ma tried hard with him even so.

He was trying to scabble up the tree now, seams bursting all over the place because his jacket was much too small.

‘Get down, Tommy! You’re getting in a right state. Maggie will give you what for when we go home. You know she’s in a really bad mood.’

She’d carried on taking in washing after Ma died. She



wasn't as good at it as Ma, for all she pounded and scrubbed and swore. It had been raining on and off all day so she didn't have anywhere to hang it to dry. It had been dripping off the rack in the kitchen, and those clean sheets and nightshirts and petticoats had been too tempting for Tommy. He'd found a stick in the gutter outside and started whacking them wildly, pretending he was a general and they were enemy soldiers. The stick was dirty – and soon the washing was patterned with mud and grime.

When Maggie saw, she burst into tears. Then she snatched the stick from his fist, gave him a good shaking, and shoved him towards me.

'Take him out before I murder him. I'll have to wash them all over again and my hands hurt so,' she said. They were red raw already and did look very sore. I felt really sorry for her but then she started yelling at me too.

'What were you *doing*, Tess, when I was busy mangling? Why didn't you stop Tommy being so naughty?' she demanded, giving me a shake too.

'I was ... I was ...' I shrugged, pretending not to remember. '*I don't know!*'

'I know what you were blooming well doing! Prancing



around like a Pomeranian and looking twice as daft!’ said Maggie.

I felt my face flushing as red as her sore hands. She must have caught a glimpse of me in the living room. I’d pushed the stools out of the way and invented a special rain dance, waving my fingers like drops of rain, and rushing here and there like storm clouds. I felt inspired, as light and nimble as a fairy – not a wretched dog. Her words stung dreadfully.

‘Don’t you mock my dancing! You’re just jealous. Joe loves it when I dance to his music. He says I have a rare talent,’ I shouted at Maggie.

‘Joe the organ grinder!’ Maggie said scornfully. ‘And you’re the organ grinder’s monkey!’

Tommy started sniggering and calling me ‘Monkey, Monkey, Monkey’, and the noise woke Ada and she started wailing.

‘Oh, get out, you little beggars!’ Maggie cried. ‘Get them out, Tess, or I’ll put you through the mangle and flatten you!’

She was joking, of course, though she looked as if she’d like to do it.

‘It’s not fair! Why should *I* have to take charge of them?’ I said. ‘*I*m a little one too!’

Ma had always babied me because I’d been born too early



and she'd needed to nurse me night and day to keep me going. I'd never quite caught up. I was only four years younger than Maggie and yet I barely came up to her waist. I sometimes used to put on a baby voice too so that Ma or Connor would chuckle and pet me.

'Why should *I* be the one who has to do the washing and the cooking and everything else?' Maggie said, tears spurting down her cheeks.

I should have run to her then and said sorry, even offered to help her scrub the dirty washing over again – but she'd wounded me, mocking my dancing. Was she *right*? Did I really look a fool?

So I sat Tommy in the baby carriage, stuffed Ada in after him, and took them outdoors. I knew Maggie had meant me to take them out of the scullery, not out of the house, but I wanted to make a grand gesture.

I was a little worried now. It had been drizzling sullenly but now it was a steady downpour. It was chilly for late summer, and I was starting to shiver without my shawl. Tommy was as tough as his old boots, so he'd cope with a good soaking, but Ada was only little and very frail. I took her into my arms, wrapping her shawl round both of us. She wailed miserably,



a rasp to her voice now because she'd been crying so long. She kept turning her head, looking desperately for milk.

I'd left her bottle on the dresser at home – though she didn't always take much interest in it when I tried to poke it into her mouth. She badly wanted Ma too.

'Poor little Ada,' I said, rubbing my cheek against the damp fluff of her hair.

There had been other babies that were too weak to thrive. Ma had mourned them all. Sometimes she repeated their names under her breath and had a little weep. I hoped the Ragged School teacher was right and Ma would be up in Heaven now, with her lost babies in her arms.

'But don't you go and join them, Ada,' I said into her tiny ear. 'We need you here with us. I'm going to keep you safe and feed you up. You can have my share of the milk and when you get teeth you can have half my grub too. I'm going to be a good big sister to you, I promise.'

Ada carried on yelling, unimpressed. I tried joggling her up and down but it made no difference. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her mouth wide open, her whole tiny body quivering.

'Don't, Ada! Do stop! Oh, please, please, please!' I said, and I pranced around a bit to see if that made any difference.



She quietened for a couple of seconds out of surprise.

‘Oh, you like that, don’t you? Let’s do a proper dance. Would the little lady be my partner for a polka?’ I asked. ‘Yes please!’ I answered myself, in a little baby voice, though Ada herself didn’t look keen.

The polka was the easiest dance ever. Joe the organ grinder taught me. It was just *one, two, three, hop!* then *one, two, three, hop!* with the other leg, again and again, in time to the music. He liked me doing it, because I pointed my feet and held out my skirts prettily, so that folk stopped to watch and put a penny in his cap. He was kind and would give me a penny if his cap was nearly full, but I’d have danced even if he gave me nothing.

Little boys like Tommy jeered at me, but little girls tried to copy me, and grown-ups smiled and called me a ‘dainty little darling’. Not a single one said I looked like a performing Pomeranian.

I held Ada under her armpits and started polkaing with her. Her feet kicked in the air as if she was actually trying to join in.

‘That’s it, lovely!’ I said, dancing on.

Ma had always called me ‘lovely’, as if it was my actual name instead of plain Tess.





‘My little Lovely,’ she’d murmur.

She couldn’t say it now to Ada, but I vowed to say it to her myself from now on. We danced in and out of the trees together, not caring about the pouring rain, though a nosy old nurse in a large cape shook her head at us. She was scurrying along with a large perambulator.

‘Get that poor child out of the rain before she catches her death!’ she commanded.

I didn’t take any notice. She wasn’t *my* nurse so I didn’t have to do what she said. I felt sorry for rich children, always being bossed around by these cross women flitting about in their dark capes like giant bats.

Another was calling now, rushing around yelling, ‘Master Cedric! *Master Cedric Cedar*, it’s raining hard! We have to go home! You’ll get such a whipping when I find you!’

Master Cedric must’ve been sensibly hiding from her and I didn’t blame him. I could spot a boy hiding in the sodden bushes by the pond. He put his finger to his mouth and I nodded slightly and danced on. That nurse told me off too, but I didn’t care and neither did Ada, who at long last seemed happy. Her eyes were open and sparkling. Her mouth was open in a smiley way, and her pale cheeks were faintly pink now.



I'd made her happy! I was a proper little mother to her! I was better than the bat brigade of nurses in the park. I danced about, and Cedric cautiously climbed out of the bush and watched. When I grew breathless at last and stopped, Cedric clapped his hands together.

'You're jolly good at dancing!' he said.

'Am I?' I said. 'Am I really?'

'I'll say!'

'Well, you're jolly good at hiding, Master Cedric,' I said.

'How on earth do you know my name?' he asked, astonished.

'I have magic powers,' I said.

'Really?' He was acting as if he actually believed me.

'No, silly. I heard your nurse yelling for you,' I said. 'You're going to be in big trouble when she finds you.'

'No I'm not,' said Cedric, though he looked worried. 'I'm going to stay here in the park. I'm going to live by myself like Robinson Crusoe.'

'Who's Robinson Crusoe when he's at home?' I asked.

'You haven't read *Robinson Crusoe*?' said Cedric. 'Oh, you must, it's a splendid adventure book about being shipwrecked. Papa reads it to me when he comes to say goodnight.'



I imagined having a father who read me a story. Cedric and I clearly lived in two different worlds.

‘My pa don’t do stuff like that,’ I said shortly.

‘Well, you could read it for yourself then,’ said Cedric. ‘I’ll lend you the book when we’ve finished it, if you like.’

I couldn’t read very well myself because there were so many of us at the Ragged School and we mostly just chanted that ‘A is for Apple’ rhyme that didn’t really make sense. I’d had my turn at the class book but it didn’t tell any stories. It was just lists of silly names like *cat*, *fat*, *hat*, *mat*, *sat*, so it wasn’t really worth bothering to figure them out.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said to Cedric even so. I wasn’t going to admit my poor reading. It was highly unlikely Cedric would be allowed to lend a book to a girl like me anyway. And if he did, then maybe Connor might read it to me. He was so clever he could read newspapers.

Ada was fidgeting now, wanting to be joggled about again. My hands were aching from holding her, so I opened the bodice of my frock and tucked her inside. Her head stuck out comically, but she seemed to like it.

‘She looks so funny!’ said Cedric. ‘Like a baby kangaroo.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.



‘Oh, you know. That animal that lives in Australia. It runs about like this.’ Cedric dropped to his haunches and leaped about. He wasn’t very good at it and keeled over sideways into the sodden grass. Now he had big smears of mud over his cream breeches.

‘Oh Lordy!’ said Cedric, peering at them. ‘Nurse will be so cross!’

‘Well, you’re going to be living here now, so it won’t matter,’ I said.

Cedric was biting his lip anxiously. ‘I know, but actually I think I need to go home now. Mama and Papa would miss me so if I stayed here. But then, if I do go home, Nurse will punish me.’ He sighed heavily.

‘Does she beat you?’ I asked sympathetically.

‘No!’ he said. ‘But she gives me the slipper and sends me to bed without any supper.’

‘She sounds so mean,’ I said.

‘She sometimes gives me castor oil and that’s awful. She holds my nose when she spoons it in so I have to swallow it,’ said Cedric. ‘I don’t like her one bit. And she’s especially cross if I get my clothes dirty.’ He rubbed at the mud but that only smeared it further.



‘Tell you what,’ I said. ‘Maggie at home is good at washing. We could ask her to wash your breeches for you.’

‘But then they’d be wet,’ said Cedric.

‘They’re all wet already!’ I said.

‘So they are,’ said Cedric.

‘Come on then,’ I said.

‘Very well!’ he said, smiling.

It was only when we got to the park gates, Cedric and me and little Ada, that I remembered something. Tommy!