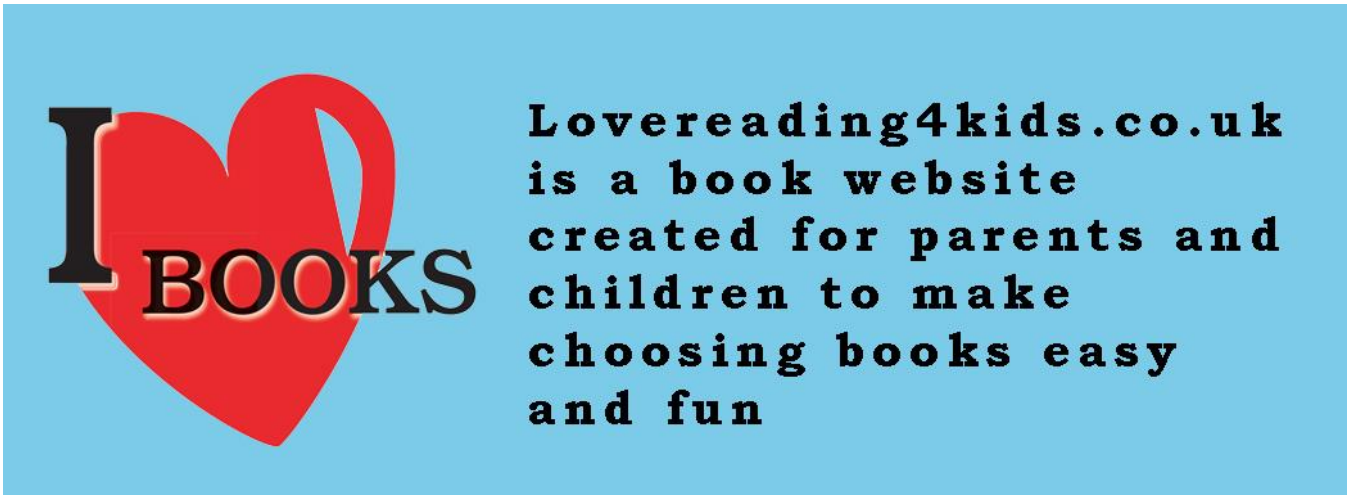


Opening extract from

Gaslight

Written by

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To (Arthur) Warren Howe, an old style Cardiff kid. Gone sailing.

Rosie Marina, an all-new Cardiff kid. Jeans rolled up to the knee, paddling.

Prologue

My mother disappeared on the sixth of September, 1894.

I was found at the docks in Cardiff, lying like a gutted fish at the water's edge.

I was found at first light. I was half drowned. No one reported me missing and no paper covered my story, though I coined the name 'The Mysterious Mermaid' when I told the tale. I don't know how I got there. I don't know what happened to my mother. People say perhaps I got a bump on the head, giving me memory loss, or perhaps something so traumatic happened to me that I've blocked it out. I don't care what happened to me. I only care what happened to her.

She had red hair like mine but brighter, glossy and thick, and so long you could plait it down her back when she let it loose. She had the face of an angel and eyes of such a deep navy you could

swim in them. Her height (I'm guessing here) was five feet five. Her distinguishing features were: freckles on her lower lip, dimples when she smiled, a birthmark on her wrist in the shape of a crescent moon. When she went missing she had a black eye and her left arm in a sling. I can remember her in that moment so clearly. But everything else is darkness.

We were running from my father. Sid told me. I was so lucky Sid was kind enough to take me in. We were running because women don't leave their husbands without going to the workhouse and if he caught us he would kill us, or commit us to the asylum. We were running – that's the last thing I remember. That and the rolling darkness.

It's the not knowing. The echoing not knowing. As dawn breaks. In the midday sun. As the night catches us in sleep.

Have you seen her?



1

Cardiff, August 1899

I'm drowning. I'm floating.

I'm drowning. I'm floating.

I'm drowning.

Even though I'm fourteen I already understand that life is complicated. I have to remember who I am, for a start.

When I'm thieving I'm Tilly Thomas. The darkest shadow. Ducking and diving. Filching and stealing. Wanting to be as invisible as a ghost. Trying to be as unnoticeable as a servant should be.

When I'm on stage I'm Ruby Radclyffe. Twinkling as the brightest light. Vibrant and jolly with my lips painted pillar-box red and my body filled with charisma like a hot air balloon. Shining and spinning like the star I'm going to be.

When I'm Nansi Howells, I am really me.

Like now: I'm swimming in the lake. Drowning. Floating. Naked. Studying the night sky. Wondering what lies beneath the water.

Fallen chimney sweeps who have turned into water babies? Unlikely.

A hungry giant water serpent with huge fangs and the ability to chew through my bones in seconds? Also unlikely, but it makes me splash a bit.

When I settle again, it hits me how strange it is that here I can choose between sinking or living. I think of myself as a mermaid. A water nymph. Something other. Ears filled with the thrum of the lake and limbs slapping the water like gentle fins. Of course, having to keep half an eye on the place where I left my clothes brings me back down to earth. It's a risk. People will nick anything they can get their hands on and I don't really want to be scarpering across Cardiff in the altogether. I can't say I would blame them for stealing from me. I'm not pure as the driven snow myself, am I?

Tonight has been a terrible night. One of the worst so far. But there's no arguing with Sid when he wants something done and he's threatening the gallows. The water will help with the bruise on my

arm. It'll wash off the blood where that monster ripped the hair from my scalp. It'll help to clean the fear away.

I take a deep breath and float with my ears under the surface. The back of my head throbs. The cold beats at my eardrums, but if I concentrate I can get past the pain. I stare at the sky and swim out the filth of the day. The girl's face when she woke to find me in her bedroom. That evil man's shouts. I ignore the rattle and scruff and blood of Cardiff and let the lap of the water at my belly drink me down. I try to think of nothing else.

I don't think about my mother.

I don't imagine her soft hands and her musical laugh.

I don't think about us walking together through the woods. Picking bluebells together. Drinking hot cocoa in front of an open fire.

I don't wonder why she disappeared and left me here. I don't wonder if she is watching over me from somewhere far away. From the tip of a twinkling star perhaps. Swinging from the crook of the moon.

I shudder and tell myself sternly that she is alive. She is alive.

I try to think about all the details of her face to make me feel better, but even though I don't want to, I imagine myself in the theatre instead, and the audience are booing and hissing at me. Sid is there, smirking at the side of the stage. He taps his cane on the boards as if he is conducting them. The smoke is hazy in the heat and the burning lime of the footlights scorches the air. There's a song playing but it's not one I recognise. It's getting slower and slower as I sink. The audience stop their jeering and gaze fixedly as I disappear into the water, as if I never really existed. Sucked up by the mirror of the starry sky. A girl from a fairy tale who was never real at all.

My mother's face comes into focus and she calls out 'Ruby' to try to save me. It's not my real name.

I come up for air as dawn breaks. It's hard to drown when you are as good at swimming as I am.



2

'Oi! Watch it!' He's a fully grown man but he almost topples as I run into him.

'Sorry, sorry, sorry.' I'm not really sorry. I'm in too much of a rush to feel anything. The ridiculousness of almost knocking over one of the knocker-uppers doesn't escape me. It'll make a funny story for the others. But I think I freaked the poor bloke out, pegging it along here, soaking wet through though there's been no rain. People are always on their guard against lunatics and rogues in the early hours. Myself included. That's one of the reasons I was running in the first place.

'Bloody kids!'

'I said I'm sorry.' I stop, to help him up from where I've bowled him over in the horse dung, but he takes a swipe at me with his hammy hands, so I start running again. He's been annoying people since before dawn by charging them money to get

them out of bed, so I tell myself I got some revenge for them.

My breath comes in sharp white blasts by the time I get to the Empire and I have to bend over and stand with my hands on my knees to get rid of the stitch that's pranging my ribs. My skirts are stinking up as far as my shins. I can't begin to imagine what I must look like. Awful, that's for sure. I try to tidy my hair but it's too scratty and tangled. It's dripped right through my dress. Even though this early autumn has been warm, it's freezing this morning and I'm shivering. Being this tired all the time doesn't help. I stand in a haberdasher's shop doorway and peek at the outside of the theatre, to check that Sid isn't about. Of course he isn't. No one is. They aren't early risers, this lot. They are late night partiers or have a second way to earn some pennies that takes them through to the first grey hours of dawn.

I let myself in. Sid's good like that at least. He's given me a room of my own in the backstage cellars and I have a mattress to myself, so I can't complain. The room is practically a box and has an odour that is indescribable. But it's better than

nothing and it's mine. I've put some flowers in a jar on the trunk in the corner and they help to brighten the darkness with the orange and lilac sway of their heads. Their smell is too fragile to battle the stench but I'm grateful for it anyway. It reminds me of the heavy scents of summer: lilacs, peonies, marigolds, peppery sweet on the air.

My real clothes are hung up next to some old, moth-eaten costumes, so I get out of this servant's uniform, part of Sid's latest cunning plan, and try to shake the cold out of them before putting them on. It doesn't work. Even in the middle of summer it's an ice pit down here. I light an oil lamp and try to appreciate the vague sense of heat.

My reflection, when I get up the courage to look at it, is ghastly. My hair, which is just the wrong sort of red, is still dirty even though it's wet and looks like a swan's nest. I need to try to sort myself out pretty quickly so I can get some kip before Sid wants me, wants to see the spoils of last night (not that I have any) and give me my work for today.

A shiver convulses my body as I think of that girl again. I should've tried to convince her that I was a real servant like I'm supposed to, but I was

so afraid I just froze to the spot, staring at her like a startled hare. She probably thought I was a ghost. Or some kind of madhouse escapee.

'Sid won't be pleased,' I tell the girl in the glass, who is wincing as she rubs the bald patch on her head. 'If he finds out.'

It all happened so fast. I hid in the girl's wardrobe when the other servants went to bed. I came out when I was sure it was dark and everyone was asleep, to go downstairs and rifle through their silver, as I'd been ordered. And then I saw it. A book. So beautiful. I thought it would be such a gorgeous thing for Bee to have. I've been trying to teach her to read, in minutes snatched from our real jobs, and it was so tempting to have a real book to learn from instead of just Penny Dreadfuls. It was lying there waiting in the darkness. 'Notice me. Look at me,' it whispered, the gold lettering catching the light on the crimson cover, the gilt-edged pages glittering. 'I promise you wonderful stories.' It was waiting there just for me.

I knew it was a risk to go so close to the sleeping girl but I couldn't get Bee's excited face out of my head. So I went for it. As I reached out

the floorboards creaked, the way things always make a racket when you are trying to be quiet.

'Who's there?' The girl sprang up in her bed like a jumping jack-in-the-box and I just stood, a petrified tailor's dummy, with the book in my hand, and my mouth open to catch flies.

She gawped at me.

I gawped back at her.

And then chaos erupted.

'AARRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHH HHHHH.' The scream coming out of that tiny mite's mouth could've sunk a ship, I'm telling you. It shocked me into moving.

I ran out of the room and on to the landing, but the house was already waking in confusion. Harassed yelps filled the darkness and lamps were lit. I, of course, had to wait for a second too long to see if my mother was one of the people emerging from the rooms.

'Get the rifle!' someone shouted.

'Burglars.' Someone else.

'Murderers!' An over-dramatic reaction, I thought.

I ran back into the bedroom, making the girl screech louder. I shoved the book in my apron

pocket and tried to yank open the window so I could get out. You wouldn't believe how much time it takes to shove one of them sash windows up when your palms are sweating and you're trembling with panic. I was through it, quick as I could, but I held on to the sill, dangling over the garden below. I wasted precious moments praying I wouldn't break my ankle or worse, then this livid man stuck his head out and looked down at me yelling, 'When I get my hands on you I'm going to slit your throat.'

Before I could let myself fall, he grabbed hold of the back of my hair, thunked the front of my head against the wall, and held me there, spitting and snarling like some rabid dog. That's when the screaming really got going from all sides.

'Let go of me!' Me, clamouring, in fear of my very life.

'ARGHHHH!' The girl wailing, I suppose in fear of hers.

'Come here you little…' The man tugging at my hair.

'Call for the police.' 'Is anyone hurt?' 'Did they take my jewels?' 'Shoot on sight and that's an order.' The entire population of the household.

I wailed the loudest and scratched at him like a circus tiger with all my will and might. I think I hurt him because he suddenly swore loudly and dropped me like a stone. I'm lucky to be alive; the landing winded me so badly.

Back in my room, I examine my wounds and see that the bruises and cuts on my legs are ripening already. My lip has been split open. There is a large bald blooded patch on the back of my head which I can see if I use two looking-glasses. Luckily the front of my head only has a small cut where it hit the bricks. It isn't much of a plus but at least I can cover everything else up. I always wait too long. Just in case. It's a mistake I have to make.

I address myself sternly in the glass. 'You do these jobs to make money, Nansi, my girl, so buck up. You and Sid have a deal. When you've saved up enough you can hire a real detective.'

I know Sherlock Holmes is a made-up creation but he would be ideal. People are always talking about him and how he deduces things.

'Your mother is out there and you are going to find her.' If that includes cheating and swindling then that's the way it has got to be. There's always

the chance she'll be in one of these houses I get sent to. Perhaps she was also hit on the head and has memory loss. I imagine her catching sight of me and all her wonderful memories coming back. We will go somewhere else and live together. Another city perhaps, in another country. Maybe she already has a house of her own and a room that she has made beautiful for a reason she can't quite put her finger on. I will track her down. No matter what.

'Nansi!' Bee always manages to sneak in without me noticing. It's a talent she has. We've become really good friends since Sid took me in. When I find my mother I'm certain that Bee will come and live with us.

'It's fine, Bee. It's just a graze.' The gape of her mouth tells me it looks worse than I'd hoped but I think I can pin my hair over it. 'You alright?'

She nods even though she looks dog tired. Bee doesn't sleep well here. She has nightmares every night. She has been here so long she doesn't know it can be different. 'Suspicious Sid wants you already. He's in a right one.'

The others call him Pernicious Sid cos he's such a nasty piece of work but Bee always gets it wrong.

I think she does it on purpose to make me laugh. I can't call him that. He's always done his best for me, even if his best is never quite enough.

'I got this for you.'

Her surprise when she sees the book is worth every bit of pain and fright. I hold it out to her and think of a china-blue bedroom, a patterned quilt, a doll's house with a family of tiny dolls. I don't know why.

'Thanks, Nan.' She leafs through it and then closes it and reads the title slowly. 'Grimms. *A book of Fairy Tales*. Sounds grim.'

I laugh. 'We can keep it safe in here if you like?'

We put it in the trunk with my other belongings. A spare dress, a blanket, some bergamot soap that I nicked.

'Tell Sid I'll be up in a minute.' I glance at my reflection again and baulk. 'And Bee, take your time with the message.'

'Will do.' The dark circles under her cinnamon eyes are deep as wells today. She works so hard to keep her place here. As an orphan, she says she is grateful for a roof over her head and a chance to earn her keep. When I'm a star, I'll buy everything for her.