

Before The Fall

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With additional amendments

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Works by the same author

Epiphany of Life

The Sinner's Kiss

Upon the Rock

The Cat

The Flowers of spring

To Henry James whose novel, *The Golden Bowl*, inspired me to write this tale.

Chapter One

It was a resplendent springtide's day. The sun shed drops of gold, and the wind kissed the cheek of the man, who wandered through a field of red, yellow and blue flowers. Yet this rustic scene of provincial France seemed to belie what he felt: for the galloping horses of doubt and regret trampled his mind. At any rate, what Carlton was about to face - reproachful stares and jeers - would forever pollute this day. Nevertheless, Carlton marched towards his destiny with determination not to surrender, not to show any sign of weakness towards Marty - the object of his affection - who eagerly waited for him. And as Carlton Aspern drew closer to the sandstone château, witness to their many nights of passion, he felt light-headed as if the flame that burnt in his heart would be blown out by self-deprecation. Why did he hate himself? But more importantly why was he going to cut the cord that bound him to Marty? His sense of shame was the obvious answer. However, if one were to examine the circumstances that led up to this moment: then the answer, he was also ashamed to admit, was that it was purely financial. Carlton Aspern, however, was brought up to believe that his place in society would be assured if he were to marry a rich wife, whose money would repair his fortunes and that of his estate, which comprised the ancient château and the surrounding countryside. Moreover, who in their right mind would marry a schemer such as Carlton Aspern?

...That was precisely what Carlton thought in London two years ago, as he was guided into the drawing room of Mrs. de Veer, who was eager to know the true extent of his book collection. A mutual friend, Franz Anderson, had told him this wealthy Australian was paying a fortune for rare books she was going to add to a library she was planning to build in her hometown of Townsville. The name of 'Townsville' seemed to convey to Carlton, as he listened to Mrs. de Veer, a sense of repugnance. He could not have imagined a worse place than Townsville to house his precious volumes of Voltaire. Although, he did not think much of Clara de Veer, in particular her woeful accent that seemed, at the time, to annoy him, he was amazed by her love for this tropical backwater, and when he ventured to ask, "Where is it?" She proudly announced, "Why Queensland of course." And as she prattled on about what books she would like to acquire, he was struck with the realisation that perhaps this dull woman might have a daughter. Therefore, without forethought he asked, "By chance do you have children?" She nodded her head and said, "My daughter, Maggie." Then the old woman rambled on telling him

what he wanted to know: the girl's age and, more importantly, whether she was unmarried. He was delighted by Mrs. de Veer's answers to which he asked, "I would like to meet her."

Mrs. de Veer was overwhelmed with joy that this cultured man would take an interest in Maggie, whom she feared would go unnoticed in London. Clara invited him to tea while they waited for Maggie to arrive... Whilst they passed the time, Mrs. de Veer chattered incessantly to the point that Carlton was afraid he might tell her to shut up; therefore, he bit his tongue. However, she told Carlton a great deal about the de Veer family, especially her late husband, George de Veer, who made his fortune in the coal industry, and his desire to build a grand library in Townsville.

Thus, her *raison d'être* was to seek out great books, the rarer the better, so that she could fulfil a dead man's dream. Moreover, her futile attempt touched Carlton that he was *peu à peu* beginning to admire her unsophisticated demeanour that had not been contaminated by European pretence. Then suddenly the door opened, and a beautiful young lady entered. The elder woman proudly exclaimed, "This is my daughter, Maggie."

When Maggie said 'hello' her voice was actually the opposite of Mrs. de Veer's for it had clarity and purity that captivated Carlton to the point at which he was affected physically: he gasped for air and suddenly he could breathe again....

...Now that feeling of breathlessness, which he thought that he would not experience again, had affected Carlton as he made his way back to the château, unaware he was being observed and that his viewpoint would change to someone else...

From the window of his room, on the second floor of the château, Marty Townsend saw the man, who next month would be manacled to a wealthy heiress, enter the building with an air of calculating charisma. Marty guessed the reason why he had come, and the significance that this springtide's day of May 4, 1903, would bring to the Thespians in the drama of life. Yet he was deluding himself into believing that Carlton Aspern cherished him more so than Carlton Aspern cherished Maggie de Veer - the wealthy Australian - who for all practical purposes was naïve and did not know Aspern's *Jardin secret* as he did. And as Aspern walked dispiritedly up the flight of stairs to the room that saw so much tenderness, he, however, felt ashamed for what he was about to do next: discarding his lover, Marty. Images of their shared intimacy illuminated his mind, but he had no other option: cut the bond that tied them together. Even so, Carlton felt unable to resist the allure of Marty Townsend, who waited for him in the chamber of carnal delight that he was about to enter. He lamented to himself, "O the horror of it all." Then he took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Time seemed to stretch into an aeon as he waited, dreading the moment he must break with the man he wildly worshipped, then the door creaked open and his reprieve rapidly disintegrated as he entered the room. Then the stillness was interrupted

by the mocking song of birds perched in a tree next to the room, so Marty walked over to the window, and closed the shutters, then he said:

“I know everything and I know why you are here.” Carlton was about to utter a word, but he continued, “You’re ashamed. Is that not why you are here? But what you are about to do is wrong.”

“How can it be, when you knew I must marry one day?”

“Don’t do this. If you do, then what will happen?”

He raised his voice, “I must for she has money.”

Wounded by his remark, he pleaded, “Je t’aime. I know you won’t sacrifice me to the golden calf of capitalism.”

“What makes you say I won’t?”

“Our shared similarities.” Carlton was about to murmur an answer, but he continued: “I, I wish you were truly a cur. If you were, then it wouldn’t matter to me what you did.” Tears wetted his lashes, so he wiped them with the back of his hand, and then he tried to change the course of their conversation. His anger, however, erupted:

“Do you want me to marry too?”

“If you think that will help.”

He asked mockingly, “And where do you suggest I find such a person?”

“Where you found me?”

Marty rushed towards him and kissed his crimson lips, and bellowed: “Should I sell myself to the highest bidder as you have done?”

“Don’t say such foolish things.”

“They’re not foolish to me. I don’t care a straw, whether we’re rich or poor.”

“It matters to me.” Marty loosened his grip and pushed him away as Aspern said, “I must marry her.”

Then Marty rushed towards the door, opened it and left the room...

...Echoes of that earlier incident seemed to reverberate in Marty’s mind, filling him with the wish to hear Carlton Aspern’s voice again. There was, however, the opportunity for him to catch up with Aspern at their mutual friend’s house at 275 Cavendish Square. Moreover, as he wandered towards the towering town houses of Cavendish Square, Marty wondered if it were wise to trust Mr. Franz Anderson, whose blue door, he saw a few yards away, so he stopped walking. Then Marty thought of ways in which to control Franz. Ways that one could argue as being tantamount to blackmail. Yet Marty

also knew that Franz could strike back by disclosing a few home truths about him, so Marty would carefully coerce him to sit still and be quiet especially about his romantic relations. All the same, Marty continued walking, and as he walked up the path, and was just about to knock on the blue door, his mind feared the moment, namely, the moment when he drew his last breath, when he would have to beg for absolution from an omnipotent God. If he continued, then what would happen? No matter his reasons, they were downright malicious, at any rate, he discarded any remaining remnants of empathy and compassion, for the chance once again to embrace Carlton. He, therefore, knocked on the door and waited.

A moment later, he was guided into the drawing room where he saw Franz reading *The Times*: unaware of the tempest that Marty was about to unleash. After the customary greetings of “Hello, it’s great to see you” and “Where have you been?” all to which Marty mumbled a reply, which could have suggested, to Franz, that Marty did not really care. Moreover, this lack of compassion worried Franz, who in a futile attempt to remedy the situation offered his visitor a cup of tea. Nevertheless, Marty ignored the offer, whether intentionally or not, by abruptly asking his host:

“You did Carlton a great service by introducing him to Maggie de Veer.”

“There was no need to come from France to tell me.” Worried as to where the conversation would lead to, Franz paused for a moment to formulate in his mind a response. Franz, however, noticed his visitor’s impatience, which was evident in the way he tapped his shoe against the chair. Therefore, Franz continued cautiously, “As I thought it best that Maggie doesn’t know of your shared history with Carlton.”

“It is wonderful of you to keep secrets as I have kept yours safely locked away in my mind.” Franz’s face whitened thereby provoking Marty to snicker. He was delighted at how his words terrorised his host, so he continued, “Now I want you to do something for me.” The flicker in Franz’s eyes diminished as he heard Marty’s request. “I want you to telephone Maggie and say ‘Marty Townsend has arrived and would like to re-establish your acquaintance.’ Could you do that for me, Franz?”

“Isn’t it for the best that you stay away?”

He was about to jump up from the chair and strike this uncooperative man. Nevertheless, he thought it best not to react violently, so instead he changed the subject by asking, “Have you painted any portraits since we last met, Franz?”

He pointed to a picture of a youthful man whose likeness mirrored that of an Apollo. Franz was surprised that he would discuss his artistic bent and then he realised:

“For God’s sake, leave them be and stay away.”

“Ah, I won’t.”

Defiant, he retorted, "What you are asking I will not do."

Surprised by his display of intractability, Marty grumbled, "Don't be difficult." Franz walked over to the window, stared at the expanse of blue, and ruminated about what to do next. During which time, Marty said, "If you want me to stay silent about your secrets, then you must do as I ask. You follow me?"

Of course, Franz understood what was being asked of him. He was no fool for he knew, very well, the dangerous dimensions of telephoning Maggie. Yet he did not want consciously to acknowledge it, so instead he acquiesced to something that he would later come to regret. Franz, therefore, knew that his friend had the upper hand over him, and this sense of powerlessness both terrified and sickened him, so he reluctantly telephoned Maggie...

Maggie's eyes beamed with joy as she put down the telephone receiver. Then she happily remarked to the others in the room that, "Marty Townsend is here in England." When Carlton heard 'his' name, he stopped reading, and was about to speak; however, the elder Mrs. de Veer said, "That's wonderful news. I thought we wouldn't see him again since we left Townsville."

The book that he was reading fell to the floor whereupon Maggie noticed his flushed cheeks. Did she associate the mentioning of Marty's name with how it affected Carlton? Perhaps not as she could not analyse the evidence like a detective to find out the criminal's identity. Even so, she noticed the way he stammered, "Who is this 'Marty Townsend'?"

Mrs. de Veer ejaculated, "O, he is a family friend. His father knew my late husband."

"Mama he is all alone in London."

"We must help our antipodean compatriot. Maggie, why don't we invite him to stay in Kensington with us?"

Maggie said enthusiastically, "Mama that is just what I was thinking."

"It's agreed. Carlton be a good son-in-law and fetch him."

Carlton willingly agreed but he tried not to seem too eager, so he acted nonchalantly as if the man he was bringing back meant nothing to him. Thus, he smiled and as he did so his upper lip twitched temporarily, and then he walked over to Maggie and pecked her cheek.

An overwhelming sense of shame enveloped him to the point at which he had difficulty walking down the stairs to the motor that waited for him beside the curb. Was he developing a conscience? Alternatively, the prospect of revivifying his amorous relations was the reason his throat felt as though it were being squeezed. Who could tell? Especially not Carlton, who managed to remove the rope from around his throat; however, if he were to falter, then both he and Marty would hang. Even so, he

continued down the stairs, and out into the bright springtide's day, where he got inside the metal horse whose engine coughed as it carried him away.

During the journey, Aspern remembered the day when he first met the young Australian, Marty Townsend: it was a wondrous day where love was born, then a week later consecrated through the physical act. O, how he wished he could rekindle their relationship. There was, however, the danger of being discovered and what that would entail for the victim and the culprits: betrayal and retribution. Carlton seemed to derive a sense of excitement in deceiving those who loved him. At the time, he didn't know if the act of deception would change Maggie either for the better or for the worse. No one, including Carlton, knew what would happen. If she were to change for the worse, it would be for very good reasons.

Anyhow, the events that I speak of are still subject to change. Carlton and the ensemble are quite capable of changing their futures if only they were to act logically. Alas, they are created from the explosive elements of love and hate: if they were to indulge in the senses, then logically they must forfeit their happiness. At any rate, Carlton was old enough to know that once he entered 275 Cavendish Square, he was subject to his visceral drives, and it was up to him to either submit or reject such instincts.

As the motor came to a halt, he warily got out, slowly walked towards the blue door of 275 Cavendish Square, and gently knocked. For a moment, his mind wandered down the dark, dangerous corridor that led to the ill begotten love of former times, o how he ached to be there again and to drink from the cornucopia of sensuality. Yet, at the same time, he was afraid of the consequences to himself and that of his intended bride, Maggie, if he were to breathe life into the debauched relationship with Marty: then his descent down the dark, dangerous corridor would be confirmed, and he could never escape. Nevertheless, as time and space stretched out into infinity, his problems seemed insignificant when compared to the universe, where cruelty and indifference seemed to be the new credo of capitalism: where poor people's desire for freedom would be subverted into serving the interests of wealthy people like Maggie and her widowed mother, Clara. Did he ever truly love Maggie or was that pretence in order to pull her purse strings, not to mention her heart as well?

Then the door suddenly opened, and he awoke from such philosophical musings into the present, where he must somehow contain Marty - prevent him from acting impulsively and ruining his chances with Maggie. And as Aspern was guided into the drawing room, his desires for Marty surfaced in the form of a flushed complexion, but this was a minor symptom for when he tried to speak his throat

tightened and he was unable to utter a sound. Delighted at the effect he had on him, Marty smiled and said:

“Hello, stranger it’s a long time since last we met. How are you?”

Then suddenly Carlton regained some semblance of propriety because as he drew closer, he saw Franz sitting in a chair opposite to them, recording their interactions for future reference.

“I beg your pardon?”

Then Marty again said in a voice of familiarity, “How are you?”

“Très bien et vous?”

“There’s no need to pretend. Franz knows everything about us.”

Embarrassed Franz stayed silent for he feared being drawn into this mire of deceit that would eventually destroy all those who were foolish enough to get involved. Even so, he observed them and the way they seemed to ingratiate themselves into the echelons of society. Franz, in contrast, was an intellectual who was invited to parties merely for decoration. At any rate, he knew how the system worked well enough to know that if he cast a stone at Marty’s window, then there would be dire consequences: social disgrace. Franz, therefore, watched their interplay of words and actions, and once they had finished their long conversation, which excluded him, he said:

“No, no go straight home. Maggie and Mrs. de Veer are dying to see you, Marty.”

Marty, however, spitefully disregarded his advice by replying, “I think Carlton and I should get Maggie a gift.”

Aspern, in turn, agreed that it would be a good idea to search for treasure for his future queen. They, therefore, departed thereby provoking a wave of worry to wash over Franz’s mind. Now the hammer of scandal was cocked that if Carlton Aspern and Marty Townsend were foolish: then the gun would discharge its deadly load. This fear of being exposed frightened Franz because his reputation meant so much to him, at any rate, he knew that it was best to stay silent, not to mention any incriminating words, and instead let the foolish couple destroy themselves.