

The opera was magical from its opening note to the final heartrending echo. It was everything Ava would have expected from a city that had been famous for its performing arts for centuries. Lina Cavalieri was brilliant as Mimi, of course, but Ava's favorite part was 'Musetta's Waltz,' in which Musetta tries to win back Marcello's affections. The singing was wonderful, she thought, but it was Puccini's music that made the performance extraordinary. Arms folded on the balcony railing, she closed her eyes and lost herself in it—the playful skipping of the violin and flute, followed by the bass and trumpet adding gravity and conflict to the melody. Finally, when she felt that she couldn't take the tension a moment longer, the drums brought the waltz to a dramatic and triumphant end. How could anyone help but fall in love under the influence of that music?

The story came to its tragic conclusion, and the hall thundered with applause as the performers took their bows. When the lights came up and it was time to descend from their box, Selous again offered his arm. "Well, my girl, how did you like it?"

"Oh, it was marvelous!" she replied. "The singers and the musicians are so talented! And the sets! Although I do get tired of stories where a woman allows others to determine her destiny. Mimi sacrificed her happiness because that's what Rodolfo wanted, and she still died in the end."

Selous didn't try to hide his admiration. "I understand completely. But my dear Miss Hart, I shouldn't think you'll have to worry about that. You strike me as a woman perfectly capable of choosing her own destiny, and to Hades with anyone who dares to object. On that topic," he added, "I might as well tell you now, as I've already informed Heller, that I've selected your route for our expedition. It is without doubt the superior one, and I am grateful to you for the effort you put into plotting it. Well done!"

Ava felt her wide grin in the muscles of her cheeks. She squeezed his arm. "Thank you for giving me the chance to prove myself. You, sir, are a true gentleman."

His sunburned face turned slightly pinker, and he cleared his throat. "I hope you'll allow me the pleasure of introducing you to a few colleagues of mine." He steered her gently toward a group of men congregating near the doors. "They are among the finest and most learned naturalists in Europe and are always glad to meet young people of like mind. Gentlemen, if you please, I should like you to know Miss Hart, the shining star of our East African expedition and the first woman to become a licensed veterinarian in the United States. I expect you will be hearing quite a lot of her in the future." Ava smiled politely and did her best to remember the names of the gentlemen, who all seemed curious but eager to learn more about her role in the party.

"Selous!" Heads turned at Teddy's familiar, booming voice. "Come with me, my man. I've just made the acquaintance of a most extraordinary adventurer, a hunter in the Amazon jungles of Brazil. You must meet him." Selous made his apologies to the group and followed in Teddy's wake.

"Might I have a moment with the shining star of our party?"

Ava turned and flashed Mit a warm smile. Maybe Muriel was right, and Naples would be the place for her Cinderella moment.

Then she saw her. Glowing olive skin, raven-dark curls tumbling over the shoulders of a sparkling gown that accentuated her hourglass figure. Diamonds flashed in her hair and at her neck, drawing all eyes to her impressive bosom.

Lina Cavaliere. The crowd seemed to gather around her like iron filings near a magnet, all vying for the chance to see the diva up close, to touch her. She was smiling and accepting flowers from her adoring fans, but she was carving a path that led directly to Mit.

“Darling!” She stepped between Mit and Ava and kissed his cheek. Ava could smell her perfume, as alluring as her melodic voice.

Mit raised her hand to his lips. “Mrs. Cavaleri, it is a true pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh, please, my dear,” she scolded. “After all the time we spent together in New York, do I not deserve to be called Lina?” She continued without waiting for an answer. “Well, what did you think? Did my performance please you?” She leaned forward, grazing his body with her voluptuous curves.

Mit smiled politely. “You were truly spectacular, as always. Your performance onstage never disappoints.”

“Mit, I insist you come at once to a little party I am having. All the important people I love will be there, and as I love you most of all, you simply must join us.” Her lips turned down in a playful pout.

Ava had seen and heard enough. It was surprising to her that a woman with so much talent still felt she needed to attach herself to a wealthy, connected man to climb the social ladder. She walked away, irritated with herself for entertaining the fantasy that Mit might see her as anything more than a colleague. “Muriel was right,” she mumbled. “This is Cinderella’s ball. Too bad Cinderella isn’t me.”

She didn’t notice Mr. Heller standing nearby with Mr. Loring and Lt. Col. Mearns until he called out to her. “Well, if it isn’t our expedition’s shining star! Mit brought along a little toy to play with, but it looks like he’s found a new one. Have you lost your shine so soon, Miss Hart?”

No matter where I go, there are angry little schoolboys and bullies, she thought. She pasted on a polite smile and gave him the standard retort. “Oh, Mr. Heller, I was certain your

route would be the one chosen for our expedition, especially as you had so much more time to plan it. Imagine my surprise when Mr. Selous chose the one that came from little ole me.” She turned on her heel before Heller’s scowl could fully emerge, feeling the need for some fresh air.

She sucked in a deep breath as she passed through the doors into the cool evening. If she could just forget the last five minutes, today had been wonderful, something out of a dream.

Look where you are, Ava Hart, she admonished herself. And stop feeling sorry for yourself.

Lined up outside the opera house were a dozen carriages for hire, waiting to take opera patrons home or out for a drive—anywhere they wished to go in beautiful Naples. She walked past them slowly, admiring each horse and giving some a pat. She stopped to watch one driver wrestle with a tilted wheel, expressing his frustration in what she guessed were some rather choice words in Italian. As he bent over the wheel to loosen it, his horse, with a devilish look on his face, reached around and gave him a nip on the rump. The man leaped up with a cry and noticed Ava there, trying very hard not to laugh.

Embarrassed, he straightened his jacket. “Scusi, signorina.”

“Oh, no need to apologize, sir. Your horse reminds me of one I have at home.” The horse nuzzled her arm and she patted his nose. Silver had done the very same thing more times than she could count while she was cleaning his hooves.

The driver didn’t speak English, so he shrugged, gave her a little bow, and went back to his wheel. Ava turned her attention to the horse, rubbing his chin and telling him all about how she’d made that spiteful Mr. Heller feel like chicken liver, which he absolutely deserved.

“You do seem to make a habit of making men feel like chicken liver, Miss Hart.”

She kept her back to Mit and continued scratching the horse's chin. "Are you still here, Mr. Roosevelt? I had thought you'd be off at Miss Cavaliere's party for all the important people she loves."

"I was hoping to spend my evening a little differently."

"Oh, really?" She still refused to turn around. "Please don't let me detain you, then."

To her surprise, he began speaking Italian to the man, who had succeeded in straightening the carriage wheel and climbed onto the driver's seat.

"How is it that you speak Italian?"

Mit stood at the step of the carriage with his hand extended and his blue eyes twinkling.

"After you, Miss Hart."

She was ready to decline, politely but firmly, and find her own way back to the hotel, but somehow her hand was in his and she was allowing him to help her onto the seat. He stepped nimbly in beside her and closed the door.

Original text

The production was everything Ava would have expected from a true Neapolitan opera in a theatre which had been one of the most significant musical centers in previous centuries. Lina Cavaliere shined as always in her character as Mimi, but Ava found that her favorite part was actually Musetta's waltz. In the story, Musetta is the ex-girlfriend of Rodolfo's best friend Marcello, and she tries to win back Marcello's affections with a solo set to a waltz. In Musetta's waltz, the singing itself was wonderful, but Ava thought that the real masterpiece was Puccini's instrumentals. She found herself leaning forwards against the balcony, closing her eyes and losing herself to the music, beginning with the violin and the flute, skipping in playful steps as it draws you in. Then comes the bass and the trumpet adding seriousness and conflict to the melody. Finally, when you feel that you can't handle the conflict any longer, it finishes with the drum at the dramatic and triumphant ending.

"How could anyone not fall in love with *that music* guiding them?" Ava whispered to herself.

At the end of the production, Selous accompanied Ava to the main hall. "How did you like it my girl?" Selous asked.

"I thought it was marvelous," Ava replied. "Though I do always find it a little tragic that many plots in the opera center around a female who lets others determine her destiny, often to her own detriment."

Selous looked admirably at Ava and replied. "Yes, but Miss King I don't think you will suffer from that same fate. I can see that you have guts my girl, even in the face of those who try to undermine you. On that subject, I might as well tell you now, since I have already informed Mr. Heller, that I chose

Commented [1]: This song is Ava's song. If you listen to it on the piano, this song embodies Ava. I spent a long time picking her song among all of the opera favorites at the time. This one is it.

your route for the expedition. It is without a doubt the superior route, and I am grateful to you for the hard work you did in creating it.”

Ava smiled broadly. She squeezed Selous’ hand and exclaimed, “Thank you for giving me the chance to prove myself. You, sir, represent my definition of a true gentleman.”

Selous smiled in return. “Now then,” Selous said as he led her over to a group of men that were congregating together, “let me introduce you to a few comrades who are among the best naturalists I know in Europe.”

“Gentlemen,” Selous said, interrupting their conversations, “Let me introduce you to Miss King, the shining star of our expedition. I think you may find that this lady is set to become one of the greatest naturalists of our age. She is also now the first licensed female veterinarian in the United States.” Ava smiled politely at the men as they made their introductions.

“Selous!” the familiar booming voice of Teddy came from behind them. “Come my man. I have just met an extraordinary adventurer who has hunted in the Amazon jungles in Brazil. You must meet him.” Selous gave his apologies to Ava as he departed with Teddy.

“Might I now have a moment with our party’s shining star?” Ava heard Mit’s voice and turned around to see him approaching her. She flashed him a brilliant smile, thinking that maybe Muriel was right, Naples is the perfect place to have a Cinderella moment after all.

That’s when Ava saw *her*. The hour glass figure with olive skin and flowing dark hair decorated in a sparkly full-length gown accentuating all of her curves and adorned with a diamond tiara on her head and lavish necklace laid on top of her ample bosom. It was Lina Cavalieri herself. All eyes were on her. The crowd seemed to warp with her as she walked, everyone pressing forward for the chance to see the most beautiful woman in the world up close. She was moving directly towards Mit, accepting flowers from every fan along the way and smiling as if the world belonged only to her.

“Hello Mit, my *darling*,” Lina said as she stepped rudely in between him and Ava and kissed him on the cheek. Ava could smell her perfume, and it was as alluring as the melodic tones of her voice.

Lina placed her hand in Mit’s as he instinctively raised it to his lips and said, “Miss Cavalieri. It is a true pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh please, my darling,” Lina scolded. “After all of our acquaintances in New York, do I not deserve to be called Lina? Well, what did you think of my performance? Did I please you?” Lina asked while pressing her voluptuous curves into Mit.

Mit smiled and said politely, “Yes, you were truly spectacular as always. I am never disappointed by your performances.”

“Well then I absolutely insist you come at once to a little party I am having with all of the important people that I love. And as I love you most of all, I won’t hear of you not being there,” Lina said with a playful pout of her lips.

Ava had heard enough, and it was getting too awkward to stand overshadowed behind this woman while she flirted shamelessly with Mit. Lina was clearly the kind of woman who was always finding the next man to hold on to as she climbed her social ladder. Ava wondered why a woman with so much natural talent felt the need to use a man to climb for her. Ava walked off, angry at herself for letting Muriel’s talk of fairy tales make her think of Mit as anything other than a colleague. “Well, I guess Muriel was right”, Ava thought. “There is a Cinderella at this ball, but it is pretty clear that it’s not me.”

She walked by Mr. Heller who was huddled in a group with Mr. Loring and Colonel Mearns and mockingly called out to her, “Well, if it isn’t our expeditions’ ‘*shining star*’, Mit’s little toy that he brought to play with on his journey. Looks to me like he has found a new toy. Perhaps you are not so shiny after all?”

Ava looked with disdain at Mr. Heller and couldn’t help but notice how familiar this all sounded, so she gave him a familiar response in return with stoic politeness, “Oh Mr. Heller. I too thought your route might be chosen for the expedition, especially as you had *so* long to design it. Boy was I surprised when I received word that the route chosen was designed *by little old me*.”

Ava turned on her heel as she saw Mr. Heller’s deep scowl emerge. She instantly felt the need for some fresh air so she darted through the front doors and sucked in a deep breath. Then she saw them, each

one lined up after the next waiting for passengers leaving from the opera to go home for the evening. They were the local horse drawn carriages for hire that would take you wherever you needed to go in the city. Ava walked by each of them slowly, admiring each horse and patting a few as she went. She stopped at one whose owner was wrestling with a fractured wheel on his carriage and expressing himself quite loudly in Italian with what she guessed were rather foul choices of words. He was bent over the wheel trying to loosen it when his horse, with a cheeky look on his face, bent down and gave him a bite right on the rump. He cried out and swirled around only to see Ava standing there trying her very best not to laugh. The driver straightened his jacket and apologized in Italian. Ava tried to talk to him in English in return, but he didn't understand a word she was saying. She gazed at the horse while the owner went back to fixing his wheel and began nuzzling his nose, thinking that this horse's sense of humor was just like Silver's. She herself had been subject to the same humiliation in the past when bending over to clean Silver's shoes. This horse clearly loved Ava's affections, and she scratched under his chin and decided to tell him all about how she made that spiteful Mr. Heller feel like chicken liver just like she had with that mean old Billy back in New York.

Ava's story was interrupted by a familiar voice behind her. "You do seem to have a habit of making men feel like chicken liver, Miss King." Instead of turning around, Ava continued facing the horse and only responded with a slight shortness in her voice, "I thought you would be off with Miss Cavalieri at her party for all of the important people that she loves."

"I had a better idea," Mit said.

"Oh" Ava said, still refusing to turn around. "And what was that?"

To Ava's surprise, Mit responded by speaking in Italian to the driver who by now had fixed his wheel and was back in his driver's seat. "You speak Italian?" Ava said flummoxed.

Mit climbed into the carriage and held out his hand to Ava, his blue eyes twinkling. "Miss King, I would be honored if you would join me. I have somewhere I'd like you to see."

Ava laughed, relented to his request and let him help her climb on to the carriage. "Ok Mr. Roosevelt. You have sparked my curiosity. Lead the way."