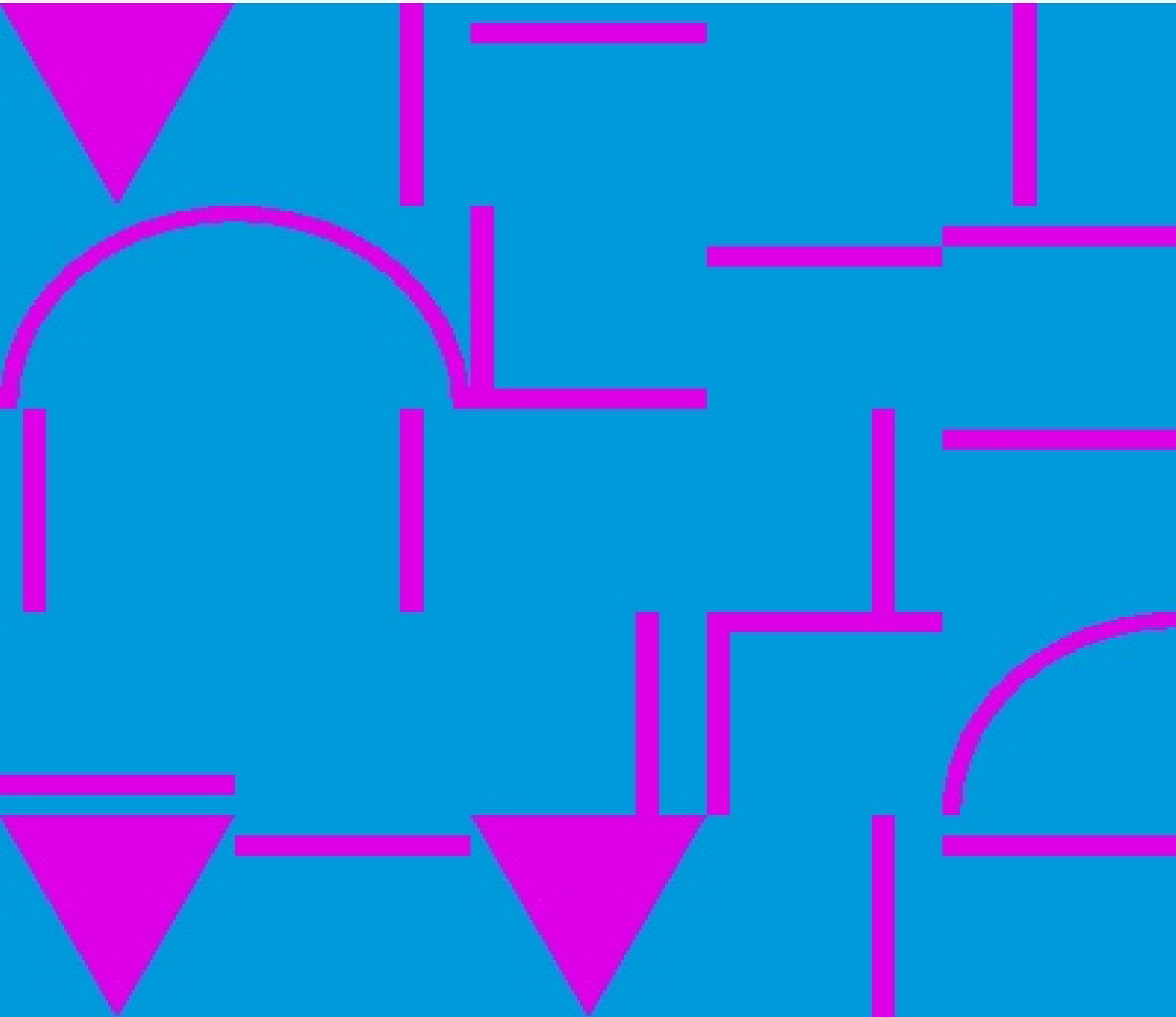
# She Buildeth Her House

Will Levington Comfort



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# She Buildeth Her House

# By Will Levington Comfort

**Author of "Routledge Rides Alone," etc**

**With a Frontispiece By**
**Martin Justice**

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**A BOUGH BROUGHT WITH SINGING**
**TO THE FEET OF**
**HER**
**WHO CROSSED THE SANDS ALONE**
**IN ADORING PILGRIMAGE**
**FOR HER SON**

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**HE REACHED THE CURBING OF THE OLD WELL WITH HIS BURDEN**

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About Will Levington Comfort

By Will Levington Comfort

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# She Buildeth Her House

# FIRST CHAPTER

## PAULA ENCOUNTERS THE REMARKABLE EYES OF HER FIRST GIANT, AND HEARKENS TO THE SECOND, THUNDERING AFAR-OFF

Paula Linster was twenty-seven when two invading giants entered the country of her heart. On the same day, these hosts, each unconscious of the other, crossed opposite borders and verged toward the prepared citadel between them.

Reifferscheid, though not one of the giants, found Paula a distraction in brown, when she entered his office before nine in the morning, during the fall of 1901. He edited the rather distinguished weekly book-page of *The States*, and had come to rely upon her for a paper or two in each issue. There had been rain in the night. The mellow October sunlight was strange with that same charm of maturity which adds a glow of attraction to motherhood. The wonderful autumn haze, which broods over our zone as the spirit of ripening grains and tinting fruits, just perceptibly shaded the vivid sky. A sentence Paula had heard somewhere in a play, "My God, how the sun does shine!" appealed to her as particularly fitting for New York on such a morning. Then in the streets, so lately flooded, the brilliant new-washed air was sweet to breathe.

Paula had felt the advisability the year before of adding somewhat to her income. Inventory brought out the truth that not one of her talents had been specialized to the point of selling its product. She had the rare sense to distinguish, however, between a certain joyous inclination to write and a marked ability for producing literature; and to recognize her own sound and sharp appreciation of what was good in the stirring tide of books. Presenting herself to Reifferscheid, principally on account of an especial liking for the book-page of *The States*, she never forgot how the big man looked at her that first time over his spectacles, as if turning her pages with a sort of psychometric faculty. He found her possible and several months won her not a little distinction in the work.

Reifferscheid was a fat, pondrous, heavy-spectacled devourer of work. He compelled her real admiration —"the American St. Beuve," she called him, because he was so tireless, and because he sniffed genius from afar. There was something unreservedly charming to her, in his sense of personal victory, upon discovering greatness in an unexpected source. Then he was so big, so common to look at; kind as only a bear of a man can be; so wise, so deep, and with such a big smoky factory of a brain, full of fascinating crypts. Subcutaneous laughter that rested her internally for weeks lingered about certain of the large man's sayings. Even in the auditing of her account, she felt his kindness.

"Now here are some essays by Quentin Charter—a big man, a young man and a slow worker," he said. "Charter's first volume was a thunderer. We greeted it with a whoop two years ago. Did you see it?"

"No," Paula replied. "I was too strong for literary trifles then."

"Anyway, look out for Charter. He didn't start to appear until he was an adult. He's been everywhere, read everything and has a punch like a projectile. An effective chap, this Charter. He dropped in to see me a few weeks after my review. He confessed the critics had made him very glad.... 'I am doing a second book,' he confided to me. 'Down on my knees to it. Work-shop stripped of encomiums; no more dinner-parties or any of that fatness. Say, it's a queer thing about making a book. You never can tell whether it's to

be a boy or a girl....'"

Paula smiled reservedly.

"I asked him what his second book was to be about," Reifferscheid went on. "'Women,' said he. 'How novel!' said I. He grinned genially. 'Reifferscheid,' he declared, in his snappy way, 'women are interesting. They're doing the thinking nowadays. They're getting there. One of these mornings, man will wake up to the fact that he's got to be born again to get in a class with his wife. Man is mixed up with altogether too much of this down-town madness. Women don't want votes, public office, or first-hand dollars. *They want men!*' ... I always remembered that little bit of stuff from Charter. He says the time will come when classy girls will get their heads together and evolve this ultimatum, which will be handed intact to adorers: 'No, boys, we can't marry you. We haven't any illusions about celibacy. It isn't nice nor attractive, but it's better than being yoked with hucksters and peddlers who come up-town at night—mental cripples in empty wagons. Go away and learn what life means, what it means to be men—*what it means to us for you to be men*! Learn how to live—and oh, boys, hurry back!'"

"Splendid!" Paula exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, Charter is a full deck and a joker. He's lived. He makes you feel him. His years are veritable campaigns. He has dangled in the vortices of human action and human passion—and seemed to come out whole!..." Reifferscheid chuckled at a memory. "'Women are interesting,' Charter finished in his dry fashion. 'I just got to them lately. I wish I could know them all.'"

"I love the book already," Paula said. Reifferscheid laughed inwardly at the feminine way she held the volume in both hands, pressing it close.

"It's the only book on my table this morning that I'd like to read," he added. "Therefore I give it to you. There's no fun in giving something you don't want.... Are you going to hear Bellingham to-night?"

She was conscious of an unaccountable dislike at the name, a sense of inward chill. It was almost as reckonable as the pleasure she felt in the work and personality of Quentin Charter.

"Who's Bellingham?" Paula swallowed dryly after the first utterance of the name.

"Mental magician. I only mentioned him, because you so seldom miss the unusual, and are so quick to hail a new cult or odd mental specimen."

"Magician—surely?" she asked.

"He comes rather stoutly recommended as such," Reifferscheid replied, "though personally mine is more than a healthy skepticism. There's a notice this morning of his lectures. He recently hypnotized a man to whom the medical profession was afraid to administer an anaesthetic—held him painless during a long and serious operation. Then Bellingham is the last word in alchemy, feminine emotions, causes of hysteria, longevity, the proportions of male and female in each person; also he renews the vital principle, advises unions, makes you beautiful, and has esoteric women's classes. A Godey's Ladies' man. Some provincial husband will shoot him presently."

Paula took the surface car home, because the day was so rare and the crowd was still downward bent. The morning paper contained an announcement of Quentin Charter's new book, and a sketch of the author. A strange, talented figure, new in letters, the article said. The paragraphs had that fresh glow of a publisher's perennial high hope. Here was the book of a man who had lived; who drew not only upon art,

history, and philosophy for his prisms of thought, but who had roamed and worked and ridden with men, keeping a sensitive finger ever at the pulse of nature; a man who had never in the most insignificant degree lowered the import or artificially raised the tension of his work to adjust it to the fancied needs of the public. In spite of the enthusiastic phrasing, everything about Charter fascinated her; even the make-up of the unread book in her hand, and the sentences that gleamed from the quickly turned pages.

She had ridden many squares, when the name of Dr. Bellingham stood out before her eyes in the newspaper. The chill in her arteries was perceptible as before, when Reifferscheid spoke the name. It was as the latter had said—the famous healer and telepathist was to start a series of classes for women.

Paula lived alone in a small apartment at the *Zoroaster*, "Top-side o' Park." Few friends, many books, within a car ride of the world's best fruition in plays, lectures, music, and painting—yet the reality of it all was the expansion of her mind in the days and nights alone. The subtle relations of things encroached upon her intelligence with a steady and certain trend. She never had to pass, like so many of cruder nature, through the horrid trials of materialism; nor to be painfully bruised in mind from buffeting between manhandled creeds and the pure ethics of the Lord Christ. Hers was not an aggressive masculine originality, but the complement of it—that inspiring, completing feminine intelligence, elastic to a man's hard-won concepts and ready with a crown for them.

Something of this type of woman, the big-brained brothers of men have written and chiselled, painted, sung and dreamed of, since human thought first lifted above the appetites. There must be a bright answer for each man's particular station of evolution in the world's dumfounding snarl of the sexes—one woman to lighten his travail and accelerate his passage to the Uplands. For we are but half-men, man and woman alike. The whole is two, whose union forms One.... This is the key to Nature's arcanum; this, the one articulate sentence from all the restless murmuring out of the past; this, the stupendous Purpose weaving the million thrilling and truant activities of the present hour—the clean desire for completion—the union of two which forms One.

The search for this completing woman is the secret of man's roving in the gardens of sense. His frequent falls into abysmal depravity are but results incidental to the occultations of his Guide Star. From reptiles in the foul smoke of chaos, to the lifted spines of manhood on a rising road, Man has come; and by the interminable torture of the paths which sink behind, he has the other half of eternity to reach the Top.

From a child whose fairies were only enchanted into books for day-time convenience, darkness to Paula meant visions, indeed. Often now at night, though she never spoke of it, the little apartment was peopled by the spirits of her reading and her ideals—mystics, priests, prophets, teachers, ascetics. To the congenial dark they came—faces unlike any she had ever seen, but quite unmistakable in her dreamings. Once when she pampered a natural aversion to meat for several months, soft foot-falls and low voices (which had nothing whatever to do with her neighbors across the hall, or the elevator-man in any passage) began to rouse her in the night. New York is no place for such refinements of sense, and she checked these manifestations through physical exercise and increased diet. She was seldom afraid, but there was a tension in all her imaginings, and she grew marvellously in this twenty-eighth year—furnishing her mind more sumptuously than she knew. Reifferscheid saw this in her eyes and in her work.

Throughout the swiftly passing day, Paula realized that she would go to Prismatic Hall in West Sixty-seventh Street, where Dr. Bellingham was to organize his lecture-course that night. Against this foreknowledge was a well-defined distaste for the man and his work. Between the two, the thought of the evening crowded frequently into mind until she became impatient with herself at the importance it assumed. It was with a certain feminine manipulation of conscience, so deft as almost to be unconscious,

that she excused her own curiosity on the ground that her disfavor for the doctor and his message would be strengthened by the first meeting, beyond the need of further experience.

One concession she made to her natural aversion—that of going late. She was in a mood poignantly critical. The real Paula Linster, she fancied, was at home, "Top-side o' Park"; here was just a sophisticated professional surface, such as reporters carry about. The Hall was packed with women; the young and the jaded; faces of pup-innocence; faces bitten from terrible expeditions to the poles of sense; faces tired and thick from the tread of an orient of emotions; slow-roving eyes which said, "I crave—I crave! I have lost the sense of reality, but seven sick and pampered organs crave within me!"

The thought came to Paula—to be questioned afterward—that man's evil, after all, is rudimentary compared to a worldly woman's; man's soul not so complicated, nor so irrevocably identified with his sensual organism. She could not avoid pondering miserably upon woman's innate love for far ventures into sensation, permitting these ventures to be called (if the world would) searches for the holy grail. The inevitable attraction for women which specialists of the body possess, actually startled her. Bellingham was one of these. On the surface of all his sayings, and all comment about him, was the bland, deadly insinuation that the soul expands in the pursuit of bodily health. About his name was the mystery of his age, whispers of his physical perfection, intimations of romantic affairs, the suggestion of his miraculous performances upon the emotions—the whole gamut of activities designed to make him the instant aversion of any normal member of his own sex. Yet the flock of females had settled about him, as they have settled about every black human plague—and glorious messiah—since the birth of days.

The thrilled, expectant look on several faces brought to Paula's mind the type of her sisters who relish being shocked; whose exaltations are patently those of emotional contact; who call physical excitement the glorifying of their spirit, and cannot be persuaded to confess otherwise. Woman as a negation for man to play upon never distressed her before with such direct and certain pressure. Here were women intent upon encountering a new sensation; women who devoutly breathed the name of Motherhood next to Godhood, and yet endured their pregnancy with organic rebellion and mental loathing; women who could not conceive of love apart from the embrace of man, and who imagine a "message" in deformed and salacious novels, making such books popular; women of gold-leaf culture whose modesty fastens with a bow—narrow temples of infinite receptivity....

Why had they come? In the perfect feminine system of information, the whisper had run: "Bellingham is wonderful. Bellingham tells you how to live forever. Bellingham teaches the renewal of self and has esoteric classes—*for the few*!" They had the sanction of one another. There was no scandal in being there openly, nor any instinct, apparently, to warn them that secret classes to discover how to live forever, had upon the surface no very tonic flavor. The digest of the whole matter was that revelations sooner or later would be made to a certain few, and that these revelations, which would be as fine oil upon the mental surfaces of many women near her, would act as acid upon the male mind generally.

In the sickening distaste for herself and for those who had to make no concession to themselves for coming, inasmuch as society permitted; and who would be heartfully disappointed in a lecture on hygiene that did not discuss the more intimate matters of the senses, Paula did not appraise the opposite sex at any higher value. She merely reviewed matters which had come to her vividly as some of the crowning frailties of her own kind. The centre of the whole affair, Dr. Bellingham, was now introduced.

He looked like a Dane at first glance. His was the size, the dusty look and the big bone of a Dane; the deep, downy paleness of cheek, the tumbled, though not mussy hair. He was heavy without being adipose, lean, but big-boned; his face was lined with years, though miraculously young in the texture of skin. The

lips of a rather small and feminine mouth were fresh and red as a girl's. In the softness of complexion and the faintest possible undertone of color, it was impossible not to think of perfected circulation and human health brought to truest rhythm. The costliest lotions cannot make such a skin. It is organic harmony. Exterior decoration does not delude the seeing eye any more than a powder-magazine becomes an innocent cottage because its walls are vine-clad.... Directly behind her, Paula now heard a slow whisper:

"I knew him twenty-five years ago, and he is not a moment older to look at."

She seemed to have heard the voice before, and though the sentence surged with a dark significance through her mind, she did not turn. Bellingham's words were now caressing the intelligence of his audience. To Paula, his soft mouth was indescribably odious with cultured passion, red with replenishment, fresh with that sinister satisfaction which inevitably brings to mind a second figure, fallen, drained. His presence set to quivering within her, fears engendered from the great occult past. Strange deviltries would always be shadowed about the Bellingham image in her mind.... Here was a man who made a shrine of his body, invested it with a heavy hungering God, and taught others—women—to bow and to serve.

To her the body was but a nunnery which enclosed for a time an eternal element. This was basic, incontrovertible to her understanding. All that placated the body and helped to make fleshly desires last long, was hostile to the eternal element. Not that the body should be abused or neglected, but kept as nearly as possible a clean vessel for the spirit, brought to a fine automatic functioning. It was as clear to Paula Linster as the faces of the women about her, that the splendid sacrifice of Jesus was not that He had died upon the Cross, but that He put on flesh in the beginning for the good of infant-souled men.... To eat sparingly of that which is good; to sleep when weary; to require cleanliness and pure air—these were the physical laws which worked out easily for decent minds. Beyond such simple affairs, she did not allow the body often to rule her brain. When, indeed, the potentialities of her sex stirred within, Paula felt that it was the down-pull of the old brood-mother, Earth, and not the lifting of wings.

Bellingham's voice correlated itself, not with the eyes and brow, but with the Lilith mouth—that strangely unpunished mouth. It was soft, suave. There was in it the warmth of breath. The high white forehead and the tousled brown hair, leonine in its masculinity—seemed foreign as another man's. She hearkened to the voice of a doctor used to women; one who knows women without illusion, whom you could imagine saying, "Why bless you, women never say 'no.'"

The eyes were blue-gray, but toned very darkly. The iris looked small in contrast to the expanse of clear white. They were fixed like a bird's in expression, incapable of warming or softening, yet one did not miss the impression that they could brighten and harden, even to shining in the dark. Heavy blonde brows added a look of severity.

Paula's spirit, as if recognizing an old and mortal enemy, gathered about itself every human protecting emotion. Frankly hateful, she surveyed the man, listening. He talked marvellously; even in her hostility, she had to grant that. The great sunning cat was in his tones, but the words were joined into clean-thought expression, rapid, vivid, unanswerable. He did not speak long; the first meeting was largely formative. Paula knew he was studying his company, and watched him peer into the faces of the women. His mouth occasionally softened in the most winsome and engaging way, while his words ran on with the refined wisdom of ages. And always to her, his eyes stood out cold, hard, deadly.

Finally, she was conscious that they were roving near her; moving left to right, from face to face, as a collection-plate might have been passed. Her first thought was to leave; but fear never failed to arouse an

impulse to face out the cause. The second thought was to keep her eyes lowered. This she tried. His words came clearly now, as she stared down into the shadow—the perfectly carved thoughts, bright and swift like a company of soldiers moving in accord. As seconds passed, this down-staring became insufferable as though some one were holding her head. She could not breathe under repression. Always it had been so; the irresistible maddened the very centres of her reason—a locked room, a hand or a will stronger than her own.

Raising her head with a gasp, as one coming to the surface from a great depth of water, she met Bellingham's glance unerringly as a shaft of light. He had waited for this instant. The eyes now boring into her own, seemed lifted apart from all material things, veritable essences of light, as if they caught and held the full rays of every arc-lamp in the Hall. Warmth and smiling were not in them; instead, the spirit of conquest aroused; incarnate preying-power, dead to pity and humor. Here was Desire toothed, taloned, quick with every subtle art of nature. Something at war with God, his eyes expressed to her. Failing to master God, failing to foul the centres of creative purity, this Something devoured the souls of women. Continually his voice sought to drug her brain. The fine edge was gone from her perceptions; dulled, she was, to all but his sayings. There was a chill behind and above her eyes; it swept backward and seemed to converge in the coarser ganglia at the base of her brain. Once she had seen a bird hop and flutter lower and lower among the branches of a lilacbush. On the ground below was a cat with head twisted upward—its vivid and implacable eyes distending. Paula could understand now the crippling magnetism the bird felt.... Finally she could hear only the words of Bellingham, and feel only his power. What he was saying now to her was truth, the unqualified truth of more-than-man.

When his eyes turned away, she felt ill, futile, immersed in an indescribable inner darkness. Her fingers pained cruelly, and she realized she had been clutching with all her strength the book in her hand—Quentin Charter's book—which she had begun since morning. She could not remember a single one of his sentences which had impressed her, for her brain was tired and ineffectual, as after a prolonged fever, but she held fast to the bracing effect of an optimistic philosophy. Then finally out of the helplessness of one pitifully stricken, a tithe of her old vitality returned. She used it at once, rose from her seat to leave the Hall. Into the base of her brain again, as she neared the door, penetrated the protest of his eyes. Had she been unable to go on, she would have screamed. She felt the eyes of the women, too; the whole, a ghastly experience. Once outside, she wanted to run.

Not the least astonishing was the quick obliteration of it all. This was because her sensations were the result of an influence foreign to her own nature. In a few moments she felt quite well and normal again, and was conscious of a tendency to make light of the whole proceeding. She reached home shortly after ten, angered at herself—inexplicable perversity—because she had taken Bellingham and the women so seriously.... That night she finished one of the big books of her life—Quentin Charter's "A Damsel Came to Peter." When the dawn stole into the little flat, her eyes were stinging, and her temples felt stretched apart from the recent hours.

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# SECOND CHAPTER

## PAULA CONTEMPLATES THE WALL OF A HUNDRED WINDOWS, AND THE MYSTERIOUS MADAME NESTOR CALLS AT THE *ZOROASTER*

Paula had never felt such a consciousness of vitality as the next forenoon, after three or four hours' sleep. She was just *un*rested enough to be alive with tension. Her physical and mental capacities seemed expanded beyond all common bounds, and her thoughts tumbled about playfully in full arenic light, as athletes awaiting the beginning of performance. She plunged into a tub of cool water with such delight as thoroughly to souse her hair, so it became necessary to spend a half-hour in the sunlight by the open window, combing and fanning, her mind turning over wonderful things.

If you ever looked across a valley of oaks and maples and elms in the full morning glow of mid-October, you can divine the glory of red and brown and gold which was this fallen hair. One must meditate long to suggest with words the eyes of Paula Linster; perhaps the best her chronicler can do is to offer a glimpse from time to time. Just now you are asked for the sake of her eyes to visualize that lustrous valley once more—only in a dusk that enriches rather than dims. A memorably beautiful young woman, sitting there by the open window—one of the elect would have said.

The difficulty in having to do with Linster attractions is to avoid rising into rhapsody. One thinks of stars and lakes, angels and autumn lands, because his heart is full as a country-boy's, and high clean-clipped thinking is choked. Certainly, once having known such a woman, you will never fall under the spell of Weininger, or any other scale-eyed genius. There is an inspiring reach to that hard-handled word, Culture, when it is used about a woman like this. It means so pure a fineness as neither to require nor to be capable of ostentation; and yet, a fineness that wears and gives and associates with heroisms. You think of a lineage that for centuries has not been fouled by brutality or banality, and has preserved a glowing human warmth, too, to retain the spirit of woman. When men rise to the real and the worthy, one by one, each will find his Paula Linster, whom to make happy is happiness; whose companionship inevitably calls forth his best; whom to be with constantly means therefore that all within him, not of the best, must surely die. Clearly when a man finds such a woman, all his roads are closed, save one—to the Shining Heights! And who can say that his royal mate will not laughingly unfold wings for him, when they stand together in the radiant altitude?

She was thinking of Charter's book as she brushed her hair dry. His sentences played brightly in her mind, fastening themselves to comment of her own for the review. Deep was the appeal of the rapt, sunlit face, as she looked away across the rear-court. The colored hall-boy of her own house might have missed the exquisite lines of lip, eyelid, nostril, brow, temple and chin, but his head uncovered in her presence, and the choicest spirit of service sprang within him. In all about her, to an enlightened vision, was the unconscious repression of beauty—art-stirring lines of mental and spiritual awakening; that look of deep inner freshness and health, the mere sight of which disgusts a man with all he has done to soil and sicken his body. Full and easily she breathed, as one who relishes sweet air like the taste of pure water. You could imagine Paula exclaiming with joy at the tonic delight of a wind from the sea, but not from the steaming aroma of a grill. It was all an æsthetic attraction—not an over-rounded arc, not a tissue stretched shiny from uneven plumpness, not a drowsy sag or fold to suggest the easy content of a mere feeding and breeding animal.

The rear-view of a great granite-ridge of rooming-houses across the court had often fascinated her with the thought of the mysteries within. Once she had spoken to Reifferscheid about the splendid story of New York yet to be written by someone who watched, as she often did, one of these walls of a hundred windows.

"Yes," he had said. "It's great to be poor. Best blood of New York is in those back rooms. Everyone needs his poverty-stage of growth—about seven years will do. It teaches you simplicity. You step into your neighbor's room and find him washing his stockings with shaving-soap. He explains that it is better than tooth-powder for textile fabrics. Also, he intimates that he has done a very serious thing in wetting down these small garments, having looked in his bag since, and learned that he has not another pair. However, he wrings them very tight and puts them on with the remark that this is a certain way to prevent shrinkage."

Even now, a man stood by his window in a sleeveless garment and a ruff of lather, shaving with a free hand, and a song between strokes. His was a shining morning face, indeed.... A bare feminine arm leaped quickly forth from behind a tightened curtain nearby and adjusted a flower-pot better to the sunlight. From somewhere came a girlish voice in Wagner's *Walkure Call*. There was not a thought of effort in her carrying that lofty elaborate music—just a fine heart tuned to harmony on a rare morning. The effect is not spoiled by the glimpse of a tortured feminine face igniting a cigarette over a gas-flame that has burned all night. The vibrations of New York are too powerful for many, but there is more of health and hope than not.... A good mother cleanses a sauce-pan from her water-pitcher and showers with the rinsing a young heaven-tree far below. Then she lifts in a milk-bottle from the stone ledge—and blows the dust from the top....

Often at night when Paula awakened she could hear the drum of a typewriter winging across the precipice—one of the night-shift helping to feed the insatiable maw of print. Had New York called him? Would the City crush him into a trifler, with artificial emotions, or was this a Daniel come to interpret her evil dreams?... In a corner-room with two windows, sat a lame young man before an easel. Almost always he was there, when there was light. Heaven be with him, Paula thought, if his picture failed.... And in one of the least and darkest, an old man sat writing. Day after day, he worked steadily through the hours. To what god or devil had he sold his soul that he was thus condemned to eternal scrivening? This was the harrowing part. The back-floors of New York are not for the old men. Back-rooms for the young men and maidens, still strong in the flight of time and the fight of competition—back-rooms for young New York. Nature loses interest in the old. Civilization should be kinder.

From an unseen somewhere a canary poured out a veritable fire-hose torrent of melody; and along one of the lower window ledges opposite, an old gray cat was crouched, a picture of sinister listening. Here was a dragon, indeed, for small, warm birds.

Directly opposite a curtain was lifted, and a woman, no longer young, appeared to breathe the morning. Many New Yorkers knew this woman for her part in children's happiness. There was a whisper that she had once been an artist's model—and had loved the artist.... There was one woman long ago—a woman with a box of alabaster—who was forgiven because she loved much.... The lady across the way loved children now, children of most unhappy fortunes. To those who came, and there were many, she gave music lessons; often all day long helping grimy fingers to falter over the keys. So she awakened poetry and planted truth-seedlings in shaded little hearts. To the children, though the lady was poor as any—in spite of her piano and a wall of books—she was Lady Bountiful, indeed.... Paula smiled. Two windows, strangely enough side by side, were curtained with stockings out to dry. In one, there were many—cerise and lavender, pink and baby blue. In the next there were but two pair, demurely black. What a world of suggestion in the contrast!... So it was always—her wall of a hundred windows, a changing panorama of

folly, tragedy, toil that would not bow to hopelessness, vanity, art, sacrifice. Blend them all together above the traffic's roar—and you have the spirit of young New York.

She put on the brass kettle at length, crossing the room for an occasional glance into the mirror as she finished her hair.... The strange numbing power she had felt the night before crept suddenly back from her eyes now to the base of her brain, striving to cripple her volition. Bellingham was calling her.... The sunlight was gone. There was a smell of hot metal in the air, as if some terrific energy had burned out the vitality. Her heart hurt her from holding her breath so long. Beyond all expression she was shocked and shamed. The mirror showed now a spectral Paula with crimson lips and haggard eyes.... An indescribable fertility stirred within her—almost mystic, like a whisper from spiritland where little children play, waiting to be born. She could have fallen in a strange and subtle thrall of redolent imaginings, except that thought of the source of it all, the occultist—was as acid in her veins.

She drank tea and crossed the street to the Park for an hour. The radiance of autumn impressed her rarely; not as the death of a year, but rather as a glorious pageant of evening, the great energies of nature all crowned with fruition and preparing for rest. Back in her room, she wrote the Charter critique, wrote as seldom before. The cool spirit of the essayist seemed ignited with a lyric ardor. In her momentary power she conceived a great literary possibility of the future—an effulgent Burns-vine blossoming forth upon the austere cliff of a Carlyle. She had finished, and it was dusk when Madame Nestor called.

For several years, at various philosophical gatherings and brotherhoods, Paula, invariably stimulated by the unusual, had encountered this remarkable woman. Having very little to say as a rule, Madame Nestor was a figure for comment and one not readily forgotten because of occasional memorable utterances. In all the cults of New York, there was likely no individual quite so out of alignment with ordinary life. Indefinitely, she would be called fifty. Her forehead was broad, her mouth soft. The face as a whole was heavy and flour-white. There was a distention of eyeballs and a pulpy shapelessness to her body which gave the impression of advanced physical deterioration—that peculiar kind of breaking down, often noticeable among psychics of long practice. Her absolute incapacity to keep anything of value was only one characteristic of interest. Madame Nestor's record of apparently thoughtless generosity was truly inspiriting.

"I had to see you to-day," she said, sinking down with a sigh of relief. "I sat behind you last night in Prismatic Hall."

The younger woman recalled with a start—the whisper she had heard. She leaned forward and inquired quickly: "So it was you, Madame Nestor, who knew—this Bellingham"—she cleared her throat as she uttered the name—"as he is now—a quarter of a century ago?"

"Yes. How very strange that you should have heard what I said.... You will join one of his classes, I presume?"

"I can imagine doing no such thing."

"Dear Paula, do you think it will really turn out—that you are to have no relation with Bellingham?"

Paula repressed the instant impulse to answer sharply. The fact that she had already felt Bellingham's power made the other's words a harsh irritation.

"What relation could I have? He is odious to me."

"I suppose I should have been a cinder long since, dear, if these were days for burning witches," Madame

Nestor said. "When I saw Bellingham's eyes settle upon you last night—it appeared to me that you are to know him well. I came here to give you what strength I could—because he is the chief of devils."

"I'm only one of the working neuters of the human hive," Paula managed to declare.

The elder woman said a strange thing: "Ah, no. The everlasting feminine is alive in your every movement. A man like Bellingham would cross the world for you. Some strong-souled woman sooner or later must encompass his undoing, and last night it came to me in a way to force my conviction—that you are the woman."

Paula bent toward her. Darkness covered the centres of her mind and she was afraid. She could not laugh, for she had already met the magician's will. "But I loathe him," she whispered. "About the very name when I first heard it yesterday was an atmosphere which aroused all my antagonism."

"Even that—he has overcome, but it may help you to endure."

"What does the man want?"

"He wants life—life—floods of young, fine vitality to renew his own flesh. He wants to live on and on in the body which you have seen. It is all he has, for his soul is dead—or feeble as a frog's. He fears death, because he cannot come back. He renews his life from splendid sources of human magnetism—such as you possess. It is Bellingham's hell to know that, once out of the flesh, he has not soul enough, if any, to command a human body again. You see in him an empty thing, which has lived, God knows how many years, hugging the warmth of his blood—a creature who knows that to die means the swift disintegration of an evil principle."

"Do you realize, Madame Nestor," Paula asked excitedly, "that you are talking familiarly of things which may exist in books of ancient wisdom, but that this is New York—New York packed about us? New York does not reckon with such things."

"The massed soul of this big city does not reckon with such things, Paula. That is true, but we are apart. Bellingham is apart. He is wiser than the massed soul of New York."

"One might believe, even have such a religious conviction, but you speak of an actual person, the terrible inner mystery of a man, whom we have seen—a man who frightened me hideously last night—and to-day! You bring the thing home to a room in a New York apartment ... Can't you see how hard to adjust, this is? I don't mean to stop or distract you, but this has become—you are helping to keep it so—such an intimate, dreadful thing!"

Madame Nestor had been too long immersed in occultism to grasp the world's judgment of her sayings. "Listen, Paula, this that I tell you is inherent in every thinking man. You are bewildered by the personal nature it has assumed.... To every one of us shall come the terrible moment of choice. Man is not conceived blindly to be driven. Imagine a man who is become a rapidly evolving mind. On the one side is the animal-nature, curbed and obedient; on the other, his gathering soul-force. The mind balances between these two—soul and body. The time has come for him to choose between a lonely path to the Heights, or the broad diverging highway, moving with pomp, dazzling with the glare of vain power, and brooded over by an arrogant materialism which slays the soul.... The spirit of man says, 'Take the rising road alone.' The old world-mother sings to him from the swaying throng, 'Come over and be my king. Look at my arts, my palaces, my valiant young men and my glorious women. I will put worship in the hearts of the strong—for you! I will put love in the hearts of the beautiful—for you! Come over and be my king! Later, when you

are old and have drunk deep of power—you may take the rising road alone.'"

Paula invariably qualified a dogmatic statement as a possibility in her own mind; but something of this—man reaching a moment of choice—had always appealed to her as a fundamental verity. Man must conquer not only his body, but his brain, with its subtle dreams of power, a more formidable conflict, before the soul assumes supremacy in the mind, and man's progress to the Uplands becomes a conscious and glorious ascent.

"You put it with wonderful clearness, Madame Nestor," she said.

"I am an old woman who has thought of these things until they are clear. This is the real battle of man, beside which victory over mere appetites of the body is but a boyish triumph. The intellect hungers for power and possession; to hold the many inferior intellects in its own despotic destiny. Against this glittering substance of attraction is the still intangible faith of the soul—an awful moment of suspense. God or Mammon—choose ye!... Listen, Paula, to New York below—treading the empty mill of commerce ——"

"New York has not chosen yet?"

"No, dear, but hundreds, thousands, are learning in preparation for that moment of choice—the falseness and futility of material possessions."

"That is a good thought—an incorruptible kind of optimism!" Paula exclaimed.... "You think this Bellingham has made the evil choice?"

"Yes. Long ago."

"Yet to have arisen to the moment of choosing, you say he must have conquered the flesh."

"Yes."

"But you depict him—I find him—Desire Incarnate!"

"Exactly, Paula, because he has reverted. *The animal controls his mind, not the soul*. Bellingham is retracing his way back to chaos, with a human brain, all lit with magic! Out of the gathered knowledge of the ages, he has drawn his forces, which to us are mystery. He uses these secret forces of Nature to prolong his own life—which is all he has. The mystic cord is severed within him. He is a body, nothing but a body—hence the passion to endure. Out of the craft of the past, he has learned—who knows how long ago?—to replenish his own vitality with that of others. He gives nothing, but drains all. Ah, Paula, this I know too well. He is kin with those creatures of legend, the *loup-garou*, the vampire. I tell you he is an insatiable sponge for human magnetism."

"Past all doubt, can't Bellingham turn back?" Paula asked tensely. "With all his worldly knowledge, and knowing his own doom, can he not turn back—far back, a lowly-organized soul, but on the human way?" Hopelessness, anywhere, was a blasting conception to her.

"No. I tell you he is a living coffin. There is nothing in him to energize a pure motive. He might give a fortune to the poor, but it would be for his own gain. He could not suffer for the poor, or love them. Dead within, he is detached from the great centres of virtue and purity—from all that carries the race forward, and will save us at the last. You see his frightful dependence upon this temporal physical instrument, since all the records of the past and the unwritten pages of the future are wiped out? Isn't it a sheer black horror,

Paula,—to know that from the great tide of hopeful humanity, one is set apart; to know that the amazing force which has carried one from a cell in the ooze to thinking manhood must end with this red frightened heart; to be forced, for the continuance of life, to feed upon the strength of one woman after another—always fairer and finer——" The look of hatred in the speaker's face had become a banner of havoc.

"Can he not stop that kind of devouring?" Paula exclaimed. "Would there not be hope—if he battled with that—put *that* vampirism behind?"

Madame Nestor regarded the other steadily, until all distortion of feature had given away to her accustomed mildness. Then she uttered an unforgettable question:

"*Can a tiger eat grains?*"

Vast ranges of terrible understanding were suggested.

"It is my duty, if I ever had a duty," the caller went on, "to make you know Bellingham as I know him. You must have no pity."

"Is there really no fact by which his age can be determined?"

"None that I know. Twenty-five years ago, when he left me hideously wise and pitifully drained, he looked as he does now."

"But why, oh why, do you always think of me with Bellingham?" Paula asked hopelessly.

"I watched his face when he regarded you last night. I knew the look."

"What is to prevent me from never seeing him? He cannot force himself upon me here—in the flesh.... Certainly you would not tell him where I am, where I go—if I begged you not to!"

Madame Nestor shuddered. "No, Paula. It is because you are frightened and tormented that such a thought comes. It is I who am showing you the real Bellingham. He menaces my race. None but big-souled women are useful to him now. He is drawn to them, as one hungry, as one always hungry. It is he first who is drawn. Then they begin to feel and respond to his occult attraction. The time might have come when you would worship him—had I not warned you. I did. I was quite his—until I learned. A woman knows no laws in the midst of an attraction like this. No other man suffices——"

"But why—why do you prepare *me*? Do you think I cannot resist?" Paula asked furiously. She felt the bonds about her already. The blood rose hot and rebellious at the thought of being bound. It was the old hideous fear of a locked room—the shut-in horror which meant suffocation.

"If I thought you could not resist, Paula," Madame Nestor said, "I should advise you to flee to the remotest country—this moment. I should implore you never to allow from your side your best and strongest friend. But I have studied your brain, your strength, your heart. I love you for the thought that has come to me—that it is you, Paula Linster, who is destined to free the race from this destroyer."

Often in the last half-hour had come a great inward revolt against the trend of her caller's words. It passed through Paula again, yet she inquired how she could thus be the means.

"By resisting him. Bellingham once told me—trust him, this was after I was fully his—that if I had matched his force with a psychic resistance equally as strong—it would mortally have weakened him. So if he seeks to subvert your will and fails, this great one-pointed power of his, developed who knows how

long—will turn and rend itself. This is an occult law."

Paula could understand this—the wild beast of physical desire rending itself at the last—but not the conception of hopelessness—Bellingham cut off from immortality. The woman divined her thoughts.

"Again I beg of you," she said in excitement, "not to let a thought of pity for him insinuate itself in your brain—not the finest point of it! Think of yourself, of the Great Good which must sustain you, of the benefit to your race—think of the women less strong! Fail in this, and Bellingham will absorb your splendid forces, and let you fall back into the common as I did—to rise again, ah, so bitterly, so wearily!... But I cannot imagine you failing, you strong young queen, and the women like me, the legion of emptied shells he has left behind—we shall canonize you, Paula, if you shatter the vampire's power."

Thoughts came too fast for speech now. They burned Paula's mind—a destructive activity, because ineffectual. She wanted to speak of the shameful experience of the morning, but she could not bring the words to confession.

"I had almost forgotten," she said lightly at length, "that it is well for one to eat and drink. Stay, won't you please, and share a bite of supper with me, Madame Nestor? We'll talk of other things. I am deadly tired of Bellingham."

A hungry man would have known no repletion from the entire offering which sufficed for these two, forgotten of appetite. Wafers of dark bread, a poached egg, pickles, a heart of lettuce and a divided melon, cake and tea—yet how fully they fared!... They were talking about children and fairy tales over the teacups, when Paula encountered again that sinister mental seizure—the occultist's influence creeping back from her reason to that part of the brain man holds in common with animals.... The lights of the room dimmed; her companion became invisible. Bellingham was calling: "Come to me—won't you come and help me in my excellent labors? Come to me, Paula. We can lift the world together—you and I. Wonderful are the things for me to show you—you who are already so wise and so very beautiful. Paula Linster,—come to me!"

Again and again the words were laid upon her intelligence, until she heard them only. All the rest was an anterior murmuring, as of wind and rivers. The words were pressed down upon the surfaces of her brain, like leaf after leaf of gold-beaters' film—and hammered and hammered there.... He was in a great gray room, sitting at a desk, but staring at her, as if there were no walls or streets between—just a little bit of blackness.... She seemed to know just where to go. She felt the place for her was there in the great gray room—a wonderful need for her there.... But a door opened into the room where he sat—a door she had not seen, for she had not taken her eyes from his face. A woman came in, a pale woman, a shell of beauty. The huge tousled head at the desk turned from her to the woman who entered. Paula saw his profile alter hideously....

Her own bright room filled her eyes again, and the ashen horror on the countenance of Madame Nestor, who seemed vaguely to see it all.

"I think I should have gone to him," Paula murmured, in the slow, flat tone of one not yet quite normally conscious.

"There is but one way, you poor distressed child—to build about you a fortress of purity—which he cannot penetrate——"

"I think I should have known the car to take—the place to enter," Paula went on, unheeding, "the elevator

entrance—the door of the room——"

Madame Nestor continued to implore her to pray. Paula shivered finally, and stared at the other for a few seconds, as if recalling the words the visitor had spoken, and the past she had lived with Bellingham. Her terrible rage toward herself spread and covered Madame Nestor. Did not the latter still dip here, there, and everywhere in the occult and weird? Might she not have something to do with the projectiles of Desire?

"I think I'd better be alone now," she said hoarsely. "One does not feel like invoking the Pure Presence—when one is chosen for such defilement."

# THIRD CHAPTER

## CERTAIN DEVELOPING INCIDENTS ARE CAUGHT INTO THE CURRENT OF NARRATIVE—ALSO A SUPPER WITH REIFFERSCHEID

In the week that followed, Paula's review of Quentin Charter's new book appeared. As a bit of luxury reading, she again went over "A Damsel Came to Peter." It stood up true and strong under the second reading—the test of a real book. The Western writer became a big figure in her mind. She thought of him as a Soul; with a certain gladness to know that he was Out There; that he refused to answer the call of New York; that he had waited until he was an adult to make his name known, and could not now be cramped and smothered and spoiled. There was a sterilized purity about parts of his work—an uncompromising thunder against the fleshly trends of living—to which she could only associate asceticism, celibacy, and mystic power. He was altogether an abstraction, but she was glad that he lived—in the West and in her brain.

Also her mind was called to lower explorations of life; moments in which it seemed as if every tissue within her had been carried from arctic repressions to the springing verdures of the Indies. A sound, an odor, a man's step, the voice of a child, would start the spell, especially in moments of receptivity or aimless pondering. Thoughts formed in a lively fascinating way, tingling dreamily over her intelligence, dilating her nostrils with indescribable fragrance, brushing her eyelids half-closed,—until she suddenly awoke to the fact that this was not herself, but Bellingham's thirst playing upon her. Beyond words dreadful then, it was to realize this thing in her brain—to feel it spread hungrily through her veins and localize in her lips, her breast, and the hollow of her arms. Bellingham crushed the trained energies of his thought-force into her consciousness, rendering her helpless. Though he was afterward banished, certain physical forces which he aroused did not fall asleep.... Frequently came that malignant efflorescence. Her name was called; the way shown her. Once when she was summoned to the 'phone, she knew that it was he, but could not at first resist. Reason came at the sound of her own hoarse and frightened voice. Again one night, between nine and ten, when Bellingham was in power, she had reached the street and was hurrying toward the surface-car in Central Park West. Her name was jovially called by Reifferscheid. He accompanied her through the Park and back to her door. He said he thought that she was working too hard, confessed himself skeptical about her eating enough.

One thought apart from these effects, Paula could not shake from her mind: Were there human beings with dead or dying souls? Did she pass on the street men and women in whom the process of soul-starvation was complete or completing? Could there be human mind-cells detached from hope, holiness, charity, eternity, and every lovely conception; infected throughout with earth's descending destructive principle? The thought terrorized her soul, so that she became almost afraid to glance into the face of strangers. To think of any man or woman without one hope! This was insufferable. Compared with this, there is no tragedy, and the wildest physical suffering is an easy temporal thing. She felt like crying from the housetops: "Listen to pity; love the good; cultivate a tender conscience; be clean in body and humble in mind! Nothing matters but the soul—do not let that die!"

Then she remembered that every master of the bright tools of art had depicted this message in his own way; every musician heard it among the splendid harmonies that winged across his heaven; every prophet stripped himself of all else, save this message, and every mystic was ordered up to Nineveh to give it

sound. Indeed, every great voice out of the multitude was a cry of the soul. It came to her as never before, that all uplift is in the words, *Love One Another*. If only the world would see and hear!

And the world was so immovable—a locked room that resisted her strength. This was her especial terror—a locked room or a locked will.... Once when she was a little girl, she released a caged canary that belonged to a neighbor, and during her punishment, she kept repeating:

"*It has wings—wings!*"

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Liberty, spaces of sky, shadowed running streams, unbroken woods where the paths were so dim as not to disturb the dream of undiscovered depths—in the midst of these, Paula had found, as a girl, a startling kind of happiness. She was tireless in the woods, and strangely slow to hunger. No gloomy stillness haunted her; the sudden scamper of a squirrel or rabbit could not shake her nerves, nor even the degraded spiral of a serpent gliding to cover. Her eyelids narrowed in the midst of confinements. School tightened her lips; much of it, indeed, put a look of hopeless toleration in her eyes, but the big, silent woods quickly healed her mind; in them she found the full life.

At one time, her father essayed to lock her in a closet. Paula told him she would die if he did, and from the look upon the child's face, he could not doubt.... He had directly punished her once, and for years afterward, she could not repress a shudder at his touch. She would serve him in little things, bring him the choicest fruits and flowers; she anticipated his wants in the house and knew his habits as a caged thing learns the movements of its keepers; invariably, she was respectful and apt—until her will was challenged. Then her mother would weaken and her father passed on with a smile. "Paula does not permit me to forget that I have the honor to be her father," he once said.

Reading grew upon her unconsciously. There was a time when she could not read, another when she could. She did not remember the transition, but one afternoon, when she was barely five, she sat for hours in the parlor still as a mole, save for the turning leaves—sat upon a hassock with Grimm. It was *The Foster Brother* which pioneered her mind. That afternoon endured as one of the most exquisite periods of her life. The pleasure was so intense that she felt she must be doing wrong.

Grimm explained the whole world, in proving the reality of fairies. The soul of the child had always been awake to influences her associates missed. Wonderful Grimm cleared many mysteries—the unseen activities of the woods, the visitors of the dark in her room before she was quite asleep; the invisible weaving behind all events. Later, books inevitably brought out the element of attraction between man and woman, but such were the refinements of her home that nothing occurred to startle her curiosity. It was left to the friendly woods to reveal a mystery and certain ultimate meanings.... She was sick with the force of her divining; the peace and purity of her mind shattered. The accruing revelations of human origin were all that she could bear. She rebelled against the manner of coming into the world, a heaven-high rebellion. Something of pity mingled with her reverence for her mother. For years, she could not come to a belief that the Most High God had any interest in a creature of such primal defilement. Queerly enough, it was the great preparer, Darwin, who helped her at the last. Man having come up through dreadful centuries from an earth-bent mouth and nostril, to a pitying heart and a lifted brow—has all the more hope of becoming an angel....

There was something of the nature of a birthmark in Paula's loathing for the animal in man and woman.

Her mother had been sheltered in girlhood to such an extent that the mention of a corsage-ribbon would have offended. Very early, she had married, and the first days of the relation crushed illusions that were never restored. The birth of Paula ended a period of inordinate sorrow, which brought all the fine threads of her life into wear, gave expression to the highest agony of which she was capable, and ravelled out her emotions one by one. As a mother, she was rather forceless; the excellent elements of her lineage seemed all expended in the capacities of the child. Her limitations had not widened in the dark months, nor had her nature refined. It was as if the heart of the woman had lost all its color and ardor. The great sweep of Paula's emotions; her strangeness, her meditative mind and heart-hunger for freedom; her love for open spaces, still groves and the prophylactic trends of running water—all expressed, without a doubt, the mysterious expiration of her mother's finer life. But something beyond heredity, distances beyond the reach of human mind to explain, was the lofty quality of the child's soul. Very old it was, and wise; very strange and very strong.

Paula never failed afterward in a single opportunity to spare younger girl-friends from the savagery of revelation, as it had come to her. The bare truth of origin, she made radiant with illimitable human possibilities.... Her dream beyond words was some time to give the world a splendid man or woman. Loving, and loved by a strong-souled, deep-thinking man; theirs the fruit of highest human concord; beautiful communions in the midst of life's nobilities, and the glory of these on the brow of their child—such was her dream of womanhood, whitened through many vicissitudes.

Her mother died when Paula was twenty. The call came in the night. In the summons was that awful note which tells the end. Her mother was on the border and crossing swiftly. Paula screamed.

There was no answer, but a faint ruffle on the brow that had been serene.

"Mother!... Mother!" a last time—then the answer:

"Don't—call—me,—Paula! Oh, it—hurts—so—to be—called—back!"

After that, the dying was a matter of hours and great pain. Had she come to her in silence, the tired spirit would have lifted easily. So Paula learned, by terrible experience, the inexpressible value of silence in a room with death. She had been very close to the mystery. Holding her mother's hand and praying inaudibly at the last, she had felt the final wrench to the very core of her being.... Departure, indeed; Paula was never conscious of her mother's spirit afterward. It is probably futile to inquire if a child of one's flesh is invariably one's spiritual offspring.... An ineffectual girl, the mother became a hopeless woman. In the interval, out of the grinding of her forces, was produced a fervent heat.... Did blind negative suffering make her receptive to a gifted child, or did Paula's mother merely give, from her own lovely flesh, a garment for a spirit-alien from a far and shining country?

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Three or four mornings after the Charter critique, Paula brought further work down-town. Reifferscheid swung about in his chair and stared at her fully thirty seconds. Then he spoke brusquely, possibly to hide his embarrassment:

"Take these three books home, but don't bother with them to-day. I want you back here at four o'clock. You are to go out to supper with me."

The idea was not exactly pleasant. She had seen Reifferscheid only a few times apart from his desk,

where she liked him without reservation. She had always pictured him as a club-man—a typically successful New Yorker, with a glitter of satire and irreverent humor about all his sayings. The thought of a supper with Reifferscheid had a bit of supper heaviness about it. The club type she preferred to know from a sort of middle distance....

"Won't you, please?"

His change of manner was effective. All brusqueness was gone. Paula saw his real earnestness, and the boyish effort of its expression. There was no reason for her to refuse, and she hesitated no longer. Yet she wondered why he had asked her, and searched her mind to learn why she could not see him at leisure, apart from a club-window's leather chair; at some particular table in a grill or buffet, or enlivening a game of billiards with his inimitable characterizations. One of the finest and most effective minds she had ever contacted belonged to this editor. His desk was the symbol to her of concentrated and full-pressure strenuousness; in his work was all that was sophisticated and world-weathered, but she could neither explain nor overcome the conviction that his excellence was in spite of, rather than the result of his life outside.... She met him on the stroke of four in the entrance to *The States* building, and he led the way at once to South Ferry, where they took the Staten Island boat. She felt that he was not at ease in the crowds, but it was a fact, also, that he did not appear so huge and froggy in the street, as in the crowded office she knew so well.

"Yes, I live over yonder," he said, drawing two stools to the extreme forward of the deck. "I supposed you knew. The nearest way out of New York, this is. Besides, you get full five cents' worth of sea voyage, and it's really another country across the bay. That's the main thing—not a better country, but different."

Little was said on the boat. It was enough to breathe the sea and contemplate the distances. She scarcely noticed which of the trolley-cars he helped her into at the terminal; but they were out of town presently, where there were curving country roads, second-growth hills, and here and there a dim ravine to cool the eye. Then against the sky she discovered a black ribbon of woods. It was far and big to her eyes, full of luring mysteries that called to her—her very own temples.... Turning to Reifferscheid, she found that he had been regarding her raptly. He coughed and jerked his head the other way, delightfully embarrassed.

"Guess you like it here," he said after a moment. "I knew you would. I knew I ought to make you come, somehow. You see, you're a little too fit—drawn just a trifle too fine. It isn't that you're out of condition; just the contrary. When one's drawn so fine as you are, one wears—just from living at joy speed.... We get off here."

"It's incredible that you should have a house all to yourself!"

They were walking on the grass that edged the road. It had taken an hour and a half to come. Dusk was beginning to crowd into the distances. Ahead on either side of the road were a few houses with land between.

"Whatever you call it," said Reifferscheid, "it's all in one piece. There it is yonder—'A wee cot, a cricket's chirr—Sister Annie and the glad face of her——'"

"A little white house under big trees!" Paula exclaimed joyously. "And what's that big dug-out thing behind?"

Reifferscheid chuckled. "Dug-out is excellent. That's the aquarium and the lily-lakes. I made those Sierras and clothed their titanic flanks with forests of sod."

"Don't ask me to speak.... All this is too wonderful for words...." To think that she had imagined this man-mammoth sitting in a club-window. In truth, she was somewhat perturbed for wronging him, though delighted with the whole expedition. Sister Annie was startling, inasmuch as her face was as fresh and wholesome as a snow-apple, and yet she could not leave her invalid's chair unassisted. She was younger than Reifferscheid.

"I'm so glad to have you come, Miss Linster," she said. "Tim was really set upon it. He speaks of you so frequently that I wanted to meet you very much. I can't get over to the city often."

"Tim." This was the name of names. Paula had known nothing beyond "T. Reifferscheid." One after another, little joys like this unfolded.

"It will be too dark after supper," the sister added. "Tim won't be content until you see his system of ponds. You better go with him now."

Reifferscheid already filled the side-door. Evidently inspection was the first and only formality demanded of the guest at the cottage. Paula followed him up a tiny gravel path to the rim of the top pond—a saucer of cement, eighteen inches deep and seven or eight feet across. It was filled with pond-weed and nelumbo foliage. Gold fish and stickle-backs played in the shadowed water.

"It isn't the time of year, you know," he said apologetically. "The lilies are through blossoming, and in a week or two, I'll have to take my fishes back to winter-quarters. You see my water supply comes from Silver Lake. The great main empties here." (Paula followed his finger to the nozzle of a hose that hung over the rim of cement on the top pond.) "The stream overflows in Montmorency Falls yonder,"—(this, a trickle down the gravel to the second pond)—"from which, you can hear the roar of the cataracts into the lower lake, which waters the lands of plenty all about."

His look of surprise and disappointment at her laughter was irresistible.

"The saurians are all in the depths, but you can see some of my snails," he went on. "You'd be surprised how important my herd of snails is in the economy of this whole lake country."

He picked up a pebble from the edge of the water, pointing out the green slime that covered it. "These are spores of a very influential vegetable, called *algæ*, which spreads like cholera and vegetates anywhere in water that is not of torrential temperament. Without my snails, the whole system would be a thick green soup in a month. It's getting a little dark to see the stickle-back nests. They domesticate very curiously. Next year, I'll have a fountain.... The second-tank contains a frail, northern variety of water-hyacinths, some rock bass, and a turtle or two. Below are the cattails and ferns and mosses. In the summer, that lower pond is a jungle, but the lilies and lotuses up here are really choice when in blossom. The overflow of water rejoices the bugs and posies generally. Annie likes the yard-flowers."

Paula would not have dared to say how enchantingly these toy-lakes and lily-beds had adjusted, in her mind, to the nature of the big man beside her, whose good word was valued by every sincere and important literary worker in the country. Tim Reifferscheid turning out his tremendous tasks in New York, would never be quite the same to her again, since she had seen him playing with his hose in his own back yard, and heard him talk about his snails and lilies, and the land posies that Sister Annie liked. Down-town, he had always stimulated her, but here with his toy-engineering and playful watersheds, he was equally bracing and just as admirable.

Darkness was covering them. "I must see it all again," she said. "I want to come when the lilies are blossoming. I could watch the fishes and things—for hours. Really, I will never call it a dug-out again."

She saw him grinning in the dusk.

"Come in to supper," he said. "You see, anything smaller than a Staten Island back-yard would hardly do for me to play in. Then there's a stillness about here that I like. It makes your ears ache a little at first. You wake up in the middle of the night and think you're under the earth somewhere, or disembodied. Finally it comes to you that there's nothing to be afraid of except the silence. A man's head gets to need it after a time. As a matter of fact, there's no place across the bay for a fat man after working hours."

"Miss Linster," called Sister Annie as they entered.

Paula followed the voice into a speckless spare room.

"Supper will be served in a moment," the other said. "I just wanted to tell you—Tim will take you back to the city to-night, grateful for the chance, but do you really have to go? This little room is yours, and you can go over together in the morning. Then a night in this stillness will calm you back into a little girl. Tim doesn't know I'm asking you. Please do just as you want——"

Paula didn't have the heart to drag the big brother back to town.

"Why," she said laughingly, "I'd much rather stay than not. Think how good this all is to me! I didn't have an idea when he asked me, other than a restaurant somewhere in New York."

"I am so glad.... Tim——"

He tried not to look relieved at the announcement. "Really, I didn't put Annie up to this, but if you are content to stay, I think it will smooth you out a bit."

After supper the three sat out in the yard. There was a heavy richness in the air, a soft sea-wind flavored with wood-fires and finished fields. Reifferscheid smoked his pipe and did most of the talking.

"I glanced over Bertram Lintell's new book—out to-day," he said. "It sort of hurts. Two or three months ago, I dropped in on him while he was doing it.... I have always had a certain interest in Lintell because I accepted his first story seven or eight years ago, as a magazine reader.... You may not know that nine-tenths of the unsolicited fiction material in a magazine's mail is a personal affront to intelligence at large. Nowhere does a man show the youth of his soul so pitifully as when first alone with white paper and an idea. He shakes down a crow's rookery and believes in his heart it's an eagle's nest. That there are men in the world paid to open his package, inspect and return same respectfully—and do it again—is an uncommercial peculiarity of a most commercial age. Editors rely upon the more or less technically flawless products of the trained, the "arrived"; writers who have forgotten their dreams—rung the bell once or twice—and show a willingness to take money for the echoes.

"An expensive reading staff is not necessary for these contributors; their stuff goes to the heart of things at once. But what sorry caravans halt in the outer courts of a magazine-office; what sick, empty, unwashed confusion is impounded there! Yet a company of men moves ever through and about, peering into the unsightly, unsavory packs—ever ordering away, ever clearing the court, lest the mess rise to heaven.... But perfect pearls have been found in these restless, complaining trash-heaps, and will be found again. Men are there to glance at all, because one of these pearls is worth a whole necklace of seconds. There's no way out of it. To make lasting good in the literary game, one must be steeled to reverses—long, ugly corroding reverses. This is the price which a man pays for the adjustment of his brain and hand to the needs of the time. As flesh needs bone, he needs these reverses. They clear the fat from the brain; increase the mental circuits, and lend to the fibres that firm delicacy which alone can carry live hot emotions without blowing out, and big voltage ideas swift and true to their appointed brilliance of expression.

"I'm gabbing a lot, but I was going to tell you about Bertram Lintell. I was first in the office to get his manuscript, and I raised the cry of 'Pearl.' It was faulty, but full of the arrogance of unhurt youth. The face of Twenty-one with all its unlined audacity stared out from the pages, and every page was an excursion. Here was a true subconscious ebullition—a hang-over from a previous incarnation, like as not. It was hard, glassy, but the physical prowess of it stimulated. Frank, brutal boyishness—that was the attraction. I shouldn't have taken it."

"You what?" Paula asked.

"It was a shame to take it," Reifferscheid mused, "but someone else—the next man, would have. You see, he needed buffeting—seven years at least. I knew he didn't have the beam and displacement to stand making good so young. It was doing him an evil turn, but we sent him the brass tag that shines like gold. Lintell was not adult enough to twig the counterfeit, not mellowed enough to realize that nothing is so sordid, nothing labeled so securely to Failure, as conscious success. As I say, I saw him at work two or three months ago. He was a patch-haired, baby lion still, dictating stories first draft to a stenographer, supplying demand like a huckster—the real treasure-house of his soul locked for life and the key thrown away.... Even money turns the head of the multitude, but money is small beer compared to the fiery potential wine of literary recognition. Long hammering, refining reverses, alone prepare a man for this. Quentin Charter said something of the kind: that a young writer should live his lean years full length, and if he really craters the mountain, he will praise every god in the Pantheon because his achievements were slow.

"Lintell's present stuff is insufferable. The point is he may have had in the beginning no less a gift than Charter's. That's why the new book sickens me so.... By the way, I got a letter from Charter this afternoon. I meant to bring it along, but I'll pass it over to you in the morning. It's yours, Miss Linster, though he did me the honor to think that I had written his critique. He says you crawled right inside his book. We don't usually answer letters of this kind. There are writers, you know, glad to turn a review office into an Admiration Exchange. But you'll want to write to Charter, I'm sure. He's different."

Paula did not answer, but she was pleased and excited that her review had been a joy to this thunderer of the West, and that he had answered her tidings of high hope for the future.

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# FOURTH CHAPTER

## PAULA ENCOUNTERS HER ADVERSARY WHO TURNS PROPHET AND TELLS OF A STARRY CHILD SOON TO BE BORN

Paula went upstairs to the editorial rooms with Reifferscheid the following morning for Charter's letter. This she carried into the city-office to be alone. Forenoon is the dead time of a morning newspaper. The place seemed still tired from the all-night struggle to spring a paper to the streets. She thrust up a window for fresh air and sat down in a reporter's chair to read.... The letter was big with boyish delight. "When a man spends a couple of years growing and trimming a pile of stuff into a sizable book," he had written, "and the first of the important reviews comes in with such a message of enthusiasm, it is the heart's 'well-done' long waited for." Beyond this, there was only a line or two about the book. It had been in the publisher's hands six months, and he was cold to it now. *The States* had interested him, however, because there was an inclination in the article to look at his work to come. In fact, some of the thoughts of the reviewer, he wrote, were sympathetic with the subject-matter simmering in his mind. Naturally, the coincidence had thrilled him. Charter, believing that Reifferscheid had done the work, wrote with utmost freedom. This attracted Paula, as it gave her a glimpse of a certain fineness between men who admire each other. The issue was not closed.... She wanted to answer the letter then and there at the reporter's desk, but Reifferscheid knew she had not gone. He might come in—and laugh at her precipitation.

After a night of perfect rest, Paula's mind was animated with thoughts of work—until she reached the *Zoroaster*. Something of Bellingham's tormenting energy was heavy in the atmosphere of her rooms. When passing the full-length mirror, she turned her face away in fear. Impatiently she caught up one of the new books (and Charter's letter for a marker), and hurried across to the Park. The fall days were still flawless.

It was not yet ten in the morning, and few people were abroad. She sat down upon one of the weathered knobs of Manhattan rock which had worn through the thin skin of soil, and allowed herself to think of the formidable affliction. To all intents, the magician had dispossessed her of the rooms, identified for years with her personality and no other. She could not put away the truth that the full forces of her mind were at bay before the psychic advances of the dreadful stranger. This was not long to be endured. Inasmuch that his power did not harmlessly glance from her, she felt that there must be great potentialities of evil within herself. This conviction made her frightened and desperate. She should have known that it was her inner development, her sensitiveness which had made her so potent an attraction for Bellingham. The substance of her whole terror was that there had been moments under his spell, when she had not been at all the mistress of her own will.

The suggestions which he projected had seemed to her the good and proper actions. She knew it as a law—that every time her own divine right to the rule of her faculties was thus usurped by an evil force, her resistance was weakened. Yet there was a shocking unfairness in the thought that she was not given a chance. In the throne-room of her mind, she was not queen. All the sacred fortifications of self seemed broken, even the soul's integrity debased, when Bellingham crushed his way in and forced her to obey. This is the great psychological crime. When one has broken into the sacred precincts, the door is left open for other malignant, earth-bound entities foully to enter and betray....

There was no one in whom she could confide, but Madame Nestor. Almost any professional man, a

physician especially, would have called her revelations hysterical.... Her constant and growing fear was of the time when she should be called by Bellingham—and nothing would supervene to save her. Some time the spell might not be broken. She became ill with tension and shame as this unspeakable possibility seethed through her mind.... Better death than to continue in being passion-ridden by this defiler, in the presence of whom she became so loathsome in her own sight—that she dared not pray....

Somewhere far off children were talking. Their voices warmed and cleansed her mind. There was a stimulating thud of hoofs on the turf-roads. She tried to read now. Her eyes travelled dutifully along the lines of her book, without bringing forth even the phase of a thought from the page of print. A swift step drew her glance down the foot-path. Bellingham was approaching. His shoulders were thrown back, his long arms swinging so that every muscle was in play, striding forward at incredible speed. He filled his lungs with every cubic inch of morning air they could contain, and expelled the volume with gusto. She had once seen a rugged Englishman take his exercise as seriously as this, on the promenade of an Atlantic liner before the breakfast-gong. To all appearances, Bellingham did not have a thought apart from his constitutional.

Paula sat very still on the rock. Her slightest movement now would attract his attention. It occurred to her afterwards that she had been like a crippled squirrel huddled in the fork of a tree—the hunter and his dog below....

At the point where the path was nearest her, he halted. The thing happened exactly as she might have conceived it in a story. For a moment he seemed to be searching his mind for the meaning of his impulse to stop. An unforgettable figure, this, as he stood there with lifted head, concentrating upon the vagary which had brought him to a standstill.... Paula may have been mistaken in her terror, but she never relinquished the thought that her proximity was known to him—before his face turned unerringly to the rock and his bright gray eyes filled with her presence.

"You are Miss Linster?" he asked, smiling agreeably.

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"You attended the first of my Prismatic Hall lectures ten days ago?... I seldom forget a face, and I remember asking one of my committee your name."

Paula found it rather a unique effort to hold in mind the truth that she had never spoken to this man before. Then the whole trend of her mental activity was suddenly complicated by the thought that all her past terrors might be groundless. Possibly Madame Nestor was insane on this subject. "It may be that her mad words and my stimulated imagination have reared a monster that has no actuality."

The bracing voices of the children, the brilliance of mid-forenoon, the man's kingly figure, agreeable courtesy, and commanding health—indeed, apart from the eyes in which she hardly dared to glance, there was nothing to connect him even vaguely with the sinister persecutions which bore his image. The whole world-mind was with him. What right had she to say that the world-mind was in error and she normal—she and the unreckonable Madame Nestor?... Paula recalled the strange intensity of her mental life for years, and the largeness of her solitudes. The world-mind would say she was beside herself from much study.... More than all, no power was exerted upon her now. Who would believe that this Bellingham, with miles of the metropolis between them, had repeatedly over-ridden her volition, when she felt no threatening influence at the present moment, almost within his reach—only the innate repulsion and the fear of her fears?

"I hope to see you again at the meetings, Miss Linster."

"They do not attract me."

"That is important, if unpleasant to learn," he remarked, as if genuinely perturbed. "I have been studying for a long time, and perhaps I have taken a roundabout road to discovery. It is quite possible that the values of my instruction are over-estimated by many.... Do you mind if I sit down a moment? I have walked a hundred squares and will start back from here." From his manner it was impossible to imagine irony covert in his humbleness.

"Certainly not, though I must return to my apartment in a moment.... I did not like the atmosphere—the audience—that first night," Paula added.

"Nor did I, altogether," he said quickly. "But how can one choose the real, if all are not admitted at first? With each lecture you will find a more select company, and there will be very few when the actual message is unfolded."

He glanced away as if to determine the exact point through the trees from which the children's voices came. His profile was unquestionably that of an aristocrat. The carriage of his head, the wonderful development of his figure, his voice and the gentle temper of his answers, even the cut of his coat and the elegance of his shoes suggested an unconscious and invariable refinement which controverted the horror he had once seemed.

"It may be that I am not quite like other people," she said, "but I cannot think of physical perfection as the first aim in life."

"Nor can I," he answered; "still I think that after the elimination of poisons from the physical organism, one's mental and spiritual powers are quickened and freer to develop."

"Do you always shape your philosophy to meet the objections of your disciples—so?"

"You are stimulating, Miss Linster, but I have made no concession to adapt myself to your views. I only declared that I weed out my classes before real work begins, and that physical disease retards mental growth. I might add that I do not lecture for money."

"Why do you teach only women?"

"There are several reasons," he replied readily enough. "I have found that a mixed audience is not receptive; there is a self-consciousness, sometimes worse, something of a scoffing spirit, which breaks the point of my appeal. Women are aroused to interest when a man appeals directly to them. They do not like to betray a profound interest in any subject apart from the household—when their lords are present. Man instinctively combats any source which tends toward mental emancipation on the part of women. It is only a few decades ago that women were forced to abide entirely within their domestic circle. Instead of using a superior physical strength now to keep her there, man's tendency is to ridicule her outside interests. So I have found that women prefer to study alone."

Bellingham answered thus circuitously, but his manner suggested that he was grateful for the inquiry, since it gave him an opportunity to express matters which had only been half-formed in his mind. Paula, whose every question had come from an inclination to confound him, began to realize that the spirit was unworthy and partook of impertinence.

"I believe in automatic health," she said impatiently. "It seems to me that refinement means this: that in real fineness all such things are managed with a sort of unconscious art. For instance, I should not have health at the price of walking twice a hundred blocks in a forenoon——"

"The point is eminently reasonable, Miss Linster," Bellingham remarked with a smile. "But what I find it well to do, I rarely advise for others. I am from a stock of powerful physical men. My fathers were sailors and fishermen. They gave me an organism which weakens if I neglect exercise, and I seem to require about five times as much physical activity as many men of the present generation. I have absolutely no use for this tremendous muscular strength; in fact, I should gladly be less strong if it could be accomplished without a general deterioration. The point is, that a man with three or four generations of gentle-folk behind him, can keep in a state of glowing health at the expense of about one-fifth the physical energy that I burn—who come from rough men of mighty outdoor labors."

This was very reasonable, except that he seemed far removed in nature from the men of boats and beaches. She had dared to glance into his face as he spoke, and found an impression from the diamond hardness of his eyes, entirely different from that which came through listening merely. But for this glance, it never would have occurred to her, that her questions had stretched his faculties to the slightest tension. She would have arisen to go now, but he resumed:

"I cannot bear to have you think that my energies are directed entirely in the interests of lifting the standards of health, Miss Linster. Really, this is but a small part of preparation. It was only because I felt you ready for the important truths—that I regretted your absence after the first night. Do you know that we live in the time of a spiritual high-tide? It is clear to me that the whole race is lifting with a wonderful inner animation. In the next quarter of a century great mystic voices shall be heard. And there shall be One above all.... I tell you people are breaking down under the tyranny of their material possessions. After desire—comes the burden of holding. We are approaching the great *ennui* which Carlyle prophesied. There is no longer a gospel of materialism. The great English and German teachers whose work was regarded as supreme philosophy by the people ten years ago, are shown to be pitiful failures in our colleges to-day—or at best, specialists of one particular stage of evolution, who made the mistake of preaching that their little division in the great cosmic line was the whole road. Materialism died out of Germany a few years ago—with a great shock of suicide. The mystics are teaching her now. I assure you the dawn is breaking for a great spiritual day such as the world has never seen. Soon a great light shall cover the nations and evil shall crawl into the holes of the earth where it is dark.... There is shortly to be born into the world—a glorious Child. While He is growing to celestial manhood—New Voices shall rise here and everywhere preparing the way. One of these New Voices—one of the very least of these—is Bellingham to whom you listen so impatiently."

Every venture into the occult had whispered this Child-promise in Paula's ears. There was such a concerted understanding of this revelation among the cults, that the thought had come to her that perhaps this was a delusion of every age. Yet she had seen a Hindu record dated a hundred years before, prophesying the birth of a Superman in the early years of the Twentieth Century. There was scarcely a division among the astrologers on this one point. She had even been conscious in the solitudes of her own life of a certain mystic confidence of such a fulfillment.... She dared not look into Bellingham's face at such a moment. The ghastly phase of the whole matter was to hear this prophecy repeated by one to whom the illustrious prospect (if he were, as she had believed) could become only an awful illumination of the hell to which he was condemned. It was—only unspeakably worse—like hearing a parrot croak, "Feed our souls with the bread of life!..." Paula stirred in her seat, and Charter's letter dropped from the book in her lap. She seized it with a rush of grateful emotion. It was a stanchion in her mind now filled with

turbulence.

"There never was a time when woman's intelligence was so eager and rational; never a time," Bellingham went on, "when men were so tired of metals and meals and miles. The groan for the Absolutely New, for the utmost in sense and the weirdest of sensations, for speed to cover distances and to overcome every obstacle, even thin air—all these express the great weariness of the flesh and make clear to the prophetic understanding that man is nearing the end of his lessons in three dimensions and five senses. There is a stirring of the spirit-captive in the worn mesh of the body."

The woman traced her name with her forefinger upon the cover of the book in her lap; again and again, "Paula—Paula—Paula." It was a habit she had not remembered for years. As a little girl when she fought against being persuaded contrary to her will, she would hold herself in hand thus, by wriggling "Paula" anywhere. All that Bellingham said was artfully calculated to inspire her with hope and joy in the world. So marvelously were the words designed to carry her high in happiness, that there was a corresponding tension of terror in remembering that Bellingham uttered them. Yet she would have felt like a lump of clay had she not told him:

"What you say is very wonderful to me."

"And it is the women who are most sensitive to the Light—women who are already unfolding in the rays, yet so far-flung and dim." Bellingham's voice was a quick emotionless monotone. "Perhaps you have noted the great amalgamation of clubs and classes of women which each year turns its power to more direct effort and valuable study. Another thing, let the word Genius be whispered about any child or youth, and he becomes at once the darling of rich matrons. What does this mean—this desire of woman to bring out the latent powers of a stranger's child? This veiled, beautiful quality is the surest sign of all. It is the spirit of Rebecca—which, even in the grief for her own dead babe, turns thrillingly to mother a wayfarer's Starry Child. Verily, when a woman begins to dream about bringing prophets into the world—the giants of those other days are close to her, crowding closer, eager to be born again."

Paula turned to him and arose. His face was not kindled. It was as if he were an actor reading lines to memorize, not yet trying to simulate the contained emotions. There is a glow of countenance where fine thought-force is in action, but Bellingham's face was not lit with the expiration of mind-energy, though his eyes glittered with set, bird-like brightness.

"I must hurry away now," she told him hastily. "I must think upon what you have said."

"I truly wish," he added softly, and with a kindness she felt, because her eyes were turned from him, "that you would join one of my wiser classes. You would be an inspiration. Besides, the little things that have been given me to tell—should be known by the very few who have reached your degree of evolution."

"Thank you," she faltered. "I must think."

"Good-by, Miss Linster."

Reaching the street in front of her apartment house, she turned just in time to see him disappear among the trees. He strode forward as if this were his world, and his days had been a continuous pageant of victories.... Her rooms were all cleared of disorder, her mind refreshed and stimulated.... That night between eleven and twelve she was writing to Charter. There were a half dozen penned pages before her, and a smile on her lips. She poured out a full heart to the big Western figure of cleanliness and strength—wrote to the man she wanted him to be.... The day had been strange and expanding. She had suffered no

evil. The thoughts remaining with her from the talk in the Park were large with significance, and they had cleared slowly from the murkiness of their source. These, and the ideal of manhood she was building out of Charter's book and letter and Reifferscheid's little sketch of him, had made the hours rich with healing. She was tired but steady-nerved as she wrote.... There was a faint tapping at her hall-door.

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# FIFTH CHAPTER

## PAULA IS INVOLVED IN THE FURIOUS HISTORY OF SELMA CROSS AND WRITES A LETTER TO QUENTIN CHARTER

Paula thrust the sheets of the letter in her desk drawer and admitted Selma Cross, an actress whose apartment was across the hall. These two had chatted together many times, sometimes intimately. Each had found the other interesting. Hints of a past that was almost classic in the fury of its struggle for publicity, had repeatedly come to Paula's ears, with other matters she greatly would have preferred not to hear. Selma Cross was huge to look upon, and at first thought without grace. There was something uncanny in her face and movements, and an extraordinary breadth between her yellow eyes which were wide-lidded, slow-moving and ever-changing. She was but little past thirty, yet the crowded traffic of her years was intricately marked.

"I saw the light under your door, and felt like coming in for a few minutes," she said. "I must talk to some one and my maid, Dimity, is snoring. You see, I'm celebrating for two reasons."

"Tell me, so I can help," Paula answered.

"Vhruebert has taken a play for me. You know, I've been begging him to for months. The play was made for me—not that it was written with me in mind, but that I just suit it. Selma Cross is to be carved in light over a theatre-entrance, twenty seconds from Broadway—next April. It will be at the *Herriot*—Vhruebert's theatre. We run through Hartford, Springfield, Rochester and that string of second cities earlier in the Spring."

Paula rose and gave both her hands.

"Oh, I'm so glad for you," she said. "I know something about how you have worked for this——"

"Yes, and the play is *The Thing*. I am an ugly slaving drudge, but have all the emotions that the sweet *ingenue* of the piece should have, and the audience watches me deliver. Yes, I've waited long for this, and yet I'm not so glad as I thought I should be. I've been pretty sure of it for the last year or two. I said I was celebrating for two things——"

"Pray, what is the other?"

"I forget that it might not interest you—though it certainly does me," Selma Cross said with a queer, low laugh.... "He wasn't ugly about it, but he has been exacting—ugh! The fact is, I have earned the privilege at last of sleeping in my own respectable apartment."

Paula couldn't help shivering a bit. "You mean you have left your——"

"Oh, he wasn't my husband.... It's such a luxury to pay for your own things—for your own house and clothes and dinners—to earn a dollar for every need and one to put away.... You didn't think that I could get my name above the name of a play—without an angel?"

"I didn't know," Paula said, "I saw you with him often. It didn't exactly occur to me that he was your husband, because he didn't come here. But do you mean that now when you don't need him any longer—

you told him to go away?"

"Just that—except it isn't at all as it looks. You wouldn't pity old man Villiers. Living God, that's humorous—after what I have given. Don't look for wings on theatrical angels, dear."

It was plain that the woman was utterly tired. She regarded Paula with a queer expression of embarrassment, and there was a look of harsh self-repression under the now-drooped eyelids.

"I don't apologize," she went on hastily. "What I have done, I would do again—only earlier in the game, but you're the sort of woman I don't like to have look at me that—I mean look down upon me. I haven't many friends. I think I must be half wild, but you make the grade that I have—and you pay the price.... You've always looked attractive to me—so easy and finished and out of the ruck."

There was a real warming sincerity in the words. Paula divined on the instant that she could forever check an intimacy—by a word which would betray the depth of her abhorrence for such a concession to ambition, and for the life which seems to demand it. Selma Cross was sick for a friend, sick from containing herself. On this night of achievement there was something pitiful in the need of her heart.

"New York has turned rather too many pages of life before my eyes, Selma, for me to feel far above any one whose struggles I have not endured."

The other leaned forward eagerly, "I liked you from the first moment, Paula," she said. "You were so rounded—it seemed to me. I'm all streaky, all one-sided. You're bred. I'm cattle.... Some time I'll tell you how it all began. I said I would be the greatest living tragedienne—hurled this at a lot of cat-minds down in Kentucky fifteen years ago. Of course, I shall. It does not mean so much to me as I thought, and it may be a bauble to you, but I wanted it. Its far-awayness doesn't torture me as it once did, but one pays a ghastly price. Yes, it's a climb, dear. You must have bone and blood and brain—a sort of brain—and you should have a cheer from below; but I didn't. I wonder if there ever was a fight that can match mine? If so, it would not be a good tale for children or grown-ups with delicate nerves. Little women always hated me. I remember, one restaurant cashier on Eighth Avenue told me I was too unsightly to be a waitress. I have done kitchen pot-boilers and scrubbed tenement-stairs. Then, because I repeated parts of plays in those horrid halls—they said I was crazy.... Why, I have felt a perfect lust for suicide—felt my breast ache for a cool knife and my hand rise gladly. Once I played a freak part—that was my greater degradation—debased my soul by making my body look worse than it is. I went down to hell for that—and was forgiven. I have been so homesick, Paula, that I could have eaten the dirt in the road of that little Kentucky town.... Yes, I pressed against the steel until something broke—it was the steel, not me. Oh, I could tell you much!..."

She paused but a moment.

"The thing so dreadful to overcome was that I have a body like a great Dane. It would not have hurt a writer, a painter, even a singer, so much, but we of the drama are so dependent upon the shape of our bodies. Then, my face is like a dog or a horse or a cat—all these I have been likened to. Then I was slow to learn repression. This is a part of culture, I guess—breeding. Mine is a lineage of Kentucky poor white trash, who knows, but a speck of 'nigger'? I don't care now, only it gave me a temper of seven devils, if it was so. These are some of the things I have contended with. I would go to a manager and he would laugh me along, trying to get rid of me gracefully, thinking that some of his friends were playing a practical joke on him. Vhruebert thought that at first. Vhruebert calls me *The Thing* now. I could have done better had I been a cripple; there are parts for a cripple. And you watch, Paula, next January when I burn up things here, they'll say my success is largely due to my figure and face!"

As she looked and listened, Paula saw great meanings in the broad big countenance, a sort of ruffian strength to carry this perfecting instrument of emotion. The great body was needed to support such talents, handicapped by the lack of beauty. Selma Cross fascinated her. Paula's heart went out to the great crude creature she had been—in pity for this woman of furious history. The processes by which her brain and flesh had been refined would have slain the body and mind of an ordinary human. It came to Paula that here was one of Mother Nature's most enthralling experiments—the evolution of an effective instrument from the coarsest and vaguest heredity.

"They are all brainless but Vhruebert. You see, unless one is a beauty, you can't get the support of a big manager's name. I mean without money—there are managers who will lend their name to your stardom, if you take the financial risk. Otherwise, you've got to attract them as a possible conquest. All men are like that. If you interest them sexually—they will hear what you have to say——"

"Isn't that a reckless talk?" Paula asked, pale from the repulsiveness of the thought. "You say it without a single qualification——"

Selma Cross stared at her vacantly for a few seconds, then laughed softly. "You don't actually believe—to the contrary?"

"Let's pass it by. I should have to be changed—to believe that!"

"I hope the time will never come when you need something terribly from a strange man—one upon whom you have no hold but—yourself.... Ah, but you—the brighter sort would give you what you asked. You ——"

"Please don't go on!" Paula whispered. "The other part is so interesting."

Selma Cross seemed to stir restlessly in her loose, softly-scented garments. "I suppose I'm too rough for you. In ninety-nine women out of a hundred, I'd say your protest was a cheap affectation, but it isn't so with you...."

"It's your set, smothery pessimism that hurts so, Selma," Paula declared intensely. "It hurts me most because you seem to have it so locked and immovable inside.... You have been so big and wonderful to win against tremendous obstacles—not against ugliness—I can't grant that. You startled me, when I saw you first. I think women have held you apart because you were uncommon. You show a strange power in your movements and expression. It's not ugliness——"

"That's mighty rare of you. I haven't had the pleasure of being defied like that before. But you are not like other people—not like other women."

"You will meet many real men and women—wiser and kinder than I am. I think your pessimism cannot endure—when you look for the good in people——"

"The kind I have known would not let me. They're just as hateful now—I mean the stuffy dolls of the stage—just as hateful, calling me 'dear' and 'love' and saying, 'How tremendous you are, Selma Cross!....' Listen, it is only a little while ago that the same women used to ask me to walk on Broadway with them—to use me as a foil for their baby faces! Oh, women are horrible—dusty shavings inside—and men are of the same family."

"You poor, dear unfortunate—not to know the really wonderful kind! You are worn to the bone from winning your victory, but when you're rested, you'll be able to see the beautiful—clearly."

"One only knows as far as one can see."

This sentence was a shock to Paula's intelligence. It was spoken without consciousness of the meaning which drove so deep into the other's mind. It suggested a mind dependent altogether upon physical eyes. Paula refused to believe that this was the key to the whole matter.

"They have been so cruel to me—those female things which bloom a year," Selma Cross continued. "Flesh-flowers! They harried me to martyrdom. I had to hate them, because I was forced to be one with them—I, a big savage, dreaming unutterable things. It's all so close yet, I haven't come to pity them.... Maybe you can tell me what good they are—what they mean in the world—the shallow, brainless things who make the stage full! They are in factories, too, everywhere—daughters of the coolies and peasants of Europe—only worse over here because their fathers have lost their low fixed place in society, and are all mixed in their dim, brute minds. They have no one to rule them. You will see a family of dirty, frightened, low-minded children—the eldest, say a girl of fifteen. A dog or a cat with a good home is rich beside them. Take this eldest girl of a brood—with all the filth of foreign New York in and about her. She is fifteen and ready for the streets. It is the year of her miracle. I've seen it a score of times. You miss her a few months and she appears again at work somewhere—her face decently clean, her eyes clear, a bit of bright ribbon and a gown wrung somewhere from the beds of torture. It is her brief bloom—so horrid to look at when you know what it means. All the fifteen years of squalor, evil, and low-mindedness for this one year—a bloom-girl out of the dirt! And the next, she has fallen back, unwashed, high-voiced, hardening, stiffening,—a babe at her breast, dull hell in her heart. All her living before and to come—for that one bloom year. Maybe you can tell me what the big purpose of it all is. Earth uses them quite as ruthlessly as any weed or flower—gives them a year to bloom, not for beauty, but that more crude seeds may be scattered. Perpetuate! Flowers bloom to catch a bug—such girls, to catch a man—perpetuate—oh God, what for? And these things have laughed at me in the chorus, called me 'Crazy Sal,' because I spoke of things they never dreamed."

"Yes," Paula said quickly, "I've seen something like that. How you will pity them when you are rested! It is hard for us to understand why such numbers are sacrificed like a common kind of plants. Nietzsche calls them 'the much-too-many.' But Nietzsche does not know quite so much as the Energy that wills them to manifest. It is dreadful, it is pitiful. It would seem, if God so loved the world—that He could not endure such pity as would be His at the sight of this suffering and degradation.... But you have no right to despise them—you, of all women. You're blooming up, up, up,—farther and farther out of the common—your blooming has been for years because you have kindled your mind. You must bloom for years still—that's the only meaning of your strength—because you will kindle your soul.... A woman with power like yours—has no right but to love the weak. Think what strength you have! There have been moments in the last half-hour that you have roused me to such a pitch of thinking—that I have felt weak and ineffectual beside you. You made me think sometimes of a great submarine—I don't know just why—flashing in the depths."

"I don't think you see me right," Selma Cross said wearily. "Many times I have been lost in the dark. I have been wicked—hated the forces that made me. I have so much in me of the peasant—that I abhor. There have been times when I would have been a prostitute for a clean house and decent clothes to cover me, but men did not look at *The Thing*—only the old man, and one other!" Her eyes brightened, either at the memory or at the thought that she was free from the former.... "Don't wince and I'll tell you about that angel. You will be wiser. I don't want you for my friend, if I must keep something back. It was over three years ago, during my first real success. I was rather startling as Sarah Blixton in Heber's *Caller Herrin*. It was in that that I learned repression. That was my struggle—to repress.... Old man Villiers saw me, and

was wise enough to see my future. 'Here's a girl,' I can imagine him saying, 'who is ugly enough to be square to one man, and she's a comer in spite of her face.' He showed where his check-book could be of unspeakable service. It was all very clear to me. I felt I had struggled enough, and went with him.... Villiers is that kind of New Yorker who feels that he has nothing left to live for, when he ceases to desire women. In his vanity—they are always vain—he wanted to be seen with a woman mentioned on Broadway. It was his idea of being looked up to—and of making other men envious. You know his sort have no interest—save where they can ruin.

"Then for two winter months, Villiers and I had a falling out. He went South, and I remained here to work. During this time I had my first real brush with love—a young Westerner. It was terrific. He was a brilliant, but turned out a rotten cad. I couldn't stand that in a young man.... You can pity an old man, much the worse for living, when he is brazenly a cad—doesn't know anything else.... When Villiers came back from the South I was bought again. I put it all nakedly, Paula, but I was older than you are now, when that sort of thing began with me. Remember that! Still, I mustn't take too much credit, because I didn't attract men.... If you don't abhor me now, you never will, little neighbor, because you have the worst.... Sometime I'll tell you a real little love story—oh, I'm praying it's real! He's a hunch-back, Paula,—the author of *The Thing*.... Nobody could possibly want a hunch-back but me—yet I'm not good enough. He's so noble and so fine!... The past is so full of abominations, and I'm not a liar.... I don't think he'd want me—though I could be his nurse. I could *carry him*!... Then there is a long-ago promise.... Oh, I know I'm not fit for that kind of happiness!..."

There was an inspiration in the last. It was strong enough to subvert Paula's mind from the road of dreary degradation over which she had been led. From rousing heights of admiration to black pits of shame, she had fallen, but here again was a tonic breath from clean altitudes. The picture in her mind of this great glowing creature tenderly mothering the poor crippled genius of *The Thing*—was a thrilling conception.

"There is nothing which cannot be forgiven—save soul-death!" Paula said ardently. "What you have told me is very hard to adjust, but I hope for your new love. Oh, I am glad, Selma, that the other is all behind! I don't know much of such things, but it has come to me that it is easier for a man to separate himself from past degradations and be clean—than a woman. This is because a man gives—*but the woman receives her sin*! That which is given cannot continue to defile, but woman is the matrix.... Still, you do not lie. Such things are so dreadful when matted in lies. We all carry burdensome devils—but few uncover them, as you have done for me. There is something noble in looking back into the past with a shudder, saying, —'I was sick and full of disease in those days,' but when one hugs the corrosion, painting it white all over —there is an inner devouring that is never appeased.... All our sisters are in trouble. I think we live in a world of suffering sororities. You are big and powerful. Your greater life is to come.... I am glad for what you have put behind. You will progress farther and farther from it. I am glad you are back across the hall —alone!"

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For many moments after Selma Cross had gone, Paula sat thinking under the lamp. At last she drew the sheets of the letter to Charter from the desk-drawer, and read them over. The same rapt smile came to her lips, as when she was writing. It was a letter to her Ideal—the big figure of cleanness and strength, she wanted this man to be. Even a line or two she added. No one ever knew, but Paula.... At length, she began tearing the sheets. Finer and finer became the squares under her tense fingers—a little pile of *confetti* on the desk at last—and brushed into a basket.... Then she wrote another letter, blithe, brief, gracious—about

his book and her opinion. It was a letter such as he would expect....

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# SIXTH CHAPTER

## PAULA IS CALLED TO PARLOR "F" OF THE *MAID-STONE* WHERE THE BEYOND-DEVIL AWAITS WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS

Paula felt singularly blessed the next morning wondering if ever there existed another woman into whose life-channel poured such strange and torrential tributaries. The current of her mind was broadening and accelerating. She was being prepared for some big expression, and there is true happiness in the thought. Reifferscheid, since her pilgrimage to Staten Island, had become a fixture of delight. Selma Cross had borne her down on mighty pinions to the lower revelations of the City, but had winged her back again on a breeze of pure romance. Madame Nestor had parted the curtains, which shut from the world's eye, hell unqualified, yet her own life was a miracle of penitence. Not the least of her inspirations was this mild, brave woman of the solitudes. Then, there was the commanding mystery of Bellingham, emerging in her mind now from the chicaneries of the past ten days; rising, indeed, to his own valuation—that of a New Voice. Finally, above and before all, was the stirring figure of her Ideal—her splendid secret source of optimism—Charter, less a man than a soul in her new dreams—a name to which she affixed, "The Man-Who-Must-Be-Somewhere."

Just once, the thought came to Paula that Bellingham had designed a meeting such as took place in the Park to soften her aversion and clear from her mind any idea of his abnormality. She could not hold this suspicion long. Attributing evil strategies to another was not easy for Paula. The simpler way now was to give him every benefit, even to regard the recent dreadful adventures with an intangible devil—as an outburst of her neglected feminine prerogatives, coincident with the stress of her rather lonely intellectual life. As for Madame Nestor, might she not have reached a more acute stage of a similar derangement? Paula was not unacquainted with the great potentialities of fine physical health, nor did she miss the fact that Mother Nature seldom permits a woman of normal development to reach the fourth cycle of her years, without reckoning with the ancient reason of her being.

She now regarded early events connected with Bellingham as one might look back upon the beginning of a run of fever.... Could he be one of the New Voices?

Paula loved to think that Woman was to be the chief resource of the Lifting Age. Everywhere among men she saw the furious hunger for spiritual refreshment. Words, which she heard by mere chance from passers-by, appalled her. It was so tragically clear to her how the life led by city men starves their better natures—that there were times when she could hardly realize they did not see it. She wanted someone to make the whole world understand—that just as there are hidden spaces between the atoms of steel which made radioactivity possible, so in the human body there is a permeating space, in which the soul of man is built day by day from every thought and act; and when the worn-out physical envelope falls away—there it stands, a record to endure.... She wanted to believe that it was the office of woman to help man make this record beautiful. Just as the old Anglo-Saxon for "lady" means "giver of bread," so she loved to think that the spiritual loaf was in the keeping of woman also.

Paula could not meditate without ecstasy upon the thought that a great spiritual tide was rising, soon to overflow every race and nation. The lifting of man from greedy senses to the pure happiness of brotherhood, was her most intimate and lovely hope. Back of everything, this lived and lit her mind. There

were transcendent moments—she hardly dared to describe or interpret them—when cosmic consciousness swept into her brain. Swift was the visitation, nor did it leave any memorable impression, but she divined that such lofty moments, different only in degree, were responsible for the great utterances in books that are deathless. The shield was torn from her soul, leaving it naked to every world-anguish. The woman, Paula Linster, became an accumulation of all suffering—desert thirsts, untold loves, birth and death parturitions, blind cruelties of battle, the carnal lust of Famine (that soft-treading spectre), welted flesh under the screaming lash, moaning from the World's Night everywhere—until the impassioned spirit within rushed forth to the very horizon's rim to shelter an agonizing people from an angry God. Such is the genius of race-motherhood—the ineffable spirit of mediation between Father and child.

One must regard with awe the reaction which follows such an outpouring.

These are the wilderness-wrestlings of the great-souled—the Gethsemanes. Out of the dream, would appear the actual spectacle of the City—human beings preying one upon the other, the wolf still frothing in man's breast—and then would crush down upon her with shattering pain the realization of her own hopeless ineffectuality. To a mind thus stricken and desolated often, premonitions of madness come at last—madness, the black brother of genius. There is safety alone in a body strong and undefiled to receive again the expanded spirit. From how many a lustrous youth—tarrying too long by the fetid margins of sense—has the glory winged away, never to return to a creature fallen into hairy despoliation.

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Paula had returned from down-town about noon. Reifferscheid, who had a weakness for Herman Melville, and annually endeavored to spur the American people into a more adequate appreciation of the old sea-lion, had ordered her to rest her eyes for a few days in *Moby Dick*. With the fat, old fine-print novel under her arm, Paula let herself into her own apartment and instantly encountered the occultist's power. She sank to the floor and covered her face in the pillows of the couch. In the past twenty-four hours she had come to believe that the enemy had been put away forever, yet here in her own room she was stricken, and so swiftly.... Though she did not realize it at once, many of the thoughts which gradually surged into her mind were not her own. She came to see Bellingham as other women saw him—as a great and wise doctor. Her own conception battled against this, but vainly, vaguely. It was as if he held the balance of power in her consciousness. Without attempting to link them together, the processes of her mind quickly will be set into words.

Her first thought, before the tightening of Bellingham's control in her brain, was to rush into his presence and fiercely arraign him for the treachery he had committed. After blaming Madame Nestor and deforming her own faculties to clear him from evil, the devilishness of the present visitation overwhelmed. And how infinitely more black and formidable now was his magic—after the utterances in the Park! This was her last real stand.... A cry of hopelessness escaped her lips, for the numbness was already about her eyes, and creeping back like a pestilence along the open highways of her mind.

"Come to me. The way is open. I am alone. I am near.... Come to me, Paula Linster, of plentiful treasures.... Do you not see the open way—how near I am? Oh, come—now—come to me now!"

Again and again the little sentences fell upon her mind, until its surface stirred against reiteration, as one, thoroughly understanding, resents repeated explanations.... It was right now for her to go. She had been rebellious and headstrong to conjure such evils about the name of a famous physician. The world called him famous. Only she and Madame Nestor had stood apart, clutching fast to their ideas of his deviltry. He

had taken the trouble to call her to him—to prove that he was good. The degradation which she had felt at the first moment of his summons—was all from her own perversity.... Clearly she saw the street below, Cathedral Way; a turn north, then across the Plaza to the brown ornate entrance of *The Maidstone*.... There was no formality about the going. Her hat and coat had not been removed.... She was in the hall; the elevator halted at her floor while the man pushed a letter and some papers under the door of the Selma Cross apartment.... In the street, she turned across the Plaza from Cathedral Way to *The Maidstone*. The real Paula Linster marshalled a hundred terrible protests, but her voice was muffled, her strength ineffectual as Josephine's beating with white hands against the Emperor's iron door. Real volition was locked in the pitiless will of the physician, to whom she hastened as one hoping to be saved.

She inquired huskily of the man at the hotel-desk.

"The Doctor is waiting on the parlor-floor—in F," was the answer.

Paula stepped from the elevator, and was directed to the last door on the left.... The sense of her need, of her illness, hurried her forward through the long hall. Sometimes she seemed burdened with the body of a woman, very tired and helpless, but quite obedient.... The figure "F" on a silver shield filled her eyes. The door was ajar. Her entrance was not unlike that of a lioness goaded with irons through a barred passage into an arena. She did not open the door wider, but slipped through sideways, gathering her dress closely about her.... Bellingham was there. His face was white, rigid from long concentration; yet he smiled and his arms were opened to her.... The point here was that he so marvelously understood. His attitude to her seemed that of a physician of the soul. She could not feel the fighting of the real woman.... Dazed and broken for the moment, she encountered the soothing magnetism of his hands.

"How long I have waited!" he quietly exclaimed. "Hours, and it was bitter waiting—but you are a wreath for my waiting—how grateful you are to my weariness!... Paula Linster, Paula Linster—what deserts of burning sunshine I have crossed to find you—what dark jungles I have searched for such fragrance!"

His arms were light upon her, his voice low and lulling. He dared not yet touch his lips to her hair—though they were dry and twisted with his awful thirst. Craft and patience altogether feline was in the art with which he wound and wove about her mind thoughts of his own, designed to ignite the spark of responsive desire.... And how softly he fanned—(an incautious blast would have left him in darkness altogether)—until it caught.... Well, indeed, he knew the cunning of the yet unbroken seals; and better still did he know the outraged forces hovering all about her, ready to defeat him for the slightest error—and leave him to burn in his own fires.

"This is peace," he whispered with indescribable repression. "How soft a resting-place—and yet how strong!... Out of the past I have come for you. Do you remember the rock in the desert on which you sat and waited long ago? Your eyes were weary when I came—weary from the blazing light of noon and the endless waning of that long day. On a great rock in the desert you sat—until I came, *until I came*. Then you laughed because I shut the feverish sun-glow from your strained eyes.... Remember, I came in the skin of a lion and shut the sunset from your aching eyes—my shoulders darkening the west—and we were alone—and the night came on...."

Clearly was transferred to hers, the picture in his own brain. One of the ancient and mystic films of memory seemed brought after ages to the light—the reddening sands, the city far behind, from which she had fled to meet her hero, deep in the desert—the glow of sunset on his shoulders and in his hair, tawny as the lion's skin he wore.... The heart quickened within her; the savage ardor of that long-ago woman grew hot in her breast. Strong as a lion he was, this youth of the Sun, and fleet the night fell to cover them. She

ate the dried grapes he gave her, drank deep from his skin of wine, and laughed with him in the swift descending night.... She felt his arms now, her face was upraised, her eyelids tensely shut. Downward the blood rushed, leaving her lips icy cold. She felt the muscles of his arms in her tightening fingers, and her breast rose against him. This was no Twentieth Century magician who thralled her now, but a glorious hero out of the desert sunset;—and the woman within her was as one consuming with ecstasy from a lover's last visit....

And now Bellingham changed the color and surface of his advances. It was his thought to make such a marvellous sally, that when he retired and the mistress once again commanded her own citadel, she would perceive the field of his activities strewn, not with corpses, but with garlands, and in their fragrance she must yearn for the giant to come yet again. The thing he now endeavored to do was beyond an ordinary human conception for devilishness; and yet, that it was not a momentary impulse, but a well considered plan, was proven by the trend of his talk of the day before.... The flaw in his structure was his apparent forgetting that the woman in his arms breathing so ardently, in her own mind was clinging to a youth out of the sunset—a youth in the skin of a lion.

"Wisdom has been given to my eyes," Bellingham resumed with surpassing gentleness. "For years a conception of wonderful womanhood has lived and brightened in my mind, bringing with it a promise that in due time, such a woman would be shown to me. The woman, the promise and the miracle of its later meaning, I perceived at last were not for my happiness, but for the world's awful need. You are the fruits of my wonderful vision—you—Paula Linster. You are the quest of my long and weary searching!"

His utterance of her name strangely disturbed her night-rapture of the desert. It was as if she heard afar-off—the calling of her people.

"On the night you entered the Hall," he said, and his face bent closer, "I felt the sense of victory, before these physical eyes found you. My thoughts roved over a world, brightened by a new hope, fairer for your presence. And then, I saw your fine white brow, the ignited magic of your hair and eyes, your frail exquisite shoulders.... It seemed as though the lights perished from the place—when you left."

The word "magic" was a sudden spark around which the thoughts of the woman now groped.... She had lost her desert lover, passion was drained from her, and there was a weight of great trouble pressing down ... "Magic"—she struggled for its meaning.... She was sitting upon a rock again, but not in the desert—rather in a place of cooled sunlight, where there were turf roads and grand, old trees—a huge figure approaching with a powerful swinging stride—yesterday, Bellingham, the Park—the Talk!... Paula lifted her shoulders, felt the binding arms around them and heard the words uttered now in the meridian of human passion:

"Listen, Paula Linster, you have been chosen for the most exalted task ever offered to living woman. The Great Soul is not yet in the world, and He must come soon!... It is you who have inspired this—you, of trained will; a mind of stirring evolution, every thought so essentially feminine; you of virgin body and a soul lit with stars! You are brave. The burden is easy to one of your courage, and I should keep you free from the world—free from the burns and the whips of this thinking animal, the world. All that I have won from the world, her mysteries, her enchantments, I shall give you, all that is big and brave and wise in song and philosophy and nature, I shall bring to your feet, as a hunter with trophies to his beloved—all that a man, wise and tender, can think and express to quicken the splendor of fertility——"

Paula was now fully conscious—her self restored to her. The Yesterday and the To-day rose before her mind in startling parallel. Her primary dread was that she might lose control again before Bellingham was

put away. The super-devilishness of his plan—hiding a blasphemy in the white robe of a spiritual consecration—had changed him in her sight to a ravening beast. The thing which he believed would cause her eagerly to bestow upon him the riches of her threefold life had lifted her farther out of his power that moment, than even she realized. Bellingham had over-reached. She was filled with inner nausea.... The idea of escape, the thought of crippling the magician's power over her forever—in the stress of this, she grew cold.... She was nearest the door. It stood ajar, as when she had entered.

"Meditation—in the place I have prepared," he was whispering, "meditation and the poetic life, rarest of fruits, purest of white garments—cleansed with sunlight and starlight, you and I, Paula Linster,—the sources of creation which have been revealed to me—for you! Wonderful woman—all the vitalities of heaven shall play upon you! We shall bring the new god into the world——"

She pushed back from his arms and faced him—white-lipped and loathing.

"You father a son of mine," she said, in the doorway. "You—are dead—the man's soul is dead within you—you whited sepulchre!"

His face altered like a white wall which an earthquake disorders at the base. White rock turned to blown paper; the man-mask rubbed out; Havoc featured upon an erect thing, with arms pitifully outstretched.

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Paula, alone in the long hall, ran to the marble stairs, hurried down and into the street—swiftly to her house. There, every thread of clothing she had worn was gathered into a pile for burning. Then she bathed and her strength returned.

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# SEVENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA BEGINS TO SEE MORE CLEARLY THROUGH MADAME NESTOR'S REVELATIONS, AND WITNESSES A BROADWAY ACCIDENT

In mid-afternoon Paula obeyed an impulse to call upon Madame Nestor. She wanted to talk with the only human being in New York who could quite understand. Madame's room was west of Eighth Avenue in Forty-fourth Street—the servant's quarter in a squalid suite, four flights up. The single window opened upon a dim shaft, heavy with emanations from many kitchens. There was not even a closet. Madame's moulted plumage was hung upon the back of the outer and only door. Books were everywhere, on the floor, in boxes, on the cot.

"My dear Paula, you felt the need of me?... I should have come to you. This does very well for me, but I dislike my poverty to be known, dear. It is not that I am the least proud, but the psychic effects of pity are depressing."

"Please, Madame Nestor, don't think of me pitying anybody! I did feel the need of you. The day has been horrible. But first, I want to tell you that I am very sorry for what I said—when you were in my rooms the other day——"

The elder woman leaned forward and kissed Paula's dress at the shoulder. There was something sweet and mild and devotional in the action, something suggestive of a wise old working-bee pausing an instant to caress its queen.

"You have been impelled to go to him, Paula?"

"Yes. It came over me quite irresistibly. I could not have been altogether myself.... I think I shall leave the city!"

Madame Nestor asked several questions, bringing out all she cared to know of Paula's experience that day. Her eyes became very bright as she said:

"I dare not advise you *not* to go away. Still, don't you see it—how wonderful was your victory to-day?"

"I can't always defeat him!" Paula cried. "His power comes over me and I move toward him—just as reptiles must follow a blind impulse started from without. Each time I follow, I must be weaker."

"But, Paula, each time something happens to restore you to yourself, thwarting his purpose, his projections are weakened."

"But if I should go far away?"

"He could only put it in your mind to return."

When Paula remembered the accidents which had preserved her, even when in the same city with the Destroyer, she could not doubt the salvation in putting a big stretch of the planet's curve between her and this dynamo.... Certain unfinished thinking could only be cleared through a friend like Madame Nestor.

"This physical consciousness which he has made me feel seems indescribably more sinister in erect human beings than the mating instinct in animals and birds," Paula declared with hesitation. "Can it be that women in general encounter influences—of this kind?"

"It is man's fault that women have broken all seasons," the Madame said bitterly. "Man has kept woman submerged since the beginning of time. Always eager to serve; and blest—or cursed—with the changeless passion to be *all* to one man—her most enduring hope to hold the exclusive love of one man—woman has adapted herself eagerly to become the monogamic answer to man's polygamic nature. Bellingham is but the embodiment of a desire which exists in greater or less degree in every man. This desire of man has disordered women. We have lost the true meaning of ourselves—I mean, as a race of women—and have become merely physical mates."

"I can hardly believe it—that even women of the streets should ever be degraded by such a horrible force," Paula said desperately. "And the sweet calm faces of some of the women we know——"

"Behind the mask of innocence, often, is a woman's terrible secret, Paula. For most women obey. Even the growth of the maid is ruthlessly forced by hot breaths of passion, until motherhood—so often a domestic tragedy—leaves the imprint of shame in her arms. The man of unlit soul has made this low play of passion his art. Woman as a race has fallen, because it is her way to please and obey. Man has taught us to believe that when he comes to our arms, we are at our highest.... And, listen, Paula, certain men of to-day, a step higher in evolution, blame woman because she has not suddenly *unlearned* her training of the ages—lessons man has graven in the very bed-rock of her nature. In the novelty of their new-found austerity, they exclaim: 'Avoid woman. She is passion rhythmic. It is she who draws us down from our lofty regions of endeavor.'"

Terrific energy of rebellion stirred Paula's mind. "But the promise is that woman's time shall come!" she exclaimed. "The Child, Jesus, said to his Mother, 'Thy time is not yet come,' but it is promised that the heel of woman shall crush the head of the Serpent. We have always borne the sin, the agony, the degradation, but our time must be close at hand! I think this is the age—and this the country—of the Rising Woman!"

Madame Nestor arose from the cot and stood before Paula, her eyes shining with emotion.

"Bless you, my beloved girl, my whole heart leaps to sanction that! I have symbolized the whole struggle of our race in your personal struggle—don't you see this, Paula?... Bellingham is the concentrate of devourers—and you the evolved woman who overcomes him! My hope for the race lies in you, and your victory to-day has filled my cup with happiness!... You say you do not dare to pray. I tell you, child,—the God of women gave you strength to-day. He is close to harken unto your need—for you are among the first of the elect to bring in the glory of the new day!... The animal in man has depleted the splendid energies of the Spirit. Passions of the kind you defeated to-day are overpowering women everywhere at this hour—lesser passions of lesser Bellinghams. Man's course to God has been a crawl through millenniums, instead of a flight through decades, because woman has bowed—obeyed. God is patient, but woman is aroused!... Above the din of wars, the world has heard the wailing of the women; out of the ghostly silence of famine and from beneath the debris of fallen empires—always the world has heard her cry for pity—her cry for pity now *become a Voice of Power*! All her tortured centuries have been for this—and the signs are upon us! Woman's demand for knowledge, her clamor for suffrage, her protest against eternally paying for man's lust with unblessed babes—all these are signs! But you, Paula Linster,—and what I know of this day—is the most thrilling sign of all to me!... Ah, woman is evolving; she is aroused! How shall she repay man for brutalizing her so long?"

"By bringing him back to God!" Paula answered.

They wept together and whispered, while the night fell about and covered the squalid room.

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It was one of her emancipated nights. Paula's spirit poured out over the city, for her mind was lit with thoughts of the ultimate redemption of her race. Bellingham could not have found her in his world that hour.... Emerging from Broadway to Forty-fourth Street, at eight in the evening, she passed under the hot brilliance of a famous hotel-entrance. As it never would have occurred to her to do in a less exalted moment, Paula glanced at a little knot of men standing under the lights. The eyes of one were roving like an unclean hand over her figure. Suddenly encountering her look, a bold, eager, challenge stretched itself upon his face. In the momentary panic, her glance darted to the others instinctively for protection—and found three smiling corpses.... Here were little Bellinghams; here, the sexual drunkenness which has made Man's course "a crawl through millenniums" to God, instead of a flight through decades. What a pitiless revelation!... She clung to her big Ideal in the West. It came to her for a second like a last and single hope—that Charter was not like that.... "God is patient and woman is aroused!" she whispered.

And farther up, a little way into Forty-seventh, Paula found a Salvation Army circle under the torch. A man with a pallid, shrunken face turned imploring eyes from one to another of the company, exclaiming: "I tell you, man's first work here below is to save his soul! I pray you—men and women, here to-night—to save your souls!"

Paula tossed her purse upon the big drum, as she passed swiftly. Luckily there was carfare in her glove, for she had not thought of that. Never before had she felt in such fullness her relation to the race....

A hansom-cab veered about the edge of the Salvation circle, swift enough to attract her eye. The horse had started before the driver was in the seat. The latter was fat and apoplectic. It was all he could do to regain his place, so that the reins still dangled. The possibility of a cab-horse becoming excited held only humor for the crowd, which parted to let the vehicle by. The horse, feeling his head, started to run just as the driver seized one of the lines and jerked his beast into the curb. There was an inhuman scream. A strange, boneless effigy of a man with twisted, waving arms—went down before the plunging horse, so suddenly swerved.... A hush seemed to have fallen upon the noisy Broadway corner. Paula was not blind in the brief interval which followed, but the world seemed gray and still, like a spectral dawn, or the unearthly setting of a dream.

"The shaft bored into him, and the horse struck him after he fell," a voice explained.

They lifted him. There was particular dreadfulness in the quantity of fluid evenly sheeted on the pavement as from a pail carefully overturned. Startling effrontery attached to the thought of man's heaven-aspiring current swimming like this upon a degraded city road. The horse, now held by the bit, snorted affrightedly at the odor. They had carried the unfortunate to the sidewalk under the lights of a tobacco-shop window. The upper part of his head and face was indefinite like a crushed tin of dark paint. But mouth and nose and chin of the upturned face left an imperishable imprint upon her mind. It was Bellingham.... Paula fled, her lips opening in a sick fashion. It seemed hours before she could reach the sanctuary of her room, where she sobbed in the dark.

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# EIGHTH CHAPTER

## PAULA MAKES SEVERAL DISCOVERIES IN THE CHARTER HEART-COUNTRY, AND IS DELIGHTED BY HIS LETTERS TO THE SKYLARK

The morning paper stated that Dr. Bellingham had suffered a fracture of the skull and internal injury, but might live. A note to Paula from Madame Nestor late the next day contained the following paragraph: "I called at the hospital to inquire. A doctor told me that the case is likely to become a classic one. Never in his experience, he stated, had he witnessed a man put up such a fight for life. It will be long, however, before he is abroad again. He must have been following you quite madly, because there never was a man more careful in the midst of city-dangers than Bellingham. Why, a scratched finger completely upset him—in the earlier days. Inscrutable, but thrilling—isn't it, my dear Paula?"

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"Did you follow *Moby Dick's* whale tracks around the wet wastes of the world?" Reifferscheid asked several mornings later, as Paula entered.

Her face was flushed. A further letter from Quentin Charter had just been tucked into her bag. "Yes, and Mr. Melville over trans-continental digressions," she answered. "He surely is Neptune's own *confrère*."

"Did you get the leviathan alongside and study the bewildering chaos of a ninety-foot nervous system?" Reifferscheid went on with delight.

"Exactly, and colored miles of sea-water with the emptyings of his vast heart. Then, there was an extended process of fatty degeneration, which I believe they called—blubber-boiling."

They laughed together over the old whale-epic.

"They remember Melville up in Boston and Nantucket," he added, "but he's about as much alive as a honey-bee's pulse elsewhere. The trouble is, you can't rectify this outrage by law. It isn't uxoricide or sheep-stealing—not to know Melville—but it's the deadly sin of ingratitude. This is a raw age, we adorn—not to rock in the boat of that man's soul. Why, he's worthy to stand with the angels on the point of the present."

The big editor always warmed her when he enthused. Here, in the midst of holiday books pouring in by scores, he had time to make a big personal and public protest against a fifty-year-old novel being forgotten.

"But isn't Melville acknowledged to be the headwaters of inspiration for all later sea-books?" Paula asked.

"Yes, to the men who do them, he's the big laughing figure behind their work, but the public doesn't seem to know.... Of course, Herman has faults—Japan currents of faults—but they only warm him to a white man's heart. Do you know, I like to think of him in a wide, windy room, tearing off his story long-hand, upon yard square sheets, grinning like an ogre at the soul-play, the pages of copy settling ankle-deep upon

the floor. There's no taint of over-breeding in the unborn thing, no curse of compression, no aping Addison—nothing but Melville, just blown in with the gale, reeking with a big story which must be shed, before he blows out again, with straining cordage booming in his ears. He harnesses Art. He man-handles Power, makes it grovel and play circus. 'Here it is,' he seems to say at the end. 'Take it or leave it. I'm rotting here ashore.'"

"You ought to dictate reviews like that, Mr. Reifferscheid," Paula could not help saying, though she knew he would be disconcerted.

He colored, turned back to his work, directing her to take her choice from the shelf of fresh books.... On the car going back, Paula opened Charter's letter. Her fingers trembled, because she had been in a happy and daring mood five or six days before when she wrote the letter to which this was the reply.

> ... Do you know, I really like to write to you? I feel untrammelled—turned loose in the meadows. It seems when I start an idea—that you've grasped it as soon as it is clear to me. Piled sentences after that are unnecessary. It's a real joy to write this way, as spirits commune. It wouldn't do at all for the blessed multitude. You have to be a mineral and a vegetable and an animal, all in a paragraph, to get the whole market. But how generous the dear old multitude is—(if the writer has suffered enough)—with its bed and board and lamplight....
>
> I have been scored and salted so many times that I heal like an earth-worm. Tell me, can scar-tissue ever be so fine? Fineness—that's the one excellent feature of being human! There's no other reason for being—no other meaning or reason for atomic affinity or star-hung space. True, the great Conceiver of Refining Thought seems pleased to take all eternity to play in....
>
> You've made me think of you out of all proportion. I don't want to help it. I'm very glad we hailed each other across the distance. There's something so entirely blithe and wise and finished about the personality I've builded from three little letters and a critique—that I refresh myself very frequently from them.... I think we must be old playmates. Perhaps we plotted ghost-stories and pegged oranges at each other in Atlantean orchards millenniums ago. I begin to feel as if I deserve to have my playmate back.... Then, again, it is as though these little letters brought to my garret window the Skylark I have heard far and faintly so long in the higher moments of dream. Just a note here and there used to come to me from far-shining archipelagoes of cloud-land. I listen now and clearly understand what you have sung so long in the Heights.... You are winged—that's the word! Wing often to my window—won't you? Life is peppering me with good things this year, I could not be more grateful.

Letters like these made Paula think of that memorable first afternoon with Grimm; and like it, too, the joy was so intense as to hold the suggestion that there must be something evil in it all. She laughed at this. What law, human or divine, was disordered by two human grown-ups with clean minds communing together intimately in letters? Quentin Charter might have been less imperious, or less precipitous, in writing such pleasing matters about herself, but had he not earned the boon of saying what he felt? Still, Paula would not have been so entirely feminine, had she not repressed somewhat. She even may have known that artful repression from without is stimulus to any man. Occasionally, Charter forgot his sense of humor, but the woman five years younger, never. The inevitable thought that in the ordinary sequence of events, they should meet face to face, harrowed somewhat with the thought that she must keep his ideals down—or both were lost. What could a mind like his *not* build about months of communion (eyes and ears strained toward flashing skies) with a Skylark ideal?... She reminded Charter that skylarks are little,

brown, tame-plumaged creatures that only sing when they soar. She could not forbear to note that he was a bit sky-larky, too, in his letters, and observed that she had found it wise, mainly to keep one's wings tightly folded in New York. She signed her next letter, nevertheless, with a small pen-picture of the name he had given her—full-throated and ascending. Also she put on her house address. Some of the paragraphs from letters which came in the following weeks, she remembered without referring to the treasured file:

> ... Bless the wings! May they never tire for long—since I cannot be there when they are folded.... Often, explain it if you can, I think of you as some one I have seen in Japan, especially in Tokyo—hurrying through the dusk in the Minimasakurna-cho, wandering through the tombs of the Forty-seven Ronins. or sipping tea in the Kameido among the wistaria blooms. Some time—who knows? I have made quite a delightful romance about it.... Who is so wise as positively to say, that we are not marvellously related from the youth of the world? Who dares declare we have not climbed cliffs of Cathay to stare across the sky-blue water, nor whispered together in orient casements under constellations that swing more perilously near than these?... We may be a pair of foolish dreamers, but Asia must have a cup of tea for us—Asia, because she is so far and so still. We shall *remember* then....
>
> And so you live alone? How strange, I have always thought of you so? From the number, I think you must overlook the Park—don't you?... It may strike you humorously, but I feel like ordering you not to take too many meals alone. One is apt to be neglectful, and women lose their appetites easier than men. I used to be graceless toward the gift of health. Perhaps I enjoy perfectly prepared food altogether too well for one of inner aspirations. The bit of a soul in which you see such glorious possibilities, packs rather an imperious animal this trip, I fear. However, I don't let the animal carry *me*—any more.
>
> I see a wonderful sensitiveness in all that you write—that's why I suggest especially that you should never forget fine food and plentiful exercise. Psychic activity in America is attained so often at the price of physical deterioration. This is an empty failure, uncentering, deluding. Remember, I say in America.... Pray, don't think I fail to worship sensitiveness—those high, strange emotions, the sense of oneness with all things that live, the vergings of the mind toward the intangible, the light, refreshing sleep of asceticism, subtle expandings of solitude and the mystical launchings,—anything that gives spread of wing rather than amplitude of girth—but I have seen these very pursuits carry one entirely out of rhythm with the world. The multitudes cannot follow us when there are stars in our eyes—they cannot see.
>
> A few years ago I had a strange period of deep-delving into ancient wisdom. A lot of big, simple treasures unfolded, but I discovered great dogmas as well—the steel shirts, iron shields, mailed fists and other junk which lesser men seem predestined to hammer about the gentle spirit of Truth. I vegetarianed, lived inside, practiced meditate, and became a sensitive, as it seems now, in rather a paltry, arrogant sense. The point is I lost the little appeal I had to people through writing. It came to me at length with grim finality that if a man means to whip the world into line at all, he must keep a certain brute strength. He must challenge the world at its own games *and win*, before he can show the world that there are finer games to play. You can't stand above the mists and call the crowd to you, but many will *follow* you up through them.... I truly hope, if I am wrong in this, that you will see it instantly, and not permit the edge and temper of your fineness to be coarsened through me. You are so animate, so delicately strong, and seem so spiritually unhurt, that it occurs to me now that there may be finer laws for you, than are vouchsafed to me. I interpreted my orders—to win according to certain unalterable rules of the world. Balzac did that. I think some Skylark sang to him at the last,

> when he did his Seraphita....
>
> I cannot help but tell you again of my gratitude. I am no impressionable boy. I know what the woman must be who writes to me.... Isn't this an excellent world when the finer moments come; when we can think with gentleness of past failures of the flesh and spirit, and with joy upon the achievements of others; when we feel that we have preserved a certain relish for the rich of all thought, and a pleasure in innocence; when out of our errors and calamities we have won a philosophy which makes serene our present voyaging and gives us keen eyes to discern the coast-lights of the future?... With lifted brow—I harken for your singing.

Paula knew that Quentin Charter was crying out for his mate of fire. She remembered that she had strangely felt his strength before there were any letters, but she could not deny that it since had become a greater and more intimate thing—her tower, white and heroic, cutting clean through the films of distance, and suggesting a vast, invisible city at its base. That she was the bright answer in the East for such a tower was incredible. She could send a song over on the wings of the morning—make it shine like ivory into the eyes of the new day, but she dared not think of herself as a corresponding fixture. A man like Charter could form a higher woman out of dreams and letter-pages than the world could mold for him from her finest clays. Always she said this—and forgot that the man was clay. A pair of dreamers, truly, and yet there was a difference in their ideals. If Charter's vision of her lifted higher, it was also flexible to contain a human woman. As for hers—Paula had builded a tower. True, there were moments of flying fog in which she did not see it, but clean winds quickly brushed away the obscurations, and not a remnant clung. When seen at all, her tower was pure white and undiminished.

Of necessity there were reactions. His familiarity with the petty intensities of the average man often startled her. He seemed capable of dropping into the parlance of any company, not as one who had listened and memorized, but as an old familiar who had served time in all societies. In the new aspect of personal letters, his book revealed a comprehension of women—that dismayed. Of course, his printed work was filled with such stuff as her letters were made of, but between a book and a letter, there is the same difference of appeal as the lines read by an actor, however gifted, are cold compared to a friend's voice. Though she wondered at Charter giving his time to write such letters to her, this became very clear, if his inclination were anything like her own to answer them. All the thinking of her days formed itself into compressed messages for him; and all the best of her sprang to her pen under his address. The effort then became to repress, to keep her pages within bounds, and the ultimate effort was to wait several days before writing again. His every sentence suggested pleasure in writing; and as a matter of fact, he repressed very little.... Was it through letters like hers in his leisure months that Charter amassed his tremendous array of poignant details; was it through such, that he reared his imposing ranges of feminine understanding? This was a question requiring a worldlier woman than Paula long to hold in mind. In the man's writing, regarded from her critical training, there was no betrayal of the literary clerk dependent upon data.

"I am no impressionable boy. I know what the woman must be who writes to me." There was something of seership in his thus irrevocably affixing his ideal to the human woman who held the pen.... His photograph was frequently enough in the press—a big browed, plain-faced young man with a jaw less aggressive than she would have imagined, and a mouth rather finely arched for a reformer who was to whip the world into line. And then there was a discovery. In a magazine dated a decade before, she ran upon his picture among the advertising pages. Verses of his were announced to appear during the year to come. He could not have been over twenty for this picture, and to her it was completely charming—a boy out of the past calling blithely; a poetic face, too, reminding her of prints she had seen of an early drawing of Keats's head now

in London—eager, sensitive, all untried!... It was not without resistance that she acknowledged herself *closer to the boy*—that something of the man was beyond her. There was a mystery left upon the face by the intervening years, "while the tireless soul etched on...." Should she ever know? Or must there always be this dim, hurting thing? Was it all the etching of the *soul*—that this later print revealed?... These were but bits of shadow—ungrippable things which made her wings falter for a moment and long for something sure to rest upon, but Reifferscheid's first talk about Charter, the latter's book, and the letters—out of these were reconstructed her tower of shining purity.

There were times when Paula's heart, gathering all its tributary sympathies, poured out to the big figure in the West in a deep and rushing torrent. Her entire life was illuminated by these moments of ardor. Here was a giving, in which the thought of actual possession had little or no part. Her finest elements were merged into one-pointed expression. It is not strange that she was dismayed by the triumphant force of the woman within her, nor that she recalled one of the first of Madame Nestor's utterances, "Nonsense, Paula, the everlasting feminine is alive in every movement of you." Yet this outpouring was lofty, and noon-sky clear. An emotion like this meant brightness to every life that contacted it.... But ruthlessly she covered, hid away even from her own thoughts, illuminations such as these. Here was a point of tragic significance. Out of the past has come this great fear to strong women—the fear to let themselves love. This is one of the sorriest evolutions of the self-protecting instinct. So long have women met the tragic fact of fickleness and evasion in the men of their majestic concentrations—that fear puts its weight against the doors that love would open wide.

Almost unconsciously the personal tension of the correspondence increased. Not infrequently after her letters were gone, Paula became afraid that this new, full-powered self of hers had crept into her written pages with betraying effulgence, rising high above the light laughter of the lines. How she cried out for open honesty in the world and rebelled against the garments of falsity which society insists must cover the high as well as the low. Charter seemed to say what was in his heart; at least, he dared to write as the woman could not, as she dared not even to think, lest he prove—against the exclaiming negatives of her soul—a literary craftsman of such furious zeal that he could tear the heart out of a woman he had not seen, pin the quivering thing under his lens, to describe, with his own responsive sensations.

So the weeks were truly emotional. Swiftly, beyond any realization of her own, Paula Linster became full-length a woman. Reifferscheid found it harder and harder to talk even bossily to her, but cleared his voice when she entered, vented a few booky generalities, and cleared his voice when she went away. Keen winter fell upon his system of emptied lakes; gusty winter harped the sound of a lonely ship in polar seas among the naked branches of the big elms above his cottage; indeed, gray winter would have roughed it—in the big chap's breast, had he not buckled his heart against it.... For years, Tim Reifferscheid had felt himself aloof from all such sentiment. Weakening, he had scrutinized his new assistant keenly for the frailties with which her sex was identified in his mind. In all their talks together, she had verified not one, so that he was forced to destroy the whole worthless edition. She was a discovery, thrillingly so, since he had long believed such a woman impossible. Now he felt crude beside her, remembered everything that he had done amiss (volumes of material supposed to be out of print). Frankly, he was irritated with any one in the office who presumed to feel himself an equal with Miss Linster.... But all this was Reifferscheid's, and no other—as far from any expression of his, as thoughtless kisses or thundering heroics.

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# NINTH CHAPTER

## PAULA IS DRAWN DEEPER INTO THE SELMA CROSS PAST AND IS BRAVELY WOOED THROUGH FURTHER MESSAGES FROM THE WEST

Selma Cross frequently filled the little place of books across the hall with her tremendous vibrations before the trial trip of her new play on the road. Paula liked to have her come in, delighted in the great creature's rapture over the hunch-back, Stephen Cabot, author of *The Thing*. There was an indescribably brighter luster in the waxing and waning of romantic tides, than the eyes of Paula had ever before discovered, so that the confidences of the other were of moment. Selma was terrified by some promise she had made years before in Kentucky. It was gradually driven deep into the listener's understanding that no matter how harsh and dreadful the intervening years had been, here was a woman to whom a promise meant a promise. Paula was moved almost to tears by the other's description of Stephen Cabot, and the first time she saw him.

"I wonder if the long white face with the pain-lit eyes could ever mean to any one else what it does to me?" Selma whispered raptly when they talked together one Sunday night. "Why, to see him sitting there before me at rehearsal—the finest, lowest head in all the chairs—steadies, exalts me! I hold fast to repression.... It It was Vhruebert who brought me to him, and the first words Stephen said were: 'Your manager is a wizard, Miss Cross, to get you for this. Why, you are the woman I wrote about in *The Thing*!'"

"Tell me more," Paula had whispered.

"We met in Vhruebert's office and forgot the manager entirely. I guess two hours passed, as we talked, and went over the play together that first time. Vhruebert sent in his office-boy finally to remind us that he was still in the building. How we three laughed about it!... Then as we started out for luncheon together, Stephen and I, Vhruebert took his place at the door before us, and delivered himself of something like this:

"'You two listen to the father of what you are to be,'" Selma Cross went on, roughening her voice and tightening her nasal passages, to imitate the old Hebrew star-maker. "'Listen to the soulless Vhruebert, who brudalizes the great Amerigan stage. You two are Art. Very well, listen to Commerce. It took me twenty-five years to learn that there must be humor in a blay. This *T'ing* would not lift the lip of a ganary-bird. It took me twenty-five years to learn there must be joy at the end of a blay—and wedding-bells. This *T'ing* ends just about—over the hills to the mad-house. Twenty-five years proved to me what I know the first day—that women of the stage must be beautiful. Miss Gross is not. I say no more. Here I have neither dramatist nor star. I could give the blay by Gabot to Ellen Terry—or to Miss Gross, if Ibsen write it. As it is, I have no name. There are five thousand people in this country writing blays with humor and habby endings. There are ten thousand beautiful women exbiring to spend it on the stage. Yet you two are the chosen of Vhruebert. When you look into each other's eye and visper how von-der-ful you are, with rising inflection; and say, "To hell with Gommerce and the Binhead Bublic!" remember Vhruebert who advances the money!'"

"And did you remember Vhruebert in that fairy luncheon together?" Paula asked happily.

"No, I only saw the long white face of Stephen Cabot. I wanted to take him in my arms and make him whole!"

For ten weeks Bellingham lay in one of the New York hospitals. "A woman attends him," Madame Nestor informed. "She is young and has been very beautiful. How well do I know her look of impotence and apathy—that look of unresisting obedience." To Paula, the magician seemed back among the dead ages, although Madame Nestor did not regard the present lull without foreboding. Paula could not feel that her real self had been defiled. The dreadful visitations were all but erased, as pass the spectres of delirium. What was more real, and rocked the centres of her being, was the conception of this outcast's battle for life. She could not forget that it was in pursuing her, that he had been injured. Facing not only death, but extinction, this idolater of life had, as one physician expressed it, held together his shattered vitality by sheer force of will, until healing set in. The only thought comparable in terror to such a conflict, had to do with the solitudes and abject frigidity of inter-stellar spaces.

The Skylark Letters, as she came to call them, were after all, the eminent feature of the fall and winter weeks. There was a startling paragraph in one of the December series: "I think it is fitting for you to know (though, believe me, I needed no word regarding you from without), that I am not entirely in the dark as to how you have impressed another. I know nothing of the color of your hair or eyes, nothing of your size or appearance,—only just how you *impressed another*. This information, it is needless to say, was unsolicited...." Just that, and no further reference. It was as though he had felt it a duty to incorporate those lines. Portions of some of the later letters follow:

> Did you know, that without the upward spread of wings—there can be no song from the Skylark? This, for me, has a fragrant and delicate significance. It is true that the poor little caged-birds sing, but how sorry they are, since they have to flutter their wings to give forth sound, and cling with their claws to the bars to hold themselves down!... I think you must have been a little wing-weary when you wrote your last letter to me. Perhaps the dusk was crowding into the Heights. No one knows as I do how the Skylark has sung and sung!... You did not say it, but I think you wanted the earth-sweet meadows. It came to me like needed rain—straight to the heart of mine that little plaint in the song. It made me feel how useless is the strength of my arms.... You see, I manage pretty well to keep you up There. I must. And because you are so wonderful, I can.... An enthralling temperament rises to me from your letters. I love to let it flood through my brain....
>
> I do not feel at all sure that you know me truly. What a man's soul appears to be, through the intimations of his higher moments, is not the man altogether that humans must reckon with. Nor must they reckon with the trampling violences of one's past. I truly believe in the soul. I believe it is an essence fundamentally fine; that great mothers brood it beautifully into their babes; that it is nourished by the good a man does and thinks. I believe in the ultimate victory of the soul, against the tough, twisted fibres of flesh which rise to demand a thousand sensations. I would have you think of me as one *lifting*; happy in discoveries, the crown of which you are; conscious of an integrating spirit; that sometimes in my silences I answer your song as one glorified. But then, I remember that you must not judge me by the brightest of my work. Such are the trained, tense bursts of speed—the swift expiration of the best. I think a man is about half as good as his best work and half as bad as his most lamentable leisure. Midway between his emotions and exaltations—is indicated his valuation.... All men clinging to the sweep of the upward cycle, must know the evil multitude at some time. Perhaps few men have met and discarded so many personal devils as I, in a single life. But I say to you as I write to-night, those devils cast out seem far back among cannibal centuries. I worship the fine, the pure,—thoughts and deeds which are expanded and warmed by the soul's

> breath. And you are the anchorage of this sweeter spirit which is upon me. Now, out of the logic which life burns into the brain, comes this thought: (I set it down only to fortify the citadel of truth in which our momentous relation alone can prosper.) Are there fangs and hackles and claws which I have not yet uncovered? Am I given the present serenity as a resting-time before meeting a more subtle and formidable enemy? Has my vitality miraculously been preserved for some final battle with a champion of champions of the flesh? Is it because the sting is gone from my scar-tissues that I feel so strong and so white to-night? I cannot think this, because I have heard—because I still hear—my Skylark sing.

The personal element of the foregoing and the hint of years of "wrath and wanderings," which she saw in his second photograph, correlated themselves in Paula's mind. They frightened her cruelly, but did not put Charter farther away. Remembering the effect of the passion which Bellingham had projected into her own brain, helped her vaguely to understand Charter's earlier years. His splendid emancipation from past evils lifted her soul. And when he asked, if his present serenity might not be a preparation for a mightier struggle, the serious reflection came—might she not ask the same question of herself? The old Flesh-Mother does not permit one to rest when one is full of strength.... Paula perceived that Quentin Charter was bravely trying to get to some sort of rational adjustment her ideal of him and the blooded reality—and to preserve her from all hurt. Doubts could not exist in a mind besieged by such letters.... One of her communications must have reflected something of her terror at the vague forms of his past, which he partially unveiled, for in answer he wrote:

> Do not worry again about the Big Back Time. Perhaps I was over assertive about the shadowed years. The main thing is that this is the wonderful present—and you, my white ally of nobler power and purpose. A gale of good things will come to us—hopes, communions and inspirations. We shall know each other—grow so fine together—that Mother Earth at last will lose her down-pull upon us—as upon perfumes and sunbeams. You have come with mystical brightening. You are the New Era. There is healing in Gethsemanes since you have swept with grace and imperiousness into possession of the Charter heart-country so long undiscovered. The big area is lit, redeemed from chaos. It is thrilling—since you are there. Never must you wing away.... Sometime you shall know with what strength and truth and tenderness I regard you. The spirit of spring is in my veins. It would turn to summer if we were together, but there could be no reacting winter because you have evolved a mind and a soul.... Body and mind and soul all evenly ignited—what a conception of woman!

Paula begged him not to try to fit such an ideal of the finished feminine to a little brown tame-plumaged skylark. Since they might some time meet, she wrote, it was nothing less than unfair for his mind, trained to visualize its images so clearly, to turn its full energies upon an ideal, and expect a human stranger—a happening—in the workaday physical vesture (such as is needed for New York activities) to sublimate the vision. She told him that he would certainly flee away from the reality, and that he would have no one but himself to blame. Visions, she added, do not review books nor write to authors whom they have not met. All of which, she expressed very lightly, though she could not but adore the spirit of ideality to which she had aroused his faculties.

At this time Paula encountered one of the imperishable little books of the world, bracing to her spirit as a day's camp among mountain-pines. Nor could she refrain from telling Charter about "The Practice of the Presence of God," as told in the conversations of Brother Lawrence, a bare-footed Carmelite of the Seventeenth Century. "No wilderness wanderings seem to have intervened between the Red Sea and the Jordan of his experience," she quoted from the preface, and told him how simple it was for this unlearned man to be good—a mere "footman and soldier" whose illumination was the result of seeing a dry and

leafless tree in mid-winter, and the thought of the change that would come to it with the Spring. His whole life thereafter, largely spent in the monastery kitchen—"a great awkward fellow, who broke everything"—was conducted as if God were his constantly advising Companion. It was a life of supernal happiness—and so simple to comprehend. Charter's reply to this letter proved largely influential in an important decision Paula was destined to make.

> Yes, I have communed with Brother Lawrence—carried the little volume with me on many voyages. I commend a mind that is fine enough to draw inspiration from a message so chaste and simple. You will be interested to hear that I have known another Brother Lawrence—a man whose holiness one might describe as "humble" or "lofty," with equal accuracy. This man is a Catholic priest, Father Fontanel of Martinique. His parish is in that amazing little port, Saint Pierre—where Africa and France were long ago transplanted and have fused together so enticingly. Lafcadio Hearn's country—you will say. I wonder that this inscrutable master, Hearn, missed Father Fontanel in his studies.... I was rough from the seas and a long stretch of military campaigning, when my ship turned into that lovely harbor of Saint Pierre. Finding Father Fontanel, I stayed over several ships, and the healing of his companionship restores me even now to remember.
>
> We would walk together on the *Morne d'Orange* in the evening. His church was on the rise of the *morne* at the foot of *Rue Victor Hugo*. He loved to hear about my explorations in books, especially about my studies among the religious enthusiasts. I would tell him of the almost incredible austerities of certain mystics to refine the body, and it was really a sensation to hear him exclaim in his French way: "Can it be possible? I am very ignorant. All that I know is to worship the good God who is always with me, and to love my dear children who have so much to bear. I do not know why I should be so happy—unless it is because I know so very little. Tell me why I live in a state of continual transport...." I can hear his gentle Latin tones even now at night when I shut my eyes—see the lights of the shipping from that cliff road, hear the creoles' moaning songs from the cabins, and recall the old volcano, *La Montagne Peleé*, outlined like a huge couchant beast against the low, northern stars.
>
> Father Fontanel has meant very much to me. In all my thinking upon the ultimate happiness of the race, he stands out as the bright achievement. At the time I knew him, there was not a single moment of his life in which the physical of the man was supreme. What his earlier years were I do not know, of course, but I confess now I should like to know.... The presence of God was so real to him, that Father Fontanel did not understand at all his own great spiritual strength. Nor do his people quite appreciate how great he is among the priests of men. He has been in their midst so long that they seem accustomed to his power. Only a stranger can realize what a pure, shining garment his actual *flesh* has become. To me there was healing in the very approach of this man.
>
> Dear Father Fontanel! All I had to do was to substitute "Higher Self" for "God" and I had my religion—the Practice of the Presence of the Higher Self. Does it not seem very clear to you?... To me, God is always an abstraction—something of vaster glory than the central sun, but one's Spiritual Body, the real being, integrated through interminable lives, from the finest materials of thought and action—this Higher Self is the Presence I must keep always with me, and do I not deserve that It should stand scornfully aloof, when, against my better knowledge, I fall short in the performance?... I think it is his Higher Self which is so lustrous in Father Fontanel, and the enveloping purity which comes from you is the same. About such purity there is nothing icy nor fibrous nor sterile.... You are singing in my heart, Skylark.

The picture Charter had drawn of Father Fontanel of Saint Pierre appealed strongly to Paula; and her

mind's quick grasp of the Charter religion—the Practice of the Presence of the Higher Self—became one of her moments of illumination. This was ground-down simplicity. True, every idea of Charter's was based upon reincarnation. Indeed, this seemed so familiar to him, that he had not even undertaken to state it as one of his fundamentals. But had she cared, she could have discarded even that, from the present concept. So to live that the form of the best within be not degraded; the days a constant cherishing of this Invisible Friend; the conduct of life constantly adjusted to please this Companion of purity and wisdom—here was ethics which blew away every cloud impending upon her Heights. Years of such living could not but bring one to the Uplands. As to Charter, God had always been to her The Ineffable—source of solar, aye, universal energy—the Unseen All. "Walking with God," "talking with God," "a personal God," "presence of God,"—these were forms of speech she could never use, but the Higher Self—this white charioteer—the soul-body that rises when the clay falls—here was a Personal God, indeed.

# TENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA SEES SELMA CROSS IN TRAGEDY, AND IN HER OWN APARTMENT NEXT MORNING IS GIVEN A REALITY TO PLAY

Selma Cross did not reach New York until the morning of the opening day at the *Herriot Theatre*. She was very tired from rehearsals and the try-outs along the string of second cities. There had been a big difference of opinion regarding *The Thing*, among what New Yorkers are pleased to call the provincial critics. From the character of the first notices, on the contrary, it was apparent that the townsmen were not a little afraid to trust such a startling play to New York. Mid-forenoon of an early April day, the actress rapped upon Paula's door.

"I have seen the boards," Paula exclaimed. "'Selma Cross' in letters big as you are; and yesterday afternoon they were hanging the electric sign in front of the *Herriot*. Also I shall be there to-night—since I was wise enough to secure a ticket ten days ago. Isn't it glorious?"

"Yes, I am quite happy about it," Selma Cross said, stretching out upon the lounge. "Of course, it's not over until we see the morning papers. I was never afraid—even of the vitriol-throwers, before. You see, I have to think about success for Stephen Cabot, too."

"Is he well?" Paula asked hastily.

"Oh yes, though I think sometimes he's a martyr. Oh, I have so much to say——"

"You said you would tell me some time how Vhruebert first decided to take you on," Paula urged.

"Before I got to the gate where the star-stuff passes through?" Selma Cross answered laughingly. "That was four years ago. I had been to him many times before he let me in. His chair squeaked under him. He looked at me first as if he were afraid I would spring at him. I told him what I could do, and he kept repeating that he didn't know it and New York didn't know it. I said I would show New York, but unfortunately I had to show him first. He screwed up his face and stared at me, as if I were startlingly original in my ugliness. I know he could hear my heart beat.

"'I can't do anything for you, Miss Gross,' he said impatiently, but in spite of himself, he added, 'Come to-morrow.' You see, I had made him think, and that hurt. He knew something of my work all right, and wondered where he would put a big-mouthed, clear-skinned, yellow-eyed amazon. The next day, he kept me waiting in the reception-room until I could have screamed at the half-dressed women on the walls.

"'I don't know exactly why I asked you to come again,' was his greeting when the door finally opened to me. 'What was it, once more, that you mean to do?'

"'I mean to be the foremost tragedienne,' I said.

"'Sit down. Tragedy doesn't bay.'

"'I shall make it pay.'

"'Um-m. How do you know? Some brivate vire of yours?'

"'I can show you that I shall make it pay.'

"'My Gott, not here! We will go to the outskirts.'

"And he meant it, Paula. It was mid-winter. He took me to a little summer-theatre up Lenox way. The place had not been open since Thanksgiving. Vhruebert sat down in the centre of the frosty parquet, shivering in his great coat. You know he's a thin-lipped, smile-less little man, but not such a dead soul as he looks. He leaks out occasionally through the dollar-varnish. Can you imagine a colder reception? Vhruebert sat there blowing out his breath repeatedly, seemingly absorbed in the effect the steam made in a little bar of sunlight which slanted across the icy theatre. That was my try-out before Vhruebert. I gave him some of Sudermann, Boker, and Ibsen. He raised his hand finally, and when I halted, he called in a bartender from the establishment adjoining, and commanded me to give something from Camille and Sapho. I would have murdered him if he had been fooling me after that. The bartender shivered in the cold.

"'What do you think of that, Mr. Vite-Apron?' Vhruebert inquired at length. He seemed to be warmer.

"'Hot stuff,' said the man. 'It makes your coppers sizzle.'

"The criticism delighted Vhruebert. 'Miss Gross, you make our goppers sizzle,' he exclaimed, and then ordered wine and told me to be at his studio to-morrow at eleven. That was the real winning," Selma Cross concluded. "To-night I put the crown on it."

Paula invariably felt the fling of emotions when Selma Cross was near. The latter seemed now to have found her perfect dream; certainly there was fresh coloring and poise in her words and actions. It was inspiriting for Paula to think of Selma Cross and Stephen Cabot having been accepted by the hard-headed Vhruebert—that such a pair could eat his bread and drink his wine with merry hearts. It was more than inspiriting for her to think of this vibrant heart covering and mothering the physically unfortunate. Paula asked, as only a woman could, the question uppermost in both minds.

"Love me?" Selma whispered. "I don't know, dear. I know we love to be together. I know that I love him. I know that he would not ask me to take for a husband—a broken vessel——"

"But you can make him know that—to you—he is not a broken vessel!... Oh, that would mean so little to me!"

"Yes, but I should have to tell him—of old Villiers—and the other!... Oh, God, he is white fire! He is not the kind who could understand that!... I thought I could do anything, I said, 'I am case-hardened. Nothing can make me suffer!... I will go my way,—and no man, no power, earthly or occult, can make me alter that way,' but Stephen Cabot has done it. I would rather win for him to-night, than be called the foremost living tragedienne.... I think he loves me, but there is the price I paid—and I didn't need to pay it, for I had already risen out of the depths. That was vanity. I needed no angel. I didn't care until I met Stephen Cabot!"

"I think—I think, if I were Stephen Cabot, I could forgive that," Paula said slowly. She wondered at herself for these words when she was alone, and the little place of books was no longer energized by the other's presence.

Selma started up from the lounge, stretched her great arm half across the room and clutched Paula's hand. There was a soft grateful glow in the big yellow eyes. "Do you know that means something—from a woman like you? Always I shall remember that—as a fine thing from my one fine woman. Mostly, they

have hated me—what you call—our sisters."

"You are a different woman—you're all brightened, since you met Stephen Cabot. I feel this," Paula declared.

"Even if all smoothed out here, there is still the old covenant in Kentucky," Selma said, after a moment, and sprang to her feet, shaking herself full-length.

"Won't you tell me about that, too?"

"Yes, but not now. I must go down-town. There is a dress-maker—and *we* breakfast together.... Root for me—for us, to-night—won't you, dear girl?"

"With all my heart."

They passed out through the hall together—just as the elevator-man tucked a letter under the door.... Alone, Paula read this Spring greeting from Quentin Charter:

> I look away this morning into the brilliant East. I think of you there—as glory waits. I feel the strength of a giant to battle through dragons of flesh and cataclysms of Nature.... Who knows what conflicts, what conflagrations, rage in the glowing distance—between you and me? Not I, but that I have strength—I do know.... By the golden glory of this wondrous Spring morning which spreads before my eyes a world of work and heroism blessed of the Most High God, I only ask to know that you are there—*that you are there*.... While eternity is yet young, we shall emerge out of time and distance; though it be from a world altered by great cosmic shattering—yet shall we emerge, serene man and woman.
>
> You are there in the brilliant East. In good time I shall go to you. Meanwhile I have your light and your song. The dull dim brute is gone from me, forever. Even that black prince of the blood, Passion, stands beyond the magnetic circle. With you *there*, I feel a divine right kingship, and all the black princes of the body are afar off, herding with the beasts. I tell you, since I have heard the Skylark sing—there is no death.

That day became a vivid memory. Charter reached the highest pinnacle of her mind—a man who could love and who could wait. The message from the West exalted her. Here, indeed, was one of the New Voices. All through the afternoon, out of the hushes of her mind, would rise this pæan from the West—sentence after sentence *for her*.... No, not for her alone. She saw him always in the midst of his people, illustrious among his people.... She saw him coming to her over mountains—again and again, she caught a glimpse of him, configured among the peaks, and striding toward her—yet between them was a valley torn with storm.... It came to her that there must be a prophecy in this message; that he would not be suffered to come to her easily as his letters came. Yet, the strength he had felt was hers, and those were hours of ecstasy—while the gray of the Spring afternoon thickened into dark. Only *The Thing* could have called her out that night; for once, when it was almost time to go, the storm lifted from the valley between them. She saw his path to her, just for an instant, and she longed to see it again....

Paula entered the theatre a moment before the curtain rose, but in the remaining seconds of light, discovered in the fourth aisle far to the right—"the finest, lowest head" and the long white face of Stephen Cabot. If a man's face may be called beautiful, his was—firm, delicate, poetic,—brilliant eyes, livid pallor. And the hand in which the thin cheek rested, while large and chalky-white, was slender as a girl's.... In the middle of the first act, a tall, elderly man shuffled down the aisle and sank into the chair in

front of Paula, where he sprawled, preparing to be bored. This was Felix Larch, one of the best known of the metropolitan critics, notorious as a play-killer.

The first-night crowd can be counted on. It meant nothing to Vhruebert that the house was packed. The venture was his up to the rise of the curtain. Paula was absorbed by the first two acts of the play, but did not feel herself fit to judge. She was too intensely interested in the career of Selma Cross; in the face of Stephen Cabot; in the attitudes of Felix Larch, who occasionally forgot to pose. It was all very big and intimate, but the bigger drama, up to the final curtain, was the battle for success against the blasé aspirations of the audience and the ultra-critical enemy personified in the man before her.

The small and excellent company was balanced to a crumb. Adequate rehearsals had finished the work. Then the lines were rich, forceful and flowing—strange with a poetic quality that "got across the footlights." Paula noted these exterior matters with relief. Unquestionably the audience forgot itself throughout the second act. Paula realized, with distaste, that her own critical sense was bristling for trouble. She had hoped to be as receptive to emotional enjoyment as she imagined the average play-goer to be. Though she failed signally in this, her sensibilities were in no way outraged, nor even irritated. On the contrary, she began to rise to the valor of the work and its performance. The acting of Selma Cross, though supreme in repression, was haunting, unforgettable. Felix Larch had twice disturbed her by taking his seat in the midst of the first and second acts. She had heard that he rarely sat out a whole performance, and took it therefore as a good omen when he returned, in quite a gentlemanly fashion, as the final curtain rose.

By some new mastery of style, Selma Cross had managed, almost throughout, to keep her profile to the audience. The last act was half gone, moreover, before the people realized that there were qualities in her voice, other than richness and flexibility. She had held them thus far with the theme, charging the massed consciousness of her audience with subtle passions. Now came the rising moments. Full into the light she turned her face.... She was quite alone with her tragedy. A gesture of the great bare arm, as the stage darkened, and she turned loose upon the men and women a perfect havoc of emptiness—in the shadows of which was manifesting a huge unfinished human. She made the people see how a mighty passion, suddenly bereft of its object, turns to devour the brain that held it. They saw the great, gray face of *The Thing* slowly rubbed out—saw the mind behind it, soften and run away into chaos. There was a whisper, horrible with exhaustion—a breast beaten in the gloom.

Felix Larch swore softly.... *The Thing* was laughing as the curtain crawled down over her—an easy, wind-blown, chattering laugh....

The critic grasped the low shoulders of a bald, thin-lipped acquaintance, exclaiming:

"Where did you get that diadem, Lucky One?"

Paula heard a hoarse voice, but the words of the reply were lost.

"Come over across the street for a minute. I want a stimulant and a talk with you," Felix Larch added, wriggling into his overcoat.

There was a low, husky laugh, and then plainly these words: "She makes your goppers sizzle—eh?... Wait until I tell her she has won and I'll go with you," added the queer little man, whom Paula knew now to be Vhruebert....

The latter passed along the emptied aisle toward Stephen Cabot, who had not left his seat. Paula noted

with a start that the playwright's head had dropped forward in a queer way. Vhruebert glanced at him, and grasped his shoulder. The old manager then cleared his throat—a sound which apparently had meaning for the nearest usher, who hurried forward to be dispatched for a doctor. It was very cleverly and quietly done.... Stephen Cabot, who could see more deeply than others into the art of the woman and the power of his own lines, and possibly deeper into the big result of this fine union of play and player—had fainted at the climacteric moment.... A physician now breasted his way through the crowd at the doors, and *The Thing* suddenly appeared in the nearest box and darted forward like a rush of wind. She gathered the insensible one in her arms and repeated his name low and swiftly.

"Yes," he murmured, opening his eyes at last.

They seemed alone.... Presently Stephen Cabot laughingly protested that he was quite well, and disappeared behind the scenes, assisted by the long, bare arm that had so recently hurled havoc over the throng. Paula waited for a few moments at the door until she was assured.

Driving home through the Park, she felt that she could not endure another emotion. For a long time she tossed restlessly in bed, too tired to sleep. A reacting depression had fallen upon her worn nerves. She could not forget the big structure of the day's joy, but substance had dropped from it.... The cold air sweeping through her sleeping-room seemed to come from desolate mountains. Lost entirely was her gladness of victory in the Selma Cross achievement. She called herself spiteful, ungrateful, and quite miserably at last sank into sleep....

She was conscious at length of the gray of morning, a stifling pressure in her lungs, and the effort to rouse herself. She felt the cold upon her face; yet the air seemed devitalized by some exhausting voltage, she had known before. There was a horrid jangle in her brain, as of two great forces battling to complete the circuit there. A face imploring from a garret-window, a youth in a lion's skin, a rock in the desert and a rock in the Park, the dim hotel parlor and the figure of yesterday among the mountain-peaks—so the images rushed past—until the tortured face of Bellingham (burning eyes in the midst of ghastly pallor), caught and held her mind still. From a room small as her own, and gray like her own with morning, he called to her: "Come to me.... Come to me, Paula Linster.... I have lived for you—oh, come to me!"

She sprang out of bed, and knelt. How long it was before she freed herself, Paula never knew. Indeed, she was not conscious of being actually awake, until she felt the bitter cold and hurried into the heated room beyond. She was physically wretched, but no longer obsessed.... She would not believe now that the beyond-devil had called again. It was all a dream, she told herself again and again—this rush of images and the summons from the enemy. Yesterday, she had been too happy; human bodies cannot endure so long such refining fire; to-day was the reaction and to-morrow her old strength and poise would come again. Quite bravely, she assured herself that she was glad to pay the price for the hours of yesterday. She called for the full series of morning papers, resolving to occupy her mind with the critical notices of the new play.

These were quite remarkable in the unanimity of their praise. The Cross-Cabot combination had won, indeed, but Paula could extract no buoyancy from the fact, nor did black coffee dispel the vague premonitive shadows which thickened in the background of her mind. The rapping of Selma Cross upon her door was hours earlier than ever before. She, too, had called for the morning papers. A first night is never finished until these are out. Paula did not feel equal to expressing all that the play had meant to her. It was with decided disinclination that she admitted her neighbor.

Selma Cross had not bathed, nor dressed her hair. She darted in noiselessly in furry slippers—a yellow

silk robe over her night-dress. Very silken and sensuous, the huge, laughing creature appeared as she sank upon the lounge and shaded her yellow eyes from the light. So perfect was her health, and so fresh her happiness, that an hour or two of sleep had not left her eyes heavy nor her skin pallid. There was an odor of sweet clover about her silks that Paula never sensed afterward without becoming violently ill. She knew she was wrong—that every fault was hers—but she could not bear the way her neighbor cuddled this morning in the fur of the couch-covering. Selma had brought in every morning newspaper issued and a thick bundle of telegrams besides. Paula told her, literally forcing the sentences, how splendidly the play and her own work had appealed to her. This task, which would have been a pure delight at another time, was adequately accomplished only after much effort now. It appeared that the actress scarcely heard what she was saying. The room was brightening and there was a grateful piping of steam in the heaters of the apartment.

"So glad you liked it, dear," Selma said briefly. "And isn't it great the way the papers treated it? Not one of them panned the play nor my work.... I say, it's queer when a thing you've dreamed of for years comes true at last—it's different from the way you've seen it come to others. I mean there's something unique and a fullness you never imagined. Oh, I don't know nor care what I'm drowning to say.... Please do look over these telegrams—*from everybody*! There's over a hundred! I had to come in here. I'd have roused you out of bed—if you hadn't been up. The telephone will be seething a little later—and I wanted this talk with you."

Big theatrical names were attached to the yellow messages. It is a custom for stages-folk to speed a new star through the first performance with a line of courage—wired. You are supposed to count your real friends in those who remember the formality. It is not well to be a day late....

"And did you notice how Felix Larch uncoiled?"

Paula looked up from the telegrams to explain how this critic had been the object of her contemplation the night before.

"He hasn't turned loose in that sort of praise this season," Selma Cross added. "His notice alone, dear, is enough to keep us running at the *Herriot* until June—and we'll open there again in the fall, past doubt."

Paula felt wicked in that she must enthuse artificially. She forced herself to remember that ordinarily she could have sprung with a merry heart into the very centre of the other's happiness.

"Listen, love," Selma resumed, ecstactically hugging her pillow, "I want to tell you things. I wanted to yesterday, but I had to hurry off. You've got so much, that you must have the rest. Besides, it's in my mind this morning, because it was the beginning of last night——"

"Yes, tell me," Paula said faintly, bringing her a cup of coffee.

"I was first smitten with the passion to act—a gawky girl of ten at a child's party," Selma began. "I was speaking a piece when the impulse came to turn loose. It may have been because I was so homely and straight-haired, or it may have been that I did the verses so differently from the ordinary routine of speaking pieces—anyway, a boy in the room laughed. Another boy immediately bored in upon the scoffer, downed his enemy and was endeavoring hopefully to kill him with bare hands, when I interfered. My champion and I walked home together and left a wailing and disordered company. That's the first brush.

"My home was Danube, Kentucky. They had a dramatic society there. Eight years after the child's party, this dramatic society gave *A Tribute to Art*. Where the piece came from is forgotten. How it got its name

never was known outside of the sorry brain that thrust it, deformed but palpitating, upon the world. Mrs. Fiske couldn't have made other than a stick of the heroine. The hero was larger timber, though too dead for vine leaves. But, I think I told you about the Big Sister—put there in blindness or by budding genius. There were possibilities in that character. Danube didn't know it, or it wouldn't have fallen to me. Indeed, I remember toward the end of the piece—a real moment of windy gloom and falling leaves, a black-windowed farmhouse on the left, the rest a desolate horizon—in such a moment the Big Sister plucks out her heart to show its running death.

"I had persisted in dramatic work, in and out of season, during those eight years, but it really was because the Big Sister didn't need to be beautiful that I got the part. I wove the lines tighter and sharpened the thing in rehearsals, until the rest of the cast became afraid, not that I would outshine them, but that I might disgrace the society on the night o' nights. You see, I was only just tolerated. Poor father, he wasn't accounted much in Danube, and there was a raft of us. Poor, dear man!

"Danube wasn't big enough to attract real shows, so the visiting drama gave expression to limited trains, trap-doors, blank cartridges and falling cliffs"—Selma Cross chuckled expansively at the memory—"and I plunged my fellow-townsmen into waters deeper and stormier than *Nobody's Claim* or *Shadows of a Great City*. Wasn't it monstrous?"

Paula inclined her head, but was not given time to answer.

"A spring night in Kentucky—hot, damp, starlit—shall I ever forget that terrible night of *A Tribute to Art*? All Danube somebodies were out to see the younger generation perpetuate the lofty culture of the place. Grandmothers were there, who played *East Lynne* on the same stage—before the raids of Wolfert and Morgan; and daddies who sat like deans, eyes dim, but artistic, you know—watched the young idea progress upon familiar paths.... The heroine did the best she could. I was a camel beside her—strode about her raging and caressing. You see how I could have spoiled *The Thing* last night—if I had let the passion flood through me like a torrent through a broken dam? That's what I did in Danube—and some full-throated baying as well. Oh, it is horrible to remember.

"The town felt itself brutalized, and justly. I had left a rampant thing upon every brain, and very naturally the impulse followed to squelch the perpetrator for all time. I don't blame Danube now. I had been bad; my lack of self-repression, scandalous. The part, as I had evolved it, was out of all proportion to the piece, to Danube, to amateur theatricals. I don't know if I struck a false note, but certainly I piled on the feeling.

"Can you imagine, Paula, that it was an instant of singular glory to me—that climax?... Poor Danube couldn't see that I was combustible fuel, freshly lit; that I was bound to burn with a steady flame when the pockets of gas were exploded.... My dazed people did not leave the hall at once. It was as if they had taken strong medicine and wanted to study the effect upon each other. I came out from behind at last, up the aisle, sensing disorder where I had expected praise, and was joined by my old champion, Calhoun Knox, who had whipped the scoffer at the child's party. He pressed my hand. We had always been friends. Passing around the edge of the crowd, I heard this sentence:

"'Some one—the police, if necessary—must prevent Selma Cross from making another such shocking display of herself!'

"It was a woman who spoke, and the man at her side laughed. I had no time nor thought to check Calhoun. He stepped up to the man beside the woman. 'Laugh like that again,' he said coldly, 'and I'll kill you!'

"It seemed to me that all Danube turned upon us. My face must have been mist-gray. I know I felt like falling. The woman's words had knifed me.

"'*Oh, you cat-minds!*' I flung at them. Calhoun Knox drew me out into the dark. I don't know how far out on the Lone Ridge Pike we walked, before it occurred to either of us to halt or speak," Selma Cross went on very slowly. "I think we walked nearly to the Knobs. The night had cleared. It was wonderfully still out there among the hemp-fields. I knew how he was pitying me, and told him I must go away.

"'I can't stand for you to go away, Selma,' Calhoun said. 'I want you to stay and be mine always. We always got along together. You are beautiful enough to me!'

"I guess it was hard for him to say it," the woman finished with a laugh, "I used to wish he hadn't put in that 'enough.' But that moment—it was what I needed. There was always something big and simple about Calhoun Knox. My hand darted to his shoulder and closed there like a mountaineer's, 'You deserve more of a woman than I am, Calhoun,' I said impetuously, 'but you can have me when I come to marry—but, God, that's far off. I like you, Calhoun. I'd fight for you to the death—as you fought for me to-night and long ago. I think I'd hate any woman who got you—but there's no wife in me to-night. I have failed to win Danube, Kentucky, but I'll win the world. I may be a burnt-out hag then, but I'll come back—when I have won the world—and you can have me and it.... Listen, Calhoun Knox, if ever a man means *husband* to me—you shall be the man, but to-night,' I ended with a flourish, and turned back home, 'I'm not a woman—just a devil at war with the world!'"

"But haven't you heard from him?" Paula asked, after a moment.

"Yes, he wrote and wrote. Calhoun Knox is the kind of stuff that remembers. The time came when I didn't have the heart to answer. I was afraid I'd ask him for money, or ask him to come to help me. Help out of Danube! I couldn't do that—better old Villiers.... But I mustn't lie to you. I went through the really hard part alone.... So Calhoun's letters were not answered, and maybe he has forgotten. Anyway, before I marry—he shall have his chance. Oh, I'll make it hard for him. I wouldn't open any letter from Danube now—but he shall have his chance——"

"What do you mean to do?"

"Why, we'll finish the season here—and Vhruebert has promised us a little run in the West during June. We touch Cincinnati. From there I'll take the Company down to Danube. I've got to win the world and Danube. After the play, I'll walk out on the Lone Ridge pike—among the hemp-fields—with Calhoun Knox——"

"But he may have married——"

"God, how I hope so! I shall wish him kingly happiness—and rush back to Stephen Cabot."

Paula could not be stirred by the story this morning. She missed, as never before, some big reality behind the loves of Selma Cross. There was too much of the sense of possession in her story—arm-possession. So readily, could she be transformed into the earthy female, fighting tooth and claw for her own. Paula could hardly comprehend in her present depression, what she had said yesterday about Stephen Cabot's capacity to forgive.... She was glad, when Selma Cross rose, yawned, stretched, and shook herself. The odor of sweet clover was heaviness in the room.... The long, bare arm darted over the reading-table and plucked forth the book Paula loved. The volume had not been hidden; there was no reason why she should not have done this, yet the action hurt the other like a drenching of icy water upon her naked heart.

"Ho-ho—Quentin Charter! So *A Damsel Came to Peter*?"

"I think—I hear your telephone,—Selma!" Paula managed to say, her voice dry, as if the words were cut from paper.

"Yes, yes, I must go, but here's another story. A rotten cad—but how he can write! I don't mean books—but letters!... He's the one I told you about—the Westerner—while the old man was in the South!"

The last was called from the hall. The heavy door slammed between them.

Paula could not stand—could not keep her mouth from dropping open. Her temples seemed to be cracking apart.... She saw herself in half-darkness—like *The Thing* last night—beating her breast in the gloom. She felt as if she must laugh—in that same wind-blown, chattering way.

# ELEVENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA IS SWEPT DEEP INTO A DESOLATE COUNTRY BY THE HIGH TIDE, BUT NOTES A QUICK CHANGE IN SELMA CROSS

Paula wrote a short letter to Quentin Charter in the afternoon, and did not begin to regret it until too late. It was not that she had said anything unwise or discordant—but that she had written at all.... Her heart felt dead. She had trusted her all to one—and her all was lost. A little white animal that had always been warm and petted, suddenly turned naked to face the reality of winter,—this was the first sense, and the paramount trouble was that she could not die quickly enough. The full realization was slow to come. Indeed, it was not until the night and the next day that she learned the awful reaches of suffering of which a desolated human mind is capable. It was like one of those historic tides which rise easily to the highest landmarks of the shore-dweller, and not till then begin to show their real fury, devastating vast fields heretofore virgin to the sea. Along many coasts and in many lives there is one, called The High Tide.... Paula felt that she could have coped with her sorrow, had this been a personal blow, but her faith in the race of men, the inspiration of her work, her dream of service—all were uprooted.

She did not pretend to deny that she had loved Quentin Charter—her first and loftiest dream of a mate, the heart's cry of all her womanhood. True, as man and woman, they had made no covenant, but to her (and had he not expressed the same in a score of ways?), there had been enacted a more wonderful adjustment, than any words could bring about. This was the havoc. She had lost more than a mere human lover. She dared now to say it, because, in losing, she perceived how great it had become—the passion was gone from her soul. Her place in the world was desolate; all her labors pointless. As a woman, she had needed his arms, less than an anchorage of faith in his nobility. And how her faith had rushed forth to that upper window across the States!

*Words*—the very word was poison to her. Writing—an emptiness, a treachery. Veritably, he had torn the pith out of all her loved books.... Bellingham had shown her what words meant—words that drew light about themselves, attracting a brilliance that blinded her; words that wrought devilishness in the cover of their white light—but Bellingham had not assailed her faith. This was the work of a man who had lifted her above the world, not one who called from beneath. Bellingham could not have crippled her faith like this—and left it to die.... Almost momentarily, came the thought of his letters—thoughts *from* these letters. They left her in a dark—that was madness....

And if they were false, what was the meaning of her exaltations? Night and morning she had looked into the West, sending him all the graces of her mind, all the secrets of her heart. He had told her of the strange power that had come to him, of the new happiness—how, as never before, he had felt radiations of splendid strength. She had not hurried him to her, but had read with ecstasy, believing that a tithe of his new power was her gift.... Words, desolate, damnable words.... "And I had thought to heal and lift New York," she exclaimed mockingly, looking down into the gray streets after the age-long night. "New York holds fast to her realities—the things she has found sure. It is well to be normal and like New York!"

The day after the door had shut upon Selma Cross, Paula was a betrayed spirit wandering alone in polar darkness. She had not slept, nor could she touch food. Twice the actress had rapped; repeatedly the telephone called—these hardly roused her. Letters were thrust under her door and lay untouched in the

hall. She was lying upon the lounge in the little room of books, as the darkness swiftly gathered that second day. All the meanings of her childhood, all the promises for fulfillment with the years, were lost. The only passion she knew was for the quick end of life—to be free from the world, and its Bellinghams.

"God, tell me," she murmured, and her voice sounded dry and strange in the dark, "what is this thing, Soul, which cries out for its Ideal—builds its mate from all things pure, from dreams that are cleansed in the sky; dreams that have not known the touch of any earthly thing—what is this Soul, that, now bereft, cries with Rachel, 'Death, let me in!...' Oh, Death, put me to sleep—put me to sleep!"

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Voices reached her from the hall:

"You can knock or ring, sir, if you like," the elevator-man was saying, "but I tell you Miss Linster is not there. She has not answered the 'phone, and there is one of the letters, sticking out from under the door, that I put there this morning, or yesterday afternoon."

"When did you see her last?" The voice was Reifferscheid's.

"Day before yesterday she was in and out. Miss Cross, the lady who lives in this other apartment, said she called on Miss Linster yesterday morning."

"The point is that she left no word—either with you or with us—before going away. We are very good friends of hers. I'll ring for luck——"

The bell rang long and loudly. Paula imagined the thick thumb pressed against it, and the big troubled face. She wanted to answer—but facing Reifferscheid was not in her that moment.... The elevator was called from below.

"No use," Reifferscheid said finally. "Here's a coin for your trouble. I'll call up the first thing in the morning——"

She heard the click of the elevator-door, and the quick whine of the car, sinking in the shaft. She recalled that she had not been at *The States* for four or five days. She had intended going down-town yesterday.... She thought long of Reifferscheid's genuine and changeless kindness, of his constant praise for sincerity anywhere and his battling for the preservation of ideals in all work. His faith in Charter recurred to her—and his frequently unerring judgments of men and women she had known. All about him was sturdy and wholesome—a substance, this, to hold fast.... Reifferscheid had come in the crisis. Paula fell asleep, thinking of snails and stickle-backs, flowers and Sister Annie, big trees and solid friends.

She awoke in a different world—at least, a world in which tea and toast and marmalade were reckonable. Her thoughts went bravely down into the depression for salvage; and a mind that can do this is not without hope. It was only eight. Reifferscheid had not yet 'phoned.... Charter would have her letter now, or soon—that letter written seven eternities ago in the first hysteria, while she could yet weep. She could not have written in the ice-cold silence of yesterday. She wished that she had not let him see that she could weep. When the tragedy had risen to high-tide in her soul—there had been no words for him. Would she ever write again?...

Her mind reverted now to the heart of things. In the first place, Selma Cross would not intentionally lie. She asked so little of men—and had asked less a few years ago—that to have her call one "cad" with an

adjective, was a characterscape, indeed. That she had intimately known Quentin Charter three years before, was unsettling in itself.... True, he made no pretensions to a righteous past. All his work suggested utter delvings into life. He had even hinted a background that was black-figured and restlessly stirring, but she had believed that he wrote these things in the same spirit which prompted the ascetic Thoreau to say, "I have never met a worse man than myself." She believed that the evils of sense were not so complicated, but that genius can fathom them without suffering their defilement. His whole present, as depicted in his letters, was a song—bright as his open prairies, and pure as the big lakes of his country.... Could she become reconciled to extended periods of physical abandonment in the Charter-past? Faintly her heart answered, but quickly, "Yes, if they are forever nameless...." "Specific abandonments?" Her mind pinned her heart to this, with the added sentence, "Is it fair for you not to hear what Selma Cross has to say—and what Quentin Charter may add?..."

The elevator-man was at the door with further letters. He did not ring, because it was so early. Softly, she went into the hall. There was an accumulation of mail upon the floor—two from *The States*; one from Charter.... This last was opened after a struggle. It must have been one of those just brought, for it was dated, the day before yesterday, and she usually received his letters the second morning. Indeed, this had been written on the very afternoon that she had penned her agony.

> I know I shall be sorry that I have permitted you to find me in a black mood like this, but I feel that I must tell you. A sense of isolation, altogether new, since first your singing came, flooded over me this afternoon. It is as though the invisible connections between us were deranged—as if there had been a storm and the wires were down. It began about noon, when the thought of the extreme youth of my soul, beside yours, began to oppress me. I perceived that my mind is imperiously active rather than humbly wise; that I am capable of using a few thoughts flashily, instead of being great-souled from rich and various ages. Ordinarily, I should be grateful for the gifts I have, and happy in the bright light from you—but this last seems turned away. Won't you let me hear at once, please?

She was not given long to ponder upon this strange proof of his inner responsiveness; yet the deep significance of it remained with her, and could not but restore in part a certain impressive meaning of their relation. Selma Cross called, and Reifferscheid 'phoned, as Paula was just leaving for down-town. It had been necessary, she explained, to the literary editor in his office, for her to make a sorry little pilgrimage during the past few days. She was very grateful it was over. Reifferscheid said abruptly that pilgrimages were nefarious when they made one look so white and trembly.

"The point is, you'd better make another to Staten Island," he added. "Nice rough passage in a biting wind, barren fields, naked woods, and all that. Besides, you must see my system of base-burners——"

"I'll just do that—when I catch up a little on my work," Paula said. "I'm actually yearning for it, but there are so many loose ends to tie up, that I couldn't adequately enjoy myself for a day or two. Really, I'm not at all ill. You haven't enough respect for my endurance, which is of a very good sort."

"Don't be too sure about that," Reifferscheid said quickly. "It's altogether too good to be hurt.... Do you realize you've never had your hat off in this office?"

"I hadn't thought of it," she said, studying him. Plainly by his bravado he wasn't quite sure of his ground.

"There ought to be legislation against people with hair the color of yours——" Reifferscheid regarded her a moment before he added, "wearing hats. You must come over to Staten—if for no other reason——"

"Oh, I begin to see perfectly now," Paula observed. "You want to add me to your system of base-burners."

He chuckled capaciously. "Early next week, then?"

"Yes, with delight"

He did not tell her of being worried to the point of travelling far up-town to ring the bell of her apartment. She could not like him less for this.... There was a telegram from Charter, when she reached home. In the next two hours, a thought came to Paula and was banished a score of times; yet with each recurrence it was more integrate and compelling. This was Saturday afternoon. Selma Cross returned from her matinée shortly before six and was alone. Paula met her in the hall, and followed into the other's apartment.

"I have just an hour, dear. Dimity has supper ready. Stay, won't you?"

"Yes," Paula forced herself to say. "I wanted to ask you about Quentin Charter. You were called away—just as you were speaking of him the other morning.... I have not met him, but his two recent books are very wonderful. I reviewed the second for *The States*. He thanked me in a letter which was open to answer."

Selma Cross stretched out her arms and laughed mirthlessly. "And so you two have been writing letters?" she observed. "I'm putting down a bet that his are rich—if he's interested."

Paula had steeled herself for this. There were matters which she must learn before making a decision which his telegram called for. Her mind held her inexorably to the work at hand, though her heart would have faltered in the thick cloud of misgivings.

"Yes, there is much in his letters—so much that I can't quite adjust him to the name you twice designated. Remember, you once before called him that—when I didn't know that you were speaking of Quentin Charter."

"I'll swear this much also," Selma Cross said savagely, "he has found your letters worth while."

"Is that to the point?"

"Why, yes Paula," the other replied, darting a queer look at her. "If I am to be held to a point—it is—because, as a writer, he uses what is of value. He makes women mad about him, and then goes back to his garret, and sobers up enough to write an essay or a story out of his recent first-hand studies in passion."

"You say he was drinking—when you knew him?"

"Enough to kill another man. It didn't seem to make his temperament play less magically. He was never silly or limp, either in mind or body, but he must have been burned to a cinder inside. He intimated that he didn't dare to go on exhibition any day before mid-afternoon."

Paula, very pale, bent forward and asked calmly as she could: "I wish you would tell me *just* what Quentin Charter did to make you think of him always—in connection with that name."

"On condition that you will recall occasionally that you have a plate before you—also supper, which won't stay hot." Selma Cross spoke with some tension, for she felt that the other was boring rather pointedly, and it was not her time of day for confessions. Still, the quality of her admiration for Paula Linster involved large good nature. ".... Extraordinary, as it may seem, my dear, Charter made me believe that he was passionately in love. I was playing Sarah Blixton in *Caller Herrin*,—my first success. It was a very effective minor part and an exceptionally good play. It took his eye—my work especially—and he

arranged to meet me. Felix Larch, by the way, took care of this formality for him. Incidentally, I didn't know Felix Larch, but my cue was greatly to be honored. Charter told me that Larch said I was peculiar for an actress and worth watching, because I had a brain.... The man, Charter, was irresistible in a wine-room. I say in a wine-room, not that his talk was of the sort you might expect there, but that he was drinking—and was at home nowhere else. You see, he has a working knowledge of every port in the world, and to me it seemed—of every book. Then, he has a sharp, swift, colorful way of expressing himself.... I told you, Villiers was away. I couldn't realize that it was merely a new type Charter found in me.... We were together when I wasn't at work. It was a wild and wonderful fortnight—to me. He used to send notes in the forenoon—things he thought of, when he couldn't sleep, he said. I knew he was getting himself braced in those early hours.... Then, one night at supper, he informed me that he was leaving for the West that night. He had only stopped in New York, on the way home from Asia, via Suez. I was horribly hurt, but there was nothing for me to say. He was really ill. The drink wouldn't bite that night, he said. We finished the supper like two corpses, Charter trying to make me believe he'd be back shortly. I haven't seen him since."

Paula began to breathe a bit more freely. "Didn't he write?"

"Yes, at first, but I saw at once he was forcing. Then he dictated an answer to one of mine—dictated a letter to me——" Selma Cross halted. The lids narrowed across her yellow eyes.

"He had said he loved you?" Paula asked with effort.

"By the way," Selma Cross retorted, "did you notice that word 'love' in either of his recent books—except as a generality?"

"Since you speak of it, I do recall he markedly avoided it," Paula said with consuming interest.

"No, he didn't use it to me. He said he never put it in a man's or woman's mouth in a story. Ah, but there are other words," she went on softly. "The man was a lover—beyond dreams—impassioned."

"About that dictated letter?" Paula urged hastily.

"Yes, I told him I didn't want any more that way. Then Villiers was back, and beckoning again. The last word I received was from Charter's stenographer. She said he was ill. Oh, I did hear afterward—that he was in a sanatorium. God knows, he must have landed there—if he kept up the pace he was going when I knew him."

In the moment of silence which followed, Paula was hoping with all her might—that this was the end.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking!" Selma said suddenly. "He has fascinated you, and you can't see that he's a rotten cad—from what I've said so far. A woman can never see the meanness of a man from another woman's experience with him. She forgives him for calling forth all another woman has—and then shaking her loose like a soiled bath-robe when one's tub is ready. But it's different when she's the discarded woman!... He was so deep, I can't believe he didn't know that episodes were new to me. Likely, he's had so many around the world, that he can't take them more seriously from the woman's angle—than from his own.... Quentin Charter was the first man to arouse all my dreams. Can't you see how it hurt when he turned out to be—well, that name you refuse to utter?"

"Yes, of course, yes, but you suggest more, Selma!"

"He used me for 'copy,' as they call it. His article on the 'acting of stage-folk after hours,' appeared in a

magazine a few weeks later. He's always a saint in his garret, you know. The article was filled with cutting cynicism about stage-matters, many of which he had discovered in the two weeks with me—and laughed over with his wine. I could have forgiven that, only he made me believe that there was not a thought apart from Selma Cross in his mind when we were together.... Oh, what's the use of me lying? I could have forgiven that, anyway!"

"What was it, you could not forgive?" Paula's face was bloodless.

"He told it all about—how easy I had proved in his hands!" the actress revealed with suppressed fury.

The other shrank back.

"That's where the expression comes in, Paula—the expression you hate. Drunk or sober—cad's the word. What a woman gives to a *man* is put in his inner vault forever. What she gives to a *cad*—is passed on to his friends."

Paula arose, tortured as if branded within. Here was a defection of character which an entire incarnation of purity could not make whole. It was true that in her heart, she had not been mortally stricken before; true, as Selma Cross had so bitterly declared, that a woman is not stayed from mating with a man because a sister has suffered at his hands.

"I have nothing to say about the word, if that is true." Paula spoke with difficulty, and in a hopeless tone.

"Please, eat some supper, dear——"

There was heart-break in the answer: "I cannot. I'm distressed, because I have spoiled yours.... You have answered everything readily—and it has hurt you.... I—feel—as—if—I—must—tell—you—why—I—asked—or I wouldn't have dared to force questions upon you. His letters made me think of him a great deal. When you picked up his book the other morning and said *that*—why, it was all I could stand for the time. His work is so high and brave—I can hardly understand how he could talk about a woman whose only fault was that she gave him what he desired. Are you sure he cannot prove that false?"

Selma Cross left her seat at the table and took Paula in her arms.

"How can he?" she whispered. "The old man knew all about us. One of his friends heard Charter talking about the easy virtue of stage women—that there were scarcely no exceptions! Charter hinted in his article that acting is but refined prostitution. Villiers said because I had a name for being square Charter had chosen to prove otherwise!... Then see how he dropped me—not a word in three years from my memorable lover! And Villiers knew about us—first and last!... I could murder that sort—and to think that his devil's gift has been working upon you——"

"You have told me quite enough, thank you." Paula interrupted in a lifeless voice. "I shall not see him."

Selma Cross held her off at arms' length to glance at her face. "You what?" she exclaimed.

"He is on the way to New York and will be at the *Granville* to-morrow afternoon, where he hopes to find a note saying he may call here to-morrow night. There shall be no note from me——"

"But did you write to him, Paula?" the actress asked strangely excited.

"Yes—a little after you left me the other morning. It was silly of me. Oh, but I did not tell him what I had heard—or who told me!... Finish your supper—you must go."

"And how did you learn of his coming?"

"He telegraphed me to-day. That's why I bothered you at your supper——"

"What a dramatic situation—if you decided to see him!" Selma Cross said intensely. "And to think—that to-morrow is Sunday night and I don't work!"

Paula felt brutalized by the change in the other's manner. "I have decided not to see him," she repeated, and left the apartment.

# TWELFTH CHAPTER

## CERTAIN ELEMENTS FOR THE CHARTER CRUCIBLE, AND HIS MOTHER'S PILGRIMAGE ACROSS THE SANDS ALONE TO MECCA

Charter had come a long way very swiftly in his search for realities. If it is required of man, at a certain stage of evolution, to possess a working knowledge of the majority of possible human experiences, in order to choose wisely between good and evil, Charter had, indeed, covered much ground in his thirty-three years. As a matter of fact, there were few degrees in the masonry of sensation, into which he had not been initiated. His was the name of a race of wild, sensual, physical types; a name still held high in old-world authority, and identified with men of heavy hunting, heavy dining and drinking. The Charters had always been admired for high temper and fair women. True, there was not a germ of the present Charter mental capacity in the whole race of such men commonly mated, but Quentin's father had married a woman with a marvellous endurance in prayer—that old, dull-looking formula for producing sons of strength. A silent woman, she was, a reverent woman, an angry woman, with the stuff of martyrdoms in her veins.

Indeed, in her father, John Quentin, reformer, there were stirring materials for memory. His it was to ride and preach, to excoriate evil and depict the good, with the blessing of a living God shining bright and directly upon it. A bracing figure, this Grandfather Quentin, an ethereal bloom at the top of a tough stalk of Irish peasantry. First, as a soldier in the British army he was heard of, a stripling with a girl's waist, a pigeon breast, and the soul's divinity breathing itself awake within. His was a poet's rapture at the sight of morning mists, wrestling with the daybreak over the mountains; and everywhere his regiment went, were left behind Quentin's songs—crude verses of a minor singer, never seeking permanence more than Homer; and everywhere, he set about to correct the degradations of men, absolutely unscared and grandly improvident. A fighter for simple loving-kindness in the heart of man, a worshiper of the bright fragment of truth vouchsafed to his eyes, a lover of children, a man who walked thrillingly with a personal God, and was so glorified and ignited by the spirit that, every day, he strode singing into battle. Such was John Quentin, and from him, a living part of his own strong soul, sprang the woman who mothered Quentin Charter, sprang pure from his dreams and meditations, and doubtless with his prayer for a great son, marked in the scroll of her soul.... For to her, bringing a man into the world meant more than a bleak passage of misery begun with passion and ended with pain.

Her single bearing of fruit was a solitary pilgrimage. From the hour of the conception, she drew apart with her own ideals, held herself aloof from fleshly things, almost as one without a body. Charter, the strongly-sexed, her merchant-husband, the laughing, scolding, joking gunner; admirable, even delightful, to Nineteenth Century men of hot dinners and stimulated nights—showed her all that a man must *not* be. Alone, she crossed the burning sands; cleansed her body and brain in the cool of evenings, expanded her soul with dreams projected far into the glistening purple heavens and whispered the psalms and poems which had fed the lyric hunger of her father.

It glorified her temples to brood by an open window upon the night-sky; to conceive even the garment's hem of that Inspiring Source, to Whom solar systems are but a glowworm swarm, and the soul of man mightier than them all. Sometimes she carried the concept farther, until it seemed as if her heart must cease to beat: that this perfecting fruit of the universe, the soul of man, must be imprisoned for a time in

the womb of woman; that the Supreme seemed content with this humble mystery, nor counted not æons spent, nor burnt-out suns, nor wasting myriads that devastate the habitable crusts—if only One smile back at Him at last; if only at last, on some chilling planet's rim, One Worthy Spirit lift His lustrous pinions and ascend out of chaos to the Father.

The spirit of her own father was nearer to her in this wonderful pilgrimage than her husband, to whom she was cold as Etruscan glasses in the deep-delved earth (yet filled with what fiery potential wine!). He called her Mistress Ice, brought every art, lure, and expression in the Charter evolution to bear upon her; yet, farther and farther into heights he could not dream, she fled with her forming babe. Many mysteries were cleared for her during this exalted period—though clouded later by the pangs of parturition.... Once, in the night, she had awakened with a sound in her room. At first she thought it was her husband, but she heard his breathing from the next chamber. At length before her window, shadowed against the faint light of the sky, appeared the head and shoulders of a man. He was less than ten feet from her, and she heard the rustle of his fingers over the dresser. For an instant she endured a horrible, stifling, feminine fright, but it was superseded at once by a fine assembling of faculties under the control of genuine courage. The words she whispered were quite new to her.

"I don't want to have to kill you," she said softly. "Put down what you have and go away—hurry."

The burglar fled quietly down the front stairs, and she heard the door shut behind him. Out of her trembling was soon evolved the consciousness of some great triumph, the nature of which she did not yet know. It was pure ecstasy that the realization brought. The courage which had steadied her through the crisis was not her own, but from the man's soul she bore! There was never any doubt after that, she was to bear a son.

There is a rather vital defect in her pursuing the way alone, even though a great transport filled the days and nights. The complete alienation of her husband was a fact. This estranged the boy from his father. Except as the sower, the latter had no part in the life-garden of Quentin Charter. The mother realized in later years that she might have ignored less and explained more. The fear of a lack of sympathy had given her a separateness which her whole married life afterward reflected. She had disdained even the minor feminine prerogative of acting. Her husband had a quick, accurate physical brain which, while it could not have accompanied nor supported in her sustained inspiration, might still have comprehended and laughingly admired. Instead, she had been as wholly apart from him as a memory. Often, in the great weariness of continued contemplation, her spirit had cried out for the sustenance which only a real mate could bring, the gifts of a kindred soul. Many times she asked: "Where is the undiscovered master of my heart?"

There was no one to replenish within her the mighty forces she expended to nurture the spiritual elements of her child. A lover of changeless chivalry might have given her a prophet, instead of a genius, pitifully enmeshed in fleshly complications. In her developed the concept (and the mark of it lived afterward with glowing power in the mind of her son)—the thrilling possibility of a union, in the supreme sense of the word, a Union of Two to form One....

Charter, the boy, inherited a sense of the importance of the "I." In his earlier years all things moved about the ego. By the time of his first letter to Paula Linster, the world had tested the Charter quality, but to judge by the years previous, more specifically by the decade bounded by his twentieth and thirtieth birthdays, it would have appeared that apart from endowing the young man with a fine and large brain-surface, the Charter elements had triumphed over the mother's meditations. To a very wise eye, acquainted with the psychic and material aspects of the case, the fact would have become plain that the hot, raw

blood of the Charters had to be cooled, aged, and refined, before the exalted spirit of the Quentins could manifest in this particular instrument. It would have been a very fascinating natural experiment had it not been for the fear that the boy's body would be destroyed instead of refined.

His mother's abhorrence for the gross animalism of drink, as she discovered it in her husband (though the tolerant world did not call him a drunkard), was by no means reflected intact in the boy's mind. A vast field of surface-tissue, however, was receptive to the subject. Quentin was early interested in the effects of alcohol, and entirely unafraid. He had the perversity to believe that many of his inclinations must be worn-out, instead of controlled. As for his ability to control anything about him, under the pressure of necessity, he had no doubt of this. Drink played upon him warmly. His young men and women associates found the stimulated Charter an absolutely new order of human enchantment—a young man lit with humor and wisdom, girded with chivalry, and a delight to the emotions. Indeed, it was through these that the young man's spirit for a space lost the helm. It was less for his fine physical attractions than for the play of his emotions that his intimates loved him. From his moods emanated what seemed to minds youthful as his own, all that was brave and true and tender. An evening of wine, and Charter dwelt in a house of dreams, to which came fine friendships, passionate amours, the truest of verses and the sweetest songs. Often he came to dwell in this house, calling it life—and his mother wept her nights away. Her husband was long dead, but she felt that something, named Charter, was battling formidably for the soul of her boy. She was grateful for his fine physique, grateful that his emotions were more delicately attuned than any of his father's breed, but she had not prayed for these. She knew the ghastly mockeries which later come to haunt these houses of dreams. Such was not her promise of fulfilment. She had not crossed the deserts and mountains alone to Mecca for a verse-maker—a bit of proud flesh for women to adore.... Charter, imperious with his stimulus, wise in his imagined worldliness, thought he laughed away his mother's fears.

"I am a clerk of the emotions," he once told her. "To depict them, I must feel them first."

And the yellow devil who built for him his house of dreams coarsened his desires as well, and wove a husk, fibrous, warm, and red, about his soul. The old flesh-mother, Earth, concentred upon him her subtlest currents of gravity; showed him her women in garments of crushed lilies; promised him her mysteries out of Egypt—how he should change the base metal of words into shining gold; sent unto him her flatterers calling him great, years before his time; calling him Emotion's Own Master and Action's Apostle; and her sirens lured him to the vine-clad cliffs with soft singing that caressed his senses. Because his splendid young body was aglow, he called it harmony—this wind wailing from the barrens.... As if harmony could come out of hell.

Old Mother Earth with her dead-souled moon—how she paints her devils with glory for the eye of a big-souled boy; painting dawns above her mountains of dirt, and sunsets upon her drowning depths of sea; painting scarlet the lips of insatiable women, and roses in the heart of her devouring wines—always painting! Look to Burns and Byron—who bravely sang her pictures—and sank.

There are vital matters of narrative in this decade of Charter's between twenty and thirty. Elements of the world-old conflict between the animal and the soul are never without human interest; but this is a history of a brighter conquest than any victory over the senses alone.... Even restless years of wandering are only suggested. Yet one cannot show how far into the heights Charter climbed, without lifting for a moment the shadow from the caverns, wherein he finally awoke, and wrestled with demons towards the single point of light—on the rising road.

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# THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

## "NO MAN CAN ENTER INTO A STRONG MAN'S HOUSE, AND SPOIL, HIS GOODS, EXCEPT HE WILL FIRST BIND THE STRONG MAN"

Charter had always been able to stop drinking when thoroughly disgusted with its effects, but his final abandonment, three years before the Skylark letters, had lasted long—up the Yangtse to the Gorges, back to Shanghai, and around the Straits and Mediterranean to New York, where he had met Selma Cross; indeed, for many weeks after he had reached his own city in the Mid-West. He had now fallen into the condition in which work was practically impossible. In the early stages, he had known brief but lightning passages of expression, when his hands moved with magical speed upon his machine, and his thoughts even faster, breaking in upon achievement three or four times in a half-hour to snatch his stimulant. Always in the midst of this sort of activity, he felt that his work was of the highest character. The swift running of his brain under the whip appeared record-breaking to the low vanity of a sot. It was with shame that he regarded his posted time-card, after such a race. Yet he had this to say of the whole work-drink matter: When at his brief best under stimulus, a condition of mind precarious to reach and never to be counted upon, the product balanced well with the ordinary output, the stuff that came in quantities from honest, healthy faculties. In a word, an occasional flashy peak standing forth from a streaky, rime-washed pile reckoned well with the easy levels of highway routine.

During his first days at home he would occupy entire forenoons in the endeavor to rouse himself to a pitch of work. Not infrequently upon awakening, he swallowed a pint of whiskey in order to retain four or five ounces. Toward mid-afternoon, still without having eaten, he would draw up his chair before the type-mill to wait, and only a finished curse would evolve from the burned and stricken surfaces of his brain. If, indeed, passable copy did come at last, Charter invariably banished restraint, drinking as frequently as the impulse came. Clumsiness of the fingers therefore frequently intervened just as his sluggish mind unfolded; and in the interval of calling his stenographer out of the regular hours, the poor brain babes, still-born, were fit only for burial.

Often, again (for he could not live decently with himself without working), he would spend the day in fussy preparation for a long, productive evening. The room was at a proper temperature; the buffet admirably stocked; pipes, cigars, and cigarettes at hand; his stenographer in her usual mood of delightful negation—when an irresistible impulse would seize his mind with the necessity of witnessing a certain drama, absolutely essential to inspiration. Again, with real work actually begun, his mind would bolt into the domains of correspondence, or some little lyric started a distracting hum far back in his mind. The neglected thing of importance would be lifted from the machine, and the letters or the verses put under weigh. In the case of the latter, he would often start brilliantly with a true subconscious ebullition—and cast the thing aside, never to be finished, at the first hitch in the rhyme or obscurity in thought. Then he would find himself apologizing slavishly for Asiatic fever to the woman who helped him—whose unspoken pity he sensed, as hardened arteries feel the coming storm. Alone, he would give way to furious hatred for himself and his degradation, and by the startling perversity of the drunken, hurry into a stupor to stifle remorse. Prospecting thus in the abysses, Charter discovered the outcroppings of dastardly little vanities and kindred nastiness which normally he could not have believed to exist in his composite or in the least worthy of his friends. A third trick drink played upon him when he was nicely prepared for a

night of work. The summons which he dared not disregard since it came now so irregularly—to dine—would sound imperiously in the midst of the first torture-wrung page, probably for the first time since the night before. In the actual illness, which followed partaking of the most delicate food, work was, of course, out of the question.

Finally, the horrors closed in upon his nights. The wreck that could not sleep was obsessed with passions, even perversions—how curiously untold are these abominations—until a place where the wreck lay seemed permeated with the foulest conceptions of the dark. What pirates board the unhelmed mind of the drunken to writhe and lust and despoil the alien decks—wingless, crawling abdomens, which, even in the shades, are but the ganglia of appetite!... A brand of realism, this, whose only excuse is that it carries the red lamps of peril.

At the end of months of swift and dreadful dissipation, Charter determined abruptly to stop his self-poisoning on the morning of his Thirtieth birthday. Coming to this decision within a week before the date, so confident was he of strength, that instead of making the end easy by graduating the doses in the intervening days, he dropped the bars of conduct altogether, and was put to bed unconscious late in the afternoon of the last. He awoke in the night, and slowly out of physical agony and mental horror came the realization that the hour of fighting-it-out-alone was upon him. He shuddered and tried to sleep, cursed himself for losing consciousness so early in the day without having prepared his mind for the ordeal. Suddenly he leaped out of bed, turned on the lights, and found his watch. With a cry of joy, he discovered that it was seven minutes before twelve. In the next seven minutes, he prepared himself largely from a quart bottle, and lay down again as the midnight-bells relayed over the city. Ordinarily, sleep would have come to him after such an application in the midst of the night, but the thought assumed dimensions that the bells *had* struck. He thought of his nights on the big, yellow river in China, and of the nearer nights in New York. There was a vague haunt about the latter—as of something neglected. He thought of the clean boy he had been, and of the scarred mental cripple he must be from now on.... In all its circling, his mind invariably paused at one station—the diminished quart bottle on the buffet. He arose at last, hot with irritation, poured the remaining liquor into the washbasin, and turned on the water to cleanse even the odor away. For a moment he felt easier, as if the Man stirred within him. Here he laughed at himself low and mockingly—for the Man was the whiskey he had drunk in the seven minutes before twelve.

Now the thought evolved to hasten the work of systemic cleansing, begun with denial. At the same time, he planned that this would occupy his mind until daylight. He prepared a hot tub, drinking hot water at the same time—glass after glass until he was as sensitive within as only a fresh-washed sore can be. Internally, the difference between hot and cold water is just the difference between pouring the same upon a greasy plate. The charred flaccid passages in due time were flushed free from its sustaining alcohol; and every exterior pore cratered with hot water and livened to the quick with a rough towel. Long before he had finished, the trembling was upon him, and he sweated with fear before the reaction that he had so ruthlessly challenged in washing the spirit from his veins.

Charter rubbed the steam from the bath-room window, shaded his eyes, and looked for the daylight which was not there. Stars still shone clear in the unwhitened distances. Why was he so eager for the dawn? It was the drunkard in him—always frightened and restless, even in sleep, *while buffets are closed*. This is so, even though a filled flask cools the fingers that grope under the pillow.... Any man who has ever walked the streets during the two great cycles of time between three and five in the morning, waiting for certain sinister doors to open, does not cease to shiver at the memory even in his finer years. It is not the discordant tyranny of nerves, nor the need of the body, pitiful and actual though it is, wherein the terror lies,—but living, walking with the consciousness that the devil is in power; that you are the debauched

instrument of his lust, putting away the sweet fragrant dawn for a place of cuspidors, dormant flies, sticky woods, where bleared, saturated messes of human flesh sneak in, even as you, to lick their love and their life.... That you have waited for this moment for hours—oh, God!—while the fair new day comes winging over mountains and lakes, bringing, cleansed from inter-stellar spaces, the purity of lilies, new mysteries of love, the ruddy light of roses and heroic hopes for clean men—that you should hide from this adoring light in a dim place of brutes, a place covered with the psychic stains of lust; that you should run from clean gutters to drink this hell-seepage.

He asked himself why he thirsted for light. If every door on his floor were a saloon, he would not have entered the nearest. And yet a summer dawn was due. Hours must have passed since midnight. He glanced into the medicine-case before turning off the lights in the bath-room. Alcohol was the base in many of the bottles; this thought incited fever in his brain.... He could hardly stand. A well-man would have been weakened by the processes of cleansing he had endured. The blackness, pressing against the outer window, became the form of his great trouble. "I wish the day would come," he said aloud. His voice frightened him. It was like a whimper from an insane ward. He hastened to escape from the place, now hateful.

The chill of the hall, as he emerged, struck into his flesh, a polar blast. Like an animal he scurried to the bed and crawled under cover, shaking convulsively. His watch ticked upon the bed-post. Presently he was burning—as if hot cloths were quickly being renewed upon his flesh. Yet instantaneously upon lifting the cover, the chill would seize him again. Finally he squirmed his head about until he could see his watch. Two-fifteen, it said. Manifestly, this was a lie. He had not wound the thing the night before, though its ticking filled the room. He recalled that when he was drinking, frequently he wound his watch a dozen times a day, or quite as frequently forgot it entirely. At all events, it was lying now. Thoughts of the whiskey he had poured out, of the drugs in the medicine-case, controlled. He needed a drink, and nothing but alcohol would do. This is the terrible thing. Without endangering one's heart, it is impossible to take enough morphine to deaden a whiskey reaction. A little only horrifies one's dreams. There is no bromide. He cried out for the poison he had washed away from his veins. This would have been a crutch for hours. In the normal course of bodily waste, he would not have been brought to this state of need in twenty-four hours. He felt the rapping of old familiar devils against his brain. He needed a drink.

The lights were turned on full in his room. The watch hanging above his head ticked incessant lies regarding the energy of passing time. He could lose himself in black gorges of agony, grope his way back to find that the minute hand had scarcely stirred.... He lay perfectly rigid until a wave, half of drowsiness, half of weakness, slowed-down the vibrations of his mind.... Somewhere in the underworld, he found a consciousness—a dank smell, the dimness of a cave; the wash of fins gliding in lazy curves across the black, sluggish water; an *eye*, green, steadfast, ashine like phosphor which is concentrated decay,—the eye of rapacity gorged. His nostrils filled with the foreign odor of menageries and aquariums. A brief hiatus now, in which objects altered. A great weight pressed against his chest, not to hurt, but to fill his consciousness with the thought of its cold crushing strength; the weight of a tree-trunk, the chill of stone, the soft texture of slimy flesh.... Full against him upon the rock, in his half-submerged cavern, lay the terror of all his obsessions—the crocodile. Savage incarnations were shaken out of his soul as he regarded this beast, a terror so great that his throat shut, his spine stiffened. Still as a dead tree, the creature pressed against him, bulging stomach, the narrow, yellow-brown head, moveless, raised from the rock. This was the armed abdomen he feared most—cruelty, patience, repletion—and the dirty-white of nether parts!... He heard the scream within him—before it broke from his throat.

Out of one of these, Charter emerged with a cry, wet with sweat as the cavern-floor from which he came

—to find that the minute-hand of his watch had not traversed the distance between two Roman numerals. He seized the time-piece and flung it across the room, lived an age of regret before it struck the walnut edge of his dresser and crashed to the floor.... The sounds of running-down fitted to words in his brain.

"*Tick—tick!... tick-tick-tick.*" A spring rattled a disordered plaint; then after a silence: "I served you—did my work well—very well—very well!..." Charter writhed, wordlessly imploring it to be still. It was not the value, but the sentient complaining of a thing abused. Faithful, and he had crushed it. He felt at last in the silence that his heart would stop if it ticked again; and as he waited, staring at it, his mind rushed off to a morning of boyhood and terrible cruelty.... He had been hunting at the edge of a half-cleared bit of timber. A fat gray squirrel raced across the dead leaves, fully sixty yards away—its mate following blithely. The leader gained the home-tree as Charter shot, crippling the second—the male. It was a long shot and a very good one, but the boy forgot that. The squirrel tried to climb the tree, but could not. It crawled about, uncoupled, among the roots, and answered the muffled chattering from the hole above—this, as the boy came up, his breast filling with the deadliest shame he had ever known. The squirrel told him all, and answered his mate besides. It was not a chatter for mercy. The little male was cross about it—bewildered, too, for its life-business was so important. The tortured boy dropped the butt of his gun upon the creature's head.... Now the tone changed—the flattened head would not die.... He had fled crying from the thing, which haunted him almost to madness. He *begged* now, as the old thoughts of that hour began to run about in the deep-worn groove of his mind....

Andas he had treated the squirrel, the watch—so he was treating his own life....

Again he was called to consciousness by some one uttering his name. He answered. The apartment echoed with the flat, unnatural cry of his voice; silence mocking him.... Then, in delusion, he would find himself hurrying across the yard, attracted by some psychic terror of warning. Finally, as he opened the stable-door, sounds of a panting struggle reached him from the box-stall where he kept his loved saddle-mare. Light showed him that she had broken through the flooring, and, frenziedly struggling to get her legs clear from the wreck, had torn the skin and flesh behind, from hoof to hock. He saw the yellow tendons and the gleaming white bone. She was half-up, half-down, the smoky look of torture and accusation in her brown eyes....

Finally came back his inexorable memories—one after another, his nights of degraded passion; the memory of brothels, where drunkenness had carried him; songs, words, laughter he had heard; pictures on the walls; combs, cards, cigarettes of the dressing-tables, low ceilings and noisome lamps; that individual something about each woman, and her especial perversion; peregrinations among the lusts of half the world's ports, where a man never gets so low that he cannot fall into a woman's arms. How they had clung to him and begged him to come back! His nostrils filled again with sickening perfumes that never could overpower the burnt odor of harlot's hair. Down upon him these horrors poured, until he was driven to the floor from the very foulness of the place wherein he lay, but a chill struck his heart and forced him back into the nest of sensual dreams....

Constantly he felt that dry direct need for cigarette inhalation—that nervous craving which makes a man curse viciously at the break of a match or its missing fire—but his heart responded instantly to the mild poisoning, a direct and awful pounding like the effect of cocaine upon the strong, and his sickness was intensified. So he would put the cigarette down, lest the aorta burst within him—only to light the pest again a moment later.

He could feel his liver, a hot turgid weight; even, mark its huge boundary upon the surface of his body. Back of his teeth, began the burning insatiable passage, collapsing for alcohol in every inch of its coiled

length; its tissues forming an articulate appeal in his brain: "You have filled us with burning for weeks and months, until we have come to rely upon the false fire. Take this away suddenly now and we must die. We cannot keep you warm, even alive, without more of the fuel which destroyed us. We do not want much—just enough to help us until we rebuild our own energy." And his brain reiterated a warning of its own. "I, too, am charred and helpless. The devils run in and out and over. I have no resistance. I shall open entirely to them—unless you strengthen me with fire. You are doing a very wicked and dangerous thing in stopping short like this. Deserted of me, you are destitute, indeed."

Charter felt his unshaven mouth. It was soft and fallen like an imbecile's. A man in hell does not curse himself. He saw himself giving. He felt that he was giving up life and its every hope, but the fear of madness, or driveling idiocy, was worse than this. He would drink for nerve to kill himself decently. The abject powerlessness of his will was the startling revelation. He had played with his will many times, used it to drink when its automatic action was to refrain. Always he had felt it to be unbreakable, until now. He was a yellow, cowering elemental, more hideous and pitiable than prohibition-orator ever depicted in his most dreadful scare-climax. There is no will when Nature turns loose her dogs of fear upon a sick and shattered spirit—no more will than in the crisis of pneumonia or typhoid.

He wrapped the bed-clothes about him and staggered to the medicine-case. There was no pure alcohol; no wood-alcohol luckily. However, a quart bottle of liver-tonic—turkey rhubarb, gum guaiac, and aloes, steeped in Holland gin. A teaspoonful before meals is the dose—for the spring of the year. An old family remedy, this,—one of the bitterest and most potent concoctions ever shaken in a bottle, a gold-brown devil that gagged full-length. The inconceivable organic need for alcohol worked strangely, since Charter's stomach retained a half-tumbler of this horrible dosage. Possibly, it could not have held straight whiskey at once. Internally cleansed, he, of course, responded immediately to the warmth. Plans for whiskey instantly awoke in his brain. He touched the button which connected with his man in the stable; then waited by a rear window until the other appeared.

"Bob," he called down shakily, "have you got any whiskey?"

"The half of a half-pint, sir."

"Bring it up quickly. Here—watch close—I'm tossing down my latch-key."

The key left his hand badly. He could have embraced Bob for finding it in the dark as he did. Charter then sat down—still with the bed-clothes wrapped about him—to wait for the other's step. He felt close to death in the silence.... Bob poured and held the single drink to his lips. Charter sat still, swallowing for a moment. Part remained within him.

"Now, Bob," he said, "run across the street to Dr. Whipple, and tell him I need some whiskey. Tell him he needn't come over—unless he wants to. I'm ill, and I've got to get out of here. Hurry back."

He dared not return to bed now—fear of dreams. To draw on parts of his clothing was an heroic achievement, but he could not bend forward to put on stockings or shoes without overturning his stomach, the lining of which was sore as a festering wound. His nostrils, with their continual suggestions, now tortured him with a certain half-cooked odor of his own inner tissues. The consciousness of having lost his will—that he was thirty years old, and shortly to be drunk again—became the nucleus for every flying storm-cloud in his brain. He knew what it would be now. He would drink regularly, fatten, redden, and betray every remnant of good left within him—more and more distended and brutalized—until his heart stopped or his liver hardened. And the great work? He tried to smile at this. Those who had looked for big things from his maturity had chosen a musty vessel. He would write of the loves of the flesh, and of

physical instincts—one of the common—with a spark of the old genius now and then to light up the havoc—that he might writhe! Yes, he would never get past that—the instantaneous flash of his real self to lift him where he belonged—so he would not forget to suffer—*when he fell back*.... "I'll break that little system," he muttered angrily, as to an enemy in the room, "I'll drink my nerve back and shoot my head off...." But bigger, infinitely more important, than any of these thoughts, was the straining of every sense for Bob's step in the hall—Bob with the whiskey from his never-failing friend, Dr. Whipple.... Yes, he had chosen whiskey to drive out the God-stuff from his soul. What a dull, cheap beast he was!

The day was breaking—a sweet summer morning. He wrapped the bed-clothes closer about him, and lifted the window higher. The nostrils that had brought him so much of squalor and horror now expanded to the new life of the day—vitality that stirred flowers and foliage, grasses and skies to beauty; the blessed morning winds, lit with faint glory. The East was a great, gray butterfly's wing, shot with quivering lines of mauve and gold. It shamed the hulk huddled at the window. Bob's foot on the stairs was the price of his brutality.

"Great mornin' for a ride. Beth is fit as a circus. I'd better get her ready, hadn't I, sir?"

"God, no!" Charter mumbled. "Help me on with my boots, and pour out a drink. Bring fresh water.... Did Doctor——"

"Didn't question me, sir. Brought what you wanted, and said he'd drop over to see you to-day."

Charter held his mouth for the proffered stimulant, and beckoned the other back.

"Let me sit still for a minute or two. Don't joggle about the room, Bob."

Revulsion quieted, the nausea passed. Bob finished dressing him, and Charter moved abroad. He took the flask with him, lest it be some forgotten holiday and the bars closed. A man who has had such a night as his is slavish for days before the fear of being *without*. He was pitifully weak, but the stimulus had lifted his mind out of the hells of obsession.

The morning wind had sweetened the streets. Lawns, hedges, vines, and all the greens seemed washed and preened to meet the sun. To one who has hived with demons, there is something so simple and sanative about the restoring night—the rest of healing and health. He could have wept at the virtue of simple goodness—so easy, so vainly sought amid the complications of vanity and desire. Well and clearly he saw now that mild good, undemonstrative, unaggressive good—seventy years of bovine plodding, sunning, grazing, drowsing—is a step toward the Top. What a travesty is genius when it is arraigned by an august morning; men who summon gods to their thinking, yet fail in the simple lessons that dogs and horses and cats have grasped! All the more foul and bestial are those whom gods have touched within; charged with treason of manhood by every good and perfect thing, when they cannot rise and meet the day with clean hearts. Charter would have given all his evolution for the simple decency of his man, Bob, or his mare, Beth.

The crowd of thoughts incensed him, so he hurried.... Dengler was sweeping out his bar. Screen-doors slammed open, and a volume of dust met the early caller as he was about to enter. Dengler didn't drink, and he was properly pleased with the morning. Lafe Schiel, who was scrubbing cuspidors for Dengler, drank. That's why he cleaned cuspidors. Dengler greeted his honored patron effusively.

"Suppose you've been working all night, Mr. Charter. You look a little roughed and tired. You work while we sleep—eh? That's the way with you writer-fellows. I've got a niece that writes. I told you about her.

She's ruined her eyes. She says she can get her best thoughts at night. You're all alike."

"Have a little touch, Lafe?" Charter asked, turning to the porter, who wiped his hands on his trousers and stepped forward gratefully.

Bottles were piled on the bar, still beer-stained from the night before. Dengler put forward clean, dripping glasses from below, and stroked the bottle with his palm, giving Lafe water, and inquiring of Charter what he would have "for a wash...." Dengler, so big-necked, healthy, and busy, talking about his breakfast and not corrupting his body with the stuff others paid for; Lafe Schiel in his last years—nothing but whiskey left—no thought, no compunction, no man, no soul, just a galvanic desire—these three in a tawdry little up-town bar at five in the morning—and he, Quentin Charter, with a splendid mare to ride, a mother to breakfast with, a world's work to do; he, Quentin Charter, in this diseased growth upon the world's gutter, in this accumulation of cells which taints all society.

Charter drank and glanced at the morning paper. The sheet still damp from the press reminded him of the night's toil in the office down-town (a veritable strife of work, while he had grovelled)—copy-makers, copy-readers, compositors, form-makers, and pressmen—he knew many of them—all fine fellows, decently resting now, deservedly resting. And the healthy little boys, cutting their sleep short, to deliver from door to door, even to Dengler's, this worthy product for the helpful dollar! Ah, God, the world was so sweet and pure in its worthier activities! God only asked that—not genius, just slow-leisured decency would pass with a blessing. God had eternity to build men, and genius which looked out upon a morning like this, from a warm tube of disease, was concentrated waste! Charter cleared his throat. Thoughts were pressing down upon him too swiftly again. He ordered another drink, and Dengler winked protestingly as he turned to call Lafe Schiel. The look said, "Don't buy him another, or I won't get my cuspidors cleaned."

So Charter felt that he was out of range and alignment everywhere, and the drink betrayed him, as it always does when in power. Not even in Lafe Scheil was the devil surer of his power this day. The whiskey did not brighten, but stimulated thought-terrors upon the subject of his own shattering.... Dengler found him interesting—this man so strangely honored by others; by certain others honored above politicians. He wondered now why the other so recklessly plied the whip.... The change that came was inevitable.

"There now, old fellow," Dengler remonstrated familiarly, "I don't like to turn you down, but you can't—honest, you can't—stand much more."

This was at seven-thirty. Charter straightened up, laughed, and started to say, "This is the first——"

But he reflected that once before this same thing had happened somewhere: he had been deemed too drunk to drink—somewhere before.... He wabbled in the memory, and mumbled something wide to the point of what he had meant to say, and jerked out.... That buttoning of his coat about his throat (on a brilliant summer morning); that walking out swiftly with set jaw and unseeing eyes, was but one of many landmarks to Dengler—landmarks on the down-grade. He had seen them all in his twenty years; seen the whole neighborhood change; seen clean boys redden, fatten, and thrive for a time; watched the abyss widen between young married pairs, his own liquors running in the bottom; seen men leave their best with him and take home their beast.... Dengler, yes, had seen many things worth telling and remembering. They all owed him at the last.... In some ways, this man, Charter, was different. He tried to remember who it was who first brought Charter in, and who that party of swell chaps were who, finding Charter there one day, had made a sort of hero out of him and tarried for hours.... The beer-man, in his leather apron, entered to spoil this musing. He put up the old square-face bottle, and served for a "chaser" a tall shell of

beer.... Even beer-men could not last. Dengler had seen many who for a year or two "chased" gin with beer at every call. There was Schultz, a year ago about this time. He'd been driving a wagon for a couple of years. Schultz had made too many stops before he reached Dengler's that day. A full half-barrel had crushed him to the pavement just outside the door.

"Put two halves in the basement, and leave me a dozen cases of pints," Dengler ordered.

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Charter was met at the door by his mother. She had expected to find him suffering from nerves, but clean. He had always kept his word, and she had waited for this day. She did not need to look at him twice, but put on her bonnet and left the house. She returned within an hour with three of Charter's men friends. Bob, whom she had left to take care of her son, reported that he had a terrible time. Charter, unable to find his six-shooter, had overturned the house and talked of conspiracy and robbery. He had fallen asleep within the last few minutes. Strange that the mother had thought to hide the six-shooter....

The men lifted him to a closed carriage. Charter was driven to a sanatorium. One of the friends undertook to stay with him for a day or two. Charter did not rightly realize where he was until evening. He appeared to take the news very quietly. Whiskey was allowed him when it was needed. Other patients in various states of convalescence offered assistance in many ways. That night, when the friend finally fell asleep in the chair at the bedside, Charter arose softly, went into a hall, *where a light was burning*, and plunged down into the dark—twenty-two brass-covered steps. His head broke the panel of the front door at the foot. His idea was the same which had made him hunt for his six-shooter the morning before. Besides the door, he broke his nose, his arm, and covered himself with bruises, but fell short, years yet unnumbered, from his intent. Under the care of experts after that, he was watched constantly, and given stimulus at gradually lengthening intervals—until he refused it himself on the seventh day. Three weeks later, still, he left the place, a man again, with one hundred and twenty needle punctures in the flesh of his unbroken arm.

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# FOURTEENTH CHAPTER

## THE SINGING OF THE SKYLARK CEASES ABRUPTLY; CHARTER HASTENS EAST TO FIND A QUEER MESSAGE AT *THE GRANVILLE*

Charter, three years after the foregoing descent into realism, was confessedly as happy a man as the Mid-West held. He accepted his serenity with a full knowledge of its excellence, and according to his present health and habits would not have been excited to find himself still among those present, had the curtain been lifted thirty or forty years away. In the year that followed the sanatorium experience, Charter in reality found himself. There were a few months in which work came slowly and was uncertain in quality. In his entire conception, nothing worse could happen than an abatement of mental activity, but he did not writhe, knowing that he richly deserved the perfect punishment. So slowly and deeply did physical care and spiritual awakening restore the forces of mind, however, that he did not realize an expansion of power until his first long work had received critical and popular acclaim, and he could see it, himself, in perspective. So he put off the last and toughest shackle of King Fear—the living death.

As for drinking, that had beaten him. He had no thought to re-challenge the champion. In learning that he could become abject, a creature of paralyzed will, he had no further curiosity. This much, however, he had required to be shown, and what a tender heart he had ever afterward for the Lafe Schiels of this world. There were other vivid animals, strong and agile, in his quiver of physical passions, but he discovered that these could not become red and rending without alcohol. Such were clubbed into submission accordingly. With alcohol, Charter could travel any one of seven sorry routes to the gutter; without it, none. This was his constant source of thankfulness—that he had refined his elements without abating their dynamics. The forces that might have proved so deadly in mastery, furnished a fine vitality under the lash.

All was sanative and open about him. Charter knew the ultimate dozen of the hundred and forty-four thousand rules for health—and made these his habit. The garret, so often spoken of, was the third-floor of his mother's mansion. Since he slept under the sky, his sleeping-room was also a solarium. There was a long, thickly-carpeted hall where he paced and smoked meditatively; a trophy-room and his study and library. Through books and lands, he had travelled as few men of his years, and always with an exploring mind. In far countries, his was an eye of quick familiarity; always he had been intensely a part of his present environ, whether Typee or Tibet. Then, the God-taught philosophers of Asia and Europe, and our own rousing young continent, were the well-beloved of his brain, so that he saw many things with eyes lit by their prophecies. As for money, he was wealthy, as Channing commends, rather than rich, and for this competence of late, he had made not a single concession, or subverted the least of his ideals, selling only the best of his thoughts, the expression of which polished the product and increased the capacity. He fitted nothing to the fancied needs of marketing. His mother began truly to live now, and her external nature manifested below in fine grains and finished services. Between the two, the old Charter formalities were observed. She was royal steel—this white-haired mother—and a cottage would have become baronial about her. Where she was, there lived order and silence and poise.

After this enumeration of felicitous details, one will conclude that this has to deal with a selfish man; yet his gruelling punishments must not be forgotten, nor the Quentin spirit. It is true that he had emerged miraculously unhurt from many dark explorations; but his appreciation of the innate treachery and

perversion of events was sound and keen. By no means did he challenge any complication which might strip him to quivering nakedness again. Rather his whole life breathed gratitude for the goodly days as they came, and glided into untormented nights. Next in importance to the discovery that his will could be beaten was this which the drinking temperament so hesitatingly grants—that there are thrilling hearts, brilliant minds, memorable conversations, and lovely impulses among men and women who will not tarry long over the wine. Simple as this seems, it was hard for a Charter to learn.... As he contemplated the full promise of his maturity, the thought often came—indeed, he expressed it in one of the Skylark letters—that this was but a period of rest and healing in which he was storing power for sterner and more subtle trials.

Such is an intimation of the mental and moral state of Quentin Charter in his thirty-fourth year, when he began to open the Skylark letters with more than curiosity.... He knew Reifferscheid, and admired him with the familiar enthusiasm of one who has read the editor's work intermittently for years. Charter, of course, was delighted with the review of his second book. It did not occur to him that it could have been written by other than the editor himself. Reifferscheid's reply to Charter's letter of thanks for the critique proved the key to the whole matter, since it gave the Westerner both focus and dimension for his visioning.

> I haven't read your book yet, old friend, but I'm going to shortly. Your fine letter has been turned over to Miss Paula Linster, a young woman who has been doing some reviews for me, of late; some of the most important, in which lot your book, of course, fell. The review which pleased you is only one of a hundred that has pleased me. Miss Linster is the last word—for fineness of mind. Incidentally, she is an illumination to look at, and I haven't the slightest doubt but that she sings and paints and plays quite as well as she writes book notices. If she liked a work of mine as well as she likes yours, I should start on a year's tramp, careless of returns from States yet to be heard from. The point that interests me is that you could do a great book about women, away off there in the Provinces—*and without knowing her*.
>
> You may wonder at this ebullition. Truth is, I'm backing down, firmly, forcefully, an inclination to do an essay on the subject. This is the first chance I ever had to express matters which have come forth from the Miraculous in the past year. All that she does has the ultimate feminine touch,—but I'll stop before I get my sleeves up again about this new order of being. Perhaps you deserve to know Miss Linster. You'd never be the same afterwards, so I'm not so sure whether I'd better negotiate it or not. I'm glad to see your book has left the post so perfectly. Always come to see me when in town. Yours solid, Reifferscheid.

And so she became the Skylark to Quentin Charter, because she was lost in the heights over by the seaboard, and only her singing came out of the blue.... There were fine feminine flashes in the letters Charter received, rare exquisite matters which can be given to the world, only through the one who inspires their warm delicacy and charm. The circuit was complete, and the voltage grew mightier and mightier.

There was a royal fall night, in which Charter's work came ill, because thoughts of her monopolized. Life seemed warm and splendid within him. He turned off the electric bulb above his head, and the moonlight burst in—a hunting moon, full and red as Mars. There was thrilling glory in the purple south, and a sense of the ineffable majesty of stellar management. He banished the night panorama with the electric button again, and wrote to the Skylark. This particular letter proved the kind which annihilates all sense of separateness, save the animal heaviness of miles, and makes this last, extra carking and pitiless for the time. It may have been that Charter would have hesitated to send this letter, had he read it over again in the cool of morning, but it happened that he yearned for a walk that night—and passed a mail-box, while

the witchery of the night still enchanted.

He felt dry, a bit burned the next morning, and saddled for a couple of hours, transferring the slight strain of nerves to his muscles. There was a note from the Skylark. She had found an old picture of his in a magazine and commented on it deliciously.... "I wonder if you think of me as I am—plain, *plain*?" she had asked.... No, he did not. Nor was it Reifferscheid's words to the contrary that prevented him. It is not in man to correlate plainness with a mystic attraction. She had never appeared to him as beautiful exactly, but fine, vivid, electric—a manifestation of eyes, lips, mind. All the poundage part of a human being was utterly vague in his concept of the Skylark.... Charter naturally lost his perspective and penetration in dealing with his own interlacing emotions.

The present letter thralled him. It was blithe in intent, but intuitively deep and keen. In a former letter, he had asked if there were not a strain of Irish in her lineage, so mercurial did her temperament play in all that she wrote. "No Irish," she had answered. "Dutch—straight Dutch. Always New York—always Dutch. I praise Providence for this 'monkey-wrench to hang upon my safety valve.'"

The "red moon" letter seemed to have caught her on the wing—at her highest and happiest—for she answered it in fine faith and lightness. Though it had carried her up and up; and though the singing came back from golden azure, yet she had not forgotten her humor. There was a suggestion of world-wisdom here, or was it world-wear?

For hours at a time, Charter was now stripped of his capacity for work. This is fine torment. Mostly there was a sheet in his type-mill, but his fingers only fluttered the space-bar. Let him begin a letter to the Skylark, however, and inspiration came, indeed. His thoughts marshalled like a perfect army then, and passed out from under his hand in flashing review.... He ate little, slept little, but his vitality was prodigious. A miracle matured in his breast. Had he not been more than usually stubborn, he would have granted long before, that he loved a woman for the first time in his life—and this a woman he had never seen.

By New Year's there was no dissembling. No day passed now in which he did not battle down an impulse to take a train for New York. This was real living. The destiny which had ruled him through so many dark wanderings, had waited until his soul was roused to dominance, before he was permitted to enter earth's true treasury. It was now that he remembered his past, and many a mile and many an hour he paced the dim hall—wrestling to be clean of it. This was a Soul which called. He did not dare to answer while a vestige of the old taints lingered.... He was seldom troubled that she might prove less inspiring than he pictured. He staked every reliance in that he had lived thirty-three years and encountered nothing comparable with this before. Passions, fascinations, infatuations, were long put behind; these were classed now in his mind beneath decent and frictionless partnerships between men and women.

The vision which inspired his romantic loneliness was all that Reifferscheid had suggested, and infinitely more which his own dreamings had supplied. She was an adult frankly challenged by the mysteries of creation; often shocked by its revelations, never above pity nor beneath humor, wonderful in her reality of culture, and wise above men with a woman's divination. But particularly, her ultimate meaning was for *him*; his quest, she was; his crown, to be. The world had preserved her singing, until he was ready; and though singing, she must ever feel the poverty of unfulfilment in her own breast, until he came. This was the stately form of the whole enchantment.

That there existed in creation a *completing* feminine for all his lonely and divided forces; that there lived one woman who could evenly ignite his body, brain, and spirit; that there was hidden in the splendid plan

of things, a Union of Two to form One; all this which had been drifting star-stuff before, became sparks now for new and terrific energies of mind; energies, however, which could be trained and directed only in her presence.

Man cannot live altogether in the altitudes. There were brief periods wherein Charter remembered the mad, drink-tainted trifler with lyrics and women. It had been a past, surely, filled with soul-murdering illusions. Those who had known him then, would have had to see him now to find faith. There had been letters about his recent books from men and women who had known him in the darker, less-spacious days. Failing to adjust this new and lusty spirit with the man they had known, they had tried to bring a laugh from him and answers to futile questions.

Charter could not forget that there come to the desk of a review-editor many personal notices concerning one whose work is being talked about. Indeed, such are handled as a matter of routine. The Skylark could not be expected always to wing aloof from these. All that was vague and indefinite did not matter; such might even be accounted as admirable specializations in life, but his acquaintance had been prodigious, and many clippings came home to him which he was not pleased to read.... Still, in the main, he relied upon Paula's solid sense of justice; and every fresh letter lifted him higher and higher. In his own letters, he did not fail to incorporate a buffer against indefinite revelations. Moreover, he had never ceased to call it wonderful—this capacity, of even the purest women, to lock the doors against the ugliest generalities of a man's past, and to reckon only with specific instances. It is here that the mother looks out through the eyes of a maid.

One April morning, he encountered a depression more formidable in vitality than ever before. Beth had just had her shoes set, and Charter tried to ride off the blue devil. He steadied his mount out of town, until she struck the ringing country road. The instant she felt her calks bite into the frosty turf, the mare flirted her head, took the bit, and became a veritable glowing battery of beautiful energy. Twelve miles he gave her, but the blue devil rode equally well and sat down again with Charter in his study. It was like a desert-island loneliness, this which beset him, as if his ship were sinking into the horizon; only it was a more poignant than physical agony—a sense of spiritual isolation.

This study had become to him the place of his dearest revelations of life. Here, of late especially, he had found refuge from every discord, and here invariably were opened the letters from the Skylark. The place of a man's work becomes a grand, quiet solace as he grows older, but calm and poise were wrested from the room to-day. He fought the depression with every trained faculty, but was whipped by it. Color and sunlight were gone from within; the zeal from future work, the warmth from every promise, the changing lustre from words, and the excellent energy of thought which impels their weaving. Twilight in mid-afternoon. He turned on the lights impatiently. Meaning and beauty were bereft from all his possessions, as buoyancy was gone from his own breast. There was something pitifully boyish in the trophies he had treasured—so much of the college cub, and the youth who refuses to permit his travels to be forgotten. He regarded his past work, as one grown out of it, regretting that it had ever attracted the materials of permanence. Smugness in his teachings; cold intellectuality brazen in all his attainments; everything about him suddenly become sinister from the old life!... He looked into the East—his country of singing, of roses, cedars, and fountains—but the gray-black twilight was a damnable intervention.... It was in this spirit, or lack of it, that he wrote the letter which revealed to Paula his inner responsiveness, as she was tossed in The High Tide.

The letter which she had written almost at the same time, reached him on the second morning thereafter; and his suffering in the interval he could only liken to one of the old sieges of reaction after dissipation. The fine, angular writing, which he never regarded without a sense of the darting swiftness of her hand;

the thin, tough sheets that crinkled, came like bounty to the starving; yet he was deathly afraid.

> Something of the long ago has just come to me—to my very rooms. It would not have been believed, had I sought it. I might have endured it, if *you* had told me. It is dreadful to play with illusions. Oh, why must we keep our gods so far away—lest we lose them? Had I waited longer, I could not have written. It seems now that you have a right to know—before my pride dries up all expression. You are not to blame—except that you were very reckless in adding happinesses one upon the other. It was all quite ridiculous. I trusted my intuition—allowed myself to think of a table spread in the wilderness of the world with you. My intuitions! I used to be so proud of them. I see now that sometimes they're quite as fallible as plain thinking, after all.
>
> I always felt you alone. I seemed to know your voice after centuries. Yes, I am sure it was that which affected me so deeply in your work and made me answer your letters with such faith. *I knew your voice*. I thought of you alone—your spirit hungry.... It makes one feel so common, when one's intuitions betray this way. The heart for writing further is cold and heavy. Once, down the wind, came a fragrant pollen, but the blowing summer is gone from my garden....

No signature.

She had not penned a skylark with a folded or broken wing. Charter sat thinking for several moments, but only because he knew there was ample time to catch the noon-train for New York. That he should do this had formed in mind before he had read five lines of the letter. This thought of action steadied him; and the proof that he had sensed her agony and reflected it throughout the past forty-eight hours made the call of the East instant and irresistible. It did not come to him at first that he was now entering the greater conflict, for which Nature had trained him in tranquillity and fed his soul unto replenishment during three years.... His first quick thought came out of old habits of mind: *An hour with her, and her heart will be healed!* Here was the old trifler. He suffered for this instant faltering of the brighter manhood. Man's fineness is not accentuated by the fact that a woman sacrifices her power within him, when she falls to pleading a little. Charter could have torn out the old mental fibres upon which played the thought of her swiftly renewed happiness by his presence.

The reality of her suffering slowly penetrated his mind. He perceived that she could not express the actuality; that her thoughts had winged ineffectually about the immovable disorder—like bees over the clumsy corpse of a rodent in the hive. It was not to be lifted, and the inspiration hermetically to seal the monster and resume activities as well as possible, had not yet come.... "I might have endured it, if *you* had told me!"

He wasted no energy trying to think exactly what had happened. It was all he could bear to grasp the full meaning that this inspiring creature who had soared and sung so long, was crushed and cold. Every sentence in her letter revealed the bruise of her heart, the absence of spontaneity.... She was as different from other women he had known—the women who had been healed by his word or his caress—as he was different in this attraction. He telegraphed that he was coming, begged that she would see him the following evening, and instructed her to leave word for him at the *Granville*. Then he packed his bag and told his mother. She laughed quietly.

"On the spur of the moment as usual, Quentin.... It will be good for you. You've been home a long time. Are you going—beyond New York?"

"I haven't a thought now of going farther, Mother," he answered....

Again twilight in mid-afternoon—as he crossed the river from Jersey. It had been a day and night to age the soul—with its inexorable stretch of material miles. New York had a different look, a different atmosphere, than ever before. Huge and full of horrible grinding; sick with work and sick with damp—but above this, the magic of her presence was over all. It was only four in the afternoon, and he had not asked to see her until seven. Might she not have watched for him or be near him now? She would know him from his pictures, and observe him as a stranger, but he had only his visions.

On the Cross-town to the *Granville*, emotions played upon him of a kind that he could not have understood in another man a few months before. Moreover, he felt himself giving way before the vibrations of the big city. Harried and shrunken, he was, like a youth from the fields; and the voice he had raised so valiantly from afar against this tremendous massed soul, seemed now but the clamor of a boy in the safety of his own door. To and fro along his inflamed nerves crept the direct need of a drink and a cigarette—old wolves forever on the watch for the spent and the wounded.... Actually terrorized, he was, at the thought she might not see him; that there might be no note for him at the *Granville*. What a voyage in the dark.

For the time, his excellent moral balance had deserted shamelessly. An adequate perception of his own position and attitude in the eyes of high womanhood had unhelmed him, quite properly. Nature had finally found a hot retort which just fitted his case—and in he went.... No purely physical ardor could have called Quentin Charter out of his study and far across the continent. Lesser loves than this have plunged nations into war, and broken the main trend of history into pregnant digressions. The more penetratingly one regards the man in his present consuming, the more formidable becomes the conviction that the human cosmos in the beginning was cleft in twain: one to grope to the light, a male; the other to suffer the way, her burden, the curse of Eve. When these mates of fire fulfil their divided destinies and sweep into the zone of mutual attraction, woe to the satellites and asteroids in the inevitable cataclysm which follows.... Yet it is out of such solar throes that gods and prophets are born.... He gave his bag to a boy at the *Granville* entrance, and stepped forward to the desk, clearing his throat and repeating his question.... The clerk rushed through the letters in "C."

"No, Mr. Charter,—not a letter, but wait just a moment; there was a telephone-call."

A chill had swept through him as the man spoke. It had not occurred to him that the word would come in other than her handwriting. This was an unsigned note, written by the telephone-girl:

> Mr. Quentin Charter: A lady who says you will understand, 'phoned that she will be home at seven to-night—if you think it wise and kind to come to her.

The message was dated at two P. M. Both chill and burning were in the words. It was strangely unlike her; yet in passing through the operator's mind, it might have become routine. The word "kind" was a torturing curb. It placed him on ugly quaking ground. How weak, how ancient and commonplace, is the human lord after all, when in doubt regarding his lady's reception of him! Where is his valor now, his taking of cities, his smiling deaths for honor? Most of all times, he is man, the male; not man, the soul. Half-way out on the surface-car, he discovered one of the big "Selma Cross" bill-boards. It was intimate, startling, an evil omen—great black letters out of the deathless past.... He stood on the fourth floor of the *Zoroaster*. The elevator-man had shown him a certain door which was slightly ajar. He was ill, breathless, and his heart sank strangely with the lights in the shaft from the descending car.... He tapped on the designated door, and a deep melodious voice, instantly identified with ancient abandonments, called gently:

"Come in!"

# FIFTEENTH CHAPTER

## QUENTIN CHARTER AND SELMA CROSS JOIN ISSUE ON A NEW BATTLE-GROUND, EACH LEAVING THE FIELD WITH OPEN WOUNDS

Charter was seized with vertigo. It was his sorry thought that the old scar-tissues, however bravely they sufficed in the days of easy-going, could not endure a crux like this. But he was wrong. It was the shock to his spirit, which made of Selma Cross a giantess of vague outlines in a room filled with swimming objects. Need for the woman of his visions had culminated in the outer hall. In the substitution there was an inner wrench, which to one of Charter's intense concentration was like a stroke; and then, too, the horrible outburst of energy in adjusting the Skylark spirit to the eminent flesh of this old plaything of his, left him drained. He steadied himself into the music-room, and sank into a deep chair, where his heart pumped furiously, but light and empty, as if it could not grip the blood locked in his veins.

He sat in a sort of trance, glimpses of many thoughts running through his brain. He deserved punishment. That was all very well, but something was wrong here. The premonition became a reality in his consciousness that he had entered upon a great desert; that he was to endure again one of his terrible thirsts; not a throat-thirst alone, but a soul-thirst. In the atmosphere of the woman, in the very odor of the room, he felt the old impassioned lyric-maker crush back into the dominance of his mind with all the impish exultation of that lower self. Pride asserted itself now. What an idiot passage in the career of a rising writer! He should always remember with shame this coming to New York—a youthful Marius in whose veins was injected mid-summer madness—coming to this city (where dollar-work is king and plumaged-woman queen) with an abortive conception from garret dreams.... A strong white light fell upon the leather cover of her reading-table, but their faces were in shadow, like the hundred actor faces in photograph upon the wall and mantel. Selma Cross was studying him keenly. The emptiness of it all was so pervading—as his blood began to move again—that he laughed aloud.

"Do you know," Selma Cross said softly, "I thought at first you had been drinking too much. I hardly knew you otherwise, remember. Shall I tell you what added thought came to me, as you crossed the floor so unsteadily—looking so white?"

"Locomotor ataxia, I suppose. I hear it is getting quite the thing for middle-generation New Yorkers.... I expected to see you a little later in your new play, but not here—to-night——"

"That is what I thought—that incurable thing. You seem floored. I didn't know a woman could do that. In the old days, you were adaptable—if nothing else."

His collar felt tight, and he stretched it out, needing more air in his lungs and more blood in his brain. It was clear enough to him now how Skylark had been stricken. The real devastation was that she belonged to this sort of thing at all; that she could consent to this trick, this trap. It was all so different from the consummate fineness, the pervading delicacy, of all Skylark thoughts. Having consented to the trick, *might she not be listening*?... He did not mind her hearing; indeed, he might say things which were needful for her to know—but that she should listen! He writhed. This was not his Skylark at all.... It was hardly Charter's way now to plunge into the centre of things. There was a feline elegance in the manner and movement of Selma Cross; she seemed so delightfully at ease, that he was willing to make it a bit harder for her.

"I suppose I was more adaptable formerly," he said slowly. "It is something, however, suddenly to encounter an old friend who has made good so fearfully and tremendously in the past week. Of course, I had read all about it. Still, I repeat it was an experience to encounter your stardom actually on the boards; and more of an experience to find you here. I'm really very glad that you secured the one great vehicle. As for your work—few know its quality better than I."

She studied him long, her eyes glowing behind the narrowed lids. "As for that, you've been biting the flaky top-crust, too," she said finally. "I never doubted what you could do in your game, but I confess I feared that whiskey would beat you to it.... Do you know you are wonderfully changed—so white, so lean? Your work has come to me since you went away; what else have you been doing?—I mean, to change you so finely."

"Garret."

Her brow clouded at the word. It was as if she had expected to laugh at him long before this. "Did any woman ever tell you that you're rather a mean sort, Quentin Charter?"

"Doubtless I have deserved it," he answered. "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking of your garret—where you gather your victims for vivisection."

"That's put very clearly."

"Do you think this is big-man stuff?"

"My case is rather an ugly one to look back upon, truly," Charter granted. "For a long time, it appeared to me that I must learn things at first-hand. With first-water talents, perhaps this is not necessary."

"A woman finally brings a man face to face," she said with sudden scorn, "and he becomes limp, agrees with everything she says.... 'Yes, it is quite true, I was an awful beast. What else, dear?'—ugh!"

Charter smiled. She was very swift and deft in supplying a man's evil motives. It is a terrible feminine misfortune—this gift of imputing—and happy women do not possess it. Few men, incidentally, are deep enough to avail themselves of all the crafts and cunnings with which they may be accredited.

"I have no intention of destroying the slightest gratification you may draw, Selma, from questioning me," he said. "If I appear limp, please remember that I'm a bit in the dark as yet. I came to this floor on a different errand. I had this errand in mind—not self-examination. However, I'll attend now in all sincerity. You were speaking of my victims for vivisection in the garret."

She appeared not to trust him in the least. "I've always wanted to know if you believed—what an apprentice I really was in love—give-and-take—when you came?"

"That was easily believed, Selma——"

"Then you grant I wasn't acting—when I gave myself to you?"

"I didn't think you were acting——"

"Then *you* were acting, because when the time came—you dropped me quite as easily as you would drop a street-cur you had been pleased to feed."

"Just there you are a bit in error. I was furiously interested, and certainly not acting altogether, until——"

"Enter—the wine," she said with a sneer.

"Yes, if you will." He was irritated for a second, having meant to say something entirely different.

"A woman so loves to hear that a man's passion for her depends upon his drinking!"

"I have always been very fond of and grateful to you. It was the whole life that the drinking carried me into—that I had such horror for when, when I became well."

"You got well very suddenly after you left me," she told him. Her huge face was livid, and her lips dry.

"On the contrary, I was a long time ill." Her temper chilled his attempts at sincerity.

"It looked so from those first few—letters, is rather a dignified word."

"I say it with shame, I was practically unable to write. I was burnt out when I left here. I had been to Asia—gone from home seven months—and the returning fool permitted the bars to welcome him——"

"You seized a moment to dictate a letter——"

"Silence would have been far better," he said. "I see that now. My only idea was to let you hear. Writing myself was out of the question by that time."

"You wrote an article about stage people—with all the loftiness of an anæmic priest."

"That was written before I left here—written and delivered——"

"All the worse, that you could write such an article—while you were spending so much time with me."

"I have never belittled what you gave me, Selma. I could praise you, without admiring the stage. You are amazingly different. I think that's why New York is talking about you to-night. I had made many trips to New York and knew many stage people, before I met you. If you had belonged to the type familiar to me, I should have needed a stronger stimulus than drink to force an interest. Had there been others like you—had I even encountered 'five holy ones in the city'—I should not have written that stage article, or others before it."

"You were one with the Broadway Glowworms, Quentin Charter. Few of them drank so steadily as you."

"I have already told you that for a long time I was an unutterable fool. Until three years ago, I did not begin to know—the breath of life."

Selma Cross arose and paced the room, stretching out her great arms from time to time as she walked. "You're getting back your glibness," she exclaimed, "your quick little sentences which fit in so nicely! Ah, I know them well, as other women are learning them. But I have things which you cannot answer so easily—you of the garret penances.... You find a starved woman of thirty—play with her for a fortnight, showing her everything that she can desire, and seeming to have no thought, but of her. I discover that there was not a moment in which you were so ardent that you forgot to be an analyst. I forgive that, as you might forgive things in my day's work. You put on your gray garret-garb, and forget the hearts of my people, to uncover their weaknesses before the world—you, so recently one of us, and none more drunk or drained with the dawn—than you! Such preaching is not good to the nostrils, but I forgive that. You are sick, and even the drink won't warm you, so you leave me at a moment's notice——"

"There was another reason."

"Hear me out, first," she commanded.... "To you, it is just, 'Adios, my dear'; to me, it is an uprooting—oh, I don't mind telling you. I was overturned in that furrow, left naked for the long burning day, but I remembered my work—the work you despise! I, who had reason to know how noble your pen can be, forgave even those first paltry letters, filled with excuses such as a cheap clerk might write. I forgave the dictation, because it said you were ill—forgave the silences.... But when you came to New York six months afterwards, and did not so much as 'phone or send me a card of greeting—Selma called in her silly tears."

"It was vile ingratitude," he said earnestly. "That's where my big fault lay. I wonder if you would try to understand the only palliation. You were strangely generous and wonderful in your ways. I did not cease to think of that. Personally, you are far above the things I came to abhor. No one understands but the victim, what alcohol does to a man when it gets him down. I tried to kill myself. I became convalescent literally by force. Slowly approaching the normal again, I was glad enough to live, but the horrors never leave the mind entirely. Everything connected with the old life filled me with shuddering fear. I tell you no one hates alcohol like a drunkard fresh in his reform."

"But I did not make you drink," she said impatiently. "I'm not a drink-loving woman."

Charter's face flushed. The interview was becoming a farce. It had been agony for him to make this confession. She would not see that he realized his ingratitude; that it was his derangement caused by indulging low propensities which made him identify her with the days of evil.

"I know that very well, Selma Cross," he said wearily, "but the stage is a part of that old life, that sick night-life that runs eternally around the belt-line."

She hated him for reverting to this point. Holding fast to what she still had to say, the actress picked up a broken thread. "You said there was another reason why you left New York so suddenly."

Charter expected now to learn if any one were listening. He was cold with the thought of the interview being weighed in the balances of a third mind.

"You've made a big point of my going away," he essayed. "The other reason is not a pretty matter, and doubtless you will call any repugnance of mine an affectation——"

"Repugnance—what do you mean?" she asked savagely, yet she was afraid, afraid of his cool tongue. "I never lied to you."

"That may be true. I'm not curious for evidence to the contrary. The day before I left for the West, a friend told me that you and I were being watched; that all our movements were known. I didn't believe it; could not see the sense—until it was proved that same night by the devious walk we took.... You doubtless remember the face of that young night-bird whom we once laughed about. We thought it just one of those coincidences which frequently occur—a certain face bobbing up everywhere for a number of days. I assured myself that night that you knew nothing of this remarkable outside interest in our affairs."

Selma Cross, with swift stealth, disappeared into the apartment-hall and closed the outer door; then returned, facing him. Her yellow eyes were wide open, filled with a misty, tortured look. To Charter the place and the woman had become haggard with emptiness. He missed the occasional click of the elevator in the outer-hall, for it had seemed to keep him in touch with the world's activities. The old carnal magnetism of Selma Cross stirred not a tissue in him now; the odor of her garments which once roused him, was forbidding. He had not the strength to believe that the door had been shut for any other reason

than to prevent Skylark from hearing. The actress had not minded how their voices carried, so long as *he* was being arraigned.... The air was devitalized. It was as if they were dying of heart-break—without a sound.... It had been so wonderful—this thought of finding his mate after the æons, his completion—a woman beautiful with soul-age and spiritual light....

Selma Cross was speaking. Charter stirred from his great trouble. She was changed, no longer the clever mistress of a dramatic hour.... Each was so burdened with a personal tragedy that pity for the other was slow to warm between them.

"Do you mean that old Villiers paid the night-bird to watch us—to learn where we went, and possibly what we said?" she was saying hoarsely. Selma Cross felt already that her cad was exploded.

"Yes, and that was unpleasant," Charter told her. "I didn't like the feel of that procurer's eyes, but what revolted me was Villiers himself. I took pains to learn his name the next day—that last day. There isn't a more unclean human package in New York.... It was so unlike you. I couldn't adjust the two. I couldn't be where he had been. I was sick with my own degradation. I went back to my garret."

Selma Cross was crippled; she saw there was no lie in this. At what a price had been bought the restoration of faith for Paula Linster!... She had heard after their compact about Villiers' early days. There had been times when her fingers itched to tighten upon his scrawny throat. To have Quentin Charter hear this record was fire in her veins; it embraced the added horror that Stephen Cabot might also hear.... There was nothing further with which to charge the man before her. She nursed her wrath to keep from crying out.

"Was it a man's way to give me no chance to explain?" she demanded.

"Broadway knew Villiers."

"I did not!"

"Anyway, I couldn't get it straight in my mind, then," Charter said hastily. "You're no vulgar woman, mad after colors and dollars. You love your work too much to be one of those insatiable deserts of passion. Nor are you a creature of black evolution who prefers the soul, to the body of man, for a plaything.... You were all that was generous and normally fervent with me.... Let's cut the subject. It does not excuse me for not calling when I came to New York. You were nothing if not good to me."

"Then Villiers paid to find out things about us," she said slowly. "He said you bragged about such matters to your friends."

Charter shivered. "I fail to see how you troubled about a man not writing—if you could believe that about him."

"I didn't see how he could know our places of meeting—any other way. I should never have seen him again, if he hadn't made me believe this of you."

Charter scarcely heard her. The thought was inevitable now that the actress might have represented him to Skylark as one with the loathed habit of talking about women to his friends. The quick inclination to inquire could not overcome his distaste for mentioning a dear name in this room. The radiant, flashing spirit behind the letters did not belong here.... His brain ached with emptiness; he wondered continually how he could ever fill the spaces expanded by the Skylark's singing....

In the brain of Selma Cross a furious struggle was joined. Never before had she been given to see so clearly her own limitations—and this in the high light of her great dramatic triumph. Her womanhood contained that mighty quality of worshiping intellect. This, she had loved in Charter long ago; in Stephen Cabot now. The inner key to her greatness was her capacity to forget the animal in man—if he proved a brain. There is only one higher reverence—that of forgetting brain to worship soul. Perceiving the attitude of Quentin Charter to her old life, it was made clear to her that she must preserve a lie in her relation with Stephen Cabot; if, indeed, the playwright did not learn outside, as Charter had done. It was plain that he did not know yet, since he had not run from her—to a garret somewhere. What a hideous mockery was this night—begun in pride! Distantly she was grateful that Paula Linster was at hand to be restored, but her own mind was whipped and cowed by its thoughts—so there was little energy for another's romance.... Charter had made no comment on her last remark. She realized now that his thoughts were bearing him close to the truth.

"You say they forced you to cast out your enemy," she declared hoarsely. "I cast out mine of my own accord. If there is palliation for you, there should be for a woman in her first experience. You asked me to stretch my imagination about a drink-reaction making you avoid me. I ask you, how is a woman, for the first time alone with a man—to know that he is different from other men? Add to this, a woman who has come up from the dregs—for years in the midst of the slum-blooms of the chorus? What I heard from them of their nights—would have taxed the versatility of even Villiers—to make me see him lower than I expected! I ask you—how did I know he was an exception—rather than the rule among the Glowworms?"

"I'm rather glad you said that," Charter declared quickly. "It's a point of view I'm grateful for. Do you wonder that the life from which you have risen to one of the regnant queens has become inseparable in my mind with shuddering aversion?"

In the extremity of her suffering, her mind had reverted, as an artist's always does when desperately pressed, to thoughts of work—work, the healer, the refuge where devils truly are cast out. Even in her work she now encountered the lash, since Charter despised it. Literally, she was at bay before him.

"Always that!" she cried. "It is detestable in you always to blame my work. I broke training. I should have won without the damned angel. You degraded yourself for years in your work, but I don't hear you blaming art for your debaucheries! You have sat alone so long that you think all men outside are foul. You sit high in your attic, so that all men look like bugs below!"

"There is something in what you say," he answered, aroused by her bigness and strength. "Yet in my garret, I do not deal with rootless abstractions. Everything has its foundation in actual observation. I moved long among the play-managers, and found them men of huckster-minds—brainless money-bags, dependent upon every passing wind of criticism. I tell you, when one talked to them or to their office-apes—one felt himself, his inner-self, rushing forth as if to fill something bottomless——"

"You do not know Vhruebert——"

"Eliminate him. I am not speaking of any particular man. I do not mean all playwrights when I say that I found playwrights as a class, not literary workers—but literary tricksters. I am not speaking of *The Thing*, nor of its author, of whom I have heard excellent word—when I say that plays are not written, but rewritten by elementals, who, through their sheer coarseness, sense the slow vibrations of the mob, and feculate the original lines to suit."

"Bah—an idea from one of your nights, when you tried to drown the blue devils! It broods over all your thinking! You forget the great army, that silent army, which is continually lifting itself artistically by

writing one after another—impossible plays. You forget the great hearts of the players—men and women who pull together for big results."

"I am not speaking of the vast library of manuscript failures, but of a small proportion which get into the sinister glare of Broadway——"

"My God, Broadway is not New York!"

"For which I am powerfully glad," he answered with energy. "As for warm human hearts—there is warmth and loyalty, genuine tears and decent hopes in every brothel and bar—yet the black trends of their existence course on. This was so hard for me to learn, that I have it very clearly.... I remember the opening night of Martha Boardman as a star—telegrams pouring in, critics besieging her dressing-room. Even her manager didn't know what he had, until the critics told him the play would stay in New York a year—yet his name was on the boards above the star and bigger than the author's. I watched the bleak, painted faces of the women and heard their false voices acclaiming the new star. What they had in their hearts was not praise, but envy. Their words were sham, indecency and lying. Eternally simulating—that's the stage life. Pity the women—poor Maachas, if you will—but their work is damnable, nevertheless. It is from such unhappy creatures evading motherhood that youths get the abominable notion that real manhood lies in the loins."

"Poor youths—go on! When you have finished I shall tell you something."

"Don't misunderstand me, Selma Cross. No one knows better than I—how the sexes prey upon each other—how they drag each other to the ground. Only I was thinking of the poor things in ties, canes, cigarettes and coatings—out catching!... I saw the whole horrid, empty game of the stage. You have come wonderfully and differently into the glare, but let me ask where is Martha Boardman to-night—a few short years later?"

"Yes, she was tired, her energy burned out, when she finally arrived. It's a stiff grade," Selma Cross said gently.

"I would explain it, that she was prostituted from *excessive simulation*—season after season of simulation—emotion after emotion false to herself! The Law says, 'Live your own life.' The Stage says, 'Act mine,'—so pitiably often a poor playwright's abortive sensations! What can happen to a body that continually makes of itself a lying instrument? Like the queen-bee whose whole life is made up of egg-laying—the brain of this poor purveyor of emotions becomes a waxy pulp. As for her soul—it is in God's hands—let us hope."

"It is good to laugh at you, Quentin Charter. You have another appetite. You wanted alcohol when I knew you first—now you thirst after purists and winged women. I have a lover now who can live among men, soar just as high as you do, work with just as much greatness and strength, without ever having degraded himself or believed all human creatures vile. The stage has its shams, its mockeries, but its glories, too. It is not all deranged by money-bags. The most brilliant of your writers give us our lines—the most wonderful of your mystics. It is true we simulate; true that ours is a constant giving; but call in your garret-high logic now, Sir Prophet: Look at the tired empty faces of my company, look at mine, after we have finished *The Thing*; then look at the strengthened grip on life and the lifted hopes which, each night, the multitude takes from out our breasts—and call ours a prostitution, if you can!"

Charter arose and extended his hand, which she took gracelessly, but was instantly sorry that she had misjudged his intent.

"Can't you see, Selma Cross, that you and I have no difference, no point for argument, if the general run of plays were like *The Thing*—as you make me see it? We had eliminated this from the discussion, but I have nothing but praise for Vhruebert, nothing but enthusiasm for Mr. Cabot and for you—if the combination gives the people an expansion of hope and a lifted ideal. Do that, and you need not reckon with critics."

Instantly she changed her point of view again, so that he was both chilled and puzzled. "I should have been glad to come out in any successful play," she said wearily. "*The Thing* just happens to have an uplift ——"

"So much is accomplished for you, then. You will never be content again with a play that has not. Oh, I don't mean ostensible good, melodramatically contrasted with obvious bad, but the subtle inspiration of real artists—that marvellous flexibility of line and largeness of meaning that fits about every life! Just as you can draw fresh strength again and again from a great poem; so, in performing a great play—one does not act, but lives!"

"Are you going?" she questioned absently.

"Yes, I confess I haven't been so consumed in years——"

She drew close to him.... "It has been dramatic, if not literary, hasn't it?" Her nostrils dilated and her lower lip was drawn back between her teeth.

He smiled.

"I feel burnt out, too," she went on softly. "It has been strange to be with you again—almost like—those early mornings.... Did you ever hear me calling you—'way off there in the West? I used to lie awake, all feverish after you went away, calling in a whisper, 'Quentin—Quentin!...' It seemed you must come, if you were alive. There were times after you went away, that I would have given this week's victory, which I saw from afar,—to have you rush in for just one hour!... In God's name," she cried suddenly, "is there really this sort of honor in living man—is it because you hate me—or do you have to drink to take a woman in your arms? You, who used to be—singing flames?"

Charter was not unattracted, but his self-command was strangely imperious. There was magnetism now in the old passion—but a flutter of wings broke the attraction.... Darkness covered the wings, and the song was stilled; yet in that faint rustling, was enchantment which changed to brute matter—these open arms and the rising breast.

"I'm afraid it is as you said—about the anæmic priest," he muttered laughingly.... And then it occurred to him that there might have been a trick to her tempting.... From this point he was sexless and could pity her, though his nerves were raw from her verbal punishments. It was altogether new in his experience—this word-whipping; and though he had not sharpened a sentence in retaliation, he could not but see the ghastly way in which a woman is betrayed by her temper, which checks a man's passion like a sudden fright. Between a woman given to rages and her lover—lies a naked sword. Consummate, in truth, is the siren who has mastered the art of silence.... Selma Cross sank back into a chair. The world's wear was on her brow and under her eyes, as she laughed bitterly.

"You always had a way of making me sick of life," she said strangely. "I wonder if ever there was a humiliation so artistically complete as mine?"

This was another facet to the prism of the woman. Charter could not be quite certain as to her present

intent, so frequently alternating had been the currents of her emotion during the interview. Typically an actress, she had run through her whole range of effects. He was not prepared yet to say which was trick, which reality; which was the woman, Selma Cross, or the tragedienne. He did not miss the thought that his theory was amazingly strengthened here—the theory that moral derangement results from excessive simulation.

"You—would—not—kiss—me," she repeated. "For my own sake, I'd like to believe—that you're trying to be true to some one,—but it's all rot that there are men like that! It's because I no longer tempt you—you spook!"

"You said you had a lover——"

She shivered. "You left me unfinished." There was a tragic plaint in her tone, and she added hastily, "There was a reason for my trying you.... I think the most corroding of the knives you have left in me to-night, is that you have refused to ask why I brought you here—refused even to utter the name—of the woman you expected to see—*in my presence*.... You may be a man; you may be a cad; you may be a new appetite, or a God resurrected out of a Glowworm. I either hate or love you—or both—to the point of death! Either way—remember this—I'll be square as a die—to you and to my friend. You'll begin to see what I mean—to-morrow, I think...."

He was at the door. "Good-night," he said and touched the signal for the elevator.

She called him back, "Come and see me—at my best—at the *Herriot*—won't you?"

"Yes——"

"But tell me what performance—and where your seat is——"

"... Good-night."

The car stopped at the floor.

# SIXTEENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA FINDING THAT BOTH GIANTS HAVE ENTERED HER CASTLE, RUSHES IN TUMULT INTO THE NIGHT

It was after eight that Sunday night, when Paula emerged from the elevator in the upper-hall of the *Zoroaster*, and noted that the door of the Selma Cross apartment was ajar.... The interval since she had parted from the actress the evening before had been abundant with misery. Almost, she had crossed the bay to visit the Reifferscheids; would have done so, indeed, had she been able to 'phone her coming. Her rooms had become a dismal oppression; Bellingham haunted her consciousness; there were moments when she was actually afraid there alone.

All Saturday night she had sleeplessly tossed, knowing that Quentin Charter was speeding eastward, and dreading the moment when he should arrive in the city and find no welcoming note from her. She dared not be in her rooms after he was due to reach the *Granville*, lest he call her by telephone or messenger—and her purpose of not seeing him be destroyed by some swift and salient appeal. She had waited until after the hour in which he had asked to call, to be sure that this time he would have given up all hope of seeing her. The prospect now of entering her apartment and remaining there throughout the night, challenged every ounce of will-force she possessed....

Battling with loneliness and bereavement, as she had been for hours, Paula was grateful to note, by the open door, that the actress was at home, even though she had left her the evening before, hurt and disappointed by the other's swift change of manner upon learning that Quentin Charter was to be in New York to-day.... It was with a startling but indefinable emotion that she heard the man's voice now through the open door. Stephen Cabot was there, she thought, as she softly let herself in to the place of ordeals, which her own flat had become.

In the dark and silence of the inner hall, the old enemy swept into her consciousness—again the awful localizations of the preying force! The usual powers of mind scattered, as in war the pith of a capital's garrisons rush forth to distant borders. By habit, her hand was upon the button, but she did not turn on light. Instead, she drew back, steeling her will to remember her name, her place in the world, her friends. Harshly driven, yet Paula repressed a cry, and fought her way out into the main hall—as from the coiling suction of a maelstrom. Even in her terror, she could not but repress a swift sense of victory, in that she had escaped from the vortex of attraction—her own rooms.

The man's voice reached her again, filled her mind with amazing resistance—so that the point of the occultist's will was broken. Suddenly, she remembered that she had once heard Stephen Cabot, protesting that he was quite well—at the end of the first New York performance of *The Thing*, and that his tones were inseparably identified with his misfortune. The voice she heard now thrilled her like an ancient, but instantly familiar, harmony. It was not Stephen Cabot's. She stood at the open door, when the vehemence of Selma Cross, who was now speaking, caused her to refrain from making her presence known. The unspeakable possibility, suddenly upreared in her mind, banished every formality. The full energies of her life formed in a prayer that she might be wrong, as Paula peered through the inner hall, and for the first time in the flesh glimpsed Quentin Charter.

She was standing before the elevator-shaft and had signaled for the car eternities ago. Selma Cross was

moving up and down the room within, but her words though faintly audible, had no meaning to the woman without. Paula's mind seemed so filled with sayings from the actress that there was no room for the interpretation of a syllable further. One sentence of Charter's startled her with deadly pain.... She could wait no longer, and started to walk down. Half-way to the main-floor, the elevator sped upward to answer her bell.... She was very weak, and temptation was fiercely operative to return to her rooms, when she heard a slow, firm step ascending the flight below. She turned from the stairs on the second floor, just as the huge, lean shoulders of Bellingham appeared on the opposite side of the elevator-shaft.

The two faced without words. His countenance was livid, wasted, but his eyes were of fire. Paula lost herself in their power. She knew only that she must return with him. There was no place to go; indeed, to return with him now seemed normal, rational—until the brightly-lit car rushed down and stopped before them.

"Excuse me for keeping you waiting, Miss Linster," the elevator-man said, "but I had to carry a message to the rear."

In the instantaneous break of Bellingham's concentration, Paula recovered herself sufficiently to dart into the car.

"Down, if you please," she said hoarsely. "The gentleman is going up."

Bellingham, who had started to follow, was stopped by the sliding-door. The conductor called that he would be back directly, as his car slid down.... In the untellable disorganization of mind, Paula knew for the moment only this: she must reach the outer darkness instantly or expire. In that swift drop to the main floor, and in the brief interval required to stop the car and slide the door, she endured all the agony of tightened fingers upon her throat. There was an ease in racing limbs, as she sped across the tiles to the entrance, as a frightened child rushes from a dark room. She would die if the great door resisted—pictured it all before her hand touched the knob. She would turn, scream, and fall from suffocation. Her scream would call about her the horror that she feared.

The big door answered, as it seemed, with a sort of leisurely dignity to her spasm of strength—and out under the rain-blurred lamps, she ran, ready to faint if any one called, and continually horrified lest something pluck at her skirts—thus to Central Park West. An Eighth Avenue car was approaching, half a square above. To stand and wait, in the fear lest Bellingham reach the corner in time for the car, assailed the last of her vitality. It was not until she had boarded it, and was beyond reach of a pedestrian on Cathedral Way, that she breathed as one who has touched shore after the Rapids. Still, every south-bound cab renewed her panic. She could have made time to South Ferry by changing to the Elevated, but fear of encountering the Destroyer prevented this. Fully three-quarters of an hour was used in reaching the waiting-room, where she was fortunate in catching a Staten Island boat without delay. Every figure that crossed the bridge after her, until the big ferry put off, Paula scrutinized; then sank nearly fainting into a seat.

Bellingham's plot was clear to her mind, as well as certain elements of his craft to obviate every possibility of failure. He had doubtless seen her enter the house, and timed his control to dethrone her volition as she reached her rooms. Since the elevator-man would not have taken him up, without word from her, Bellingham had hastened in and started up the stairs when the car was called from the main floor. His shock at finding her in the second-hall was extraordinary, since he was doubtless struggling with the entire force of his concentration, to hold her in the higher apartment and to prepare her mind for his own reception. It was that moment that the elevator-man had saved her; yet, she could not forget how

the voice of Quentin Charter had broken the magician's power a moment before; and it occurred to her now how wonderfully throughout her whole Bellingham experience, something of the Westerner's spirit had sustained her in the crises—Quentin Charter's book that first night in Prismatic Hall; Quentin Charter's letter to which she had clung during the dreadful interview in the Park....

As for Quentin Charter rushing immediately to the woman of lawless attractions, because he had not received the hoped-for note at the *Granville*—in this appeared a wantonness almost beyond belief. Wearily she tried to put the man and his base action entirely out of mind. And Selma Cross, whose animation had been so noticeable when informed of Charter's coming, had fallen beneath the reach of Paula's emotions.... She could pity—with what a torrential outpouring—could she pity "that finest, lowest head!"

She stepped out on deck. The April night was inky-black. All day there had been a misty rain from which the chill of winter was gone. The dampness was sweet to breathe and fresh upon her face. The smell of ocean brought up from the subconscious, a thought already in tangible formation there. The round clock in the cabin forward had indicated nine-forty-five. It seemed more like another day, than only an hour and a half ago, that she had caught the Eighth Avenue car at Cathedral Way. The ferry was nearing the Staten slip. In a half-hour more, she would reach Reifferscheid's house. Her heart warmed with gratitude for a friend to whom she could say as little or as much as she pleased, yet find him, heart and home, at her service. One must be terrified and know the need of a refuge in the night to test such values. A few hours before, she had rejected the thought of going, because a slight formality had not been attended to. Hard pressed now, she was seeking him in the midst of the night.... At the mention of the big man's name, the conductor on the Silver Lake car took her in charge, helped her off at the right road, and pointed out the Reifferscheid light. Thus she felt her friend's kindness long before she heard the big elms whispering over his cottage. The front-window was frankly uncurtained, and the editor sat within, soft-shirted and eminently comfortable beside a green-shaded reading-lamp. She even saw him drop his book at her step upon the walk. A moment later, she blinked at him laughingly, as he stood in the light of the wide open doorway.

"Properly 'Driven From Home,' I suppose I should be tear-stained and in shawl and apron," she began.

He laughed delightedly, and exclaimed: "How could Father be so obdurate—alas, a-a-las! Lemme see, this is a fisherman's hut on the moors, or a gardener's lodge on the shore. Anyway, it's good to have you here.... Annie!"

He took her hat and raincoat, wriggling meanwhile into a coat of his own, arranged a big chair before the grate, then removed her rubbers. Not a question did he ask, and Sister Annie's greeting presently, from her chair, was quite the same—as if the visit and the hour were exactly in order.

"You'll stay a day or two, won't you?" he asked. "Honestly, I don't like the way they treat you up there beyond the Park.... It will be fine to-morrow. This soft rain will make Mother Earth turn over and take an eye-opener——"

"The truth is, I want to stay until there's a ship for the Antilles," she told him, "and I don't know when the first one goes."

"I hope it's a week at least," he said briskly. "The morning papers are here with all the sailings. A sea-voyage will do you a world of good, and Europe doesn't compare with a trip to the Caribbean."

"Just you two—and one other—are to know," Paula added nervously.

Reifferscheid had gathered up a bundle of papers, and was turning pages swiftly. "There isn't a reason in the world why everybody should know," he remarked lightly, "only you'd better be Lottie or Daisy Whats-her-name, as the cabin lists of all outgoing ships are available to any one who looks."

"Tim will be delighted to make everything easy for you," Sister Annie put in.

Thus mountains dissolved. The soulful accord and the instant sympathy which sprang to meet her every word, and the valor behind it all, so solid as to need no explanation—were more than Paula could bear.... Reifferscheid looked up from his papers, finding that she did not speak, started with embarrassment, and darted to the buffet. A moment later he had given her a glass of wine and vanished from the room with an armful of newspapers. The door had no sooner closed upon him than Paula discovered the outstretched arms of Sister Annie. In the several moments which followed her heart was healed and soothed through a half-forgotten luxury....

"The twin-screw liner, *Fruitlands*,—do you really want the first?" Reifferscheid interrupted himself, when he was permitted to enter later.

"Yes."

"Well, it sails in forty-eight hours, or a little less—Savannah, Santiago de Cuba, San Juan de Porto Rico—and down to the little Antilles—Tuesday night at ten o'clock at the foot of Manhattan."

"That will do very well," Paula said, "and I'd like to go straight to the ship from here—if you'll——"

"Berth—transportation—trunks—and sub-let your flat, if you like," Reifferscheid said as gleefully as a boy invited for a week's hunt. "Why, Miss Linster, I am the original arrangement committee."

"You have always been wonderful to me," Paula could not help saying, though it shattered his ease. "This one other who must know is Madame Nestor. She'll take care of my flat and pack things for me—if you'll get a message to her in the morning when you go over. I don't expect to be gone so long that it will be advisable to sub-let."

"Which is emphatically glad tidings," Reifferscheid remarked hastily.

"You'll want all your summer clothes," said Sister Annie. "Tim will see to your trunks."

"Sometime, I'll make it all plain," Paula tried to say steadily. "It's just been life to me—this coming here—and knowing that I could come here——"

"Miss Linster," Reifferscheid broke in, "I don't want to have to disappear again. The little things you need done, I'd do for any one in the office. Please bear in mind that Sister Annie and I would be hurt—if you didn't let us do them. Why, we belong—in a case like this. Incidentally, you are doing a bully thing—to take a sail down past that toy-archipelago. They say you can hear the parakeets screeching out from the palm-trees on the shore, and each island has a different smell of spice. It will be great for you—rig you out with a new set of wings. You must take Hearn along. I've got his volume here on the West Indies. He'll tell you the color of the water your ship churns. Each day farther south it's a different blue——"

So he jockeyed her into laughing, and she slept long and dreamlessly that night, as she had done once before in the same room.... The second night following, Reifferscheid put her aboard the *Fruitlands*.

"It's good you thought of taking your cabin under a borrowed name, Miss—er—Wyndam—Miss Laura Wyndam," he said in a low voice, for the passengers were moving about. "I'll write you all about it. You

have famous friends. Selma Cross, who is playing at the *Herriot*, wanted to know where you were. I thought for a minute she was going to throw me down and take it away from me. Quentin Charter, by the way, is in town and asked about you. Seemed depressed when I told him you were out of town, and hadn't sent your address to me yet. I told him and Miss Cross that mail for you sent to *The States* would get to you eventually. Both said they would write—so you'll hear from them on the ship that follows this." He glanced at her queerly for a second, and added, "Good-by, and a blessed voyage to you, Tired Lady. Write us how the isles bewitch you, and I'll send you a package of books every ship or two——"

"Good-by—my first of friends!"

Two hours afterward Paula took a last turn on deck. The spray swept in gusts over the *Fruitlands's* dipping prow. The bare masts, tipped with lights, swung with a giant sweep from port to starboard and back to port again, fingering the black heavens for the blown-out stars. She was lonely, but not altogether miserable, out there on the tossing floor of the Atlantic....

# SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA SAILS INTO THE SOUTH, SEEKING THE HOLY MAN OF SAINT PIERRE, WHERE *LA MONTAGNE PELÉE* GIVES WARNING

Wonderfully strengthened, she was, by the voyage. Sorrow had destroyed large fields of verdure, and turned barren the future, but its devouring was finished. Quentin Charter was adjusted in her mind to a duality with which Paula Linster could have no concern. Only to one mistress could he be faithful; indeed, it was only in the presence of this mistress that he became the tower of visions to another; in the midst of the work he worshipped, Quentin Charter had heard the Skylark sing. Paula did not want to see him again, nor Selma Cross. To avoid these two, as well as the place where the Destroyer had learned so well to penetrate, she had managed not to return to her apartment during the two days before sailing.... There would never be another master-romance—never again so rich a giving, nor so pure an ideal. Before this tragic reality, the inner glory of her womanhood became meaningless. It was this that made the future a crossing of sterile tundras,—yet she would keep her friends, and love her work, and try to hold her faith....

Bellingham did not call her at sea, but he had frightened her too profoundly to be far from mind. The face she had seen in the hall-way was drawn and disordered by the dreadful tortures of nether-planes; and awful in the eyes, was that feline vacancy of soul. Once in a dream, she saw him—a pale reptile-monster upreared from a salty sea, voiceless in that oceanic isolation, a shameful secret of the depths. The ghastly bulk had risen with a mute protest to the sky against dissolution and creeping decay—and sounded again....

To her, Bellingham was living death, the triumph of desire which rends itself, the very essence of tragedy. She gladly would have died to make her race see the awfulness of *just flesh*—as she saw it now.... His power seemed ended; she felt with the Reifferscheids and Madame Nestor, that her secret was hermetic, and there was a goodly sense of security in the intervening sea....

And now there was a new island each day; each morning a fresh garden arose from the Caribbean—sun-wooed, rain-softened isles with colorful little ports.... There was one tropic city—she could not recall the name—which from the offing had looked like the flower-strewn gateway to an amphitheatre of mountains.

The *Fruitlands* had lain for a day in the hot, sharky harbor of Santiago; had run into a real cloudburst off the Silver Reefs of Santo Domingo, and breathed on the radiant next morning before the stately and ancient city of San Juan de Porto Rico—shining white as a dream-castle of old Spain, and adrift in an azure world of sky and sea. She spent a day and an evening in this isle of ripe fruits and riper amours; and took away materials for a memory composite of interminable siestas, restless radiant nights, towering cliffs, incomparable courtesy, and soft-voiced maidens with wondrous Spanish eyes that laugh and turn away.

Then for two days they had steamed down past the saintly archipelago—St. Thomas, St. Martin, St. Kitts; then Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, and a legion of littler isles—truncated peaks jutting forth from fragrant, tinted water. There were afternoons when she did not care to lift her voice or move about. Fruit-juices and the simplest salads, a flexible cane chair under the awnings, a book to rest the eyes from the gorgeous sea and enchanted shores, somnolence rather than sleep—these are enough for the approach to

perfection in the Caribbean, with the Lesser Antilles on the lee.... Then at last in late afternoon, the great hulking shape of Pelée loomed watery green against the sky; in the swift-speeding twilight, the volcano seemed to swell and blacken until it was like the shadow of a continent, and the lights of Saint Pierre pricked off the edge of the land.

At last late at night, queerly restless, she sat alone on deck in the windless roadstead and regarded the illumined terraces of Saint Pierre. They had told her that the breath from Martinique was like the heavy moist sweetness of a horticultural garden, but the island must have been sick with fever this night, for a mile at sea the land-breeze was dry, devitalized, irritating the throat and nostrils.

There was no moon, and the stars were so faint in the north that the mass of Pelée was scarcely shaped against the sky. The higher lights of the city had a reddish uncertain glow, as if a thin film of fog hung between them and the eye; but to the south the night cleared into pure purple and unsullied tropic stars. The harbor was weirdly hot.

Before her was the city which held the quest of her voyaging—Father Fontanel, the holy man of Saint Pierre.... *Only a stranger can realize what a pure shining garment his actual flesh has become. To me there was healing in the very approach of the man*.... This was the enduring fragment from the Charter letters; and in that dreadful Sunday night when she began her flight from Bellingham, already deep within her mind Father Fontanel was the goal.... Paula set out for shore early the next morning. The second-officer of the *Fruitlands* sat beside her in the launch. She spoke of the intense sultriness.

"Yes, Saint Pierre is glowing like a brazier," he said. "I was ashore last night for awhile. The people blame the mountain. Old Pelée has been acting up—showering the town with ash every little while lately. It's the taint of sulphur that spoils the air."

She turned apprehensively toward the volcano. *La Montague Pelée*, over the red-tiled roofs of Saint Pierre, looked huge like an Emperor of the Romans. Paled in the intense morning light, he wore a delicate ruching of white cloud about his crown. They stepped ashore on the Sugar Landing where Paula found a carriage to take her to the *Hotel des Palms*, a rare old plantation-house on the *Morne d'Orange*, recently converted for public use.

The ponies were ascending the rise in *Rue Victor Hugo*, at the southern end of the city, when Paula discovered the little Catholic church she had imaged for so many weeks, *Notre Dame des Lourdes*, niched away in the crowded streets with a Quebec-like quaintness, and all the holier from its close association with the lowly shops. From these walls had risen the spiritual house of Father Fontanel—her far bright beacon.... The *porteuses*, said to be the lithest, hardiest women of the occident, wore a pitiable look of fatigue, as they came down from the hill-trails, steadying the baskets upon their heads. The pressure of the heat, and the dispiriting atmosphere revealed their effects in the distended eyelids and colorless, twisted lips of the burden-bearers.

The ponies at length gained the eminence of the *Morne d'Orange*, and ahead she saw the broad, white plantation-house—*Hotel des Palms*. To the right was the dazzling, turquoise sea where the *Fruitlands* lay large among the shipping, and near her a private sea-going yacht, nearly as long and angelically white. The broad verandas of the hotel were alluring with palms; the walls and portcullises were cooled with embroidering vines. Gardens flamed with poinsettias and roses, and a shaded grove of mango and India trees at the end of the lawn, was edged with moon flowerets and oleanders. Back of the plantation-house waved the sloping seas of cane; in front, the Caribbean. On the south rose the peaks of Carbet; on the north, the Monster.

Paula had hardly left the veranda of magnificent vistas two hours later, when the friendly captain of the *Fruitlands* approached with an elderly American, of distinguished appearance, whom he presented—Mr. Peter Stock, of Pittsburg.

"Since you are to leave us here, Miss Wyndam," the captain added, "I thought you would be glad to know Mr. Stock, who makes an annual cruise around these Islands—and knows them better than any American I've encountered yet. Yonder is his yacht—that clipper-built beauty just a bit in from the liner."

"I've already been admiring the yacht," Paula said, "and wondering her name. There's something Venetian about her dazzling whiteness in the soft, deep blue."

"I get it exactly, Miss Wyndam—that 'mirage of marble' in the Italian sky.... My craft is the *Saragossa*." His eyelids were tightened against the light, and the voice was sharp and brisk. His face, tropically tanned, contrasted effectively with the close-cropped hair and mustache, lustrous-white as his ship.... Paula having found the captain's courtesy and good sense invariable during the voyage, gladly accepted his friend, who proved most interesting on the matter of Pelée.

"I've stayed here in Saint Pierre longer now than usual," he told her, pointing toward the mountain, "to study the old man yonder. Pelée, you know, is identified with Martinique, much the same as the memory of Josephine; yet the people of the city can't seem to take his present disorder seriously. This is cataclysmic country. Hell—I use the word to signify a geological stratum—is very close to the surface down here. All these lovely islands are merely ash-piles hurled up by the great subterranean fires. The point is, Lost Atlantis is apt to stir any time under the Caribbean—and rub out our very pretty panorama."

"You regard this as an entertainment worth waiting for?" Paula asked.

The vaguest sort of a smile passed over his eyes and touched his lips. "Pelée and I are very old friends. I spoke of the volcanic origin of these islands in the way of suggesting that any seismic activity in the archipelago—Pelée's present internal complaint, for instance,—should be taken significantly. Saint Pierre would have been white this morning—except for the heavy rain before dawn."

"You mean volcanic ash?"

"Exactly."

"That explains the white scum I saw in the gutters, driving through the city.... But it isn't altogether a novelty, is it, for the mountain to behave this way?"

"From time to time in the past ten days, Miss Wyndam, Pelée has had a session of grumbling."

"I mean as a usual thing——"

He turned to her abruptly and inquired, "Didn't you know that there hasn't been a sound from Pelée for twenty years before the month of April now ending?"

This gave intimacy to the disorder. Mr. Stock was called away just now, but after dinner that night he joined Paula again on the great veranda.

"Ever been in Pittsburg?" he asked.

"No."

"I've only to shut my eyes in this second-hand air—to think I'm back among the steel mills of the lower Monongahela."

"The moon looks like beaten egg," Paula said with a slight shiver. "They must be suffering down in the city. You're the expert on Pelée, Mr. Stock, please tell me more about him."

He had been regarding the new moon, low and to the left of the Carbet peaks. It had none of the sharpness of outline peculiar to the tropics, but was blurred and of an orange hue, instead of silvery. "It's the ash-fog in the air which has the effect of a fine wire screen," he explained. "We'll have a white world to-morrow, if it doesn't rain."

They turned to the north where a low rumbling was heard. It was like distant thunder, but the horizon beyond Pelée was unscathed by lightning.

"Are you really worried, Mr. Stock?"

"Why, it's as I said. The fact that Pelée is acting out of the ordinary is quite enough to make any one skeptical regarding his intentions."

He discussed familiarly certain of the man-eaters among the mountains of the world—Krakatoa, Bandaisan, Cotopaxi, Vesuvius, Ætna, calling them chronic old ruffians, whom Time doesn't tame.

"A thousand years is nothing to them," he added. "They wait, still as crocodiles, until seers have built their temples in the high rifts and cities have formed on their flanks. They have tasted blood, you see, and the madness comes back. Twenty years is only a siesta. Pelée is a suspect."

"I think I should prefer to hear you tell the treachery of volcanoes outside of the fire-zone," she declared. "It's like listening to ghost stories in a haunted house."

Pelée rumbled again, and Paula's fingers involuntarily started toward his sleeve. The heavy wooden shutters of the great house rattled in the windless night; the ground upon which they stood seemed to wince at the Monster's pain. She was conscious of the fragrance of roses and magnolia blooms above the acrid taint of the air. Some strange freak of the atmosphere exerted a pressure upon the flowers, forcing a sudden expulsion of perfume. The young moon was a formless blotch now in the fouled sky. A sigh like the whimpering of many sick children was audible from the servants' cabins behind the hotel.... Later, from her own room, she saw the double chain of lights out in the harbor—the *Saragossa* pulling at her moorings among the lesser craft, like a bright empress in the midst of dusky maid-servants; and in the north was Vulcan struggling to contain the fury of his fluids. She was a little afraid of Pelée.

Very early abroad, Paula set out on her first pilgrimage to *Notre Dame des Lourdes*. Rain had not fallen in the night, and she regarded a white world, as Stock had promised, and the source of the phenomenon with the pastelle tints of early morning upon his huge eastern slope. She had slept little and with her face turned to the north. A cortege had passed before her in dream—all the destroyers of history, each with a vivid individuality, like the types of faces of all nations—the story of each and the desolation it had made among men and the works of men.

Most of them had given warning. Pelée was warning now. His warning was written upon the veins of every leaf, painted upon the curve of every blade of grass, sheeted evenly-white upon the red tiles of every roof. Gray dust blown by steam from the bursting quarries of the mountain clogged the gutters of the city and the throats of men. It was a moving, white cloud in the river, a chalky shading that marked the highest reach of the harbor tide. It settled in the hair of the children, and complicated the toil of bees in the

nectar-cups. With league-long cerements, and with a voice that caused to tremble his dwarfed companions, the hills and *mornes*, great Pelée had proclaimed his warning in the night.

# EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA IS INVOLVED IN THE RENDING FORTUNES OF SAINT PIERRE AND *THE PANTHER* CALLS WITH NEW YORK MAIL

Father Fontanel was out in the parish somewhere. One of the washer-women told her this, at the door of the church. There were many sick in the city from the great heat and the burned air—many little children sick. Father Fontanel always sought the sick in body; those who were sick in soul, sought him.... So the woman of the river-banks, in her simple way, augmented the story of the priest's love for his people. Paula rested for a few moments in the dim transept. Natives moved in and out for a breath of coolness, some pausing to kneel upon the worn tiles of the nave. Later she walked among the lower streets of the suffering city, her heart filled with pity for the throngs housed on the low breathless water-front. Except when the wind was straight from the volcano, the hotel on the *Morne d'Orange* was made livable by the cool Trades.

The clock in the *Hopital l'Militaire* struck the hour of nine. Paula had just hired a carriage at the Sugar Landing, when her eye was attracted by a small crowd gathering near the water's edge. The black cassock of a priest in the midst drew her hurrying forward. A young man, she thought at first, from the frail shoulders and the slender waist.... A negress had fallen from the heat. Her burdens lay together upon the shore—a tray of cakes from her head, and a naked babe from her arms.... A glimpse at the priest's profile, and she needed not to be told that this was the holy man of Saint Pierre.

Happiness lived in the face above the deep pity of the moment. It was an attraction of light, like the brow of Mary in Murillo's *Immaculate Conception*; or like that instant ethereal radiance which shines from the face of a little child passing away without pain. The years had put an exquisite nobility upon the plain countenance, and the inner life had added the gleam of adoration—"the rapture-light of holy vigils kept."

Paula rubbed her eyes, afraid lest it were not true; afraid for a moment that it was her own meditations that had wrought this miracle in clay. Lingering, she ceased to doubt the soul's transfiguration.... Father Fontanel beckoned a huge negro from a lighter laden with molasses-casks—a man of strength, bare to the waist.

"Take the little mother to my house," he said.

A young woman standing by was given charge of the child.... "Lift her gently, Strong Man. The woman will show you the way to the door." Then raising his voice to the crowd, the priest added, "You who are well—tell others that it is yet cool in the church. Carry the ailing ones there, and the little children. Father Pelée will soon be silent again.... Does any one happen to know who owns the beautiful ship in the harbor?"

His French sentences seemed lifted above a pervasive hush upon the shore. The native faces wore a curious look of adulation; and Paula marvelled in that they seemed unconscious of this. She was not a Catholic; yet she uttered his name with a thrilling rapture, and with a meaning she had never known before:

"Father Fontanel——"

He turned, instantly divining her inspiration.

"Mr. Stock, who owns the ship yonder, is staying at the *Hotel des Palms*," she said quickly. "I have a carriage here. I was thinking that the sick woman and her child might be taken to your house in that. Afterward, when she is cared for, you might wish to ride with me to the Hotel—where I also live."

"Why, yes, Child—who are you?"

"Just a visitor in Saint Pierre—a woman from the States."

Her arrangement was followed, and the negro went back to his work. Father Fontanel joined her behind the carriage.

"But you speak French so well," he observed.

"Not a few Americans do. I was grateful that it came back to me here."

"Yes, for I do not speak a word of English," he said humbly.

They walked for a moment in silence, his head bowed in thought. Paula, glancing at him from time to time, studied the lines of pity and tenderness which shadowed the eyes. His mouth was wonderful to her, quite as virgin to the iron of self-repression as to the soft fullness of physical desire. This was the marvel of the face—it was above battle. Here were eyes that had seen the Glory and retained an unearthly happiness—a face that moved among the lowly, loved, pitied, abode with them; yet was beautiful with the spiritual poise of Overman.

"It was strange that you did not meet Lafcadio Hearn when he was here," she said at length.

He shook his head, asked the name again and the man's work.

"A writer who tarried here; a mystic, too, strange and strong."

"I know no writer by that name—but how did you know that I did not meet him, Child?"

"I was thinking he would write about you in his book of Martinique sketches—had he known."

He accepted the explanation innocently. "There was a writer here—a young man very dear to me—of whom you reminded me at once——"

"Of whom I reminded you, Father?" she repeated excitedly. "You mean because I spoke of another writer?"

"No, I saw a resemblance—rather some relationship of yours to my wonderful young friend.... He said he would come again to me."

She had spoken of Hearn in the hope that Father Fontanel would be reminded of another writer whose name she did not care to mention. His idea of relationship startled her to the heart; yet when she asked further, the good man could not explain. It had merely been his first thought, he said,—as if she had *come* from his friend.

"You thought much of him then, Father Fontanel?"

He spoke with power now. "A character of terrible thirsts, Child,—such thirsts as I have never known.

Some moments as he walked beside me, I have felt him—like a giant with wolves pulling at his thighs, and angels lifting his arms. Great strength of mind, his presence endowed me, so that I would have seen more of him, and more,—but he will come back! And I know that the wolves shall have been slain, when he comes again——"

"And the angels, Father?" she whispered.

"Such are the companions of the Lifted, my daughter.... It is when I meet one of great conflicts that I am suffused with the spirit of worship in that I am spared. God makes my way so easy that I must wonder if I am not one of His very weak. It must be so, for my mornings and evenings are made lovely by the Presence. My people hearken unto my prayers for them; they love me and bring their little children for my blessing—until I am so happy that I cry aloud for some great work to do that I may strive heroically to show my gratitude to God—and lo, the doors of my work are opened, but there are no lions in the way!"

She knew now all that Charter had meant. In her breast was a silent mystic stirring—akin to that endearing miracle enacted in a conservatory of flowers, when the morning sun first floods down upon the glass.... The initial doubt of her own valor in suffering Selma Cross to shatter her Tower, sprang into being now. Father Fontanel loved him, and had looked within.

That the priest had perceived a "relationship" swept into the woman's soul. Low logic wrought from the physical contacts of Selma Cross trembled before the other immaterial suggestion—that Quentin Charter would come back to Saint Pierre triumphantly companioned, his wolves slain.... She forgot nothing of the actress's point of view; nor that the Westerner did not reach her floor in the *Zoroaster* and encounter an old attraction by accident. He was not one to force his way there, if the man at the elevator told him Miss Linster was not in. All of these things which had driven her to action were still inexplicable, but final condemnation was gone from the evidence—as the stone rolled away.

Bellingham?... The mystery now, as she stood within this radiant aura, was that any point of his desire could ever have found lodgment within. Her sense of protection at this moment was absolute. She had done well to come here.... Again swept into mind, Quentin Charter's silent part in saving her from the Destroyer—the book, the letter, the voice; even to this sanctuary she had come through a sentence from him. For a moment the old master-romance shone glorious again—like a lone, valiant star glimpsed in the rift of storm-hurled clouds.

They had reached the low street door of Father Fontanel's house, a wing of the church. A native doctor had been summoned and helped to carry the woman in. She was revived presently.

"Father," Paula said, remembering the words of the washer-woman, as they emerged into the street, "when one is sick of soul—does one knock here?"

"One does not knock, but enters straightway," he answered. "The door is never locked.... But you look very happy, my daughter."

"I am happy," she answered.

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They drove together to the *Hotel des Palms*. Paula did not ask, though she had something of an idea regarding the priest's purpose in asking for Peter Stock. Though she had formed a very high opinion of the

American, it occurred to her that he would hardly approve of any one directing arteries of philanthropy to his hand. He had been one of those ruffian giants of the elder school of finance who began with the axe and the plow; whose health, character and ethics had been wrought upon the anvil of privation; whose culture began in middle life, and, being hard-earned, was eminent in the foreground of mind—austere and inelastic, this culture, yet solidly founded. Stock was rich and loved to give, but was rather ashamed of it. Paula could imagine him saying, "I hate the whining of the strong." For twenty years since his retirement, he had voyaged about the world, learning to love beautiful things, and giving possibly many small fortunes away; yet he much would have preferred to acknowledge that he had knocked down a brute than endowed an asylum. Mr. Stock was firm in opinion, dutiful in appreciation for the fine. His sayings were strongly savored, reliant with facts; his every thought was the result of a direct physical process of mind,—a mind athletic to grip the tangible, but which had not yet contracted for its spiritual endowment. In a word a splendid type of American with which to blend an ardently artistic temperament.... Paula, holding something of this conception of the capitalist, became eager to see what adjustment could follow a meeting with his complement in characteristic qualities—her revered mystic. Mr. Stock was pacing up and down the mango grove. Leaving Father Fontanel on the veranda, she joined the American.

"I found a holy man down on the water-front, mildly inquiring who owned the *Saragossa*," she said laughingly, "and asked him to share my carriage. He has not told me what he wants, but he's a very wonderful priest."

She noted the instant contraction of his brows, and shrank inwardly at the hard, rapid tone, with which he darted the question:

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No, Mr. Stock."

"Yes. I'll see him." It was as if he were talking to his secretary, but Paula liked him too well to mind. They drew near the veranda.

"... Well, sir, what is it?" he spoke brusquely, and in French, studying the priest's upturned face. Mr. Stock believed he knew faces. Except for the years and the calling, he would have decided that Father Fontanel was rather too meek and feminine—at first glance.

"What I wished to ask depends upon your being here for a day or two," the priest said readily. "Father Pelée's hot breath is killing our children in the lower quarters of the city, and many of the poor women are suffering. The ship out in the harbor looked to me like a good angel with folded wings, as I walked the water-front this morning. I thought you would be glad to let me send some mothers and babies—to breathe the good air of the offing. A day, or a night and a day, may save lives."

Paula had felt a proprietary interest in Father Fontanel's mission, no matter what it proved to be. She was pleased beyond measure to find that he was entirely incapable of awe or cringing, before a man of stern and distinguished mien and of such commanding dignity. Moreover, he stated the favor quite as if it were an advantage which the American had not thought of for himself. So interested was she in the priest's utterance, that when her eyes turned from his face to Stock's—the alteration there amazed her. And like the natives of the water-front, the American did not seem to be *aware* of the benign influence. He had followed the French sentences intently at first, but caught the whole idea before the priest was finished.

"Did you know I wasn't a Catholic?" he asked. The question apparently had been in his mind before he felt himself responding to the appeal.

"No," Father Fontanel answered sincerely. "The truth is, it didn't occur to me whether you were or not."

"Quite right," Mr. Stock said quickly. "It has no place, whatever, so long as you don't think so. You've got a good idea. I'll be here for a day or two. You'll need money to hire boats; then my first officer will have to be informed. My launch is at the Sugar Landing.... On second thought, I'll go back down-town with you.... Miss Wyndam—later in the day—a chat with you?"

"Of course."

Father Fontanel turned, thanking her with a smile. "And the name is 'Wyndam,'" he added. "I had not heard it before."

Paula watched them walking down the driveway to the carriage which she had retained for Father Fontanel. The inclination was full-formed to seek the solitude of her room and there review the whole delightful matter.... She was glad that the priest had not asked her name, for under his eyes—she could not have answered "Wyndam."

It was not until the following evening, after a day of actual physical suffering from Pelée and the heat, even on the *Morne*, that she had the promised talk with Peter Stock.

"I like your priest," he said, "He works like a man, and he hasn't got a crook in his back. What he wants he seems to get. I have sent over a hundred natives out yonder on the *Saragossa*, negotiated for the town's whole available supply of fresh milk, and Laird, my chief officer, is giving the party a little cruise to-night ——"

"Do you know—I think it is splendid?" she exclaimed.

"What?"

"The work—your ship filled with gasping unfortunates from the city!"

"Do you happen to know of any reason why an idle ship should not be used for some such purpose?"

"None, whatever," she said demurely, quite willing that he should adjust the matter to suit himself. His touchiness upon the subject of his own benefactions remanded her pleasurably of Reifferscheid. Her inward joy was to study in Peter Stock the unacknowledged influence of Father Fontanel—or was it an unconscious influence? The American's further activities unfolded:

"By the way, have you been reading the French paper here—*Les Colonies*?"

Paula had not.

"The editor, M. Mondet, is the smug authority for a statement yesterday that Saint Pierre is in absolutely no danger from the mountain. Now, of course, this may be true, but he doesn't know it—unless he should have the Dealer in Destiny on the wire. There is always a big enough percentage of foolish virgins in a city, so it peeved me to find one in the sole editorial capacity. My first impulse was to calk up the throat of M. Mondet with several sheets of his abominable assurances. This I restrained, but nevertheless I called upon him to-day. His next issue appears day after to-morrow, and my idea is for him to print a vigorous warning against Pelée. Why, he could clear the town of ten thousand people for a few days—until the weather settles. Incidentally, if the mountain took on a sudden destroying streak—just see what he would have done! Some glory in saving lives on that scale."

"Vine leaves, indeed," said Paula, "Did M. Mondet tell you he would print this warning?"

"Not exactly. He pointed out the cost of detaching a third of the city's inhabitants. I told him how this cost could be brought down within reason, and showed myself not unwilling to back the exodus. I'm a practical man, Miss Wyndam, and these things look bigger than they really are. But you never can tell what a tubby little Frenchman will do. It's atrocious for a man in his position to say that a volcano won't volcane—sorely tempting to old Father Pelée—a sort of challenge. It would be bad enough to play Pilate and wash his hands of the city's danger—but to be a white-lipped, kissing Judas at the last supper of Saint Pierre ____"

"Did you tell him that?" Paula asked hastily.

"Not in those words, Miss Wyndam, but he seemed to be a bit afraid of me—kept watching my hands and pulling at his cravat. When he finally showed me to the door, his was the delicacy of one who handles dynamite. At all events, I'm waiting for his next issue to see if my call 'took!' I really do wish that a lot of these people would forget their clothes, chickens, coals, coins, and all such, for a few days and camp somewhere between here and Fort de France."

Paula was thrilled by the American's zeal. He was not content, now that he had begun, to deal with boatloads, but wanted to stir the city. She would have given much to know the exact part of Father Fontanel in this rousing ardor of her new friend. "And you really think Pelée may not hold out?" she asked.

"I'm not a monomaniac—at least, not yet," he replied, and his voice suggested a certain pent savagery in his brain. "Call it an experiment that I'm sufficiently interested in to finance. The ways of volcanoes are past the previsions of men. I'd like to get a lot of folks out of the fire-zone, until Pelée is cool—or a billion tons lighter. This ordered-up-to-Nineveh business is out of my line, but it's absorbing. I don't say that Pelée will blow his head off this week or this millennium, but I do say that there are vaults of explosives in that monster, the smallest of which could make this city look like a leper's corpse upon the beach. I say that the internal fires are burning high; that they're already playing about the vital cap; that Pelée has already sprung several leaks, and that the same force which lifted this cheerful archipelago from the depths of the sea is pressing against the craters at this moment. I say that Vesuvius warned before he broke; that Krakatoa warned and then struck; that down the ages these safety valves scattered over the face of the earth have mercifully joggled before giving way; that Pelée is joggling now."

"If M. Mondet would write just that," Paula said softly, "I think you would have your exodus."

She sought her room shortly afterward. Pelée's moods had been variable that day. The north had been obscured by a fresh fog in the afternoon. The ash and sulphur fumes, cruel to the lungs on the breezy *Morne*, six miles from the craters, gave her an intimation of the anguish of the people in the intervening depression where the city lay. The twilight had brought ease again and a ten-minute shower, so there was real freshness in the early evening. Rippling waves of merriment reached her from the darky quarters, as the young men from the fields came forth to bathe in the sea. Never before was the volatile tropic soul so strongly evidenced for her understanding, as in that glad hour of reaction—simple hearts to glow at little things, whose swift tragedies come and go like blighting winds which, though they may slay, leave no wound; instant to gladden in the groves of serenity, when a black cloud has blown by.

Her mind was sleepless.... Once, long after midnight, when she fell into a doze, it was only to be awakened by a dream of a garrote upon her throat. The ash had thickened again, and the air was acrid. The hours seemed to fall asleep in passing. From her balcony she peered into the dead-black of the North

where Pelée rumbled at intervals. Back in the south, the blurred moon impended with an evil light. A faint wailing of children reached her from the servants' cabins. The sense of isolation was dreadful for a moment. It seemed to rest entirely with her that time passed at all; that she must grapple with each moment and fight it back into the past....

The *Panther*, a fast ship with New York mail, was due to call at Saint Pierre within forty-eight hours. Paula, to hasten the passing of time, determined to take the little steamer over to Fort de France for a day, if morning ever came. She must have slept an hour after this decision, for she was unconscious of the transition from darkness to the parched and brilliant dawn which roused her tired eyes. The glass showed her a pallid face, darkly-lined.

The blinding light from the East changed the dew to steam before it touched the ground. The more delicate blossoms in the gardens withered in that hectic burning before the sun was an hour high. Driving down through the city to the Landing she found the *Rue Victor Hugo* almost deserted. The *porteuses* were gone from the highway; all doors were tightly shut, strangely marring the tropical effect; broken window-panes were stuffed with cloths to keep out the vitiated air. The tough little island mules (many in their panniers with no one leading), scarcely moved, and hugged the east walls for shade. From the by-ways she imagined the smell of death.

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"Hottest morning Saint Pierre has known for years," the captain said, as she boarded the little steamer which hurriedly put off.... Night had fallen (and there had been little to break the misery of Saint Pierre that day), when she reached the Hotel once more. She retired immediately after dinner to take advantage of a fresh, south wind which came with the dark and promised to make sleep possible.... Rumblings from the volcano awoke her just before dawn. Glancing out over the harbor, she perceived the lights of a big liner lying near the *Saragossa*. There was no sleep after this discovery, since she felt this must be the *Panther* with letters from New York. According to her schedule, the steamer had cleared from Manhattan a full week after the *Fruitlands*. Paula breakfasted early, and inquired at the desk how soon the mails would be distributed.

"Did you arrange at the post-office to have your mail sent care of the Hotel?" the clerk inquired.

"Yes."

"The bags should be here very shortly, Miss Wyndam. The *Panther* anchored at two this morning."

"Please send any letters for me to my room at once," she told him, and went there to wait, so that she might be alone to read.... Madame Nestor's writing was upon one envelope, and Reifferscheid's upon another, a large one, which contained mail sent to Paula Linster in his care to be forwarded to Laura Wyndam, among them letters from Selma Cross and Quentin Charter, as well as a note from the editor himself.

The latter she read first, since the pages were loose in the big envelope. It was a joyous, cheery message, containing a humorous account of those who called to inquire about her, a bit of the gospel of work and a hope for her health—the whole, brief, fine and tonic—like her friend.... Tearing open the Charter letter, she fell into a vortex of emotions:

This is my fifth day in New York, dear Skylark, and I have ceased trying to find you. It was not to

trouble or frighten you that I searched, but because I think if you understood entirely, you would not hide from me. I hope Miss Cross has had better success than I in learning your whereabouts, because she has changed certain views regarding me. If you shared with her those former views, it is indeed important that you learn the truth, though it is not for me to put such things in a letter. I have not seen Miss Cross since that first night; nor have I had the heart yet to see *The Thing*. Reifferscheid tells me that you may be out of the city for two or three months. I counted him a very good friend of mine, but he treats me now with a peculiar aversion, such as I should consider proper for one to hold toward a wife-beater. It is all very strange and subtly terrifying—this ordeal for which I have been prepared. I see now that I needed the three full years of training. What I cannot quite adjust yet is that I should have made you suffer. My every thought blessed you. My thoughts bless you to-night—sweet gift of the world to me.

Live in the sun and rest, Skylark; put away all shadowy complications—and you will bring back a splendid store of energy for the tenser New York life. I could not have written so calmly a few days ago, for to have you think evil of me drove straight and swiftly to the very centres of sanity—but I have won back through thoughts of you, a noon-day courage; and it has come to me that our truer relation is but beginning.

I have not yet the fibre for work; New York is empty without you, as my garret would be without your singing. I shall go away somewhere for a little, leaving my itinerary—when I decide upon it—at the *Granville*. Some time soon I shall hear from you. All shall be restored—even serenity to your beautiful spirit. I only suffer now in that it proved business of mine to bring you agony. I wanted to make you glad through and through; to lift your spirit, not to weight it down; to make you wiser, happier,—to keep you *winged*. This, as I know the truth, has been my constant outbreathing to you....

My window at the *Granville* faces the East—the East to which I have come—yet from the old ways, I still look to the East for you. New York has found her Spring—a warm, almost vernal night, this, and I smell the sea.... Two big, gray dusty moths are fluttering at the glass—softly, eagerly to get at the light—as if they knew best.... They have found the way in, for the window was partly open, and have burned their wings at the electric bulb. The analogy is inevitable ... but *you* would not be hurt, for flame would meet flame.... I turned off the light a moment and remembered that you have already been hurt, but that was rather because flame was not restored by flame....

One moth has gone away. The other has curled up on my table like a faded cotton umbrella. So many murder the soul this way in the pursuit of dead intellectual brilliance....

Bless your warm heart that brims with singing—singing which I must hear again.... An old sensation comes to me now as I cease to write. My garret always used to grow empty and heartless—as I closed and sealed a letter to you.... You are radiant in the heart of Quentin Charter.

She was unconscious of passing time, until her eye was attracted by the heavy handwriting of Selma Cross upon a *Herriot Theatre* envelope. This communication was an attempt to clear herself with Paula, whose intrinsic clarity had always attracted truth from the actress; also it seemed to contain a struggle to adjust herself, when once she began to write, to the garment of nettles she had woven from mixed motives.

I am almost frantic searching for you. I knew you were in the hall *that night*, because I saw your hat as you started to walk down. Charter was saying things about the stage that made me want to shut the door, but I must tell you why I made him come there. When it occurred to me how horribly you had been hurt by my disclosures regarding him, the thought drove home that there might be some mistake.

You would not see him, so I sent a telephone-message to the *Granville* for him to call. He, of course, thought the message from you. Indeed, he would not have come otherwise. He avoided me before, and that night, he certainly would have seen no one but you. Our elevator-man at the *Zoroaster* had orders from me to show a gentleman inquiring for you about seven, to my apartment.

My thought was, to learn if by any possibility I was wrong in what I had told you. I even thought I might call you in that night. Anyway, you would be just across the hall—to hear at once any good word. He thought at first that it was a trap that *we* had arranged—that you were somewhere in the apartment listening! Oh, I'm all in a welter of words—there is so much, and your big brute of an editor would give me no help. The woman in your rooms is quite as blank about you. I never beat so helplessly against a wall.

But here's the truth: Charter did not talk about our relations. Villiers had a spy watching all our movements—and was thus informed. Then, when he got back, Villiers told me that Charter had talked to men—all the things that his spy had learned. He did this to make me hate Charter. This is the real truth. Charter seems to have become a monk in the three years. This is not so pleasant to write as it will be for you to read, but he would not even mention your name in my room! I want to say that if it is not you—some woman has the new Quentin Charter heart and soul. I could have done the thing better, but the dramatic possibility of calling him to the *Zoroaster* blinded my judgment, and what a hideous farce it turned out! But you have the truth, and I, my lesson. Please forgive your fond old neighbor—who wasn't started out with all the breeding in the world, but who meant to be square with you.

Paula felt that she could go down into the tortured city at this moment with healing for every woe. She paced the room, and with outstretched arms, poured forth an ecstasy of gratitude for his sake; for the restoration of her Tower; for this new and glorious meaning of her womanhood. The thought of returning to New York by the first boat occurred; and the advisability of cabling Quentin Charter for his ease of mind.... At all events, the time of the next steamer's leaving for New York must be ascertained at once. She was putting on her hat, when Madame Nestor's unopened letter checked her precipitation. The first line brought back old fears:

I'm afraid I have betrayed you, my beloved Paula. It is hard that my poor life should be capable of this. Less than two hours ago, as I was busied about the apartment, the bell rang and I answered. At the door stood Bellingham. He caught my eyes and held them. I remember that instant, the suffocation,—the desperate but vain struggle to keep my self-control. Alas, he had subjected my will too thoroughly long ago. Almost instantly, I succumbed to the old mastery.... When his control was lifted, I was still standing by the opened door, but he was gone. The elevator was at the ground-floor. He must have passed by me and into the apartment, for one of your photographs was gone. I don't think he came for that, though of course it will help him to concentrate I cannot tell what else happened in the interval, but my dreadful fear is that he made me divulge your place of refuge. What other purpose could he have? It is almost unbearable that I should be forced to tell him—when I love you so—if, indeed, that has come to pass.... He has altered terribly since the accident. I think he has lost certain of his powers—that his thwarted desire is murdering him. He did not formerly need a photograph to concentrate. His eyes burned into mine like a wolf's. I know, even in my sorrow, that yours is to be the victory. He is breaking up or he would not *come to you*....

For a moment or two Paula was conscious of Pelée, and the gray menace that charged the burnt-out air.

Then came the thought of Father Fontanel and the door that was never locked; and presently her new joy returned with ever-rising vibration—until the long-abated powers of her life were fully vitalized again.... She was wondering, as she stepped into the hall and turned the key in her door, if she would be considered rather tumultuous in cabling Charter.... At the stairway, she halted, fearing at first some new mental seizure; then every faculty furiously-nerved, she listened at the balustrade for the repetition of a voice that an instant before had thrilled her to the soul.... There had only been a sentence or two from the Voice. Peter Stock was now replying:

"He's a man-servant of the devil, this pudgy editor," he said striding up and down the lower hall in his rage. "A few days ago I called upon him, and in sweet modesty and limping French explained the proper policy for him to take about this volcano. To-day he devotes a half-column of insufferable humor to my force of character and alarmist views. Oh, the flakiness of the French mind! M. Mondet certainly fascinates me. I shall have to call upon him again."

Paula heard the low laugh of the other and the words:

"Let's sit down, Mr. Stock. I want to hear all about the editor and the mountain. I was getting to sea somewhere, when the New York papers ran a line about Pelée's activity. It started luring memories, and I berthed at once for Saint Pierre. It was mighty good to see the *Saragossa* lying familiarly in the roadstead ____"

Trailing her fingers along the wall to steady herself, Paula made her way back to the door of her room, which she fumblingly unlocked.

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# NINETEENTH CHAPTER

## QUENTIN CHARTER IS ATTRACTED BY THE TRAVAIL OF *PELÉE*, AND ENCOUNTERS A QUEER FELLOW-VOYAGER

Charter did not find Paula Linster in the week of New York that followed his call at the *Zoroaster*, but he found Quentin Charter. The first three or four days were rather intense in a psychological way. The old vibrations of New York invariably contained for him a destructive principle, as Paris held for Dr. Duprez. The furious consumption of nerve-tissue during the first evening after his arrival; a renewal of desires operating subconsciously, and in no small part through the passion of Selma Cross; his last struggle, both subtle and furious, with his own stimulus-craving temperament, and the desolation of the true romance—combined, among other things, worthily to test the growth of his spirit.... The thought that Skylark had fallen into the hands of Selma Cross, and had been given that ugly estimate of him which the actress held before his call, as he expressed it in his letter, "drove straight and swiftly to the very centres of sanity." Over this, was a ghastly, whimpering thing that would not be immured—the effect of which, of all assailants to rising hope, was most scarifying: That Paula Linster had suffered herself to listen to those old horrors, and had permitted him to be called to the bar before Selma Cross. No matter how he handled this, it held a fundamental lesion in the Skylark-fineness.

Charter whipped his wastrel tendencies one by one until on the fifth day his resistance hardened, and the brute within him was crippled from beating against it. His letter to Paula Linster was a triumph of repression. Probably one out of six of the thoughts that came to him were given expression. He felt that he had made of Selma Cross an implacable enemy, and was pursued by the haunting dread (if, indeed, the conversation had not been overheard), that she might think better about "squaring" him. It was on this fifth day that for a moment the mystic attraction returned to his consciousness, and he heard the old singing. This was the first reward for a chastened spirit. Again and again—though never consciously to be lured or forced—the vision, unhurt, undiminished, returned for just an instant with a veiled, but exquisite refinement.

The newspaper account of Pelée's overflowing wrath immediately materialized all his vague thought of voyaging. His quest had vanished from New York. Had Selma Cross been true to her word; at least, had any part of their interview been empowered to restore something of the faith of Paula Linster—there had been ample time for him to hear it. He was afraid that, in itself, his old intimacy with the actress had been enough to startle the Skylark into uttermost flight. Reifferscheid's frigidity had required only one test to become a deep trouble. His hint that Miss Linster would be away two or three months rendered New York and a return to his own home equally impossible. Father Fontanel held a bright, substantial warmth for his isolated spirit—and the *Panther* was among the imminent sailings.

He bought his berth and passage on the morning of the sailing date, and there was a matinée of *The Thing* in the meantime. Charter did not notify Selma Cross of his coming, but he liked the play unreservedly, and was amazed by the perfection of her work. He wrote her a line to this effect; and also a note of congratulation and greeting to Stephen Cabot.... It was not without a pang that he looked back at Manhattan from The Narrows that night.

For several mornings he had studied the gaunt, striding figure of a fellow-passenger, who appeared to be

religious in the matter of his constitutional; or, as a sailor softly remarked as he glanced up at Charter from his holy-stoning, "He seems to feel the need av walkin' off sivin or eight divils before answerin' the breakfast-gong...." In behalf of this stranger also, Charter happened to overhear the chief-steward encouraging one of the waiters to extra-diligence in service, Queerly, in the steward's mind, the interest seemed of a deeper sort than even an unusual fee could exact—as if he recognized in the stranger a man exalted in some mysterious masonry. And Charter noticed that the haggard giant enforced a sort of willing slavery throughout the ship—from the hands, but through the heads. This strange potentiality was decidedly interesting; as was the figure in itself, which seemed possessed of the strength of vikings, in spite of an impression, inevitable to Charter when he drew near—of one enduring a sort of Promethean dissolution. Charter reflected upon the man's eyes, which had the startling look of having penetrated beyond the formality of Death—into shadows where inquisition-hells were limned. It was not until he heard the steward address the other as "Doctor Bellingham," that the fanciful attraction weakened. His recollection crowded instantly with newspaper paragraphs regarding the Bellingham activities. Charter was rather normal in his masculine hatred for hypnotic artists and itinerary confessionals for women.

The *Panther* ran into a gale in that storm-crucible off Hatteras. Charter smiled at the thought, as the striding Bellingham passed, doing his mileage on the rocking deck, that the roar of the wind in the funnels aloft was fierce energy in the draughts of this human furnace. While his own interest waned, the other, curiously enough, began to respond to his unspoken overtures of a few days before. The *Panther* was a day out from San Juan, steaming past the far-flung coral shoals off Santo Domingo, when Charter was beckoned forward where Bellingham sat.

"This soft air would call a Saint Francis down from his spiritual meditations," the Doctor observed.

The voice put Charter on edge, and the manner affected him with inward humor. It was as if the other thought, "Why, there's that pleasant-faced young man again. Perhaps it would be just as well to speak with him." As he drew up his chair, however, Charter was conscious of an abrupt change in his mental attitude—an inclination to combat, verbally to rush in, seize and destroy every false utterance. His initial idea was to compel this man who spoke so glibly of meditations to explain what the word meant to him. This tense, nervous impatience to disqualify all the other might say became dominant enough to be reckoned with, but when Charter began to repress his irritation, a surprising inner resistance was encountered. His sensation was that of one being demagnetized. Thoughts and words came quickly with the outgoing energy of the current. Altogether he was extraordinarily affected.

"These Islands are not particularly adapted for one who pursues the austerities," he replied.

"Yet where can you find such temperamental happiness?" Bellingham inquired, plainly testing the other. His manner of speech was flippant, as if it were quite the same to him if his acquaintance preferred another subject.

"Anywhere among the less-evolved nations, when the people are warm and fed."

The Doctor smiled. "You will soon see the long, lithe coppery bodies of the Islanders, as they plunge into the sea from the Antillean cliffs. You will hear the soft laughter of the women, and then you will forget to deny their perfection." Sensuality exhaled from the utterance.

"You speak of the few brief zenith years which lie at the end of youth," Charter said. "This sort of perfection exists anywhere. In the Antilles it certainly is not because the natives have learned how to preserve life."

"That's just the point," said Bellingham, "Add to their natural gifts of beautiful young bodies—the knowledge of preservation."

"Take a poor, unread Island boy and inform him how to live forever," Charter observed. "Of course, he'll grasp the process instantly. But wouldn't it be rather severe on the other boys and girls, if the usual formula of perpetuating self is used? I mean, would he not have to restore his vitality from the others?"

Bellingham stared at him. Charter faced it out, but not without cost, for the livid countenance before him grew more and more ghastly and tenuous, until it had the effect of becoming altogether unsubstantial; and out of this wraith shone the eyes of the serpent. The clash of wills was quickly passed.

"You have encountered a different fountain of youth from mine," the Doctor said gently.

"Rather I have encountered a disgust for any serious consideration of immortality in the body."

"Interesting, but our good Saint Paul says that those who are in the body when the last call sounds, will be caught up—without disturbing the sleep of the dead."

"It would be rather hard on such bodies—if the chariots were of fire," Charter suggested.

He was inwardly groping for his poise. He could think well enough, but it disturbed him to feel the need to avoid the other's eyes. He liked the shaping of the conversation and knew that Bellingham felt himself unknown. Charter realized, too, that he would strike fire if he hammered long enough, but there was malevolence in the swift expenditure of energy demanded.

Bellingham smiled again. "Then you think it is inevitable that the end of man is—the clouds?"

"The aspiration of the spirit, I should say, is to be relieved of feet of clay.... Immortality in the body—that's an unbreakable paradox to me. I'm laminated, Harveyized against anything except making a fine tentative instrument of the body."

"You think, then, that the spirit grows as the body wastes?"

"Orientals have encountered starvation with astonishing results to philosophy," Charter remarked. "But I was thinking only of a body firmly helmed by a clean mind. The best I have within me declares that the fleshly wrapping becomes at the end but a cumbering cerement; that through life, it is a spirit-vault. When I pamper the body, following its fitful and imperious appetites, I surely stiffen the seals of the vault. In my hours in which the senses are dominant the spirit shrinks in abhorrence; just as it thrills, warms and expands in rarer moments of nobility."

"Then the old martyrs and saints who macerated themselves wove great folds of spirit?"

The inconsequential manner of the question urged Charter to greater effort to detach, if possible, for a moment at least, the other's Ego. "In ideal," he went on, "I should be as careless of food as Thoreau, as careless of physical pain as Suso. As for the reproductive devil incarnated in man—it, and all its ramifications, since the most delicate and delightful of these so often betray—I should encase in the coldest steel of repression——"

"You say, in ideal," Bellingham ventured quietly. "... But are not these great forces splendid fuel for the mind? Prodigious mental workers have said so."

"A common view," said Charter, who regarded the remark as characteristic. "Certain mental workers are

fond of expressing this. You hear it everywhere with a sort of 'Eureka.' Strength of the loins is but a coarse inflammation to the mind. A man may use such excess strength, earned by continence, in the production of exotics, feverish lyrics, and in depicting summer passions, but the truth is, that so long as that force is not censored, shriven and sterilized—it is the same jungle pestilence, and will color the mind with impurity. It is much better where it belongs—than in the mind."

"You do not believe in the wild torrents, the forked lightnings, and the shocking thunders of the poets?"

"I like the calm, conquering voices of the prophets better.... Immortality of the body?... There can be no immortality in a substance which earth attracts. We have vast and violent lessons to learn in the flesh; lessons which can be learned only in the flesh, because it is a matrix for the integration of spirit. It appears to me that, in due time, man reaches a period when he balances in the attractions—between the weight of the body and the lifting of the soul. This is the result of a slow, refining process that has endured through all time. Reincarnation is the best theory I know for the process. That there is an upward tendency driving the universe, seems to be the only cause and justification for Creating. Devolution cannot be at the centre of such a system.... The body becomes more and more a spotless garment for the soul; soul-light more and more electrifies it; the elimination of carnality in thought may even render the body delicate and transparent, but it is a matrix still, and falls away—when one's full-formed wings no longer need the weight of a thorax——"

"What an expression!" Bellingham observed abruptly. He had been staring away toward a low, cloudy film of land in the south. One would have thought that he had heard only the sentence which aroused his comment. Charter was filling with violence. The man's vanity was chained to him like a corpse. This experience of pouring out energy to no purpose aroused in Charter all the forces which had combined to force the public to his work. The thought came that Bellingham was so accustomed to direct the speech and thought of others, mainly women, that he had lost the listening faculty.

"Let me express it, then," Charter declared with his stoutest repression, "that this beautiful surviving element, having finished with the flesh, knows only the attraction of Light. It is the perfect flower of ages of earth-culture, exquisite and inimitable from the weathering centuries, and is radiant for a higher destiny than a cooling planet's crust——"

"My dear young man, you speak very clearly, prettily, and not without force, I may say,—a purely Platonistic gospel."

Charter's mental current was turned off for a second. True or false, the remark was eminently effective. A great man might have said it, or a dilettante.

"In which case, I have a firm foundation."

"But I am essentially of the moderns," said Bellingham.

"Perhaps I should have known that from your first remark—about the brown bodies of the Islanders, rejoicing in the sunlight and bathing in these jewelled seas."

"Ah, yes——" The softening of Bellingham's mouth, as he recalled his own words, injected fresh stimulant into the animus of the other. As Charter feared the eyes, so he had come to loathe the mouth, though he was not pleased with the intensity of his feelings.

"Do you honestly believe that—that which feels the attraction of earth, and becomes a part of earth after death—is the stuff of immortality?" he demanded.

"By marvellous processes of prolongation and refinement—and barring accident—yes."

"Processes which these poor Islanders could understand?"

"We are moving in a circle," Bellingham said hastily.

For the first moment, Charter felt the whip-hand over his own faculties.

"I've noted the great, modern tendency to preach *body*," he said, inhaling a big breath of the fragrant air, "to make a religion of bodily health—to look for elemental truth in alimentary canals; to mix prayer with carnal subterfuge and heaven with health resorts. Better Phallicism bare-faced.... I read a tract recently written by one of these body-worshippers—the smug, black devil. It made me feel just as I did when I found a doctor book in the attic once, at the age of ten.... Whatever I may be, have done, may feel, dream or think below the diaphragm—hasn't anything to do with my religion. I believe in health, as in a good horse or a good typewriter, but my body's health is not going to rule my day."

"You are young—to have become chilled by such polar blasts," Bellingham said uneasily, for he now found the other's eyes but without result.

"I came into the world with a full quiver of red passions," Charter said wearily, yet strangely glad. "The quiver is not empty. I do not say that I wish it were, but I have this to declare: I do not relish being told how to play with the barbs; how to polish and point and delight in them; how to put them back more deadly poisoned. I think there are big blankets of mercy for a natural voluptuary—for the things done when tissues are aflame—but for the man who deliberately studies to recreate them without cost, and tells others of his experiments—frankly, I believe in hell for such men-maggots. Oblivion is too sweet. The essence of my hatred for these Bodyists is because of the poison they infuse into the minds of youths and maidens, whose character-skeletons are still rubbery.... But let such teachers purr, wriggle, and dilate—for they're going back right speedily to the vipers!"

Bellingham's eyes had been lost in the South. He turned, arose, and after a pause said lightly, "Your talk is strong meat, young man.... I—I suffered a serious accident some months ago and cannot stay too long in one place. We shall talk again. How far do you go with the *Panther*?"

"Saint Pierre."

Charter already felt the first pangs of reaction. His vehemence, the burn of temper for himself, in that he had allowed the other's personality to prey upon him, and the unwonted aggressiveness of his talk—all assumed an evil aspect now as he perceived the occultist's ghastly face. In rising, Bellingham seemed to have stirred within himself centres of unutterable torture. His look suggested one who has been drilled in dreadful arcanums of pain, unapproached by ordinary men.

"I think I must have been pent a long time," Charter said in his trouble. "Perhaps, I'm a little afraid of myself and was rehearsing a warning for the strength of my own bridle-arm—since we're swinging down into these Isles of Seduction."

"You'll find a more comfortable coolness with the years, I think, and cease to abhor your bounding physical vitality. Remember, 'Jesus came eating and drinking——'"

Charter started under the touch of the old iron. "But 'wisdom is justified of all her children,'" he responded quickly.

They were at the door of Bellingham's cabin, which was forward on the promenade. The doctor laughed harshly as he turned the key. "I see you have your Scriptures, too," he said. "We must talk again."

"How far do you go with the *Panther*?" Charter asked, drawing away. His eyes had filled for a second, as the door swung open, with the photograph of a strangely charming young woman within the cabin.

"I have not decided—possibly on to South America."

Charter felt as he walked alone that he had shown his youth, even a pertness of youth. He recalled that he had done almost all the talking; that he had felt the combativeness of a boy who scents a rival from another school—quite ridiculous. Moreover, he was weary, as if one of his furious seasons of work had just ended—that rare and excellent kind of work which gathers about itself an elemental force to drive the mind as with fire until the course is run.... He did not encounter Bellingham during the rest of the voyage.

Long before dawn the *Panther* gained the harbor before Saint Pierre, and Charter awoke to the consciousness of a disorder in the air. Alone on deck, while the night was being driven back over the rising land, he was delighted to pick out the writhing letters of gold, "*Saragossa*," through the smoky gray, a few furlongs to the south. Peter Stock, an acquaintance from a former call at Saint Pierre, had become a solid and fruitful memory....

Father Fontanel was found early, where the suffering was greatest in the city. The old eyes lit with gladness as he caught Charter with both hands, and murmured something as his gaze sank into the eyes of the younger man—something which Charter did not exactly understand, about wolves being slain.

"What have you been doing with Old Man Pelée, Father? We heard him groaning in the night, and the town is fetid with his sickness."

"Ah, my son, I am afraid!"

Had all the seismologists of civilization gathered in Saint Pierre, and uttered a verdict that the volcano was an imminent menace, Charter would not have turned a more serious look at Pelée than he did that moment.... At the *Palms*, he found Peter Stock and a joyous welcome. They arranged for luncheon together, and the Capitalist hurried down into the city.... That proved a memorable luncheon, since Peter Stock at the last moment persuaded Miss Wyndam to join them.

Charter was disturbed with the thought that he had seen her before; and amazed that he could have forgotten where. He could only put it far back among the phantasmagoria of drinking days. Certainly the sane, restored Charter had never met this woman and forgotten. His veins were dilated as by a miraculous wine.

"The name is new to me, but I seem to have seen you somewhere, Miss Wyndam," he declared.

"That's the second time you've said that, young man," Mr. Stock remarked. "Don't your sentences register?"

"It's always bewildering—I know how Mr. Charter feels," Paula managed to say. "I'm quite sure we were never introduced, though I know Mr. Charter's work."

"That's good of you, indeed," he said. "I don't mean—to know my work—but to help me out with Friend Stock. It is bewildering that I have forgotten. I feel like a boy in an enchanted forest. Pelée has been working wonders all day."

"I can't follow you," the Capitalist sighed. "Your sentences are puckered."

They hardly heard him. Paula, holding fast with all her strength to the part she had planned to play, sensed Charter's blind emotion, distinct from her own series of shocks. To her it was that furious moment of adjustment, when a man and his ideal meet for the first time in a woman's heart. As for this heart, she feared they would hear its beating. Instantly, she knew that he had not come to Saint Pierre expecting to find her; knew that she was flooding into his subconsciousness—that he felt *worlds* and could not understand. She found the boy in his eyes—the boy of his old picture—and the deep lines and the white skin of a man who has lived clean, and the brow of a man who has thought many clean things. He was thinking of the Skylark, and "Wyndam" disturbed him.... Always when he hesitated in his speech, the right word sprang to her lips to help him. She caught the very processes of his thinking; his remoteness from the thought of food, was her own.... For hours, since she had heard his voice below, Paula had paced the floor of her room, planning to keep her secret long. She would play and watch his struggle to remember the Skylark; she would weigh the forces of the conflict, stimulate it; study him among men, in the presence of suffering, and in the dread of the mountain. All this she had planned, but now her whole heart went out to the boy in his eyes—the boy that smiled. All the doubts which at best she had hoped for the coming days to banish were erased in a moment; she even believed in its fullness the letter from Selma Cross—because he was embarrassed, brimming with emotions he could not understand, quite as the boy of her dreams would be. She lived full-length in his silences, hardly dared to look at him now, for she felt his constant gaze. She knew that she was colorless, but that her eyes were filled with light.... Presently she realized that they were talking of Father Fontanel.

"He's a good old man," said Peter Stock. "He works day and night—and refuses to call it work. Just think of having a servant with a God like Father Fontanel's to make work easy!"

"He's even a little bit sorry for Pelée," Charter said. "I'm never quite the same in Saint Pierre. Many times up in the States, I ask myself, if it isn't largely in my mind about Father Fontanel's spirit and his effect upon me. It isn't. Stronger than ever it came to me this morning. You know him?" He turned the last to the woman.

"Yes, I found him down on the water-front——"

"And brought him to me," said Mr. Stock, and added: "You know what bothered me about priests so long—they seem to have it all settled between them that theirs is the only true Air-line Limited to God. Fontanel's down in the lowlands, where life is pent and cruel, where there are weak sisters and little ones who have to be helped over hard ways—that's what gets Peter Stock."

"You don't know how good that is to hear," Paula said softly. "I have thought it, too, about some men in holy orders—black figures moving along in a 'grim, unfraternal' Indian file, with their eyes so occupied in keeping their feet from breaking fresh ground—that it seems they must sometimes lose the Summit."

Charter looked from one to the other. Peter Stock regarded their plates. Paula made a quick pretense of eating, and was grateful when Charter broke the silence: "Yes, Father Fontanel has found one of the trails to the Top—one of the happy ones. Sometimes I think there are just as many trails, as an ant could find to the top of an apple. Wayfarers go a-singing on Father Fontanel's trail—eyes warm with soft skies and untellable dreams. It's a way of fineness and loving-kindness——"

Mr. Stock had risen from the table and moved to a window which faced the North. All was vague about them. Paula had been carried by Charter's voice toward far-shining mountains.... In the silence, she met the strange, steady eyes of *the boy*, and looked away to find that the room had darkened.

"It is getting dark," he said.

She would have said it, if he hadn't.

The mountain rumbled.

"The North is a mass of swirling grays and blacks," Peter Stock announced from the window. "It isn't a thunderstorm——"

A sharp detonation cleaved the darkening air, and from the rear of the house the answer issued—quavering cries of children, sharp calling of mothers, and the sullen undertone of men. A subdued drumming came from the North now, completing the tossing currents of sound about the house. The dismal bellowing of cattle and the stamping of ponies was heard from the barns. All this was wiped out by a series of terrific crashes, and the floor stirred as if intaking a deep breath. The dining-room filled with a crying, crouching gray-lipped throng of servants. A deluge of ash complicated the half-night outside, and the curse of sulphur pressed down.

Paula arose. Charter had taken his place close beside her, but spoke no word.

# TWENTIETH CHAPTER

## CHARTER'S MIND BECOMES THE ARENA OF CONFLICT BETWEEN THE WYNDAM WOMAN AND SKYLARK MEMORIES

In the *Rue Rivoli* there was a little stone wine-shop. The street was short, narrow, crooked, and ill-paved—a cleft in Saint Pierre's terrace-work. Just across from the vault-like entrance to the shop, the white, scarred cliff arose to another flight of the city. Between the shop and the living-rooms behind there was a little court, shaded by mango-trees. Dwarfed banana-shrubs flourished in the shade of the mangoes, and singing-birds were caged in the lower foliage. Since the sun could find no entrance, the wine-shop was dark as a cave, and as cool. One window, if an aperture like the clean wound of a thirteen-inch gun could be called a window, opened to the north; and from it, by the grace of a crook in the *Rue Rivoli*, might be seen the mighty-calibred cone of Pelée.

Pere Rabeaut's wine was very good, and some of it was very cheap. The service was much as you made it, for if you were known you were permitted to help yourself. In this world there was no one of station too lofty to go to Pere Rabeaut's; and since those of no station whatsoever drank rum, instead of wine, you would meet no one there to whom it was not a privilege to say "*Bon jour*."

"Come and see my birds," the crafty Rabeaut would say if he approved of you.

"Where do you live?" you might ask, being a stranger.

"In the coolest hovel of Saint Pierre," was his invariable answer.

And presently, if you were truly alive, you would find yourself in the little stone wine-shop, listening to the birds and looking over the stalled casks, demijohns, and bottles, filled with more or less concentrated soil and sun. In due course, Soronia would appear in the shadowy doorway (it would seem that the bird-songs were hushed as she crossed the court), and she would show you a vintage of especially long ago. After that, though you became a missionary in Shantung, or a remittance-man in Tahiti, you would never forget the bouquet of the Rabeaut wines, the cantatas of the canaries, nor the witchery of Soronia's eyes.... If the little stone wine-shop were transplanted in New York, artists would find it, and you would be forced to fetch your own goblet and have difficulty in getting in and out for the crowd o' nights.

Thither Charter went the next morning and sat down in the cherished coolness. Peter Stock had reminded him of their former talks there, over a particular wine of Epernay, and had arranged to meet him this morning.... In the foreground of Charter's mind a gritty depression had settled, but throughout the finer, farther consciousness, where realities abide, there hung a mystic constellation, which every little while (and with a shock of ecstasy, so wonderful that his *mere* brain was alarmed and called it scandalous), fused together into a great, glowing ardent Star of Bethlehem....

Again, the *mere* brain said: "What have you done with your three years? The actress knew you better than you knew yourself. All your letters, and the spirit of your letters, have fallen into ruin before the first woman you meet down here in a dreamy, tropic isle. How can you—you, who have lived truly for a little while, and seemed to have felt the love that lifts—sink into the fragrant meshes of romance, through the beautiful eyes of a stranger to your world and to your ways? And what of Skylark, the lovely, the

winged?..." And the soul of the man riding at its moorings in the bright calm of wisdom's anchorage, made laughing answer: "This is the Skylark—ah, not that Wyndam is Linster,—but this is the veiled queen who has waited so long for the House of Charter to be ready. This is the forever-fairy that puzzled the nights and mornings of the long-ago Charter boy. It was her wing that held the last dart of light in the gardens of boyhood before the frowning thunders came. It was her songs that made the youth's mind magic with lyrics, certain ones so very clear that they fitted into words. It was to find her dazzling brow that lured him to prodigious wanderings, until he fell fainting in the dust of other women's chariots. It was the rustling of her wings that he heard from without, when he lay in the Caverns of Devouring, where the twain, Flesh and Death, hold ghastly carnival; the flash of her wings again that lifted his eyes to the Rising Road. It was her spirit in the splendid East whose miracles of singing and shining made glorious, with creative touch, his hours by the garret window.... It was she of exquisite shoulder and starry eyes and radiant sympathies—before whom the boy, the man and the spirit, bowed in thankfulness yesterday...."

And so he sat there thinking, thinking,—glimpsing the errant centuries in the same high light of memory that this very morning recurred—an hour or two ago, when he had walked with her through the mango-grove in the coolness following a dawn-shower that had washed the white weight of Pelée's ash-winter from the trees.... "What a chaos I must be," he murmured in dull anguish, "with the finest of my life plighted to a vision that is lost—while I linger desolate in the presence of wondrous reality!" ... Some one was moving and whispering in the little room across the court of the song-birds.... Peter Stock entered, his white hair and mustache dulled with ash; his eyes red and angry.

"Well, I think I've got Father Fontanel frightened," he said, sinking down across the little round table. "He's telling the people to shut up their houses and go to Fort de France. Sixty or seventy have started, and many more have gone up to Morne Rouge and Ajoupa Boullion, where it happens to be cool, though they're just as close to the craters. Fontanel has come into a very proper spirit of respect for Pelée's destructive capacity. By the way, did you hear what happened yesterday, during the darkness and racket while we were at dinner?"

"Not definitely. Tell me," Charter urged.

"The extreme northern end of the city, or part of it, was flooded out like an ant-hill under a kettle boiling over. The River *Blanche* overflowed her banks, and ran with boiling mud from the volcano. Thirty people were killed and the Usine Guerin destroyed."

"I didn't think it was so bad as that."

"I hope I'm wrong, but the Guerin disaster may be only a preliminary demonstration—like the operator experimenting to find if it is dark enough to start the main fireworks. Nobody can complain to Saint Peter that Pelée hasn't warned."

"There's another way to look at it," Charter said. "The volcano's overflow into the River *Blanche* might have eased the pressure upon the craters. I wonder if there is any authority or precedent for such a hope?"

"If Pelée's fuse is burning shorter and shorter toward a Krakatoan cataclysm," Peter Stock declared moodily, "it's not for man to say what spark will shake the world.... I tried to see Mondet this morning—but couldn't get in. You wouldn't think one white, small person could contain so much poison. I am haunted with the desire to commit physical depredations."

"I think I'll take a little journey up toward the craters to-morrow," Charter confided, after a moment. "They say that the weather is quiet and clean to the north of the mountain. One might ride up and try to reason

with *Pere Pelée*——"

At this juncture Soronia entered the wine-shop from the little court, to fill the eyes and the goblets of the Americans. A dark, ardent, alluring face; flesh like dull gold, made wonderful by the faintest tints of ripe fruit; eyes that could melt and burn and laugh; a fragile figure, but radiantly abloom, and as worthily draped as a young palm in a richly blossoming vine. She made one think of a strange, regal flower, an experiment of Nature, wrought in the most sumptuous shadow of a tropic garden.... She was gone. Charter laughed at the drained look in Peter Stock's face.

"An orchid——" the latter began.

"Or a sunlit cathedral window."

"Will the visitation be repeated? Do I wake or sleep?"

"The years have dealt artistically in the little wine-shop," said Charter. "They say old Pere Rabeaut married a *fille de couleur*—daughter of a former Governor-General of Martinique."

"Some Daphne of the Islands, she must have been, since Pere Rabeaut does not seem designed to father a sunset.... It's my first glimpse of Soronia this voyage. She was beautiful in a girlish way last year.... She's in love, or she couldn't glow like that. I met Pere Rabeaut down in the city——"

Charter arose. "Perhaps the lover is across the court. I heard a whispering through the bird-songs—and one could not fail to note how she hurried back.... I must go on. The water is no better here than elsewhere."

"But the wine is," said Peter Stock. "Wait luncheon for me at the *Palms*.... By the way, how'd you like to take a little cruise—feel the *Saragossa* under you, running like a scared deer to hitch herself to the solid old Horn, built of rock and sealed with icebergs——"

"A clean thought, in this air—but the eventualities here attract. When Father Fontanel grows afraid for the city, well, it may not be scientific, but it's ominous.... I wanted to ask if it ever occurred to you that even the *Morne d'Orange* might fall into the sweeping range of Pelée's guns?"

"In other words—if the mountain won't recede from Miss Wyndam, we'd better snatch up Miss Wyndam and make a getaway from the mountain?"

From far within a "Yea" was acclaimed, yet there was a sullen Charter integrity which had given its word to Skylark, and feared the test of being shut on the same ship with a woman who endowed him with such power that he felt potent to go to the craters and remonstrate with the Monster.

"It might be well to ask her," Charter replied gloomily, "but I'm rather absorbed in the action here and Father Fontanel's work. I want to look at the craters from behind——"

"Twice you've said that," said Peter Stock, "and each time it reminds me that I'm old, yet there's a lure about it. I'm thinking——"

Their heads were together at the little round window for the mountain had rumbled again, and they stared beyond the city into the ashen shroud.

"Grand old martyr," Charter muttered, "hang on, hang on!... The flag of truce still flies."

Paula at the *Palms* reflected the Charter conflict that morning. She had seen it in his eyes and felt it in his heart, as they had walked together in the mock-winter of the mango-grove before breakfast. Away from him now, however, she could not be sure that "Wyndam," representing the woman, altogether satisfied his vision of Skylark. Very strange, he was, in his struggling, and it became harder, and a more delicate thing than she had believed, to say, "I am Paula Linster." She had felt this great restlessness of his spirit vaguely in the early letters—a stormy, battling spirit which his brain constantly labored to interpret. She had seen his moments of calm, too, when the eyes and smile of the boy rendered his attractions so intimate to her, that she could have told him anything—but these calms did not endure even in her presence. She did not want the woman, Wyndam, despised, nor yet the Skylark put from him. It became a reality, that out of his struggle Truth would rise; meanwhile, though not with the entire sanction of a certain inner voice, she withheld her secret, remaining silent and watchful in the midst of the greatest drama the world could bring to her understanding....

Paula did not fail to note that Peter Stock was somewhat surprised when she refused for the present his invitation to spend the nights at least out in the cool Caribbean. She saw, moreover, that Quentin Charter was beginning to fear the mountain, because she remained at the *Palms*. Indeed, it was hard for all to remember that in form, at least, they were mere acquaintances, so familiar had they become to each other in the pressure of Pelée. Above all this, she was almost continually conscious of Bellingham since the receipt of Madame Nestor's letter. It was not that his power was formidable enough to disorder the unfolding of the drama, but she felt his nearness, his strategies—all the more strange, as there had been no sign of him since the arrival of the *Panther*. If for no other reason, she would have found it difficult to disclose her real name to Quentin Charter, while her mind was even distantly the prey of the black giant.

These were tremendous hours—when but a word from her withheld two hearts from bursting into anthems. Bravely, she gloried in these last great refinings—longings, fears, exaltations, but never was she without the loftiest hope of her life. The man who had come was so much that *the man* should be. She saw his former years as the wobblings of a top that has not yet gained its momentum. Only at its highest speed does the top sing its peace with God.... Had not the finest glow of his powers been reserved until her coming?...

In such moments as these, she could look back upon her own agonies with gratitude. She had needed a Bellingham. Should she not be thankful that a beyond-devil had been required to test her soul? In the splendid renewals of her spirit, Paula felt that she could look into the magician's eyes now and command him from her. She was even grateful that she had been swept in the fury of The High Tide, nor would she have had that supreme night of trial when she fled from the *Zoroaster*, stricken from her past. Just as Quentin Charter, of the terrible thirsts, had required his years of wrath and wandering, so her soul had needed the test of a woman's revelations and man's sublimated passion. Deep within lived a majestic happiness—earned.

At one o'clock, as she was going below for luncheon, the sun gave up trying to shine through the ash-fog, but volumes of dreadful heat found the earth. The *Saragossa* was invisible in the roadstead; there was no line dividing shore and sea, nor sea and sky. It was all an illimitable mask, whose fabric was the dust which for centuries had lain upon the dynamos of Pelée.

# TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER

## CHARTER COMMUNES WITH THE WYNDAM WOMAN, AND CONFESSES THE GREAT TROUBLE OF HIS HEART TO FATHER FONTANEL

"Do you know what I discovered this morning?" Peter Stock asked, after the three had found a table together. "M. Mondet is trying to keep the people in town for political reasons. It appears that there is to be an election in a few days. All my efforts, and, by non-parishioners, the efforts of Father Fontanel, are regarded as a political counter-stroke—to rush a certain element of the suffrage out of the town.... This is certainly Ash-Wednesday, isn't it?"

Charter laughed. "My theory that the Guerin disaster might relieve the craters and give surcease to Saint Pierre—doesn't seem to work out. The air is getting thicker, even."

"It isn't really ash, you know," explained Mr. Stock, "but rock, ground fine as neat in the hell-mills under the mountain and shot out by steam through Pelée's valves——"

"Intensely graphic," said Paula.

"It has been rather a graphic morning," Charter remarked. "Friend Stock is virile from his activities with Father Fontanel."

"Well, I didn't make a covenant with the mountain—as you did this morning in the wine-shop. You should have seen him, Miss Wyndam, staring away at the volcano and, muttering, 'Hang on, old chap, hang on!....' My dear young woman, doesn't a ride on the ocean sound good for this afternoon? You can sit on deck and hold the little black babies. The *Saragossa* takes another load to Fort de France in two or three hours."

She shook her head. "Not just yet. You don't realize how wonderful the drama is to me—you and Father Fontanel, playing Cassandra down in the city—the groaning mountain, and the pity of it all. I confess a little inconvenience of the weather isn't enough to drive me out. It isn't very often given to a woman to watch the operations of a destiny so big as this."

The capitalist turned to Charter. "You know Empress Josephine was born in Martinique and has become a sort of patron saint for the Island. A beautiful statue of her stands in the square at Fort de France where our refugees are encamped. I was only thinking that the map of Europe and the history of France might have been altered greatly if our beloved Josephine had been gifted with a will like this—of Miss Wyndam's."

Her pale, searching face regarded Charter for a second, and his eyes said plainly as words, "Don't you think you'd better consider this more seriously?"

"Maybe you'll like the idea better for the evening, when the *Saragossa* is back in the roadstead again, comparatively empty," Peter Stock added presently. "Father Fontanel and I have a lot to do in the meantime. Can you imagine our first parents occupying themselves when the first tornado was swooping down—our dear initial mother, surpassingly wind-blown, driving the geese to shelter, propping up the orchards, getting out the rain-barrels, and tightening tent-pins?"

"Vividly," said Paula.

"That's just how busy we are—Father Fontanel and I."

It was to be expected that a sophomoric pointlessness should characterize the sayings of the two in the midst of Peter Stock's masculinity and the thrilling magnitude of the marvel each was to the other.... They were left together presently, and the search for treasure began at once:

"... The present is a time of readjustment between men and women," he was saying. "It seems to me that the great mistake people make—men and women alike—is that each sex tries to raise itself by lowering the other. It hardly could be any other way just now, and at first—with woman filled with the turmoil of emerging from ages of oppression—fighting back the old and fitting to the new. But in man and woman—not in either alone—lies completion. If the two do not quite complete each other, a Third often springs from them with an increased spiritual development."

"Yes," she answered, leaning forward, her chin fitted to her palms. "The *I-am* and the *You-are-not* will soon be put away. I like to think of it—that man and woman are together in the complete human. There is a glorious, an arch-feminine ideal in the nature of the Christ——"

"Even in the ineffable courage," he added softly. "That is woman's—the finer courage that never loses its tenderness.... His Figure sometimes, as now, becomes an intimate passion to me——"

"As if He were near?"

"As if He were near—still loving, still mediating—all earth's struggle and anguish passing through Him and becoming glorified with His pity and tenderness—before it reaches the eyes of the Father.... There is no other way. Man and woman must be One in Two—before Two in One. They must not war upon each other. Woman is receptive; man the origin. Woman is a planet cooled to support life; man, still an incandescent sun, generates the life."

"That is clear and inspiring," she said. "I have always wanted it said just like that—that one is as important as the other in the evolution of the Individual——"

"And for that Individual are swung the solar systems.... Look at Job—denuded of all but the Spirit. There is an Individual, and his story is the history of an Initiation.... We are coming to a time when Mind will operate in man and woman *conscious* of the Soul. When that time comes true, how the progress to God will be cleared and speeded! It will be a flight——"

"Instead of a crawl," she finished.

They were alone in the big dining-room. Their voices could not have reached the nearest empty table. It was like a communion—their first communion.

"I have felt it," she went on in a strange, low tone, "and heard the New Voices—Preparers of the Way. Sometimes it came to me in New York—the stirring of a great, new spiritual life. I have felt the hunger—that awful hollowness in the breasts of men and women, who turn to each other in mute agony, who turn to a thousand foolish sensations—because they do not realize what they hunger for. Their breasts cry out to be filled——"

"And the Spirit cries out to flood in."

"Yes, and the Spirit asks only for Earth-people to listen to their inner voices and love one another," she

completed. "It demands no macerations, no fetters, no fearful austerities—only fineness and loving kindness."

"How wonderfully they have come to me, too—those radiant moments—as I sat by my study window, facing the East," he whispered, not knowing what the last words meant to her. "How clear it is that all great and good things come with this soul-age—this soul-consciousness. I have seen in those lovely moments that Mother Earth is but one of many of God's gardens; that human life is but a day in a glorious culture-scheme which involves many brighter and brighter transplantings; that the radiance of the Christ, our Exemplar, but shows us the loveliness which shall be ours when we approach that lofty maturity of bloom——"

A waiter entered with the word that a man from the city, Pere Rabeaut, desired to see Mr. Charter. Each felt the dreadfulness of returning so abruptly to sordid exterior consciousness—each felt the gray ghost of Pelée.

"I shall go and see what is wanted, Miss Wyndam, and hurry back—if I may?" he said in a dull, tired tone.

It was the first time he had said "Wyndam," and it hurt cruelly at this moment.... "No, no," she said rising hastily. "It would spoil it to come back. We could not forget ourselves like that—so soon again. It always spoils—oh, what am I saying? I think our talk must have interested me very much."

"I understand," he said gently. "But we shall talk again—and for this little hour, my whole heart rises to thank you."

Pere Rabeaut was waiting upon the veranda. Peculiarly, at this moment he seemed attached to the crook of wine-shop servitude, which Charter had never noticed with such evidence among the familiar casks. Moreover, disorder was written upon the gray face.

"*Mon Dieu*, what a day, M. Charter!—a day of judgment! Soronia's little birds are dying!"

Charter regarded the sharp, black eyes, which darted over his own face, but would not be held in any gaze.

"I heard from my daughter that you are going to the craters of the mountain," the old man said. "'He will need a guide,' said I at once. 'And guides are scarce just now, for the people are afraid of Pelée. Still, he's an old patron,' I said to Soronia. 'He cannot go to the mountain without a guide, so I shall do this little thing for him. He must have our Jacques.'"

Charter drew him away. He did not care to have it known at the *Palms* that he was projecting a trip to the summit. Perhaps the inscrutable Pere Rabeaut was conferring a considerable favor. It was arranged that if he decided to make the journey, the American should call at the wine-shop for Jacques early the following morning. Pere Rabeaut left him none the poorer for his queer errand.

Charter avoided Miss Wyndam for the rest of the day. Beyond all the words of their little talk, had come to him a fullness of womanhood quite beyond the dreamer. As he remembered the lustrous face, the completion of his sentences, the mutual sustaining of their thoughts, their steady, tireless ascent beyond the need of words; as he remembered her calms, and the glimpses of cosmic consciousness, her grasp, her expression, her silences, the exquisite refinement of her face, and the lingering adoration in her eyes—the ideal of the Skylark was so clearly and marvellously personified that for moments at a time the vision was lost in the living woman. And for this, Quentin Charter proposed to suffer—and to suffer alone.

So he supped down-town, and waited for Father Fontanel at the parish-house. The priest came in during the evening and Charter saw at once, what the other never could have admitted, that the last few days had borne the good man to the uttermost edges of his frail vitality. Under the lamp, the beautiful old face had the whiteness of that virgin wax of Italian hives in which the young queens lie until the hour of awakening. The tired, smiling eyes, deeply shadowed under a brow that was blest, gazed upon the young man with a light in his eyes not reflected from the lamp, but from his great love—in that pure fatherhood of celibacy....

"Ah, no, I'm not weary, my son. We must have our walks and talks together on the *Morne* again.... When old Father Pelée rests once more from his travail, and the people are happy again, you and I shall walk under the stars, and you shall tell me of those glorious saints, who felt in the presence of God that they must put such violent constraint upon themselves.... When I think of my suffering people—it comes to me that the white ship was sent like a good angel—and how I thank that noble lady for taking me at once to this great rock of an American, who bluffs me about so cheerily and grants all things before they are asked. What wonderful people you are from America! But it is always so—always these good things come to me. Indeed, I am very grateful.... Weary?—what a poor old man I should be to fall weary in the midst of such helpers...."

Charter sat down beside him under the lamp and told him what an arena his mind had become for conflict between a woman and a vision. Even with the writer's trained designing, the tale drew out with an oriental patience of weaving and coloring. Charter had felt a woman's need for the ease of disclosure, and indeed there was no other man whom he would have told. He had a thought, too, that if by any chance Pelée should intervene—both the woman and the Skylark might learn. He did not tell of his plan to go to the mountain—lest he be dissuaded. In his mind the following day was set apart—as a sort of pilgrimage sacred to Skylark.

"Old Pelée has shadowed my mind," Father Fontanel said, when the story was done. "I see him before and between all things, but I shall meditate and tell you what seems best in my sight. Only this, my son, you may know, that when first the noble lady filled my eyes—I felt you near her—as if she had come to me from you, whom I always loved to remember."

Charter bowed and went his way, troubled by the shadow of Pelée in the holy man's mind; and yet glad, too, that the priest had felt him near when he first saw Miss Wyndam. It was late when he reached the *Palms* yet sleeplessness ranged through his mind, and he did not soon go to his room. The house and grounds were all his own. He paced the veranda, the garden paths and drives; crossed the shadowy lawns, brooded upon the rumbling mountain and the foggy moon high in the south.... At the side of the great house to the north, there was a trellis heavily burdened with lianas. Within, he found the orifice of an old cistern, partially covered by unfixed planking. A startling thought caused him to wonder why he had not explored the place before. The moonlight, faint at best, gave but ghostly light through the foliage, yet he kicked away a board and lit a match. A heavy wooden bar crossed the rim and was set stoutly in the masonry. His mind keenly grasped each detail at the exterior. A rusty chain depended from the thick cross-piece. He dropped several ignited matches into the chamber. Slabs of stone from the side-walls had fallen into the cistern, which seemed to contain little or no water.... From one of the native cabins came the sound of a dog barking. A shutter clicked in one of the upper windows of the plantation-house.

# TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER

## CHARTER MAKES A PILGRIMAGE TO THE CRATERS OF *PELÉE*—ONE LAST DAY DEVOTED TO THE SPIRIT OF OLD LETTERS

Charter left the *Palms* early to join his guide at the wine-shop. He had kept apart from Peter Stock for two reasons. The old capitalist easily could have been tempted to accompany him. Personally, Charter did not consider a strong element of danger, and a glimpse into the volcano's mouth would give him a grasp and handling of the throes of a sick world, around which all natural phenomena would assume thereafter an admirable repression. To Peter Stock it would be an adventure, merely. More than all this, he wanted to go to the mountain alone. It was the Skylark's day; and for this reason, he hurried out of the *Palms* and down to the city without breakfast.... A last look from the *Morne*, as it dipped into the *Rue Victor Hugo*—at a certain upper window of the plantation-house, where it seemed he was leaving all the bright valiant prodigies of the future. He turned resolutely toward Pelée—but the Skylark's song grew fainter *behind*.

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Pere Rabeaut's interest in the venture continued to delight him. Procuring a companion was no common favor, since inquiries in the town proved that the regular guides were in abject dread of approaching the Monster now. Soronia, Pere Rabeaut, and his new servant awaited him in the *Rue Rivoli*. The latter was a huge Creole, of gloomy visage. They would not find any one to accompany them in the lower part of the city, he said, as the fear there was greater than ever since the Guerin disaster. In Morne Rouge, however, they would doubtless be able to procure mules, food, and other servants if necessary, for a day's trip to the craters. All of which appeared reasonable to Charter, though he wondered again at the vital interest of Pere Rabeaut, and the general tension of the starting.

The two passed down through the city, and into the crowd of the market-place, where a blithesome little drama unfolded. Peter Stock had apparently been talking to the people about their volcano, urging them, no doubt, to take the advice of Father Fontanel and flee to Fort de France, when he had perceived M. Mondet passing in his carriage. Charter saw his friend dart quickly from the crowd and seize the bridle. Despite the protestations of the driver, the capitalist drew the vehicle into view of all. His face was red with the heat and ashine with laughter and perspiration. Alarm and merriment mingled in the native throng. All eyes followed the towering figure of the American who now swung open the door of the carriage and bowed low to M. Mondet.

"This, dear friends," Peter Stock announced, as one would produce a rabbit from a silk hat,—"this, you all perceive, is your little editor of *Les Colonies*. Is he not bright and clean and pretty? He is very fond of American humor. See how the little editor laughs!"

M. Mondet's smile was yellowish-gray and of sickly contour. His article relative to the American appealed to him now entirely stripped of the humor with which it was fraught a few days before, as he had composed it in the inner of inner-offices. This demon of crackling French and restless hands would stop at nothing. M. Mondet pictured himself being picked up for dead presently. As the blow did not fall on the instant, the sorry thought tried him that he was to be played with before being dispatched.

"This is the man who tells you that Saint Pierre is in no danger—who scoffs at those who have already gone—who inquires in his paper, 'Where on the Island could a more secure place than Saint Pierre be found in the event of an earthquake visitation?' M. Mondet advises us to flee with all dispatch to the live craters of a volcano to escape his hypothetical earthquake." Peter Stock was now holding up the Frenchman's arm, as a referee upraises the whip of a winning fighter. "He says there's no more peril from Pelée than from an old man shaking ashes out of his pipe. I proposed to wager my ship against M. Mondet's rolled-top desk that he was wrong, but there was a difficulty in the way. Do you not see, my friends of Saint Pierre, that, if I won the wager, I should not be able to distinguish between M. Mondet's rolled-top desk and M. Mondet's cigarette case in the ruins of the city——"

There had been a steady growling from the mountain.

"Ah!" Stock exclaimed after a pause, "Pelée speaks again! 'I will repay—verily, I will repay!' growls the Monster. Let it be so, then, friends of mine. I will turn over my little account to the big fire-eater yonder who will collect all debts. I tell you, we who tarry too long will be buying political extras and last editions in hell from this bit of a newspaper man!"

Charter laughingly turned away to avoid being seen, just as M. Mondet was chucked like a large, soft bundle into the seat of his carriage and the door slammed forcibly, corking whatever wrath appertained. In any of the red-blooded zones, a foreigner who performed such antics at the expense of a portly and respected citizen would have encountered a quietus quick and blasting, but the people of Martinique are not swift to anger nor forward in reprisal.

Charter's physical energy was imperious, but the numbness of his scalp was a pregnant warning against the perils of heat. There were moments in which his mind moved in a light, irresponsible fashion, as if obsessed at quick intervals, one after another, by mad kings who dared anything, and whom no one dared refuse. Somehow his brain contrived with striking artifices to keep the Wyndam-Skylark conflict in the background; yet, as often as he became aware of old Vulcan muttering his agonies ahead, just so often did the reality rise that the meaning and direction of his life was gone, if he was not to see again the woman at the *Palms*.

Jacques, his guide, followed in sullen silence. They crossed the Roxelane, and presently were ascending toward Morne Rouge. Saint Pierre was just still enough now to act like a vast sounding-board. Remote voices reached them, even from the harbor-front to the left, and from shut shops everywhere.... It was nearly mid-day, when he rode out from Morne Rouge, with three more companions.

The ash-hung valley was far behind, and Charter drank deeply of the clean, east wind from the Atlantic. There was a rush of bitterness, too, because the woman was not there to share these priceless volumes of sunlit vitality. All the impetus of enterprise was needed now to turn the point of conflict, and force it into the background again.... They pushed through Ajoupa Boullion to the gorge of the Falaise, the northward bank of which marked the trail which Jacques chose to the summit.

And now they moved upward in the midst of the old glory of Martinique. The brisk Trades blowing evenly in the heights, wiped the eastern slope of the mountain clear of stone-dust and whipped the blasts of sulphur down into the valley toward the shore. Green lakes of cane filled the valleys behind, and groves of cocoa-palms, so distant and so orderly that they looked like a city garden set with hen and chickens.... Northward, through the rifts, glistened the sea, steel-blue and cool. Before them rose the vast, green-clad mass of the mountain, its corona dim with smoke and lashed by storm. Down in the southwest lay the ghastly pall, the hidden, tortured city, tranced under the cobra-head of the volcano and already

laved in its poison.

The trail became very steep at two thousand feet, and this fact, together with the back-thresh of the summit disturbance, forced Charter to abandon the animals. It transpired that two of the three later guides felt it their duty, at this point, to stay behind with the mules. A little later, when the growling from the prone, upturned face of the Monster suddenly arose to a roar that twisted the flesh and outraged the senses of man, Charter looked back and found that only one native was faltering behind, instead of two. And this one was Jacques, of the savage eyes. Pere Rabeaut was praised again.

Fascination for the dying Thing took hold of him now and drew him on. Charter was little conscious of fear for his life, but of a fixed terror lest he should be unable to go on. He found himself tearing up a handkerchief and stuffing the shreds in his ears to deaden the hideous vibrations. With the linen remaining, he filled his mouth, shutting his jaws together upon it, as the wheels of a wagon are blocked on an incline.

The titanic disorder placated his own. He became unconscious of passing time. From the contour of the slope, remembered from a past visit, he was aware of nearing the *Lac des Palmists*, which marked the summit-level. Yet changes, violent changes, were everywhere evidenced. The shoulder of the mountain was smeared with a crust of ash and seamed with fresh scars. The crust was made by the dry, whirling winds playing upon the paste formed of stone-dust and condensed steam. The clicking whir, like a clap of wings, heard at intervals, accounted for the scars. Bombs of rock were being hurled from the great tubes. Here he shouted to Jacques to stay behind; that he would be back in a few moments. There was a nod of assent from the evil head.

That he was in the range of a raking volcano-fire impressed with a sort of laughing awe this ant clinging to the beard of a giant. Up, knees and hands, now, he crawled—up over the throbbing chin, to the black, pounded lip of the Monster. Out of the old lake coiled the furious tower of steam and rock-dust which mushroomed in high heaven, like a primal nebula from which worlds are made. It was this which fell upon the city. Pockets of gas exploded in the heights, rending the periphery, as the veil of the temple was rent. Only this horrible torrent spreading over Saint Pierre to witness, but sounds not meant for the ear of man, sounds which seemed to saw his skull in twain—the thundering engines of a planet.

The rocky rim of the lake was hot to his hands and knees, but a moment more he lingered. A thought in his brain held him there with thrilling bands. It was only a plaything of mind—a vagary of altitude and immensity. "Did ever the body of a man clog the crater of a live volcano?" was his irreverent query. "Did ever suicidal genius conceive of corrupting such majesty of force with his pygmy purpose?"

There he lay, sprawled at the edge of the universal mystery, at the secret-entrance to the chamber of earth's dynamos. The edge of the pit shook with the frightful work going on below, yet he was not slain. The torrent burst past and upward with a southward inclination, clean as a missing bullet. The bombs of rock canted out from sheer weight and fell behind. That which he comprehended—although his eyes saw only the gray, thundering cataclysm—was never before imagined in the mind of man.

The gray blackened. The roar dwindled, and his senses reeled. With a rush of saliva, the linen dropped from his open mouth. Charter was sure there was a gaping cleft in his skull, for he could feel the air blowing in and out, cold and colder. He tried to lift his hands to cover the sensitive wound, but they groped in vain for his head. With the icy draughts of air, he seemed to hear faintly his name falling upon bare ganglia. For a second he feared that the lower part of his body would not respond; that he was uncoupled like a beast whose spine is broken.... It was only a momentary overcoming of the gas, or altitude, or the dreadful disorder, or all three. Yet he knew how he must turn back if he lived.... His name

was called again. He thought it was the Reaper, calling forth his ghost.

"Quentin Charter! Quentin Charter!"

Then he saw the Wyndam woman on the veranda of the *Palms*, her face white with agony, her eyes straining toward him.... Turning hastily—he missed death in a savage, sordid reality. Jacques had crept upon him, a maniac in his eyes, dog's slaver on his lips. A rock twice as large as his head was upraised in both arms. With a muscular spasm one knows in a dream, Charter's whole body united in a spring to the side—escaping the rock. Jacques turned and fled like a goat, leaping from level to level.

Charter managed to follow. He felt weak and ill for the time, as though Pelée had punished him for peering into matters which Nature does not thank man for endeavoring to understand.... The three natives pressed about him far down on the slope. Jacques had vanished. The sun was sinking seaward. Charter mounted his mule, turning the recent incident over in his mind for the manieth time. His first thought had been that the indescribable gripping of the mountain had turned mad a decent servant, but this did not stand when he recalled how Pere Rabeaut had importuned him to accept Jacques, and how the latter had fled from his *failure*. Yet, so far as he could see, there was no reason in the world why a conspiracy to murder him should have origin in the little wine-shop of *Rue Rivoli*. It was all baffling even at first, that a rock had been chosen, when a knife or a pistol would have been effective. This latter, he explained presently. There was a possibility of his body being found; a smashed head would fall to the blame of *Pere Pelée*, who was casting bombs of rock upon the slopes; while a knife or a bullet-wound on his body would start the hounds indeed.

He rode down the winding trail apart from the guides. Darkness was beginning, and the lights of Ajoupa Boullion showed ahead. The mountain carried on a frightful drumming behind. Coiling masses of volcanic spume, miles above the craters, generated their own fire; and lit in the flashes, looked like billows of boiling steel. Charter rode upon sheer nerve—nerve at which men had often wondered. At length a full-rigged thought sprang into his mind, which had known but the passing of hopeless derelicts since the first moment of descent. It was she who had called to save him. The woman of flesh had become a vision indeed. The little Island mule felt the heel that moment.... Charter turned back to the red moiled sky—a rolling, roaring Hades in the North.

"I can't help it, Skylark," he murmured, "if you *will* merge into this woman. She may never know that a man fled from her to the mountain to-day, and is hurrying back—as to the source of all beauty!... Charter, Charter, your thoughts are boiling over——"

He rode into the streets of Morne Rouge, so over-crowded now with the frightened from the lower city, that many were huddled upon the highway where they would be forced to sleep. Here he paid the three guides, but retained his mule.... On the down trail again, he re-entered the bank of falling ash and the sulphurous desolation. Evil as it was, the taint brought a sense of proximity to the *Morne* and the *Palms*. Saint Pierre was dark and harrowingly still under the throbbing volcano. The hoof-beats of the mule were muffled in ash, as if he pounded along a sandy beach. Often a rousing fetor reached the nostrils of the rider, above the drying, cutting vapor from Pelée, and the little beast shied and snorted at untoward humps on the highway. War and pestilence, seemingly, had stalked through Saint Pierre that day and a winter storm had tried to cover the aftermath.... He passed through *Rue Rivoli*, but was far too eager to reach the *Palms* to stop at the wine-shop. The ugly mystery there could be penetrated afterward. Downward, he turned toward the next terrace, where the solitary figure of a woman confronted him.

"Mr. Charter!" she cried. "And—you are able to ride?"

"Why, what do you mean, Miss Wyndam?" he said, swiftly dismounting. "What are you doing 'way up here alone—in this dreadful suffocation?"

"I was looking for a little stone wine-shop——" She checked herself, a scroll of horrors spreading open in her brain.

"It's just a little way back," he said, in a repressed tone. "I have an errand there, too. Shall I show you?"

"No," she answered shuddering. "I'll walk with you back to the *Palms*. I must think.... Oh, let us hurry!"

He lifted her to the saddle, and took the bridle-rein.

# TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER

## CHARTER AND STOCK ARE CALLED TO THE PRIEST'S HOUSE IN THE NIGHT, AND THE WYNDAM WOMAN STAYS AT THE *PALMS*

Peter Stock was abroad in the *Palms* shortly after Charter left for the wine-shop to join Jacques, for the day's trip. The absence of the younger man reminded him of the project Charter had twice mentioned in the wine-shop.

"I can't quite understand it," he said to Miss Wyndam as he started for the city, "if he really has gone to the craters. He had me thinking it over—about going along. Why should he rush off alone? I tell you, it's not like him. The boy's troubled—got some of the groan-stuff of Pelée in his vitals."

The day began badly for Paula. Her mind assumed the old dread receptivity which the occultist had found to his advantage; terrors flocked in as the hours drew on. One pays for being responsive to the finer textures of life. Under the stimulus of heat, good steel becomes radiant with an activity destructive to itself, but quite as marvellous in its way as the starry heavens. What a superior and admirable endowment, this, though it consumes, compared to the dead asbestos-fabric which will not warm. Paula felt the city in her breast that day—the restless, fevered cries of children and the answering maternal anguish, the terror everywhere, even in bird-cries and limping animals—that cosmic sympathy.

She knew that Charter would not have rushed away to the mountain without a "good morning" for her, had she told him yesterday. She saw him turn upon the *Morne*, look steadily at her window, almost as if he saw the outline of her figure there—as the call went to him from her inner heart.... She had reconstructed his last week in New York, from the letter of Selma Cross and his own; and in her sight he had achieved a finer thing than any warrior who ever broadened the borders of his queen. Not a word from her; encountering a mysterious suspicion from Reifferscheid; avoiding Selma Cross by his word and her own; vanquishing, who may know how many devils of his own past; and then summoning the courage and gentleness to write such a letter as she had received—a letter sent out into the dark—this was loyalty and courage to woo the soul. With such a spirit, she could tramp the world's highway with bruised feet, but a singing heart.... And only such a spirit could be true to Skylark; for she knew as "Wyndam" she had quickened him for all time, though he ran from her—to commune with Pelée. She felt his strength—strength of man such as maidens dream of, and, maturing, put their dreams away.

"... as I sat by my study window, facing the East!" Well she knew those words from his letters; and they came to her now, from the talk of yesterday in the high light of an angelic visitation. Always in memory the dining-room at the *Palms* would have an occult fragrance, for she saw his great love for Skylark there, as he spoke of "facing the East." How soon could she have told him after that, but for the evil old French face that drew him away.... "You deserve to suffer, Paula Linster," she whispered. "You let him go away, —without a tithe of your secret, or a morsel of your mercy."

Inevitable before such a conception of manhood—Paula feared her unworthiness. She saw herself back in New York, faltering under the power of Bellingham; swayed by those specialists, Reifferscheid in books, Madame Nestor in occultism; and, above all blame-worthily, by Selma Cross of the passions. She seemed always to have been listening. Selma Cross had been strong enough to destroy her Tower; and this, when the actress herself had been so little sure of her statements that she must needs call Charter to prove them.

Nothing that she had done seemed to carry the stamina of decision.... So the self-arraignment thickened and tightened about her, until she cried out:

"But I would have told him yesterday—had not that old man called him away!"

Peter Stock returned at noon, imploring her to go out to the ship, for even on the *Morne*, Pelée had become a plague. He pointed out that she was practically alone in the *Palms*; that nearly all of Father Fontanel's parishioners had taken his word and left for Fort de France or Morne Rouge, at least; that he, Peter Stock, was a very old man who had earned the right to be fond of whom he pleased, and that it seriously injured an old man's health when he couldn't have his way.

"There are big reasons for me to stay here to-day—big only to me," she told him. "If I had known you for years, I couldn't be more assured of your kindness, nor more willing to avail myself of it, but please trust me to know best to-day. Possibly to-morrow."

So the American left her, complaining that she was quite as inscrutable as Charter.... An hour or more later, as she was watching the mountain from her room, a little black carriage stopped before the gate of the *Palms*, and Father Fontanel stepped slowly out. She hurried downstairs, met him at the door, and saw the rare old face in its great weariness.

"You have given too much strength to your work, Father," she said, putting her arm about him and helping him toward the sitting-room.

"I am quite well," he panted. "I was among my people in the city, when our amazing friend suddenly appeared with a carriage, bustled me in and sent me here, saying there were enough people in Saint Pierre who refused to obey him, and that he didn't propose that I should be one."

"I think he did very well," she answered, laughing. "What must it be down in the city—when we suffer so here? We cannot do without you——"

"But there is great work for me—the great work I have always asked for. Believe me, I do not suffer."

"One must not labor until he falls and dies, Father."

"If it be the will of the good God, I ask nothing fairer than to fall in His service. Death is only terrible from afar off in youth, my dear child. When we are old and perceive the glories of the Reality, we are prone to forget the illusion here. In remembering immortality, we forget the cares and ills of flesh.... I am only troubled for my people, stifling in the gray curse of the city, and for my brave young friend. My mind was clouded when he asked me certain questions last night; and to-day, they say he has gone to the craters of the mountain."

"What for?" she whispered quickly.

"Ah, how should I know? But he tells me of people who make pilgrimages of sanctification to strange cities of the East—to Mecca and Benares——"

"But they go to Benares to die, Father!"

"I did not know, my daughter," he assured her, drawing his hand across his brow in a troubled fashion. "He has not gone to the mountain for that, though I see storms gathering about him, storms of the mountain and hatreds of men. But I see you with him afterward—as I saw him with you—when you first spoke to me."

She told him all, and found healing in the old man's smile.

"It is well, and it is wonderful," he whispered at last. "Much that my life has misunderstood is made clear to me—by this love of yours and his——"

"'And his,' Father?"

"Yes."

There was silence. She would not ask if Quentin Charter had also told his story. Father Fontanel arose and said he must go back, but he took the girl's hands, looked deeply into her eyes, saying with memorable gentleness:

"Listen, child,—the man who cannot forget a vision that is lost, will be a brave mate for the envisioned reality that he finds."

At intervals all that afternoon she felt the influence of Bellingham. It was not desire. Dull and impersonal, it appealed, as one might hear a child in another house repeatedly calling to its mother. Within her there was no response, save that of loathing for a spectre that rises untimely from a past long since expiated. She did not ask herself whether she was lifted beyond him, or whether he was debased and weakened, or if he really called with the old intensity. Glimpses of the strange place in which he lodged occasionally flashed before her inner mind, but it was all far and indefinite, easily to be banished. To her, he had become inextricable from the reptiles. There was so much of living fear and greater glory in her mind that afternoon, that these were but evil shadows of slight account.

The torturing hours crawled by, until the day turned to a deeper gray, and the North was reddened by Pelée's cone which the thick vapor dimmed and blurred. Paula was suffered to fight out her battle alone. She could not have asked more than this. A thousand times she paced across her room; again and again straining her eyes northward, along the road, over the city into the darkness, and the end of all things—the mountain.... There was a moment in the half-light before the day was spent, in which she seemed to see Quentin Charter, as Father Fontanel had told her, hemmed in by all the storms and hates of the world. Over the surface of her brain was a vivid track for flying futile agonies.

The rumbling that had been incessant was punctuated at intervals now by an awesome and deeper vibration. Altogether, the sound was like a steady stream of vehicles, certain ones heavier and moving more swiftly than others, pounding over a wooden bridge. To her, there was a pang in each phase of the volcano's activity, since Quentin Charter had gone up into that red roar.... She did not go down for dinner. When it was eight by her watch, she felt that she could not live, if he did not return before another hour. Several minutes had passed when there was a tapping at her door, and Paula answering, was confronted by a sumptuous figure of native womanhood. It was Soronia.

"Mr. Charter is at the wine-shop of Pere Rabeaut in *Rue Rivoli*," she said swiftly, hatefully, as though she had been forced to carry the message, and would not utter a word more than necessary. "He has been hurt—we do not think seriously—but he wants you to come to him at once."

"Thank you. I will go to him at once," Paula said, turning to get her hat. "Pere Rabeaut's wine-shop in the *Rue Rivoli*?... You say he is not seriously hurt——"

She had not turned five seconds from the door, but the woman was gone. There was much that was strange in this; many thoughts occurred apart from the central idea of glad obedience, and the fullness of gratitude in that Pelée had not murdered him.... The *Rue Rivoli* was a street of the terraces, she ascertained on the

lower floor; also that it would be impossible to procure a carriage. Mr. Stock had been forced to buy one outright, her informer added, and to use one of his sailors for a driver.... So she set out alone and on foot, hurrying along the sea-road toward the slope where *Rue Victor Hugo* began. The strangeness of it all persistently imposed upon her mind, but was unreckonable, compared to the thought that Quentin Charter would not have called for her, had he been able to come. From this, the fear of a more serious wound than the woman had said, was inevitable.

Paula had suffered enough from doubting; none should mar her performance now. Unerringly, the processes of mind throughout the day had borne her to such an action. She would have gone to any red-lit door of the torrid city.... Vivid terrors of some dreadful crippling accident hurried her steps into running....

Pelée, a baleful changing jewel in the black North, reminded her that Charter would not have gone up to that sink of chaos, had she spoken the word yesterday. The thought of that wonderful hour brought back the brooding romance in tints almost ethereal. Higher in her heart than he had reached in any moment of the day's fluctuations, the image of Charter wounded, was upraised now and sustained, as she turned from *Rue Victor Hugo* into the smothering climb to the terraces. All she could feel was a prayer that he might live; all the trials and conflicts and hopes of the past six months hovered afar from this, like navies crippled in the roadstead....

She must be near the *Rue Rivoli*, she thought, suddenly facing an empty cliff. It was at this moment that she heard the soft foot-falls of a little native mule, and encountered Quentin Charter....

Quickly out of the great gladness of the meeting arose the frightful possibilities from which she had just escaped. They were still too imminent to be banished from mind at once. Again Charter had saved her from the Destroyer. She would have wept, had she ventured to speak as he lifted her into the saddle. Charter was silent, too, for the time, trying to adjust and measure and proportion.

Constantly she kept her eyes upon him as he walked slightly ahead, for she needed this steady assurance that he was there and well. She felt her arms where his stiffened fingers had been, as he lifted her so easily upon the mule. She wanted to reach forward and touch his helmet. They had descended almost to *Rue Victor Hugo*, when he said:

"As I looked down the fiery throat of that dragon up there to-day, everything grew black and still for a minute, like a vacuum.... Will you please tell me if I came back all right, or are we 'two hurrying shapes in twilight land—in no man's land?'"

His amusing appeal righted her. "I have not heard of donkey shapes in twilight-land," she answered.... And then in the new silence she tried to bring her thoughts to the point of revelation, but she needed light for that—light in which to watch his face. Moreover, revelations contained Bellingham, and she was not quite ready to speak of this. It was dreadful to be forced to think of the occultist, when her heart cried out for another moment such as that of yesterday, in which she could watch his eyes and whisper, "I am very proud to be the Skylark you treasure so...."

"Do you think it kind to frighten your friends?" she asked finally. "When they told me you had gone to the craters—it seemed such a reckless thing to do——"

"You see, I rode around behind the mountain. It's very different to approach from the north. I wished you were there with me in the clean air. Pelée's muzzle is turned toward the city——"

"I sent you many cheers and high hopes—did they come?"

"Yes, more than you know——" He checked himself, not wishing to frighten her further with the story of Jacques, "You said you were looking for the little wine-shop. Did some one send for you?"

"Yes."

"Some one you know?"

"They told me you were there—hurt. That's why I came, Mr. Charter."

He drew up the mule and faced her. "I was there this morning, but not since.... There's something black about this. Pere Rabeaut was rather officious in furnishing a guide for me. I'd better find out——"

"I don't want you to go back there to-night!" she said intensely. "I think we are both half-dead. I don't feel coherent at all. It has been a life—this day."

"I am sorry to have made it harder for you. Certainly I shall not add to your worry to-night. I was thinking, though, it's rather a serious thing to call you out alone at this hour, through a city disordered like this—in my name."

"There's much need of a talk. We shall soon understand it all.... That must be Mr. Stock coming. He has the only carriage moving in Saint Pierre, they say."

Charter pulled the mule up on the walk to let the vehicle pass, but the capitalist saw them and called to his driver to stop.

"Well," he said gratefully, "I'm glad to get down to earth again. You two have had me soaring.... Charter, you don't mean to tell me you called Miss Wyndam to meet you in the wine-shop?"

"No. There's a little matter there which must be probed later. I had the good fortune to meet Miss Wyndam before she reached there."

Paula watched Charter as he spoke. Light from the carriage-lamp fell upon him. His white clothing was stained from the saddle, his hair and eyebrows whitened with dust. His eyes shone in a face haggard unto ghastliness.

"I'd go there now," Stock declared, after asking one or two questions further, "but I have to report with sorrow that Father Fontanel is in a very weak condition and has asked for you. I just came from the *Palms*, hoping that you had returned, and learned that Miss Wyndam was mysteriously abroad. My idea is to make the good old man go out to the ship to-night. That's his only chance. He just shakes his head and smiles at me, when I start in to boss him, but I think he'll go for you. The little parish-house is like a shut-oven—literally smells of the burning.... The fact is, I'm getting panicky as an old brood-biddy, among all you wilful chicks.... Miss Wyndam has promised for to-morrow, however."

Her heart went out to the substantial friend he had proved to every one, though it was all but unthinkable to have Quentin Charter taken from the *Palms* that night.

"I'll go with you at once, but we must see Miss Wyndam safely back.... She'll be more comfortable in the carriage with you, and we can hurry," Charter declared.

He held his arms to her and lifted her down.

"How I pity you!" she whispered. "You are weary unto death, but I am so glad—so glad you are safely back from the mountain."

"Thank you.... You, too, are trembling with weariness. It would not do, not to go to Father Fontanel—would it?"

"No, no!"

At the hotel, Charter took a few moments to put on fresh clothing. Paula waited with Peter Stock on the lower floor until he appeared. The capitalist did not fail to see that they wanted a word together, and clattered forth to see the "pilot of his deep-sea hack."

"You'd better go aboard to-morrow morning," Charter said.

"Yes, to-morrow, possibly,—we shall know then. You will be here in the morning—the first thing in the morning?"

"Yes." There was a wonder-world of emotion in his word.

"And you will not go to the wine-shop, before you see me—in the morning?"

He shook his head. His inner life was facing the East, listening to a Skylark song.

"There is much to hear and say," she whispered unsteadily. "But go to Father Fontanel—or I—or you will not be in time! He must not die without seeing you—and take my love and reverence——"

They were looking into each other's eyes—without words.... Peter Stock returned from the veranda. Charter shivered slightly with the return to common consciousness, clenched his empty left hand where hers had been.

"The times are running close here," he whispered huskily. "Sometimes I forget that we've only just met. Father Fontanel alone could call me from here to-night. Somehow, I dread to leave you. You'll have to forgive me for saying it."

"Yes.... But in the morning—oh, come quickly.... Good-night."

She turned hastily to the staircase, and Charter's remarks as he rode townward with the other, were shirred, indeed....

# TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER

## HAVING TO DO ESPECIALLY WITH THE MORNING OF THE ASCENSION, WHEN THE MONSTER, *PELÉE*, GIVES BIRTH TO DEATH

The old servant met them at the door with uplifted finger. Father Fontanel was sleeping. They did not wish to disturb him but sat down to wait in the anteroom, which seemed to breathe of little tragedies of Saint Pierre. On one side of the room was the door that was never locked; on the other, the entrance to the sleeping-room of the priest. Thus he kept his ear to the city's pulse. Peter Stock drowsed in the suffocating air. Charter's mind slowly revolved and fitted to the great concept.... The woman was drawn to him, and there had been no need of words.... Each moment she was more wonderful and radiant. There had not been a glance, a word, a movement, a moment, a breath, an aspiration, a lift of brow or shoulder or thought, that had not more dearly charmed his conception of her triune beauty.

The day had left in his brain a crowd of unassimilated actions, and into this formless company came the thrilling mystery of his last moment with her—a shining cord of happiness for the labyrinth of the late days.... There had been so much *beyond words* between them—an overtone of singing. He had seen in her eyes all the eager treasure of brimming womanhood, rising to burst the bonds of repression for the first time. Dawn was a far voyage, but he settled himself to wait with the will of a weathered voyager whose heart feels the hungry arms upon the waiting shore.

The volcano lost its monstrous rhythm again, and was ripping forth irregular crashes. Father Fontanel awoke and the *Rue Victor Hugo* became alive with voices, aroused by the rattling in the throat of the mountain. Charter went into the room where the priest lay.

"Come, Father," he said, "We have waited long for you. I want you to go out to the ship for the rest of the night. You must breathe true air for an hour. Do this for me."

"Ah, my son!" the old man murmured, drawing Charter's head down to his breast. "My mind was clouded, and I could not see you clearly in the travail of yesterday."

"Many of your people are in Fort de France, Father," the young man added. "They will be glad to see you. Then you may come back here—even to-morrow, if you are stronger. Besides, the stalwart friend who has done so much for your people, wants you one night on his ship."

"Yes, my son.... I was waiting for you. I shall be glad to breathe the dawn at sea."

Peter Stock pressed Charter's hand as they led Father Fontanel forth. The mountain was quieter again. The bells of Saint Pierre rang the hour of two.... The three reached the Sugar Landing where the *Saragossa's* launch lay.

"Hello, Ernst," Stock called to his man. "I've kept you waiting long, but top-speed to the ship—deep water and ocean air!"

The launch sped across the smoky harbor, riding down little isles of flotsam, dead birds from the sky and nameless mysteries from the roiled bed of the harbor. The wind was hot in their faces, like a stoke-hold blast. Often they heard a hissing in the water, like the sound of a wet finger touching hot iron. A burning

cinder fell upon Charter's hand, a messenger from Pelée. He could not feel fire that night.... He was living over that last moment with her—gazing into her eyes as one who seeks to penetrate the mystery of creation, as if it were any clearer in a woman's eyes than in a Nile night, a Venetian song, or in the flow of gasolene to the spark, which filled the contemplation of Ernst.... He remembered the swift intaking of her breath at the last, and knew that she was close to tears.

The launch was swinging around to the *Saragossa's* ladder. Father Fontanel had not spoken. Wherever the ship-lights fell, the sheeting of ash could be seen—upon mast and railing and plates. They helped the good man up the ladder, and Stock ordered Laird, his first officer, to steam out of the blizzard, a dozen miles if necessary. The anchor chain began to grind at once, and three minutes later, the *Saragossa's* screws were kicking the ugly harbor tide. Charter watched, strangely disconcerted, until only the dull red of Pelée pierced the thick veil behind. A star, and another, pricked the blue vault ahead, and the air blew in fragrant as wine from the rolling Caribbean, but each moment was an arraignment now.... He wanted none of the clean sea; and the mere fact that he would not rouse her before daylight, even if he were at the *Palms*, did not lessen the savage pressure of the time.... Father Fontanel would not sleep, but moved among his people on deck. The natives refused to stay below, now that the defiled harbor was behind. There was a humming of old French lullabies to the little ones. Cool air had brought back the songs of peace and summer to the lowly hearts. It was an hour before dawn, and the *Saragossa* was already putting back toward the roadstead, when Father Fontanel called Charter suddenly.

"Make haste and go to the woman, my son," he said strangely.

Charter could not answer. The priest had spoken little more than this, since they led him from the parish-house. The *Saragossa* crept into the edge of the smoke. The gray ghost of morning was stealing into the hateful haze. They found anchorage. The launch was in readiness below. It was not yet six. Ernst was off duty, and another sailor,—one whose room was prepared in the dim pavilion—waited at the tiller. Charter waved at the pale mute face of the priest, leaning overside, and the fog rushed in between.

The launch gained the inner harbor, and the white ships at anchor were vague as phantoms in the vapor—French steamers, Italian barques, and the smaller West Indian craft—all with their work to do and their way to win. Charter heard one officer shout to another a whimsical inquiry—if Saint Pierre were in her usual place or had switched sites with hell. The day was clearing rapidly, however, and before the launch reached shore, the haze so lifted that Pelée could be seen, floating a pennant of black out to sea. In the city, a large frame warehouse was ablaze. The tinder-dry structure was being destroyed with almost explosive speed.

A blistering heat rushed down from the expiring building to the edge of the land. Crowds watched the destruction. Many of the people were in holiday attire. This was the Day of Ascension, and Saint Pierre would shortly pray and praise at the cathedral; and at *Notre Dame des Lourdes*, where Father Fontanel would be missed quite the same as if they had taken the figure of Saint Anne from the altar.... Even now the cathedral bells were calling, and there was low laughter from a group of Creole maidens. Was it not good to live, since the sun was trying to shine again and the mountain did not answer the ringing of the bells? It was true that Pelée poured forth a black streamer with lightning in its folds; true that the people trod upon the hot, gray dust of the volcano's waste; that the heat was such as no man had ever felt before, and many sat in misery upon the ground; true, indeed, that voices of hysteria came from the hovels, and the weaker were dying too swiftly for the priests to attend them all—but the gala-spirit was not dead. The bells were calling, the mountain was still, bright dresses were abroad—for the torrid children of France must laugh.

A carriage was not procurable, so Charter fell in with the procession on the way to the cathedral. Many of the natives nodded to him; and may have wondered at the color in his skin, the fire in his eyes, and the glad ring of his voice. Standing for a moment before the church, he hurled over the little gathering the germ of flight; told them of the food and shelter in Fort de France, begged them laughingly to take their women and children out of this killing air.... It was nearly eight—eight on the morning of Ascension Day.... She would be ready. He hoped to find a carriage at the hotel.... At nine they would be in the launch again, speeding out toward the *Saragossa*.

Twenty times a minute she recurred to him as he walked. There was no waning nor wearing—save a wearing brighter, perhaps—of the images she had put in his mind. Palaces, gardens, treasure-houses—with the turn of every thought, new riches of possibility identified with her, were revealed. Thoughts of her, winged in and out his mind like bright birds that had a cote within—until he was lifted to heights of gladness which seemed to shatter the dome of human limitations—and leave him crown and shoulders emerged into illimitable ether.

The road up the *Morne* stretched blinding white before him. The sun was braver. Panting and spent not a little, he strode upward through the vicious pressure of heat, holding his helmet free from his head, that air might circulate under the rim. Upon the crest of the *Morne*, he perceived the gables of the old plantation-house, above the palms and mangoes, strangely yellowed in the ashen haze.

Pelée roared. Sullen and dreadful out of the silence voiced the Monster roused to his labor afresh. Charter darted a glance back at the darkening North, and began to run.... The crisis was not past; the holiday darkened. The ship would fill with refugees now, and the road to Fort de France turn black with flight. These were his thoughts as he ran.

The lights of the day burned out one by one. The crust of the earth stretched to a cracking tension. The air was beetling with strange concussions. In the clutch of realization, Charter turned one shining look toward the woman hurrying forward on the veranda of the *Palms*.... Detonations accumulated into the crash of a thousand navies.

She halted, her eyes fascinated, lost in the North. He caught her up like a child. Across the lawn, through the roaring black, he bore her, brushing her fingers and her fallen hair from his eyes. He reached the curbing of the old well with his burden, crawled over and caught the rusty chain. Incandescent tongues lapped the cistern's raised coping. There was a scream as from the souls of Night and Storm and Chaos triumphant—a mighty planetary madness—shocking magnitudes from the very core of sound! Air was sucked from the vault, from their ears and lungs by the shrieking vacuums, burned through the cushion of atmosphere by the league-long lanes of electric fire.... Running streams of red dust filtered down.

It was eight on the morning of Ascension Day. *La Montagne Pelée* was giving birth to death.

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# TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER

## THE *SARAGOSSA* ENCOUNTERS THE RAGING FIRE-MISTS FROM *PELÉE* EIGHT MILES AT SEA, BUT LIVES TO SEND A BOAT ASHORE

Peter Stock stared long into the faint film of smoke, until the launch bearing Charter ashore was lost in the shipping. The pale, winding sheet was unwrapped from the beauty of morning. There was an edging of rose and gold on the far dim hills. His eyes smarted from weariness, but his mind, like an automatic thing, swept around the great circle—from the ship to the city, to the plantation-house on the *Morne* and back to the ship again. He was sick of the shore, disgusted with people who would listen to M. Mondet and not to him. Miss Wyndam had refused him so often, that he was half afraid Charter would not be successful, but he was willing to wait two hours longer, for he liked the young woman immensely, liked her breeding and her brain.... He joined Laird, his first officer, on the bridge. The latter was scrutinizing through the glass a blotch of smoke on the city-front.

"What do you make of it, sir?" Laird asked.

The lenses brought to the owner a nucleus of red in the black bank. The rest of Saint Pierre was a gray, doll-settlement, set in the shelter of little gray hills. He could see the riven and castellated crest of Pelée weaving his black ribbon. It was all small, silent, and unearthly.

"That's a fire on the water-front," he said.

"That's what I made of it, sir," Laird responded.

Shortly afterward the trumpetings of the Monster began. The harbor grew yellowish-black. The shore crawled deeper into the shroud, and was lost altogether. The water took on a foul look, as if the bed of the sea were churned with some beastly passion. The anchor-chain grew taught, mysteriously strained, and banged a tattoo against its steel-bound eye. Blue Peter drooping at the foremast, livened suddenly into a spasm of writhing, like a hooked lizard. The black, quivering columns of smoke from the funnels were fanned down upon the deck, adding soot to the white smear from the volcano.

"Better get the natives below—squall coming!" Peter Stock said, in a low tone to Laird, and noted upon the quiet, serious face of this officer, as he obeyed, an expression quite new. It was the look of a man who sees the end, and does not wince.

The women wailed, as the sailors hurried them below and sealed the ways after them. A deep-sea language passed over the ship. There were running feet, bells below, muffled cries from the native-women, quick oaths from the sailors; and then, Peter Stock felt the iron-fingers of fear about his heart—not for himself and his ship eight miles at sea, but for his good young friend and for the woman who had refused to come.

A hot, fetid breath charged the air. The ship rose and settled like a feather in a breeze; in a queer light way, as though its element were heavily charged with air, the water danced, alive with the yeast of worlds. The disordered sky intoned violence. Pelée had set the foundations to trembling. A step upon the bridge-ladder caused the American to turn with a start. Father Fontanel was coming up.

"Oh, this won't do at all," Peter Stock cried in French. "We're going to catch hell up here, and you don't belong."

He dashed down the ladder, and led the old man swiftly back to the cabin, where he rushed to the ports and screwed them tight with lightning fingers, led the priest to a chair and locked it in its socket. Father Fontanel spoke for the first time.

"It's very good of you," he said dully, "but what of my people?"

Stock did not answer, but rushed forth. Six feet from the cabin-door, he met the fiery van of the cataclysm, and found strength to battle his way back into the cabin.... From out the shoreward darkness thundered vibrations which rendered soundless all that had passed before. Comets flashed by the port-holes. The *Saragossa* shuddered and fell to her starboard side.

Eight bells had just sounded when the great thunder rocked over the gray-black harbor, and the molten vitals of the Monster, wrapped in a black cloud, filled the heavens, gathered and plunged down upon the city and the sea. As for the ship, eight miles from the shore and twelve miles from the craters, she seemed to have fallen from a habitable planet into the firemist of an unfinished world. She heeled over like a biscuit-tin, dipping her bridge and gunwales. She was deluged by blasts of steam and molten stone. Her anchor-chain gave way, and, burning in a dozen places, she was sucked inshore.

Laird was on the bridge. Plass, the second officer, on his way to the bridge, to relieve or assist Laird as the bell struck, was felled at the door of the chart-room. A sailor trying to drag the body of Plass to shelter, was overpowered by the blizzard of steam, gas, and molten stone, falling across the body of his officer. The ship was rolling like a runaway-buoy.

Peter Stock had been hurled across the cabin, but clutched the chair in which the priest was sitting, and clung to an arm of it, pinning the other to his seat. Several moments may have passed before he regained his feet. Though badly burned, he felt pain only in his throat and lungs, from that awful, outer breath as he regained the cabin. Firebrands still screamed into the sea outside, but the *Saragossa* was steadying a trifle, and vague day returned. Stock was first to reach the deck, the woodwork of which was burning everywhere. He tried to shout, but his throat was closed by the hot dust. The body of a man was hanging over the railing of the bridge. It was Laird, with his face burned away. There were others fallen.

The shock of his burns and the terrible outer heat was beginning to overpower the commander when Pugh, the third officer, untouched by fire, appeared from below. In a horrid, tongueless way, Stock fired the other to act, and staggered back into the cabin. Pugh shrieked up the hands, and set to the fires and the ship's course. Out of two officers and three sailors on deck when Pelée struck, none had lived. Peter Stock owed his life to the mute and momentary appearance of Father Fontanel.

The screaming of the native-women reached his ears from the hold. Father Fontanel stared at him with the most pitiful eyes ever seen in child or woman. Black clouds were rolling out to sea. Deep thunder of a righteous source answered Pelée's lamentations. The sailors were fighting fire and carrying the dead. The thin shaken voice of Pugh came from the bridge. The engines were throbbing. Macready, Stock's personal servant, entered with a blast of heat.

"Thank God, you're alive, sir!" he said, with the little roll of Ireland on his tongue. "I was below, where better men were not.... Eight miles at sea—the long-armed divil av a mountain—what must the infightin' have been!"

Peter Stock beckoned him close and called huskily for lint and oils. Macready was back in a moment from the store-room, removed the cracked and twisted boots; cleansed the ashes from the face and ears of his chief; administered stimulant and talked incessantly.

"It's rainin' evenchooalities out.... Ha, thim burns is not so bad, though your shoes were pretty thin, an' the deck's smeared with red-hot paste. It's no bit of a geyser in a dirt-pile, sure, can tell Misther Stock whin to come and whin to go."

The cabin filled with the odor of burnt flesh as he stripped the coat from Stock's shoulder, where an incandescent pebble had fallen and burned through the cloth. Ointments and bandages were applied before the owner said:

"We must be getting pretty close in the harbor?"

This corked Macready's effervescence. Pugh had been putting the *Saragossa* out to sea, since he assumed control. It hadn't occurred to the little Irishman that Mr. Stock would put back into the harbor of an island freshly-exploded.

"I dunno, sir. It's hard to see for the rain."

"Go to the door and find out".

The rain fell in sheets. Big seas were driving past, and the steady beat of the engines was audible. There was no smoke, no familiar shadow of hills, but a leaden tumult of sky, and the rollers of open sea beaten by a cloudburst. The commander did not need to be told. It all came back to him—Laird's body hanging over the railing of the bridge; Plass down; Pugh, a new man, in command.

"Up to the bridge, Macready, and tell Pugh for me not to be in such a damned hurry—running away from a stricken town. Tell him to put back in the roadstead where we belong."

Macready was gone several moments, and reported, "Pugh says we're short-handed; that the ship's badly-charred, but worth savin'; in short, sir, that he's not takin' orders from no valet—meanin' me."

Nature was righting herself in the brain of the American, but the problems of time and space still were mountains to him. Macready saw the gray eye harden, and knew what the next words would be before they were spoken.

"Bring Pugh here!"

It was rather a sweet duty for Macready, whose colors had been lowered by the untried officer. The latter was in a funk, if ever a seaman had such a seizure. Pugh gave an order to the man at the wheel and followed the Irishman below, where he encountered the gray eye, and felt Macready behind him at the door.

"Turn back to harbor at once—full speed!"

Pugh hesitated, his small black eyes burning with terror.

"Turn back, I say! Get to hell out of here!"

"But a firefly couldn't live in there, sir——"

"Call two sailors, Macready!" Stock commanded, and when they came, added, "Put him in irons, you

men!... Macready, help me to the bridge."

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It was after eleven when the *Saragossa* regained the harbor. The terrific cloudburst had spent itself. Out from the land rolled an unctuous smudge, which bore suggestions of the heinous impartiality of a great conflagration. The harbor was cluttered with wreckage, a doom picture for the eyes of the seaman. Dimly, fitfully, through the pall, they began to see the ghosts of the shipping—black hulls without helm or hope. The *Saragossa* vented a deep-toned roar, but no answer was returned, save a wailing echo—not a voice from the wreckage, not even the scream of a gull. A sailor heaved the lead, and the scathed steamer bore into the rising heat.

Ahead was emptiness. Peter Stock, reclining upon the bridge, and suffering martyrdoms from his burns, gave up his last hope that the guns of Pelée had been turned straight seaward, sparing the city or a portion of it. Rough winds tunnelling through the smoke revealed a hint of hills shorn of Saint Pierre. A cry was wrung from the American's breast, and Macready hastened to his side with a glass of spirits.

"I want a boat made ready—food, medicines, bandages, two or three hundred pounds of ice covered with blankets and a tarpaulin," Stock said. "You are to take a couple of men and get in there. Get the steward started fitting the boat, and see that the natives are kept a bit quieter. Make 'em see the other side—if they hadn't come aboard."

"Mother av God," Macready muttered as he went about these affairs. "I could bake a potatie here, sure, in the holla av my hand. What, thin, must it be in that pit of destruction?" He feared Pelée less, however, than the gray eye, and the fate of Pugh.

The launch had not returned from taking Charter ashore, so one of the life-boats was put into commission. The German, Ernst, and another sailor of Macready's choice, were shortly ready to set out.

"You know why I'm not with you, men," the commander told them at the last moment. "It isn't that I couldn't stand it in the boat, but there's a trip ashore for you to make, and there's no walking for me on these puff-balls for weeks to come. Macready, you know Mr. Charter. He had time to reach the *Palms* before hell broke loose. I want you to go there and bring him back alive—and a woman who'll be with him! Also report to me regarding conditions in the city. That's all. Lower away."

A half-hour later, the little boat was forced to return to the ship. The sailor was whimpering at the oars; the lips of Ernst were twisted in agony; while Macready was silent, sign enough of his failing endurance. Human vitality could not withstand the withering draughts of heat. At noon, another amazing downpour of rain came to the aid of Peter Stock who, granting that the little party had encountered conditions which flesh could not conquer, had, nevertheless, been chafing furiously. At two in the afternoon, a second start was made.

Deeper and deeper in toward the gray low beach the little boat was pulled, its occupants the first to look upon the heaped and over-running measure of Saint Pierre's destruction. The three took turns at the oars. Fear and suffering brought out a strange feminine quality in the sailor, not of cowardice; rather he seemed beset by visionary terrors. Rare running-mates were Macready and Ernst, odd as two white men can be, but matched to a hair in courage. The German bent to his work, a grim stolid mechanism. Macready jerked at the oars, and found breath and energy remaining to assail the world, the flesh and the devil, which was Pugh, with his barbed and invariably glib tongue. How many times the blue eyes of the German rolled

back under the lids, and his grip relaxed upon the oars; how many times the whipping tongue of Macready mumbled, forgetting its object, while his senses reeled against the burning walls of his brain; how many times the sailor hoarsely commanded them to look through the fog for figures which alone he saw—only God and these knew. But the little boat held its prow to the desolate shore.

They gained the Sugar Landing at last, or the place where it had been, and strange sounds came from the lips of Ernst, as he pointed to the hulk of the *Saragossa's* launch, burned to the water-line. It had been in his care steadily until its last trip. Gray-covered heaps were sprawled upon the shore, some half-covered by the incoming tide, others entirely awash. Pelée had brought down the city; and the fire-tiger had rushed in at the kill. He was hissing and crunching still, under the ruins. The sailor moaned and covered his face.

"There's nothing alive!" he repeated with dreadful stress.

"What else would you look for—here at the very fut av the mountain?" Macready demanded. "Wait till we get over the hill, and you'll hear the birds singin' an' the naygurs laughin' in the fields an' wonderin' why the milkman don't come."

The market-place near the shore was filled with the stones from the surrounding buildings, hurled there as dice from a box. Smoke and steam oozed from every ruin. The silence was awful as the sight of death. The streets of the city were effaced. Saint Pierre had been felled and altered, as the Sioux women once altered the corpses of the slain whites. There was no discernible way up the *Morne*. Breathing piles of debris barred every passage. Under one of these, a clock suddenly struck three—an irreverent survival carrying on its shocking business beneath the collapsed walls of a burned and beaten city, frightening them hideously. It would have been impossible to traverse *Rue Victor Hugo* had the way been clear, since a hundred feet from the shore or less, they encountered a zone of unendurable heat.

"I could die happy holdin' Pugh here," Macready gasped. "Do you think hell is worse than this, Ernst, barrin' the effrontery of the question? Ha—don't step there!"

He yanked the German away from a puddle of uncongealed stuff, hot as running metal.... The sailor screamed. He had stepped upon what seemed to be an ash-covered stone. It was soft, springy, and vented a wheezy sigh. Rain and rock-dust had smeared all things alike in this gray roasting shambles.

"Won't somebody say something?" the sailor cried in a momentary silence.

"It looks like rain, ma'm," Macready offered.

They had been forced back into the boat, and were skirting the shore around by the *Morne*. Saint Pierre had rushed to the sea—at the last. The volcano had found the women with the children, as all manner of visitations find them—and the men a little apart. Pelée had not faltered. There was nothing to do by the way, no lips to moisten, no voice of pain to hush, no dying thing to ease. There was not an insect-murmur in the air, nor a crawling thing upon the beach, not a moving wing in the hot, gray sky—a necropolis, shore of death absolute.

They climbed the cliffs to the north of the *Palms*, glanced down through the smoke at the city—sunken like a toothless mouth. Even the *Morne* was a husk divested of its fruit. Pelée had cut the cane-fields, sucked the juices and left the blasted stalks in his paste. The old plantation-house pushed forth no shadow of an outline. It might be felled or lost in the smoky distance. The nearer landmarks were gone—homes that had brightened the heights in their day, whose windows had flashed the rays of the afternoon sun as it rode down oversea—levelled like the fields of cane. Pelée had swept far and left only his shroud, and the

heaps upon the way, to show that the old sea-road, so white, so beautiful, had been the haunt of man. The mangoes had lost their vesture; the palms were gnarled and naked fingers pointing to the pitiless sky.

Macready had known this highway in the mornings, when joy was not dead, when the songs of the toilers and the laughter of children glorified the fields; in the white moonlight, when the sea-winds met and mingled with the spice from tropic hills, and the fragrance from the jasmine and rose-gardens.... He stared ahead now, wetting his puffed and tortured lips. They had passed the radius of terrific heat, but he was thinking of the waiting gray eye, when he returned without the man and the woman.

"It'll be back to the bunkers for Dinny," he muttered.... "Ernst, ye goat, you're intertainin', you're loquenchus."

They stepped forward swiftly now. There was not a hope that the mountain had shown mercy at the journey's end.... They would find whom they sought down like the others, and the great house about them. Still, there was a vague God to whom Macready had prayed once or twice in his life—a God who had the power to strike blasphemers dead, to still tempests, light volcanic fuses and fell Babylons. To this God he muttered a prayer now....

The ruins of the plantation house wavered forth from the fog. The sailor plucked at Macready's sleeve, and Ernst mumbled thickly that they might as well get back aboard.... But the Irishman stood forth from them; and in that smoky gloom, desolate as the first day, before Light was turned upon the Formless Void, bayed the names of Charter and the woman.

Then the answer:

"*In the cistern—in the old cistern!*"

Macready made a mental appointment with his God, and yelled presently: "Didn't I tell you 'twould take more than the sphit of a mountain to singe the hair of him?... Are you hurted, sir?"

# TWENTY-SIXTH CHAPTER

## PAULA AND CHARTER IN SEVERAL SETTINGS FEEL THE ENERGY OF THE GREAT GOOD THAT DRIVES THE WORLD

Charter roused, after an unknown time, to the realization that the woman was in his arms; later, that he was sitting upon a slimy stone in a subterranean cell filled with steam. The slab of stone held him free from the four or five inches of almost scalding water on the floor of the cistern. The vault was square, and luckily much larger than its circular orifice; so that back in the corner they were free from the volcanic discharge which had showered down through the mouth of the pit—the cause of the heated water and the released vapors. An earthquake years before had loosened the stone-lining of the vault. With every shudder of the earth now, under the wrath of Pelée, the walls, still upstanding, trembled.

Charter was given much time to observe these matters; and to reckon with mere surface disorders, such as a bleeding right hand, lacerated from the rusty chain; a torn shoulder, and a variety of burns which he promptly decided must be inconsequential, since they stung so in the hot vapor. Then, someone with a powerful arm was knocking out three-cushion caroms in his brain-pan. This spoiled good thinking results. It is true, he did not grasp the points of the position, with the remotest trace of the sequence in which they are put down. Indeed, his mind, emerging from the depths into which the shock of eruption had felled it, held alone with any persistence the all-enfolding miracle that the woman was in his arms....

Presently, his brain began to sort the side-issues. Her head had lain, upon his shoulder during that precipitous plunge, and her hair had fallen when he first caught her up. He remembered it blowing and covering his eyes in a manner of playful endearment quite impossible for an outsider to conceive. Meanwhile, the blast from Pelée was upon the city; traversing the six miles from the crater to the *Morne*, faster than its own sound; six miles in little more than the time it had taken him to cross the lawn from the veranda to the cistern. A second or two had saved them.

The fire had touched her hair.... Her bare arm brushed his cheek, and his whole nature suddenly crawled with the fear that she might not wake. His head dropped to her breast, and he heard her heart, light and steadily on its way. His eyes were straining through the darkness into her face, but he could not be sure it was without burns. There was cumulative harshness in the fear that her face, so fragile, of purest line, should meet the coarse element, burning dirt. His hands were not free, but he touched her eyes, and knew that they were whole.... She sighed, stirred and winced a little—breath of consciousness returning. Then he heard:

"What is this dripping darkness?"

The words were slowly uttered, and the tones soft and vague, as from one dreaming, or very close to the Gates.... In a great dark room somewhere, in a past life, perhaps, he had heard such a voice from someone lying in the shadows.

"We are in the old cistern—you and I——"

"I—knew—you—would—come—for—me."

It was murmured as from someone very weary, very happy—as a child falling asleep after a dream,

murmurs with a little contented nestle under the mother-wing.

"But how could you know?" he whispered quickly. "My heart was too full—to take a mere mountain seriously—until the last minute——"

"*Skylarks—always—know!*"

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Torrents of rain were descending. Pelée roared with the after-pangs. Though cooled and replenished by floods of black rain, the rising water in the cistern was still hot.

"It was always hard for me to call you Wyndam——"

"Harder to hear, Quentin Charter...."

"But are you sure you are not badly burned?" he asked for the tenth time.

"I don't feel badly burned.... I was watching for you from the window in my room. I didn't like the way my hair looked, and was changing it when I saw you coming—and the Black behind you. I tried to fasten it with one pin, as I ran downstairs.... It fell. It is very thick and kept the fire from me——"

"From us." He would have preferred his share of the red dust.

She shivered contentedly. "What little is burned will grow again. Red mops invariably do."

" ... And to think I should have found the old cistern in the night!... One night when I could not sleep, I walked out here and explored. The idea came then——"

"I watched you from the upper window.... The shutter wiggled as you went away. It was the next day that the 'fraids got me. You rushed off to the mountain."

Often they verged like this beyond the borders of rational quotation. One hears only the voices, not the words often, from Rapture's Roadway.

"Just as I begin to think of something Pelée erupts all over again in my skull——"

"I didn't know men understood headache matters.... Don't you think—don't you really think—I might be allowed to stand a little bit?"

"Water's still too hot," he replied briefly.

The cavern was not so utterly dark. The circle of the orifice was sharply lit with gray.... They lost track of the hours; for moments at a time forgot physical distress, since they had known only mystic journeys before.... They whispered the fate of Saint Pierre—a city's soul torn from the shrieking flesh; shadows lifted from the mystery of the little wine-shop; clearly they saw how the occultist, his magnetism crippled, had used Jacques and Soronia; and Charter recalled now where he had seen the face of Paula before—the photograph in the Bellingham-cabin on the *Panther*.... A second cloudburst cooled and eased them, though they stood in water.... It seemed that Peter Stock should have made an effort to reach them by this time. Save that the gray was unchangeable in the roof the world, Charter could not have believed that this was all one day. The power which had devastated the city, and with unspent violence swept the *Morne*, might

have reached three leagues at sea!... Above all these probabilities arose their happiness.

"It seems that I've become a little boy," he said, "on one of those perfect Christmas mornings. Don't you remember, the greatest moment of all—coming downstairs, partly dressed, into the room *They* had made ready? That moment, before you actually see—just as you enter the mingled dawn and fire-light and catch the first glisten of the tree?... I'm afraid, Paula Linster, you have found——"

"A boy," she whispered. Her face was very close in the gray.... "The loved dream-boy. The boy went away to meet sternness and suffering and mazes of misdirection—had to compromise with the world to fit at all. Ah, I have waited long, and the man has come back to me—a boy."

"*La Montagne Pelée* is artistic."

"It may be in this marvellous world, where men carry on their wars and their wooings," she went on strangely, "some pursuing their little ways of darkness, some bursting into blooms of valor and tenderness; —it may be that two of Earth's people, after a dreadful passage through agony and terror, have been restored to each other—as we are. It may be that in the roll of Earth's tableaux, another such film is curled away from another age and another cataclysm."

"Paula," he declared, after a moment, "I have found a Living Truth in this happiness—the Great Good that Drives the World! I think I shall not lose it again. Glimpses of it came to me facing the East—as I wrote and thought of you. One glimpse was so clear that I expressed it in a letter, 'I tell you there is no death, since I have heard the Skylark sing....' I lost the bright fragment, for a few days in New York—battled for the prize again both in New York and yesterday at the mountain. To-day has brought it to me—always to keep. It is this: Were you to die, I should love you and know you were near. This is love above Flesh and Death—the old mystifying Interchangeables. This happiness is the triumph over death. It is a revelation, a mighty adoring—not a mere woman in my arms, but an ineffable issue of eternity. A woman, but more—Love and Labor and Life and the Great Good that Drives the World! This is the happiness I have and hold to-day: Though you died, I should know that you lived and were mine."

"I see it—it is the triumph over death—but, Quentin Charter—I want *you* still!"

"Don't you see, it is the strength you give me!—that girds me to say such things?"

So they had their flights into silence, while the eternal gray lived in their round summit of sky—until the voices of the rescuers and their own grateful answers.... The sailor was sent back to the boat for rope, while Macready cheered them with a fine and soothing Gaelic oil.... They lifted Paula, who steadied and helped herself by the chain; then sent the noose down for Charter.

"Have you the strent', sir, to do the overhand up the chain?" Macready questioned, and added in a ghost's whisper, "with the fairest of tin thousand waitin' at the top?"

Charter laughed. To lift his right arm was thrashing pain, but he made it easy as he could for them; and in the gray light faced the woman.

She saw his lacerated hand, the mire, fire-blisters upon his face, the blood upon his clothing, swollen veins of throat and temples, and the glowing adoration in his eyes.... She had bound her hair, and there was much still to bind. No mortal hurt was visible. Behind her was the falling sea. On her right hand the smoking ruin of the *Palms*; to the left, Pelée and his tens of thousands slain; above, the hot, leaden, hurrying clouds.... Ernst, Macready and the sailor moved discreetly away. Backs turned, they watched the puffs of smoke and steam that rose like gray-white birds from the valley of the dead city.

"Ernst, lad," said Macready, "the boss and the leadin' lady are havin' an intellekchool repast in the cinter av the stage by the old well. Bear in mind you're a chorus girl and conduct yourself in accord. Have you a drop left in the heel av the flask, Adele, dear?"

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They were nearing the *Saragossa* in the dusk, and their call had been answered with a rousing cheer from the ship....

"Please, sir, you said you would take me sailing," Paula called, as she readied the head of the ladder.

Though he could not stand, Peter Stock had an arm for each; and they were only released to fall into the embrace of Father Fontanel. They saw it now in the ship's light: Pelée had stricken the old priest, but not with fire.... The two were together shortly afterward at supper, in clean dry make-shifts, very ludicrous.

"I came to you empty-handed, and soiled from the travail of the journey," she whispered. "All but myself was in a certain room that faced the North."

"There are booties, flounces and ribands in the shops of Fort de France," Charter replied with delight. "Peter Stock shall be allowed certain privileges, but not to make any such purchases. I carry circular notes—and insist on straightening them out."

"Haven't you discovered that Skylarks are not of the insisting kind—even when they need new plumage? Anything that looks like insistence nearly scares the life out of them. Isn't it a dear world?"

All this was smoothly coherent to him.... Alone that night, they drew deck-chairs close together forward; and snugly wrapped, would have nothing whatever to do with Peter Stock's sumptuous cabins. They needed floods of rest, but were too happy, save just to take little sips of sleep between talk.

"You must have been afraid at first," she said, "of turning a foolish person's head with all that beauty of praise in your letters.... I think you were writing to some image you wanted to believe lived somewhere, but had little hope ever really to find. I could not take it all home to me at first.... I felt that you were writing to a lovely, shadowy sister who was safely put away in a kind of twilight faëry—a little figure by a well of magical waters. Sometimes I could go to her, reach the well, but I could not drink at first—only listen to the music of the water, watch it bubble and flash in the moon."

"I love your mind, Paula Linster," he said suddenly, "—every phase of it. By the way—*love's* a word I never used before to-day—not even in my work, save as an abstraction."

She remembered that Selma Cross had said this of him—that he never used that word.

"You could not have said that to 'Wyndam'——"

"Yes—for Skylark was singing more and more about her. I soon should have had to say it to 'Wyndam.'"

"I loved your fidelity to Skylark," she told him softly.

Dust of Pelée would fall upon the archipelago for weeks, but this of starless dark was their supreme night. "Feel the sting of the spray," he commanded. "Hear the bows sing!... It's all for us—the loveliest of earth's distances and the sky afterward——"

"But behind," she whispered pitifully.

"Yes—Pelée 'splashed at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comet's hair.'"

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The next night had fallen, and the two were through with the shops of Fort de France. Paula's dress was white and lustrous, a strange native fabric which the man regarded with seriousness and awe. He was in white, too. His right hand was swathed for repairs, the arm slung, and a thickness of lint was fitted under his collar. About his eyes and mouth was a slight look of strain still, which could not live another day before the force of recuperative happiness.... Up through the streets of the Capital, they made their way. Casements were open to the night and the sea, but the people were dulled with grief. Martinique had lost her first born, and Fort de France, the gentle sister of Saint Pierre, was bowed with the spirit of weeping. They had loved and leaned on each other, this boy and girl of the Mother Island.

Through the silent crowds, Charter and Paula walked, a part of the silence, passing the groves and towers, where the laws of France are born again for the little aliens; treading streets of darkness and moaning. A field of fire-lights shone ahead—red glow shining upon new canvas. This was the little colony of Father Fontanel, sustained by his American friend,—brands plucked from the burning of Saint Pierre. They passed the edge of the bivouac. A woman sat nursing her babe, fire-light upon her face and breast, drowsy little ones about her. Coffee and night-air and quavering lullabies; above all, ardent Josephine in marble, smiling and dreaming of Europe among the stars.... It was a powerful moment to Quentin Charter. Great joy and thrilling tragedy breathed upon his heart. He saw a tear upon Paula's cheek, and heard the low voice of Father Fontanel—like an echo across a stream. He saw them and hastened forward, more than white in the radiance.

"It is the moment of ten thousand years!" he exclaimed, grasping their hands.

Paula started, and turned to Charter whose gaze sank into her brain.... And so it came about unexpectedly; in the fire-light among the priest's beloved, under the Seven Palms and the ardent mystic smile of the Empress....

*Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works.... Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest, all the days of thy life.*

The words rang in their ears, when they were alone in the city's darkness, and the fire-lights far behind.

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On the third day following, they stood together on the *Morne d'Orange*—the three. Father Fontanel had been in feverish haste to gaze once more upon his city; while Charter and Paula had a mission among the ruins.... The *Saragossa* was sitting for a new complexion in the harbor of Fort de France, so they had been driven over from the Capital, along the old sea-road. The wind was still; the sun shone through silent towers of smoke, and it was noon. Sunlight bathed the stripped fields of cane, and, seemingly inseparable from the stillness, brooded upon the blue Caribbean. The wreck of the old plantation-house was hunched closer to the ground.

They left Father Fontanel in the carriage, and approached the cistern. Charter halted suddenly at the edge of the stricken lianas, grasping Paula's arm. The well-curbing was broken away, and the earth, for yards surrounding, had caved into the vault. They stood there without speaking for a moment or two, and then he led her back to the carriage.... Father Fontanel did not seem aware of their coming or going, but smiled when they spoke. His eyes, charmed with sunlight, were lost oversea.

At last they stood, the priest between them, at the very edge of the *Morne* overlooking the shadowed *Rue Victor Hugo*—a collapsed artery of the whited sepulchre.... The priest caught his breath; his hands lifted from their shoulders and stretched out over the necropolis. His face was upraised.

"God, love the World!" he breathed, and the flesh sank from him.... Much death had dulled their emotions, but this was translation. For an instant they were lifted, exalted, as by the rushing winds of a chariot.

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They did not enter the city that day, but came again, the fourth day after the cataclysm. Out of the heat from the prone city, arose a forbidding breath, so that Paula was prevailed upon to stay behind on the *Morne*.... Sickened and terrified by the actualities, dreadful beyond any imaging, Charter made his way up the cluttered road into *Rue Rivoli*. Saint Pierre, a smoky pestilential charnel, was only alive now through the lamentations of those who had come down from the hills for their dead.

The wine-shop had partly fallen in front. The stone-arch remained, but the wooden-door had been levelled and was partially devoured by fire. A breath of coolness still lingered in the dark place, and the fruity odor of spilled wine mingled revoltingly with the heaviness of death. The ash-covered floor was packed hard, and still wet from the gusts of rain that had swept in through the open door and the broken-backed roof; stained, too, from the leakage of the casks. Charter's boot touched an empty bottle, and it wheeled and careened across the stones—until he thought it would never stop.... Steady as a ticking clock, came the "drip-drip" of liquor, escaping through a sprung seam from somewhere among the merciful shadows, where the old soldier of France had fallen from his chair.

He climbed over the heap of stones, which had been the rear-door, and entered the little court from which the song-birds had flown. Across the drifts of ash, he forced his steps—into the semi-dark of the living-room behind.

The great head that he had come to find, was rigidly erect, as if the muscles were locked, and faced the aperture through which he had entered. It seemed to be done in iron, and was covered with white dust—Pelée's dust, fresh-wrought from the fire in which the stars were forged. The first impression was that of calm, but Charter's soul chilled with terror, before his eyes fathomed the reality of that look. Under the thick dust, there suddenly appeared upon the features, as if invisible demons tugged at the muscles with hideous art, a reflection from the depths.... Bellingham was sitting beside a table. He had seen Death in the open door. The colossal energies of his life had risen to vanquish the Foe, yet again. His mind had realized their failure, and what failure meant, before the End. Out of the havoc of nether-planes, where Abominations are born, had come a last call for him. That glimpse of hell was mirrored in the staring dustless eyes.... Around his shoulders, like a golden vine, and lying across his knees, clung the trophy of defeat—Soronia. Denied the lily—he had taken the tiger-lily.... Under the unset stones of the floor, a lizard croaked.

Charter, who had fallen of old into the Caverns of Devouring, backed out into the court of the song-birds,

in agony for clean light, for he had seen old hells again, in the luminous decay of those staring eyes.... He recalled the end of Father Fontanel and this—with reverent awe, as one on the edge of the mystery. Through the ends of these two, had some essential balance of power been preserved in the world?

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# TWENTY-SEVENTH CHAPTER

## PAULA AND CHARTER JOURNEY INTO THE WEST; ONE HEARS VOICES, BUT NOT THE WORDS OFTEN, FROM RAPTURE'S ROADWAY

Peter Stock had cabled to New York for officers and men to make up a ship's company. The *Saragossa* was overhauled, meanwhile, in the harbor of Fort de France, and the owner expressed his intention of finishing his healing at sea. On the same ship, which brought his seamen from New York, arrived in Fort de France a corps of newspaper correspondents, who were not slow to discover that in the bandaged capitalist lay one of the great stones of the eruption from the American point of view. This literally unseated Peter Stock from his chair on the veranda of the hotel at the Capital. With his guests, he put to sea within thirty-six hours after the arrival of the steamer from New York; indeed, before the *Saragossa's* paint was dry. His vitality was not abated, but the great figures of Pelée and Fontanel, enriched by M. Mondet as a sort of clown-attendant, had strangely softened and strengthened this rarely-flavored personality. As for his two guests, that month of voyaging in the Caribbean and below, is particularly their own. The three were on deck as the *Saragossa* plied past Saint Pierre, five or six miles deep in the roadstead, a last time. The brute, Pelée, lay asleep in the sun before the gate of the whited sepulchre.

"Did I ever tell you about my last interview with M. Mondet?" Peter Stock inquired.

Charter had witnessed it, on his way to the craters that morning, but he did not say so, and was regaled with the story. "Bear witness," Peter Stock finished, pointing toward the city, "that I forgive M. Mondet. Doubtless he was writing a paragraph on the staunchness of Pelée—when his desk was closed for him."

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They reached New York the first week in July. No sooner had Peter Stock berthed the *Saragossa* and breathed the big city, than he discovered how dearly he loved Pittsburg.... Paula went alone to the little apartment Top-side o' Park, where Madame Nestor absolved her strong young queen; alone also first to *The States*, though there was a table set for four over in Staten Island the following day....

Charter and Reifferscheid regarded each other a trifle nervously in the latter's office, before they left for the ferry. Each, however, found in the eyes of the other a sudden grip on finer matters than obvious explanations, so that no adjustment of past affairs was required. To Charter, this moment of meeting with the editor became a singularly bright memory, like certain moments with Father Fontanel. Reifferscheid had put away all the flowerings of romance, and could not know that their imperishable lustre was in his eyes—for the deeper-seeing eyes of the woman. He was big enough to praise her happiness, big enough to burst into singing. It had been a hard moment for her, but he sprang high among the nobilities of her heart, and was sustained.... What if it were just a throat-singing? There was no discordant note. These are the men and the moments to clinch one's faith in the Great Good that Drives the World.

Selma Cross had left the *Zoroaster*, and, with Stephen Cabot, was happily on the wing, between the city, shores and mountains. *The Thing* was to open again in September at the *Herriot*, and the initial venture into the West was over. Had she wished, Paula was not given a chance to do without the old friendship.... The story of taking the Company down into Kentucky from Cincinnati and fulfilling the old promise to

Calhoun Knox proved rare listening:

"I won't soon forget that night in Cincinnati, when I parted from Stephen Cabot," she said, falling with the same old readiness into her disclosures. "'Stephen,' I told him, 'I am taking the Company down into Danube to play to-morrow night in my home. I don't want you to go....' I had seen the real man shine out through physical pain many times. It was so now, and he looked the master in the deeper hurt. He's a self-fighter—the champion. He asked me if I meant to stay long, as I took his cool, slim hand. I told him that I hoped not, but if it transpired that I must stay for a while, I should come back to Cincinnati—for one day—to tell him.... I saw he was the stronger. I was all woman that moment, all human, wanting nothing that crowds or art could give. I think my talk became a little flighty, as I watched his face, so brave and so white.

"I knew his heart, knew that his thoughts that moment would have burned to the brute husk, coarser stuff than he was made of.... Here's a Stephen who could smile up from the ground as—as they stoned.... So I left him, standing by the window, in the upper-room of the hotel, watching the moving river-lights down on the Ohio.

"Late the next afternoon I reached Danube, and was driven directly to the theatre—which was new. There was a pang in this. The town seemed just the same; the streets and buildings, the sounds and smells, even the sunset patch at the head of Main Street—all were just as they should be, except the theatre. You see, all the dreams of greatness of that savage, homely girl, had found their source and culmination in the old house of melodrama, parts of which, they told me, now were made over into darkey shanties down by the river. I felt that my success was qualified a little in that it had not come in the life of the old house.

"I joined the Company at the theatre, without seeing any of the Danube folk. The audience was already gathering. Through an eyelet of the curtain, I saw Calhoun Knox enter alone, and take a seat in the centre, five rows from the orchestra. He seemed smaller. The good brown tan was gone. There was a twitch about his mouth that twitched mine. Other faces were the same—even the lips that had spoken my doom so long ago. I had no hate for them now....

"I looked at Calhoun Knox again, looked for the charm of clean simplicity, and kept putting Stephen Cabot out of my heart and brain.... This man before me had fought for me twice, when I had needed a champion.... They pulled me away from the eyelet, and *The Thing* was on.

"I could feel the town's group-soul that night—responded to its every thought, as if a nerve-system of my own was installed in every mind. They were listening to the woman who had startled New York. I felt their awe. It was not sweet, as I had dreamed the moment would be. After all, these were my people.

"I wanted their love, not their adulation. There had been nights back in the East, when I had felt my audience, and turned loose *The Thing* with utmost daring, knowing that enough of the throng could follow me. But this night I played slowly, played down, so that all could get it. This was not a concession to the public, but a reconciliation. And at the last, I moved and spoke pityingly, lest I hurt them; played to the working face of Calhoun Knox with all its limitations—as you would tell a story to a child, and hasten the happy ending to steady the quivering lip.... And then it came to me slowly, after the last curtain had fallen, that Danube was calling for its own, and I stepped out from behind.

"'Once in the days of tumult and misunderstanding,' I told them, 'I was angry because you did not love me. Now I know that I was not lovable. And now I feel your goodness and your forgiveness. I pray you not to thank me any more, lest I break down under too much joy....' Then I went down among them. A woman kissed me, but the moment was so big and my eyes so clouded that I did not remember the face....

Presently the real consciousness came. Danube had dropped back to the doors. My hand was in the hand of Calhoun Knox.

"Far out the Lone Ridge pike, we walked, to the foot of the Knobs. I was breathing the smell of my old mountains. You can rely, that I had kept my voice bright. 'I have come back to you, Calhoun,' I said.

"'I shouldn't be here,' he stammered in real panic. 'You didn't write, and I married——'

"I could have hugged him in a way that would not have disturbed his wife, but I said reproachfully, 'And you let me come 'way out here alone with you, wicked Married Man?...' I started back for town, and then thought better of it—waited for him to come up, and took his hand.

"'Calhoun,' I said, 'I found you a solid friend when I needed one pitifully. Selma Cross never forgets. You have always been my Kentucky Gentleman. God bless your big bright heart. I wish you kingly happiness!'

"And then I did rush back. We separated at the edge of the town. I wanted to run and cry aloud. The joy was so new and so vast that I could scarcely hold it. Miles away, I heard the night-train whistle. My baggage was at the hotel, but I didn't care for that, and reached the depot-platform in time. The Company was there, but they had reserved a Pullman. I went into the day-coach, because I wanted to be alone—sat rigidly in the thin-backed seat. There were snoring, sprawling folks on every hand.... After a long time, some one stirred in his seat and muttered, 'High Bridge.' The brakeman came through at age-long intervals, calling stations that had once seemed to me the far country. Then across the aisle, a babe awoke and wailed. The mother had others—a sweet sort of woman sick with weariness. I took the little one, and it liked the fresh arms and fell asleep. It fitted right in—the soft helpless warm little thing—and felt good to me. Dawn dimmed the old meadows before I gave it up to be fed—and begged it back again.

"And then Cincinnati from the river—brown river below and brown smoke-clouds above. It seemed as if I had been gone ages, instead of only since yesterday. Unhampered by baggage, I sped out of the day-coach, far ahead of the Company in the Pullman, but the carriage to the hotel was insufferably slow; the elevator dragged.... It was only eight in the morning, but I knew his ways—how little he slept.... His door was partly open, and I heard the crinkle of his paper, as he answered my tap.

"'Aren't you pretty near ready for breakfast, Stephen?' I asked.... He stood in the doorway—his head just to my breast. His face was hallowed, but his body seemed to weaken. I crossed the threshold to help him, and we—we're to be married before the new season opens."

Paula loved the story.

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And at length Paula and Charter reached the house of his mother, whose glory was about her, as she stood in the doorway. Before he kissed her, the mother-eyes had searched his heart.... Then she turned to his garland of victory.

"I am so glad you have brought me a daughter."

The women faced each other—the strangest moment in three lives.... All the ages passed between the eyes of the maid and the mother; and wisdoms finer than words, as when two suns, sweeping past in their great cycle, shine across the darkness of the infinite deep; ages of gleaning, adoring, suffering, bearing, praying; ages of listening to little children and building dreams out of pain; the weathered lustre of Naomi and the

fresh radiance of Ruth; but over all, that look which passed between the women shone the secret of the meaning of men—God-taught Motherhood.

To Charter, standing afar-off, came the simple but tremendous revelation, just a glimpse into that lovely arcanum which mere man may never know in full.... He saw that these two were closer than prophets to the Lifting Heart of Things; that such are the handmaidens of the Spirit, to whom are intrusted God's avatars; that no prophet is greater than his mother.

To the man, it was new as the dream which nestled in Paula's heart; to the women, it was old as the flocks on the mountain-sides of Lebanon. They turned to him smiling. And when he could speak, he said to Paula:

"I thought you would like to see the garret, and the window that faces the East."

**THE END**

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# About Will Levington Comfort

## *Author of "She Buildeth Her House" and "Routledge Rides Alone"*

## (*Eight Editions*)

Well-known as one of the most successful short-story contributors to American magazines, Will Levington Comfort awoke one morning a little over a year ago to find himself famous as a long-story writer. Seldom has the first novel of an author been accorded the very essence of praise from the conservative critics as was Mr. Comfort's "Routledge Rides Alone," acknowledged to be the best book of 1910.

While young in years, Mr. Comfort, who is thirty-three, is old in experience. In 1898 he enlisted in the Fifth United States Cavalry, and saw Cuban service in the Spanish-American War. The following year he rode as a war correspondent in the Philippines a rise which resulted from vivid letters written to newspapers from the battlefields and prisons.

Stricken with fever, wearied of service and thinking of Home, he was next ordered by cable up into China to watch the lid lifted from the Legations at Peking. Here he saw General Liscum killed on the Tientsin Wall and got his earliest glance of the Japanese in war. Another attack of fever completely prostrated him and he was sent home on the hospital ship "Relief."

In the interval between the Boxer Uprising and the Russo-Japanese War, Mr. Comfort began to dwell upon the great fundamental facts of world-politics. But the call of smoke and battle was too strong, and, securing a berth as war-correspondent for a leading midwestern newspaper, he returned to the far East and the scenes of the Russo-Japanese conflict in 1904. He was present at the battle of Liaoyang his description of which in "Routledge Rides Alone" fairly overwhelms the reader.

Few novels of recent years have aroused the same enthusiasm as was evoked by this story of "Routledge." Book reviewers both in this country and in Europe have suggested that the book should win for its author the Peace prize because it is one of the greatest and most effective arguments against warfare that has ever been presented.

# By WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

## ROUTLEDGE RIDES ALONE

## COLORED FRONTISPIECE BY MARTIN JUSTICE

Here is a tale indeed—big and forceful, palpitating with interest, and written with the sureness of touch and the breadth of a man who is master of his art. Mr. Comfort has drawn upon two practically new story-places in the world of fiction to furnish the scenes for his narrative—India and Manchuria at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. While the novel is distinguished by its clear and vigorous war scenes, the fine and sweet romance of the love of the hero, Routledge—a brave, strange, and talented American—for the "most beautiful woman in London" rivals these in interest.

The story opens in London, sweeps up and down Asia, and reaches its most rousing pitch on the ghastly field of Liaoyang, in Manchuria. The one-hundred-mile race from the field to a free cable outside the war zone, between Routledge and an English war correspondent, is as exciting and enthralling as anything that has appeared in fiction in recent years.

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