SUNDAY TIMES YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

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Tipping the Velvet

'This could be the most important debut of its kind since that of Jeanette Winterson'

DAILY TELEGRAPH

TIPPING THE VELVET

Sarah Waters

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster? If you have, you will remember it. Some quirk of the Kentish coastline makes Whitstable natives - as they are properly called - the largest and the juiciest, the savouriest yet the subtlest, oysters in the whole of England. Whitstable oysters are, quite rightly, famous. The French, who are known for their sensitive palates, regularly cross the Channel for them; they are shipped, in barrels of ice, to the dining-tables of Hamburg and Berlin. Why, the King himself, I heard, makes special trips to Whitstable with Mrs Keppel, to eat oyster suppers in a private hotel; and as for the old Queen -she dined on a native a day (or so they say) till the day she died.

Did you ever go to Whitstable, and see the oyster-parlours there? My father kept one; I was born in it - do you recall a narrow, weather-boarded house, painted a flaking blue, half-way between the High Street and the harbour? Do you remember the bulging sign that hung above the door, that said that Astley's Oysters, the Best in Kent were to be had within? Did you, perhaps, push at that door, and step into the dim, low-ceilinged, fragrant room beyond it? Can you recall the tables with their chequered cloths - the bill of fare chalked on a board - the spirit-lamps, the sweating slabs of butter?

Were you served by a girl with a rosy cheek, and a saucy manner, and curls? That was my sister, Alice. Or was it a man, rather tall and stooping, with a snowy apron falling from the knot in his neck-tie to the bow in his boots? That was my father. Did you see, as the kitchen door swung to and fro, a lady stand frowning into the clouds of steam that rose from a pan of bubbling oyster soup, or a sizzling gridiron? That was my mother.

And was there at her side a slender, white-faced, unremarkable-looking girl, with the sleeves of her dress rolled up to her elbows, and a lock of lank and colourless hair forever falling into her eye, and her lips continually moving to the words of some street-singer's or music-hall song?

That was me.

Like Molly Malone in the old ballad, I was a fishmonger, because my parents were. They kept the restaurant, and the rooms above it: I was raised an oyster-girl, and steeped in all the flavours of the trade. My first few childish steps I took around vats of sleeping natives and barrels of ice; before I was ever given a piece of chalk and a slate, I was handed an oyster-knife and instructed in its use; while I was still lisping out my alphabet at the schoolmaster's knee, I could name you the contents of an oyster-cook's kitchen -could sample fish with a blindfold on, and tell you their variety. Whitstable was all the world to me, Astley's Parlour my own particular country, oyster-juice my medium. Although I didn't long believe the story told to me by Mother - that they had found me as a baby in an oyster-shell, and a greedy customer had almost eaten me for lunch - for eighteen years I never doubted my own oyster-ish sympathies, never looked far beyond my father's kitchen for occupation, or for love.

It was a curious kind of life, mine, even by Whitstable standards; but it was not a disagreeable or even a terribly hard one. Our working day began at seven, and ended twelve hours later; and through all those hours my duties were the same. While Mother cooked, and Alice and my father served, I sat upon a high stool at the side of a vat of natives, and scrubbed, and rinsed, and plied the oyster-knife. Some people like their oysters raw; and for them your job is easiest, for you have merely to pick out a dozen natives from the barrel, swill the brine from them, and place them, with a piece of parsley or cress, upon a plate. But for those who took their oysters stewed, or fried - or baked, or scalloped, or put in a pie - my labours were more delicate. Then I must open each oyster, and beard it, and transfer it to Mother's cooking-pot with all of its savoury flesh intact, and none of its liquor spilled or tainted. Since a supper-plate will hold a dozen fish; since oyster-teas are cheap; and since our Parlour was a busy one, with room for fifty customers at once - well, you may calculate for yourself the vast numbers of oysters which passed, each day, beneath my prising knife; and you might imagine, too, the redness and the soreness and the sheer salty soddenness of my fingers at the close of every afternoon. Even now, two decades and more since I put aside my oyster-knife and quit my father's kitchen for ever, I feel a ghostly, sympathetic twinge in my wrist and finger-joints at the sight of a fishmonger's barrel, or the sound of an oyster-man's cry; and still, sometimes, I believe I can catch the scent of liquor and brine beneath my thumb-nail, and in the creases of

my palm.

I have said that there was nothing in my life, when I was young, but oysters; but that is not quite true. I had friends and cousins, as any girl must have who grows up in a small town in a large, old family. I had my sister Alice - my dearest friend of all - with whom I shared a bedroom and a bed, and who heard all my secrets, and told me all of hers. I even had a kind of beau: a boy named Freddy, who worked a dredging smack beside my brother Davy and my Uncle Joe on Whitstable Bay.

And last of all I had a fondness - you might say, a kind of passion - for the music hall; and more particularly for music-hall songs and the singing of them. If you have visited Whitstable you will know that this was a rather inconvenient passion, for the town has neither music hall nor theatre - only a solitary lamp-post before the Duke of Cumberland Hotel, where minstrel troupes occasionally sing, and the Punch-and-Judy man, in August, sets his booth. But Whitstable is only fifteen minutes away by train from Canterbury; and here there was a music hall - the Canterbury Palace of Varieties - where the shows were three hours long, and the tickets cost sixpence, and the acts were the best to be seen, they said, in all of Kent.

The Palace was a small and, I suspect, a rather shabby theatre; but when I see it in my memories I see it still with my oyster-girl's eyes -I see the mirror-glass which lined the walls, the crimson plush upon the seats, the plaster cupids, painted gold, which swooped above the curtain. Like our oyster-house, it had its own particular scent - the scent, I know now, of music halls everywhere - the scent of wood and grease-paint and spilling beer, of gas and of tobacco and of hair-oil, all combined. It was a scent which as a girl I loved uncritically; later I heard it described, by theatre managers and artistes, as the smell of laughter, the very odour of applause. Later still I came to know it as the essence not of pleasure, but of grief.

That, however, is to get ahead of my story.

I was more intimate than most girls with the colours and scents of the Canterbury Palace — in the period, at least, of which I am thinking, that final summer in my father's house, when I became eighteen - because Alice had a beau who worked there, a boy named Tony Reeves, who got us seats at knock-

down prices or for free. Tony was the nephew of the Palace's manager, the celebrated Tricky Reeves, and therefore something of a catch for our Alice. My parents mistrusted him at first, thinking him 'rapid' because he worked in a theatre, and wore cigars behind his ears, and talked glibly of contracts, London, and champagne. But no one could dislike Tony for long, he was so large-hearted and easy and good; and like every other boy who courted her, he adored my sister, and was ready to be kind to us all on her account.

Thus it was that Alice and I were so frequently to be found on a Saturday night, tucking our skirts beneath our seats and calling out the choruses to the gayest songs, in the best and most popular shows, at the Canterbury Palace. Like the rest of the audience, we were discriminating. We had our favourite turns - artistes we watched and shouted for; songs we begged to have sung and re-sung again and again until the singer's throat was dry, and she - for more often than not it was the lady singers whom Alice and I loved best - could sing no more, but only smile and curtsey.

And when the show was over, and we had paid our respects to Tony in his stuffy little office behind the ticket-seller's booth, we would carry the tunes away with us. We would sing them on the train to Whitstable - and sometimes others, returning home from the same show as merry as we, would sing them with us. We would whisper them into the darkness as we lay in bed, we would dream our dreams to the beat of their verses; and we would wake next morning humming them still. We'd serve a bit of music-hall glamour, then, with our fish suppers - Alice whistling as she carried platters, and making the customers smile to hear her; me, perched on my high stool beside my bowl of brine, singing to the oysters that I scrubbed and prised and bearded. Mother said I should be on the stage myself.

When she said it, however, she laughed; and so did I. The girls I saw in the glow of the footlights, the girls whose songs I loved to learn and sing, they weren't like me. They were more like my sister: they had cherry lips, and curls that danced about their shoulders; they had bosoms that jutted, and elbows that dimpled, and ankles - when they showed them - as slim and as shapely as beer-bottles. I was tall, and rather lean. My chest was flat, my hair dull, my eyes a drab and an uncertain blue. My complexion, to be sure, was perfectly smooth and clear, and my teeth were very white; but these - in our family, at least - were counted unremarkable, for since we all passed our days in a miasma of

simmering brine, we were all as bleached and blemishless as cuttlefish.

No, girls like Alice were meant to dance upon a gilded stage, skirted in satin, hailed by cupids; and girls like me were made to sit in the gallery, dark and anonymous, and watch them.

Or so, anyway, I thought then.

The routine I have described - the routine of prising and bearding and cooking and serving, and Saturday-night visits to the music hall - is the one that I remember most from my girlhood; but it was, of course, only a winter one. From May to August, when British natives must be left to spawn, the dredging smacks pull down their sails or put to sea in search of other quarry; and oyster-parlours all over England are obliged, in consequence, to change their menus or close their doors. The business that my father did between autumn and spring, though excellent enough, was not so good that he could afford to shut his shop throughout the summer and take a holiday; but, like many Whitstable families whose fortunes depended upon the sea and its bounty, there was a noticeable easing of our labours in the warmer months, a kind of shifting into a slower, looser, gayer key. The restaurant grew less busy. We served crab and plaice and turbot and herrings, rather than oysters, and the filleting was kinder work than the endless scrubbing and shelling of the winter months. We kept our windows raised, and the kitchen door thrown open; we were neither boiled alive by the steam of the cooking-pots, nor numbed and frozen by barrels of oyster-ice, as we were in winter, but gently cooled by the breezes, and soothed by the sound of fluttering canvas and ringing pulleys that drifted into our kitchen from Whitstable Bay.

The summer in which I turned eighteen was a warm one, and grew warmer as the weeks advanced. For days at a time Father left the shop for Mother to run, and set up a cockle-and-whelk stall on the beach. Alice and I were free to visit the Canterbury Palace every night if we cared to; but just as no one that July wanted to eat fried fish and lobster soup in our stuffy Parlour, so the very thought of passing an hour or two in gloves and bonnet, beneath the flaring gasoliers of Tricky Reeves's airless music hall, made us gasp and droop and prickle.

There are more similarities between a fishmonger's trade and a music-hall manager's than you might think. When Father changed his stock to suit his patrons' dulled and over-heated palates, so did Tricky. He paid half of his performers off, and brought in a host of new artistes from the music halls of Chatham, Margate and Dover; most cleverly of all, he secured a one-week contract with a real celebrity, from London: Gully Sutherland — one of the best comic singers in the business, and a guaranteed hall-filler even in the hottest of hot Kentish summers.

Alice and I visited the Palace on the very first night of Gully Sutherland's week. By this time we had an arrangement with the lady in the ticket-booth: we gave her a nod and a smile as we arrived, then sauntered past her window and chose any seat in the hall beyond that we fancied. Usually, this was somewhere in the gallery. I could never understand the attraction of the stalls ticket; it seemed unnatural to me to seat oneself below the stage, and have to peer up at the artistes from a level somewhere near their ankles, through the faint, shimmering haze of heat that rose above the footlights. The circle gave a better view, but the gallery, though further away, to my mind gave the best of all; and there were two seats in the front row, at the very centre of the gallery, that Alice and I particular favoured. Here you knew yourself to be not just at a show but in a theatre: you caught the shape of the stage and the sweep of the seats; and you marvelled to see your neighbours' faces, and to know your own to be like theirs - all queerly lit by the glow of the footlights, and a damp at the lip, and with a grin upon it, like that of a demon at some hellish revue.

It was certainly as hot as hell in the Canterbury Palace on Gully Sutherland's opening night - so hot that, when Alice and I leaned over the gallery rail to gaze at the audience below, we were met by a blast of tobacco- and sweat-scented air, that made us reel and cough. The theatre, as Tony's uncle had calculated, was almost full; yet it was strangely hushed. People spoke in murmurs, or not at all. When one looked from the gallery to the circle and the stalls, one saw only the flap of hats and programmes. The flapping didn't stop when the orchestra struck up its few bars of overture and the house lights dimmed; but it slowed a little, and people sat up rather straighter in their seats. The hush of fatigue became a silence of expectation.

The Palace was an old-fashioned music hall and, like many such places in the 1880s, still employed a chairman. This, of course, was Tricky himself: he sat at a

table between the stalls and the orchestra and introduced the acts, and called for order if the crowd became too rowdy, and led us in toasts to the Queen. He had a top-hat and a gavel -1 have never seen a chairman without a gavel - and a mug of porter. On his table stood a candle: this was kept lit for as long as there were artistes upon the stage, but it was extinguished for the interval, and at the show's close.

Tricky was a plain-faced man with a very handsome voice - a voice like the sound of a clarinet, at once liquid and penetrating, and lovely to listen to. On the night of Sutherland's first performance he welcomed us to his show and promised us an evening's entertainment we would never forget. Had we lungs? he asked. We must be prepared to use them! Had we feet, and hands? We must make ready to stamp, and clap! Had we sides? They would be split! Tears? We would shed buckets of them! Eyes?

'Stretch 'em, now, in wonder! Orchestra, please. Limes-men, if you will.' He struck the table with his gavel - clack !- so that the candle-flame dipped. 'I give you, the marvellous, the musical, the very, very merry, Merry" - he struck the table again -'Randalls!'

The curtain quivered, then rose. There was a seaside backdrop to the stage and, upon the boards themselves, real sand; and over this strolled four gay figures in holiday gear: two ladies - one dark, one fair - with parasols; and two tall gents, one with a ukulele on a strap. They sang 'All the Girls are Lovely by the Seaside", very nicely; then the ukulele player did a solo, and the ladies lifted their skirts for a spot of soft-shoe dancing on the sand. For a first turn, they were good. We cheered them; and Tricky thanked us very graciously for our appreciation.

The next act was a comedian, the next a mentalist - a lady in evening dress and gloves, who stood blindfolded upon the stage while her husband moved among the audience with a slate, inviting people to write numbers and names upon it with a piece of chalk, for her to guess.

'Imagine the number floating through the air in flames of scarlet,' said the man impressively, 'and searing its way into my wife's brain, through her brow.' We frowned and squinted at the stage, and the lady staggered a little, and raised her hands to her temples.