



The Slums

Slamming the door behind her, Fannie stumbles down the staircase and lurches out onto the cobbles. The street is narrow. Whenever a horse and cab pass down it, pedestrians are forced to lift their hems and slop into the mess of leaves and mire which gathers along its edges; there are no pavements here, in the poorer part of the city. But now it is quiet, and Fannie is able to stride down the middle of the street undisturbed. The memory of ballerinas – straight as an honest look, delicate as lily petals – holds her every muscle suitably taut, and she glides as gracefully as a swallow over the uneven ground.]

An argument hammers against the pane of an upstairs window and Fannie glances up to see the shadow of a man standing braced as his wife pounds at his chest with her fists. Three or four strikes later, she collapses into him and allows herself to be held. Fannie moves on. She knows which part of the city she must visit for a transaction such as this. She must go beyond the docks and then south, into the slums. There, everything is for sale.]

She's visited only once before. With her gentleman. When they had ventured out in search of Turkish opium, which, her gentleman told her, had the strongest hallucinogenic properties. 'For pleasure,' he'd winked, and she had clung to him as the slum dwellers had reached out for her hands, her hair. *So pale*, they'd pleaded. *So fair*. As though all they were in want of was simple sanitation; as though they weren't already starved to bones and mad with it.

In the slums, she knows, her gold curls will fetch a pretty price.

The smell reaches out for her while she still has the noise of the docks – the heaving ships, the hollering sailors – in her ears. It is a tacky smell, so thick with alcohol and urine and tobacco smoke and despair that Fannie presses her hand over her mouth for fear that it will work its way into her body. It has a taste, this smell. It is leathery and bitter over her tongue. Fannie finds she cannot swallow it. She steps slower, recalling the hollow-eyed beggars, the skull-and-skin children. She would turn back, were it not for her daughter's laughter echoing through her memory. Two years now since Fannie waved her off into a better life. Two years since she has listened to her sing. Two years since she has held another person. And how she wishes she had someone to hold now, as she crosses into the slums, and the mounds of muck banked up against the stonework of the buildings reveal themselves to have faces, hands, feet, hearts. It is corporeal, the need she has to be held. It is more than a want. It is the throb of a wound, or the thrust of a cough up the throat. It is as unstoppable and necessary as

all those bodily happenings, and the lack of it leaves Fannie cold. Always cold. The beggars she is walking by must surely share in this with her, and because and in spite of the fact, she wants to stop and talk with every one of them. To find out their stories.

She lifts her chin higher. She cannot let herself be deterred. It is Wednesday night. She has only until Friday to find the rest of the sum the innkeeper has asked for.

The bellowing of the hawkers directs her through the labyrinth of streets, and finally she enters an alleyway lined by shawled women carrying baskets and vials, jars and barrels: jellied eels, beaded necklaces, seashells, apples, scarves, glass eyes, breads, tobacco pipes, spirits, herbs, curiosities suspended in vinegar, mismatched boots, brooches, vanity mirrors, bed linens, fortunes. All are coated in a fine layer of smut. Above, across the seven feet or so which separate the alleyway's two teetering walls, white sheets have been hung. Weathered to a dirty cream and sagging, they reveal only three slender sickles of sky. Without sight of the moon or stars, it seems darker here.

'What can we do you for, miss?' a woman croaks. 'Some rouge for those pale cheeks, perhaps?'

'No, thank you,' Fannie replies.

'Something to fill your belly then?' says another voice behind her.

Fannie spins around. 'Oh, no. Thank you. I...'

'I know what you need,' claims a slim girl with startling, bright-green eyes, who is suddenly upon her. 'It's a pretty ornament you want, for that lovely hair of yours.'

Filthy faces loom towards her, crowding closer and closer, their fetid breaths clouding the way through. Hands pluck at her skirt. Fingers pinch the skin of her arms. She whirls about once, twice, then grasps the green-eyed girl's shoulder. The girl's eyes constrict in defiance. *I'll give you nothing for nothing*, says the tightening of her jaw. 'My hair,' Fannie breathes. 'Do you know where I might sell it?'

The girl, realising that Fannie is almost as desperate as she, shrinks by an inch or two. 'At the end,' she says, indicating the way with a dip of her head, 'turn right. Second door on the left.'

'Thank you,' Fannie calls as she rushes away. She does not want to stay here a moment longer than she must. A cold dread is shivering across her shoulders. She feels constantly that someone or something is about to touch her back.

At the end of the alleyway, she puts a hand to the stone to steady herself as she wheels around the corner. The hand comes away deep green and slimy. She stops, lifts her skirt, and wipes it clean against her stocking – the easiest item to wash. Then, straightening up and settling herself with a deep breath, she steps forward and raps on the second door.

It is a small, wooden arch – any grown adult would have to duck to move through it – and Fannie wonders at what kind of person resides within.

Soon she is summoned inside by a guttural, 'Enter.' Pushing open the door, Fannie shuffles into heavy gloom. In a far corner, a candle is lit, but it illuminates only a tiny wedge of the room. A bulky figure waits in a wingback chair,

which the candle shows to be deep crimson and torn. Fannie squints at the person, but can make out only a large gathering of skirts, and a pair of plump, aged hands locked across a belly.

'Hello, dear.'

Fannie's blood chills at the realisation of who she is standing before.

'I hadn't expected you so soon, but I'm always ready for a visitor.'

'But you.... Do you live here?'

'Oh no,' says Mother. 'I visit occasionally, that's all. To see how business is doing. Now, we're shearing you today, are we? You'll want to keep the teeth a little longer, I should say.'

At this, Mother pushes herself upwards with a long groan. Turning her colossal back on Fannie, she fidgets with a lamp for a trice then, lifting it, shambles across the room. The shifting light swings over a wooden ladderback chair, placed baldly in the middle of the space, and beside it, a long wooden sideboard, scattered with every sort of implement. Blunt-ended scissors, hook-ended scissors, forceps, pliers, needles with rounded eyes in place of points, razor blades. None is clean enough to glint, but their rusted shapes are altogether discernible as Mother suspends the lamp above them and, putting a forefinger to her lips, deliberates over her tool of choice.

'Is it a difficult decision?' Fannie asks, careful to keep her voice from fluttering.

Mother's body remains bent over her tools, but her head swivels in Fannie's direction. 'Pah!' she laughs. 'Not so very

difficult, no. I was just trying to decide which would allow me closest to the skin without ruining the curl. What do you think?' She grins. Not menacingly, but - it seems to Fannie - honestly. After all, she is only making her living. It is not so very different from sitting in a row of factory girls and stitching fabric to make rich women look pretty. Mother will make a poor woman look ugly instead, but it is a transaction all the same. A service. A necessary exchange. Her looks for her daughter's health. It is not such a difficult decision.

Fannie moves to the sideboard and pauses fleetingly before plucking up a medium-sized pair of scissors with a point which tapers into invisibility. They are lighter than expected.

'Small enough to crop close to the skull,' she explains. 'Sharp enough to take the hair away cleanly.'

'Well, Mother croons, 'you do surprise me, child. So calm. So definite. Are you certain you are only an out-of-work seamstress?'

'I'm certain I'm a great deal more,' Fannie replies, standing to her fullest height, which, while not significant, exceeds Mother's by some three or four inches.

Mother rests her weight against the sideboard and crosses her arms, with some difficulty, over her brimming bust. 'Is that so? And what more might you be, tell me?'

'Well, I was once a dancer with the Royal Ballet,' Fannie says, inventing an entirely new existence for herself in a breath. Why not? She has no life of her own to claim anymore. There is nothing to stop her rewriting her past. So willing is she suddenly to convince herself that she was once a completely different girl, that she almost lifts her arm to demonstrate

some swishing movement she could not possibly know the name of. Mother's collusion in the game keeps her from feeling foolish.

'Oh, yes?' says Mother. 'Go on.'

'And after that, I rode out horses for the Queen.'

'For the Queen, no less! And then you decided to become a seamstress.'

'In a manner of speaking,' Fannie replies, tilting her chin.

'Decisions are not always made by one person alone.'

'And yet they must often be borne by one person alone,' Mother muses.

Fannie nods her head slowly. 'Yes, I suppose you are right. But I shall not suffer for mine. I have decided that I will wear my cropped scalp proudly.'

Mother's smile drops. She touches a gentle hand to Fannie's shoulder. 'Let's see, shall we?'

At Fannie's throat, something thickens. She gulps it away. 'Perhaps,' she begins, a little louder than is necessary in the cave-like room, 'I could become a nun. I hear a cold head is important to the job.'

'Are you sure you could suit the habit?' Mother asks.

Fannie gives a small shrug. 'They are a little drab, but I've worn this coat for so long, I'm sure I'd welcome the change.'

Mother indicates the chair, and Fannie obliges, noting as she sits how hard the wood is against her buttocks. Likely, she has shed more weight. At the thought, her stomach grumbles for a hot baked potato; the crisped skin is her favourite. When she last ate, she couldn't say.

Mother is not the only one

'It's a brave choice,' Mother mumbles, gathering up Fannie's hair. As she plaits it – so it doesn't fall loose when it is cut, Fannie assumes – Fannie stays silent. Her hair has always been her greatest beauty. She knew that long before her gentleman uttered the words. But it is not the beauty of it she mourns, as Mother cuts the air to ensure the snap of her scissors is sharp enough. It is that her hair, whatever its shade or curl, is hers and hers alone. It is a part of what makes her Fannie. Were there some way to paint her irises brown, or make her ears smaller, or widen her smile, Fannie would not subscribe to it. God or nature or chance has made a decision as to the curves and colours which make her up, and the world would not know her if they were to change. She would not know herself.

While Mother plaits and plaits, she hums softly. Fannie closes her eyes to the lullaby, realising that it is the very same one she used to sing to her daughter. She had thought she had invented it, but she must only have learnt it somewhere. How else would Mother know it too? Mother loops one layer of hair over another, rhythmically, humming, and Fannie's breathing starts to slow. She sways slightly with the melodic lilt of Mother's voice. Her head begins to nod; the room grows warmer around her; she hides in the dark behind her eyelids and, for the first time in many months, her shoulders lower, her stomach slackens, and she drops towards a dreamless sleep. Fannie longs for rest which is not haunted by her daughter's skipping laugh, or the phantom grasp of her gentleman's hands over hers as he moves against her.

The calm is broken by Mother's voice and Fannie's eyes peel open again.

'Last chance, child,' she says. 'Are you certain about this?'

Fannie nods. 'Yes.'

Bending forwards, Mother swings her head around to bring herself nose to nose with Fannie. 'Yes?'

'Yes,' Fannie replies, but the word is little more than a tremor.

Mother's eyebrows lift. 'Yes?' she asks again.

'Yes,' Fannie says, firmer this time.

'Yes?' Mother bellows, gripping the roots of Fannie's hair suddenly and wrenching back her head. Something near the top of Fannie's spine pops. The base of her skull cracks against the top of the chair. She tenses, making sure not to emit a cry of pain. Strength is what Mother wants her to demonstrate, she knows. Determination. And Fannie has enough of that to tear out every last strand of her hair with her own hands should she need to.

She fixes her eyes unblinking on the damp-blackened ceiling and the flicker of candlelight over it, wraps her hands tight around the splintered arms of the chair, and bawls, 'Do it, Mother!' The command echoes off the bare stone walls. 'Do it!' Her voice seems to shift the stonework. All around her trembles. Dust suffuses the room. 'Now!' she screams, and whatever it is that controls her voice vibrates hideously in her throat, threatening to snap. An unexplained agony is pulsing through her body. Fury, she supposes. Fury that she has been reduced to making this grubby transaction; that all the while

her gentleman has more money than he could ever need; that her daughter is sick and she cannot hold her to her breast; that Mother will likely pay her a pittance for her beautiful hair; that her hair will not be enough. Fannie fears she might rupture she is so angry. But who would care for her daughter then? Who would buy the medicine her sweet girl needs if not Fannie? There is no choice but this. And yet, she does not have to accept it quietly. Stare set on the ceiling, she opens her mouth as wide as her jaw will allow and she screams.

She is silenced only by the first snip of the scissors, which seems to sound louder than any bedlam her lungs can produce. Her tears had sprung from her scream but she refuses to snivel or whimper as Mother lifts each plait away from her head and – snip – shears her like a common herd animal. Fannie lifts her chin and clamps her lips against the quivering. It is only hair. Only hair. No – it is more than that. It is her daughter's saviour.

'Mother,' she says.

'Yes, child.'

'I don't want to keep my teeth.'



Blood

There is one thing Fannie feels she knows without a doubt, as she scutters away from Mother's, her mouth swelling with blood, and it is that she has never been properly loved. Her gentleman had enjoyed the shell of her well enough. Her parents, before their deaths, had admired her with a sort of detached approval – largely, she supposes, because her manners were adequate enough to do them proud in sophisticated company. An aunt of hers had shown interest for a while, hoping Fannie might become a teacher at her small, underfunded schoolhouse. But none had loved her in a simple, truthful way. None had wanted her for what she was, only what she could offer them. None, should they pass by her now, would gather her scalped and toothless form to their chest and hold her while she wept.

And so, she concludes, she must not weep.

She hurries on, the knitted scarf Mother has loaned her wrapped tight about her head and pinched beneath her chin. Past the crones flogging their wares beneath a canopy of sullied sheets. Past the docks, with its fleet of slumber-swayed ships,

Fannie (Sue's baby)

go. That she can be trusted. That, whatever it might mean, she is familiar.

She reaches out for the rebel's hand and they clasp fingers tightly, tugging each other through their mismatched strides and laughing all the harder for it. And how good the warmth of another's hand feels to Fannie. How spurring. This, above all else, is what she has needed.

'I had a dream like this once,' she breathes, and she smiles and smiles, because here, in this singular whistling moment, what lies ahead of her, finally, is possibility.

A feeling she had forgotten starts to niggle at her. It is something like a swelling, she supposes – like the surfacing of a breathless seal from a surging roller, or the rising of a hot-air balloon, or the first pitch and rush of love. It is a buoyancy. It is lifting her. Hope, she thinks; it is called hope. And she floats on it, all the way back to the docks, where the sudden sight of Mother standing, arms tight across her chest, face severe as a long gaol sentence, punctures it and sends Fannie plummeting towards the dirty ground. She begins again to cough, but this time, she cannot stop so easily, she cannot catch her breath. Blood clogs her throat – thick and bitter. She hangs over her knees and, with each splutter, stars burst before her eyes and they are blindingly black.



Stolen

When finally Fannie's coughing stops, Mother cocks her mouth and shrugs. 'You're too late,' she says. 'They're all out cold.'

The rebel shifts sideways to peer over Mother's shoulder and down towards the jetties. 'All of them?' she asks.

'Every last one,' Mother replies.

Only then does Fannie notice the stillness: no hollers; no thuds; no bartering. The three women go to lean over the balustrade and consider the sight below. All across the docks, sailors slump over drained barrels or into each other; they sprawl, starfish-like, over the jetties; they snore, tucked up like kittens atop enormous coils of rope. They are harmless, weak.

'They docked with a shipload of rum,' Mother continues, 'and kept a few barrels for their pleasure. The eclipse put them in a strange humour, I'd say. They've already drunk themselves into oblivion.'

'What will we do?' the rebel mouths. They are speaking in whispers, loath to disturb the men they really ought to charm awake.

They listen to the gentle pulse of the waves, pushing into the dock then flowing out, the occasional snap of the galleon's sails. Fannie thinks of that seascape hanging in Mother's lodgings: the thick bumps left behind by the liberal application of oil; the pure white spindrift she had almost been able to feel on her face. She recalls the first time she met Mother, when she had imagined her a wild and fearsome figurehead. She knows then what they must do.

'We could take the ship.'

Mother and the rebel exchange a quizzical look, but they do not laugh at Fannie's suggestion. Though spoken quietly, the confidence in her words is unmistakable. When she hears no protest, she speaks again, louder.

'We should take the ship.' Already there seems to Fannie no other option. She can taste the salt on her lips, feel a cold wind slicing through her clothes. She recognises the rolling fright of knowing there is nothing beneath but water. It would be like flying.

'We can't sail a ship,' the rebel points out.

A grin spreads quick across Mother's face. Her eyes flash.

'What's to stop us learning?'

The rebel releases a panicked laugh. 'You're mad!'

'No,' Fannie replies. 'We're brave.'

Clasping hands, the three women proceed down a set of stone steps – shaded and slime-slippery, even on this bright morning – and duck under the archway into the cavern. The fire has been doused and the air is hung with smoke, but the smoke is nowhere near as thick as the anxiety which clouds

the room as the women wonder where they will find enough custom to earn their keep. Where usually the lover and the virgin would be draped over the chaise longue, today they perch on its edge, knees held neatly together, jackets buttoned up to their necks. They are flanked by two more girls Fannie knows only as the mystic and the sage. Another paces the faded rag of rug, swinging her arms before and behind her like a boxer limbering up for a fight – the huntress. Perhaps, Fannie thinks, when they are aboard the ship, the parts they play will be cast aside and she will learn their true names. She trusts it will be so. Having no men onboard to trade their bodies with, what would be the need of such reductive brandings?

'Gather up anything you can,' Mother says, flapping her hands arbitrarily around the sparse room. 'We're to leave anon.'

'To go where?' asks the lover, rising.

'On an adventure,' Mother returns.

Anticipation twists in Fannie's stomach. To step on board a real ship and sail into the morning. To be only amongst these women, who have shown her such kindness. To set off on an adventure all of her own. The anticipation twists again and turns into dread.

'My daughter,' Fannie blurts. 'I need to get her back first. She has to come with us.'

Mother turns to Fannie and Fannie is struck, again, by the older woman's mesmerism. Her small eyes gleam with promise. The confusion of coloured shawls she wears make a mystery of her body. Fannie has no idea who Mother is

beneath her rouge and her silks and her jewellery. She is any woman, every woman.

'We'll take her with us, of course. We'll get her back. But not today.'

Fannie nods against her rising tears and Mother grips her upper arm, squeezes, then releases it.

'She belongs with you,' Mother says. 'You'll get her back. But now, you must hold your nerve. You were right – we should take the ship. We've earned it, don't you think?'

'Yes,' is all Fannie can manage to reply.

Soon, the lover and the mystic cradle small bundles in their laps. Fannie cannot imagine what they contain. None of them owns anything beyond her own sense of self. The rebel has pulled on a coat and wound her hair into a scarf. The virgin is biting at her lip. The huntress ceases her pacing and, finally, the girls gather in a clutch at the doorway.

'All right. Quietly about it, then,' Mother says.

They creep out of the cavern, along the tunnel, and out into the brilliant, salt stung morning. No trace remains of that strange, fleet darkening Fannie and the rebel had witnessed as they left the letter-writer's house. The sky is high and creamy blue as it rises away from the last hints of its phoenix-feathered dawn. The air, so close to the water, is chill and clean. The galleon they are to commandeer joggles gently, bumping against the softened wood of the jetty now and then, its sails hardly rippling. A lone gull flaps down to settle on her mast, ruffles its wings, snaps its head to left and right, then hauls itself into flight again and lazes away.

'There she is,' Mother breathes. The women move as one towards the galleon, Mother leading them, as though she really is the figurehead of a grand vessel and they comprise the prow, the hull, the sails.

With the sailors still incapacitated, the docks remain quiet, and the women's heels thunder over the wood as though they number an army. Fannie glances about herself: at the lover's tawny curls; at the virgin's slender shoulders; at the mystic's swinging skirts; at the sage's raised chin. They will make a fine crew – these fearless women, her brave daughter – and they will sail to all the corners of the Earth with only the moon and the tides to guide them. They will become pirates, hunting the treasure of their own lives.

Fannie, buoyed again by the idea, begins to laugh. Mother whips her head around to shush her, but Fannie can do nothing to settle herself. Her voice echoes off the city walls. She clamps her lips shut, but the sound pushes its way out. Already, they are making too much noise. Already, they are forgetting the silence they have been subjected to all this time.

'Hurry, then,' Mother huffs.

Fannie grabs the rebel's wrist and tugs. In response, the rebel barks out a laugh.

'Lord!' says Mother. 'Quickly.'

They begin to scuttle along the jetty. Fannie's hilarity is contagious and soon, the virgin, the lover, the sage, the mystic, even the huntress, are shrieking with excitement. They are urged on by their own voices. They step quicker, Fannie skipping ahead, and soon they are running along the jetty, the

planked wood bouncing beneath the pound of their feet, and the virgin's lissom limbs seem to belong to each of them, and they all wear Fannie's wild grin, and they are propelled towards the galleon by Mother's unbreakable confidence, and Fannie can hardly keep track of who is who, so muddled are they, so close are they, so united are they by this rush to freedom.

It is the men, this time, who will be left stranded on the docks.

'Here we come,' Fannie gasps. And she is laughing and weeping, because soon she will be with her daughter again, and she will be able, finally, to offer her what she has wished to offer since the day she took her first tentative breath – the whole world.

(Fannie's
mother)

Author's Note

Since Victor Hugo's epic novel *Les Misérables* published in 1862, there have been countless adaptations made for stage and screen, and I have been a fan of many. As a child, I played the VHS of the 10th Anniversary Concert until the picture jumped and distorted. I loved every character. Valjean was a hero and a heartthrob. Eponine was brave and entrancing. As I grew older and started to consider my own status as a woman in society, however, it was Fantine's role that most held my fascination. She was, it seemed to me, as brave as Eponine, as goodhearted as Valjean, as firm in her convictions as the dogged Javert. But her storyline was shaped always around the other players. She is abandoned by Félix, cast out by the factory foreman, abused by her customers when she turns to prostitution, arrested by Javert as punishment for her desperation. When, finally, a man does show her kindness, it comes too late: she is close to death. It felt to me as though Fantine existed always in relation to these men, as though she had no agency. But who would she be, I wondered, if the male characters were stripped from the story? What would happen