

An excerpt from *The Little Shadows*, by Marina Endicott

Gentry Fox was the shortest man Clover had ever seen, shorter than she was by far. As if someone had pressed down on the head of a normal man, but some time ago, so he'd had time to get used to it.

· *They do a royal tea* ·

He had to look up, even at Bella, which he did with a sideways glint. 'What—have—we—here?' he asked, his voice both gravelled and silky.

The girls stood in a line, not sure whether to proceed. He waved a hand, beckoning them to the stage, and they went stiffly down the raked aisle, not entirely sure of their footing in the thicker darkness of the auditorium. Mama patted Clover, who moved aside to let her through. She took two steps and stopped, perhaps afraid, Clover thought.

But no. She had paused only to make a better entrance. Mr Fox looked up, inquiring, when she did not speak—then, looking again, gave Mama a very warm, familiar smile. He laughed and bowed, and bowed again, coming forward as he bent and rose and bent.

'Oh, my dear sir, you may recall that I have had the distinct pleasure of making your acquaintance before,' Mama said to the little bowing man. Bowing now herself.

'But of course, of *course* I recall,' Mr Fox said, murmuring and mincing. 'With the *greatest*, my dear Flora, the greatest of pleasure.'

Pleasure, pleasure. They were nodding dolls, bowing and rebowing. Clover felt Aurora pull her close, then slide an arm behind to pull Bella into place.

'And these?'

'Oh, *these!* My dear Mr Fox! You see before you—my daughters.'

Dark eyes gleamed in his dark rumpled face, turning from one girl to the next. His squashed neck was supple, owl-like. Inspecting Aurora. Then Clover, Bella. And back to Mama.

'They are jewels,' he said with great simplicity. 'They sing? They dance?'

'They do!' Mama clapped her hands because he was so clever. 'May we?'

'Will you? Will they? Johnny Drawbank! Clear those hands away, if you will.

Lights!'

This was a much bigger stage, a much bigger theatre. Not a jewel box like the Empress; the floorboards not as clean beneath the dirty chairs, and the stage not clean either.

Deep, though, and high—four long curtain legs before the backdrop. Clover thought doing it in one here would be a pleasure, because the stage bowed outwards and left an acre of room in front of the great red curtain (its ragged bottom dragging on the boards, gold bobble-trim gappy and dimmed).

Worklights shone on the piano, and on the stage. As Mama and the girls climbed the moveable gangplank over the orchestra pit, on came the footlights, the gas flaring gently, and the stage became welcoming.

‘We’ll start with an old song,’ Mama said, twinkling down at Mr Fox. ‘*After the Ball*,’ she murmured to the girls, and sat herself at the piano gracefully. Her little hands raised themselves over the keys, and paused, and then were off, playing with unusual care and a rippling dash—the conservatory glass, the palms, the tinkling waltz heard from a distance... They told the sentimental story plain, the way she had taught them, not as a tired tale but as if this were their Uncle Chum explaining his bachelor life to them. None of the girls could remember meeting him, but they all had affection for him, from this imaginary memory. It made Clover believe that Mama must have a soft spot for Chum too, after all.

*...oh Uncle, please.  
Why are you single; why live alone?  
Have you no babies; have you no home?  
I had a sweetheart, years, years ago;  
Where she is now, pet, you will soon know.  
List to the story, I'll tell it all,  
I believed her faithless after the ball.*

Watching the girl he loved being kissed, standing empty-hearted with two glasses of punch in his hands... How plaintive the old man became, and what a small, stupid thing to ruin someone’s life: ‘*he was her brother!*’ Then they were into the chorus again, waltzing in place to prove they could do it in one:

*Many the hopes that have vanished  
After the ball.*

Mama ended with a fading chord, well in keeping with the natural delivery of the song, and left a dainty hand poised in air for a moment as the girls bowed. Then she twirled on the piano stool, face out to the audience, to Gentry Fox. He rose from his seat in the front row with a hearty ‘Bravo!’ clapping his hands delightedly.

Coming forward to the stage, he stretched out a hand to Mama as if he could reach hers, which not even a tall man could have, and she reached down to him without moving from the stool.

‘Lovely, lovely girls! *Lovely* to hear that old song again, so freshly rendered! And how well I recall you, my dear Flora—at the Hippodrome, was it not?—with that little number.’

‘Oh, Gentry, a hundred years ago,’ Mama said, blushing and bobbing. Bella laughed too, to see her so pleased. Clover looked at Mr Fox with attention: a living clue to Mama’s old life. But beside her she could feel Aurora waiting, tense, and her own confidence drained away.

‘Now you must let me give you some lunch,’ Gentry said, taking out a card case. ‘Hand my card to the girl at the Grandon Hotel, they do a royal tea there... and thank you for warming an old man’s heart. You are visiting in the neighbourhood? With family?’

Mama got up from the piano, her face fallen into a polite parody of her earlier happiness. ‘You have no work for my girls, then, Gentry?’ she asked—her voice sad, but her face remaining cheerful.

‘My dear Flora, they are young and charming, and I am inundated with acts. Between you and me and your eighteen best friends, this is a poor place I find myself. We have only seven on the bill—all but continuous, you know—three shows a day, a hardscrabble life.’

‘But what a training ground!’ Mama said lightly—still working, still arguing, however her words might be disguised as chat.

‘But such delicately reared girls, my dear Flora, could not be expected to— And my bill is full for this and *several* weeks to come.’

‘But I see you lack a closer,’ Mama said. Her last effort.

‘Oh, as to that, I use the pictures as a closer. Nothing beats a very old pictograph for encouraging an audience’s hearts for home.’

‘I bet we could chase them better, if we’re so bad!’ Bella called over the footlights at him, laughing at her own audacity.

Clover pinched her quickly, but Gentry laughed too, darting a sharp look at Bella’s cheeky, lively face. But he still held out the calling card. Lunch, not life.

• *Gentry Fox* •

‘Well thank you, Gentry, for seeing us. It was a piece of old times to find you here,’ Flora said, folding her music as if they hadn’t a care in the world, as if they were, in fact, visiting family and perfectly easy. As if they hadn’t spent twenty-three dollars on train fare.

She and Aurora looked at each other, and she lifted her chin and smiled. ‘Off we go, then,’ she said. ‘But we had better return to our friends for luncheon, thank you all the same.’

Aurora lighted down on the first step, lifting her skirt delicately over her tight-laced new boot. The second step, the second boot (and above it, a stretch of smooth white stocking). The third step, the fourth. ‘But Mama,’ she said, smiling into Gentry’s upturned face. ‘I think *I’d* like some tea.’

He held out his hand with the card again, and she took it, and then his arm, for help in navigating the last steps.

‘Thank you, Mr Fox,’ Aurora said. She stopped to pull on her elegant mauve kid gloves. ‘And will you come with us? My sisters and I would love to hear how you and Mama come to know each other so well; how you come to be in this theatre, and what wonders you are working in this out-of-the-way place—we see your dodgers all over town!’

Gentry blinked, but resisted, even though her eyes were so clear, their colour shifting from blue to green, a dark line around the iris. Beautiful, yes. The curve of her clear warm cheek and jaw ran enticingly into the hidden reaches of the neck, under that glossy pile of bright, ruly-unruly hair.

‘Alas, no, I shall be engaged all afternoon with wretched business,’ he told her sadly.

Aurora gave him a beautiful smile, exchanged his arm for her sister’s, and walked up the raked aisle. The tiny waist of her jacket remained steady; below it the skirt swayed, its length tantalizing along the ground in an eddy of dust. The youngest one, the filly, hopped off the last step and sparkled at him, then dashed after the elder two.

‘Look at her, the darling! All legs and heels and promise,’ he said to Flora, before he could check himself. ‘But I am sentimentalizing. Time to retire to the country!’

Flora took the steps without assistance, pulling on her own gloves, her music in its leather case beneath her arm, and bowed to Gentry. He looked at her soft face, brown curls at her brow. Still pretty as paint, even softened into middle age. A loving heart, if a silly one.

She stepped down onto the floor, not wanting to tower above him more than she could help—for his sake as well as her own. A stroke of luck to have found him here. It could not be wasted.

‘Gentry,’ she said, then drew a breath in. ‘I wonder—I’ve done my best with my dear girls, but they need polish, of course. I wonder if you would consider taking them on for a few weeks, for nothing—well, or for just the usual travelling expenses, alone—to gain experience, to be introduced to the profession.’

She had caught his attention. Either his pockets were to let, or his native stinginess was stirring. How much this would cost her, coming and going, she thought she knew.

‘I’m sure we could go farther afield and find paid work, but it’s you, the association with someone of your calibre! I know very well how much good you did me, all those years ago, and I wish that same good for my girls. Can you find it in your heart to blame me?’

‘The thing is, Flora,’ he said, not unkindly, ‘your dainty girls are too refined for this place—it would be cruel. They are not—’

‘They *are*. I promise you. They are better by far than I.’ Her urgency led her to put a hand on his arm. A small hand in a black cloth glove, it vanished on his black sleeve.

‘Gentry, for old times’ sake—I beg you.’

After a moment, he bowed one last time. ‘Madam, that plea is impossible to refuse. Not today. But bring them here at nine tomorrow, and I will see what can be done.’

She found it hard to look at him, after putting herself so low before him, but busied herself with her music case.

He gestured towards it: ‘Have you a lobby photograph for the girls there?’ He saw from her face that they had none. ‘After your lunch go to Leroy’s studio on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They will not overcharge you.’

As Flora went up the aisle, he called after her. ‘What happened to your schoolmaster?’

‘Oh—’ She shrugged and almost smiled. ‘Oh, he died.’ She nodded, and went through the bright doorway.