

Angela Carter

NIGHTS AT
THE CIRCUS



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Published by Vintage 1994

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Shadow Dance

The Magic Toyshop

Several Perceptions

Heroes And Villains

Love

The Infernal Desire Machines Of Dr Hoffman

Fireworks

The Passion Of New Eve

The Bloody Chamber

Nights At The Circus

Black Venus

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American Ghosts And Old World Wonders

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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, 'congtinong') '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 – bonnnnefemmerie? – 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 shoulderblades. 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