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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Somnambulist

Written by Essie Fox

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# WILTON'S MUSIC HALL

PRESENTS

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL'S FAMOUS OPERETTA,

*THE STORY OF*

## ACIS AND GALATEA

Polyphemus desired the nymph Galatea. Seduced by her beauty and singing, the giant wooed her with precious shells and stones. He offered her delicacies; the sweet flesh of newly-born children, red wines fortified with their blood. He followed whenever she left the shore, wandering through the meadows or woods. But, when spying her naked, entwined in the arms of the shepherd boy Acis, his fury drew down dark and thunderous clouds. He flung bolts of lightning, great rocks and boulders, cruelly murdering his usurper.

Galatea fled back to the oceans, buried beneath the waves, never singing or showing her face again. But where her tears mingled with the blood of Acis, bubbling up from the stones that had crushed him, that liquid became a sparkling stream that flowed down the hillside and into the sea, so that Acis's spirit could join with his love, to follow where Polyphemus could not.

That cutting was pasted in Cissy's scrapbook. The date she'd written underneath was November 13th 1881; the very last time she ever sang.

Cissy had the voice of an angel. But then, she was closer to Heaven than any of us could know. It used to make me shiver

inside, hearing those notes so clear and pure, like crystal, like rippling water, until – just like water – she slipped through our hands.

Some nights I still dream of her as Galatea, her face streamed with liquid ribbons of light, her eyes gazing up from the depths of the sea. And she sees Polyphemus: the giant who still grieves, who still waits on the shore for his nymph to return, who is doomed to view nothing but shifting waves.

They say passion is sweet, and it may be for some. But a love unrequited must taste dry as ashes. It must be as bitter as gall.

# 1

I'd been to Wilton's Hall before. I would have been seven or eight at the time, and somehow Aunt Cissy persuaded Mama to allow me a trip to the pantomime. *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* it was, and as we rushed off to climb in a cab, Mama called after us down the front steps, 'You watch that child . . . there'll be forty thieves in the audience!'

I heard Cissy's sudden intake of breath as she paused to look back from the pavement edge, 'Oh, Maud . . . you know we'll be perfectly safe. I promise to bring Phoebe home by ten.'

And we were quite safe, and home by ten, though perhaps Mama's fears had been justified because something was stolen – and that was my heart; coming home in a giddy excitement, unable to eat or sleep that night for thinking of all the sights and sounds, the thick smells of greasepaint, tobacco and sweat. That show had been mayhem, like nothing I'd ever seen before, with Alf Merchant's 'astonishing, leaping, juggling' dogs, and the high-stepping dancers, and the swaggering swell who got the whole crowd singing along with 'Burlington Bertie from Bow'.

I thought that was wonderful, happening to live in Bow myself, humming the chorus all the way home, though when the cab pulled up for a while, caught in a jam on the Mile End Road, Cissy leaned closer, touching my arm, saying, 'Best we don't sing that in front of Maud . . . I don't think your mama would approve.'

'I know,' I answered with sad resignation, repeating my

mama's favourite chant, ' "The halls are all seething with drunkards and sin". But Cissy . . .' I frowned, biting down on my lip, staring up at my aunt in confusion, 'you're not a sinful drunk, and you used to work in the theatre too.'

'Yes,' Cissy sighed, her face slowly lighting up in a smile, 'and you know, there were nights when the opera house closed, when we all stayed in costume and jumped into broughams, driven at breakneck speed across town . . . performing at Wilton's all over again.'

I squeezed my eyes shut to think of that, wishing I could have seen her then, wishing that I could go back in time. But as it turned out, several years would pass by before I returned to Wilton's Hall.

When I did it was everything I remembered. Brass barley-twist pillars. A balcony fronted with friezes of roses, and the walls painted pink with gilt plasterwork, full of arched niches and sparkling mirrors. The ceiling was crowned by a glass chandelier with thousands of crystals and burning jets, and when Aunt Cissy came onto that stage the light shimmered like blessings all over her face. Her brown eyes were splintered with gold. Her turquoise gown gleamed in watery twists, and the emeralds wound at her arms and throat were glinting green flashes of fire.

My mama, inclined as something of a prude, had been scandalised when that costume was made, complaining the silk 'clung indecently' to every curve of her sister's body. But on the night of the performance her morals were spared any humiliation for, confined with the flu to her bedroom in Bow, snuffling over a menthol bowl, Mama was in no state to go anywhere – not even the short drive to Whitechapel. And, though I'm ashamed to admit it, I was glad of her illness that night. It meant I might actually have some fun. It meant I had Cissy all to myself.

Well, almost all. Old Riley, her dresser, was bustling around in the backstage room, threading some pearls into Cissy's hair, curling it up with the irons. But as Cissy had hardly performed in years, Old Riley's main occupation those days was that of a seamstress – making up other people's theatrical costumes, making up most of our dresses and hats. And she threw in a bit of palm reading too, though Mama insisted she never told mine, threatening with dark looks of reproach: 'The Devil comes as a soothsayer, a sorcerer, a conjurer of spells. Never trust those who call up the dead for such things are abominations to God.'

While watching her deft fingers working the needle, I was trying to imagine Old Riley as Satan – with horns, cloven feet and a long forked tail – when I suddenly jumped at the sound of some knocking, like a thundering drum roll outside on the door, and a freckled bald head was poking round, and Old Riley was beaming, 'Oh look, here's Bill Wright come to see us. Phoebe, have you met Bill before? He's a good friend of mine . . . the stage manager here.'

Old Riley might have been widowed for years, but she never went short on male company and Bill blew her a kiss as he stepped in the room, big sausagey fingers held out to shake mine. 'I've certainly heard of Miss Turner. Charmed to meet you at last, I'm sure. Perhaps we'll see more of you, after the show? Mr Wilton's ordered in the champagne and there's none of the usual rabble tonight. The whole place is heaving with West End toffs, with it being an operatic event. But there's a slight problem.' He turned to my aunt. 'I was wondering, Mrs Stanhope' – though unmarried, and really a Miss like me, professionally Cissy was called *Mrs* Stanhope – 'whether your niece, Miss Turner here, might consider getting herself decked up as one of our shepherdesses tonight? We're already four down, what with this wretched ailment that's going around. She'll only need smile, be one extra body to stand on the stage, to make up our depleted numbers.'

'Well, Phoebe, what do you think?' Cissy looked back through the foxed, blackened glass, still holding a cup in front of her mouth. She'd been gargling with port wine and vinegar, hoping to ward off Mama's contagion: any ill effects it might have on her voice.

I laughed nervously, and then blurted out, 'Oh . . . I'd love to . . .' though soon growing reticent. 'But what do you think Mama would say?'

'How old are you, dearie?' Old Riley set down her box of pearls, her one good eye fixed hard on me. The other was covered up by a patch, and I never did get to see underneath. Cissy told me she'd lost the sight when a cart had thrown up a stone in the street, putting her eye clean out. And, just what were the chances of that! But she saw well enough with what was left. Very green it was, with laughter lines crinkling all round the edge, though right then it was narrowed in stern concentration, and I felt embarrassed to be so appraised, and I wondered why she'd asked my age, when surely she knew that perfectly well, so often visiting round at our house; practically one of the family.

Meanwhile, glancing back at Cissy, I saw myself in the mirror, the glimpse of a dim and distorted reflection in which I might be her shadowy wraith. But where my aunt's hair was a waving soft brown, mine was straight as a poker and very much darker, the same with my eyes which, when finally free of that silvery spell, looked back at Old Riley again to say, 'I'll be seventeen, next February.' And then, to Bill Wright, still hovering there by the open door, 'I *can* sing a little. I know all the words from Cissy's rehearsing but . . .' I paused for a moment, and despite a fire crackling away in the hearth, I started to shiver. When I swallowed my throat felt gritty and sore, and my voice sounded queerly hoarse when I said, 'It's . . . well, what Mama would think.'

'Nearly seventeen! Our little Phoebe! My, my . . . where

have all the years gone?' Old Riley let out a wistful sigh. 'Well, a shame for the show not to be a success, and you know what I think of Maud Turner . . . always too protective with you! I'm surprised she's let you come out tonight, considering what she thinks of the halls. But it's only this once and where's the harm? Come on, dearie. I think you'll enjoy it. We'll get you fixed up in no time at all. A quick dash of powder to give you some colour and—'

'And no need to sing,' Bill Wright assured. 'Smile and follow the other girls' actions. You're pretty enough. You've a natural grace, and there's no denying it's in the blood!'

'Why not give it a go?' Cissy looked over her shoulder, giving me one of those mischievous smiles, just as she used to when I was small, when she would arrive back home very late, when Mama was sleeping soundly next door and Cissy would stand beside my bed, lifting a finger up to her lips, whispering 'Ssh' as she climbed on in, then snuggling close as she held me tight and told me all of those wonderful stories – stories about her singing days when she travelled to faraway places – places like Paris, or even Vienna, from times long before I had even been born.

And the proof of her fame was right there in our hall where, halfway up the stairs on the little half-landing, the copy of a Millais was hung. That painting was called *The Somnambulist*, and it showed a young woman with flowing dark hair, wearing no more than a thin cotton gown as she walked at the perilous edge of a cliff. She carried a candle, but no flame had been lit, and I always feared she might slip to her death, dashed on the rocks in a cold grey sea.

Some thought it was based on a popular novel, the one called *The Woman in White*. Others said that an opera inspired it, and that woman the very spit of Aunt Cissy when she was singing the part of Amina, in Bellini's *La Sonnambula.* The production in Covent Garden had sold out on every night. I

know, because I saw the cuttings, all of them pasted up in her scrapbook. I loved to stroke that book's leather covers and look through the pages inside. Cissy saved some of my drawings there too, and the daisy chains from our days in the park – all those withered and fragile links of our love. Whenever I wove them I used to pray – and my prayer was this, and always the same – that if none of those tiny stems were to break then God might grant my secret wish: for Cissy to be my mother, not Maud.

You see, Maud, my mama, was so ordered and strict you'd hardly think them related at all. I used to feel like a frayed piece of string caught up in an endless tug of war, being torn between Cissy, all music and light, and Mama with her stern and daunting frown as she sat there embroidering quotes from the Bible, or reciting from that old book of hers, the one full of *Moral Advice for Young Ladies*. It felt like a penance. Not that I'd ever done anything wrong, but if my mama could have her way we'd spend half our lives on our knees in church, or marching along the Mile End Road, singing hymns and banging on tambourines.

It was on account of her being in with that Mr Brown's Hallelujah crowd, all very much against alcohol. But Mama was a woman of strange contradictions and if Cissy's friends were visiting – particularly Mr Collins, a wonderful pianist who still played the halls – we might have a bit of a sing-song, and Cissy would pour out glasses of port, and though Mama looked on with a scowl, she still used to sneak a sip now and then. And, come every Christmas, Old Riley would tease her by waving a sherry glass under her nose while Mama looked peevish and ranted back, 'Mrs Riley, if you were not Cissy's good friend, I would ask you to go back home, right now. Mr Turner would be spinning round in his grave if he knew of the demon drink in this house.'

Mr Turner, that is my dead father, had once been a soldier

in Mr Brown's Army. I believe that was how he and Mama first met. He died when I was no more than a baby, but the way Mama constantly spoke his name you'd think it was her, not Old Riley at all, who was trying to summon up the dead. Though, going by that photograph propped by her bed – a young man, a pith helmet on top of his head, a white band round the front daubed with strident black letters: PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD – well, you'd wonder Mama could have liked him at all. And I know it must sound disrespectful to speak so of my very own father, but if you could have seen that picture – those glowering eyes, and the dark bristled growth sprouting around a miserable mouth – then I think you would know what I mean. He was not what you'd call the most handsome man.

Anyway, with him being 'promoted to Glory', Mama took me out on the streets in his place, marching with the Hallelujah crowd, dressing me up like the rest of the women, in blue capes and blue bonnets with big red rosettes. I hated that hat. It was always too hot, sticky and itchy under my chin. I hated the way the drunkards leered or spat out great gobbets of black congealed blood and how, once, when we handed out temperance tracts, a ragged old man with a scabby cracked face caught hold of my arm and dragged me into an alley where he slammed me hard against a slimed wall, where he tried to fumble under my skirts, and his breath on my face stank of fish and decay, and though I was repulsed, quite terrified, his glittering eyes transfixed me. I thought they were burning right into my soul. I thought they looked just like my father's.

At some point, I must have come to my senses, screaming and kicking until Mama appeared, and then I was retching and sick on the pavement, and then I was crying all the way home. Once we were back, she ran me a bath with the water so hot that it scalded my skin. She scrubbed out my mouth with the carbolic soap, and then set to work with the rubbing below, so

rough I was stinging and sore for days, and later while I lay in my bed a terrible row got up downstairs, with Aunt Cissy shouting that it was a disgrace to send a child out on the streets like that, and what was Maud Turner trying to prove?

After that day, if Mama went out with her banners and flags, I stayed at home in the care of my aunt and instead of the Bible Cissy would read from her poetry books, or romantic novels with thrilling, mysterious stories that Mama called lurid and lewd. Mind you, if she happened to be in the room I knew she was listening to every word. You could practically see her ears flapping.

Still, I have to admit, she looked fit to explode the time when Old Riley was at the house, saying that Cissy should write her own novel, and what a sensation that would be – filled with famous musicians, a French marquis, even a rogue prince from nearer home. No matter I'd heard it all before, and I'm sure only half of those stories were true, but I loved to imagine that glamorous world, always wondering why, for all her admirers, and all of the presents of jewellery and flowers, Aunt Cissy had never decided to marry – and why she had given up the stage.

I did ask Mama about it once but she only dithered and stammered excuses, first saying that Cissy had been taken ill, then that Jesus had led her to see the light, coming at last to realise how immoral her life in the theatre had been. But I wasn't convinced by any of that, always sensing there must have been something more; something that might have caused Cissy remorse.

Perhaps that's why I never did pluck up the courage to ask my aunt about it directly. Perhaps, that's why I felt so pleased when Cissy decided to work again – to play Galatea at Wilton's Hall. And how thrilling it was to be there that night because even though the passing of years had begun to trace lines on my aunt's lovely face, when Old Riley was done with

her box of tricks, Cissy looked flawless, she looked like a goddess; eyes sparkling, lips reddened with carmine paste. When she walked out onto that stage, something magical happened. She grew shiny and sleek. She exuded an aura of golden light. And when Aunt Cissy opened her mouth, when all of those lovely notes issued out, I think everyone in the audience sighed – as if they were already mourning her loss.

A firm nudge in my back, and Bill Wright was hissing, 'Go on then, Miss Turner, you'll be all right. What are you waiting for?'

Straight away, I felt trapped, my limbs stiff as a corpse, my fingernails digging into my palms. At the stage front, beyond the flare of the lights, hundreds of eyes peered up through the gloom. At the back was a painted oilcloth, a glorious pastoral scene where woodlands and meadows sloped down into rivers, where a grotto was strewn with seaweed and shells. On the floor, a mirror was set as a pool, reflecting the azure skies above with its fluffy-winged cherubs in cotton wool clouds. Around it were grasses and flowers, all most realistic, cut out from board, over which I almost stumbled and fell when dragged on by another shepherdess. I followed her lead, with both arms flung wide, very nearly colliding with a stuffed lamb when she stopped at a mossy hillock, where she sat and reclined upon the green velvet, where I also attempted a graceful pose, though soon realising that it was one thing to observe from the wings, quite another to act naturally on the stage. I felt like some gauche automaton, unable even to open my mouth, never mind being able to mime the words:

*Oh the pleasure of the plains!*
*Happy nymphs and happy swains*

Oh, there was no pleasure, however lovely the flights of the voices and orchestra strains that were swirling all around the

hall. That baroque masque might be an idyll for some, but for Phoebe Turner there was nothing but cringing embarrassment. I tried to smile as instructed. I tried to hold my crook elegantly, but the flowers and ribbons were all of a tremble, and the garland of roses set on my head began to slip forward alarmingly. My nose was itching. I wanted to sneeze, was finding it harder and harder to breathe, and those flouncy skirts and petticoats, the corset Old Riley had laced so tight, were made for a much smaller Bo Peep than me. And, there I was, stuck on Wilton's stage, shuffling my way across the boards until I was safely concealed once more – where I belonged – right next to the ropes, the winches and pulleys; the clumsy backstage mechanisms – where Bill Wright stared out from the opposite wing, his big bald dome all shiny with sweat, his hands flung up in frustration. But the best I could do was to shake my head, to offer a mute apology before my attention diverted elsewhere, hearing the crowd's collective gasp – watching as Cissy walked onto the stage. Her arm rested on that of the shepherd boy, Acis, a young tenor whose hair was a crown of gold curls, who looked over and smiled, and gave me a wink! The hot rise of my blush must have matched his cheeks, powdered very pink and much too effete to make a convincing Acis for me. But who in that hall would not believe, or be entranced when Cissy sang:

*Oh, didst thou know the pains of absent love,*
*Acis would ne'er from Galatea rove*

Looking back out at the audience, all thoughts of pretty boy Acis were lost when my eye came to rest on somebody else – a man who was sitting in the front row. Though in late middle age he was strikingly handsome, with thick silver hair swept back from his brow, a waxed grey moustache above sensual lips and, beneath hooded lids, his eyes were so dark they might have been black. I wondered if those eyes had me mesmerised,

for a watery rushing sound filled my ears, all the mellow woodwind arpeggios becoming strangely discordant and slow, until nothing was left but one long blurring note during which I was wondering who he could be, and whether he'd ever been to our house – perhaps a musician, or another singer – because I felt sure I'd seen him before, and yet, I couldn't—

My ears filled up with the music again, and that was the moment when Cissy's voice faltered, when I looked over and saw that her gaze had fixed upon the very same man. It was only a slight hesitation. Her composure was soon regained – except for one thing, and perhaps no one else even noticed it there, that glistening silver trail on her cheek.