

**THE GREAT REFUSAL,
BEING LETTERS
OF A DREAMER IN
GOTHAM, PP. 1-155**

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The Great Refusal, Being Letters of a Dreamer in Gotham, pp. 1-155 by Paul Elmer More

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LETTERS OF A DREAMER
IN GOTHAM

EDITED BY

PAUL ELMER MORE

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"Amanti verbum non mundum"



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INTRODUCTION

ALL that is necessary for the understanding of these letters can be told in a few words. Their author was born and educated in New York. After receiving the baccalaureate degree at Columbia College, he studied in the graduate classes for two years, and then went abroad. He traveled through the various countries of Europe, passing a winter in Greece, and proceeded thence to India and the far East, where he remained a number of months. He would have been content, on returning home, to give himself up to a life of leisure and quiet study, as the means of his family permitted; but the American instincts of his father and relatives in general regarded such unproductive idleness as degrading. In accordance with their wishes, he overcame his reluctance, and accepted a position as teacher in the — school, this being the only active life he deemed himself suited to enter upon. Here he fulfilled the duties of instructor in Latin for one year, but I am told the result was deplorable. The nervous strain was too great for his sensitive nature, and by spring-time his health was so materially affected that he was permitted to retire

from active life and bury himself in his study. He never, after that, left his home on Staten Island, except to visit in the city. And his learning, which even at this age must have been prodigious, was wasted in the vapors of mysticism.

It was in the early spring of his year of misfortune, and under circumstances described in one of these letters, that he met the woman whom he chose to call Lady Esther. Her influence over him can be gathered from the following pages.

I myself saw him twice at her house. His appearance was noticeable enough. On the street, perhaps, one would have passed him by without a second look, but in the parlor his attitude and the expression of his countenance marked him at once as a man apart. He was rather tall, and of a slender figure, quick but not ungraceful in movement. His head was large and high; but what impressed one most was the peculiar lack of harmony between the lower and upper parts of his face. His mouth and chin were soft, almost voluptuous, the curve of the lips wavering between melancholy and sarcasm. The eyes, on the other hand, were cold, abstracted, and repellent. They were the eyes of a dreamer, but of an egotist as well. I remember one occasion when the sympathetic expression of the mouth and the distant, abstracted look of the eyes made a contrast that had about it something almost preternatural.

Again, a third time, not long before his death, I met him in his own home under circumstances peculiarly trying. It was shortly after the last letter in this collection was written, and when he had completely withdrawn himself from the world in order to follow out certain oriental notions concerning the spiritual life. I was the bearer of a message of the utmost delicacy. He received me cordially, with the precise and impressive manner habitual to men who pass their time among books, and I think divined at once the reason of my visit. For the sake of privacy, perhaps, he led me into his library, a large rectangular room on the second floor, from whose windows I could see the sparkling water of the bay, and afar off the smoke of the great city. I observed here, for the first time in my life, the subduing, almost melancholy, effect of the view of many vessels passing silently before our gaze. The room itself was plainly furnished, with bookshelves built against the walls and reaching almost to the ceiling. Several large photographs from the Buddhist monasteries, and a water-color representing our friend, were the only pictures; indeed, his books left little space for ornaments. Only one object struck me as at all bizarre: on the mantel was a carefully mounted death's-head, with a short inscription in crimson paint across the forehead. The characters were Sanscrit, as I suspected.

Our conversation soon turned to oriental subjects suggested by the Buddhist scenes on the wall, and from them I took occasion to refer to the portrait, remarking the excellence of the likeness. He assured me it was done from a small photograph by an artist who had never seen the original, but who was guided by his directions. He spoke of her quite freely, of her astonishing beauty, and of the influence she had formerly exercised on his character. I was encouraged by his frankness to express my surprise that he should find it necessary, in pursuance of his conception of the higher life, to abandon this influence which even yet awakened in him such noble reflections. He replied at some length, as if anxious to render my task easy.

“There is a state in our progress,” he said, “when nothing is more efficacious in arousing our purest sentiments and leading us upward, than the contemplation of beauty. This seems to us then the divine light sent into the world to guide our steps in slippery places. The man who follows it is a Platonist. You have read the ‘Phædrus’ and the ‘Symposium,’ and I need say no more. But as time goes on, we are dismayed to find our advance checked at a certain point beyond which this guide cannot take us. Then our perception is deepened. The material world is seen in its naked reality. Two paths are open to us. Either with the followers of the Vedanta we look upon

matter as pure illusion, arising out of ignorance and ready to vanish away as soon as comprehended: or else, with the school of the Sankhya, we deem it eternal and self-existent; but still look upon the union of the spirit with it as the result of illusion and ignorance, which being removed, the spirit escapes from its fetters, and Nature, as a dancing girl who has once been seen, retires modestly from view. Pardon my reference to unfamiliar philosophies, but I do not know how better to express that stage of our spiritual progress when the material world becomes in every aspect a hindrance to us. Whichever way our reason leads us — and the two systems are morally one — beauty to the enlightened mind becomes above all things the most dangerous illusion. Were it not for the beautiful forms of Nature displayed before the soul, we should not cling to our present impure state, nor refuse to accept in its fullness the divine light already perceived by the intellect."

"But," I objected, "is there nothing besides this? Can you not conceive of moral excellence in another which might still make love a celestial guide in this higher life, without appealing to mere physical beauty?"

"You miss my meaning. There is no moral excellence, as you understand it. Such qualities of the heart are still connected with manners and physical agents. The true aim of the phi-