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ROBERT GRAVES

FLESH-COLOURED NET TIGHTS

DEAREST AUNT MAY,

I must at last explain that long telegram I sent you from Olga, who's my ballet teacher, asking for all those pairs of flesh-coloured net tights to be put on the B.E.A. plane. I hope you didn't think that they were for the Dolorous Nuns to wear themselves. It is a story rather like the 'Belle of the Ballet' serial in Girl, though nobody gets kidnapped or locked into a spidery cellar. Olga's a Polish refugiada, who escaped from the Russians to Sadler's Wells in England and said: 'I'm a prima ballerina from Warsaw. Please, can I have a job?' So they gave her a scrubbing-brush and a pail. Olga scrubbed floors for ages, but three years ago she escaped from the English to Majorca. The Governor allowed her to start a school for Classical Ballet here, because his wife had seen Moira Shearer's Red Shoes and thought that it was very artistic and in good taste; but Brunhilda Schwarzfuss, the German lady who has a Tanzgruppe here, wasn't at all pleased by the news.

Brunhilda is square and bouncy and wears a sort of deerstalker hat. She waves her drumstick and shouts: 'Now, niñas, I'll put on the gramophone today and you'll all be little horses galloping along the sands and suddenly putting your heads down and kicking up your heels. Bang, bang, bang! Off you run! Muy bien! Muy bien!' After two goes of that, she changes the record and they play at being soldiers, or else rabbits. Then the bigger girls express their emotions in dances they invent themselves, which means waggling their arms and tossing their heads back and giving a few backward kicks, or pretending to be terribly afraid of something and push it off without looking at it. Or they play at shepherdesses and fawns. The shepherdesses are the neat girls; the fauns are the clumsy ones, whose mothers have asked Brunhilda to run some of the fat off them and make them easier to marry. The shepherdesses waltz around and the fauns jump after them and pretend to blow pipes. It is all rather awful, because they don't learn a single one of the 120 basic positions of ballet, and the windows are tight shut to prevent draughts and most of the girls are afraid of the cold showers afterwards and rub themselves with Majorcan eau de Cologne instead.

Last year Olga married an American called Bill, the nice poor sort of American. He is a composer and was a trumpeter. But he sold his trumpet to marry Olga and had to teach English for a living instead. Bill said to Olga: 'We must advertise if we want this school to pay. The best way is to put on a good show at the Plaza.' Olga said: 'Oh, no, Bill, my girls aren't ready. After only three years I should be ashamed.' Bill said: 'Nonsense, nobody here will know the difference, and the girls will get experience. Let's do Glasnov's Four Seasons and aim for early April.'

How Olga worked us! We almost hated her sometimes, though she's so sweet really, because we had to go straight from our various convents to ballet class and never had time for a sit-down supper and came home nearly dead at about ten o'clock. But the Nuns thought that dancing was idleness, and made us work dreadfully hard at Visigothic Kings and Principal Exports of Spain and The Properties of Solid Bodies, to show we were industrious. We had to get 'Outstanding' on our weekly reports instead of just 'Approved'. And Sor Juana one day reprobated me for practising ballet steps in the playground and called me presumptuous; but I said I was just cold. And she said: 'Don't answer back, my daughter. You ought to bear the cold bravely!' Well, that afternoon we found a hot-water bottle lying about in a corner of the playground. It must have fallen from under Sor Juana's skirts; so my companions chose me to give it back to her, which I did very politely without a word.

I'm at the Sacred Tunics, but the Little Flowers who have a big new convent down the road pay Brunhilda to give their girls dancing lessons. Of course, I don't really know who had said what; only it's certain that the Mother Superior of the Little Flowers took aside all the girls who go to Olga's and warned them that she was of doubtful antecedents and that, if they took part in the public performance of the Four Seasons, they'd all get zero on their term's report. Luckily one of the girls was the daughter of the man who fabricated the convent beds and tables and chairs and things. They are six months behindhand with paying. So she went crying to her father and said: 'Father, will you let them insult Olga? After you and Mother, she's the best person in Majorca.' And he answered: 'Enough, child, I'll tell them things.' So he did, and after that the Little Flowers even let the girls go off early to rehearsals.

Bill hired the Plaza Theatre for April 1st and taught the orchestra the Four Seasons music. It had taken him weeks to prepare it for the right number of instruments and copy out the parts. Then about New Year we read an 'interviu' in the Prensa Palmesana in which Brunhilda said that Classical Ballet was very bad for the legs and very monotonous and already going out of fashion, and that she would put on a performance in the Plaza early in March with all her Tanzgruppe pupils. When the man from the Prensa asked what would she show, she answered: 'The Four Seasons, danced with all naturalness and liberty of expression.'

One of Olga's girls is the niece of the man who has a mortgage on the Plaza Theatre, and she went crying to her father and said: 'Father, will you let them insult Olga? After you and Mother she's the best person in Majorca.' And he answered: 'Enough, child, we'll tell them things, the insects.' So next day his brother made the theatre owner warn Brunhilda that the Plaza would probably be out of action all March because it was to be altered for 3-D. So that was all right. Then suddenly the convent of Dolorous Nuns started giving Olga's pupils zero even if they were top of the class. I found out from the bus-man who collects the Dolorous daygirls from the other side of Palma that someone had told terrible lies about Olga's being a Protestant and in love with the

theatre-owner. But Olga's confessor happened to be the Dolorous Nuns' confessor too, so he told them things. Don't think that our Majorcan nuns aren't good people. They are terribly good; but the trouble is they just don't like Classical Ballet.

Meanwhile Brunhilda and Carmen Carabel the flamenco teacher had made a sort of alliance against the Ballet School. Carmen teaches American lady tourists to manage castanets and stamp their heels and chew roses and make proud gipsy faces full of hate, so as to win fancy-dress prizes when they get home. And her father, who owns a night club, is a great friend of the Millionairess, whose husband owns the Prensa. That was why the Prensa had printed Brunhilda's 'interviu'. The Millionaire allows the Millionairess to censor the art and music and literature pages, to keep her out of mischief. He censors the news and the sports, to keep himself out of mischief.

Anyhow, two days before the show the Dolorous Nuns and the Little Flowers and my own Sacred Tunics said that all the girls over twelve years old would be expelled if they danced bare-legged on the stage. That was when we telegraphed you for the tights, which can't be bought here. You were splendid, Aunt May! They arrived five hours before the performance, but it was a public holiday with the customs office shut. The chief customs man happened to be the father of one of our Rain Fairies and a very kind man. He opened the office and wrote something in the book. Then he handed Olga the tights and said: 'This is now tomorrow; the duty is fifty-four pesetas sixty céntimos. Pay me when you like.'

It was simply a marvellous show. Olga danced herself, and Bill borrowed a dress suit and conducted wildly and we all got encores and flowers and everyone said nobody would have believed Palma could produce anything so memorable and artistic. But of course there wasn't a single word about it in the Prensa Palmesana next day, although their photographer had been photographing like mad and Señor Colom the music critic congratulated Olga afterwards on our great and genial display. Luckily the Admiral's niece, who is also the Governor's goddaughter, was one of our Dead-Leaf fairies. She went crying to the Governor -- you can guess the rest -- and next day we found a whole page of photographs in the Prensa.

That's all, really, except for Brunhilda's show ten days later. It wasn't Glasnov's Four Seasons at all, but a lot of potty little dances, done to German music, with Snowflakes and Bunnies jumping about to a gramophone which had a loudspeaker in front of it. And then these Bailes Creativos by the bigger girls! And the shepherdesses and fauns! And the joke was, their legs were as bare as on the beach!

Olga took us all to watch and we clapped until our hands were sore, it was so terrible. And now a cathedral canon has written a long article in the Semana Católica, about the proclivious immorality of dancing; which means Brunhilda too. I don't know how this serial will continue.

Much love and thanks,

Margaret.