

**THE  
CRYSTAL CUP**

BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON

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Into a crystal cup the dusky  
wine  
I pour, and, musing at so rich  
a shrine,  
I watch the star that haunts its  
ruddy gloom.

—George Sterling

# **PART I**

# CHAPTER I

“OLD age will be served,” said Mrs. Carteret grimly. “But I suppose you think I am a long time dying.”

Gita made a face in the heavy shade of the bed-hangings, but replied politely: “I am glad to be here, grandmother, and when it’s my turn to die I’ll take all the time I choose.”

She had a crisp clear voice and a staccato delivery, which she made no attempt to modify in the sick-room, and the old lady frowned.

“I never cared for your mother, but she had a soft low voice, ‘an excellent thing in woman.’ Why did you not model your own upon it? And you do all you can to distort and destroy the Carteret beauty in your attempt to look like a boy. The Carteret women were all dashing brunettes, but feminine. Otherwise they never would have had men crawling at their feet, generation after generation.”

“If men crawled at my feet—which they don’t do these days, anyhow—I’d kick them out of the way. And if I were a man myself—and I wish to God I were—I’d see women to the devil before I’d make a fool of myself——”

“I don’t like your language. I don’t like your voice. I don’t like your bobbed hair——”

“My hair is not bobbed.”

“Bad enough whatever it is. I don’t like your ‘brooding brows,’ to quote an expression I read in a silly novel. I don’t like your boyish defiant bearing; it is not ladylike. I don’t like your ugly tailored suits—I’ve never seen you with a single feminine adornment——”

“You never will. Haven’t I told you I hate—loathe—being a female?”

“Fiddlesticks. I don’t pretend to know what bee you’ve got in your bonnet, but if you’ll take my advice you’ll pluck it out before it’s too late——”

“It’s not in my bonnet. It’s inside my skull.”

“Don’t interrupt me. You’ve no manners. . . . But you’re a Carteret all the same, in spite of your ridiculous airs and notions, and you look—could look—exactly as I did in my youth: I was your grandfather’s second cousin and a Carteret to my finger-tips—except that you are not tall enough. I was five-feet-eight and you must be quite three inches shorter. I was the beauty and the belle of my day, and that is more than you will ever be unless you take heed before it is too late.”

The gray old voice, with its sudden moments of vehement life, trailed off and her gaze turned inward. The light from the open window shone on her face high on the pillows in the ancient four-post bed, and Gita looked at it with the cold appraisal of youth. Beautiful? Once, perhaps. The black eyes were still keen and bright, although sunken deep in sockets as yellow and crinkled as an old Asiatic’s. The bony ridge of the nose was high and thin, but the cheeks were seamed with a thousand little wrinkles and the mouth was a pale satiric line. She looked more like an old bird of prey than the remnants of a woman, and Gita decided it was not



worth the mental effort to repad that face with firm young flesh and give it the pedestal of a swan-like neck or any of the other absurdities of archaic youth. She looked longingly through the window at the sunlight, but she had made up her mind to “do the decent thing” as the old lady had rescued her from poverty and heaven knew what not. Besides, she admitted grudgingly, blood was blood, and her grandmother had no one else. Noblesse oblige. Moreover, she rather liked this new-found relative, with her sharp, sarcastic, if superannuated, mind. If she had been affectionate life would have been unendurable once more.

The old Carteret Manor was not far from the island covered by Atlantic City, and behind the Old Shore Road. It was surrounded on three sides by pine woods but open to the sea on the east. There had been a storm the night before and from this high window Gita could see the tossing spray that hid the horizon. She forgot her grandmother until the old lady spoke again.

“They named you Gita, anyhow!” she said triumphantly. “The first daughter of every son was always named Gita, but it would have been like your father to break the tradition, especially as your mother disliked me. . . . There have been many Gita Carterets! And you are a Carteret through and through. Not a trace of your mother, thank heaven——”

“I won’t hear a word against my mother! My mother was an angel and a martyr, and as for my father—I don’t care if he was your son——”

“He was a scallywag. I’ll not deny it. Many of the Carteret men were. My sympathies were with your mother although I liked her as little as she liked me. She was no wife for Gerald—I told her

so—but for that matter only a Carteret could handle a Carteret. Nevertheless, young lady, it behooves a child to speak of its parents with respect.”

Miss Carteret gave an unladylike snort.

“Oh, yes! And there is one thing you have *not* inherited, and that is the Carteret grand manner. Even your father had that, and when he was most intoxicated. You have neither manner nor manners.”

“Both are out of date.”

“Are they? I am not so sure. The world is not entirely composed of what you call the younger generation. Are you a specimen of the flappers all these magazines and novels are full of?”

“I am not. Silly little *females*. Besides, I’m twenty-two.”

“I can’t make out whether you seem to hate men or women more, and you won’t give any reason.”

“I don’t hate women. I only resent being one. If you had been my old grandfather I’d have starved in the streets before I’d have come here.”

“It is a wonder, with your remarkable freedom of speech, you don’t say you would have gone on the streets.”

“Oh, never! I’d have died a thousand deaths first. Not,” she added hurriedly, “because I’d have been too good for it, but because—well, I’d have killed the first man that touched me.”

“Of course you are virtuous,” said the old lady complacently. “All the Carteret women have been. Flirts and coquettes, perhaps——”

“Virtuous nothing. I don’t care a damn——”

“You are not a boy, after all, so kindly refrain from swearing in my presence. The Carteret men swore like troopers, but their women never forgot themselves. And please remember that I am helpless. I cannot rise and leave the room.”

“Sorry, grandmother. I’ll not do it again.”

“You have a good heart, anyhow——No, you needn’t snort. It’s a hideous noise, and a good heart is no disgrace in even a modern young woman. I like you in spite of everything, and I wish I could have had the bringing-up of you.”

“I wish to God you had!” the girl exclaimed with unexpected passion. “I wish my mother could have died when I was born, or at least too young to remember anything, and that my father had brought me to you and then blown out his cruel brains.”

“Well, I do not. There are some words I dislike exceedingly and ‘suicide’ is one of them. And I despise cowards.” (“Old cliché,” muttered Gita.) “That is another thing in you that pleases me. You have a high courage. All the Carterets had that.”

“One more reason for being a Carteret!”

“You are an impertinent minx. . . . But I thought your parents were happy for a few years? I was given to understand that, although I never saw your mother again and Gerald only came home twice.”

“Before my time, then. I can remember back to the age of four, and one of my first recollections is his knocking my mother about.”

“What an expression! I suppose you mean he struck her. It is bad enough, heaven knows, however you express it. Gerald! I never

thought he would so far forget himself, for a gentleman is never more of a gentleman than when he is in his cups. But he always had an ungovernable—yes, a vicious temper. But what a handsome dog he was! I was so proud of him. He was the youngest of ten and I am afraid I spoiled him. Is that the secret of your hatred of men?”

“Among others.”

“Well, I should hope you had a better reason than that. You should have too much common sense to judge all men by one. What are your other reasons?” she asked curiously. “I don’t understand you at all. Too many years between us, I suppose. I don’t understand any of the modern young women, and you appear to be the most singular of them all. Not that I have met many, bed-ridden as I am, but I have read some of the modern novels and they horrify me. You have certain points of difference, and I am thankful for that much. No doubt it is because you are a Carteret. You are not a fool at all events. Do you smoke cigarettes?”

“I do.”

“Well, don’t you ever dare bring one in here, or smell of one. Do you drink cocktails?”

“No. ’Fraid of bootlegger stuff.”

“I don’t mind you drinking a glass of wine with your dinner. There is some old Burgundy and port in the cellar, and, no doubt, a case or two of champagne. Tell Topper to bring up anything you like—but only one glass at a meal, though; and as the champagne is in quart bottles——”

“Thanks, grandmother, but I really don’t care about it. It’s time for your medicine.”

She came out into the light, and Mrs. Carteret looked at her with a frown. “You *could* be a beauty,” she said plaintively. “Why won’t you, my dear? And at least don’t stick your hands in your pockets again when you are in my presence—like a whistling schoolboy.”

“Well, I can’t just now.” Gita’s somber face broke into a smile that revealed even white teeth brilliantly enameled, and for the moment she looked feminine and roguish in spite of her cropped head and rigid spine. “Let me lift you a little higher. You nearly choked last time.”

She thrust her arm under the pillow and held the glass to the old lady’s sunken lips, then lowered her gently and returned to her chair in the shade of the curtains.

Mrs. Carteret sighed. “You have your good points, Gita, and I do wish you could have come to me before, although a sick-room is no place for a young girl. Eighty-two! It is a great age. Too old for a woman to live to by thirty—forty years. Your generation won’t live as long.”

“I should hope not. But I wish you wouldn’t die.” For the first time the hard boyish voice quivered. “I haven’t anyone else. Why don’t you try this rejuvenation thing?”

“Not I. Thirty years ago, perhaps, if they hadn’t been so long discovering it. But I’ve had enough of life. Eighty-two! All the friends of my youth, all my children, dead. Nobody left but you, and I do not love you. You came to me too late and you are too different, if you are a Carteret. But it is kind of you to say that, my dear, and I am glad I can leave you independent, if not wealthy. You will have the old place and about eight thousand a year, although it may be less, what with the inheritance tax and all.” A

look of sharp anxiety came into her eyes. “You won’t sell the manor, Gita? I could not rest in my grave.”

“I shouldn’t think of selling it. Sometimes I think I’d like to live here alone for the rest of my life.”

“Nonsense. But it doesn’t take much to keep it up, aside from the taxes. The grounds went to ruin long ago, and the greater part of the house has been closed since taxes and prices began to go up and my income down. . . . Carteret Manor was a great domain in the seventeenth century, and even in your great-grandfather’s time, but we were always an extravagant and improvident race. There’s nothing left of the old manor now but forty acres. Most of that is in woodland, although there are two farms, rented to decent folk. The rest of my small fortune is in securities, and there is a house in Atlantic City. Mr. Donald will be over from Philadelphia again in a day or two and I’ll tell him to have a talk with you. If I thought I could live a year longer I’d transfer everything to you, but there is some sort of law——”

“That would be rather a reckless thing to do!” For a moment Gita’s brilliant black eyes softened as she leaned forward. “I might sell out and skip, having first run you into the poorhouse.”

“You may have bad manners and worse language, but I’ve lived too long to make any mistake about character——”

“And of course I’m a Carteret,” said Gita mischievously.

“Of course. But it’s not worth talking about. I’ll not live a month, much less a year. . . . There’s something else. I’ve wanted to speak of it ever since you came, but this is the first time I’ve had my way

with that nurse and the opportunity for something like a real talk with you. Moreover—I suppose you'll spit fire."

"Fire away. Don't mind me."

"Well, it's this. I don't like the old name to die out. None of my sons married except your father and William, who died without issue. The other two died young, one out yonder in the Thoroughfare, when he was fourteen. Three of the girls died in childhood during a diphtheria epidemic—my own Gita among them! Violet and Rose withered away in this house, unmarried; they were plain, and I would not countenance such suitors as they attracted. In the few plain Carteret women the Carteret spirit seemed also to be lacking. Evelyn had her full measure. She cut a great swath in New York, where my sister gave her a season, and then married to suit herself. But she died childless—long since. Now, you and I are the only Carterets left and unless you do as I ask the old name will be forgotten—like many another old name only to be found in some history of New Jersey."

"Well?" Gita's crisp voice rose a key.

"I should die content if you would promise me to ask—yes, insist, that your husband take our name——"

"I'll never marry! Never! Never!" Now Gita's voice was harsh and defiant.

"Fiddlesticks. All girls say that. I said it myself—and did not marry until I was twenty-seven. I was too fond of being a belle—I had more scalps at my belt than any girl of my time." Again her gaze turned inward. "My father was one of the founders of Atlantic City—one of that group of far-sighted men that all Philadelphia

laughed at—and put more than a penny in the old United States Hotel. Ah, what gay times we had! That old hotel was the scene of my triumphs, season after season. People of quality went to resorts in those days. Now they avoid them as they would the plague, if one may judge from the hordes on the Boardwalk. I used to be wheeled up and down in one of those chairs before I was bed-ridden . . . Nothing but tourists——”

“Well, why not?” demanded Gita, who was growing restless. “It is a public walk and even tourists want to enjoy themselves, I suppose.”

Mrs. Carteret, recalled, drew her scant brows together. “I am not talking of rights,” she said coldly. “I merely regret a time when the beach and even the Boardwalk was a promenade of fashion, of beautiful well-dressed women and handsome men. They were better to look at, and I happen to dislike common and undistinguished people. I hope you do not think yourself ‘democratic,’ among other things?”

“Certainly I do. About the only decent treatment I’ve ever had has been from ‘common’ people—until we went to California, at all events. It was gentlemen, men of my father’s class, that made my mother’s life unendurable. And we hardly set up to be aristocrats on five cents a year.”

“Your mother should have written me she was in such dire straits. I knew that your father was living extravagantly in Europe but I never suspected he was spending his capital. He told me on both his visits that he was temporarily hard up. The first time I lent him a large sum of money. The second time I refused, under the advice of Mr. Donald’s father, and reproached him with extravagance. He



flew into a terrible temper, flung himself out of the house, and never even wrote to me again. Well, he died soon after. . . . But I would never have permitted his wife and child to suffer.”

“My mother would have starved before she would have taken a cent from a Carteret.”

“She should not have permitted her child to starve. . . . However—there is one question I should like to ask before we go further—and I have other things to say. I wish you would move your chair into the light. I can hardly see you.”

Gita moved her chair obediently although with an impatient jerk.

Mrs. Carteret regarded her grandchild with a penetrating sharp gaze.

“Answer me this question, truthfully, and without quibbling. Have you actually no pride of race?”

“I think such things ridiculous.”

“You do? And would you—honestly, mind you—rather be a Jenks or a Hobbs than a Carteret? With no generations of breeding and education behind you? Just a common young woman with rudely modeled features and a blowsy prettiness, without an atom of distinction? Answer me that.”

Gita moved uneasily. “It is good enough as a background, I suppose. But I’m no snob.”

“No Carteret was ever a snob. But they were aristocrats. Vulgar people do not know the difference, and you are not vulgar, absurd as you are. There are worse things in life than poverty, and you may thank your stars you have escaped a few of them, owing to

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