



descent into hell

Charles Williams

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The action takes place in Battle Hill, outside London, amidst the townspeople's staging of a new play by Peter Stanhope. The hill seems to reside at the crux of time, as characters from the past appear, and perhaps at a doorway to the beyond, as characters are alternately summoned heavenwards or descend into hell.

Pauline Anstruther, the heroine of the novel, lives in fear of meeting her own doppelgänger, which has appeared to her throughout her life. But Stanhope, in an action central to the author's own theology, takes the burden of her fears upon himself—Williams called this The Doctrine of Substituted Love—and enables Pauline, at long last, to face her true self. Williams drew this idea from the biblical verse, "Ye shall bear one another's burdens"

And so Stanhope does take the weight, with no surreptitious motive, in the most affecting scene in the novel. And Pauline, liberated, is able to accept truth.

On the other hand, Lawrence Wentworth, a local historian, finding his desire for Adela Hunt to be unrequited, falls in love instead with a spirit form of Adela, which seems to represent a kind of extreme self-love on his part. As he isolates himself more and more with this insubstantial figure, and dreams of descending a silver rope into a dark pit, Wentworth begins the descent into Hell.

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