

CHAPTER 1

The Lure of the City

When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, she carried with her only a small suitcase, a handbag made out of cheap imitation alligator skin, a small lunch in a paper bag, a scrap of paper with her sister's address, and four dollars in cash. It was August, 1889. She was eighteen years old, eager, and timid. And because she was young and inexperienced, she was also full of illusions about the world. She had a moment of sadness as she left behind her family, her village, and her childhood. But it was easy to break ties with them, since they could never offer her anything important.

Of course, she could always come back. Every day there were many trains that came to Chicago. And Columbia City, her childhood home, was only a few hours away. She looked at the little slip of paper with her sister's address on it and wondered. As she watched the familiar green countryside pass by her, she quickly turned her thoughts to Chicago and imagined what it might be like.

When a young woman leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into the hands of someone who can save her, and her life becomes better. Or she takes on the moral values of the city, and her life becomes worse. There is nothing in between. Like a powerful magnet, the city shrewdly, powerfully attracts human souls. With its thousand lights, sounds, and activities, the city can fascinate and seduce. And it can easily trick or corrupt an innocent woman, especially if she has no one to guide her.

Caroline, who was called Sister Carrie by her family, was guided mostly by self-interest. She was a typical American girl—of average intelligence, though not well educated. She was pretty, though not yet able to flirt like a woman. But she was eager to develop her charms, to own more things, to conquer the city.

“That,” said a voice in her ear, “is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin.”

“Is it?” she answered nervously.

For some time she had been aware that the man sitting behind her had been looking her over. She knew that she ought to ignore him. But previous conquests had made him daring. His magnetic appeal was stronger than her timidity. And so she answered.

He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the back of her seat.

“Yes,” he pursued smoothly. “That is a great resort for Chicago people. The hotels are swell.

You aren't familiar with this area, are you?"

"Oh, yes, I am," answered Carrie. "That is, I live in Columbia City. I have never been through here, though."

"So, this is your first visit to Chicago," he observed.

All this time, she had been looking at him out of the corner of her eye. He had bright red cheeks and a light moustache. He was wearing a stylish gray felt hat. Torn between wanting to protect herself and wanting to flirt with this attractive man, she now looked directly at him.

"I didn't say that," she said.

"Oh," he answered pleasantly, pretending that he had made a mistake. "I thought you did."

He was a traveling salesman. And he dressed and acted with one goal in mind—seducing young women. His type was called a "masher." Without good clothes, of course, such a man was nothing. This one wore a flashy, tight-fitting brown suit, highly polished tan shoes, a pink-striped shirt with gold-plated buttons set with jewel-like stones, and several heavy rings. Whenever he saw a single woman, he approached her in a slick, familiar manner. But he used a special technique with young women who looked vulnerable. First he would be attentive to them, offering to help them in all kinds of little ways. Then he would gradually move in closer and win them over.

As Carrie looked at this man's fashionable clothing, she became self-conscious about her own

plain, blue dress and worn-out shoes.

“Let’s see,” he went on. “I know lots of people in your town—Morgenroth, who owns the clothing store, and Gibson, the dry goods man.”

“Oh, do you?” she interrupted. She remembered how much she had longed for the things in their store windows. And so she became more interested in the conversation.

Having found a way to capture her attention, the man now came around and sat beside her. He talked about clothing sales, his travels, Chicago, and things to do in the city.

“If you are going there, you’ll really enjoy it. Do you have any relatives?”

“I am going to visit my sister,” she explained.

“There’s so much to see—theaters, crowds, tall buildings, fine houses. Oh, you’ll really like that.”

She realized that she would never be able to afford such a lifestyle. And that made her feel even less important. And yet, the possibility of so much wealth also appealed to her. She could not help smiling when he told her she reminded him of a popular actress.

“You’ll be staying in Chicago for a little while, won’t you?” he asked, now that they were having such an easy conversation.

“I don’t know,” said Carrie vaguely, worried for a moment that she might not find a job.

“Several weeks, anyhow,” he said, looking steadily into her eyes.

She realized that he was interested in her for the one reason that a woman both enjoys and fears. If she had been more experienced, however, she would have known how to keep her true feelings secret. And she would never have looked a man so steadily in the eyes.

“Why do you ask?” she said.

“Well, I’m going to be there several weeks. I could show you around.”

“I don’t know whether you can or not. I mean, I don’t know whether I can. I shall be living with my sister, and . . .”

“Well, if she minds, we’ll fix that.” He took out his pencil and a little notebook as if it were all settled. “What is your address there?”

She fumbled in her bag for the address slip.

He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a fat wallet. It was filled with slips of paper, some mileage books, a roll of dollar bills. She had never before met anyone so impressive. She imagined that he was at the center of a world of fortune. And so she had a positive attitude toward everything he might do.

He handed her a neat business card, which read, “Bartlett, Caryoe & Company.” He touched the corner where his name was engraved, “Charles H. Drouet.”

“That’s me,” he said. “It’s pronounced ‘Drew-eh.’ Our family was French, on my father’s side.”

Then he showed her a letter with a picture on it. “This is the company I work for, at the corner

of State and Lake.” He was proud to be connected with such a company, and he made her feel the same way.

“What is your address?” he began again, ready to write it down.

She looked at his hand.

“Carrie Meeber,” she said slowly. “Three hundred and fifty-four West Van Buren Street, in care of S.C. Hanson.”

He wrote it down and asked, “You’ll be at home if I stop by Monday night?”

“I think so,” she answered.

But their casual words did not express their true feelings. When he took her address, she felt that she had given up something to him. And he felt that he had gained a victory over her. Already they felt that they were somehow associated. Already he took control in directing the conversation. His words were easy. Her manner was relaxed.

As they approached Chicago, it was almost night. And night promises pleasure and freedom for people that work hard during the day.

“This is the Chicago River,” said Drouet, pointing enthusiastically to a little muddy creek. “Chicago is getting to be a great town. It’s wonderful. You’ll find lots to see here.”

But she felt only fear—fear that she was alone, away from home, and rushing into the city. For the city seemed to her like a huge sea of life and work.

“Chicago! Chicago!” called the conductor,

slamming the door open. Carrie picked up her poor little suitcase and closed her hand firmly on her bag.

Drouet stood up, straightening his pants. "I suppose your relatives will be here to meet you? Let me carry your suitcase."

"Oh, no," she said. "I'd rather you wouldn't. I'd rather you wouldn't be with me when I meet my sister."

"All right," he said kindly. "I'll be near, though, in case she isn't here. And then I can take you out there safely."

"You're so kind," said Carrie. She appreciated his taking care of her in this unfamiliar situation.

"Chi-ca-go!" called the conductor, stretching out the word. Carrie watched the glow of the street-lights passing by. The train was slowing down, and people were crowding in front of the door.

"Well, here we are," said Drouet, leading the way to the door. "Goodbye, till I see you Monday." He held out his hand.

"Goodbye," she answered, taking his hand.

"Remember, I'll be looking till you find your sister."

She smiled into his eyes.

They got off the train, and he pretended not to be watching her. A thin-faced, ordinary looking woman recognized Carrie and hurried over toward her.

"Why, Sister Carrie!" she began, as they hugged each other.

Suddenly Carrie felt a cold reality closing in on her. Looking at her sister, she was reminded that the world of work was hard and grim. At that moment, the wonderful city world of lights, sounds, and excitement seemed to disappear.

“So, how are all the folks at home?” she began. “How is father, and mother?”

Carrie answered, but she was looking the other way, toward Drouet. He was looking back. He saw that she saw him, and that she was safe with her sister. He gave her a faint smile and turned to go. As he left her, Carrie felt that she was losing something. With her sister she felt alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea.