

THE AWAKENING

Chapter 21 — Narrator Script (Booth Ready)

by Kate Chopin · narrated by Mike Vendetti & Kathy Verduin

Edna Pontellier

Mademoiselle Reisz

NARRATOR

★ BEAT — Mademoiselle Reisz's rooftop apartment introduced

Set the scene without hurry — this cramped, smoke-stained room under the roof is its own world, deliberately inhospitable to casual visitors. The detail of the river crescent and the steamers' chimneys visible from the dingy windows should be read with a quiet sense of Chopin's irony: beauty glimpsed through grime. Introduce Mademoiselle with warmth and oddness in equal measure — the prunella gaiter, the laughter that is really a full-body contortion, the shabby artificial violets. Keep the pace deliberate; we are settling into a distinctive place.

Some people contended that the reason Mademoiselle Reisz [*mad-mwah-ZEL REES*] always chose apartments up under the roof was to discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars and callers. There were plenty of windows in her little front room. They were for the most part dingy, but as they were nearly always open it did not make so much difference. They often admitted into the room a good deal of smoke and soot; but at the same time all the light and air that there was came through them. From her windows could be

seen the crescent of the river, the masts of ships and the big chimneys of the Mississippi steamers. A magnificent piano crowded the apartment. In the next room she slept, and in the third and last she harbored a gasoline stove on which she cooked her meals when disinclined to descend to the neighboring restaurant. It was there also that she ate, keeping her belongings in a rare old buffet, dingy and battered from a hundred years of use.

When Edna knocked at Mademoiselle Reisz's front room door and entered, she discovered that person standing beside the window, engaged in mending or patching an old prunella gaiter. The little musician laughed all over when she saw Edna. Her laugh consisted of a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body. She seemed strikingly homely, standing there in the afternoon light. She still wore the shabby lace and the artificial bunch of violets on the side of her head.

★ BEAT — Sparring over coffee — Mademoiselle's candor and Edna's

This is a comedy of two proud women who respect each other precisely because neither flatters the other. Mademoiselle's teasing should be dry, slightly needling, quick — she enjoys the game. Edna's 'I don't know whether I like you or not' is the chapter's first great line: read it with perfect matter-of-fact candor, no wink. Mademoiselle's subsequent delight should feel genuine. The rhythm of this exchange is brisk; don't let the dialogue sag between lines.

MADemoiselle REISZ

So you remembered me at last. I had said to myself,
'Ah, bah! she will never come.'

EDNA PONTELLIER

Did you want me to come?

MADemoiselle REISZ

I had not thought much about it,

answered Mademoiselle. The two had seated themselves on a little bumpy sofa which stood against the wall.

MADemoiselle REISZ

I am glad, however, that you came. I have the water boiling back there, and was just about to make some coffee. You will drink a cup with me. And how is la belle dame? Always handsome! always healthy! always contented!

She took Edna's hand between her strong wiry fingers, holding it loosely without warmth, and executing a sort of double theme upon the back and palm.

MADemoiselle REISZ

Yes, I sometimes thought: 'She will never come. She promised as those women in society always do, without meaning it. She will not come.' For I really don't believe you like me, Mrs. Pontellier.

EDNA PONTELLIER

I don't know whether I like you or not,

replied Edna, gazing down at the little woman with a quizzical look.

The candor of Mrs. Pontellier's admission greatly pleased Mademoiselle Reisz. She expressed her gratification by repairing forthwith to the region of the gasoline stove and rewarding her guest with the promised cup of coffee. The coffee and the biscuit accompanying it proved very acceptable to Edna, who had declined refreshment at Madame Lebrun's and was now beginning to feel hungry. Mademoiselle set the tray which she brought in upon a small table near

at hand, and seated herself once again on the lumpy sofa.

★ **BEAT — Robert's letter — Mademoiselle reveals, withholds, recites**

The emotional temperature rises here, but slowly — through Edna's mounting urgency and Mademoiselle's deliberate withholding. Edna's repeated 'Let me see the letter' should escalate from curious request to something nearer desperation; Mademoiselle's 'Oh, no' and 'No, and again, no' are immovably comfortable. When Mademoiselle actually quotes the letter — 'Have you seen Mrs. Pontellier? How is she looking?' — read those quotations in a slightly mocking, singsong register: they are both tender and absurd to her. The pivot to the debate about art and the courageous soul should feel natural, not a detour — it is Mademoiselle measuring Edna.

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

I have had a letter from your friend,

she remarked, as she poured a little cream into Edna's cup and handed it to her.

EDNA PONTELLIER

My friend?

MADEMOISELLE REISZ

Yes, your friend Robert. He wrote to me from the City of Mexico.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Wrote to you?

repeated Edna in amazement, stirring her coffee absently.

MADemoiselle REISZ

Yes, to me. Why not? Don't stir all the warmth out of your coffee; drink it. Though the letter might as well have been sent to you; it was nothing but Mrs. Pontellier from beginning to end.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Let me see it,

requested the young woman, entreatingly.

MADemoiselle REISZ

No; a letter concerns no one but the person who writes it and the one to whom it is written.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Haven't you just said it concerned me from beginning to end?

MADemoiselle REISZ

It was written about you, not to you. 'Have you seen Mrs. Pontellier? How is she looking?' he asks. 'As Mrs. Pontellier says,' or 'as Mrs. Pontellier once said.' 'If Mrs. Pontellier should call upon you, play

for her that Impromptu of Chopin's, my favorite. I heard it here a day or two ago, but not as you play it. I should like to know how it affects her,' and so on, as if he supposed we were constantly in each other's society.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Let me see the letter.

MADemoiselle REISZ

Oh, no.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Have you answered it?

MADemoiselle REISZ

No.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Let me see the letter.

MADemoiselle REISZ

No, and again, no.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Then play the Impromptu for me.

MADemoiselle REISZ

It is growing late; what time do you have to be home?

EDNA PONTELLIER

Time doesn't concern me. Your question seems a little rude. Play the Impromptu.

MADemoiselle REISZ

But you have told me nothing of yourself. What are you doing?

EDNA PONTELLIER

Painting! I am becoming an artist. Think of it!

MADemoiselle REISZ

Ah! an artist! You have pretensions, Madame.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Why pretensions? Do you think I could not become an artist?

MADemoiselle REISZ

I do not know you well enough to say. I do not know your talent or your temperament. To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.

EDNA PONTELLIER

What do you mean by the courageous soul?

MADemoiselle REISZ

Courageous, ma foi! The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Show me the letter and play for me the Impromptu. You see that I have persistence. Does that quality count for anything in art?

MADemoiselle REISZ

It counts with a foolish old woman whom you have captivated,

replied Mademoiselle, with her wriggling laugh.

The letter was right there at hand in the drawer of the little table upon which Edna had just placed her coffee cup. Mademoiselle opened the drawer and drew forth the letter, the topmost one. She placed it in Edna's hands, and without further comment arose and went to the piano.

★ **BEAT — The Chopin Impromptu — music, letter, tears, departure**

This is the chapter's emotional climax — music and longing fusing into a single sustained note. Read the musical paragraphs slowly, almost ruminatively; Chopin allows the prose to become the music. The shadows deepening, the music filling the room and floating out over the housetops — these should feel genuinely unearthly,

not merely pretty. Edna's sob recalls the midnight weeping at Grand Isle: let that echo land without underlining it. The chapter's final image — Mademoiselle retrieving the crumpled, tear-damp letter from the floor and smoothing it back into its envelope — is quiet, tender, and final. End without sentimentality.

Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu.

Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended. She sat in the sofa corner reading Robert's letter by the fading light. Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love notes of Isolde's song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing.

The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon

the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air.

Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle [*grand EYE-uhl*] when strange, new voices awoke in her. She arose in some agitation to take her departure.

EDNA PONTELLIER

May I come again, Mademoiselle?

she asked at the threshold.

MADAMOISELLE REISZ

Come whenever you feel like it. Be careful; the stairs and landings are dark; don't stumble.

Mademoiselle reentered and lit a candle. Robert's letter was on the floor. She stooped and picked it up. It was crumpled and damp with tears. Mademoiselle smoothed the letter out, restored it to the envelope, and replaced it in the table drawer.

— END OF CHAPTER 21 —