'AFTERNOON, LOVELY.' GRAHAM the doorman salutes Hettie with his good arm. ‘How’s my favourite dancer, then? You on a double today?’

‘’Fraid so.’ She leans into the little hutch where he sits by the door, oil heater on. It smells cosy, of warm wool and pipe. Graham is a fixture of the Palais. A brawny Cockney with an accent to match, he used to work on the railways before the war, and his stories are legion. It is said you can lose hours in his cubby hole, emerge blinking in the light and be ten years older, your youth stripped away.

One of the last to be called up.
Didn’t want an old bugger like me.
Proud to lose it in the end.
Two days till the Armistice!
Saw it there, twitching on the ground. Hand still moving.
Knew it was mine from the tattoo on the wrist!
‘Commiserations,’ says Graham.
‘Need the money.’ Hettie shrugs.

‘Don’t we all. Hang on a sec.’ He reaches into his pocket and takes out a tin, opens it and takes a tablet out. ‘Here you go.’ He passes it over the hatch towards her, a Nelson’s meat lozenge, brown-red. ‘Keep your strength up.’ He winks. ‘Kept us going for hours, they did. Route marches. All the way ‘cross France.’

This is what he always says.
'Thanks,' says Hettie, tucking it into her cardigan pocket. 'I'll keep it for later.'

This is what she always does. This is their little routine. Does he suspect that she only keeps the stinky little tablets long enough to put them in the cloakroom bin?

But it is their ritual, and she supposes it makes both of them feel good.

'I don't know how you girls do it,' he says, shaking his head. 'Dancing for hours. I really don't.'

Hettie shrugs, as if to say, What's to do? Then pulls her cardy round her, heading down the long, unheated corridor to the strip-lit dressing room at the end. The scattered girls turn to greet her, and they exchange hellos as she hangs her corduroy bag on the rail. Those girls who are changed already are sitting, chattering, puffing on illicit cigarettes despite the NO SMOKING signs nailed to the walls.

The chilly Palais cloakroom is one of the dubious perks of the job. It's not what you'd expect, though, from the ones out front, which are all decked out with Chinese wallpaper covered in pagodas and birds. The walls back here are just covered in paint, and a dismal green colour at that. Some of the girls have scratched their initials into the plasterwork, which is already starting to peel. Some wit has even written a poem at knee height:

Beware old Grayson
If he thinks that you're late, son
He'll take you behind and
He'll give you what for.

When Hettie first started, she had to have it explained to her: Grayson, the thin-lipped floor manager whose hard line on tardiness is legendary, is rumoured to live with another man.
somewhere in Acton Town. The boys swear he’s forever giving them lingering looks.

She takes off her cardy, blouse and skirt, hangs them on the rail and pulls on her dance dress, shivering in anticipation of the cold to come. Without the press of bodies that fills the Palais later in the week, the vast dance floor will be freezing. The management don’t allow you to take your woollies inside, so the girls try all the tricks they can, sewing extra layers under their dresses, or wearing two pairs of stockings, but nothing much will work on a winter Monday afternoon; your only hope is to be hired and keep moving so you don’t have to sit still for long.

‘Hey, Hettie!’

‘Did you get in then? Did you see it? Dalton’s? Saturday night?’

She turns to see that a ring of girls has gathered behind her, their faces expectant; hungry animals, waiting for the scraps. ‘Yes, we did.’

‘So it’s real, then?’

‘It’s real, all right. It’s so hidden, though, you’d never know it was there.’

The girls seem to exhale as one, and she can almost feel their breath alight on her, gilding her with their envy. She thinks of telling them about the dancers, about the way those people moved as though they didn’t care, but it’s just too tricky to explain.

‘And what about the band? Were they as good as the Dixies?’

‘The band were killing.’

‘And Di’s man? What’s he like?’

‘Smitten. And rich.’

The girls sigh, draw away, back to the mirrors, their powder
and cigarettes, giving last-minute adjustments to their faces, their
hair. Hettie pulls her dance shoes out of her bag and sits down to
buckle them on, warmed by a rare glow of satisfaction. She is
envied for once. It may not be nice, but it still feels good.

Di rushes in just in time, pulling a face, whips off her coat and
changes at lightning speed, as the door opens and Grayson’s head
appears around it.

‘Time, ladies.’ He claps his hands. ‘Out on to that floor.’ He
puts his head into the room and sniffs theatrically. ‘And if I catch
any of you smoking, that’ll be pay docked for a week.’

The girls move out into the chilly corridor, Hettie and Di at
the back, the boys coming out of the dressing room opposite.
Twelve of them, all dressed in their suits, ready for the afternoon
shift.

The usual mix of feelings compete in Hettie as the dancers
pass through the big double doors on to the floor. There is no
doubt that the Palais is spectacular: everything out here is
Chinese, the whole dance floor covered by a re-creation of a
pagoda roof; painted glass and lacquer panels showing Chinese
scenes are hung around, and the ceiling is supported by tall black
columns, all of which are decorated in dazzling golden letters. In
the middle of the floor is a miniature mountain, with a fountain
running down its sides, and beneath one of two smaller replica
temples the band is warming up.

The first time she saw the Palais was when she came down for
her audition on a cold day in January. Parts of it were still roped
off, and the sound of hammering and sawing formed a back-
ground to the thumping piano accompaniment as Grayson drilled
the hopeful dancers in front of a severe-looking woman, who
barked out orders and culled the men and women from five hun-
dred to eighty during the course of the day.
Even then, in its unfinished state, smelling of shavings and planed wood, you could feel it was going to be something special.

There were the adverts placed in all the local newspapers:

PALAIS DE DANSE! THE TALK OF LONDON!
Largest and most luxurious dancing palace in Europe!
Two Jazz Bands.
Lady and Gentlemen Instructors.
Evening Dress Optional.

Hettie used to cut them out of the paper and leave them on the kitchen table for her mother to read.

Six thousand people turned up that first weekend, and stepping out on to the dance floor that first time, seeing it in all its glory, it truly did seem like a palace. But what Hettie soon came to realize was that none of its splendour was meant for the staff. It was all for the punters, for the ones who had paid their two and six. For Hettie and Di and the other dancers, the Pen waited. As it still waits.

They file in now, boys on one side, girls on the other, heads bowed as Grayson inspects the line for any cardigans, any hankies visible, anyone slouching, any contraband cigarettes or knitting needles that might while away the dances that you spend unpicked. His gaze rakes them; General Grayson – that’s what the boys call him, especially the ones who were out in France.

Twelve boys, twelve girls a shift.
Twenty dances in the afternoon (3–6), twenty-five in the evening (8–12).
Sixpence a dance.
‘Bloody freezing in here tonight,’ hisses Di, as Grayson stalks past.

Grayson stops. He turns slowly, and Di looks down at her hands. But there’s no time for reprimands since the heavy door opens and the punters stream through; hundreds of them, even on a Monday night, heavy footed on the sprung wooden floor.

The band makes a bit of a ragged start and the few first couples brave it out. It’s always a waltz first at the beginning of the night. Hettie surveys the scrappy scene, hands in her armpits against the cold. If people ever bother to wear evening dress to the Palais, they definitely don’t on a Monday, and the dance floor is a sludge of brown and black and grey, the men in lounge suits, the women mostly in blouses and skirts.

An upright matron trussed into a woollen two-piece is crossing the floor with a determined stride, heading towards the male pen. Di nudges Hettie and giggles. ‘Here she is.’ Across the aisle, Simon Randall sits up straighter, spits surreptitiously on to his hand and smoothes down his hair. The woman stops before him, holding a ticket coyly in her hand. Simon, smirking, takes it and lets himself out. Hired. Simon is one of the most popular men, rented out two afternoons a week by this same woman at eleven shillings a time. Not including tips.

The crowd are scattered now, some of them sitting at tables, a few buying drinks from the little cabins around the sides of the floor. The cavernous room is filling up, the dance floor thickening, the band sounding stronger, the afternoon starting to find its shape. Hettie’s eye catches a tall man, moving slowly amongst the crowd on the other side of the floor, and she sits up, leans forward, her heart hammering; it looks like him, the man from Dalton’s: Ed.

The Palais? I went there once.
She grips the rail. Would he come here looking for her?

The man steps out on to the dance floor and she leans forward, the better to see, almost standing in her seat, but as he comes closer she sees it isn’t him. This man, other than being tall, is nothing like him; this man has the hesitant, shuffling gait of the false-legged. You can tell them a mile off. You have to be careful with them; they can trample all over you and not even know.

‘What was that about, then?’ whispers Di.

‘Nothing.’ Hettie, feeling cross, shakes her head.

But the man has had his attention caught and is making his way across the floor. She knows the look: a little vague, half-whistling through his teeth, as though he is pretending not to know how this business works. ‘Afternoon,’ he says, hands in his pockets.

‘Good afternoon.’

‘How much is all this malarkey, then?’

‘Sixpence,’ says Hettie.

‘Sixpence?’ The man looks aggrieved, his voice rising a notch. ‘But I’ve just paid two and six to get in.’

‘Come with a partner,’ Di chimes in, ‘if you don’t want to pay.’

The man flushes crimson.

Hettie feels immediately terrible. Her heart wilts – for him, for her, for the whole damn business. ‘You buy your ticket over there,’ she says gently, indicating the cabin to her left. ‘It’s a foxtrot next.’

The man swallows. ‘I’ll come back,’ he says, ‘shall I?’ His shall aggressive, daring her to say no.

‘Yes.’ She smiles at him. ‘Please do.’

The man walks stiffly away, as though if he bumped into
anything he might break and he and his dignity smash all over the floor.

Di snorts. ‘That’ll be fun.’

‘It’s all right for you,’ Hettie rounds on her. ‘I need the money. I haven’t got a man who’ll buy me things, have I?’

Di’s mouth rounds into a surprised little O. ‘What’s got into you, then? Get out on the wrong side of bed, did you?’

Hettie shrugs. She doesn’t know why, but she’s irritated with Di today. With the Palais. With all of it. The man is back, his ticket in his hand. She takes it from him, puts it in her pouch and lets herself out of the small metal gate. And when she smiles at him, it’s not just for show, because, really, heaven knows what it must take them, any of them, to come here alone.

She lifts her arms, opens her palms.

This is how it works: you are hired, and you dance. If you’re nice to them, and they like the way you move, then they ask you for another, which means another sixpence, and so it goes. The management takes half your pay, so it pays to be nice.

The man’s hands are clammy as he pulls her close. He smells of sweat and basements and clothes that need a wash. He’s about as far from the man in Dalton’s as it’s possible to be.

That makes two of them then.

The band strikes up, and they move out across the floor.