The Jewel Box

Anna Davis

Published by Black Swan

Extract

© Anna Davis 2009, Black Swan edition, 2009, an imprint of Transworld Publishers

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE JEWEL BOX

Anna Davis

BLACK SWAN

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

THE JEWEL BOX
A BLACK SWAN BOOK: 9780552773393

First publication in Great Britain
Black Swan edition published 2009

Copyright © Anna Davis 2009

Anna Davis has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in 11/15pt Giovanni Book by
Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Piccadilly Herald

4th April, 1927

The West-Ender

Last night, at the newly opened Salamander Dinner-Dance Club on Coventry Street (they serve one of London's better steak-au-poivres accompanied by brisk, stirring jazz) a louche gentleman in a top hat wreaked violent Charleston on me, and simply would not be shaken off. Today I am officially 'In Recovery' – the kind that necessitates a night at home with a fish-paste sandwich and a mug of cocoa. For it's not merely my head that's aching; it's not just the usual ringing of the ears, rasping of the throat and churning of the stomach. No, today my lily-white tootsies are black and blue too. Reader, I can barely walk!

As you know, it's been over a year since the Charleston stepped off the boat and took up residence in our better night-clubs. They dance it

dandily in Paris and New York. So how much longer is it going to be before the Londoner learns how to do it properly? Men are generally the worst. There's something, frankly, convulsive about those kicking, flailing legs. At the Salamander, you take your life in your hands when you step on to the dance-floor. In fact, I wouldn't even advise taking a table *beside* the dance-floor. But many of the fairer sex are not so much better – really, there are a lot of farmyard hens strutting about the West End, pecking and flapping.

The solution? Lessons, of course. Trust me, girls, it's a sound investment. I suggest any of you with a nagging suspicion that your Charleston may be of the feathered, clucking sort should seek out, post-haste, Miss Laeticia (known to her friends as 'Teenie Weenie') Harrison, of Mayfair. Take heed: this might change your life. In an ideal world, one would of course take the hubby or boyfriend along to Teenie Weenie's, but if he thinks he's too fine and manly for classes you'll have to teach him yourself. Let's face it, we've been educating our men in so many departments since long before we – that is, those of us over thirty – got the vote (NB, the under-thirties would have my sympathy were it not for the fact that I covet their tender youth) and we'll be doing so for as long as men are men and women are women. Embrace your fate.

Two irritating comments that I regularly encounter of an evening now my fame is spreading: 'Miss Sharp, where do you find the stamina to go out all night

every night? Your job must be the hardest in London' and 'What an easy job you have, Miss Sharp. All you have to do is go out and enjoy yourself and then tell us all about it.'

Also, I am outraged at the reports of various pretenders claiming to be me in order to blag good tables and complimentary cocktails. Doormen, if ever in doubt, ask 'Diamond' to blow you a smoke ring. This is a very particular talent of mine, and should instantly reveal any fake gems. Oh, and by the way, I have never in my life had to *ask* for a free drink!

Diamond Sharp

1

The photograph shows a woman with flirtatious eyes and sharply bobbed hair. She is seated alone at a restaurant table with an empty champagne glass in front of her. Resting between the first two fingers of her gloved hand is a lit cigarette in a long ebony holder. From her lipsticked mouth, slightly open, issues a perfect smoke ring. The slogan above the photograph reads simply 'Dare you?' The small print beneath the image explains that the tobacco in Baker's Lights is toasted and does not aggravate the throat.

Mr Aubrey Pearson tossed the proof on to the desk and leant back against creaky leather upholstery. 'Well?'

Grace Rutherford, from the hard wooden seat on the other side of the table, cleared her throat. 'Well, Mr Pearson, I was thinking . . .'

'Were you? Were you *really*?' The eyebrows moved towards each other in a deep frown. 'Did you think for one moment about how our client would react to this?' He indicated the proof.

Grace took a breath. If only she was having this discussion with Mr Henry Pearson, the older brother. He was altogether more free-thinking. 'I believe this campaign could increase Baker's sales by about a third. Maybe more. We've never targeted women before – not for cigarettes – and it's about time we did. This year, London girls are wearing their hair and dresses shorter than ever, copying the Hollywood flapper look. They want the life that goes with it too – dancing the Charleston all night, having romances with dashing young men. It's the dream. Living life just a little bit wild. Doing things their mothers wouldn't have done. They all smoke, you know, the Hollywood actresses.'

Mr Pearson rubbed his head, where the hair was thinning. Perhaps it was thinning *because* he always rubbed it there, in just that spot. 'Miss Rutherford, we absolutely cannot have an image of a girl smoking a cigarette in this advertising campaign. We have a reputation to uphold.'

'Oh, sir, that's such bunkum. It's about time Pearson & Pearson joined the modern age.'

'A word of warning.' Pearson's voice was quiet now. 'If I were you, I should think very carefully about what you plan to say next.'

'All right.' Grace swallowed. 'Forget about the image. We don't have to show a woman smoking. Imagine a dance-floor full of couples. In the foreground a man extends a hand to a girl, inviting her to step out. The copy reads "Will you? Won't you?" Here's another: the

girl is seated beside her beau in an open-top car. The line is, "How fast are you?"'

Pearson pulled open a desk drawer and rummaged about inside. Slamming it shut, he bellowed for his secretary, Gloria, to fetch an aspirin.

'Sir?' Grace leant forward.

'How long have you been with us, Miss Rutherford?'

'Almost ten years.'

He proffered a smile. It looked all wrong on his face – as though someone had glued it there. 'You might well think, my dear, that London has changed considerably in those ten years.'

'Oh, it has.'

'But I would put it to you that not all of those changes are for the better. There are many people out there – *many* – who take that view. And at the heart of this ever-changing city there is a fundamental core of values that remain unchanged, and must continue so. A still, stable core, around which whirls a lot of flux and chaos. Pearson & Pearson is part of that core. That's why we're able to hold on to clients like Baker's in the face of all the competition.'

'Sir, with respect—'

'Respect – yes, that's a part of it, Miss Rutherford. Do you think it demonstrates respect for your employers and their clients when you arrive at the office an hour late, and visibly bleary? Or when you sit about the place, smoking cigarettes and exchanging jokes? Do you think it sets a good example to the typists and the secretaries?'

'But the other copy-writers do just the same. And nobody seems to mind.'

Another of those glued-on smiles. 'You're an intelligent girl. I shouldn't need to spell it out for you. And what the devil possessed you to put *yourself* in that blessed photograph? Stanley Baker'd laugh himself all the way down the road to Benson's if I let him see that proof.'

The secretary appeared with two aspirins and a glass of water, set them down on the desk and retreated. In her wake came a distinctly uncomfortable silence.

'So,' said Grace, 'shall I hand in my notice?'

A chuckle. 'My, what drama! You have spirit, that's for certain. Go back and do some more thinking. You did hit on something with your idea about targeting women. But not this way. See if you can come up with something more . . . domestic. And as to the rest of it—'

'I know, sir. I understand.'

Ten minutes later, in her tiny office, Grace picked up the telephone and asked to be connected to Richard Sedgwick, the editor of the *Piccadilly Herald* newspaper.

'Dickie, I want you to meet me for dinner tonight.'

'Grace? Is that you?'

'Of course it's me. Seven o'clock? I don't much care where.'

'Sorry, old thing. Busy tonight.'

Grace drummed her finger-nails impatiently on the desk. 'What sort of busy? Work?'

Something that might have been a sigh but could easily have been a crackle on the line.

'I'm not sure that's any of your—'

'So it's a girl. Not that dreadful Patsy again? It's *not* her, is it, Dickie?'

'Grace. You know how fond of you I am, but—'

'That lisp is an affectation. Didn't you realize? And the nose-wrinkling. She's playing the *little girl*. She thinks that's what men want.' A frown. 'It's not, is it, Dickie?'

'I'm not seeing Patsy this evening.'

'Then who?' Becoming aware of an unusual silence among the typists outside the room, Grace extended her right leg and gave the door a sharp kick so that it slammed shut.

'I have to go and see that German picture. You know – the one that cost all the money. It's on at the Pavilion.'

'Oh, that. Nobody's going to *Metropolis*, Dickie. It's depressing and preposterous. Evil machines and virgin girls – or was it the other way around? Quite, quite silly.'

'Thank you for your enlightened and knowledgeable view, dearest.'

'Not at all.' Grace slid a cigarette from the box on her desk and searched about for a book of matches. 'What say we eat at the Tour Eiffel? You know how I hate it there, but I'd go anywhere for you, darling.'

'My, how selfless we are.'

'Then we could round the night off with a little party that Diamond's been invited to.'

'So we're going dancing now, too?'

Grace found her matches and struck one, the receiver wedged between ear and shoulder. 'Seriously, Dickie. There's something I need to talk to you about.'

Coming up Tottenham Court Road half an hour late, Grace was caught in an April downpour with no umbrella. There were no taxis, trams or buses in sight, and so she was obliged to scurry inelegantly through the end-of-day hordes; gutter water splattering up her ankles; grey rain soaking through her clothes in smeary patches; the scent of wet builders' dust rank in her nostrils. As she hurried, she silently cursed her time-keeping (Grace was always half an hour late); her employers (for locating their offices on Piccadilly – simply not close enough to Percy Street, home of the Tour Eiffel); the weather (this was *London*, after all. Who *didn't* curse the weather occasionally?); God (in whom she didn't believe); and Dickie Sedgwick (for agreeing to meet her, and for liking the Tour Eiffel).

By the time she arrived at the restaurant the rain was heavier still. Running, head down, for the door, Grace collided, hard enough to make her teeth rattle, with a very solid person. A hand closed around her forearm, and she looked up into pale, blue eyes set wide apart in a broad face. The mouth was smiling – or perhaps it was just one of those mouths that's shaped so that it always appears to smile.

'Are you married?' The voice was smoothly American.

'No.' The word was out before she could stop it. The hand still held her forearm.

'Good.' When he spoke, he seemed to be looking past her.

She became aware of a taxi parked nearby, its motor running. The man had perhaps just got out of it. The driver would be watching.

'*Excuse* me.' She jerked free and moved haughtily towards the restaurant.

'Thirty-two, I should think.' His smile, reflected in the glass, was distorted. Jagged. 'There's a poignancy in your face.' He was delving in his pocket for change, stepping back to pay the driver. 'Liquid and lovely.'

'I'm thirty, actually. Not that it's any of your business.'

'It'll ice over in a year or two,' said the man. 'Always does.'

Before the war, the Tour Eiffel had been a haunt for the more avant-garde artists and writers; Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound. Later on the sketches and notes in the visitors' book were added to by Charles Chaplin, Ronald Firbank and George Gershwin – and the restaurant became the favourite of a more glitzy, fashionable crowd. By 1927, it was a monument to itself, with prices to match. The paintings and etchings of varying quality that crowded its walls put Grace in mind of gravestones, albeit higgledy-piggledy, crazily coloured gravestones. This place traded on its bohemian past. One could perhaps order an hors d'oeuvre of

coddled memories followed by a main course of stewed nostalgia. Certainly, Dickie Sedgwick was quite at home here.

'Punctual as ever.' Dickie stood up to kiss her on the cheek. 'Gracie, darling, you're absolutely soaking!'

'It's nothing. I shall be dry again directly.' Grace sat on a carved walnut chair. 'Meanwhile you can amuse yourself by watching great clouds of steam rising off me.'

'Well, if you're sure.' Dickie sat down. 'I feel I should *do* something for you.'

'Just get me a drink, will you?'

'Try some of this.' He turned the wine bottle on the table so she could see its label. 'It's from the Rhône valley, so Joe tells me. Frightfully good.'

'I'm sure it is, but I'm lacking a glass. Be a good fellow, and get Joe's attention.'

He was still talking about the wine, and she was dabbing with her napkin at the damp patches on her black silk-crêpe dinner dress, when, glancing up, she saw the broad-shouldered man from the street enter the dining room. He was wearing a white starched evening shirt and bow-tie. Rudolph Stulik, the proprietor, was instantly at his side, leading him to the best corner table, fussing about over his comfort, lighting his cigarette. The pale-blue eyes turned suddenly in Grace's direction, and she looked away – down at the beaded jet buckle on her dress, and back up at Dickie. He had a crumpled weariness about him this evening. Not at all his dapper, ebullient self.

'You seem tired, Dickie. Is everything all right at the *Herald*?'

A flicker of irritation. 'It's not all about the newspaper, you know, Grace.'

'I know.'

An awkward moment. It was best not to draw him out further. Grace chanced another little gaze across the room. Stulik was explaining the menu to the American in the greatest detail, then pointing out a few paintings by the better-known of his art clientele. The man appeared interested, but as Stulik looked away he shot a glance directly at Grace.

'Pig of a day.' Grace made herself look at Dickie, and only Dickie. 'I handed in my notice.' She took a sip from her glass. 'I say, you're right about the wine. Very crisp.'

'*Did* you?'

'Well, I tried to. Pearson didn't take me seriously, though. Aubrey Pearson, that is. And I suppose I didn't take myself seriously either. I can't afford to lose my job, not really. But they're such dinosaurs, they drive one to distraction.'

'So you're always saying. Shall we both have the fish? They've lemon sole today. With new potatoes.'

'Dickie, you have no idea what it's like for a girl, working in a place like that. The men can do just whatever they like, so long as they get their copy written on time. But me – one hint of a laugh, one whiff of ciggie smoke and I'm for it. I'm supposed to be grateful to them, don't you see? For *letting* me work there. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I was wondering . . .'

Sedgwick chuckled. 'You were wondering what it would be like to work at the *Herald*. D'you honestly think it's any better on a newspaper? Do you think you'd be treated just like any other fellow? It's the world we live in, my darling. But it's getting better – slowly.' He nodded to the waiter. 'Joe, two fish, please.'

'Too slow for me.' Grace looked across the room without meaning to. The American was staring at his wrist-watch, frowning . . . She dragged her attention back to Dickie's freckled face – back to the matter in hand. 'I've been thinking. What if Diamond were to start writing more than just her column? She could do book reviews, political comment, horoscopes even!'

He shook his head. 'It wouldn't work.'

'But *why*? Diamond is a huge success, you're always saying so. Who else on your silly paper gets sacks of letters? Who else gets gossiped about by *other* newspapers? Do you know what Harold Grimes came up with yesterday in the *Mail*? He thinks Rebecca West is Diamond Sharp. *Rebecca West*!'

'Man's an idiot.' Dickie spoke under his breath, then cleared his throat. 'Look. I couldn't be more pleased with the way it's all going. I can hardly believe it, to be truthful. But reading Diamond is like eating liquorice. You only want the tiniest bit.'

A huff. 'Well, I needn't be Diamond all the time.'

His hand came across the table to take hold of hers. Gently. 'Grace, you *are* Diamond. *All* the time. You couldn't be anyone else if you wanted to. I wouldn't *want* you to be anyone else.'

The American was looking over again. At her hand, held in Dickie's.

'Though sometimes I feel like Victor Frankenstein,' Dickie muttered.

'Well, then.' She freed her hand. 'I shall have to do what any right-thinking monster would, and demand that you double my fee.'

'Now, now, Miss Sulky. You'd better watch out – that frown of yours is carving permanent lines in your forehead. Ages you by a good ten years, I'd say.'

'Oh, Dickie, you're so beastly! There's simply no use in talking to you about anything serious.' She cast about in vain for their waiter. 'Where's Joe? We need some more wine.'

The American was gone from his table.

A bottle and a half later, Dickie and Grace hailed a taxi to Cirós on Orange Street. The rain had set in. Coupled with the darkness, it blurred the city. Grace gazed out of the window at bright shop-fronts and the streaks of light reflected on the wet pavements. Figures scuttled beneath umbrellas or huddled together at bus stops, but for the most part London had gone home to bed.

'Who the devil goes to a party on a *Tuesday*?' Dickie said. 'It simply isn't civilized. Whose party is it, anyway?'

'I can't remember.' Grace was as vague as the wet night. 'I've lost the invitation.'

'Splendid. *Now* she tells me. And you could have mentioned it's at Cirós. I'd assumed it was a little jazz

party at someone's house. I'd have changed my suit if I'd known. Put on a bow-tie.'

Grace opened her bag, drew out a black silk tie and passed it across. 'Don't fret. Diamond is always prepared for emergencies. And do cheer up – the invitation said champagne. It's bound to be jolly.'

Toying with the tie, Dickie started on a story about Cirós – another night, another party – but Grace had stopped listening; awed, as always, by Piccadilly Circus at night. Here was the Big New World that left the likes of Pearson & Pearson lagging far behind in the gentle past. The Circus, most famous convergence point of London's great thoroughfares, was illuminated now by huge bold brand names picked out in coloured lights. London County Council's strenuous efforts to legislate against these advertisements had succeeded only in strengthening the determination of retailers to cash in on their location. Down at ground level, however, all was shabby, temporary and makeshift during the construction of an enormous new Underground station. The seminal statue of Eros had been removed while the works were in progress, and at first it had seemed that the Circus's soul had gone with it. By now, though, Eros had been gone for so long that Grace could barely remember what it looked like. The soul of Piccadilly seemed instead to inhabit the new advertisements. While ostensibly they yelled 'Schweppes', 'Bovril', 'Gordon's Gin', they might really have been shouting, 'I am London. I am the future'.

Tonight the rain was so heavy that the spectacle

appeared smeary and dreamlike. Raindrops, lit in bright colours, ran ceaselessly across the window, so that it appeared to Grace as if the Circus was crying. Through the tears she glimpsed the dry interiors of other taxis carrying girls with laughing mouths, tired ladies in hats, young men with a look of hunter or hunted. The insides of other motor cars like tiny, complete worlds. And she, with Dickie, in their own little world, drifting through it all in a kind of trance . . .

Until a taxi pulled momentarily alongside theirs, and she saw someone in profile. A clean jaw, a Roman nose . . .

'It's that man!'

'What man? What are you talking about?'

'Oh.' The other taxi had turned right. It had been the most fleeting of glimpses. Had it really been the American? Or was it just that she was still thinking about him, somewhere behind it all?

'Grace?'

'It's nothing. Look, we're here. Let me help you with that tie.'

Double doors opened to reveal Cirós' famous glass dance-floor like a sheet of ice, over which the dancers appeared to skate. Jean Lensen and his Cirós Club Dance Orchestra were in full swing. White suits, slicked-down hair, gleaming brass. The air was smoky and heady with the mingled perfume of a great many women, undercut by a bitter edge of perspiration.

'No wonder the streets were empty,' Grace muttered.

'Everyone's in here.' And indeed it did feel as though every fashionable man and woman in London was collected here under one roof. Vivacious flappers rattling with beads and rhinestones, gazelle-like women in silks and feather plumes, immaculate men in dress-shirts.

'Well, you were right about the champagne,' said Dickie. Waiters threaded back and forth, bearing trays laden with glasses. He lifted one for Grace and one for himself. 'Look over there.'

By the long bar stood a precarious pyramid of glasses. A barman mounted a step-ladder and proceeded to pour from the largest champagne bottle Grace had ever seen. Glittering liquid flowed and frothed its way down the pyramid, filling the glasses in a Möet et Chandon fountain, while nearby onlookers applauded.

Dickie, who was clearly still feeling underdressed and underconfident, brightened when someone called out to him. Grace recognized Ronnie Hazelton from the *Times*, along with a group of tiresome cronies. Still getting her measure of the room, and wanting to explore further, she made as if to follow Dickie but then slipped off through the crowd.

Further away from the dance-floor, seated at tables and, for the most part, talking intently, were a less shiny bunch of people: balding grey men with spectacles, squat little men with beards. Book people, thought Grace, spotting Samuel Woolton, the well-known publisher who'd just set up his own company. Editors, novelists, poets, hiding behind all the pretty boys and girls with titles and private incomes who liked to play

at having a job. This must be a literary party – well, notionally anyway.

'Dried off now, I see.' He was standing right behind her. Too close.

'Have you been following me?' She spoke without turning around, directing her gaze out at the dance-floor. A spotlight was on one of the trumpeters as he launched into a flashy solo.

'I was going to ask you the same question.'

She turned to face him, and as she looked at him something flickered in her stomach and made her want to giggle. An excited girlish giggle – the sort of giggle she absolutely mustn't give in to.

He was such a broad person – those shoulders, that neck. There was an overwhelming maleness to him. She wanted to know what it would be like to dance with him – to feel the large hands resting heavy on her shoulders, her back.

'Come, now.' She wagged a finger at him. 'Confess.'

He smiled. 'I saw you come in with your friend fifteen minutes ago. I've been here two hours.'

'Rubbish! Your taxi pulled alongside ours on Regent Street.'

A raised eyebrow. 'How flattering. I've obviously made quite an impression on you.'

'Well, I think you left a bruise on my foot earlier, if that's what you mean by an *impression*.'

He took the empty champagne glass from her hand and replaced it with a filled one. 'What I mean,' he said, 'is that when you're thinking about someone – when

you can't get them out of your mind – you see them everywhere.'

Grace allowed herself a chuckle. He was the sort who used verbal combat as a seduction technique. 'Thirty-eight,' she said, looking him up and down.

'Pardon me?'

'Years old. Or maybe forty. And divorced. It's the done thing in America, isn't it? You might even be divorced *twice*.'

Now he was the one to laugh. 'I suppose I deserved that, Miss . . .'

'You can call me Sapphire.'

'Can I now?' He reached out to clink glasses with her.

'And you? Who are you?'

'Me?' He shrugged. 'I'm a typical Irishman. Full of blarney.'

She rolled her eyes. 'That accent is about the least Irish I've ever heard. I suppose you have a great-grandfather from Skibbereen or Ballydehob or something. Isn't it enough to be American?'

She didn't know quite how it came about – it was hot and she was a little dizzy – but his right hand was against her cheek now. Just resting there, holding her face so that she couldn't but look into his pale, humorous eyes.

'I guess I enjoy a little romance,' he said. 'Don't you?'

* * *