

A close-up photograph of a wooden desk. A black pen with a gold-colored tip lies diagonally across the center. To the left, a white envelope is partially visible, with a black and white braided cord resting on it. To the right, a white card or envelope is also partially visible. The background is a dark wood grain.

***CORRA HARRIS,
PAUL ELMER
MORE***

***THE JESSICA
LETTERS***

Corra Harris, Paul Elmer More

The Jessica Letters

An Editor's Romance

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The First Part

which shows how Jessica visits an editor
in the city, and what comes of it.

I

PHILIP TO JESSICA

NEW YORK, April 20, 19—.

MY DEAR MISS DOANE:

You will permit me to address you with this semblance of familiarity, I trust, for the frankness of our conversation in my office gives me some right to claim you as an acquaintance. And first of all let me tell you that we shall be glad to print your review of *The Kentons*, and shall be pleased to send you a long succession of novels for analysis if you can always use the scalpel with such atrocious cunning as in this case. I say atrocious cunning, for really you have treated Mr. Howells with a touch of that genial “process of vivisection” to which it pleases him to subject the lively creatures of his own brain.

“Mr. Howells,” you say, “is singularly gifted in taking to pieces the spiritual machinery of unimpeachable ladies and gentlemen”; and really you have made of the author one of the good people of his own book! That is a malicious revenge for his “tedious accuracy,” is it not? And you dare to speak of his “hypnotic power of illusion which is so essentially a freak element in his mode of expression that even in portraying the tubby, good-natured, elderly

gentleman in this story he refines upon his vitals and sensibilities until the wretched victim becomes a sort of cataleptic." Now that is a "human unfairness" from a critic whom the most ungallant editor would be constrained to call fair!

I forget that I am asked to sit as adviser to you in a question of great moment. But be assured neither you nor your perplexing query has really slipped from my memory. Often while I sit at my desk in this dingy room with the sodden uproar of Printing House Square besieging my one barricaded window, I recall the eagerness of your appeal to me as to one experienced in these matters: "Can you encourage me to give my life to literature?" Indeed, my brave votaress, there is something that disturbs me in the directness of that question, something ominous in those words, *give my life*. Literature is a despised goddess in these days to receive such devotion.

Naked and poor thou goest, Philosophy,

as Petrarch wrote, and as we may say of Literature. If you ask me whether it will pay you to employ the superfluities of your cleverness in writing reviews and sketches and stories—why, certainly, do so by all means. I have no fear of your ultimate success in money and in the laughing honours of society. But if you mean literature in any sober sense of the word, God forbid that I should encourage the giving of your young life to such a consuming passion. Happiness and success in the pursuit of any ideal can only come to one who dwells in a sympathetic atmosphere. Do you think a people that lauds Mr. Spinster as a great novelist and Mr. Perchance as a great critic can have any knowledge of that deity you would follow, or any sympathy for the follower?

It has been my business to know many writers and readers of books. I have in all my experience met just four men who

have given themselves to literature. One of these four lives in Cambridge, one is a hermit in the mountains, one teaches school in Nebraska, and one is an impecunious clerk in New York. They are each as isolated in the world as was ever an anchorite of the Thebaid; they have accomplished nothing, and are utterly unrecognised; they are, apart from the lonely solace of study, the unhappiest men of my acquaintance. The love of literature is a jealous passion, a self-abnegation as distinct from the mere pleasure of clever reading and clever writing as the religion of Pascal was distinct from the decorous worship of Versailles. The solitude of self-acknowledged failure is the sure penalty for pursuing an ideal out of harmony with the life about us. I speak bitterly; I feel as if an apology were due for such earnestness in writing to one who is, after all, practically a stranger to me.

Forgive my naïve zeal; but I remember that you spoke to me on the subject with a note of restrained emotion which flatters me into thinking I may not be misunderstood. And, to seek pardon for this personal tone by an added personality, it distresses me to imagine a life like yours, with which the world must deal bountifully in mere gratitude for the joy it takes from you—to imagine a life like yours, I say, sacrificed to any such grim Moloch. Write, and win applause for gay cleverness, but do not consider literature seriously. Above all, write me a word to assure me I have not given offence by this very uneditorial outburst of rhetoric.

Sincerely yours,
PHILIP TOWERS.

II

JESSICA TO PHILIP

MORNINGTOWN, GEORGIA, April 27, 19—.

MY DEAR MR. TOWERS:

Since my return home I have thought earnestly of my visit to New York. That was the first time I was ever far beyond the community boundaries of some Methodist church in Georgia. I think I mentioned to you that my father is an itinerant preacher. But for one brief day I was a small and insignificant part of the life in your great city, unnoted and unclassified. And you cannot know what that sensation means, if you were not brought up as a whole big unit in some small village. The sense of irresponsibility was delightful. I felt as if I had escaped through the buckle of my father's creed and for once was a happy maverick soul in the world at large, with no prayer-meeting responsibilities. I could have danced and glorified God on a curbstone, if such a manifestation of heathen spirituality would not have been unseemly.

But the chief event of that sensational day was my visit to you. Of course you cannot know how formidable the literary editor of a great newspaper appears to a friendless young writer. And from our brief correspondence I had already pictured you grim and elderly, with huge black brows bunched together as if your eyes were ready to spring upon me miserable. I even thought of adding a white beard—you do use long graybeard words sometimes, and naturally I had associated them with your chin. You can imagine, then, my relief as I entered your office, with the last legs of my courage tottering, and beheld you, not in the least ferocious in appearance, and not even *old!* The revulsion from my fears and anxieties was so swift and complete that, you will remember, I gave both hands in salutation, and had I possessed a miraculous third, you should have had that also.

I am so pleased to have you confirm my judgment of Howells's novel; and that I am to have more books for review. I doubt, however, if Mr. Howells will ever reap the benefit of my criticisms, for not long since I read a note from

him saying that he never looked into *The Gazette*. You must already have given offence by doubting his literary infallibility.

But on the whole you question the wisdom of my ambition to “give my life to literature.” As to that I am inclined to follow Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler’s opinion: “Writing is like flirting—if you can’t do it, nobody can teach you; and if you can do it, nobody can keep you from doing it.” With a certain literary aspirant I know, writing is even more like flirting than that—an artful folly with literature which will never rise to the dignity of a wedding sacrifice. She could no more give herself seriously to the demands of such a profession than a Southern mockingbird can take a serious view of music. He makes it quite independently of mind, gets his inspiration from the fairies, steals his notes, and dedicates the whole earth to the sky every morning with a green-tree ballad, utterly frivolous. Such a performance, my dear Mr. Towers, can never be termed a “sacrifice”; rather it is the wings and tail of humour expressed in a song. But who shall say the dear little wag has no vocation because his small feather-soul is expressed by a minuet instead of an anthem?

Therefore do not turn your editorial back upon me because I am incapable of the more earnest sacrifice. Even if I only chirrup a green-tree ballad, I shall need a chorister to aid me in winning those “laughing honours of society.” And your supervision is all the more necessary, since, as you said to me, I live in a section where the literary point of view is more sentimental than accurate. This is accounted for, not by a lack of native wit, but by the fact that we have no scholarship or purely intellectual foundations. We are romanticists, but not students in life or art. We make no great distinctions between ideality and reality because with us existence itself is one long cheerful delusion. Now, while I suffer from these limitations more or less, my ignorance is

not invincible, and I could learn much by disagreeing with you! Your letters would be antidotal, and thus, by a sort of mental allopathy, beneficial.

Sincerely,
JESSICA DOANE.

III

PHILIP TO JESSICA

MY DEAR MISS DOANE:

There can be no doubt of it. Your reply, which I should have acknowledged sooner, gives substance to the self-reproach that came to me the moment my letter to you was out of my hands. All my friends complain that they can get nothing from me but “journalistic correspondence”; and now when once I lay aside the hurry and constraint of the editorial desk to respond to what seemed a personal demand in a new acquaintance, I quite lose myself and launch out into a lyrical disquisition which really applies more to my own experience than to yours. Will you not overlook this fault of egotism? Indeed I cannot quite promise that, if you receive many letters from me in the course of your reviewing, you may not have to make allowances more than once for a note of acrid personality, or egotism, if you please, welling up through the decorum of my editorial advisings. “If we shut nature out of the door, she will come in at the window,” is an old saying, and it holds good of newspaper doors and windows, as you see.

But really, what I had in mind, or should have had in mind, was not the vague question whether you should “sacrifice your life to literature,”—that question you very properly answered in a tone of bantering sarcasm; but whether you should sacrifice your present manner of life to come and seek your fortune in this “literary metropolis”—Heaven save the mark! Let me say flatly, if I have not already said it,

there is no literature in New York. There are millions of books manufactured here, and millions of them sold; but of literature the city has no sense—or has indeed only contempt. Some day I may try to explain what I mean by this sharp distinction between the making of books, or even the love of books, and the genuine aspiration of literature. The distinction is as real to my mind—has proved as lamentably real in my actual experience—as that conceived in the Middle Ages between the life of a *religiosus*, Thomas à Kempis, let us say, and of a faithful man of the world. But this is a mystery, and I will not trouble you with mysteries or personal experiences. You would write as your Southern mockingbird sings his “green-tree ballad”; the thought of that bird mewed in a city cage and taught to perform by rote and not for spontaneous joy, troubled me not a little. I am sending you by express several books.... [1]

IV

PHILIP TO JESSICA

MY DEAR MISS DOANE:

I have said such harsh things about our present-day makers of books that I am going to send you, by way of palliative, a couple of volumes by living writers who really have some notion of literature. One is Brownell's *Victorian Prose Masters*, and the other is Santayana's *Poetry and Religion*. If they give you as much pleasure as they have given me, I know I shall win your gratitude, which I much desire. It is a little disheartening and a justification of my pessimism that neither of these men has received anything like the same general recognition as our fluent Mr. Perchance, that interpreter of literature to the American *bourgeoisie*. I will slip in also a volume or two of Matthew Arnold, as a good touchstone to try them on. Now that you are becoming a

professional weigher of books yourself, you ought to be acquainted with these gentlemen.

V

JESSICA TO PHILIP

MY DEAR MR. TOWERS:

Do not reproach yourself for having written me a “journalistic” letter. I always think of an editor as having only ink-bottle insides, ever ready to turn winged fancies into printed matter, or to enter upon a “lyrical disquisition” concerning them. Your distinction consists in a disposition to abandon the formalities of the editorial desk that you may “respond to the personal demands of a new acquaintance.” And this humane amiability leads me to make a naïve confession. There are some people whose demands are always personal. I think it is their limitation, resulting from a state of naturalness, more or less primitive, out of which they have not yet evolved. They do not appeal to your judgment or wisdom or even to your sympathy, but to *you*. Their very spirits are composed of a sort of sunflower dust that settles everywhere. And if they have what we term the higher life at all, it is expressed by a woodland call to some tree-top spirit in you. Thus, here am I, really desirous of an abstract, artistic training of the mind, already taking liberties with the sacred corners of your editorial dignity by impressing *personal* demands.

And just so am I related to the whole of life—even to the “publicans” in my father’s congregation. Indeed, if the desire “to eat with sinners” insured salvation, there would be less cause for alarm about my miraculous future state. The attraction, you understand, depends not upon the fact of their being sinners, but upon the sincerity of their mortality. The more unassumingly these reprobates live in their share of the common flesh, far below spiritual

pretences, the more does my wayward mind tip the scales of unregenerate humour in their direction. My instincts hobnob with their dust. But do not infer that I have identified you with these undisciplined characters. When I was a child, out of the rancour of a well-tutored Southern imagination I honestly believed that every man the other side of Mason and Dixon's line had a blue complexion, thin legs, and a long tail. And once when I was still very young, as I hurried from school through a lonely wood, I actually *saw* one of these monsters quite plainly. And I thought I observed that his tail was slightly forked at the end! I have long since forgiven you these terrifying caudal appendages, of course, but, for all that, I keep a wary eye upon my heavenly bodies and at least one wing stretched even unto this day when my guardian angel introduces a Northern man. My patriotic instincts recommend at once the wisdom of strategy. And it is well the "personal demands" come from me to you; for, had the direction been reversed, by this time I should have sought refuge somewhere in my last ditch and run up a little tattered flag of rebellion to signify the state of my mind.

It is just as well that you advise me against trying my fortunes in your "literary metropolis." My father is set with all his scriptures against the idea. "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to eternal life"; and, having predestined me for a deaconess in his church, he is firmly convinced that the strait and narrow way for me does not lie in the direction of New York. However, I have already whispered to my confidential hole-in-the-ground that nothing but the extremity of old-maid desperation will ever induce me to accept the vocation of a deaconess. Thus do a man's children play hide and seek with the beam in his eye while he practises upon the mote in theirs! But if, some day when the heavens are doubtful between sun and rain, you espy a little ruffled rainbow, propelled by a goose-quill pen,

coquetting northward with the retiring clouds, know that 'tis the spirit of Jessica Doane arched for another outing in your literary regions.

Meanwhile you amaze me with the charge that "of literature the city has no sense, or indeed only contempt," and I await the promised explanation with interest. For my own part, I often wonder if there will remain any opportunities for literary intelligence to expand at all when the happy (?) faculty of man's ingenuity has devastated all nature's countenance and resources with "improvements," cut down all the trees to make houses of, and turned all the green waterways into horse-power for machinery. Then we shall have cotton-mill epics, phonograph elegies from the tops of tall buildings; and then ragtime music, which interprets that divine art only for vulgar heels and toes, will take the place of anthems and great operas.

The books have come, and among them is another lady's literary effort to make a garden. *Judith* it is this time, following hard upon the sunburned heels of *Elizabeth*, *Evelina*, and I do not know how many more hairpin gardeners. Why does not some man with a real spade and hoe give his experience in a sure-enough garden? I am wearied of these little freckled-beauty diggers who use the same vocabulary to describe roses and lilies that they do in discussing evening toilets and millinery creations.

VI

JESSICA TO PHILIP

MY DEAR MR. TOWERS:

We have had a visitor, Professor M——, the doctor of English literature in E—— College, which you will remember is not very far from Morningtown. He came to examine a few first editions father has of some old English classics—(I have neglected to tell you that this is father's one carnal

indulgence, dead books printed in funny hunchbacked type!). He is a young man, but so bewhiskered that his face suggests a hermit intelligence staring at life through his own wilderness. His voice is pitched to a Browning tenor tone, and I have good reasons for believing that he is a bachelor.

Still we had some talk together, and that is how I came to practise a deceit upon you. Seeing a copy of *The Gazette* lying on the table this morning, Professor M—— was reminded to say that there was a “strong man,” Philip Towers by name, connected with that paper now. I cocked my head at once like a starling listening to a new tune, for that was the first time I had heard your name praised by a literary man in the South. He went on to say that he had been delighted with your last book, *Milton and His Generation*, and asked if I had observed your work in the literary department of *The Gazette*. I admitted demurely that I had. He praised several reviews (all written by me!) particularly, and said that you were the only critic in America now who was telling the truth about modern fiction. Then he incensed me with this final comment:

“I do not understand how he does this newspaper work so forcefully, almost savagely, and is at the same time capable of writing such delicate, scholarly essays as this volume contains!”

“I have seen Mr. Towers,” I remarked, mentally determining that you should suffer for that distinction.

“Indeed! what manner of man is he?”

“His dust has congealed, stiffened into a sort of plaster-of-Paris exterior, and he has what I call a *disinterred* intelligence!”

“A what?”

“A man whose very personality is a kind of mental reservation, and whose intelligence has been resurrected up

through the thought and philosophy of three thousand years.”

M—— looked awkward but impressed.

And I hoped he would ask how you actually looked, for I was in the mood to give a perfectly God-fearing description of you.

But from the foregoing you will see that I am capable of sharing your literary glory on the sly, and without compunction. Indeed, the false rôle created in me a perverse mood. And I entered into a literary discussion with M—— that outraged his pedantic soul. It was my way of perjuring his judgment, in return for his unwitting approval of my reviews. Besides, the assumption of infallibility by dull, scholarly men who have neither imagination nor genius has always amused me. And this one danced now as frantically as if he had unintentionally grasped a live wire that hurt and burned, but would not let go! Finally I said very engagingly:

“Doctor M——, I hope to improve in these matters by taking a course of instruction under you next year.”

“Now God forbid that you should ever do such a thing, Miss Doane! I would sooner have you thrust dynamite under the chair of English Literature, than see you in one of my classes!”

Thus am I cast upon the barren primer commons of this cold world! And that reminds me to say that I have been reading the essays by Arnold and Brownell which you gave me, with no little animosity. Brownell’s criticism of Thackeray is very suggestive, and brushes away a deal of trash that has been written about his lack of artistic method. But I never supposed such loose sentences would be characteristic of so acute a critic. They do not stick together naturally, but merely logically. And I am sure you would not tolerate them