THE LIGHT OF THE STAR

HAMLIN GARLAND

This edition published 2026
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-76183-033-4 (hardcover)
978-1-76183-032-7 (softcover)

First published in 1904.

This edition is based on the Harper & Brothers printing by 1904.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

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by

Hamlin Garland

"HE WAS A NOTICEABLY HANDSOME FIGURE
AS HE SAT ALONE IN THE BOX"

Contents

I

AFTER the appointment with Miss Merival reached him (through the hand of her manager), young Douglass grew feverishly impatient of the long days which lay between. Waiting became a species of heroism. Each morning he reread his manuscript and each evening found him at the theatre, partly to while away the time, but mainly in order that he might catch some clew to the real woman behind the shining mask. His brain was filled with the light of the star—her radiance dazzled him.

By day he walked the streets, seeing her name on every billboard, catching the glow of her subtle and changeful beauty in every window. She gazed out at him from brows weary with splendid barbaric jewels, her eyes bitter and disdainful, and hopelessly sad. She smiled at him in framework of blue and ermine and pearls—the bedecked, heartless coquette of the pleasure-seeking world. She stood in the shadow of gray walls, a grating over her head, with deep, soulful, girlish eyes lifted in piteous appeal; and in each of these characters an unfathomed depth remained to vex and to allure him.

Magnified by these reflections on the walls, haloed by the teeming praise and censure of the press, she seemed to dominate the entire city as she had come to absorb the best of his own life. What her private character really was no one seemed to know, in spite of the special articles and interviews with her managers which fed the almost universal adulation of her dark and changeful face, her savage and sovereign beauty. There was insolence in her tread, and mad allurement in the rounded beauty of her powerful white arm—and at his weakest the young playwright admitted that all else concerning her was of no account.

At the same time he insisted that he was not involved with the woman—only with the actress. "I am not a lover—I am a playwright, eager to have my heroine adequately portrayed," he contended with himself in the solitude of his room, high in one of the great apartment buildings of the middle city. Nevertheless, the tremor in his nerves caused him thought.

Her voice. Yes, that, too, was mysterious. Whence came that undertone like the moan of a weary wastrel tortured with dreams of idyllic innocence long lost? Why did her utterance, like her glorious face, always suggest some inner, darker meaning? There were times when she seemed old—old as vice and cruelty, hoarse with complaints, with curses, and then again her lips were childishly sweet, and her voice carried only the wistful accents of adolescence or the melody of girlish awe.

On the night before his appointment she played *The Baroness Telka*, a lurid, lustful, remorseless woman—a creature with a vampire's heart and the glamour of Helen of Troy—a woman whose cheeks were still round and smooth, but whose eyes were alight with the flame of insanity—a frightful, hungry, soulless wretch. And as he sat at the play and watched that glittering, inexplicable woman, and thought of her rôles, Douglass asked himself: "How will she meet me to-morrow? What will be the light in her eyes when she turns them upon me? Will she meet me alone—haughty, weary with praise, or will she be surrounded by those who bow to her as to a queen?" This latter thing he feared.

He had not been without experience with women—even with actresses; but no woman he had ever met had appealed to his imagination beyond the first meeting. Would it be so with Helen Merival? He had loved twice in his life, but not well enough to say so to either of his sweethearts. Around Myra's name clung the perfume and moonlight of summer evenings in the far-off mid-continent village where he was born, while Violet recalled the music, the comfort, and the security of a beautiful Eastern home. Neither of these sweet and lovely girls had won his heart completely. How was it that this woman of the blazoning bill-boards had already put more of passion into his heart than they of the pure and sheltered life?

He did not deceive himself. It was because Helen

could not be understood at a glance. She appealed to his imagination as some strange bird—alien voyager—fled from distant islands in dim, purple seas. She typed the dreams of adventuring youth seeking the princesses of other and more romantic lands.

At times he shuddered with a fear that some hidden decay of Helen Merival's own soul enabled her to so horrify her audience with these desolating rôles, and when the curtain fell on *The Baroness*, he was resolved to put aside the chance of meeting the actress. Was it worth while to be made ashamed and bitter? She might stand revealed as a coarse and selfish courtesan—a worn and haggard enchantress whose failing life blazed back to youth only when on the stage. Why be disenchanted? But in the end he rose above this boyish doubt. "What does it matter whether she be true or false? She has genius, and genius I need for my play—genius and power," and in the delusion he rested.

He climbed to his den in the tower as physically wearied as one exhausted with running a race, and fell asleep with his eyelids fluttering in a feverish dream.

The hour of his appointment with her fell upon Sunday, and as he walked up the street towards her hotel the bells in a church on a side street were ringing, and their chimes filled his mind with memories of the small town from which he came. How peaceful and sweet the life of Woodstock seemed now. The little meeting-house,

whose shingled spire still pointed at the stars, would always be sweet with the memory of Myra Thurber, whose timid clasp upon his arm troubled him then and pained him now. He had so little to give in return for her devotion—therefore he had given nothing. He had said good-bye almost harshly—his ambition hardening his heart to her appeal.

Around him, in his dream of those far-off days, moved other agile forms—young lovers like Myra and himself, their feet creaking on the glittering snow. They stepped slowly, though the bells called and called. The moonlight was not more clear and untouched of baleful fire than Myra's sweet eyes looking up at him, and now he was walking the wet pavement of the great metropolis, with the clang and grind of cars all about him, on his way to meet a woman whose life was spent in simulating acts as destructive as Myra's had been serene and trustful. At the moment he saw his own life as a thread in some mysterious drama.

"To what does it lead?" he asked, as he drew under the overhanging portal of the great hotel where the star made her home. It was to the man of the West a splendid place. Its builders had been lavish of highly colored marbles and mosaics, spendthrift of light and gilding; on every side shone the signs and seals of predatory wealth. Its walls were like costly confectionery, its ornaments insolent, its waste criminal. Every decorative feature was hot, restless,

irreverent, and cruel, quite the sort of avenue one might expect to find in his walk towards the glittering woman of the false and ribald drama.

"She chose her abode with instinctive bad taste," he said, bitterly; and again his weakness, his folly turned him cold; for with all his physical powers he was shy to the point of fear.

He made a sober and singular spot in the blaze of the rotunda. So sombre was his look, so intent his gaze. Youths in high hats and shining shirt-fronts stood in groups conversing loudly, and in the resplendent dining-hall bediamonded women and their sleek-haired, heavy-jewelled partners were eating leisurely, attended by swarms of waiters so eager they trod upon one another's feet.

The clerk eyed him in impassible silence as he took out his worn card-case, saying: "Please send my card to Miss Merival."

"Miss Merival is not receiving any one this evening," the clerk answered, with a tone which was like the slap of a wet glove in the face.

Douglass faced him with a look which made him reflect. "You will let her be the judge of that," he said, and his tone was that of one accustomed to be obeyed.

The little man bowed. "Oh, certainly, Mr. Douglass, but as she left orders—"

When the boy with his card had disappeared into the candy-colored distances, the playwright found himself

again studying the face of his incomprehensible sorceress, who looked down upon him even at that moment from a bulletin-board on the hotel wall, Oriental, savage, and sullen—sad, too, as though alone in her solitary splendor. "She can't be all of her parts—which one of them will I find as I enter her room?" he asked himself for the hundredth time.

"Miss Merival will see Mr. Douglass," said the bellboy. "This way, sir."

As he stepped into the elevator the young man's face grew stern and his lips straightened out into a grim line. It was absurd to think he should be so deeply moved by any woman alive, he who prided himself on his self-possession.

Down a long hall on the tenth floor the boy led him, and tapped at a door, which was opened after a pause by a quiet woman who greeted him with outstretched hand, kindly cordial.

"How do you do, Mr. Douglass? It is very good of you to come," she said, with the simplest inflection.

"This must be an elder sister," he thought, and followed her into a large sitting-room, where a gray-haired woman and a young man were sipping after-dinner coffee.

"Mother, this is Mr. Douglass, the author of *The Modern Stage*, the little book of essays we liked so well." The elderly lady greeted him cordially, but with a timid air. "And this is my brother Hugh," the young man gave Douglass's hand a firm and cordial grip.

"Sit down, please—not there—over here, where the light will fall on you. I want to see how you look," she added, in smiling candor; and with that smile he recognized in his hostess the great actress.

He was fairly dazed, and for the moment entirely wordless. From the very moment the door had opened to him the "glittering woman" had been receding into remote and ever remoter distances, for the Helen Merival before him was as simple, candid, and cordial as his own sister. Her voice had the home inflection; she displayed neither paint nor powder; her hair was plainly brushed—beautiful hair it was, too—and her dress was lovely and in quiet taste.

Her face seemed plain at first, just as her stature seemed small. She was dark, but not so dark as she appeared on the stage, and her face was thinner, a little careworn, it seemed to him; and her eyes—"those leering, wicked eyes"—were large and deep and soft. Her figure was firm, compact, womanly, and modest in every line. No wife could have seemed more of the home than this famous actress who faced him with hands folded in her lap.

He was stupefied. Suddenly he perceived the injustice and the crass folly of his estimate of her character, and with this perception came a broader and deeper realization of her greatness as an actress. Her real self now became more complex than his wildest imagined ideal of her. That this sweet and reflective girl should be the actress was as difficult to understand as that *The Baroness* should be at heart

a good woman. For five minutes he hardly heard what she said, so busy was his mind readjusting itself to this abrupt displacement of values. With noiseless suddenness all the lurid light which the advertiser had thrown around the star died away. The faces which mocked and mourned, the clutching hands, the lines of barbaric ornaments, the golden goblets of debauchery, the jewelled daggers, the poison phials—all those accessories, designed to produce the siren of the posters, faded out, and he found himself face to face with a human being like himself, a thoughtful, self-contained, and rather serious American girl of twenty-six or twenty-eight years of age.

Not merely this, but her attitude towards him was that of a pupil. She lifted eyes to him as to one occupying an intellectual height. She began to tell him how much she enjoyed his little book on the drama, which a friend had recommended to her, but as soon as he had fairly recovered himself he led her away from his own work. "I am supposed to be an architect," he explained. "I write of the stage because I love it—and because I am a failure in my profession. My book is a very slight and unambitious attempt."

"But you know the stage and its principles," she insisted; "and your view of the future is an inspiration to those of us who wish to do good work. Your letter was very helpful to me, for I am deeply discouraged just now. I am disgusted with the drama in which I work. I am weary of these unwholesome parts. You are quite right, I shall never

do my best work so long as I am forced to assume such uncongenial rôles. They are all false, every one of them. They are good acting rôles, as acting goes; but I want plays that I can live as well as act. But my manager tells me that the public will not have me in anything else. Do you think they would? Is he right?" She ended in appeal.

"I think the public will take you at your best in anything you do," he replied, with grave gallantry. "I don't know that managers are omniscient. They are only men like the rest of us."

She smiled. "That is high treason; but I'm very much inclined to believe it is true. I am willing to concede that a theatre must be made to pay, but I am not content to think that this splendid art is always to be measured by the number of dollars which fall into the box-office. Take Westervelt as a type. What ideals has he? None whatever, save to find a play that will run forever and advertise itself."

She had dreams, too, it seemed. She glowed with her plans, and as she timidly presented them Douglass perceived that the woman was entirely unconscious of the false glamour, the whirling light and tumult, which outsiders connected with her name. At the centre of the illumination she sat looking out upon the glorified bill-boards, the gay shop windows, the crowded auditoriums, a wholesome, kindly, intelligent woman, subject to moods of discouragement like himself, unwilling to be a slave to a money-grubber. Something in his face encouraged the story of

her struggles. She passed to her personal history while he listened as one enthralled.

The actress fled, and the woman drew near. She looked into the man's eyes frankly, unshrinkingly, with humor, with appeal. She leaned towards him, and her face grew exquisitely tender and beautiful. "Oh, it was a struggle! Mother kept boarders in order that Hugh and I might go to school—didn't you, dear old muz?" She laid her hand on her mother's knee, and the mother clasped it. "Father's health grew worse and worse, and at last he died, and then I had to leave school to help earn our living. I began to read for entertainments of various sorts. Father was a Grand Army man, and the posts took an interest in my reading. I really earned a thousand dollars the second year. I doubled that the next year, and considered myself a great public success." She smiled. "Mother, may I let Mr. Douglass see how I looked then?"

The mother nodded consent, and the great actress, after a few moments' search, returned with a package of circulars, each bearing a piquant, girlish face.

"There," she said, as she handed them to Douglass, "I felt the full ecstasy of power when that picture was taken. In this I wore a new gown and a new hat, and I was earning fifty dollars at each reading. My success fairly bewildered me; but oh, wasn't it glorious! I took mother out of a tenement and put her in a lovely little home. I sent Hugh to college. I refurnished the house. I bought pictures and

rugs, for you know I continued to earn over two thousand a year. And what fun we had in spending all that money!"

"But how did you reach the stage?" he asked.

She laughed. "By way of 'the Kerosene circuit,' if you know what that means."

"I've heard the phrase," he answered; "it corresponds to the old-time 'barn-storming,' doesn't it?"

"It does."

Hugh interposed. "I wouldn't go into that, sis."

"Why not? It's great fun—now. I used to think it pretty tragic sometimes. Yes, I was nineteen when I went on the New England rural circuit—to give it a better name. Oh, I've been through all the steps! As soon as I felt a little secure about mother, I ventured to New York in answer to advertisements in *The Reflector*, and went out 'on the road' at 'fifteen per.'" These slang phrases seemed humorous as they came from her smiling lips, but Douglass knew some little part of the toil and discomfort they stood for.

Her eyes danced with fun. "I played *The Lady of Lyons* in a 'kitchen set,' and the death-scene in *East Lynne* before a 'wood drop.' And my costumes were something marvellous, weren't they, mother? Well, this lasted two seasons—summer seasons; while I continued to read in winter in order to indulge my passion for the stage in summer and early autumn. Then I secured a small part in a real company, and at a salary that permitted me to send some money home. I knocked about the country

this way two seasons more—that makes me twenty-two. I knew the office of every manager in New York by this time, but had been able to reach an audience with but one or two. They were kind enough, but failed to 'see anything' in me, as the phrase goes; and I was quite disheartened. Oh, 'the Rialto'!" Her face clouded and her voice softened. "It is a brilliant and amusing place to the successful, but to the girl who walks it seeking a theatrical engagement it is a heartless and cruel place. You can see them there to-day—girls eager and earnest and ready to work hard and conscientiously—haunting the agencies and the anterooms of the managers just as I did in those days—only five years ago."

"It seems incredible," exclaimed Douglass. "I thought you came here from a London success."

"So I did, and that is the miraculous chapter of my story. I went to London with Farnum—with only a little part—but McLennan saw me and liked my work, and asked me to take the American adventuress in his new play. And then—my fortune was made. The play was only a partial success, but my own position was established. I continued to play the gay and evil-minded French and Russian woman of the English stage till I was tired of them. Then I tried *Joan of Arc* and *Charlotte Corday*. The public forced me back to *The Baroness Telka*, and to wealth and great fame; and then I read your little book, which seemed directed straight to me, and I asked Hugh

to write you—now you have the 'story of me life.' I have had no struggle since—only hard work and great acclaim." She faced her mother with a proud smile. Then her face darkened. "But—there is always a but—I want New York to know me in some better way. I'm tired of these women with cigarettes and spangled dinner-gowns."

She laid her hand again on her mother's knee, and the gentle old fingers closed around the firm, smooth wrist.

"I've told mother that I will cut these rôles out. We are at last in a position to do as we please. I am now waiting for something worth while to come to me. That is my present situation, Mr. Douglass. I don't know why I've been so frank. Now let me hear your play."

He flushed a little. "To tell the truth, I find it rather hard to begin. I feel as though I were re-enacting a worn-out scene in some way. Every other man in the car writes plays nowadays and torments his friends by reading to them, which, I admit, is an abominable practice. However, as I came here for that express purpose, I will at least outline my scenario."

"Didn't you bring the play itself?"

"Yes; but, really, I hesitate. It may bore you to death."

"You could not write a play that would bore me—I am sure of that."

"Very well," he soberly answered, and drew forth his manuscript. As if upon signal, the mother and her son rose

to withdraw. "You are entirely justified," said Douglass, with some humor. "I quite understand your feelings."

"We should like very much to hear it, but—"

"No excuses, I beg of you. I wonder at Miss Merival's hardihood. I am quite sure she will live to repent her temerity."

In this spirit of banter the playwright and the star were left alone with the manuscript of the play. As he read on, Douglass was carried out of his own impassivity by the changes in the face before him. It became once more elusive, duskily mysterious in its lines. A reflective shadow darkened the glorious eyes, veiled by drooping lids. Without knowing it, the actress took on from moment to moment the heart-trials of the woman of the play. In a subconscious way even as he read, Douglass analyzed and understood her power. Hers was a soul of swift and subtle sympathy. A word, a mere inflection, was sufficient to set in motion the most complicate and obscure conceptions in her brain, permitting her to comprehend with equal clarity the Egyptian queen of pleasure and the austere devotee to whom joy is a snare. From time to time she uttered little exclamations of pleasure, and at the end of each act motioned him to proceed, as if eager to get a unified impression.

It was after eleven o'clock when he threw down the manuscript, and, white with emotion, awaited her verdict. She was tense with the strain, and her lashes were wet

with tears, but her eyes were bright and her mind alert. She had already entered upon a new part, having been swept up into a region of resolution as far away from the pleasant hostess as from the heartless adventuress whose garments she had worn but the night before. With hands clasped between her knees, and shoulders laxly drooping, she brooded on the sorrows of his mimic world.

"I will do your play," she said at last. "I will do it because I believe in its method and because I think it worthy of my highest powers."

The blood rushed to the playwright's throat and a smarting heat dimmed his eyes. He spoke with difficulty. "I thank you," he said, hoarsely. "It is more than I expected; and now that you have promised to do it, I feel you ought not to take the risk." He could say no more, overcome by the cordial emphasis of her decision.

"There is a risk, I will be frank with you; but your play is worth it. I have not been so powerfully moved in years. You have thrilled me. Really I cannot tell you how deeply your theme has sunk into my heart. You have the Northern conscience—so have I; that is why I rebel at being merely the plaything of a careless public. Yes, I will do your play. It is a work of genius. I hope you wrote it in a garret. It's the kind of thing to come from a diet of black bread and water."

He smiled. "I live in a sort of garret, and my meals are frequently beans and brown bread. I hope that will do."

"I am glad the bread is at least brown.... But you are tired. Leave the manuscript with me." He rose and she moved towards him with a gesture of confidence which made words impossible to him. "When we meet again I want you to tell me something of yourself.... Good-night. You will hear from me soon." She was regal as she said this—regal in her own proper person, and he went away rapt with wonder and admiration of the real Helen Merival as she now stood revealed to him.

"She is greater than my dreams of her," he said, in a sort of rapture as he walked the street. "She is greater than she herself can know; for her genius is of the subtle, unspeakable deeps—below her own consciousness, beyond her own analysis. How much greater her art seems, now that I have seen her. It is marvellous! She will do my play, and she will succeed—her power as an actress would carry it to a success if it were a bad play, which it is not. My day has dawned at last."

Helen went to bed that night with a consciousness that something new and powerful had come into her life. Not merely the play and her determination to do it moved her—the man himself profoundly impressed her. His seriousness, his decision and directness of utterance, and the idealism which shone from his rugged, boyish face remained with her to the verge of sleep. He was very handsome, and his voice singularly beautiful, but his power to charm lay over and beyond these. His sincere

eyes, his freedom from flippant slang, these impressed her with a sense of his reliability, his moral worth.

"He is stern and harsh, but he is fine," she said to her mother next morning, "and his play is very strong. I am going to do it. You will like the part of *Lillian*. It has the Scotch sense of moral responsibility in it."

II

DOUGLASS rose next morning with a bound, as if life had somehow become surcharged with fresh significance, fresh opportunity. His professional career seemed dull and prosaic—his critical work of small avail. His whole mind centred on his play.

His was a moody, sensitive nature. Stern as he looked, and strong as he really was, he could be depressed by a trifle or exalted by a word. And reviewing his meeting with Helen in the light of the morning, he had more than a suspicion that he had allowed himself to talk too freely in the presence of the brother and mother, and that he had been over-enthusiastic, not to say egotistic; but he was saved from dejection by the memory of the star's great, brown-black eyes. There was no pretence in them. She had been rapt—carried out of conventional words and graces by something which rose from the lines he had written, the characters he had depicted.

The deeper his scrutiny went the more important she became to him. She was not simple—she was very complex, and an artist of wonderful range, and certainty of appeal.