THE AWAKENING

Chapter 16 — Narrator Script (Booth Ready)

by Kate Chopin · narrated by Mike Vendetti & Kathy Verduin

Léonce Pontellier **Edna Pontellier** **Madame Lebrun** **Adèle Ratignolle** **Mademoiselle Reisz**

NARRATOR

★ BEAT — The world dulled — Edna seeks Robert in photographs and letters

Open in a minor key: the brightness gone out of everything. Read the first paragraphs with a kind of muted, flat sorrow — not weeping, but a dullness that has settled over the season. The detail of Edna going through Robert's old photographs in Madame Lebrun's room should feel private and slightly obsessive; let each image (baby, kilts, first trousers, the college portrait) land separately, as if she's turning pages slowly. The note that there is 'no recent picture' of the Robert she knows lands quietly and hard. Madame Lebrun's explanation about photographs is light and practical — a useful contrast to Edna's intensity.

Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing. She sought him everywhere—in others whom she induced to talk about him. She went up in the mornings to Madame Lebrun *[luh-BRUHN]*'s room, braving the clatter of the

old sewing-machine. She sat there and chatted at intervals as Robert had done. She gazed around the room at the pictures and photographs hanging upon the wall, and discovered in some corner an old family album, which she examined with the keenest interest, appealing to Madame Lebrun for enlightenment concerning the many figures and faces which she discovered between its pages.

There was a picture of Madame Lebrun with Robert as a baby, seated in her lap, a round-faced infant with a fist in his mouth. The eyes alone in the baby suggested the man. And that was he also in kilts, at the age of five, wearing long curls and holding a whip in his hand. It made Edna laugh, and she laughed, too, at the portrait in his first long trousers; while another interested her, taken when he left for college, looking thin, long-faced, with eyes full of fire, ambition and great intentions. But there was no recent picture, none which suggested the Robert who had gone away five days ago, leaving a void and wilderness behind him.

Madame Lebrun had an explanation for the absence of any recent portrait:

MADAME LEBRUN

> Oh, Robert stopped having his pictures taken when he had to pay for them himself! He found wiser use for his money, he says,

explained Madame Lebrun. She had a letter from him, written before he left New Orleans. Edna wished to see the letter, and Madame Lebrun told her to look for it either on the table or the dresser, or perhaps it was on the mantelpiece.

The letter was on the bookshelf. It possessed the greatest interest and attraction for Edna; the envelope, its size and shape, the post-mark, the handwriting. She examined every detail of the outside before opening it. There were only a few lines, setting forth that he would leave the city that afternoon, that he had packed his trunk in good shape, that he was well, and sent her his love and begged to be affectionately remembered to all. There was no special message to Edna except a postscript saying

that if Mrs. Pontellier *[pon-tel-YAY]* desired to finish the book which he had been reading to her, his mother would find it in his room, among other books there on the table. Edna experienced a pang of jealousy because he had written to his mother rather than to her.

★ BEAT — Pontellier visits; the manifesto about the essential self

Two distinct moments here: Pontellier's visit and the question 'How do you get on without him?' should feel domestic and slightly oblivious — he sees nothing strange in Edna's obsessive questioning. Then the scene shifts to the remembered argument with Madame Ratignolle about sacrifice. That argument is the chapter's philosophical heart. Edna's speech — 'I would give up the unessential… but I wouldn't give myself' — should be read with careful conviction, the voice of someone working something out in real time. Ratignolle's reply is good-natured and slightly bewildered. Edna's final 'Oh, yes you could!' is bright, fond, and slightly sad.

Every one seemed to take for granted that she missed him. Even her husband, when he came down the Saturday following Robert's departure, expressed regret that he had gone.

LÉONCE PONTELLIER

How do you get on without him, Edna?

EDNA PONTELLIER

It's very dull without him,

she admitted. Mr. Pontellier had seen Robert in the city, and Edna asked him a dozen questions or more. Where had they met? On Carondelet Street, in the morning. They had gone “in” and had a drink and a cigar together. What had they talked about? Chiefly about his prospects in Mexico, which Mr. Pontellier thought were promising. How did he look? How did he seem—grave, or gay, or how? Quite cheerful, and wholly taken up with the idea of his trip, which Mr. Pontellier found altogether natural in a young fellow about to seek fortune and adventure in a strange, queer country.

Edna tapped her foot impatiently, and wondered why the children persisted in playing in the sun when they might be under the trees. She went down and led them out of the sun, scolding the quadroon for not being more attentive.

It did not strike her as in the least grotesque that she should be making of Robert the object of conversation and leading her husband to speak of him. The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way

resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel. She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself. Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle *[rah-tee-NYOL]* that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain.

EDNA PONTELLIER

> I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.

ADÈLE RATIGNOLLE

I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential, but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Oh, yes you could!

laughed Edna.

★ BEAT — Mademoiselle Reisz approaches — gossip about Robert and Victor

Reisz arrives like a prickly, contrary force. Her voice should be tart and direct, with no softening. Her demolition of the 'favorite son' myth is delivered with relish; let the malice come through clearly, but keep it wry rather than vicious. Edna's small interventions ('I thought he had great patience with his brother') are gentle and slightly protective of Robert — she is drinking in any information about him even when it stings. The Mariequita detail at the end lands as a small personal jealousy note for Edna.

She was not surprised at Mademoiselle Reisz *[REES]*'s question the morning that lady, following her to the beach, tapped her on the shoulder and asked if she did not greatly miss her young friend.

EDNA PONTELLIER

> Oh, good morning, Mademoiselle; is it you? Why, of course I miss Robert. Are you going down to bathe?

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

> Why should I go down to bathe at the very end of the season when I haven't been in the surf all summer,

replied the woman, disagreeably.

"I beg your pardon," offered Edna, in some embarrassment, for she should have remembered that Mademoiselle Reisz's avoidance of the water had furnished a theme for much pleasantry. Some among them thought it was on account of her false hair, or the dread of getting the violets wet, while others attributed it to the natural aversion for water sometimes believed to accompany the artistic temperament. Mademoiselle offered Edna some chocolates in a paper bag, which she took from her pocket, by way of showing that she bore no ill feeling. She habitually ate chocolates for their sustaining quality; they contained much nutriment in small

compass, she said. They saved her from starvation, as Madame Lebrun's table was utterly impossible; and no one save so impertinent a woman as Madame Lebrun could think of offering such food to people and requiring them to pay for it.

EDNA PONTELLIER

> She must feel very lonely without her son. Her favorite son, too. It must have been quite hard to let him go.

Mademoiselle laughed maliciously.

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

> Her favorite son! Oh, dear! Who could have been imposing such a tale upon you? Aline Lebrun lives for Victor, and for Victor alone. She has spoiled him into the worthless creature he is. She worships him and the ground he walks on. Robert is very well in a way, to give up all the money he can earn to the family, and keep the barest pittance for himself. Favorite son, indeed! I miss the poor fellow myself, my dear. I liked to see him and to hear him about the place—the only Lebrun who is worth a pinch of

salt. He comes to see me often in the city. I like to play to him. That Victor! hanging would be too good for him. It's a wonder Robert hasn't beaten him to death long ago.

EDNA PONTELLIER

I thought he had great patience with his brother,

offered Edna, glad to be talking about Robert, no matter what was said.

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

Oh! he thrashed him well enough a year or two ago. It was about a Spanish girl, whom Victor considered that he had some sort of claim upon. He met Robert one day talking to the girl, or walking with her, or bathing with her, or carrying her basket—I don't remember what;—and he became so insulting and abusive that Robert gave him a thrashing on the spot that has kept him comparatively in order for a good while. It's about time he was getting another.

"Was her name Mariequita *[mah-ree-eh-KEE-tah]*?" asked Edna.

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

> Mariequita—yes, that was it; Mariequita. I had forgotten. Oh, she's a sly one, and a bad one, that Mariequita!

Edna looked down at Mademoiselle Reisz and wondered how she could have listened to her venom so long. For some reason she felt depressed, almost unhappy. She had not intended to go into the water; but she donned her bathing suit, and left Mademoiselle alone, seated under the shade of the children's tent. The water was growing cooler as the season advanced. Edna plunged and swam about with an abandon that thrilled and invigorated her. She remained a long time in the water, half hoping that Mademoiselle Reisz would not wait for her.

★ BEAT — Walk back — Reisz invites Edna to the city; the season ends

A quiet coda — the abrasiveness softened, Reisz almost tender in her admiration of Edna. Keep it brief and light; the city-address detail (a pencil stub, a scrap of card) is a small, practical intimacy that plants the seed for later chapters. The final exchange about whether the summer was pleasant should be dry and gently comic — Reisz's 'rather pleasant, if it hadn't been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins' is a perfect, prickly exit line.

But Mademoiselle waited. She was very amiable during the walk back, and raved much over Edna's appearance in her bathing suit. She talked about music. She hoped that Edna would go to see her in the city, and wrote her address with the stub of a pencil on a piece of card which she found in her pocket.

EDNA PONTELLIER

When do you leave?

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

Next Monday; and you?

"The following week," answered Edna, adding:

EDNA PONTELLIER

It has been a pleasant summer, hasn't it, Mademoiselle?

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

Well, rather pleasant, if it hadn't been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins.

— END OF CHAPTER 16 —