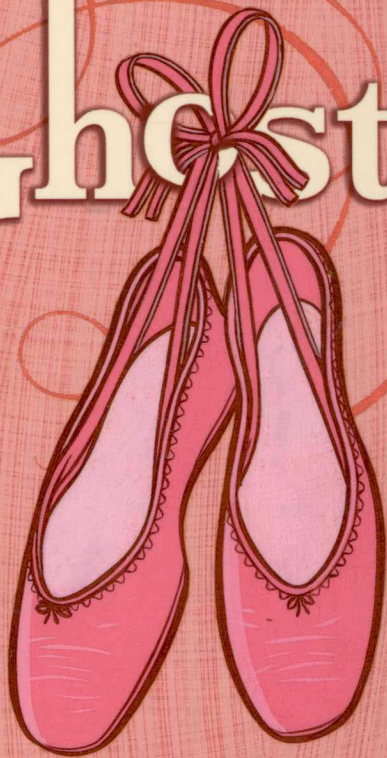


Harriet's Ghost



Bridget Crowley

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First published in Great Britain in 2005
by Hodder Children's Books

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A Catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 0 340 88156 9

Typeset in Palatino by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

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

The paper and board used in this paperback by
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The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental
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Hodder Children's Books
A division of Hodder Headline Limited
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

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Chapter 1

'I ate my feet!'

Harriet took a moment to work out what Marianne meant. Marianne was sitting on the floor in the big, airy studio, stretching her feet back and forth doing 'good toes, naughty toes', regarding them in the huge mirror with a fercious frown. Light suddenly dawned on Harriet. 'Hate!' She meant 'hate', not 'ate'. Even though they'd been friends for two years now, Harriet still found Marianne's accent confusing sometimes. Her English wasn't bad but she couldn't manage 'w's and 'th's, and 'h's were non-existent.

'There's nothing wrong with your feet,' said Harriet. 'I keep telling you. There's nothing wrong with you at all.'

She gave an inaudible sigh and avoided looking at herself, twizzling round on her bottom away from the mirror to make sure. Mirrors, mirrors, all around.

She sat hugging her knees, her shoulders slumped. Why did it have to matter what shape you were, as long as you could dance?

‘But look at *your* feet, ‘Arry.’

Harriet looked down at them. They were the best thing about her: high insteps, strong arches, good workaday feet for a dancer. But when she looked at Marianne: tiny, slim, long legs, neck like a – a swan, there was no other word for it. And her feet were good enough for anyone except herself. Harriet gave another sigh.

‘There is nothing wrong with your feet, Marianne,’ she said again, emphasizing each word. ‘Nothing wrong at all with any bit of you.’

Like almost everyone in the school, Marianne never stopped worrying about what she looked like, but since the assessments three weeks ago, Harriet suddenly realized, she seemed to have got worse. Marianne gave a French kind of shrug and pouted a bit. Then she smiled.

‘Oh ‘Arry, always you say the right thing.’

She leapt up and spun round in front of the mirror, landed in a perfect fifth position and examined herself in the mirror, turning her head, poking and prodding at bits of herself, rising and lowering on the offending feet, the instep not exactly bulging but

more than enough for most people. Most dancers. The frown returned as she began to experiment with her turn out.

The studio door banged open and Gareth strode in, his ballet bag hoiked over one shoulder.

'Ullo, 'Arry,' he said with a grin, mimicking Marianne's accent. He hopped over Harriet's legs, dumped his bag in the corner, levered off his trainers toe to heel, tied his sweatshirt round his waist and flopped down beside her to put on his soft-shoes. But all the while, Harriet noticed without surprise, he didn't take his eyes off Marianne.

'Bonjour, toi,' he called out to her.

Marianne chasséed out of the classiest arabesque Harriet had seen in a long while and came over to him, her pointe shoes making her waddle with her weight back on her heels. She placed a hand on his shoulder and kissed the air on either side of his cheeks, dipping forward and tossing up a nonchalant leg vertically behind her.

'Ga-a-arete,' she said in a singsong voice, and returned to surveying herself critically in the mirror, her fluffy white practice tutu sticking out round her, making her legs look even longer. 'I lo-o-ve pas de deux class. Pas de deux,' she hummed to herself, 'is best.'

She swung into a spectacular pirouette. Gareth looked at Harriet.

‘What *shall* we do with her?’ he said with a grin.

‘Nothing, *Garrette*,’ said Harriet. ‘She’ll do very well for herself, without us doing anything.’

‘True,’ said Gareth, with a glum little nod, ‘but it would be nice to be noticed once in a while.’

‘Nutter!’ said Harriet. ‘Of course she notices. You know she does. She’s just – just – well, if you’re going to dance you’ve got to be single-minded, you know that. And she’s single-minded.’

‘Hmm,’ said Gareth. ‘I sometimes think I’m just good for being her pas de deux partner. Marianne’s crane,’ he said, sticking up an arm above his head with a rueful shrug.

Harriet laughed. ‘Oh, go on,’ she said. ‘You know it’s not like that. It’s just that she knows what she wants and works for it. She’s got her priorities right, I suppose you could say.’

Gareth gave her knee a friendly pat. ‘And you don’t? Come on, Harry.’

‘Look,’ said Harriet, keeping her voice low, ‘we all know where she’s going. To the top . . . to the very, very top. You just have to watch her for five minutes and you know.’

‘Yep,’ said Gareth with a smile that managed to

look proud of Marianne and a little sad all at the same time. 'She'll be up there with the greats, you're right. And then ...'

'And then you'll be up there with her, Gareth. You will. You won't get left behind. They as good as told you that at the assessments.' Gareth gave a modest shrug. Harriet hesitated. 'But me ... well ...'

Harriet's tone made Gareth suddenly look concerned.

'What do you mean? You're a *very* good dancer, Harry.'

'Mmm. But not quite good enough.'

'Plenty good enough. You're strong and quick – punchy, and you can jump like ...'

'But not quite the right – the right *shape*. Short and squat, me.'

'No, you're not.'

'Yes, I am. Well, compared with some.' She nodded in the direction of Marianne, but with no malice in her glance. 'Anyway ... it appears I'm not "company material".' She made a face, rolling her eyes, and lowered her head on to her knees for a moment. 'I kind of knew ages ago really, but after the assessment ...'

Gareth burst out: 'Is that what they told you? And you've been keeping it to yourself all this time? I hate

those assessments. They do more harm than good, if you ask me.'

'No. They tell it how it is, Gareth.'

'But—'

'But nothing. Honest. They just made it clear.' She made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. '“You're a capable dancer, Harriet my dear, a little shall-we-say overenthusiastic at times perhaps, but just not quite what we are looking for *physically*, you understand, so . . .” Anyway, I only have to look in the mirror . . .'

'You're not going to give up?'

'“Course not. And I haven't got to leave or anything. I mean, I can finish the training but then . . .'

'Oh, Harry, that's – that's just . . .'

'There's other things to do but join this company, Gareth – let's face it, who wants to be thirty-sixth swan for ever? Not likely.'

Quite what those other things might be, she wasn't sure yet, but she was equally sure that she would find out somehow. Gareth looked at her, a troubled frown on his face, his hand, absent-mindedly, still on her knee. She lifted it off, plonked it down on his own and scrambled to her feet as Miss McGregor came in with the pianist. Gareth

glanced over at Marianne and Harriet noticed his face soften.

The students moved to the barre, adjusting garments, flexing muscles. Harriet went over to where Marianne had already chosen her spot, one leg up round her ear somewhere. Harriet grinned at her, shook her head and, leaning forward, both hands on the barre, stretched the back of each leg alternately, bouncing gently up and down. She pushed the practice tutu down firmly over her hips and eased herself into second position for the first plié. The pianist settled himself and ran his fingers quickly up and down the keyboard, as Miss McGregor gave a brief smile round the room, clicked her fingers '... and two, and three, and four, and ...' The class began.

Afterwards, Harriet's partner, Will, wanted to practise a lift that had gone wrong. Gareth followed Marianne out of the studio. By the time Harriet got to the canteen, they were sitting together at a table. In front of him, Gareth had a sandwich and a cup of tea, two Mars bars and a packet of crisps. Marianne, pointe shoes on the table, was sipping at a Diet Coke. Harriet fetched an egg salad and a yoghurt from the bar and went to sit with a group of other girls, but Marianne called her over.

‘ ‘Arry! Where are you going?’

‘Thought you might want to be alone,’ said Harriet with a grin, looking at Gareth. He shoved out a chair for her to sit next to him.

‘Don’t be daft,’ he said with a slight frown, looking at Marianne under his eyebrows. Marianne paid no attention but went on sipping her Coke, stirring the straw round in the neck of the bottle. She looked up at Harriet.

‘You get it right, ‘Arry?’

‘What? Oh, the lift you mean. Well, sort of. I expect it’s my fault, but I can’t quite see why it doesn’t work really properly yet. Will’s a hero anyway, taking me on.’

She dug into the salad, spearing a tomato and demolishing it. Marianne reached over, extracted a bit of lettuce and started to nibble.

‘Help yourself,’ said Harriet, pushing the plate a bit nearer Marianne, but Marianne shook her head and wriggled back in her seat.

‘What do you mean, Will’s a hero?’ said Gareth.

‘Well . . . lumping me round like he does,’ said Harriet, cutting the egg and embellishing it with mayonnaise. ‘Like carting round a sack of potatoes.’

‘Oh, come on, Harry, anyone would think you weighed a tonne.’

'Not far off,' said Harriet cheerfully, avoiding his eyes.

'Well, I can lift you, easy.'

'Yeah? Anyway, it doesn't matter any more. No *Rose Adagio* for me, mateys. I'm just sorry for Will, that's all, while I'm still here.'

Marianne sat forward. 'What? I don't understand. Why do you say that?'

Gareth sighed. 'Harry's got the idea she's not going to dance.'

Marianne looked horrified. 'But . . .'

'That's not what I said at all,' said Harriet, polishing off the mayonnaise with a bit of roll. 'I said not with the company, that's all. There are other places, you know. Places where you don't have to be just the right height, just the right shape, just the right – I don't know – right everything . . . Where you don't have to starve to death to . . .' She gave a quick look at Marianne but there was no reaction. She tore the lid off the yoghurt, shifted Marianne's shoes and the Mars bars, hunting about on the table, then stood up and bounced across the canteen to fetch a spoon.

'Oops,' said Gareth.

'She is upset,' said Marianne.

'Just a bit, you could say.'

'But she wants to dance. She cannot give up, Garette, non.'

'They've told her she won't get into the company. Last assessment. She just told me. I didn't know. Did you?'

Marianne frowned, looked round at Harriet and shook her head. 'She did not tell me . . .'

'Nor me. She's kept it to herself—' Gareth stopped suddenly as Harriet returned, hooked the seat underneath her with her foot and sat down. She dug the spoon into the yoghurt.

'Mmm,' she said, sucking the spoon vigorously, 'not bad, but just think – if you didn't have to watch it all the time, you could have ice cream, and banana and custard and – and . . .'

'Mars bars?' said Gareth, pushing one towards her.

Harriet put out her hand, then drew it back with a rueful smile.

'Not yet,' she said, 'give me time. I'm not used to the idea yet. I've lived on a diet for two whole years. And let's face it, I'll always have to be careful, I suppose, no matter what I do. Careful. Sensible. What a life.'

'You wouldn't swap it, you know you wouldn't,' said Gareth and she laughed.

'Maybe not,' she said, 'we'll have to see.'

'Crème brûlée,' said Marianne suddenly, with a faraway look in her eyes.

Gareth laughed. 'Can't oblige with that,' he said. 'Here, you have the Mars bar.'

'Non, non, non,' said Marianne, waving her hands and shaking her head frantically, 'mustn't even think – chocolate . . . no. I can feel my 'ips growing just looking at it.'

Gareth laughed again, but bit his lip.

'You can finish my yoghurt if you like,' said Harriet. 'That won't hurt you.' She gave Marianne another quick look from the corner of her eye.

Marianne peered into the little pot, ran a finger round the edge and put it in her mouth. For a moment or two, she chewed on it. Eyes wide, she peered in again, looked up at Harriet and said, 'Doesn't count, does it, if it is someone else's?'

She went to put in her finger again but snatched it away looking guilty, picked up her things hastily, stuffed her shoes into her bag and stood up.

'See you later,' she said. 'Repertoire, 'alf past four?'

Kissing the air towards each of them, she clattered across the canteen in her clogs and disappeared through the door.

Harriet scratched her head. 'Now you see her, now

you don't,' she said. 'Comes of being a Swan Queen in the making, I suppose.'

'Yup,' said Gareth. 'I suppose you're right.' He hesitated, fiddling about with his empty sandwich carton. 'Harry . . .' he said, looking up at her quickly then looking away again. 'Do you . . . I mean, do you ever see her eat? I mean, actually eat?'

Harriet sighed. 'No, I don't, well – herb tea, black coffee, Diet Coke . . . But, Gareth, she must eat some time. She's got the strength of an ox for all she's so – so skinny. That's got to come from somewhere. Oh, she's so lucky. I think she could eat a herd of horses – chocolate ones – and never put on an ounce. And here's me been dieting ever since I got here and look at me . . .'

'I'm looking and you're fine. And you don't starve, you eat – sensibly. But Marianne . . . Look, Harry, I know dieting's a habit round here, even a couple of the boys are at it, but . . .'

'Yes, I know, there's dieting and – and dieting. I had noticed, Gareth, but I suppose I just hoped it wasn't happening. What do you think we should do?'

But before Gareth could answer, there was a noise in the corridor, upraised voices, scuffling. Gareth jumped up and swore under his breath.

'If that's Jessica again, I'll . . .'

The door opened and Jessica stormed in. Heads turned and looked up at her as she hitched up her leotard strap over her shoulder and shook herself.

'What's up, Jess?' said a voice, with what might have been a suppressed laugh.

'Nothing,' she said, making an effort to breathe evenly. 'Nothing I can't handle.'

'I'll bet,' said the voice, and a giggle ran round the room. Jessica joined a group at a far table, and immediately, two or three immaculately groomed heads drew together in sympathy with the still scarlet-faced girl.

Just then, Will barged in, letting the doors swing behind him. He stuck out his bottom to stop them, launched into a series of chassés pas de bourrés across the room, ending with a slide on to Harriet's table. He ran his fingers through his dark curls – highlighted today with pink – spiking them up into a quiff.

'Was that Jessica having a go at Marianne out there?' said Gareth.

Will nodded, casting his eyes at the ceiling with a theatrical sigh.

'They had a bit of a *do* in the corridor. One of Jessica's mates put her up to it, I think, but you know

what Marianne is . . . she won't let go once the bit's between her teeth. Grrr!' He bared his own teeth and shook his head, crooking up his fingers like claws.

'Huh,' said Gareth. 'Why can't they just leave her alone?'

'You know why not,' said Will. 'Because lousy Jessica was the Big Fromage before Marianne came and she can't handle it.'

'But they're so different,' said Gareth. 'I can't see why Jessica doesn't realize there's room for both of them.'

Harriet couldn't either, but the place was full of petty rivalry and bitching. One minute you had a best friend, the next you didn't – though at least she and Marianne had lasted. But Jessica was a prize freak when it came to being jealous and she'd say anything to Marianne to upset her.

'She's in training for Queen of the Wilis, she is,' said Will with a pert nod towards Jessica. 'Beaky nose, pointy fingernails, purple lippie and all.' He pouted, making a juicy kissing sound with his lips. 'Bet she'll do Queen of the Wilis one day. Superbaddie in *Giselle* bossing all those poor wimpy little maidens – she's made for it.'

He pulled himself up on to the half pointe in a tight, tight fifth position, twirling round in a circle