

THE AWAKENING

Chapter 9 — Narrator Script (Booth Ready)

by Kate Chopin · narrated by Mike Vendetti & Kathy Verduin

Robert Lebrun

Mademoiselle Reisz

NARRATOR

★ BEAT — Saturday soirée — lights, dancing, and the ice-cream

Open with the atmosphere of the bright, festive hall — lamps blazing, curtains puffing in the Gulf breeze, the whole pension gathered for an evening of informal entertainment. The tone is festive but slightly overstuffed, a benign chaos of domestic pleasure. Read the catalog of entertainments with mild, affectionate irony — Chopin is gently fond of this world even as Edna is beginning to chafe against it. The parrot's outburst should be quick, sharp, bird-like; Victor's imperious authority is comic. The ice-cream passage is warmly farcical — linger a beat on Victor's pride.

Every light in the hall was ablaze; every lamp turned as high as it could be without smoking the chimney or threatening explosion. The lamps were fixed at intervals against the wall, encircling the whole room. Some one had gathered orange and lemon branches, and with these fashioned graceful festoons between. The dark green of the branches stood out and glistened against the white muslin curtains which draped the windows, and which puffed, floated, and

flapped at the capricious will of a stiff breeze that swept up from the Gulf.

It was Saturday night a few weeks after the intimate conversation held between Robert and Madame Ratignolle [*rah-tee-NYOL*] on their way from the beach. An unusual number of husbands, fathers, and friends had come down to stay over Sunday; and they were being suitably entertained by their families, with the material help of Madame Lebrun [*luh-BRUHN*]. The dining tables had all been removed to one end of the hall, and the chairs ranged about in rows and in clusters. Each little family group had had its say and exchanged its domestic gossip earlier in the evening. There was now an apparent disposition to relax; to widen the circle of confidences and give a more general tone to the conversation.

Many of the children had been permitted to sit up beyond their usual bedtime. A small band of them were lying on their stomachs on the floor looking at the colored sheets of the comic papers which Mr. Pontellier [*pon-tel-YAY*] had brought down. The little

Pontellier boys were permitting them to do so, and making their authority felt.

Music, dancing, and a recitation or two were the entertainments furnished, or rather, offered. But there was nothing systematic about the programme, no appearance of prearrangement nor even premeditation.

At an early hour in the evening the Farival [*fah-ree-VAHL*] twins were prevailed upon to play the piano. They were girls of fourteen, always clad in the Virgin's colors, blue and white, having been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their baptism. They played a duet from "Zampa," and at the earnest solicitation of every one present followed it with the overture to "The Poet and the Peasant."

"Allez vous-en! Sapristi!" shrieked the parrot outside the door.

He was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that

summer. Old Monsieur Farival, grandfather of the twins, grew indignant over the interruption, and insisted upon having the bird removed and consigned to regions of darkness. Victor *[VIK-tor]* Lebrun objected; and his decrees were as immutable as those of Fate. The parrot fortunately offered no further interruption to the entertainment, the whole venom of his nature apparently having been cherished up and hurled against the twins in that one impetuous outburst.

Later a young brother and sister gave recitations, which every one present had heard many times at winter evening entertainments in the city.

A little girl performed a skirt dance in the center of the floor. The mother played her accompaniments and at the same time watched her daughter with greedy admiration and nervous apprehension. She need have had no apprehension. The child was mistress of the situation. She had been properly dressed for the occasion in black tulle and black silk tights. Her little neck and arms were bare, and her hair, artificially crimped, stood out like fluffy black plumes over her

head. Her poses were full of grace, and her little black-shod toes twinkled as they shot out and upward with a rapidity and suddenness which were bewildering.

But there was no reason why every one should not dance. Madame Ratignolle could not, so it was she who gaily consented to play for the others. She played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive.

Almost every one danced but the twins, who could not be induced to separate during the brief period when one or the other should be whirling around the room in the arms of a man. They might have danced together, but they did not think of it.

The children were sent to bed. Some went submissively; others with shrieks and protests as they were dragged away. They had been permitted to sit up

till after the ice-cream, which naturally marked the limit of human indulgence.

The ice-cream was passed around with cake—gold and silver cake arranged on platters in alternate slices; it had been made and frozen during the afternoon back of the kitchen by two black women, under the supervision of Victor. It was pronounced a great success—excellent if it had only contained a little less vanilla or a little more sugar, if it had been frozen a degree harder, and if the salt might have been kept out of portions of it. Victor was proud of his achievement, and went about recommending it and urging every one to partake of it to excess.

★ **BEAT — Edna on the gallery — Robert fetches Mademoiselle Reisz**

A tonal pivot: from the communal warmth of the hall, we follow Edna outside, where the moon is rising over the Gulf and a sense of expansion begins to gather. Keep the moon description luminous and unhurried — it sets the mystical key for what follows. Robert's offer to fetch Mademoiselle Reisz is tender and purposeful; his description of her as shuffling and quarrelsome is lightly comic but should not trivialize the woman. The entrance of Mademoiselle Reisz into the hall — the settling, the expectancy — should feel like a held breath.

After Mrs. Pontellier had danced twice with her husband, once with Robert, and once with Monsieur Ratignolle, who was thin and tall and swayed like a reed in the wind when he danced, she went out on the gallery and seated herself on the low window-sill, where she commanded a view of all that went on in the hall and could look out toward the Gulf. There was a soft effulgence in the east. The moon was coming up, and its mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water.

Robert came out on the porch to where she sat. He spoke the name of Mademoiselle Reisz [*REES*] with easy familiarity:

ROBERT LEBRUN

Would you like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play?

Of course Edna would like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play; but she feared it would be useless to entreat her.

ROBERT LEBRUN

I'll ask her. I'll tell her that you want to hear her.

She likes you. She will come.

He turned and hurried away to one of the far cottages, where Mademoiselle Reisz was shuffling away. She was dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep. She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others. Robert prevailed upon her without any too great difficulty.

She entered the hall with him during a lull in the dance. She made an awkward, imperious little bow as she went in. She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair.

MADemoiselle REISZ

Ask Mrs. Pontellier what she would like to hear me play,

she requested of Robert. She sat perfectly still before the piano, not touching the keys, while Robert carried her message to Edna at the window. A general air of surprise and genuine satisfaction fell upon every one as they saw the pianist enter. There was a settling down, and a prevailing air of expectancy everywhere. Edna was a trifle embarrassed at being thus signaled out for the imperious little woman's favor. She would not dare to choose, and begged that Mademoiselle Reisz would please herself in her selections.

★ **BEAT — The music strikes — Edna unmade and remade**

This is the spiritual climax of the chapter and one of the novel's pivotal passages. Lower your voice and slow the pace for Edna's description of how she usually hears music — the pictures it evokes. Then let the shift happen: Reisz plays, and there are no pictures. The passions themselves arrive. Do not rush or dramatize — the prose is already doing enormous work. The trembling, the choking, the blinded tears should land quietly, almost internally. Reisz's parting pat on the shoulder and her 'Bah!' are gruff, unsentimental, exactly right — keep them dry.

Edna was what she herself called very fond of music. Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind. She sometimes liked to sit in the room of mornings when Madame Ratignolle played or practiced. One piece which that lady played Edna had

entitled "Solitude." It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it "Solitude." When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him.

Another piece called to her mind a dainty young woman clad in an Empire gown, taking mincing dancing steps as she came down a long avenue between tall hedges. Again, another reminded her of children at play, and still another of nothing on earth but a demure lady stroking a cat.

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth.

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her.

Mademoiselle had finished. She arose, and bowing her stiff, lofty bow, she went away, stopping for neither thanks nor applause. As she passed along the gallery she patted Edna upon the shoulder.

MADemoiselle REISZ

Well, how did you like my music?

The young woman was unable to answer; she pressed the hand of the pianist convulsively. Mademoiselle Reisz perceived her agitation and even her tears. She patted her again upon the shoulder as she said:

MADemoiselle REISZ

You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!

and she went shuffling and sidling on down the gallery toward her room.

But she was mistaken about “those others.” Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm. Voices came from all around: what passion! what an artist! Someone claimed to have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz. That last prelude — Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!

It was growing late, and there was a general disposition to disband. But some one, perhaps it was Robert, thought of a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon.

— *END OF CHAPTER 9* —