



VINTAGE

NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

ANGELA CARTER

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About the Book

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SARAH WATERS

Is Sophie Fevvers, toast of Europe's capitals, part swan . . .
or all fake?

Courted by the Prince of Wales and painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, she is an aerialiste extraordinaire and star of Colonel Kearney's circus. She is also part woman, part swan. Jack Walser, an American journalist, is on a quest to discover the truth behind her identity. Dazzled by his love for her, and desperate for the scoop of a lifetime, Walser has no choice but to join the circus on its magical tour through turn-of-the-nineteenth-century London, St Petersburg and Siberia.

About the Author

Angela Carter was born in 1940. She read English at Bristol University, and from 1976–8 was a fellow in Creative Writing at Sheffield University. She lived in Japan, the United States and Australia. Her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, was published in 1965, followed by *The Magic Toyshop* (1967, John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), *Several Perceptions* (1968, Somerset Maugham Award), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *Love* (1971), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Nights at the Circus* (1984, James Tait Black Memorial Prize) and *Wise Children* (1991). Four collections of her short stories have been published: *Fireworks* (1974), *The Bloody Chamber* (1979, Cheltenham Festival of Literature Award), *Black Venus* (1985) and *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993). She was the author of *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979), and two collections of journalism, *Nothing Sacred* (1982) and *Expletives Deleted* (1992). She died in February 1992.

ALSO BY ANGELA CARTER

Short Stories

Fireworks
The Bloody Chamber
Black Venus
American Ghosts and Old World Wonders
Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories
The Virago Book of Fairy Tales (editor)
The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales (editor)
Wayward Girls and Wicked Women (editor)

Novels

Shadow Dance
The Magic Toyshop
Several Perceptions
Heroes and Villains
Love
The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman
The Passion of New Eve
Wise Children

Non-fiction

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History
Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings
Expletives Deleted
Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings

Drama

Come unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays
The Curious Room: Collected Dramatic Works

Nights at the Circus

Angela Carter

With an Introduction by
Sarah Waters

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

My first encounter with the lush, extravagant universe of Angela Carter's fiction came in 1984, when I was just eighteen. This was the year that Carter collaborated with Neil Jordan to produce the film *The Company of Wolves*. Quite by chance, I caught a radio programme promoting the film, and discussing Carter's collection of rewritten fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, on which it was based. I'd had a taste for the Gothic since childhood. The idea of a book which seemed to mix Perrault and Grimm with Hammer Horror impressed me enormously. Carter's name stuck in my mind and, on a trip to Cardiff soon after, I went into a bookshop and sought *The Bloody Chamber* out.

I was a bookish teenager and relatively well-read, but Carter's writing was unlike anything I'd ever come across before: vivid, theatrical, full of dazzlingly rococo narrative swoops and a startling sexual bluntness. A few years later, studying *The Bloody Chamber* for a literature MA, I would appreciate more than ever the sophistications of Carter's project, her engagement with the founding myths of Western culture, and with Freud and Lacan. But in the meantime, I simply read every bit of her writing I could lay my hands on. *The Passion of New Eve* and *Heroes and Villains* I discovered to be baroque apocalyptic fables, stories of sex-change, sorcery, the epic struggle between civilisation and chaos. *The Magic Toyshop* I read as a Gothic story of adolescent awakening, of pleasure and fear. *The Sadeian Woman*, a piece of cultural criticism, daringly recast the Marquis de Sade as a clear-sighted analyst of sexual relations, the feminist's 'unconscious ally'.

Nights at the Circus was published in the autumn of 1984, as I was starting life as an English student, too poor to afford a hardback. I bought the novel when it came out in paperback the following year and begged the university bookshop to give me the poster that had been sent out as part of the publicity campaign; and I stuck it to my college bedroom wall, as I might have pinned up other iconic '80s images – the film poster for *Betty Blue*, or stickers saying 'Coal Not Dole.'

I had to wait until 1991 for Carter's next novel, the rambunctious *Wise Children*; this time, a girlfriend bought me the hardback as a birthday present. I had no idea that this would be Carter's last work. I did not know that she was already becoming ill. This was years before I ever thought of writing myself, and the literary world was a closed and very distant one. I was familiar with a much-reproduced image of her, which showed an appealing-looking, handsome woman with strikingly high cheekbones and white hair, but I had never seen her speak or read from her work. Then, on a Sunday evening in the February of 1992, a friend rang me up to say that he had just heard on the radio that Angela Carter had died of lung cancer. We were both floored by the news – both, absurdly, as upset as if we'd known Carter personally; and both, with the sorrow of passionate readers, devastated at the loss of such a glorious literary talent.

Our reaction was, I suspect, far from unique. Carter's literary reputation had been relatively slow to build; there had been a surge of popular interest in her work, at exactly the time I'd first heard of her, as a result of the release of Jordan's film; but her audience, after that, remained a fiercely devoted one. And her writing had a particular resonance, I think, for women readers. Her theatrical, fabular style has much in common with that of the other great magic realists, Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez; but she wrote, always, with a distinctly feminist agenda, determined to debunk cultural fantasies around

sexuality, gender and class. She helped stimulate an excitement about feminist writing and feminist publishing (she was hugely supportive, for example, of the founding of the women's publishing house Virago Press, in 1979), and many of her literary preoccupations – the challenging of the canon, the rewriting of fairy tale and myth, the imagining of female utopias and dystopias – lie at the heart of much feminist writing and thought from the 1970s and '80s. But few other writers, female or male, had her imagination, her literary audacity, her confidence with language and idea. Few had her power to unsettle as well as to inspire and console.

Nights at the Circus is her masterpiece; it's also the most engaging and accessible of her fictions. Her earliest novels tend towards the stylised; *Nights*, by contrast, is a sprawling, garrulous book, a picaresque story of Rabelaisian proportions, with a suitably larger-than-life heroine: Fevvers, the winged Victorian 'Cockney Venus', six feet two in her stockings, with a voice like clanging dustbin lids and a face as 'broad and oval as a meat dish'. Fevvers's extraordinary life-story – given in the form of an interview to a sceptical American journalist, Jack Walser, backstage at the Alhambra Music Hall – makes up the novel's substantial Part One. After that, still in pursuit of his story, Walser signs up alongside Fevvers as a clown, and Parts Two and Three transport us, unexpectedly, to Imperial Russia; first to the barely controlled mayhem of the St Petersburg Circus and then to the dizzying white wastes of Siberia. As the landscape grows more extreme, so Carter pushes at the limits of the novel form itself. The cosy realist start expands, via fantasy and allegory, to open up a space for radical change. By the end of the book, personalities will have been reformed, social and gender dynamics rewritten, by – a wonderful phrase, which beautifully sums up Carter's style and literary ethos – 'the radiant shadow of the implausible'.

For Carter was, among many things, a fabulous storyteller, a professional liar, always revelling in narrative and its rude, primal pull. *Nights at the Circus* is full of stories, its basic structure regularly opening out to offer us the potted biographies of minor characters. There are Ma Nelson's prostitutes, for example, who first discover Fevvers, newly hatched and abandoned, in a basket on the doorstep of their Whitechapel brothel. There are the inhabitants of the Museum of Women Monsters - Fanny Four-Eyes, the Wiltshire Wonder, and others - with whom Fevvers briefly throws in her fortunes once the brothel is disbanded. There are the artistes of the Imperial Circus: Mignon, the Ape-Man's abused missus; the tiger-taming Abyssinian Princess; and Buffo the Clown, who loses his wits mid-performance and is carted off to an asylum - much to the delight of the unsuspecting crowd, for whom it's all part of the craziness of the ring. These characters' stories erupt like fantastic blossoms out of the already gaudy foliage of Carter's narrative, pushing it in wild, surprising directions but never throwing it off balance or weighing it down.

The novel treads a similarly agile path between realism and fantasy. Its historical setting, for example, is a very specific and meaningful one - the action takes place at the 'fag-end' of the 1890s, and Fevvers is utterly a woman of her time, a woman who's been painted by Lautrec, had supper with Willy and Colette, troubled the psychoanalysts of Vienna, and been courted by the Prince of Wales. The outrageous name-dropping becomes more sly and more exuberant as the novel proceeds. Carter's pen trips with wonderful breeziness through the Western literary canon, offering us echoes of Goethe, Shakespeare, Poe, Swift, Baudelaire, Mozart and Blake; but giving nods, too, to Yeats, Laurel and Hardy, Foucault, and - 'They're a girl's best friend,' twinkles Fevvers at one point, displaying her diamond earrings - Anita Loos. As these flagrant anachronisms hint - and as Carter makes explicit once we

reach the 'Sleeping Beauty of a city' that is *fin de siècle* St Petersburg, soon to be awakened by the 'bloody kiss' of revolution - *Nights at the Circus* does not belong to 'authentic history'. It offers, instead, a kind of fantasy history, weaving its stories in and across the gaps, silences and pregnant shadows of recorded fact.

It's a tribute to Carter's skill as a novelist that her characters can inhabit this gloriously artificial universe and yet remain so emotionally compelling and physically convincing. Even Fevvers's feathers convince us. Carter clearly gave them an awful lot of thought - 'Really,' she once said, in interview, 'how very, very inconvenient it would be for a person to have real wings, just how really difficult' - and I've always been tickled by the attention she gives to Fevvers's aerodynamics, the detail into which Fevvers goes when explaining to Walser her awesome but inconvenient physique:

My legs don't tally with the upper part of my body from the point of view of pure aesthetics, d'you see. Were I to be the true copy of Venus, one built on *my* scale ought to have legs like tree-trunks, sir; these flimsy little underpinnings of mine have more than once buckled up under the top-heavy distribution of weight upon my torso, have let me down with a bump and left me sprawling. I'm not tip-top where walking is concerned, sir, more *tip-up*.

Fevvers is a wonderfully fleshly creation, a creature of sweats and appetites, of belches and farts. Her predicament - like that of many charismatic women (like Wedekind's Lulu, for example, about whom Carter would write a stage play in 1987) - is that she is continually preyed upon by people seeking to turn her into a commodity or a symbol. She narrowly escapes being ritually sacrificed by the sinister Mr Rosencreutz, who sees her as 'Flora; Azrael; Venus Pandemos!'. She is almost turned into a literal 'bird in a gilded cage' by a Russian Grand Duke. Just as Walser, 'unfinished' at the novel's start, must be remade, reformed, via amnesia and cultural displacement, so Fevvers has to

learn how to tell her own story, on her own terms: to become 'No Venus, or Helen, or Angel of the Apocalypse, not Izrael or Isfahel', but the agent of her own imagination and her own desire. For only then will she become a symbol really worth celebrating - a symbol of the new century which, significantly, is just breaking at the novel's close, a century in which (with a bit of luck) 'all the women will have wings'.

Carter was committed to telling tales of transformation throughout her career; in *The Bloody Chamber*, women are transformed into beasts, beasts are changed into men, in allegories of power and desire. Like all her fictions, *Nights at the Circus* has its share of villains and victims, female and male, but the narrative ultimately celebrates liberation, the casting off of myth and mind forg'd manacles, the discovery of voice, empathy, conscience, the making of a 'new kind of music'. The novel ends with Fevvers's laughter, with an affirmation of life. And Carter's very prose is something to smile at, teeming as it does with memorable images, metaphors and similes. A drawing-room, for example, is 'snug as a groin'. A woman 'crackle[s] quietly with her own static'. A sky is 'tinted the lavender of half-mourning', a violet is 'the colour of tired eyelids', a tiger moves 'like orange quicksilver, or a rarer liquid metal, a quickgold'. Carter's writing, not just in this novel but throughout her work, is a celebration of words - a celebration of language and all the marvellous things that language can be made to do.

It's this combination of lushness and tremendous optimism, I think, which made *Nights at the Circus* so memorable for so many readers in Margaret Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s; and it's something which renders the novel inspiring today, in a different political climate but at a time when much British fiction seems to affect an affectless style, and to be interested in themes of failure, decay, and disappointment. Like all thoughtful novelists, Carter

engaged very explicitly with the issues of her day. Her account of the Imperial Circus was written in a period when St Petersburg had been reborn twice, as Petrograd and Leningrad, but before its original name had been restored to it; and in a world in which Nike – the Winged Victory whom Fevvers impersonates at the Whitechapel brothel – was still a relatively innocent motif. One can't help but wonder what Carter would have made of post-Communist politics, globalisation, New Labour, the invasion of Iraq, and – because one of her strengths, I think, was her promiscuous plundering of popular culture as well as the canon – it's impossible not to regret the rich and irreverent fictions she might have woven out of reality TV, the cult of celebrity, cosmetic surgery, and ASBOs. She was one of the great late twentieth-century British writers, producing novels, short stories, journalism and plays that spoke to a shared cultural climate, but in a style that was entirely her own. She was also enormously influential. Rereading *Nights at the Circus* for this reissue, in fact, I could see, in a rich, original form, many of the themes and preoccupations that have surfaced in my own work. I could never have written the novels that I have without having read the fictions of Angela Carter first. I'm still sorry that I shall never get to meet her, and thank her.

Sarah Waters, 2006

1

LONDON

ONE

'LOR' LOVE YOU, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. 'As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the "Cockney Venus", for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me "Helen of the High Wire", due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore - for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*.

'Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!'

The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare him: 'Believe it or not!' Then she spun round on her swivelling dressing-stool - it was a plush-topped, backless piano stool, lifted from the rehearsal room - and confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false lash from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture and a small, explosive, rasping sound.

Fevvers, the most famous *aerialiste* of the day; her slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' And she didn't let you forget it for a minute; this query, in the French language, in foot-high letters, blazed forth from a wall-size poster, souvenir of her Parisian triumphs, dominating her London dressing-room. Something hectic, something fittingly impetuous and dashing about that poster, the preposterous depiction of a young woman shooting up like a rocket,

whee! in a burst of agitated sawdust towards an unseen trapeze somewhere above in the wooden heavens of the Cirque d'Hiver. The artist had chosen to depict her ascent from behind - bums aloft, you might say; up she goes, in a steatopygous perspective, shaking out about her those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she. And she was a *big* girl.

Evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts.

But these notorious and much-debated wings, the source of her fame, were stowed away for the night under the soiled quilting of her baby-blue satin dressing-gown, where they made an uncomfortable-looking pair of bulges, shuddering the surface of the taut fabric from time to time as if desirous of breaking loose. ('How does she do that?' pondered the reporter.)

'In Paris, they called me *l'Ange Anglaise*, the English Angel, "not English but an angel", as the old saint said,' she'd told him, jerking her head at that favourite poster which, she'd remarked off-handedly, had been scrawled on the stone by 'some Frog dwarf who asked me to piddle on his thingy before he'd get his crayons so much as out sparing your blushes'. Then - 'a touch of sham?' - she'd popped the cork of a chilled magnum of champagne between her teeth. A hissing flute of bubbly stood beside her own elbow on the dressing-table, the still-crepitating bottle lodged negligently in the toilet jug, packed in ice that must have come from a fishmonger's for a shiny scale or two stayed trapped within the chunks. And this twice-used ice must surely be the source of the marine aroma - something fishy about the Cockney Venus - that underlay the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas that made you feel you breathed the air in Fevvers' dressing-room in lumps.

One lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification.

‘And now,’ she said, ‘after my conquests on the continent’ (which she pronounced, ‘congting’) ‘here’s the prodigal daughter home again to London, my lovely London that I love so much. London – as dear old Dan Leno calls it, “a little village on the Thames of which the principal industries are the music hall and the confidence trick”.’

She tipped the young reporter a huge wink in the ambiguity of the mirror and briskly stripped the other set of false eyelashes.

Her native city welcomed her home with such delirium that the *Illustrated London News* dubbed the phenomenon, ‘Fevvermania’. Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with ‘Fevvers’ garters, stockings, fans, cigars, shaving soap . . . She even lent it to a brand of baking powder; if you added a spoonful of the stuff, up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did. Heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise, this Helen launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side. (‘Have you heard the one about how Fevvers *got it up* for the travelling salesman . . .’) Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger: ‘Have you seen Fevvers?’ And then: ‘How does she do it?’ And then: ‘Do you think she’s *real*?’

The young reporter wanted to keep his wits about him so he juggled with glass, notebook and pencil, surreptitiously looking for a place to stow the glass where she could not keep filling it – perhaps on that black iron mantelpiece whose brutal corner, jutting out over his perch on the horsehair sofa, promised to brain him if he made a sudden movement. His quarry had him effectively trapped. His attempts to get rid of the damn’ glass only succeeded in dislodging a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes’ nest of

silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet, final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, 'essence of Fevvers', that clogged the room. When she got round to it, she might well bottle the smell, and sell it. She never missed a chance.

Fevvers ignored his discomfiture.

Perhaps the stockings had descended in order to make common cause with the other elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use, that she hurled round the room apparently at random during the course of the many dressings and undressings which her profession demanded. A large pair of frilly drawers, evidently fallen where they had light-heartedly been tossed, draped some object, clock or marble bust or funerary urn, anything was possible since it was obscured completely. A redoubtable corset of the kind called an Iron Maiden poked out of the empty coalscuttle like the pink husk of a giant prawn emerging from its den, trailing long laces like several sets of legs. The room, in all, was a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor, sufficient, in its homely way, to intimidate a young man who had led a less sheltered life than this one.

His name was Jack Walser. Himself, he hailed from California, from the other side of a world all of whose four corners he had knocked about for most of his five-and-twenty summers - a picaresque career which rubbed off his own rough edges; now he boasts the smoothest of manners and you would see in his appearance nothing of the scapegrace urchin who, long ago, stowed away on a steamer bound from 'Frisco to Shanghai. In the course of his adventuring, he discovered in himself a talent with words, and an even greater aptitude for finding himself in the right place at the right time. So he stumbled upon his profession, and, at this time in his life, he filed copy to a New York newspaper for a living, so he could travel wherever he pleased whilst retaining the privileged irresponsibility of the

journalist, the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing which cheerfully combined, in Walser's personality, with a characteristically American generosity towards the brazen lie. His avocation suited him right down to the ground on which he took good care to keep his feet. Call him Ishmael; but Ishmael with an expense account, and, besides, a thatch of unruly flaxen hair, a ruddy, pleasant, square-jawed face and eyes the cool grey of scepticism.

Yet there remained something a little unfinished about him, still. He was like a handsome house that has been let, furnished. There were scarcely any of those little, what you might call *personal* touches to his personality, as if his habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being. I say he had a propensity for 'finding himself in the right place at the right time'; yet it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively, *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought.

He would have called himself a 'man of action'. He subjected his life to a series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle. That was how he knew he was alive.

So Walser survived the plague in Setzuan, the assegai in Africa, a sharp dose of buggery in a bedouin tent beside the Damascus road and much more, yet none of this had altered to any great degree the invisible child inside the man, who indeed remained the same dauntless lad who used to haunt Fisherman's Wharf hungrily eyeing the tangled sails upon the water until at last he, too, went off with the tide towards an endless promise. Walser had not experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know *how* to be afraid. So his habitual disengagement was involuntary;

it was not the result of judgment, since judgment involves the positives and negatives of belief.

He was a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness. That was why he was a good reporter. And yet the kaleidoscope was growing a little weary with all the spinning; war and disaster had not quite succeeded in fulfilling that promise which the future once seemed to hold, and, for the moment, still shaky from a recent tussle with yellow fever, he was taking it a little easy, concentrating on those 'human interest' angles that, hitherto, had eluded him.

Since he was a good reporter, he was necessarily a connoisseur of the tall tale. So now he was in London he went to talk to Fevvers, for a series of interviews tentatively entitled: 'Great Humbugs of the World'.

Free and easy as his American manners were, they met their match in those of the *aerialiste*, who now shifted from one buttock to the other and - 'better out than in, sir' - let a ripping fart ring round the room. She peered across her shoulder, again, to see how he took *that*. Under the screen of her bonhomerie - bonnefemmerie? - he noted she was wary. He cracked her a white grin. He relished *this* commission!

On that European tour of hers, Parisians shot themselves in droves for her sake; not just Lautrec but *all* the post-impressionists vied to paint her; Willy gave her supper and she gave Colette some good advice. Alfred Jarry proposed marriage. When she arrived at the railway station in Cologne, a cheering bevy of students unhitched her horses and pulled her carriage to the hotel themselves. In Berlin, her photograph was displayed everywhere in the newsagents' windows next to that of the Kaiser. In Vienna, she deformed the dreams of that entire generation who would immediately commit themselves wholeheartedly to psychoanalysis. Everywhere she went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed, showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press and the King of Portugal

gave her a skipping rope of egg-shaped pearls, which she banked.

Now all London lies beneath her flying feet; and, the very morning of this self-same October's day, in this very dressing-room, here, in the Alhambra Music Hall, among her dirty underwear, has she not signed a *six-figure contract* for a Grand Imperial Tour, to Russia and then Japan, during which she will astonish a brace of emperors? And, from Yokohama, she will then ship to Seattle, for the start of a Grand Democratic Tour of the United States of America.

All across the Union, audiences clamour for her arrival, which will coincide with that of the new century.

For we are at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history. It is the final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety-nine. And Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off.

Walser is here, ostensibly, to 'puff' her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of. Though do not think the revelation she is a hoax will finish her on the halls; far from it. If she isn't suspect, where's the controversy? What's the news?

'Ready for another snifter?' She pulled the dripping bottle from the scaly ice.

At close quarters, it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel. At six feet two in her stockings, she would have to give Walser a couple of inches in order to match him and, though they said she was 'divinely tall', there was, off-stage, not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar. Her face, broad and oval as a meat dish, had been thrown on a common wheel out of coarse clay; nothing subtle about her appeal, which was just as well if she were to function as the democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man.

She invitingly shook the bottle until it ejaculated afresh. 'Put hairs on your chest!' Walser, smiling, covered his glass up with his hand. 'I've hairs on my chest already, ma'am.'

She chuckled with appreciation and topped herself up with such a lavish hand that foam spilled into her pot of dry rouge, there to hiss and splutter in a bloody froth. It was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it; there was enough of her to go round, and some to spare. You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance. You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers. Even Walser did not guess that.

'About your name . . .' Walser hinted, pencil at the ready.

She fortified herself with a gulp of champagne.

'When I was a baby, you could have distinguished me in a crowd of foundlings only by just this little bit of down, of yellow fluff, on my back, on top of both my shoulder blades. Just like the fluff on a chick, it was. And she who found me on the steps at Wapping, me in the laundry basket in which *persons unknown* left me, a little babe most lovingly packed up in new straw sweetly sleeping among a litter of broken eggshells, she who stumbled over this poor, abandoned creature clasped me at that moment in her arms out of the abundant goodness of her heart and took me in.

'Where, indoors, unpacking me, unwrapping my shawl, witnessing the sleepy, milky, silky fledgling, all the girls said: "Looks like the little thing's going to sprout Fevvers!" Ain't that so, Lizzie,' she appealed to her dresser.

Hitherto, this woman had taken no part in the interview but stood stiffly beside the mirror holding a glass of wine like a weapon, eyeing Jack Walser as scrupulously as if she were attempting to assess to the last farthing just how much money he had in his wallet. Now Lizzie chimed in, in a dark brown voice and a curious accent, unfamiliar to Walser,

that was, had he known it, that of London-born Italians, with its double-barrelled diphthongs and glottal stops.

‘That is so, indeed, sir, for wasn’t I myself the one that found her? “Fevvers”, we named her, and so she will be till the end of the chapter, though when we took her down to Clement Dane’s to have her christened, the vicar said he’d never heard of such a name as Fevvers, so Sophie suffices for her legal handle.

‘Let’s get your make-up off, love.’

Lizzie was a tiny, wizened, gnome-like apparition who might have been any age between thirty and fifty; snapping, black eyes, sallow skin, an incipient moustache on the upper lip and a close-cropped frizzle of tri-coloured hair – bright grey at the roots, stark grey in between, burnt with henna at the tips. The shoulders of her skimpy, decent, black dress were white with dandruff. She had a brisk air of bristle, like a terrier bitch. There was ex-whore written all over her. Excavating a glass jar from the rubble on the dressing-table, she dug out a handful of cold cream with her crooked claw and slapped it, splat! on Fevvers’ face.

‘You ’ave a spot more wine, ducky, while you’re waiting,’ she offered Walser, scouring away at her charge with a wad of cotton wool. ‘It didn’t cost *us* nothing. Some jook give it you, didn’t ’e. *There*, darling . . .’ wiping off the cold cream, suddenly, disconcertingly, tenderly caressing the *aerialiste* with the endearment.

‘It was that French jook,’ said Fevvers, emerging beefsteak red and gleaming. ‘Only the one crate, the mean bastard. Have a drop more, for Gawd’s sake, young feller, we’re leaving you behind! Can’t have the ladies pissed on their lonesome, can we? What kind of a gent are you?’

Extraordinarily raucous and metallic voice; clanging of contralto or even baritone dustbins. She submerged beneath another fistful of cold cream and there was a lengthy pause.

Oddly enough, in spite of the mess, which resembled the aftermath of an explosion in a *corsetière's* Fevvers' dressing-room was notable for its anonymity. Only the huge poster with the scrawled message in charcoal: *Toujours, Toulouse*, and that was only self-advertisement, a reminder to the visitor of that part of herself which, off-stage, she kept concealed. Apart from that, not even a framed photograph propped amongst the unguents on her dressing-table, just a bunch of Parma violets stuck in a jam-jar, presumably floral overspill from the mantelpiece. No lucky mascots, no black china cats nor pots of white heather. Neither personal luxuries such as armchairs or rugs. Nothing to give her away. A star's dressing-room, mean as a kitchenmaid's attic. The only bits of herself she'd impressed on her surroundings were those few blonde hairs striating the cake of Pears transparent soap in the cracked saucer on the deal washstand.

The blunt end of an enamelled hip bath full of suds of earlier ablutions stuck out from behind a canvas screen, over which was thrown a dangling set of pink fleshings so that at first glance you might have thought Fevvers had just flayed herself. If her towering headdress of dyed ostrich plumes were unceremoniously shoved into the grate, Lizzie had treated the other garment in which her mistress made her first appearance before her audience with more respect, had shaken out the robe of red and purple feathers, put it on a wooden hanger and hung it from a nail at the back of the dressing-room door, where its ciliate fringes shivered continually in the draught from the ill-fitting windows.

On the stage of the Alhambra, when the curtain went up, there she was, prone in a feathery heap under this garment, behind tinsel bars, while the band in the pit sawed and brayed away at 'Only a bird in a gilded cage'. How kitsch, how apt the melody; it pointed up the element of the meretricious in the spectacle, reminded you the girl was rumoured to have started her career in freak shows. (Check,

noted Walser.) While the band played on, slowly, slowly, she got to her knees, then to her feet, still muffled up in her voluminous cape, that crested helmet of red and purple plumes on her head; she began to twist the shiny strings of her frail cage in a perfunctory way, mewling faintly to be let out.

A breath of stale night air rippled the pile on the red plush banquettes of the Alhambra, stroked the cheeks of the plaster cherubs that upheld the monumental swags above the stage.

From aloft, they lowered her trapezes.

As if a glimpse of the things inspired her to a fresh access of energy, she seized hold of the bars in a firm grip and, to the accompaniment of a drum-roll, parted them. She stepped through the gap with elaborate and uncharacteristic daintiness. The gilded cage whisked up into the flies, tangling for a moment with the trapeze.

She flung off her mantle and cast it aside. There she was.

In her pink fleshings, her breastbone stuck out like the prow of a ship; the Iron Maiden cantilevered her bosom whilst paring down her waist to almost nothing, so she looked as if she might snap in two at any careless movement. The leotard was adorned with a spangle of sequins on her crotch and nipples, nothing else. Her hair was hidden away under the dyed plumes that added a good eighteen inches to her already immense height. On her back she bore an airy burden of furled plumage as gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo. On her red mouth there was an artificial smile.

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!

LOOK AT ME!

She rose up on tiptoe and slowly twirled round, giving the spectators a comprehensive view of her back: seeing is believing. Then she spread out her superb, heavy arms in a backwards gesture of benediction and, as she did so, her wings spread, too, a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink.

Oooooooh! The gasps of the beholders sent a wind of wonder rippling through the theatre.

But Walser whimsically reasoned with himself, thus: now, the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or, as we should say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbows, wrists and fingers, all complete. So, if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings!

Put it another way: would you believe a lady with four arms, all perfect, like a Hindu goddess, hinged on either side of those shoulders of a voluptuous stevedore? Because, truly, *that* is the real nature of the physiological anomaly in which Miss Fevvers is asking us to suspend disbelief.

Now, wings without arms is *one* impossible thing; but wings *with* arms is the impossible made doubly unlikely - the impossible squared. Yes, sir!

In his red-plush press box, watching her through his opera-glasses, he thought of dancers he had seen in Bangkok, presenting with their plumed, gilded, mirrored surfaces and angular, hieratic movements, infinitely more persuasive illusions of the airy creation than this over-literal winged barmaid before him. 'She tries too damn' hard,' he scribbled on his pad.

He thought of the Indian rope trick, the child shinning up the rope in the Calcutta market and then vanishing clean

away; only his forlorn cry floated down from the cloudless sky. How the white-robed crowd roared when the magician's basket started to rock and sway on the ground until the child jumped out of it, all smiles! 'Mass hysteria and the delusion of crowds . . . a little primitive technology and a big dose of the will to believe.' In Kathmandu, he saw the fakir on a bed of nails, all complete, soar up until he was level with the painted demons on the eaves of the wooden houses; what, said the old man, heavily bribed, would be the point of the illusion if it *looked* like an illusion? For, opined the old charlatan to Walser with po-faced solemnity, is not this whole world an illusion? And yet it fools everybody.

Now the pit band ground to a halt and rustled its scores. After a moment's disharmony comparable to the clearing of a throat, it began to saw away as best it could at – what else – 'The Ride of the Valkyries'. Oh, the scratch unhandiness of the musicians! the tuneless insensitivity of their playing! Walser sat back with a pleased smile on his lips; the greasy, inescapable whiff of stage magic which pervaded Fevvers' act manifested itself abundantly in her choice of music.

She gathered herself together, rose up on tiptoe and gave a mighty shrug, in order to raise her shoulders. Then she brought down her elbows, so that the tips of the pin feathers of each wing met in the air above her headdress. At the first crescendo, she jumped.

Yes, jumped. Jumped up to catch the dangling trapeze, jumped up some thirty feet in a single, heavy bound, transfixed the while upon the arching white sword of the limelight. The invisible wire that must have hauled her up remained invisible. She caught hold of the trapeze with one hand. Her wings throbbed, pulsed, then whirred, buzzed and at last began to beat steadily on the air they disturbed so much that the pages of Walser's notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place, had to scramble to find it again, almost displaced his composure but managed to grab

tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box.

First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise. (Check if she trained as a dancer.)

My, how her bodice strains! You'd think her tits were going to pop right out. What a sensation *that* would cause; wonder she hasn't thought of incorporating it in her act. Physical ungainliness in flight caused, perhaps, by absence of *tail*, the rudder of the flying bird - I wonder why she doesn't tack a tail on the back of her cache-sexe; it would add verisimilitude and, perhaps, improve the performance.

What made her remarkable as an *aerialiste*, however, was the speed - or, rather the lack of it - with which she performed even the climactic triple somersault. When the hack *aerialiste*, the everyday, wingless variety, performs the triple somersault, he or she travels through the air at a cool sixty miles an hour; Fevvers, however, contrived a contemplative and leisurely twenty-five, so that the packed theatre could enjoy the spectacle, as in slow motion, of every tense muscle straining in her Rubenesque form. The music went much faster than she did; she dawdled. Indeed, she did defy the laws of projectiles, because a projectile cannot *mooch* along its trajectory; if it slackens its speed in mid-air, down it falls. But Fevvers, apparently, potted along the invisible gangway between her trapezes with the portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon flapping from one proffered handful of corn to another, and then she turned head over heels three times, lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum.

(But surely, pondered Walser, a *real* bird would have too much sense to think of performing a triple somersault in the first place.)

Yet, apart from this disconcerting pact with gravity, which surely she made in the same way the Nepali fakir had made

his, Walser observed that the girl went no further than any other trapeze artiste. She neither attempted nor achieved anything a wingless biped could not have performed, although she did it in a different way, and, as the Valkyries at last approached Valhalla, he was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief.

For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman – in the implausible event that such a thing existed – have to pretend she was an artificial one?

He smiled to himself at the paradox: in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world. But – and Walser smiled to himself again, as he remembered his flutter of conviction that seeing was believing – what about her *belly button*? Hasn't she just this minute told me she was hatched from an *egg*, not gestated *in utero*? The oviparous species are not, by definition, nourished by the placenta; therefore they feel no need of the umbilical cord . . . and, therefore, don't bear the scar of its loss! Why isn't the whole of London asking: does Fevvers have a belly button?

It was impossible to make out whether or not she had a navel during her act; Walser could recall, of her belly, only a pink, featureless expanse of stockinette fleshing. Whatever her wings were, her nakedness was certainly a stage illusion.

After she'd pulled off the triple somersault, the band performed the *coup de grâce* on Wagner, and stopped. Fevvers hung by one hand, waving and blowing kisses with the other, those famous wings of hers now drawn up behind her. Then she jumped right down to the ground, just dropped, just plummeted down, hitting the stage squarely on her enormous feet with an all too human thump only partially muffled by the roar of applause and cheers.