

Theodore Dreiser

The Stoic

The logo for 'Lingua' features a stylized quill pen nib on the left, with the word 'Lingua' written in a cursive script to its right.

CHAPTER 1

There were two most disturbing problems confronting Frank Cowperwood at the time of his Chicago defeat, when, so reducingly and after so long a struggle, he lost his fight for a fifty-year franchise renewal.

First, there was his age. He was nearing sixty, and while seemingly as vigorous as ever, it would be no easy matter, he felt, with younger and equally resourceful financiers on the scene, to pile up the great fortune which assuredly would have been his if his franchise had been extended. That fortune would have been all of \$50,000,000.

Secondly, and of even greater importance, in his realistic judgment, was the fact that by this time he had still not achieved social connections of any value; in other words, social prestige. Of course, his youthful incarceration in the penitentiary in Philadelphia had not helped matters, and then, too, his natural varietism, plus his unfortunate marriage to Aileen, who had been no real social help, and his own determined and almost savage individualism, had alienated many who otherwise might have been friendly to him.

For Cowperwood was not one to make friends of those less forceful, subtle, or efficient than himself. It smacked too much of meaningless self-depreciation and was, at best, in his opinion, a waste of time. On the other hand, he found, the strong and cunning or genuinely significant were not always easy to acquire as friends. Particularly here in Chicago, where he had fought so many of them for

position and power, they had chosen to combine against him, not because he represented morals or methods different from any they were willing to practice or accept in others, but rather because he, a total stranger, had ventured on financial preserves presumably their own and had risen to greater wealth and power, and in less time, than they had. Moreover, he had attracted the wives and daughters of some of the very men who were most jealous of him financially, and so they had set out to ostracize him socially and had well-nigh succeeded in doing so.

So far as sex was concerned, he had always desired individual freedom and proceeded ruthlessly to achieve it. At the same time, he had always held the thought that somewhere he might well meet a woman so superior that in spite of himself he might be held, not to absolute faithfulness—he was never willing to count upon that in regard to himself—but rather to a genuine union of understanding and affection. For eight years now he had felt that he had really found that ideal individual in the girl, Berenice Fleming. Obviously, she was not overawed by his personality or his fame, nor at all impressed by his usual arts. And because of that, as well as the deep aesthetic and sensual spell she cast over him, there had arisen in him a conviction that she, with her youth, beauty, mental awareness, and certainty as to her own personal value, could contrive and maintain the natural social background for his force and wealth, assuming, of course, that he were ever free to marry her.

Unfortunately, for all his determination in connection with Aileen, he had not been able to divest himself of her. For one thing, she was determined not to give him up. And to have added a contest for freedom to his difficult railway

fight in Chicago would have been too much of a burden. Moreover, in Berenice's attitude, he saw no trace of the necessary acceptance. Her eyes appeared to be set toward men not only younger than himself but with conventional social advantages which his personal record made it impossible for him to offer her. This had given him his first real taste of romantic defeat, and he had sat alone in his rooms for hours at a time convinced that he was hopelessly beaten in his battle for greater fortune and for the love of Berenice.

And then suddenly she had come to him and announced a most amazing and unexpected surrender, so that he experienced a sense of rejuvenation which almost at once definitely restored his old constructive mood. At last, he felt, he had the love of a woman who could truly support him in his quest for power, fame, prestige.

On the other hand, as frank and direct as had been her explanation of why she had come—"I thought you really might need me now... I have made up my mind"—still, there was on her part a certain hurt attitude in regard to life and society which moved her to seek reparation in some form for the cruelties she felt had been imposed on her in her early youth. What she was really thinking, and what Cowperwood, because of his delight at her sudden surrender did not comprehend, was: You are a social outcast, and so am I. The world has sought to frustrate you. In my own case, it has attempted to exclude me from the sphere to which, temperamentally and in every other way, I feel I belong. You are resentful, and so am I. Therefore, a partnership: one of beauty and strength and intelligence and courage on both sides, but without domination by either of us. For without fair play between us, there is no possibility

of this unsanctioned union enduring. This was the essence of her motive in coming to him at this time.

And yet Cowperwood, aware as he was of her force and subtlety, was not so fully aware of her chain of thought in this direction. He would not have said, for instance, looking upon her on that wintry night of her arrival (perfect and flowery out of an icy wind), that she was as carefully and determinedly aligned mentally. It was a little too much to expect of one so youthful, smiling, gay and altogether exquisite in every feminine sense. And yet she was. She stood daringly, and yet secretly somewhat nervously, before him. There was no trace of malice in regard to him; rather love, if a desire to be with him and of him for the remainder of his days on these conditions might be called love. Through him and with him she would walk to such victory as might be possible, the two of them whole-heartedly and sympathetically co-operating.

And so, on that first night, Cowperwood turned to her and said: "But Bevy, I'm really curious as to this sudden decision of yours. To think you should come to me now just when I have met my second really important setback."

Her still blue eyes enveloped him as might a warming cloak or a dissolving ether.

"Well, I've been thinking and reading about you for years, you know. Only last Sunday, in New York, I read two whole pages about you in the *Sun*. They made me understand you a little better, I think."

"The newspapers! Did they, really?"

"Yes, and no. Not what they said about you critically, but the facts, if they are facts, that they pieced together. You never cared for your first wife, did you?"

“Well, I thought I did, at first. But, of course, I was very young when I married her.”

“And the present Mrs. Cowperwood?”

“Oh, Aileen, yes. I cared for her very much at one time,” he confessed. “She did a great deal for me once, and I am not ungrateful, Bevy. Besides, she was very attractive, very, to me at that time. But I was still young, and not as exacting mentally as I am now. The fault is not Aileen’s. It was a mistake due to inexperience.”

“You make me feel better when you talk that way,” she said. “You’re not as ruthless as you’re said to be. Just the same, I am many years younger than Aileen, and I have the feeling that without my looks my mind might not be very important to you.”

Cowperwood smiled. “Quite true. I have no excuses to offer for the way I am,” he said. “Intelligently or unintelligently, I try to follow the line of self-interest, because, as I see it, there is no other guide. Maybe I am wrong, but I think most of us do that. It may be that there are other interests that come before those of the individual, but in favoring himself, he appears, as a rule, to favor others.”

“I agree, somehow, with your point of view,” commented Berenice.

“The one thing I am trying to make clear to you,” went on Cowperwood, smiling affectionately at her, “is that I am not seeking to belittle or underestimate any hurt I may have inflicted. Pain seems to go with life and change. I just want to state my case as I see it, so that you may understand me.”

“Thanks,” and Berenice laughed lightly, “but you needn’t feel you are on the witness stand.”

“Well, almost. But please let me explain a little about Aileen. Her nature is one of love and emotion, but her intellect is not, and never was, sufficient for my needs. I understand her thoroughly, and I am grateful for all she did for me in Philadelphia. She stood by me, to her own social detriment. Because of that I have stood by her, even though I cannot possibly love her as I once did. She has my name, my residence. She feels she should have both.” He paused, a little dubious as to what Berenice would say. “You understand, of course?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Berenice, “of course, I understand. And, please, I do not want to disturb her in any way. I did not come to you with that in view.”

“You’re very generous, Bevy, but unfair to yourself,” said Cowperwood. “But I want you to know how much you mean to my entire future. You may not understand, but I acknowledge it here and now. I have not followed you for eight years for nothing. It means that I care, and care deeply.”

“I know,” she said, softly, not a little impressed by this declaration.

“For all of eight years,” he continued, “I have had an ideal. That ideal is you.”

He paused, wishing to embrace her, but feeling for the moment that he should not. Then, reaching into a waistcoat pocket, he took from it a thin gold locket, the size of a silver dollar, which he opened and handed to her. One interior face of it was lined with a photograph of Berenice as a girl of twelve, thin, delicate, supercilious, self-contained, distant, as she was to this hour.

She looked at it and recognized it as a photograph that had been taken when she and her mother were still in

Louisville, her mother a woman of social position and means. How different the situation now, and how much she had suffered because of that change! She gazed at it, recalling pleasant memories.

“Where did you get this?” she asked at last.

“I took it from your mother’s bureau in Louisville, the first time I saw it. It was not in this case, though; I have added that.”

He closed it affectionately and returned it to his pocket. “It has been close to me ever since,” he said.

Berenice smiled. “I hope, unseen. But I am such a child there.”

“Just the same, an ideal to me. And more so now than ever. I have known many women, of course. I have dealt with them according to my light and urge at the time. But apart from all that, I have always had a certain conception of what I really desired. I have always dreamed of a strong, sensitive, poetic girl like yourself. Think what you will about me, but judge me now by what I do, not by what I say. You said you came because you thought I needed you. I do.”

She laid her hand on his arm. “I have decided,” she said, calmly. “The best I can do with my life is to help you. But we... I... neither of us can do just as we please. You know that.”

“Perfectly. I want you to be happy with me, and I want to be happy with you. And, of course, I can’t be if you are going to worry over anything. Here in Chicago, particularly at this time, I have to be most careful, and so do you. And that’s why you’re going back to your hotel very shortly. But tomorrow is another day, and at about eleven, I hope you will telephone me. Then perhaps we can

talk this over. But wait a moment." He took her arm and directed her into his bedroom. Closing the door, he walked briskly to a handsome wrought-iron chest of considerable size which stood in a corner of the room. Unlocking it, he lifted from it three trays containing a collection of ancient Greek and Phoenician rings. After setting them in order before her, he said:

"With which of these would you like me to pledge you?"

Indulgent, and a little indifferently, as was her way—always the one to be pleaded with, not the one to plead—Berenice studied and toyed with the rings, occasionally exclaiming over one that interested her. At last, she said:

"Circe might have chosen this twisted silver snake. And Helen, this green bronze circlet of flowers, perhaps. I think Aphrodite might have liked this curled arm and hand encircling the stone. But I will not choose for beauty alone. For myself, I will take this tarnished silver band. It has strength as well as beauty."

"Always the unexpected, the original!" exclaimed Cowperwood. "Bevy, you are incomparable!" He kissed her tenderly as he placed the ring on her finger.

CHAPTER 2

The essential thing which Berenice achieved for Cowperwood in coming to him at the time of his defeat was to renew his faith in the unexpected and, better yet, in his own luck. For hers was an individuality, as he saw it, self-seeking, poised, ironic, but less brutal and more poetic than his own. Where he desired money in order to release its essential content, power, to be used by him as he pleased, Berenice appeared to demand the privilege of expressing her decidedly varied temperament in ways which would make for beauty and so satisfy her essentially aesthetic ideals. She desired not so much to express herself in a given form of art as to live so that her life as well as her personality should be in itself an art form. She had more than once thought, if only she had great wealth, very great power, how creatively she would use it. She would never waste it on great houses and lands and show, but rather surround herself with an atmosphere which should be exquisite and, of course, inspirational.

Yet of that she had never spoken. Rather, it was implicit in her nature, which Cowperwood by no means always clearly interpreted. He realized that she was delicate, sensitive, evasive, elusive, mysterious. And, for these reasons, he was never tired of contemplating her, any more than he was of contemplating nature itself: the new day, the strange wind, the changing scene. What would the morrow be like? What would Berenice be like when next

he saw her? He could not tell. And Berenice, conscious of this strangeness in herself, could not enlighten him or any other. She was as she was. Let Cowperwood, or any, take her so.

In addition to all this, she was, he saw, an aristocrat. In her quiet and self-confident way, she commanded respect and attention from all who came in contact with her. They could not evade it. And Cowperwood, recognizing this superior phase of her as the one thing he had always, if almost subconsciously, admired and desired in a woman, was deeply gratified as well as impressed. She was young, beautiful, wise, poised—a lady. He had sensed it even in the photograph of the twelve-year-old girl in Louisville eight years before.

But now that Berenice had come to him at last, there was one thing that was troubling him. That was his enthusiastic and, at the moment, quite sincere suggestion of absolute and single devotion to her. Did he really mean that? After his first marriage, particularly after the experience of children and the quite sober and humdrum nature of his domestic life, he had fully realized that the ordinary tenets of love and marriage were not for him. This was proved by his intrigue with the young and beautiful Aileen, whose sacrifice and devotion he subsequently rewarded by marrying her. Yet that was as much an act of equity as of affection. And subsequent to that, he considered himself wholly liberated, sensually as well as emotionally.

He had no desire to attempt, much less achieve, a sense of permanency. Nonetheless, he had for eight years been pursuing Berenice. And now he was wondering how he should present himself honestly to her. She was, as he

knew, so extremely intelligent and intuitive. Lies sufficient to placate, if not really deceive, the average woman, would not advantage him much with her.

And worse, at this time, in Dresden, Germany, there was a certain Arlette Wayne. Only a year ago he had entered on the affair with her. Arlette, previously immured in a small town in Iowa and anxious to extricate herself from a fate which threatened to smother her talent, had written Cowperwood, enclosing a picture of her siren self. But not receiving a reply, she had proceeded to borrow money and appear before him in person in his Chicago office. Where the picture had failed, the personality of Arlette had succeeded, for she was not only daring and self-confident, but possessed of a temperament with which Cowperwood was really in sympathy. Besides, her object was not purely mercenary. She was genuinely interested in music, and she had a voice. Of that he became convinced, and he desired to help her. She had also brought with her convincing evidence of her background: a picture of the little house in which she and her widowed mother, a local saleswoman, were living, and a quite moving story of her mother's struggles to maintain them and further her ambition.

Naturally, the few hundred dollars which her aspirations required were as nothing to Cowperwood. Ambition in any form appealed to him, and now, moved by the girl herself, he proceeded to plan her future. For the time being, she was to have the best training Chicago could offer. Later, should she really prove worth while, he would send her abroad. However, so as not to commit or entangle himself in any way, he had specifically arranged a budget on which she was to live, and that budget was still in force.

He had also advised her to bring her mother to Chicago to live with her. She therefore rented a small house, sent for her mother, and established herself, and in due course Cowperwood became a frequent visitor.

Yet because of her intellect and the sincerity of her ambition, their relationship had been based on mutual appreciation as well as affection. She had not been moved by any desire to compromise him in any way, and it had been only shortly before Berenice's arrival in Chicago that he had persuaded Arlette to go to Dresden, for he had realized that he might not be a personal part of Chicago much longer. And had it not been for Berenice, he would have presently visited Arlette in Germany.

But now, as he compared her to Berenice, he felt no sensual pull in her direction, for in that way, as in all others, Berenice promised to absorb him completely. However, still interested in Arlette as an artistic temperament, and concerned to see her succeed, he intended continuing to aid her. Only, as he now felt, it might be best to drop her from his life completely. It would mean little to him. She had had her day. Best start on a new footing entirely. If Berenice was going to demand absolute romantic faithfulness on pain of separation, then he would do the best he could to conform to her desires. She was surely worthy of really important sacrifices on his part. And in that frame of mind, he was more inclined to dream and promise than at any time since his youth.

CHAPTER 3

The following morning, a little after ten o'clock, Berenice telephoned Cowperwood and they agreed to meet at his club for a talk.

As she entered by a private stairway to his apartment, she found him waiting to greet her. There were flowers in the living room and bedroom. But still so dubious was he as to the reality of this conquest that, as she came leisurely up the steps, looking at him and smiling, he scanned her face anxiously for any suggestion of change. But as she crossed the threshold and allowed him to seize her and hold her close, he felt reassured.

"So you came!" he said, gaily and warmly, at the same time pausing to survey her.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" she asked, laughing at the expression on his face.

"Well, how was I to be sure?" he queried. "You never did anything I wanted you to do before."

"True, but you know why. This is different." She yielded her lips to his.

"If you only knew the effect your coming has had on me," he went on, excitedly. "I haven't slept a wink all night. And I feel as though I'd never need to sleep again... Pearly teeth... Slate blue eyes... rosy mouth..." he went on admiringly. And he kissed her eyes. "And this sunray hair." He fingered it admiringly.

"The baby has a new toy!"