

Extract from *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters

She sang that night like - I cannot say like an angel, for her songs were all of champagne suppers and strolling in the Burlington Arcade; perhaps, then, like a fallen angel - or yet again like a falling one: she sang like a falling angel might sing with the bounds of heaven fresh burst behind him, and hell still distant and unguessed. And as she did so, I sang with her - not loudly and carelessly like the rest of the crowd, but softly, almost secretly, as if she might hear me the better if I whispered rather than bawled.

And perhaps, after all, she did. I had thought that, when she walked on to the stage, she had glanced my way - as much as to say, the box is filled again. Now, as she wheeled before the footlights, I thought I saw her look at me again. The idea was a fantastic one - and yet every time her gaze swept the crowded hall it seemed to brush my own, and dally with it a little longer than it should. I ceased my whispered singing and merely stared, and swallowed. I saw her leave the stage - again, her gaze met mine - and then return for her encore. She sang her ballad and plucked the flower from her lapel, and held it to her cheek, as we all expected. But when her song was finished she did not peer into the stalls for the handsomest girl, as she usually did. Instead, she took a step to her left, towards the box in which I sat. And then she took another. In a moment she had reached the corner of the stage, and stood facing me; she was so close I could see the glint of her collar-stud, the beat of the pulse in her throat, the pink at the corner of her eye. She stood there for what seemed to be a small eternity; then her arm came up, the flower flashed for a second in the beam of the lime - and my own hand, trembling, rose to catch it. The crowd gave a broad, indulgent cheer of pleasure, and a laugh. She held my flustered gaze with her own more certain one, and made me a little bow. Then she stepped backwards suddenly, waved to the hall, and left us.

I sat for a moment as if stunned, my eyes upon the flower in my hand, which had been so near, so recently, to Kitty Butler's cheek. I wanted to raise it to my own face - and was about to, I think, when the clatter of the hall pierced my brain at last, and made me look about me and see the inquisitive, indulgent looks that were turned my way, and the nods and the chuckles and the winks that met my up-turned gaze. I reddened, and shrank back into the shadows of the box. With my back turned to the bank of prying eyes I slipped the rose into the belt of my dress, and pulled on my gloves. My heart, which had begun to pound when Miss Butler had stepped towards me across the stage, was still beating painfully hard; but as I left my box and made my way towards the crowded foyer and the street beyond, it began to feel light, and glad, and I began to want to smile. I had to place a hand before my lips so as not to appear an idiot, smiling to myself as if at nothing.