

## A God Facing Both Ways – Chapter 3

By Heather Douglass

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*“Vos pieds! Vos pieds!”*

On legs that displeased her, Madame Quirion used willow. The branch spanned six foot, slender as a horsewhip, stripped of its bark. Her dancers never knew when it was coming. Madame always stood on a chair in the orchestra pit, while the offending girl might be moving at the back of the stage. She would wait. She knew at what point the legs in question came within reach of her weapon, and though she looked frail the speed of her strike could make lightning jealous. And like lightning, the willow made no noise. The dancers heard only its effect.

They had fallen into pairs stage front when a cry of ‘Sweet Jesus!’ went up, and the newest girl fell like a dropped marionette. She left her partner without space to execute the next steps. Her skirt was trodden on, but she would not move. Nola waited until the number called for a gentle *chassé* to the left, and as she passed the body she hissed, “Get up or they put you back on the boat.”

“Let them try,” the girl snarled. But she stood and rubbed her ankle, caught up with her partner and tried not to limp.

*“Allons,”* called Madame, “now dip, and dip. But not like cow maids--,”

Cow *meds*, the way she heard it. Nola rolled her eyes. Fancy Sir Howard saying it was the Irish who spoke badly. In all the time she’d been his mistress, he never made her an exception to that rule, though Mrs. Martin called her well spoken and she was a lady, or must have been. But it worried her, that he still found fault. To make amends she practised every morning: scraps of conversation overheard in the

promenade, lines remembered from a previous night's play. Surely it put her leaps and bounds ahead of a French woman.

“Now dip, and dip...”

Howard might pay for French lessons, if she picked the moment to ask. On the occasions he saw fit to compliment her, he'd say she had the complexion to be foreign. He called her *mi piccola Signorina Bianca*. Drunken talk, that was how it started, then he remembered the name when sobered and it stuck. It gave him sure and long lasting pleasure to treat her as two different women, since the second was his invention. She played the game because it brought him out of bad moods, especially in the beginning when her pronunciation was poor. Eventually she learned the secret of the 'nyah' in *signorina*: set the tongue behind the front teeth and push the sound through the nose.

“And spin—no, no no mademoiselle! *Qui est-ce?* Tell me, *elle avec le nez laid?*” Madame pointed. The pianist stumbled over his keys; the dancers halted. They kept their line, roughly speaking, checked their costumes, stared at the floor. Nola pretended to lace her slippers.

“Who?” Madame insisted. She leaned over so her chin rested on the stage, thrust her whole arm between the footlights and flailed at them with her switch. They'd been careful to stand out of reach.

“Lizzie,” the new girl identified herself.

“*Pourquoi* stiff as starch? You will get fat hips, *ma douce*, when you are old. Even now the movement is heavy, heavy. Why did you all stop? *Allez, allez*, from two bars before the turn!”

Devil piss on you, Nola thought. The marrow in her bones hurt, a comfort if only because it meant she still had bones. Hunger scraped away at the middle of her,

made her feel the piano notes passed right through the space between arms and legs. She had a slice of bread wrapped in a rag and pinned under her bonnet. If Sir Howard kept his promise tonight they might go to dinner and the bread could keep for tomorrow. Then two days until the final review, after which they would be paid.

It was the same for all of them; it was their most difficult part. Madame cried '*commencez*' and every other dancer stepped away to the right three and back five to form a double line. Mary knew a barrow man in Whitcomb Street who'd give away an apple if he could put it up her dress. The central girl in both lines stopped and the others curled round her, joined hands to form a circle. Eveline looked aristocratic and rarely needed tricks outside the theatre. After four circuits Nola broke the ring and led her women across the stage to the opposite standing girl. The other group did the same, and this was tricky. Service a kitchen boy for vegetables from a stockpot or chop bones scraped from a diner's plate. Nola thought the hungry gap would disappear when she became a mistress. It did a while.

Both lines of dancers crossed at centre stage, slipping through the spaces between fast moving bodies. Though the music crescendoed, they could all be heard counting.

Madame's willow beat in time. "Take away the maypole," she called. The last person in each row caught the standing girl and whisked her round the wings before both groups met at the gaslights as a single unit once more.

"*Et bon. Arrêtez,*" Madame did not applaud but her dog, who slept in the pit, leapt to its feet and yapped. While the old lady went to fetch the beast and kiss its nose, Nola tipped her head back to let the sweat soak into her hair. Lizzie came alongside and copied her.

"I'll never be good enough," she said.

Nola blew all the air from her lungs and replied, "I don't know about that." But she did. There was little between living and dying, between getting a thing and not getting it. Lizzie had no mother, no natural grace and no regular gentlemen. A girl might be short one of these and manage, but without them all?

"I can't dance any more. I'll fall asleep on the promenade tonight and won't get a trick."

"Then do your sleeping when you're on your back."

"Eh?" Lizzie queried, "can't do that, can I."

"Why not?"

"Won't the gander notice if I'm not making noise?"

"You can't help make noise the way they buck up and down. And it's ladylike."

"Never is."

"If you don't believe me," Nola said, "ask Eveline. A lady should shut her eyes. She shouldn't want to see the business."

"*Maintenant!*" Madame put the dog under her arm. "Again, because the chassé was ruined. Your places."

They groaned in unison. "If I die before we finish," Lizzie said, "don't pray for me. I've done my time in hell."

But Nola said a prayer for her anyway. When Madame dismissed them she went backstage to a hiding place between the flats. She said one for Eveline, Mary and dancers in other troupes: that they would never get the willow or cramp. She asked that holes not appear in their stockings, and that they might all be blessed with a way over, round or through their fate to places where they could afford to eat dinner every night. It looked a devout exercise. If mother could see--well, better not to

imagine mother seeing, but she might approve of the piety. In truth it was more superstition, for who knew where good things came from?

She said 'amen', left the Empire, and walked to the room she rented over a coffeehouse on Jermyn Street. She undressed and draped her underclothes over the chair to dry. She unpinned her bonnet. She took down her hair and brushed it until her arms hurt as much as her legs. The petals from a rose she'd got the night before sat soaking in a cup of cold tea. She smelled the liquid and sighed; it hadn't much scent. She dipped her fingers in nonetheless, daubed behind her ears and under her armpits. She poured some into a cupped hand and slopped herself between the legs.

It made her run shivering to pull her drawers back on. When she knocked on the wall Mrs. Martin came from the next room. She'd known her three years, but if she knew the woman another ten she couldn't imagine calling her anything but Mrs. Martin. She arrived wearing the dress Nola remembered from their first meeting, matronly black crepe with a high collar and a ruff with feathers. Stairwell gossip said she'd once been the madame of five gay houses; no one knew why she gave it up. But every girl in the building looked to her if their silks got stained or they caught a rash or worse.

Mrs. Martin laced her corset, helped her into her evening dress and fixed her hair, all in silence. Only when she'd fixed the hat in place she said, "I didn't hear you come in last night. I heard Ann and Nel. Did you go out?"

"I did. But all I got for my trouble was a flower and a sore cunt."

"Ah," she replied. If she were very angry she would say as much, but the tone was sufficiently piqued. The truth had waited until her work was done and could not be undone.

“Howard is back from Italy,” Nola said quickly. “He should be waiting for me this evening.” Mrs. Martin squeezed the back of her neck, which was the signal for her to stand and be inspected.

“Lovely,” the old madame proclaimed. “Let’s see what that does, shall we?” She turned soft then, too soft, gave Nola wet kisses on both cheeks. It was a relief to wish her goodnight. After that there was time in quantity; it was too early to leave and there was nothing to do but watch the traffic from her window and fight the guilt. She had not lied. Many things could be said about Nola Larmour, and heaven knew she wasn’t always as poor as she made out. But she wouldn’t be known for stretching credit past the point of decency. She would get money tonight; she would tell Howard she needed a bottle of scent. He was usually generous when he’d been away. But no matter how she reasoned her conscience wouldn’t settle. On her way out she hung her bonnet with the piece of bread over Mrs. Martin’s doorknob.

When she returned to Leicester Square there were coloured lights on all the buildings and the street was crowded with shadows: carriages, hansoms, horses, dogs and people. Above that rose the cloud of their steam but no fog, which was a mercy. She went in the stage door and down the first staircase to the dancers’ dressing room. She knocked but could tell from the din that no one would hear. She let herself in.

“Hush!” someone cried. The long table had girls sitting and girls standing behind the sitters, vying for the mirrors. They were all different kinds of naked. One grabbed a wig to cover her breasts.

“Jenny,” Nola waved to her. There was no getting closer without stepping on a part of someone’s body. “Came to wish you luck.”

Jenny blew her a kiss. So did two other dancers, whom she’d never seen before, and the better part of the room burst into laughter.

“Will you meet Howard tonight?” Jenny asked.

“With any luck.”

“If he takes you to the Savoy you must order trout. I can’t remember the name of the dish, but it was drowned in cream.”

There were sighs. “Cream,” someone murmured.

“If he takes me to the Savoy I let him order. If I look at the menu I want to eat it all. Anyway, don’t you think about cream--you need to be light on your feet.”

“Feet?!” Jenny shrieked. “What feet? Would to God I could feel my feet.”

“Amen,” said the girl with the wig over her breasts.

“Must go,” Nola backed away, waving more. “Good luck!”

“And you!” She shut them in. Then she returned upstairs, followed the main passage to the backstage. Where it opened out, just beyond the green room and opposite the prompter’s box, there was a door that led to a corridor not available to the public. Separated by a wall from the house seats to the right of the theatre, it was reserved for performers, to get them quickly to the lobbies and bars.

And Nola had it to herself. As she walked she talked, “*Allons, allons, et bon. Arrêtez.*” She thought the execution not bad. How to use the words in conversation was another matter. She would have been better served to know the French for ‘hello my darling’ or ‘how kind’ or ‘you will spoil me’, which phrases Madame Quirion was unlikely to use. She reached the pass door at the end of the corridor. She opened it, and stepped through onto a broad thoroughfare of carpet that ran the width of the house, directly behind the last row of seats.

This was the Empire promenade, a theatre in its own right. Every man paid to see the show onstage; that was for appearances, but the one that went on here was as much if not more popular. The plush avenue was a parade route and a market, though

a person who did not know might not see. They might notice the number of women increase as they approached from the lobby; they might expect to see some old or less attractive faces but would not find them. Nothing brash went on here, no bared ankles or winking. That was for the street, and the managers wouldn't hesitate to turn you out unless you learned a subtle way to sell yourself, to drift over the carpet like an elegant ghost, nod to your men and speak in murmurs.

No woman lingered here without business to conduct. Innocent females were escorted by their men through the danger area and put safely in their seats. The promenade's affairs were discreet but there was always a chance of trouble. Once in a while some crusading citizen would try to have it stopped, though the last time had been before the Queen died.

Having entered, Nola became the object of much and varied attention. The men remained where they were, standing or sitting, and if they were in conversation they did not pause. They took her in between sentences, as they drew on a cigarette or sipped their drinks. She assessed them according to category: men who had paid for her, men who knew what she was but had not. Some of the latter were Howard's friends. Finally there were men she didn't know at all. They took the most interest, trying to determine if she was famous enough that they ought to recognise her, or whether she could become sufficiently famous to warrant their staking a claim before the competition got fierce.

She could ignore it all tonight. She slid into the traffic of women, followed the current but didn't let her eyes get caught. She looked out for her fellow dancers. She spotted Eveline out of the fray already, drawn into a group of four barely older than her. She would take what she wanted and Mary, who hovered at her shoulder, might pick from the remains. Lizzie was still walking the carpet alone. She waved but Nola

ignored her. No distinction made between promenade and powder room--must they teach the girl *all* her manners?

Kindness, she reminded herself. On nights like these she could afford to feel magnanimous, and she was grateful for Howard in spite everything he did, because he would free her from uncertainty, from having to meet someone new. There were whores who shuddered at the thought of marriage. But she could gladly settle with one man, withdraw from all the demure and desperate hunting.

So she turned out of the promenade and walked straight down the centre of the expansive lobby. She passed the first bar. She expected to find Howard waiting but he was not. Rather than stop she carried on past the other until she reached the stairs; she leaned over the rail to watch people pour through the main doors into the great hall below. There was no sign of him. She went back, walking close to the wall where she was less noticeable and scoured the floor, every male face. Not, not, not, not, no. She turned away once, to slow her breathing and blink.

A regular gentleman—what a stupid label--they were anything but. He could hoard her every spare hour for a fortnight and leave her for two months. What should she do? The dream of dinner was fading, the trout and the cream; suddenly her legs felt so weak she yearned for a chair. But they were all taken. She limped back to the first bar. When she had nearly reached its marble counter Gregor the barman spotted her, and gave a slow nod. He slipped an envelope between his rows of clean glasses.

“Message from your governor,” he said as she took it.

It made her want to be unpleasant. “Was he here? When?” she demanded.

“He wasn’t,” Gregor said. “His fellow brought it. Said it was money he owed me, but he doesn’t owe me anything. So it must be for you.”

She broke the Tarleton seal and drew out the thick, smooth paper she normally loved to touch. 'Dear B,' it began, 'so sorry. Ghastly appearances to keep. Will lunch at the Criterion Tuesday. You could come to the flat that afternoon.'

No, no she could not. She would be at rehearsal that afternoon or Madame would drop her from the troupe. He knew that. Oh, she could happily throw back her head and scream, shatter the glasses and the well-fed expressions on too many faces. And what about money? She opened the envelope wide and looked in vain--nothing.

Gregor knew. "He ought to pay you for the trouble of coming."

She wanted to make light of it but couldn't. Everything she thought to say was blasphemous.

"Now then," the barman warned. "A face like that will drive away customers. Yours and mine."

She watched him open the till and put in change. Little heaps of coins sat in their compartments, shiny ones and dull. Farthing would get her a cup of sweet coffee; a penny would buy a duff or a pie. She made herself turn away and watch the men send meaningful looks to particular women while the women replied in code with a tug on the finger of a glove or the turn of a fan. The elegant mating game. She had best collect her wits and think about joining it. She allowed herself one expression of irritation, a gusty sigh.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Gregor. "See the young man standing against the pillar there...not far from your new girl?"

"Lizzie?" Nola asked. Gregor nodded.

"He asked for you by name. Must have been an hour ago."

The man in question was tall; he could do with broader shoulders to carry his tuxedo jacket, otherwise he was all right. His complexion, like hers, was on the

darker side. He had wavy hair and a wrinkle at the corner of his mouth. Respectable by virtue of his clothes yet somehow he didn't work. He deported himself like a man who didn't quite know what he was.

"I don't know him," she said.

"He knows the governor calls you Bianca."

"Eh?"

"Did I know a Miss Nola Larmour, he asked, or she might be calling herself Bianca."

"He couldn't." Nola pinched the fingers of her gloves, trying to understand it. No one else could know. She might have told Jenny--she didn't remember. But once, and that wouldn't make it common knowledge. She continued to study the man. He stared into his drink too much, that was it, and never sipped. He must be new to London, or to England.

"Was he American?" she asked Gregor.

"Why?" he replied, "do you know an American?"

"No."

"I told him you came now and again. I told him his best chance was to find a spot with a view of the stairs. That way, I thought, he wouldn't loiter here. I didn't want him here in case Sir Howard came. You know how he gets."

"Do you think he knows Howard?"

"Couldn't say," the barman answered.

"Did he say his name?"

"He didn't."

The young man had stepped away from the pillar and was making his way through the milling people, across the promenade until he reached the back row of

seats. He took in the view to his right and to his left. The orchestra filed into the pit and began to tune their instruments. He faced the stage and gave his attention to that.

“Maybe he’s hoping to see you perform,” Gregor suggested.

Nola left the bar without replying.

**END OF CHAPTER 3**