

“AS THE COMING OF DAWN”

By James Branch Cabell

“OH, I say, you know!” observed Billy Woods, as he finished the sixth chapter of “Ashtaroth’s Lacquey,” and flung down the book.

“Rot, utter rot,” assented Mr. Charteris, pleasantly; “puerile and futile trifling with the fragments of the seventh commandment, as your sturdy common sense instantly detected. In fact,” he added, hopefully, “I think it’s quite bad enough to go into a tenth edition.”

Coming from the author, this should have been fairly conclusive; but Billy refused to be comforted. “Look here, Jack!” said he, pathetically, “why don’t you brace up and write something—decent?”

Charteris flicked the ashes from his cigarette, with conscious grace. “Is not impropriety the spice of literature?” he queried, softly. “Sybarite that I am, I have descended to this that I might furnish butter for my daily bread!” He refilled his glass and held the sparkling drink for a moment against the light. “This time next year,” said he, dreamily, “I shall be able to afford cake; for I shall have written ‘As the Coming of Dawn.’”

Mr. Woods sniffed, and refilled his glass likewise.

“For the reign of subtle immorality,” sighed Mr. Charteris, “is well-nigh over. Already the augurs of the pen wink as they fable of a race of men evilly scintillant in talk and gracefully erotic. We know that this, alas, cannot be, and that in real life our peccadilloes shrink into dreary vistas of divorce-cases and the police-court, and that crime has lost its

splendor. We sin very carelessly—sordidly, at times—and artistic wickedness is rare. It is a pity; life was once a scarlet volume scattered with misty-coated demons; it is now a yellow journal, wherein our virtues are the not infrequent misprints, and our vices the hackneyed formulas of journalists. Yes, it is a pity!”

“Dear Jack,” remonstrated Mr. Woods, “you are sadly *passé*; that pose is of the Beardsley period and went out many magazines ago.”

“The point is well taken,” admitted Mr. Charteris, “for our life of to-day is already reflected—faintly, I grant you—in the best-selling books. We have passed through the period of a slavish admiration for wickedness and wide margins; our quondam decadents now snigger in a parody of primeval innocence, and many things are forgiven the latter-day poet if his botany be irreproachable. Indeed, it is quite time; for we have tossed over the contents of every closet in the *ménage à trois*. And I—*moi, qui vous parle*—I am wearied of hansom-cabs and the flaring lights of Broadway, and henceforth I shall demonstrate the beauty of pastoral innocence.”

“Saul among the prophets,” suggested Mr. Woods, helpfully.

“Quite so,” assented Mr. Charteris; “and my first prophecy will be ‘As the Coming of Dawn.’”

Mr. Woods tapped his forehead significantly. “Mad, quite mad!” said he, in parenthesis.

“I shall be idyllic,” continued Mr. Charteris, sweetly. “I shall write of the ineffable glory of first love; I

shall babble of green fields and the keen odors of Spring and the shame-faced countenances of lovers met after last night's kissing. It will be the story of love that stirs blindly in the hearts of maids and youths, and does not know that it is love—the love that manhood has half forgotten and that youth has not skill to write of. But I shall write its story as it has never been written before; and I shall make a great book of it, that will go into thousands and thousands of editions. Before heaven, I will!" He brought his fist down emphatically on the table.

"H'm!" said Mr. Woods, dubiously; "going back to renew associations with your first love? You'll find her grandchildren terribly in the way, you know."

"It is imperative," said Mr. Charteris, shortly, "for the scope of my book that I should view life through youthful eyes."

Mr. Woods whistled softly. "'Honorable young gentleman,'" he murmured, as to himself, "'desires to meet attractive young lady. Object: to learn how to be idyllic in four-hundred pages.'"

There was no answer.

"I say, Jack," queried Mr. Woods, "do you think this—this sort of thing is fair to the girl? Isn't it a little cold-blooded?"

Charteris smiled, somewhat evasively. "To-morrow," said he, with firmness, "I leave Greenfield Springs in search of 'As the Coming of Dawn.'"

"Look here," said Mr. Woods; "if you start on a tour of the country, looking for assorted dawns and idylls, it'll end in my bailing you out of the lock-up. You take a liver-pill and go to bed."

II

CHARTERIS notified the hotel-clerk and the newspaper correspondents next morning that Greenfield was about to be bereft of the presence of the distinguished novelist. Then, as his train did not leave till night, he resolved to

be bored on horseback, rather than on the golf-links, and had Chloris summoned from the stables for a final investigation of the country roads thereabouts.

Chloris elected to follow a new route this afternoon shortly after leaving the hotel grounds, and Charteris, knowing by long experience that any questioning of this decision could but result in undignified defeat, assented. Thus it came about that they trotted down a green country lane and came to a narrow brook, which babbled across the roadway and was overhung with thick foliage that lisped and whispered cheerfully in the placid light of the declining sun. It was there that the germ of "As the Coming of Dawn" was found.

For Charteris had fallen into a reverie, and Chloris, taking advantage of this, twitched the reins from his hand and proceeded to satisfy her thirst in a manner that was rather too noisy to be quite good form. Charteris sat in patience, idly observing the sparkling reflection of the sunlight on the water. Then Chloris snorted, as something rustled through the underbrush, and Charteris, turning, perceived a vision.

The vision was in white, with a maddening profusion of open-work. There were blue ribbons connected with it. There were also black eyes, of the almond-shaped, heavy-lidded sort that Charteris had thought existed only in Lely's pictures, and great coils of brown hair that was gold where the chequered sunlight fell upon it, and two lips that were very red. He was filled with a deep pity for his tired horse and a resolve that for this once her thirst should be quenched. Thereupon, he lifted his cap hastily, but Chloris scrambled to the other bank, spluttered, and had carried him a quarter of a mile before Charteris announced to the evening air that he was a fool and that Chloris was various picturesque but uncomplimentary things. Then he smiled, equivocally.

"Dainty little Philistine!" said he.

After this they retraced their steps, Charteris peering anxiously about the road.

"Pardon me," said Charteris, subsequently; "have you seen anything of a watch—a small gold one, set with pearls?"

"Heavens!" said the vision, sympathetically, "what a pity! Are you sure it fell here?"

"I don't seem to have it about me," answered Charteris, with cryptic significance. He searched about his pockets, with a puckered brow. "And as we stopped here—" He looked inquiringly into the water.

"From this side," observed the vision, impersonally, "there is less glare from the brook."

Having tied Chloris to a swinging limb, Charteris sat down contentedly. The vision moved hurriedly, lest he should be crowded.

"It might be further up the road," she suggested, demurely.

"I must have left it at the hotel," observed Charteris, rapt in meditation.

"You might look," said she, peering into the water.

"Forever!" assented he, rather fatuously.

The vision flushed. "I didn't mean—" she began.

"I did," quoth Charteris, "every word of it."

"In that case," said she, rising, "I shall—" A frown wrinkled her brow; then a deep, curved dimple performed a similar office for her cheek, as Charteris sighed pathetically. "I wonder—" said she, with some hesitation.

"Of course not," said he, composedly; "there's nobody about."

The vision sat down. "You mentioned your sanatorium?" quoth she, sweetly.

"The Asylum of Love," said Charteris; "discharged—under a false impression—as cured; and sent to paradise."

"Oh!" said she.

"It is," said he, defiant.

She looked about her. "The woods are beautiful," she conceded, softly.

"They form an admirable background," said he, with some irrelevance. "It is a veritable Eden, before the coming of the snake."

"Before?" queried she, dubiously.

"Undoubtedly," said Charteris. He felt his ribs, in meditative wise. "And just after——"

"It is quite time," said she, judicially, "for me to go home."

"It is not good," pleaded Charteris, "for man to be alone."

"I have heard," said she, "that the—almost any one can cite Scripture to his purpose."

Charteris thrust out a foot for inspection. "No suggestion of a hoof," said he; "no odor of brimstone, and my inoffensive name is John Charteris."

"Of course," she submitted, virtuously, "I could never think of making your acquaintance in this irregular fashion; and, therefore, of course, I could not think of telling you that my name is Marian Winwood."

"Of course not," agreed Charteris; "it would be highly improper."

There was an interval. Charteris smiled.

"I am country-bred," said she, in flushed explanation; "and you are——"

"A citizen of no mean city," he admitted. "I am from New York!"

"—horrid," finished she.

Charteris groaned, miserably.

"But I have been to New York," said she.

"Ah?" said he, vacantly. "Eden Musée?"

"Yes," said she, with ill-concealed pride.

Charteris groaned once again.

"And it is quite time for me to go to supper," she concluded, with some lack of sequence.

"Look here!" remonstrated he; "it isn't six yet." He exhibited his watch to support this statement.

"Oh!" she cried, with wide, indignant eyes.

"I—I mean—" stammered he.

She rose to her feet.

"—I'll explain——"

"I do not care to listen to any explanations."

"—to-morrow."

"You will not." This was said very firmly. "And I hope you will have the kindness to keep away from these woods; for I always walk here in the afternoon." Then, with an indignant toss of the head, the vision disappeared.

Charteris whistled. Subsequently, he galloped back to the hotel.

"See here!" said he, to the hotel-clerk; "how long does this place keep open?"

"Season closes October fifteenth, sir."

"All right; I'll need my room till then. Here, boy! See if my luggage has been taken to the station; and, if it has, send it back—Charteris, Room 249—and be quick!"

III

"It will be very dreadful," sighed she, in a tired voice; "for I shall come here every afternoon. And there will be only ghosts in the woods—wistful, pathetic ghosts of dead days—and I shall be very lonely."

"Dear," said Charteris, "is it not something to have been happy? It has been such a wonderful Summer, and come what may, nothing—nothing—can rob us of its least golden moment. And it is only for a little."

"You will come back?" said she, half-doubtingly.

"Yes," said Charteris, and felt the black waves of degradation and unutterable self-contempt sweep over his soul, like a flood, and wash the manhood from it. "You wonderful, elfin creature, I shall come back—to your home, that I have seen only from a distance. I don't believe you live there—you live in some great, gnarled oak hereabouts, and at night its bark uncloses to set you free, and you and your sisters dance out the satyrs' hearts in the moonlight. I know you are a dryad—a wonderful, laughing, clear-eyed dryad strayed out of the golden age."

"Alas!" said she, sadly; "I am only a girl, dear—a very weak, frightened

girl, with very little disposition to laughter just now. For you are going away. Oh, Jack, you have meant so much to me! The world is so different since you have come, and I am so happy and so miserable that—that I am afraid." An impossible, infinitesimal handkerchief stole upward to two great, sparkling eyes.

"Dear!" said Charteris. And this remark appeared to meet the requirements of the situation.

Then there was a silence which he devoted to a consideration of the pitiful littleness of his soul. The Autumn woods flushed and burned about them; there was already the damp odor of decaying leaves in the air. The whinnying of Chloris smote the stillness like an impertinence. The Summer was ended; but "As the Coming of Dawn" was practically complete.

It was not the book that Charteris had planned, but a far greater one that was scarcely his. There was no word written, as yet. But for two months he had viewed life through Marian Winwood's eyes; day by day, his half-formed, tentative ideas had been laid before her with elaborate carelessness, to be approved, altered or rejected, as she decreed, until at last they were welded into a perfect, compact whole that was a book. Bit by bit, they had planned it, he and she; and, as Charteris dreamed of it as it should be, his brain was fired with exultation, and he defied his soul and swore that the book, for which he had pawned his self-respect, was worth—well worth—the price that he had paid. This was in Marian's absence.

"Dear!" said she.

Charteris looked up into her eyes. They were filled with a tender, unutterable confidence that thrilled him like physical cold. "Marian," said he, simply, "I shall never come back."

Her eyes widened a trifle, but she did not seem to comprehend.

"Have you never wondered," said he, hoarsely, "that I have never kissed you?"

“Yes,” she answered. Her voice was emotionless.

“And yet — yet —” Charteris sprang to his feet. “Dear God, how I have longed! Yesterday, only yesterday, as I read to you from the verses I had made to other women, those women that are but pale, colorless shadows by the side of your stanch, vivid beauty—and you listened wonderingly and said the proper things and then lapsed into dainty boredom—how I longed to take you in my arms, and quicken your calm Philistine blood with my kisses! You knew—you must have known! Did you sleep last night?” he queried, a sharp note in his voice.

“No,” said she, dully.

“Nor I. All night I tossed in sick, fevered dreams of you. I am mad for love of you. And yet only once have I kissed—your hand. Dear God, your hand!” His voice quavered, effectively.

“Yes,” said she; “I remember.”

“I have struggled; I have conquered this madness—for madness it is. We can laugh together and be excellent friends—no more. We have laughed, have we not, dear, a whole Summer through? Now comes the ending. Ah, I have seen you puzzling over my meaning ere this—now follows a laugh.”

She smiled, stupidly.

“For we can laugh together—that is all. We are not mates. You were born to be the wife of a strong man and the mother of his clean-blooded children, and you and your sort will inherit the earth and make the laws for us poor weaklings who dream and scribble and paint. We are not mates. But you have been very kind to me. I thank you and say good-bye; and I pray that I may never see you after to-day.”

There was something of magnificence in the egotism of the man and his complacent deprecation of his artistic temperament; it was a barrier he recognized unquestioningly; and with equal plainness he perceived the petty motives that now caused him to point it out to Marian. His lips

curled half in mockery of himself as he framed the bitter smile he felt the situation demanded; but he was fired with the part he was playing, and half-belief crept into his mind that Marian was created chiefly for the purpose she had already served. He regarded her shrunken form as through the eyes of future readers of his biography. She represented an episode in his life. He pitied her sincerely, and under all, his lower nature, held in leash for two months past, chuckled and grinned and leaped at the thought of a holiday.

She rose to her feet. “Good-bye,” said she.

“You—you understand, dear?” he queried, tenderly.

“Yes,” she answered; “I understand—not what you have just told me, for in that, of course, you have lied. But I understand you, Jack, dear. Ah, believe me, you are not an uncommon type, a type not strong enough to live life healthily—just strong enough to dabble in life, to trifle with emotions, to experiment with other people’s lives. Indeed, I am not angry, Jack, dear; I am only—sorry; and the Summer has been very happy.”

IV

CHARTERIS returned to New York and wrote “As the Coming of Dawn.”

He spent nine months in this. His work at first was mere copying of the completed book that had already existed in his brain; but when it was transcribed therefrom, he wrote and rewrote, cast and recast each paragraph of the fantastic, jeweled English that had made him the despair of his admirers. It was the work of his life; it was beautiful and strong and clean; and he dandled the child of his brain tenderly for a while and arrayed it in perfect garments and clothed it in words that had a taste in the mouth and would one day lend an aroma to the printed page, and rejoiced shamelessly in that which he had done. Then he went out and sought

the luxury of a Turkish bath, and in the morning, after a rub-down and an ammonia cocktail, awoke to the fact that there were breakfasts in the world that sent forth savory odors and awaited the coming of ravenous humanity.

A week later, he sent for Billy Woods and informed him that he, Charteris, was a genius; waved certain type-written pages to demonstrate the fact. He added, as an afterthought, that he was a cad. Subsequently, he read divers portions of "As the Coming of Dawn" aloud, and Mr. Woods sipped Chianti of a rare flavor and listened.

"Look here!" said Mr. Woods, suddenly; "have you seen 'The Imperial Votaress'?"

Mr. Charteris frowned petulantly. "Don't know the lady," said he.

"She's advertised on half the posters in town," said Mr. Woods. "And it's the book of the year. And it's your book."

Mr. Charteris laid down his manuscript. "I beg your pardon?" said he.

"Your book," repeated Mr. Woods, firmly; "scarcely a hair's difference between them, except in the names."

"H'm!" observed Mr. Charteris, in a careful voice. "Who wrote it?"

"Marian Winwood," said Mr. Woods.

"Eh?" said Mr. Charteris. "Name sounds familiar, somehow."

"Dear me!" remonstrated Billy. "Why, she wrote 'A Bright Particular Star,' you know, and 'The Acolytes,' and—and lots of others." Billy is not literary in his tastes.

The author of "As the Coming of Dawn" swallowed a glass of Chianti at a gulp.

"Of course," said he, slowly, "I can't, in my position, run the risk of being charged with plagiarism."

Thereupon, he threw the manuscript into the open fire, which his thin blood and love of the picturesque rendered necessary, even in May.

"Oh, look here!" cried Billy, catching up the papers. "It—it's infernally good, you know! Can't you—can't you fix it—change it a bit?"

Mr. Charteris took the manuscript and replaced it firmly among the embers. "As you justly observe," said he, "it is infernally good. It is much better than anything else I shall ever write."

"Why, then—" said Billy.

"Why, then," said Mr. Charteris, "the only thing that remains to do is to read 'The Imperial Votaress.'"



AN OPEN QUESTION

THE band around his Summer hat he lent her for a belt;
So when she gave it back again he saw the little welt
Her buckle had inflicted, and he whispered, bending low,
"If I but look on this, dear one, your measure I shall know."

With just the least suspicion of annoyance in her pout,
"Is that the only way," she said, "you have of finding out?"

HELEN CHAUNCEY.



HE who never smiles should not on that account consider himself the centre of gravity.