LISTENING FOR THE LARK! A STORY: BY
WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

"Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away."—Song of Songs.

ONE of the very first mornings of spring! The north light from the roof blended with the yellow virginal essence of warmth, beaming in from the southern windows, which opened, alas, upon a side street in the center of New York. Carlotta looked down upon the hotel-entrance opposite, and the fat unpleasant line of horses’ backs. The noise came up in a detached fashion, but the sky was warm, an indescribable dazzle of yellow and pearl that made her listen for a lark. This reminded her of Europe and of her almost disintegrated patrimony. It had been altogether too long since she had heard a lark.

Painting had failed her. She had given most of her bit of a fortune to Paris in exchange for the conviction that she had everything but a certain divine, or mannish, quality that drives the woman to individualism and victory. She had the impulse, the application, the temperament, but lacked the one-pointed spoiling fury which bulks the career. Her sense of humor intervened in the place of that ambition which imperils the soul to gain its ends.

City life exhausted her. The three years since she was twenty-five, had seemed possessed to show her all the vulgarities of the human race. . . . A happy woman living in the country with her own babies was the only remaining unbroken illusion. Heaven had been stripped from everything else. Of late she had known moments of such tension, that she felt like giving up and becoming a married woman.

If she could shut her eyes—would that other dream go, too? For three years there had been a dreary burning within. The country and voices of children had called to her secretly, continually. Was that but another art which Mother Nature designs woman to learn the tragedy of, forcing her to accept a Bluebeard in the bargain, before she can become an Initiate?

It wasn’t because she had found modern men stupid that Carlotta was afraid. One can mother stupidity. But there had been here and there within recent months, revelations of callousness that froze the sources of her vitality for the time. She tried still to believe that these were matters of her personal ill-luck, and did not mean a hard and general waywardness of men.

She had become interested in pottery, but it was not prospering. Pottery would doubtless go the way of the rest. . . . She might go to the country to live, but that was only half the dream. Country meant children; each meant the other to her. Her greatest sorrow was the wasting street-bred thousands—the myriad little souls of
LISTENING FOR THE LARK!

New York who were not given their chance. . . . She might take the children of other women, and go to the country, but that was not the full dream. Perhaps it would come to that. . . .

PRESENTLY the elevator-door in the hall sounded with a tiny clatter, and her knocker dropped. She admitted a stranger who believed he spoke the Anglo-Saxon, but did not; a young man, elbows pinned to his sides, as if to retain valuable pamphlets. He made it clear to her with some difficulty that the old mansion of which her studio was the loft, was to be torn down; that the wreckers would arrive very early on the morning of the first of the month, less than a fortnight away.

“But I have a lease,” she repeated. “It was to run for three years!”

His face seemed to inquire as he stood there, “Why do you speak of lease or personal convenience when the wreckers are coming?” Also he testified that the woman who had supplied Carlotta with her lease (having given up the studio for a man) meant well enough, but did not have the authority to grant leases, her own tenure not being established. . . . Carlotta could not speak. The air was sick with him, with wreckers and commerce. He smiled, tightened his elbows and went his way.

She sat in the center of the floor and wept. An attorney, after examining her lease, had expressed his opinion that the tight-elbowed creature was right. It was not so much that she needed a studio—the relics of her failures were everywhere—but she needed her house. This was all she had. . . . Carlotta felt herself too long upon the vine—would have been surprised and incredulous to hear that this was far from true. The city turmoil came up and the noon suffocation. . . . Her knocker fell. For no particular reason, Carlotta thought it was the lease-man again, the native of New York. She allowed him to wait, pictured him waiting there, his elbows tight. The knocker fell again before she opened.

It was the Tyronian.

“Hello,” said he. “What’s the matter?”

He built bridges. He had come just twice before; once with another woman, when he had sat speechless for an hour; a second time, for five minutes in which Carlotta was forced to talk. . . . He had ranged like a maverick in her mind since that second call. There was something to him; yet she could not tell whether it was pure pose or pure poise. . . .

“You’ve been crying,” he said, as if there was nothing else to expect from her at eleven-forty-five in the morning. There was
LISTENING FOR THE LARK!

something peremptory and proprietary as well in his manner of speech.

"I thought it was some one else at the door. I would not have let you in—"

"I’m glad you expected someone. I really wanted to come in."

It was restful, with a forbidden restfulness,—this arrogant will-power in the fated studio. A pilot had been taken on. But it would be all the worse when he went away. She was ready to cringe, to lean, to weep. She hated herself, but the passion was not potent enough to count. All her thoughts were now clinging; all the man-hunting heredity of her species had risen. Carlotta had been drawing toward the door of the inner room. Suddenly she disappeared. Alone, it occurred to her not to be a coward at any cost.

"I’m washing my face," she called steadily.

She heard him pacing up and down the studio. Presently he sat down, and by the squeak of the little cane chair, she knew he was at her table of the clays.

"Better put on your hat and coat while you’re there," he called, in a tone of absorption. "We’ll go out somewhere—"

She didn’t obey, though she wanted to go forth above all things. When she emerged, he was finishing to suit himself, the small figure of a girl which she had begun; in fact, he was fashioning a waist of sensuous loveliness with his thumb, stroking it sideways over the wet clay. The figure itself was held in the same hand—a large brown authoritative hand that she had not noted before. Carlotta had struggled over that little figure. All the stiffness was gone from it now; something of the rigidity from her own life-struggle, as well.

"I suppose you paint, too," she said in rebellion.

"I do, but not as you might say, for a living. Clay and paint are play matters. I’ll show you some of my things. You work too hard—"

A

ND this was the instant that she really looked into his face. It was the first time, a wonderful look, never quite to be duplicated. The Tyronian was still seated, and she was still standing. His hair was thick and close-cropped, the eyes deep and steady, the forehead lined, as if puckered often to shield the eyes from the sun. All she had seen from passing glances before, was but a mask for the blithe tenderness of the man. There could be no effrontery in what he said, after this penetrating look of hers. He spoke what he saw, a trained man, and meant it, no more nor less. He must have been brought up by some woman of exceeding great wisdom, never to lie to himself, never to speak other than the thought.
LISTENING FOR THE LARK!

Who had a better right to criticise her work than this man whose hands were full of wizardry? Stiffness and strain of her own work were everywhere in the room. She had worked too hard. She had talked too much of effects, and like most talkers she had failed to produce effects. When one is a rhythmic instrument of one’s art, one does not talk technique. But the background of all his fascination for her was the open spaces that he breathed. He seemed to mean the Country—to have come from country gardens on this first real day of spring. . . . She found herself telling him of the creature who had called earlier, the preparer for the wreckers.

“He seemed afraid a deep breath would fill his lungs, if he loosed his elbows,” she added.

He put down the clay figure, and held his sticky hands clear of the table. She ran to get him a basin and towel. He washed thoughtfully.

“You didn’t put on your hat and coat,” he said. “To-morrow we will talk about this property man.”

As Carlotta searched for the full significance of the last remark, she discovered that she had brought her wrap. He took it from her hand and helped her. . . . As they passed the piano to the hall-door, Carlotta’s card-tray reminded her that she knew him only as “The Tyronian.” The other woman had spoken his real name but once. For the present at least, it was utterly gone from her. “Tyronian” had sufficed for all her thinking. . . . She halted, fingered the tray, making it possible for him to leave his card with the others. He slapped his pockets, concluding hastily:

“I haven’t one with me. Come on!”

She narrowly missed imploring him to take one more look.

He did not seem to be concerned by the occasional silences now, though Carlotta’s mind groped for words. Once when they had not spoken for five minutes, her self-consciousness swooped down with all its manners, fears, conventions and crudities. She became almost a polite person, and turned at last to the Tyronian. He was like a horse-lover, with a colt along. Playfully he managed—with lightness and little concern, with a fine enjoyment for the stages of the journey.

“Come on, we go this way,” he said, turning her by the shoulder toward a particular car, after they had ferried over the river at the top of town. She was sure the car would leave before they reached it. . . . He didn’t run, but they caught the car. All the way along, it was the same. . . . He was on the one side; the world on the other. Mainly, the world was utterly and perversely wrong. In certain moments she touched the mysterious peace of great companionship. This was Man, inclusive, reliant. . . . There were
LISTENING FOR THE LARK!

moments of intense concentration, moments of rippling fun, moment aghast at herself. They passed another Jersey town, and were walking along the river. It was very high and noble.

"Why, look at you—you're a little girl again! Not the same at all that I found this morning—the City making you cry. You don't belong to that. Only the races that have failed and the races that haven't had their chance yet—belong to the City. When one is ready for reality as you are—and doesn't go forth to find it—that one dies—"

She was thinking of the return to the studio—the different loneliness. "But one can't wander abroad day after day," she said. "No work would be done."

"You don't understand. The City isn't the place for us to work. The City is the temple of trade. Producers should bring in their work. It's the same as going to a temple to pray—one doesn't live there."

She waited for him to talk more.

"This morning while I was at work," he said presently, "all at once I thought of you back there. It was as if you were calling for help—"

"Perhaps I was," she breathed. This man meant the Country to her.

"I got it. . . . I was in the garden—uncovering roses. Only once a year the earth smells as it did this morning. It came to me that it would not do for you to wait another day. So I went to town for you. . . . We're nearly there—"

It took her breath away.

"Why, don't you see—we do very well there for a time in the struggle, but think of the children—"

They had passed along the wall of large private grounds, following a path to the very edge of the land. He pointed across to Manhattan.

"I have thought many times of the children," she said. "They can't touch the earth and they can't see the stars in the City. I have passed whole streets full of children—everywhere the drugged look about their eyes. You would get it if you stayed. And then one does not do well with paint where others are working. One must get out of the market to learn to play. Good work is play. . . . There is nothing like a garden to steady the hand—roses, anything. . . . See, I was working here when you called—"

The soil had been turned along the path, and the winter wrappings of straw removed from the pruned bush-roses.

"But where is your house?" she asked.
LISTENING FOR THE LARK!

THE Tyronian smiled, and took her hand. They began a steep descent of the bluff. He laughed at her fears, half-lifted her down certain stony steps, when she hesitated. They turned to the right, along a seven-foot ledge, and before her was the weathered door of a stone cottage, coppery brown like the splendid wall itself, and vined. On her left hand was the brilliant etheric divide, the Hudson below.

“It's an eyrie!” she whispered, and her soul loved it.

The world was forgotten. Everything she had ever known was unlike this, yet she wanted it as it was. As he turned the key in the ancient oaken door, she looked up into his face. It was a place of power.

He smiled, held the door open, his eyes laughing but tender. She would never see the mask again. . . . All that she had known before was unfinished, explanatory. This Tyronian was what a human adult should be in this year of our Lord. Somewhere within was a far small terror at her own instantaneous adjustments, but in her deepest soul she nestled to the place—as the stone cot to the cliff. The one terror was lest the dream should end.

The windows slid back like carriages under his hand, and the wind and the light came in. The vine tendrils came trailing through, and light from the waning east, over the shadowed river. Carlotta thought of morning through those windows—facing the east over Manhattan, from the very frontier of the east. She saw his books, his pictures, his desk and bed. The rock of the wall had been hollowed out, so that the place was large within. And they were alone. He took her coat, and came toward her again.

“This morning, up there with the roses, it came to me that this was the day to go for you. . . . The first time I saw you, I knew you were the one. I had never really thought of a woman until then. I went again to be sure. You were the one. I am glad the arts have not given you all you wanted. That would have spoiled you. They are not the way to happiness. They are ways to play. The world is to play in. I have enough for us—”

He stopped. She could not speak.

“Do not be afraid,” he added quietly. “Your laws are my laws. I love everything that you wish.”

SHE drew back from him. The east was fading. “A man and woman should not mate with less beauty than the eagles, Carlotta.”

“As we neared this place, it came to me,” she said. “I began to understand that you had come for me. I wanted it just this way. If
THE HUMOROUS GARDENER

"I am one, you must know, who am looked upon as a humorist in gardening. I have several acres about my house, which I call my garden, and which a skilful gardener would not know what to call. It is a confusion of kitchen and parterre, orchard and flower-garden, ... mixt and interwoven with one another. ... My flowers grow up in several parts of the garden in the greatest luxuriance and profusion. I am so far from being fond of any particular one, by reason of its rarity, and if I meet with any one in a field which pleases me, I give it a place in my garden. By this means, when a stranger walks with me, he is surprised to see several large spots of ground covered with ten thousand different colors, and has often singled out flowers he might have met with under a common hedge, in a field, or in a meadow, as some of the greatest beauties of the place. The only method that I observe in this particular is to range in the same quarter the products of the same season, that they may make their appearance together, and compose a picture of the greatest variety. There is the same irregularity in my plantations, which run into as great a wilderness as their natures will permit. I take in none that do not naturally rejoice in the soil; and am pleased when I am walking in a labyrinth of my own raising, not to know whether the next tree I shall meet with is an apple or oak; an elm or pear tree. ... You must know ... that I look upon the pleasure we take in a garden as one of the most innocent delights in human life. A garden was the habitation of our first parents before the fall. It is naturally apt to fill the mind with calmness and tranquillity, and to lay all its turbulent passions at rest. It gives us a great insight into the contrivance and wisdom of Providence, and suggests innumerable subjects for meditation. I cannot but think the very complacency and satisfaction which a man takes in these works of nature to be laudable if not a virtuous habit of mind."

JOSEPH ADDISON.