

*Becoming Carlotta* excerpt

1921, the decisive year, did not start well. At the end of January, a week after Carlotta returned to New York, she received notice that *The Jury of Fate* had been postponed indefinitely. At thirty-two, she was once more an unemployed actress, and her prospects were dimmer than they had been a year ago. She suspected that she had burned her bridges with the Shuberts. The letter she'd written had been a gamble that she'd lost. She was now dependent on Chamberlain Brown to find her roles with independent producers outside the Shubert organization. She put on the pressure, and in mid-February, Brown called with the good news that George M. Cohan wanted to know if she would like to be considered for the lead in a new play he was producing, a straight play.

It sounded too good to be true, and Carlotta was wary. "George M. Cohan and there's no singing or dancing?"

"No, and the play is by Augustus Thomas. You can't get any more legitimate than that."

This was an impressive name, an almost certain ticket to success. "What is the play?" she asked.

"It's called *Nemesis*. It's a detective play. The gimmick is the criminal's use of fingerprints to implicate someone else. You play Marcia Kallan, a high-society lady who is having an amorous affair with a sculptor. Your husband finds out and hatches a plan to destroy you and your lover by stabbing you and leaving the sculptor's fingerprints on the murder weapon. It's a Thomas kind of play—it hinges on the problems with use of fingerprints to convict murderers and the technical details of faking the fingerprints."

"What sort of woman is Marcia?"

"Oh, not a vamp, if that's what you're worried about. She's a smart, beautiful, young woman who is married to a boring, much older man, and she gets seduced by the sculptor's promise of a romantic life in Paris. She has some good scenes with her friends as well as the sculptor."

Carlotta read for Cohan twice and had to wait while he auditioned several other actresses, but in the end, she won the part. It was to be her first starring role on Broadway, and she worked very hard. In Carlotta's view, the tryout weeks in Philadelphia could not have gone better. Hailing the play as one of Thomas's best, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* said, "Not in years has such a perfect ensemble been observable in the American theatre." Carlotta herself was singled out for her "finesse and distinction." On the last night in Philadelphia, there were five curtain calls. Carlotta nearly floated to her dressing room carrying a large bouquet of red roses presented by a gentleman who told her he had seen the play three times. This, she thought, was the play she had been waiting for.

Waiting in her dressing room was George M. Cohan. He looked as if he wished he were elsewhere. She affected not to notice his discomfort and hoped there weren't going to be big changes made at this point.

"Did you see the show?" she asked, turning her beaming face to him. "I think we've finally smoothed out those rough spots in Act Two. John is really brilliant at staging these things."

"Yes," he said. "You've all done a great job. But I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Miss Monterey. You won't be going to New York with the show."

The twinge of doubt she had felt when she saw his face became a wave of panic that rose from her stomach to her throat. "I don't understand," she said, doing her best to control her voice. "The reviews have been so positive. The audiences have been wonderful. They gave me and Emmett a second curtain call by ourselves tonight. What's wrong with my performance?"

His voice grew hearty, false. "Your performance is fine," he said. "No one faults your performance. We just think we need to go another way for the play to make it in New York. It's kind of a specialty play, and we need a star to put it over. You and Emmett are great. People love you in it, but neither one of you has the star power to bring 'em in before the show gets a reputation. You understand that."

Carlotta did not respond.

“Well,” he went on, even more heartily than before, “we managed to get Olive Tell, who was such a hit in *Civilian Clothes* last year. We’d had her in mind before, and she just got free.”

Carlotta looked at him. “Olive Tell.”

“I know she’s known more as a comic actress, but we think she’ll bring a light touch to this part that will help to put the show over.”

“But the show is a success. Everyone says it depends on its unusually good ensemble cast. Why would you throw it all off balance like that?”

Cohan shifted in his chair. “Look, Miss Monterey. I know you’re upset about this. Anybody would be. But I can’t argue with you about the show. This is the way we’ve decided to go, and I’m sorry that means that you won’t be coming to New York.”

“I see,” she said, controlling her voice with a great effort. “I think you’re making a big mistake, Mr. Cohan.”

Cohan stood up and smiled. “I hope not,” he said, “but it wouldn’t be the first.” He held out his hand and she shook it.

Of all Carlotta’s recent setbacks in the theater, this was the worst. She felt that Marcia Kallan was her part. The one that was to bring her not only the attention but the respect of the theater world. It was proof at last that she was a serious actress and a leading lady. And she had just lost it because this little mick wanted to give a part to a chit of a movie actress he was screwing, or hoped to. She had been in the position of the replacing actress before, but never of the replaced. She had always thought the resentment of the companies was uncalled for. Now she knew what the other actors thought of her. She hated the theater, loathed it. If she had not put so much of her effort, so much of herself, into her quest to be recognized, if the alternative had not been worse, she would be done with it right then and there. But she had a year, one year in New York, and she was seized with a renewed determination to make the most of it. This was it, no holds barred, sink or swim. Whatever it took, she resolved, she would make her way in New York. She knew a lot more about how to do that now than she had five years ago.

Part of the strategy Carlotta planned for the rest of the year was to make and exploit all the theatrical connections she could, so when Merle Maddern asked her to come along to a theatrical benefit at the Players Club, she did not make an excuse to avoid a large social gathering filled with strangers, as she might have before. If there was anywhere she could meet and talk to new producers, it would be the Players Club. When she appeared, it was in her most becoming afternoon outfit, a bottle-green Schiaparelli dress and matching coat that had taken a large bite out of her salary from *The Dauntless Three*, an expense she had not mentioned to Mel. There were several important producers at the event, among many other theater people and patrons of the arts. She presented her most engaging persona to the ones she met—sophisticated but warm and good-humored, with an approachable, down-to-earth “California” quality that made her exotic beauty all the more captivating to the beholder.

Halfway through the evening, Carlotta noticed that someone was watching her from across the room. He was a small, trim man with a neat mustache and dark hair who looked to be in his fifties. A number of people engaged him in conversation, in which he joined politely, but he seemed always to have her in view somehow. This in itself was not unnerving. Carlotta was used to being stared at. But there seemed something different about this man, so calm and self-possessed, and yet so intent. When Merle came up, Carlotta shot a little glance toward him and said, “Who is that man? He’s been staring at me all night.”

Merle looked around the room and turned back to her. “You mean that little man over in the corner? That’s James Speyer. If he’s really staring at you, you’re a lucky girl. He’s richer than God.”

“Truly?” Carlotta took another swift glance.

“Yes, he’s Speyer of Speyer and Company, the international bankers. They’re as big as J. P. Morgan. He’s a philanthropist, gives a lot to the arts. His wife just died a month or so ago. She was even more charitable than he is. She started the free animal hospital and the workhorse parade before the war, and the Irene club for working girls. She was always holding events for the Actors Fund that Minnie was involved in. I’m surprised you never heard of them.”

Carlotta looked across the room again and nearly caught the man’s eye as he looked away. “It does ring a bell now,” she said. “Why don’t you introduce him to me.”

Merle laughed. “Oh, I don’t know James Speyer. Just know of him. But he seems so interested in you that if we made our way across the room, I have a feeling introduction would not be necessary.”

Fifteen minutes later, the two actresses were chatting with James Speyer as if they were all old friends. Five minutes after that, Merle excused herself, saying she should find her cousin. Carlotta decided to be direct. “Have we met before, Mr. Speyer? You seemed to be looking in my direction earlier.”

“No,” he said, equally direct. “I just appreciate a beautiful woman.”

“Why, thank you,” she said. “There are a good many beautiful women here this evening.”

He smiled. “But you’re the most beautiful,” he said, “so you merit my attention.”

“Thank you again, kind sir,” she said, looking at him through her long eyelashes.

At that point someone came up and began talking about Players Club business, so Carlotta thought it a good time to make her exit. She expected that she would see Mr. Speyer again, and she was not disappointed. She had told him nothing about her living arrangements, but two dozen red roses arrived at her apartment the next day with a note saying that he remembered she had said she enjoyed opera and inviting her to join him in his box the following Thursday to see *Oberon*. She was delighted. It had been a while since she had had this kind of attention, and he was a very rich man.

Carlotta knew she looked dazzling when she appeared in Speyer’s box at the Met on Thursday. She wore a flattering white *décolleté* evening dress that was not Paul Poirot but easily could have been, and all the Moffat family jewels she had managed to hold onto. Speyer was enchanted. Carlotta had not actually seen *Oberon* before, but since she was well-acquainted with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and trained enough in opera to discuss the finer points of the performances, she was able to make some intelligent comments during the intermissions, which endeared her further to Speyer. After the performance, he didn’t take her to supper at Delmonico’s, as most men his age would have, or to one of the new nightclubs to dance, as a younger man might have, but instead took her to a quietly elegant restaurant where a string quartet played Viennese waltzes and none of fashionable New York was on display.

“I hope you enjoy this place,” he said. “I like it because it’s quiet enough for conversation and I’m partial to the Viennese music and German food.”

“It’s charming,” said Carlotta, looking around. “I’m so glad we’ll have a chance to talk.” And talk they did. About the opera and Shakespeare, and the theater and the arts in general. Speyer was an avid theater-goer and knew more about the season than Carlotta did, but he was more interested in talking about dramatic literature than the theater gossip that Carlotta was usually called on to supply. She had not had such an animated literary discussion since the Academy days, and she enjoyed it. She was conscious that her enjoyment brought a glow to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes that made her look younger and more beautiful.

Observing Carlotta, James Speyer thought her a rare combination of remarkable beauty and stimulating company. Although he had been devoted to Ellin, his late wife and partner in philanthropy, he considered himself something of a connoisseur of women, and he had not met many like this. Speyer was a cultivated man, a collector and patron of the arts. Although he had been born in New York, he was brought up in Frankfurt, where the family banking business was based, and had been placed in banks in London and Paris to complete his financial education before he returned to New York to join his father at Speyer & Company.

Since the bank specialized in marketing U. S. bonds abroad and foreign securities in the U. S., Speyer had traveled regularly throughout his life, often spending several months at a time in Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Berlin, and traveling throughout Europe. Multilingual, he eagerly soaked up all the culture he could in these various countries. Both his Fifth Avenue mansion and his estate in Westchester County were filled with art he had collected abroad, and he did what he could to encourage the arts in New York. He was delighted to be able to have such a stimulating conversation with a beautiful actress.

Carlotta wished her dinner partner were a little taller and a little younger, but otherwise, she thought him the perfect companion. When he brought her to her door, she said she couldn't remember when she had had more delightful evening. Speyer felt the same way, and their evenings at the opera soon became a weekly engagement. Over the spring months, their social relationship deepened into a real friendship. He told her about the unexpected devastation he had felt when Ellin died after years of illness, and he thanked her often for helping to fill the emotional void she had left. Carlotta played the part of ministering angel impeccably. At first, she was just doing her best to perform his ideal vision of her, but as she got to know him, she felt a true affection and admiration for him. To her he was always the cultivated gentleman, wonderfully generous and attentive, open to confidences and free with advice and material help. Eventually Carlotta trusted him enough to confide her deep disappointment in her career and her fear that she would be trapped in Oakland if she didn't find the right role to make her a star soon. She told him that her dream was to do great plays, by playwrights like Shakespeare and Schiller, where her talent would be challenged and grow. He began to assume a protective role toward her that was part avuncular, part romantic. She referred all her dilemmas to him, whether they were professional, financial, or personal.