

An excerpt from  
THE LITTLE SHADOWS, Marina Endicott  
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*In 1912, Aurora and her young sisters Clover and Bella (who is 13, but pretending to be 16) entered vaudeville as the sister-trio-harmony act, the Belle Auroras. By February, 1913, they have arrived at a theatre in Butte, Montana, touring for the first time without their mother.*

The dressing rooms were shining clean, bright with mirrors. At one side a darling stove puffed heat into the room. Bella held her boots toward it one at a time to admire their gleam in the rows of electric bulbs. The first time they'd had electric lights in a dressing room, too. This was the fanciest place.

Aurora had checked the playbill and there were no other females on it—only Sybil, who had a dressing room of her own with Julius—so she let Bella pick the best spot for their table and set out their things, with a place for Clover between them. Clover is the best friend of each of us, Bella thought, she is always between us. But she loved Aurora too. In some ways she and Aurora were the most alike. Clover was the sweetest, though.

A thousand thousand Bellas found the ranked mirrors entrancing. Their placement round the room showed her herself as a regiment of girls, all those shards and ghosts dainty and slim and ready to dance. The Parthenon's old mirrors were not so flattering.

A tap on the door—and two heads poked around it, like another doubling mirror.

'Mr East and Mr Verrall!' Bella exclaimed, happy to see old friends.

'Oh, we will not intrude,' Verrall was saying, as East burst through his arm and into the room, to give each of the sisters a warm and slightly over-personal embrace.

Verrall flapped an envelope in his long fingers. Not entirely clean, Aurora saw, after their railway journey, but neither must hers be.

'We were charged with, given, we—'

East snatched the letter from him. 'Jimmy the Bat got us to bring this,' he said, rolling his eyes at Verrall's politesse. 'Not knowing what hotel you would be putting up at, and do you know yourselves?'

'I believe we are at Mrs. Seward's,' Aurora said. 'It is only a boarding house.'

'We will call it an hotel,' Verrall declared. 'We are there too.'

'Mrs. Seward's is the only place to stay in Butte,' East announced, sunk in gloom.

'Fine testimonial,' Verrall said. 'Not a paid endorsement.'

'We are thinking about hotels, because our present routine, that we are breaking in on this western swing, is hotelly.'

'It has a hotellishness about it,' Verrall agreed.

‘A dark, hellish hotellishness.’

‘So Miss Bella, we were wondering if you could be purr-suaded—’

‘We need, we have need, we are in need of, a good little girl...’

‘...to hotel for us tonight?’

No matter how they talked over each other you could always hear each one, Bella noticed. East was the funniest. Or maybe Verrall, with his sad eyes and bluish teeth.

‘We would add to your consequence the amount of one silver dollar.’ Verrall flourished the coin as if it was a king’s ransom.

‘Per diem,’ East put in hastily. ‘Not per showem.’

‘To help you in your act?’ Bella was astonished.

‘That very thing. You would have one or two lines, just old hocus, but would carry the day, and could wear whatever pretty little frock you’ve been singing in, without a change to trouble you.’

Aurora said, before Bella could agree, ‘We’d have to see the lines. There cannot be any suggestive nonsense.’ She felt herself to be Mama while they were here, and was determined to look after their reputation as delicate girls.

‘What, none?’

‘No, no, East!’ Verrall said. ‘None of the kind, nothing, no. Only a sweet girl receptionist, a little stupid.’

‘A very stupid, but such a pretty little hen!’ said East, chucking Bella under the chin, almost kissing her, but somehow managing to make Aurora smile with it.

Bella spun round, her skirt wheeling. ‘Oh yes, yes, yes, please!’ she cried.

While East and Verrall set about coaching Bella, Aurora read the letter they’d brought her:

*Dear Miss Aurora,*

*Verrall has promised to take this letter with him, as he believes that you and your sisters are performing now with Gentry Fox’s company—Mr Fox is known all over by reputation and have heard all good things about him, hoping you are getting good value out of him.*

*Things have gone on here, but Miss Eleanor has decided to return East, which means I must go too for now. We’ve lost Mr Hanrahan (who played her vile husband in the melodrama you might recall) and cannot do the show longer so she pulls it back to NY or Boston and we will do The Slap again if she can hook up with Mr Christopher. May be some time before I make it back Out West again and I am sorry for it, keep up with your dancing and one of these turns it will be you and me.*

*Yours already, without any Right to style myself so,  
Jimmy Battle.*

No, he did not have any right. It made her warm to think of it, but almost equally irritated. He was the puppy of that actress, even if he was working on a song-and-dance routine on the side. She touched

the signature, *Jimmy Battle*. Small writing, but not cramped. He was a good match for her, they were the same in many ways. But there ought to be some balance in things. Perhaps she too would find a patron for a while.

The orchestra master knew his work and put the girls through their cues like lightning, wasting no time at all on compliments but treating them like veterans, which was better. He nodded them off at the end and turned to the more difficult cues for the Furniture Tusslers, a robust pair of young men with small eyes and ham-shaped arms who threw tables and chairs, and each other, across the stage at predetermined intervals, to the loud crashing of cymbals and an occasional hoot from a horn. The wood-crash operator was irritably busy at stage right—when the girls crossed his line of vision he missed a cue. They fled.

Bella (who had looked back to gaze at the younger, handsomer Tussler) stomped on the foot of the waiting glass-crash man, who swore horribly, and gave her a black-toothed grin when she apologized. She loved his glittering basket of glass shards, and the spare bottles he had lined up to break in it.

But the wood-crash machine with its heavy handle frightened her. It sounded too much like a real man falling down stairs, or landing in a wood-pile, or breaking a spindly Sheraton desk, depending on the velocity at which the handle was turned.

East and Verrall were quarrelling on the stairs as the girls went down, as they seemed almost always to be doing, when not performing or testing out their routines on personable girls. Aurora felt herself to be above them, although she could not have said why; Clover liked them well enough but was still shy of their patter-schtick.

Bella, however, was one of their company now, and they put out their black-suited arms to stop her halfway down the stairs, and got her to run through her lines again at a whisper. ‘Would you like to take a bath?’ ‘No thanks, I’ll leave it right where it is!’ and all the rest of the old gags.

The second time through, Bella’s tongue tripped up and she said, ‘Would you like me to take a bath?’ Quick as lightning East said, ‘Whoo-hoo, *absolutely!*’ —eyes goggling happily out of his head, hands somehow conjuring a claw-foot tub.

She didn’t hesitate either, but asked, as if it was his luggage, ‘Where would you like me to take it?’ which made East laugh out loud instead of carrying on—and that was winning the trick, so she was proud of herself. But Verrall said that gag would get them tossed out of the theatre, even in the relaxed environs of Butte, and they must go back to the usual way. At the end of the whispering rehearsal, Verrall shook her hand and told her she was histrionic, which she gathered was a good thing to be.

Butte was not Helena, no. The crowd was rougher—there was a woodsy smell in the theatre, a Paddockwood kind of smell, made up of tobacco and tanned hides, drink and men’s working clothes; although there were women in the audience, they were well outnumbered by men. Faces visible in the

spilling light were white and owl-eyed, and some of the men stood up when Aurora and Clover danced the Music Box, the better to see them twirl.

And opening was not closing. The stone-cold crowd talked generally through the first number, *Buffalo Gals*, and gave only a smattering of applause. Bella, who had grown used to being liked, found that she was almost angry not to have that appreciative cushion; she put more vim into *I Can't Do the Sum* and seemed to win their attention. Aurora—and even, dutifully, Clover—twinkled and glimmered at the boxes and caught what eyes they could, but it was uphill work, and then all downhill during *Early One Morning*, for which that crowd was definitely not in the mood.

If they'd had another number prepared, Aurora thought, they could have substituted it at the last minute, and she determined to bring one of their other songs up to scratch. Something with a little pep—or maybe a more familiar, more sentimental number would get through to these rough miners.

They danced off stage left (at the Hippodrome, by decree, all acts entered right and exited left; from time to time they had horse acts and could not afford traffic mix-ups backstage) and watched the Furniture Tusslers begin.

The Tusslers went over big, as soon as they began to break things. The crash-box man was kept hopping. When the younger Tussler brother came swinging out into the wings on a handy rope, followed by a medium-sized chest of drawers, the girls darted to the stairs and down to their dressing room.

Once her lips had been re-pinked, Bella trotted back up to stage right to be ready for East & Verrall's number, and caught the last of the Tusslers' act.

That younger one had rangy legs that curved in strong lines front and back. His arms, bare beneath a brocade waistcoat, were clean-boned and taut. He saw her watching and stared at her so boldly that she looked away and went through her lines in her head.

East and Verrall crowded into the wings beside her, kissed each side of her face, and went on. An afternoon of hard work had whipped their hotel number into slightly better shape.

They started in one, the sea-front olio drop covering up the terrible mess left in two and three by the Furniture Tusslers. Behind the drop the hands raced to clear that mess.

Bella loved the dual view she had from the wings: East and Verrall's chatty number going on in front, bathed in the sweetness of pinky-golden light, all alive—and at the same time, behind the olio, deathly silent in faint blue light, stagehands went through their orchestrated moves, soundlessly crouching, lifting slowly as if they were in a dream; the Furniture Tusslers walked like ghosts through their old life to retrieve their props.

In front, Verrall opened the number, minding his own business in a straw boater on the promenade, whistling idly till East came rolling onstage as if with a punch, brought up short and saved from the ocean by Verrall's foot.

‘I was living the life of Riley,’ East said, dusting off his coat.

‘And then what happened?’

‘Riley came home.’

Verrall was sympathetic. ‘Women! You got to keep moving, Mr. East.’

‘Yes,’ said East, looking nervously behind him, ‘Now I’ll *have* to move. Have you a recommendation for an hotel?’

Their turn went on, light pattering music up and down under their voices in the same absurd style as their pattering conversation. On cue—exactly as the last of the stagehands whisked across behind a broom—the seafront olio rose to reveal a hotel lobby drop and a desk, in two, and Verrall strolled back to become the hotel manager.

Sidling up to the desk, East chomped a cigar between his teeth.

Verrall cried, ‘Hey, put that out, there’s no smoking in here.’

‘What makes you think I’m smoking?’ asked East, eyes wide open.

‘You’ve got a cigar in your mouth!’

‘I got boots on my feet, don’t mean I’m walking.’

Verrall told him, in deep disdain: ‘You’re going to make some woman a wonderful husband.’

With a wild-agonized roll of the eyes East said, ‘I’m afraid I am!’

‘You don’t even know what a husband is.’

‘Oh, yes I do!’ East snapped back, uncrushed. ‘A husband is what’s left of a sweetheart after the nerve has been killed.’

After they’d tangled a bit over the price of a room, Verrall tinged his little desk bell and yelled, ‘Front! Show the man the Elevator!’

But East said, ‘No, no, I want a room with a bed in it.’

‘You will be needing a bath, sir?’ Verrall asked, very cold.

East, indignant: ‘How rude!’ Then, anxious, ‘Would you say I do?’

Verrall rang his desk bell again ferociously, and Bella went skittering on in her dancing slippers, eyes wide as saucers for her first dramatic role. She was helpfully unhelpful, as they’d rehearsed, and she said the lines as they’d told her to, and when she got a laugh she could not help checking the audience and laughing too—her naïve pleasure making it all the funnier; she was quick to play with that, the way East and Verrall played.

When they came off after the turn they told Bella she’d saved their bacon.

‘Cat-calls off, wolf-whistles on. That was all for you, cupcake,’ East said as they bundled her down the stairs at the intermission. He gave her bottom a thoughtful pat.

‘That last gag of yours was a three-person joke,’ Verrall told East. ‘I hope those three enjoyed themselves.’

‘Over the heads of the rest. Had ’em, lost ’em, had ’em, lost ’em—one long recurring nightmare. I’d hang myself if my belt would hold.’

‘It’ll be better at the second show, when the audience is half-cut.’ Verrall pulled the script out of his pocket and a pencil from the ribbon of his bowler hat, made a few swift strokes and scribbled a note. ‘Lose the dining room bit, lose *They raise chickens in the cellar, the guests are fond of dark meat*. Too high-brow for this house.’

‘We’ll have to put the girl back in,’ East said.

‘*She was knocking on my door all night, but there were complaints, so I had to let her out—*’ Verrall scratched. ‘Good, that’ll lead into *There’s a dead girl in that other bed...*’

‘*Yes, but how did you find out she’s dead?*’ East said, accusing the imaginary guest. ‘Or do you think that’s going too strong?’

Bella was laughing too hard to talk, so exhilarated she could have turned right around and gone back out again; and the best of it was, she’d be able to do it again at the second show, and at the third, and all this week!

‘All this,’ she could not help telling Verrall. ‘This! Every bit of it!’ But she put her fist into her mouth and made herself calm down so she would have something left for the next two shows.

Mrs Seward’s boarding hotel was a large, noisy place full of vaudeville people. Their first night there, the company visited with acquaintances from other theatres in town, in general movement through the house that seemed to go on almost all night. At three a.m. Mrs Seward emerged in awful dudgeon and rang a brass bell, and everyone went back to their own rooms, as East and Verrall had promised would happen, and finally something close to silence fell over the house and the girls could sleep, although with the sick knowledge that they’d have to be up in four hours to make the band call for the next day’s performances.

The next night, Friday night, a proposal floated through the dressing rooms: to go out after the show to hear some members of the Hippodrome orchestra, who were moonlighting at a roadhouse in the nearby countryside.

Most of the company were going, and a visiting impresario was to put in an appearance.

‘A chance not to be missed,’ Julius confided, leaning in to their dressing room. His eyes popped at her earnestly: a surprising pale green, like peeled grapes floating in custard. ‘We work, we strive, art is all—but at a certain juncture, management is a necessity. Mr Fitzjohn Mayhew is a rising man and was last winter at the Follies. I think it worth the excursion.’

Aurora considered the proposal as she creamed off her makeup, listening to Sybil's rippling account of how such a party would be perfectly permissible and even educational, while making up her own mind. The hotel would be in a din till three again, anyway. They'd been to country dances at home in Paddockwood, some quite rambunctious, and could certainly take care of themselves; besides, they'd be with all their friends from the Parthenon company.

She did briefly wonder whether she ought to leave Bella behind at Mrs Seward's, but Bella heard her saying as much to Clover and scotched that plan.

'Cat piss! I am just as fit as you to go out in the country without Mama,' Bella cried. 'You can't leave me here while you two go gallivanting!'

'I'm thinking of your good,' Aurora told her sharply. 'You're still a child.'

'Ha! No, I'm not anymore! Don't treat me like a baby.'

'Only our own dear Baby,' Clover said, using Bella's old pet-name to be kind. 'We must look out for you.'

'If I'm old enough for the show, I'm old enough to go out with you.'

Aurora would have fought her down, but the boarding hotel with its wandering artistes was no safer a place for a girl alone. Instead she did a quick job on Bella's eyes, then Clover's and her own, as if looking older would better fortify them to cope with any questionable atmosphere they might encounter. They had done nothing but work and struggle for many months, and it was delightful to think of a trip to the woods.

After the last show the whole party together rode the streetcar till the track ended, at a blank crossroads on the high edge of the saucer-shaped valley between the mountains that held Butte cupped. After a chilly wait, a cutter came jingling along out of the darkness. A lantern swung from its perch and a man with surprisingly few teeth jumped down to help them up into the hay that filled the wagon-bed, and plumped carriage robes around them, paying some special attention to the girls' knees and feet until Julius growled at him; then they slid slowly off into the night woods.

The moon had risen long before and rode above them, a silver orange dangling just out of reach. Clover was squashed in beside Mr Verrall, but if she craned her neck slightly her cheek grazed the coat of Victor Saborsky, sitting on the wagon's sidebar. At one corner the wagon lurched and Victor put out a hand to save her from being tossed out. It was too dark to see his eyes but his hand felt warm right through her melton coatsleeve.

The silence of the forest was broken by a chuffing, a huffing. The cutter drew to one side of the narrow track; in a moment the clattering sewing-machine sound grew louder—then a touring car burst out

of the shadows behind them, squeezed past, honking, and tore off, headlamps brightening the darkness ahead, around a bend.

‘Fitzjohn Mayhew,’ Julius pronounced. ‘His imprimatur.’

It was peaceful once the automobile had gone. The cutter slid on, runners scraping over gravel—winter was drying out to spring. Before long music twined out of the woods, and around another bend they found a warmly-lit huddle under the trees, a low log-built house with small windows under its eaves, each one a prick of light; buggies and wagons were ranged outside it. Clover took Bella’s hand on one side and Aurora caught her other hand, and they followed behind Sybil and Julius, and before East and Verrall, Victor Saborsky, the Tussler boys and the musicians. The procession crowded up into the ante-porch and through a cracked and moss-packed door into a cacophony of noise and smoke.

Aurora tried to make out the room through the haze, comparing it to Jenny’s house in Helena. A low dive, she thought, and the smell was fierce, but there was music playing over the racket of talk, and none of the men seemed instantly violent. Miners, mostly, she thought, or officials at the mines. Girls and women moved through the crowd, a sprinkling among the men: some well-dressed working women, a few drunken drabs. Wan, skinny chits who looked like God’s last leftovers carried tin jugs of beer and unlabelled bottles.

Some of the Parthenon-Hippodrome people moved across to join the band: silver plates on an accordion flashed in the lamplight as one of their friends joined the fiddles, the musicians squashing together to make a larger empty space on the platform; blurry forms of dancers waited to begin.

Although it irked her, Aurora saw that she had made a mistake in coming. It was not a box-house (where girls went straight from the stage down to dally with the patrons in small enclosed boxes, for a little extra income), but it was not at all a respectable place. She kept a grip on Bella’s hand.

East took Clover’s elbow and steered all three girls to a half-empty table, then vanished. He and Verrall reappeared almost at once with stools, crowded them in tight about the table, and got all the party seated just in time for the pounding on the tables to convey that the dancing was about to start.

There was no sign of the impresario that Julius had promised. Aurora did a quick check of the room but saw no-one who could possibly have come in that touring car. There must be other rooms. Or perhaps there was different entertainment in the outbuildings crouched around the wagon yard. She settled herself to watch, but kept one eye on the room.

This was a wild place, Bella thought. Just what she was in the mood for! The thin girls serving and the thin men drinking interested her equally. The trampled floor was dark dirt; the long, low-ceilinged room was dank with a distillery brew of yeasty sweat, but the woodsmoke and deer-hide smell reminded her of country dances in Paddockwood, and the theatre people near them all seemed like old friends too: East and Verrall of course, but Saborsky and the Tusslers too. The older Tussler gave her a wink and she

gave him a twinkling one back, so he elbowed his brother and guffawed, repeating his winking again and again. He was not entirely right in his head.

It was loud, and the tables were scummed with old beer. Fitful light from oil lamps set on tables and hung from beams was not bright enough to make it truly cheerful, but she felt like she knew the ropes here. In a back L of the room, which must be closer to the still-room, since the jugs of beer came from that end, men and a few women were playing cards.

The dancers came on: a man and woman, both wearing tattered street clothes and caps. The music changed, and crashed. Then the man grabbed the woman's arm and pulled her to him and slapped her, hard! But she didn't seem to mind. Still holding her arm, the man did a cocky strut outwards, grabbed her into a crouching bear-hug, and they did a rough little dance, a squatting parody of a waltz. In jerky shots, the man twirled the woman out of his hold and back again as they spun, and spun, and finally fell, still clutching each other, and rolled around writhing on the boards with one foot of the man stomping them in circles. It was tight and harsh—none of it pretty, but exciting to witness, like a fight on the street.

Next up was a singer, an older woman with a rasping voice and low-slung breasts that threatened to burst out of her stained satin dress. She did music-hall stuff, at a rattling pace and with no stinting of lewd gestures and eye-rollings. Ugly, but with enough cocky assurance to put her songs across, and the music was lively. Interesting to watch the musicians at face-level, too, since the girls were usually above and behind the orchestra pit.

Aurora craned her neck from time to time. Still no Mayhew.

At first it had been lovely to sit in the warmth, cozed up between Clover and Aurora, but now Bella was hot, and the place was only ordinary after all. She wound round the tables to the back of the long room, as if she might be looking for a way out to the privy, but she had no need, only restlessness.

She'd worn her black skirt of course, it not needing to stay perfect for performances. Aurora had let her wear her flowered shirtwaists, so dainty. She must look as old as the rest of them, with her eyes darkened so.

There was a stronger smell back here, a hay smell or a burning-barrel smell. She supposed it was some unusual cure of tobacco. East had followed her and caught her sniffing at the air. He said, 'That's loco weed, hashish.' Verrall was there too, and added, 'The Assassin of Youth. Makes them feel a little less sad, for a while.'

'But you wouldn't want that, no, no,' East said, steering her slightly wide of that table, those people. 'Although we are as sad as can be. We need sorrow, to be comic in our Art.'

'No sadness for you,' Verrall agreed. 'Cards, though—we could all use some of the innocent joy that gambling brings to the hectic personality.'

At home in Paddockwood Bella had frequently played with the men. Papa had taught her how to play poker, making it look like she couldn't play very well, and although that joke only worked once, she did enjoy trotting it out. East tucked her into the crowd watching a small table where a heavy-set woman was dealing and talking, talking and dealing. She seemed to make a profession of cards, and Bella could see that she was good.

The younger of the Tusslers was playing at the table, but he dashed his hand down in disgust as East and Bella joined the group, and the older brother replaced him. The younger stood beside them to watch a hand or two, commenting scornfully under his breath to East on the play. East stayed silent and watched; admiring his detached alertness, Bella copied him. She had a trill of pleasure running under her skin to be in this wild place, at night, alone. She was not the baby sister here. She was herself.

Near the end of a song from a bitter woman with lank blond hair, there was a commotion at the door and a large man came in, a bevy of theatre people around him chattering and showing off, oblivious to the performance. From his white silk scarf and pointed beard, from the cut of the astrakhan-collared overcoat, and from the very fine suit revealed as he doffed his coat (which was whisked to safety by one of his entourage), Aurora knew that this must be Mr Fitzjohn Mayhew.

The singer onstage knew it too—she snapped urgent fingers at the band-leader and the music changed to a hotter song, syncopated and loud, and she shouted a welcome over the heads of the crowd: 'Fitz! About time you came back to the sticks!'

Mayhew raised his cane and saluted her. Everything fine about him, including his manners. He waved the cane to encourage the music, and the singer went on with a bawdy piece about her loving cup and the man to fill it up. Sybil, sitting alert in the shadow of Julius's bulk, pressed an importunate hand on Aurora's arm. 'You must sing next,' she hissed.

'Oh, no,' Aurora said, surprised. 'They've got plenty here to entertain.'

'Julius will work it. It's your best chance for Fitz Mayhew. He's got an eye for a pretty girl, you go ahead. You can't say no!'

She could not, of course. Julius had already lumbered up and was talking to the band captain, gesturing back at the table. But what—not their Parthenon act, in case Mayhew might have caught the show. What for this crowd? They'd been riotous, she thought, violent and loud; so we'll be quiet. Something simple and sad. *After the Ball*? It was long and didn't make sense without all the verses, and she wasn't sure she and Clover could get through to the last without losing the crowd.

Julius came back and escorted Clover up to the stage—Bella was nowhere to be seen, but Aurora dared not hesitate or they would lose this chance.

Something to catch their memory, and catch the attention of this Mayhew. And the band didn't know them, and they had no sides.

Aurora leaned across to the fiddler and asked him, with her most engaging smile and a small, apologetic, enlisting shrug—what is to be done?—if they could borrow the loan of his violin for just one song. He blushed and handed it over.

'*Songs My Mother,*' she whispered to Clover, who gave her a strange eye back, but tuned the fiddle plick-plick-plick dutifully, swung it under her chin, and with her thin hip edged behind Aurora into better position for her bow arm to begin the intro. Obedient to the music, the crowd quietened to listen. Aurora sang alone, not too high, but rising into alt at the end of each line.

*Songs my mother taught me,  
In the days long vanished;  
Seldom from her eye-lids  
Were the teardrops banished.*

Nothing to that song: just a little door opened to the mother that you missed so dreadfully, who had loved you as nobody ever could else; and now that she was dead, who would pray for you?

As the verse ended Clover went soaring on the fiddle, a yellowy amateurish looking thing that wept convincingly. The song streamed straight from sadness, confusion stripped away, only one-bladed pain remaining. Missing you, missing you, the violin sang. Missing Papa's violin, which had been sold in the first year after he died, among the first things, because they could hope to get another some day. The piano had not gone for another six months. Clover's bow pulled strongly down and rose sweetly up.

Then Aurora, with the verses again, no embellishment.

*Now I teach my children,  
Each melodious measure.  
Oft the tears are flowing,  
Oft they flow, from my memory's treasure.*

It was a sentimental song and could not be sung sentimentally. Back in Helena, Mama would be washing dishes and cleaning tables and perhaps humming to herself to keep her cheer—but not this song, which always made her weep uncontrollably.

Aurora's clear voice freed the audience to be sad each in their own hearts, or glad of their mothers, or perhaps to mourn for never having had one. But she herself only thought of Mama's cracked red hands and empty purse, and that they'd better make some money very soon and double-quick.

At the back of the smoky room, she could see Mayhew's head turned, watching them. He had a dramatic, upright bearing; an air that hesitated between distinguished and raffish. Like she imagined Florenz Ziegfeld must look. He'd left off his beaver hat, so his silver-dusted hair showed, but his stiff collar kept him looking formal in this rough place.

The lines of the song ran out again, after the same two verses repeated, and then—no ending, as there is no ending to remembering, only fading a little, folding and refolding, til the violin wept one last short chord, and they were done.

She curtsied, accepting with grateful modesty the applause of this difficult crowd, won over. She took Clover's hand and pulled her forward, and they curtsied together. Clover gave back the fiddle with a little bow.

At the side of the little platform the jagged dancers took their arms and kissed them, the woman weeping quite openly. 'Dvorak!' she sobbed. The girls nodded, and clasped their arms in return, and then the band had started up again into a reeling Irish tune and they could sit again. Two clogging girls came out: almost identical, two stocky girls with one face, one bolster-shaped body, twice repeated. Buxom, and not sufficiently strapped up, Aurora considered.

Clover had an empty stool beside her. Victor came out of the shadows and perched on it.

'I did not know you played the fiddle too.'

She bent her head. 'I am sadly out of practice, I believe I must give it up for good.'

'I like your playing, it is clean and warm. And I am myself in need of a fiddler.'

Clover looked up to his thin, already-dear face.

'For my act,' he said. 'I work best without orchestra, only a single ghostly fiddle in the wings. Will you consider playing for me?'

'I have no violin now,' she said.

'Let us go out of this oppressive room and figure a way for you to find one.' He stood and offered her his hand. 'The woods are good for walking, here, and it is not too cold.'

Clover looked at Aurora.

'May I take your sister for some air, dear Miss?' Victor asked.

Aurora considered him. Friend of their friend, gentle-seeming, and well-known to the vaudeville folk. His act, the best she'd ever seen. And Clover's face was shining like she had not seen it since—for ages. She turned her own face away so Clover would not see that in her eyes.

'Of course,' she said coolly, engrossed again in the musicians.

He tucked Clover's hand in his arm and led her through the maze of tables. Aurora turned and watched them as they went, lifting her chin in a bob to acknowledge Mayhew's wave of appreciation as he caught her eye, and his kindly nod to Clover when they passed him at the door.

From the back of the room, Bella saw Clover's familiar step, and the curve of her face as she looked back over her shoulder to see if Victor was still following. Bella stared after her sister, walking out into the night with the tired-faced genius. He looked like a heartbroken saint. Aurora was watching them go too, she must have let Clover go out. Hmmp! They had sung without her, and she had not decided yet

whether to be cross or let it go. Very likely they'd only had a moment's notice, and had not been able to send for her. But she still hadn't found a way to join the card game, and this was dull stuff, stuck watching all night long.

'Need some air,' the Tussler beside her said, suddenly. 'Want a walk?'

Bella was surprised.

'Or don't you dare to walk in the darkness?'

Bella laughed. She was never frightened of the dark. And why not go for a walk? Clover could. So could she.

Mayhew had watched the singer and her little sister, the two of them reminding him of the penny-dreadful play, *The Two Orphans*: Henriette the beautiful orphan and her blind sister who sang in the streets of Paris and were, naturally, discovered to be aristocrats. Maybe the play could be adapted... His agile mind trotted the idea through its paces and discarded it. Unless he had a pretty pair of sisters, one a singer.

The singer's face—open planes, flat lids over lustrous dark eyes, pearly skin illumined even in this dark place, drawing the lantern-light—was as much a part of her charm as the abundant floss of golden hair, the delicate line of cheek and chin. He calculated her value.

But it was difficult to stick to the task; the heart kept attempting to fly out of his breast as he listened. A young swan, looking up to catch back bright tears; the odd, thin bird-sister behind her playing a borrowed fiddle. Not the usual run of artiste at Leary's roadhouse.

When the song was over the bird sister left their table, going out with Victor Saborsky; that was interesting. Victor was famous for his reserve; held himself aloof, as Mayhew knew to his slight pain. For him to single out one of the sisters—that suggested a higher value than he'd tallied himself.

A space vacant beside the beauty. (The line of her neck taut and slender as she looked toward the door; a little aloofness of her own in her bearing.) Mayhew made his way across the room, shedding his jolly party as he went, like drops of rain from an astrakhan collar. 'Champagne for my true friends,' he told Julius, saluting him. 'And true pain for my sham friends.'

Aurora laughed, as her ear leapt to the joke. As if champagne were available at this out-of-the-way place. But a tray was coming toward them, carried by one of Mayhew's minions, balancing glasses and two bottles with foil-wrapped necks. Aurora had never yet had champagne.

'Brought it out from Butte,' Mayhew murmured in her ear, as the others exclaimed. He took the first bottle, ripped off the foil and untwisted a little metal trap, and very efficiently swirled the bottle while holding the cork—which exploded out of the neck of the bottle, foam spilling in a rush over the table and onto Aurora's dark skirt.

‘Damn it all!’ he cried. ‘You’ve shaken the bottle, Bert.’ He let champagne flow into glasses as he dabbed at Aurora’s skirt with the napkin from the bottle, until they were both generally damped, except for their spirits.

The champagne was sharp, sweet; Aurora did not let herself gulp it.

Black-velvet country darkness made the roadhouse clearing seem like the entrance to a fairytale. The woods that swallow Snow White when she runs away, Bella thought—or Baba Yaga’s forest. A chicken-foot hut would be just the thing out here. Clover and Victor had disappeared up into the birch woods, so Bella made the Tussler walk the other way, toward the dark hill. She had not been told his name and it felt a bit foolish to ask.

‘Oughta be a still-room out here somewhere,’ he said. ‘Could find us a beer, you’d like that.’

She would not, she did not like beer one bit. But a search for any kind of treasure was always to her taste. He took the lantern hanging above the chopping block, and she took one sitting beside an empty wagon and lit it from his, making a small game of lighting it with one try from a tuft of straw.

The straw flared up and almost singed his eyebrows, and he dodged backward, making her laugh. He did not like that, she saw. She stopped.

They set off, the Tussler looking for some tell-tale smoke or a lit door, but there was none to be seen. The huge darkness of the night was shoved back by the light from the oil lanterns, hers and the Tussler’s each throwing beams every which way through the woods, washing out the moonlight. They could not see the stars for the jangling, swinging light around them.

Bella caught a glimpse of a gleam of metal—there—it was a handle. A door cut into the hill. She pointed. ‘A root cellar!’

‘Might be good in there,’ he agreed. He must think of nothing but his stomach. But sometimes neither did she. He was a gangly boy, not very bright, she thought. His bottom lip hung sulky and loose. She’d almost rather be back inside watching the card-play with East and Verrall. But she did think it would be good fun to explore the root cellar.

Nothing but a cave dug into the hillside, a tiny wooden door made it look like a brownie’s house. The door stuck a little, then gave way, leather hinges letting it fall askew after she dragged it open over the snow.

She loved dark places—nothing to be afraid of in the darkness. It was people you had to fear. Shadows shifted around thin pillars, like inside a mine—and maybe jewels down there, or a dragon’s hoard of gold. The Tussler crowded behind her, so she stepped forward into the low space. Once her eyes had adjusted she saw straggling shelves lining the dirt walls, some lined with dull-gleaming jars, some

empty and furred with dust. Trays of carrots and apples in sand, jars of beets, pickles, jam, crocks of preserved eggs in isinglass. It was a treasure trove, but only of food.

‘We ought not to be in here,’ she said, sadly, and turned to go.

But he was in her way, blocking the passage to the door. He had set his lantern on a shelf and he fumbled with something she could not see beneath his coat-jacket.

He took her hand and pulled it towards him, and she thought he was going to put something in it—an egg, or perhaps a dead mouse. Instead he yanked her hand between his legs where he had something bulging. His manhood, she supposed. She had only seen down there in quite small boys, who went swimming in the slough behind the school house in Paddockwood and jumped into the air, little front-tails wagging; it was a surprise to feel how springy and hard his was.

She felt it jump under her hand and then he pulled her harder and hurt her wrist and at the same time he smeared her mouth with his flabby lip. She had not minded Nando kissing her, she had liked it very much, but this was a different thing. It—she wanted to stop.

‘Stop,’ she said, her voice too quiet. She could not make it louder, it was as if the wind had gone out of her.

After three thudding heart-beats she wrenched her face away, but he found it again and twisted it back to his mouth, thick fingers like a vise on her cheek. She still held the lantern, and if she dropped it, it would break and the wooden shelves would catch fire—she was afraid. The dirt wall behind her and the roof above them seemed to be moving, the earth closing in around them, and he was still pulling and shoving her, his rough jacket scratching her face and the button at the top digging into her neck painfully and all the time him pulling at her hand and trying to tuck it into his pants, unbuttoning them with one hand and panting, that was maybe the worst of it, the pig-snuffling noise he was making. With his shoving she was pushed backwards into the shelves and the jars were going to shake together and the crocks on the bottom shelves would break, there would be beet-juice and isinglass from the eggs all over her new boots, but she could not make her hands do anything other than push vaguely at him. She had forgotten about breathing even.

Then Verrall, outside in the clearing, called, ‘Bella? East?’

The Tussler stood still, his mouth open and the bottom lip hanging purplish. She could not think why she had ever found him handsome.

‘Cunny-cunny fucking cunny,’ he said in her ear. ‘That’s all you are.’ The air of him speaking was hot inside her head.

‘Bugger *you*,’ she said, and with her free hand slapped his face with all her might. It made a mighty noise. Her hand stung and her forearm ached from the jarring contact.

He slammed her back against the wall. She gasped at the pain, at the shock of it, how strong he was, and his fist came at her—she jerked her head and he almost missed, catching only her cheek instead of her nose and eyes.

She had never been hit before. Her whole skull tingled and rang. He ground her hand into the hard-packed earth-wall for good measure, and shoved out of the cellar past Verrall, cursing him on his way.

Bella took the hand in her other hand and rubbed it. She did not want to touch her face and feel that pain from the outside. Her face felt broken. She ought not to have come in here with him. She had taken him for a weak sister. That was stupid.

‘He was bothering you?’ Verrall asked her.

‘No, no,’ she said. Nobody must know that.

‘I could fetch Miss Aurora—let me—’

‘No! No, no, no,’ she said, her face desperate, eyes black in its pallor in this low light.

She kept turning her head from side to side so that Verrall was worried about her. Had the Tussler hit her?

‘What were you doing out here anyway?’ East said roughly, coming behind Verrall. He held a fist-full of snow up to her cheek and pressed. The cold scorched her face. ‘You are like a bad kitten. You must learn to look after yourself better! And not to lead men on.’

‘Oh no,’ she said, more pitifully, so that Verrall wished to comfort her. ‘I did not— I only meant—’

‘Yes, yes, that’s the usual,’ East said, disgusted. ‘You only meant to have some fun and next you found him excited.’

‘Let me get your sister,’ said Verrall, in some agitation. His delicate hands flapped.

‘Oh no, no!’ she cried, quite desperate. ‘You must not, she will be angry, she will say it is because I am too young, please do not tell her.’

‘Or—Clover—’

‘No! It is all right, I am quite all right, it was only a surprise.’

‘You are only a little thing, how were you to know how he might be?’

East snorted. ‘She’s a woman, ain’t she? Born to be one, born knowing.’

‘You are too hard on her, East. It’s only a baby still.’

‘I am not,’ Bella said stoutly. She brushed down her front and tried to sweep the dirt off the back of her skirt. ‘And I did not get beet juice on my boots, so you need not tell.’

‘Well, come with us,’ East said, long-suffering. ‘We will look after you. No more going off into corners or you will get what comes to you.’

Tears started to her eyes but she opened her eyes wider and they did not fall. She thought she might throw up, but she shut her teeth together and refused.

Side by side with Mayhew, who had commandeered the stool next to hers, Aurora sat watching a dancer—the one Mayhew told them he'd come to see. He was looking for a bit of flash for his next venture, he said, and a quick man could find treasures in these dark woods that the slower-moving producers in Boston and New York might give their ears to book.

*Elvira of the Regiment*, the band captain called, and she came prancing on in a little military jacket with a soldier's cap; her small worn boots had brass heels that clicked to the music. Now she seemed only lazily beating time; now she rushed along, seized by the joy of the moment. Those little brass heels! They gave a tantalizing syncopation to the dancing. Aurora looked round for her sisters. But Clover was still off with Victor—and Bella? She could not crane her head far enough to see Bella at the card tables.

This dancer was like Mama, if propriety was not necessary. Off came the jacket and the cap, revealing a scrap of bodice and a loose-laced cummerbund—then off flew her jaunty skirt and she danced in what appeared to be her underthings, a red-dyed collection of cloth with a wild gypsy air. Tapping-mad, she reeled and stamped and flew. At the conclusion of the dance she swirled the skirt up to make herself an officer's cape, then trotted along the edge of the platform in an orderly fashion and took leave of her public with a right military salute. Although this place had no boxes, as she wove through the crowd there was no doubt that she was making a series of appointments with various of the men.

Not that, for us, Aurora thought. We don't have to, we're going to make our money on our feet. And they had Mama, who knew the ropes, and who meant to keep them in the first flight, both in art and respectability.

Mayhew had risen to clap for the little military dancer, but he did not leave Aurora's table entirely, only reaching across several hands to give the dancer a pasteboard card and hold her in a moment's conversation.

Mayhew's acquaintance could not be wasted—Aurora knew she ought to sit with him, work the conversation round to their act, and invite him to come to see them at the Hippodrome. But as he was occupied with Elvira, she thought she'd run and check on Bella, whose absence was suddenly causing her a cramp of fright. She had forgotten how rough the men were, how green Bella was.

She made her way through the maze of tables, but Bella was nowhere to be seen—no East or Verrall, either, and only the older Tussler. Aurora asked, bending to his odd-shaped ear, if he'd seen the others; he waved a hand toward the door, or perhaps merely to make her leave him to his cards. He had

crumpled bills piled on the table before him, and whether winning or losing was not interested in her little sister.

Bella must have gone outside. The air was thick with smoke back here, and the stink stronger. Aurora stood still for a moment, thinking; then side-stepped back through the crowded tables to get her wrap. Too cold to do without, if she had to search for long.

She reached for Bella's things on back of her chair, and told Sybil that she'd got to go. 'Keep him entertained for me till we get back,' she said, relying on Sybil's good nature, Julius's love of exalted company, and their pressing need to keep Mayhew's interest aroused.

Mayhew tore his gaze away from Elvira's predatory, evenly-spaced teeth to see where the little swan was headed. No conveyance would be town-ward for some time; must be the privy she intended. Let her go for now. He turned back to Elvira and continued negotiations for a more exploratory interview with her later, at his Butte hotel.

The door shut behind her and shut half the noise away with it. Aurora pulled on her wraps, and (after a pause to gather her courage) felt her way along the log wall, half-blind in the darkness, heading like a moth for the glow of light from the wagon yard. She could hear strange noises, and felt someone go past a few feet away from her as she rounded the corner of the roadhouse. There were the rails of the corral fence. She made her way along by touching the poles every few feet—but there were fearful shapes in the darkness. She was never easy without light.

A mound—was that crumpled thing, lying there, Bella? Oh, no!

She stood still, uncertain whether she could bring herself to touch the bundle on the ground. A lantern—she was turning back to get one when she saw a bobbing light coming through the trees, and then another beside it.

'Miss Avery, Aurora?'

Verrall, with Bella on his arm. Aurora ran stumbling over the packed snow to reach her quickly. 'Are you—?' She did not know what to ask.

Bella had a hand filled with snow pressed to her cheek. Tears welled into her eyes but she only sounded angry: 'I ran into a tree-branch in the dark, I am so stupid!'

'It will leave a miserable bruise,' Verrall said.

'You should see the other fella,' East said, irrepressible. From within Aurora's warm clasp Bella punched his coat-sleeve.

'It is too cold to stand here,' Aurora said. 'I must find Clover, too.'

But she remembered the bundle on the ground. Verrall was handing her his lantern already, courteous as always; she took it and went back to the corral fence, to the place where she had seen the

fallen heap. It was a woman lying there. Aurora set the lantern down beside her and gently pulled the woman's shoulder.

'Are you in difficulty?' she asked, feeling the inadequacy of the words. 'Can we help you?'

A shock-white face turned toward them, and lolled semi-conscious there. Red hair like fox-fur springing from her forehead, a pinched nose, blood coming from it. Her dress was torn, her skirt ripped away, and there was blood there too on the pallid, splaying legs.

'How did you know she was dead?' East asked, after a little silence. Verrall groaned and turned away into the darkness, to be loudly sick.

Bella knelt by Aurora and lifted the bloody head to her lap. She still had a clump of snow in her hand, and with that she touched the broken cheek and eyelids. It was just a girl. Aurora found her hands and chafed them.

The girl shifted, not moaning but making a small cat sound. She opened her eyes and stared at them, then closed her eyes again and tried to cover her skinny legs. Bella put a hand on her forehead. It was cold.

'Mr East?' Aurora said into the darkness.

'In a minute,' he said. 'Finish off, for the lord's sake, Verrall! How much do you have in there?'

Then Mayhew was there, full of authority. He bent and lifted the girl by the shoulders, Bella and Aurora giving him room; he felt her head with practiced fingers, then said, 'Upsy-daisy,' and lifted her right up to her feet.

She stood there swaying. Bella found the ripped end of her skirt, and tucked it into her waist so she was covered. Aurora took the girl's outstretched hand. 'Can you see?' she asked. 'Can you speak to me?'

The girl's tongue appeared and licked her broken lip. A purple mark showed faintly on her neck in the dim light. 'My shawl...' she said. Bella searched for it, found it caught on a splinter of the fence-rail.

Aurora asked her, 'Who hurt you?'

'I—he—I—' The girl stopped and touched her neck, and felt along her chest. 'He took my—'

Mayhew still had hold of her back. 'Best not to pry into it,' he told the others, quietly. 'It's her livelihood, after all. You wouldn't want to get her turned off.'

Bella was so sorry for her. No bigger than herself, and not much older, from her voice. Her matted red braid had come down. It lay like a rope around her neck. Her poor lip.

'It's nothing,' the girl finally said. She shook her head, slowly, experimentally. 'I'm lucky, this time.' She had a strong accent—Irish, perhaps, mangled through her swollen mouth. She put up one hand and tucked a strand of hair back into order. 'Let me go.'

Aurora stared at her rough dress and the ugly mess someone had made of her face, and fell back. There was nothing to be done.

‘You sang so nice,’ the girl said. She almost smiled but her lips were clearly too much hurt to move like that. She took her shawl from Bella and walked off, feet very careful, into the dark recess behind the roadhouse where the privy was.