

THE FRUIT OF THE TREE

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BOOK III—(Continued)

XIX



It was late in October when Amherst returned to Lynbrook.

He had begun to learn, in the interval, the lesson most difficult to his direct and trenchant nature: that compromise is the law of married life. On the afternoon of his talk with his wife he had sought her out, determined to make a final effort to clear up the situation between them; but he learned that, immediately after luncheon, she had gone off in the motor with Mrs. Carbury and two men of the party, leaving word that they would probably not be back till evening. It cost Amherst a struggle, when he had humbled himself to receive this information from the butler, not to pack his portmanteau and take the first train for Hanaford; but he was still under the influence of Justine Brent's words, and also of his own feeling that, at this juncture of their lives, a break between himself and Bessy would be final.

He stayed on accordingly, enduring as best he might the mute observation of the household, and the gentle irony of Mr. Langhope's attentions; and before he left Lynbrook, two days later, a kind of provisional understanding had been reached.

His wife proved more firm than he had foreseen in her resolve to regain control of her income, and the talk between them ended in reciprocal concessions, Bessy consenting to let the town house for the winter and remain at Lynbrook, while Amherst agreed to restrict his improvements at Westmore to such alterations as had already been begun, and to reduce the expenditure on these as much as possible. It was virtually the defeat of his policy, and he had to suffer the decent triumph of the Gaineses, as well as the bitterer pang of his foiled aspirations. In spite of the opposition of the directors,

he had taken advantage of Truscomb's resignation to put Duplain at the head of the mills; but the new manager's outspoken disgust at the company's change of plan made it clear that he would not remain long at Westmore, and it was one of the miseries of Amherst's situation that he could not give the reasons for his defection, but must bear to figure in Duplain's terse vocabulary as a "quitter." The difficulty of finding a new manager expert enough to satisfy the directors, yet in sympathy with his own social theories, made Amherst fear that Duplain's withdrawal would open the way for Truscomb's triumphant reinstatement, an outcome on which he suspected that Halford Gaines had always counted; and this possibility loomed before him as the final defeat of his hopes.

Meanwhile the issues confronting him had at least the merit of keeping him busy. The task of modifying and retrenching his plans contrasted drearily with the hopeful activity of the past months, but he had an iron capacity for hard work under adverse conditions, and the fact of being too busy for thought helped him to wear through the days. This pressure of work relieved him, at first, from too close consideration of his relation to Bessy. He had yielded up his dearest hopes at her wish, and for the moment his renunciation had set a chasm between them; but gradually he saw that, as he was patching together the ruins of his Westmore plans, so he must presently apply himself to the reconstruction of his married life.

Before leaving Lynbrook he had had a last word with Miss Brent; not a word of confidence—for the same sense of reserve kept both from any explicit renewal of their moment's intimacy—but one of those exchanges of commonplace phrase that circumstances may be left to charge with special meaning. Justine had merely asked if he were really leaving and, on his assenting,

had exclaimed quickly: "But you will come back soon?"

"I shall certainly come back," he answered; and after a pause he added: "I shall find you here? You are going to remain at Lynbrook?"

On her part also there was a shade of hesitation; then she said with a smile: "Yes, I shall stay."

His look brightened. "And you will write me if anything—if Bessy should not be well?"

"I will write you," she promised; and a few weeks after his return to Hanaford he had, in fact, received a short note from her. Its ostensible purpose was to reassure him as to Bessy's health, which had certainly grown stronger since Dr. Wyant had persuaded her, after the dispersal of the last house-party, to accord herself a short period of quiet; but (the writer added) now that Mr. Langhope and Mrs. Ansell had also left, the quiet was perhaps too complete, and Bessy's nerves were beginning to suffer from the reaction.

Amherst had no difficulty in interpreting this brief communication. "I have succeeded in dispersing the people who are always keeping you and your wife apart; now is your chance: come and take it." That was what Miss Brent's letter meant; and his answer was a telegram to Bessy, announcing his return to Long Island.

The step was not an easy one to take; but decisive action, however hard, was always easier to Amherst than the ensuing interval of readjustment. To come to Lynbrook had required a strong effort of will; but the effort of remaining there called into play less disciplined faculties.

Amherst had always been used to doing things; now he had to resign himself to enduring a state of things. The material facilities of the life about him, the way in which the machinery of the great empty house ran on like some complex apparatus working in the void, increased the exasperation of his nerves. Dr. Wyant's suggestion—which Amherst suspected Justine of having prompted—that Mrs. Amherst should cancel her autumn engagements, and give herself up to a quiet outdoor life with her husband, seemed to present the very opportunity these two distracted spirits needed to find and repossess each other. But, though Amherst was grateful to Bessy for having

dismissed her visitors—partly to please him, as he guessed—yet he found the routine of the establishment more oppressive than when the house was full. If he could have been alone with her in a quiet corner—the despised cottage at Westmore, even!—he fancied they might still have been brought together by restricted space and the familiar exigencies of life. All the primitive necessities which bind together, through their recurring daily wants, natures fated to find no higher point of union, had been carefully eliminated from the life at Lynbrook, where material needs were not only provided for but anticipated by a hidden mechanism that filled the house with the perpetual sense of invisible attendance. Though Amherst knew that he and Bessy could never meet in the region of great issues, he thought he might have regained the way to her heart, and found relief from his own inaction, in the small ministrations of daily life; but the next moment he smiled to picture Bessy in surroundings where the clocks were not wound of themselves and the doors did not fly open at her approach. Those thick-crowding cares and drudgeries which serve as merciful screens between so many discordant natures would have been as intolerable to her as was to Amherst the great glare of leisure in which he and she were now confronted.

He saw that Bessy was in the state of propitiatory eagerness which always followed on her gaining a point in their long duel; and he could guess that she was tremulously anxious not only to make up to him, by all the arts she knew, for the sacrifice she had exacted, but also to conceal from every one the fact that, as Mr. Langhope bluntly put it, he had been "brought to terms." Amherst was touched by her efforts, and half-ashamed of his own inability to respond to them. But his mind, released from its normal preoccupations, had become a dangerous instrument of analysis and disintegration, and conditions which, a few months before, he might have accepted with the wholesome tolerance of the busy man, now pressed on him unendurably. He saw that he and his wife were really face to face for the first time since their marriage. Hitherto something had always intervened between them—first the spell of her grace and beauty, and the brief joy of her participation in his work; then the sorrow of their

child's death, and after that the temporary exhilaration of carrying out his ideas at Westmore—but now that the last of these veils had been torn away they confronted each other as strangers.

The habit of keeping factory hours drove Amherst forth long before his wife's day began, and in the course of one of these early tramps he met Miss Brent and Cicely setting out for a distant swamp where rumour had it that a rare native orchid might be found. Justine's sylvan tastes had developed in the little girl a passion for these pillaging expeditions, and Cicely, who had discovered that her step-father knew almost as much about birds and squirrels as Miss Brent did about flowers, was not to be appeased till Amherst had scrambled into the pony-cart, wedging his long legs between a fern-box and a lunch-basket, and balancing a Scotch terrier's telescopic body across his knees.

The season was so mild that only one or two light windless frosts had singed the foliage of oaks and beeches, and gilded the roadsides with a smooth carpeting of maple leaves. The morning haze rose like smoke from burnt-out pyres of sumach and sugar-maple; a silver bloom lay on the furrows of the ploughed fields; and now and then, as they drove on, the wooded road showed at its end a tarnished disk of light, where sea and sky were merged.

At length they left the road for a winding track through scrub-oaks and glossy thickets of mountain-laurel; the track died out at the foot of a wooded knoll, and clambering along its base they came upon the swamp. There it lay in charmed solitude, shut in by a tawny growth of larch and swamp-maple, its edges burnt out to smouldering shades of russet, ember-red and ash-en-grey, while the quaking centre still preserved a jewel-like green, where hidden lanes of moisture wound between islets tufted with swamp-cranberry and with the charred browns of fern and wild-rose and bay. Sodden earth and decaying branches gave forth a strange sweet odour, as of the aromatic essences embalming a dead summer; and the air charged with this scent was so still that the snapping of witch-hazel pods, the drop of a nut, the leap of a startled frog, pricked the silence with separate points of sound.

The pony made fast, the terrier released, and fern-box and lunch-basket slung over Amherst's shoulder, the three explorers set forth on their journey. Amherst, as became his sex, led the way; but after a few absent-minded plunges into the sedgy depths between the islets, he was ordered to relinquish his command and fall to the rear, where he might perform the humbler service of occasionally lifting Cicely over unspannable gulfs of moisture.

Justine, leading the way, guided them across the treacherous surface as fearlessly as a king-fisher, lighting instinctively on every grass-tussock and submerged tree-stump of the uncertain path. Now and then she paused, her feet drawn close on their narrow perch, and her slender body swaying over as she reached down for some rare growth detected among the withered reeds and grasses; then she would right herself again by a backward movement as natural as the upward spring of a branch—so free and flexible in all her motions that she seemed akin to the swaying reeds and curving brambles which caught at her as she passed.

At length the explorers reached the mossy corner where the orchids lurked, and Cicely, securely balanced on a fallen tree-trunk, was allowed to dig the coveted roots. When they had been packed away, it was felt that this culminating moment must be celebrated with immediate libations of jam and milk; and having climbed to a dry slope among the fragrant pepper-bushes, the party fell on the contents of the lunch-basket. It was just the hour when Bessy's maid was carrying her breakfast-tray, with its delicate service of old silver and porcelain, into the darkened bed-room at Lynbrook; but early rising and hard scrambling had whetted the appetites of the naturalists, and the plain nursery fare which Cicely spread before them seemed a sumptuous reward for their toil.

"I do like this kind of picnic much better than the ones where mother takes all the footmen, and the mayonnaise has to be scraped off things before I can eat them," Cicely declared, lifting her foaming mouth from a beaker of milk.

Amherst, lighting his pipe, stretched himself contentedly among the pepper-bushes, steeped in that unreflecting peace which is shed into some hearts by communion with

trees and sky. He too was glad to get away from the footmen and the mayonnaise, and he imagined that his stepdaughter's exclamation summed up all the reasons for his happiness. The boyish wood-craft which he had cultivated in order to encourage the same taste in his factory lads came to life in this sudden return to nature, and he redeemed his clumsiness in crossing the swamp by spying a marsh-wren's nest that had escaped Justine, and detecting in a swiftly-flitting olive-brown bird a belated tanager in autumn incognito.

Cicely sat rapt while he pictured the bird's winter pilgrimage, with glimpses of the seas and islands that fled beneath him till his long southern flight ended in the dim glades of the equatorial forests.

"Oh, what a good life—how I should like to be a wander-bird, and look down people's chimneys twice a year!" Justine laughed, tilting her head back to catch a last glimpse of the tanager.

The sun beamed full on their ledge from a sky of misty blue, and she had thrown aside her hat, uncovering her thick waves of hair, blue-black in the hollows, with warm rusty edges where they took the light. Cicely dragged down a plummy spray of traveller's joy and wound it above her friend's forehead; and thus wreathed, with her bright pallour relieved against the dusky autumn tints, Justine looked like a wood-spirit who had absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year.

She leaned back laughing against a tree-trunk, pelting Cicely with witch-hazel pods, making the terrier waltz for scraps of gingerbread, and breaking off now and then to imitate, with her clear full notes, the call of some hidden marsh-bird, or the scolding chatter of a squirrel in the scrub-oaks.

"Is that what you'd like most about the journey—looking down the chimneys?" Amherst asked with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know—I should love it all! Think of the joy of skimming over half the earth—seeing it born again out of darkness every morning! Sometimes, when I've been up all night with a patient, and have seen the world *come back to me* like that, I've been almost mad with its beauty; and then the thought that I've never seen more than a little corner of it makes me feel as if I were chained. But I think if I had wings I should choose to be a house-swallow; and then,

after I'd had my fill of wonders, I should come back to my familiar corner, and my house full of busy humdrum people, and fly low to warn them of rain, and wheel up high to show them it was good haying weather, and know what was going on in every room in the house, and every house in the village; and all the while I should be hugging my wonderful big secret—the secret of snow-plains and burning deserts, and coral islands and buried cities—and should put it all into my chatter under the eaves, that the people in the house were always too busy to stop and listen to—and when winter came I'm sure I should hate to leave them, even to go back to my great Brazilian forests full of orchids and monkeys!"

"But, Justine, in winter you could take care of the monkeys," the practical Cicely suggested.

"Yes—and that would remind me of home!" Justine cried, swinging about to pinch the little girl's chin.

She was in one of the buoyant moods when the spirit of life caught her in its grip, and shook and tossed her on its mighty waves as a sea-bird is tossed through the spray of flying rollers. At such moments all the light and music of the world seemed distilled into her veins, and forced up in bubbles of laughter to her lips and eyes. Amherst had never seen her thus, and he watched her with the sense of relaxation which the contact of limpid gaiety brings to a mind obscured by failure and self-distrust. The world was not so dark a place after all, if such springs of merriment could well up in a heart as sensitive as hers to the burden and toil of existence.

"Isn't it strange," she went on with a sudden drop to gravity, "that the bird whose wings carry him farthest and show him the most wonderful things, is the one who always comes back to the eaves, and is happiest in the thick of everyday life?"

Her eyes met Amherst's. "It seems to me," he said, "that you're like that yourself—loving long flights, yet happiest in the thick of life."

She raised her dark brows laughingly. "So I imagine—but then you see I've never had the long flight!"

Amherst smiled. "Ah, there it is—one never knows—one never says, *This is the moment!* because, however good it is, it always seems the door to a better one beyond.

Faust never said it till the end, when he'd nothing left of all he began by thinking worth while; and then, with what a difference it was said!"

She pondered. "Yes—but it *was* the best, after all—the moment in which he had nothing left. . . ."

"Oh," Cicely broke in suddenly, "do look at the squirrel up there! See, father—he's off! Let's follow him!"

As she crouched there, with head thrown back, and sparkling lips and eyes, her fair hair—of her mother's very hue—making a shining haze about her face, Amherst recalled with a pang the winter evening at Hopewood, when he and Bessy had tracked the grey squirrel under the snowy beeches. Scarcely three years ago—and how bitter memory had turned! A chilly cloud spread over his spirit, reducing everything once more to the leaden hue of reality. . . .

"It's too late for any more adventures—we must be going home," he said.

XX

AMHERST'S morning excursions with his step-daughter and Miss Brent renewed themselves more than once. He welcomed any pretext for escaping from the unprofitable round of his thoughts, and these woodland explorations, with their breathless rivalry of search for some rare plant or elusive bird, and the contact with the child's happy wonder, and with the morning brightness of Justine's mood, gave him his only moments of self-forgetfulness.

But the first time that Cicely's chatter carried home an echo of their adventures, Amherst saw a cloud on his wife's face. Her passing resentment of Justine's influence over the child had long since subsided, and in the temporary absence of the governess she was glad to have Cicely amused; but she was never quite satisfied that those about her should have pursuits and diversions in which she did not share. Her jealousy did not concentrate itself upon her husband and Miss Brent: Amherst had never shown any inclination for the society of other women, and if the possibility had been suggested to her, she would probably have said that Justine was not "in his style"—so unconscious is a pretty woman apt to be of the versatility of masculine tastes. But Amherst saw that she felt herself excluded from amuse-

ments in which she had no desire to join, and of which she consequently failed to see the purpose; and he gave up accompanying his step-daughter.

Bessy, as if in acknowledgment of his renunciation, rose earlier in order to prolong their rides together. Dr. Wyant had counselled her against the fatigue of following the hounds, and she instinctively turned their horses away from the course the hunt was likely to take; but now and then the cry of the pack, or the flash of red on a distant slope, sent the blood to her face and made her press her mare to a gallop. When they escaped such encounters she showed no great zest in the exercise, and their rides resolved themselves into a spiritless middle-aged jog along the autumn lanes. In the early days of their marriage the joy of a canter side by side had merged them in a community of sensation beyond need of speech; but now that the physical spell had passed they felt the burden of a silence that neither knew how to break.

Once only, a moment's friction galvanized these lifeless rides. It was one morning when Bessy's wild mare Impulse, under-exercised and over-fed, suddenly broke from her control, and would have unseated her but for Amherst's grasp on the bridle.

"The horse is not fit for you to ride," he exclaimed, as the hot creature, with shudders of defiance rippling her flanks, lapsed into sullen subjection to his hand.

"It's only because I don't ride her enough," Bessy panted. "That new groom is ruining her mouth."

"You must not ride her alone, then."

"I shall not let that man ride her."

"I say you must not ride her alone."

"It's ridiculous to have a groom at one's heels!"

"Nevertheless you must, if you ride Impulse."

Their eyes met, and she quivered and yielded like the horse. "Oh, if you say so——" She always hugged his brief flashes of authority.

"I do say so. You promise me?"

"If you like——"

Amherst had made an attempt to occupy himself with the condition of Lynbrook, one of those slovenly villages, without individual character or the tradition of self-respect, which spring up in America on the skirts of

the rich summer colonies. But Bessy had never given Lynbrook a thought, and he realized the futility of hoping to interest her in its mongrel population of day-labourers and publicans so soon after his glaring failure at Westmore. The sight of the village irritated him whenever he passed through the Lynbrook gates, but having perforce accepted the situation of prince consort, without voice in the government, he tried to put himself out of relation with all the questions which had hitherto engrossed him, and to see life simply as a spectator. He could even conceive that, under certain conditions, there might be compensations in the passive attitude; but unfortunately these conditions were not such as the life at Lynbrook presented.

The temporary cessation of Bessy's weekend parties had naturally not closed her doors to occasional visitors, and glimpses of the autumnal animation of Long Island passed now and then across the Amhersts' horizon. Blanche Carbury had installed herself at Mapleside, a fashionable autumn colony half-way between Lynbrook and Clifton, and even Amherst, unused as he was to noting the seemingly inconsecutive movements of idle people, could not but remark that her visits to his wife almost invariably coincided with Ned Bowfort's cantering over unannounced from the Hunt Club where he had taken up his autumn quarters.

There was something very likeable about Bowfort, to whom Amherst was attracted by the fact that he was one of the few men of Bessy's circle who knew what was going on in the outer world. Throughout an existence which one divined to have been both dependent and desultory, he had preserved a sense of wider relations and acquired a smattering of information to which he applied his only independent faculty, that of clear thought. He could talk intelligently and not too inaccurately of the larger questions which Lynbrook ignored, and a gay indifference to the importance of money seemed the crowning grace of his nature, till Amherst suddenly learned that this attitude of detachment was generally ascribed to the liberality of Mrs. Fenton Carbury. "Everybody knows she married Fenton to provide for Ned," some one let fall in the course of one of the smoking-room dissertations upon which the host of Lynbrook had such diffi-

culty in fixing his attention; and the speaker's matter-of-course tone, and the careless acquiescence of his hearers, were more offensive to Amherst than the fact itself. In the first flush of his disgust he classed the story as one of the lies bred in the malarious air of after-dinner gossip; but gradually he saw that, whether true or not, it had sufficient circulation to cast a shade of ambiguity on the persons concerned. Bessy alone seemed deaf to the rumours about her friend. There was something captivating to her in Mrs. Carbury's slang and noise, in her defiance of decorum and contempt of criticism. "I like Blanche because she doesn't pretend," was Bessy's vague justification of the lady; but in reality she was under the mysterious spell which such natures cast over the less venturesome imaginations of their own sex.

Amherst at first tried to deaden himself to the situation, as part of the larger coil of miseries in which he found himself; but all his traditions were against such tolerance, and they were roused to revolt by the receipt of a newspaper clipping, sent by an anonymous hand and enlarging allusively on the fact that the clandestine meetings of a fashionable couple were being facilitated by the connivance of a Long Island *châtelaine*. Amherst, hot from the perusal of this paragraph, sprang into the first train, and laid the clipping before his father-in-law, who chanced to be passing through town on his way from the Hudson to the Hot Springs.

Mr. Langhope, ensconced in the cushioned privacy of the reading-room at the Amsterdam Club, where he had invited his son-in-law to meet him, perused the article with the cool eye of the collector to whom a new curiosity is offered.

"I suppose," he mused, "that in the time of the Pharaohs the Morning Papyrus used to serve up this kind of thing—" and then, as the nervous tension of his hearer expressed itself in a sudden movement, he added, handing back the clipping with a smile: "What do you propose to do? Kill the editor, and forbid Blanche and Bowfort the house?"

"I mean to do something," Amherst began, suddenly chilled by the realization that his wrath had not yet shaped itself into a definite plan of action.

"Well, it must be that or nothing," said Mr. Langhope, drawing his stick medita-

tively across his knee. "And, of course, if it's *that*, you'll land Bessy in a devil of a mess."

Without giving his son-in-law time to protest, he touched rapidly but vividly on the inutility and embarrassment of libel suits, and on the devices whereby the legal means of vindication from such attacks may be turned against those who have recourse to them; and Amherst listened to him with a sickened sense of the incompatibility between abstract standards of honour and their practical application.

"What should you do, then?" he murmured, as Mr. Langhope ended with his light shrug and a "See Tredegar, if you don't believe me"—; and his father-in-law replied, with a gesture of evasion: "Why, leave the responsibility where it belongs!"

"Where it belongs?"

"To Fenton Carbury, of course. Luckily it's nobody's business but his, and if he doesn't mind what is said about his wife I don't see how you can take up the cudgels for her without casting another shade on her somewhat chequered reputation."

Amherst stared. "His wife? What do I care what's said of her? I'm thinking of mine!"

"Well, if Carbury has no objection to his wife's meeting Bowfort, I don't see how you can object to her meeting him at your house. In such matters, as you know, it has mercifully been decided that the husband's attitude shall determine other people's; otherwise we should be deprived of the legitimate pleasure of slandering our neighbours." Mr. Langhope was always careful to temper his explanations with an "as you know": he would have thought it ill-bred to omit this parenthesis in elucidating the social code to his son-in-law.

"Then you mean that I can do nothing?" Amherst exclaimed, frowning.

Mr. Langhope smiled. "What applies to Carbury applies to you—by doing nothing you establish the fact that there's nothing to do; just as you create the difficulty by recognizing it." And he added, as Amherst sat silent: "Take Bessy away, and they'll have to see each other elsewhere."

Amherst returned to Lynbrook with the echoes of this casuistry in his brain. It seemed to him but a part of the ingenious system of evasion whereby a society bent on the undisturbed pursuit of amusement had

contrived to protect itself from the intrusion of the disagreeable: a policy summed up in Mr. Langhope's concluding advice that Amherst should take his wife away. Yes—that was wealth's contemptuous answer to every challenge of responsibility: duty, sorrow and disgrace were equally to be evaded by a change of residence, and nothing in life need be faced and fought out while one could pay for a passage to Europe!

In a calmer mood Amherst's sense of humour would have preserved him from such a view of his father-in-law's advice; but just then it fell like a spark on his smouldering prejudices. He was clear-sighted enough to recognize the obstacles to legal retaliation; but this only made him the more resolved to assert his will in his own house. He no longer paused to consider the possible effect of such a course on his already strained relations with his wife: the man's will rose in him and spoke.

The scene between Bessy and himself was short and sharp; and it ended in a way that left him more than ever perplexed at the ways of her sex. Impatient of preamble, he had opened the attack with his ultimatum: the suspected couple were to be denied the house. Bessy flamed into immediate defence of her friend; but to Amherst's surprise she no longer sounded the note of her own rights. Both were animated by emotions deeper-seated and more instinctive than had ever before confronted them; yet while Amherst's resistance was gathering strength from the conflict, his wife's suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed in tears and submission. She would do as he wished, of course—give up seeing Blanche, dismiss Bowfort, wash her hands, in short, of the imprudent pair—in such matters a woman needed a man's guidance, a wife must of necessity see with her husband's eyes; and she looked up into his through a mist of penitence and admiration. . . .

XXI

IN the first reaction from her brief delusion about Stephen Wyant, Justine accepted with a good grace the necessity of staying on at Lynbrook. Though she was now well enough to return to her regular work, her talk with Amherst had made her feel that, for the present, she could be of more use by remaining with Bessy; and she was not sorry

to have a farther period of delay and reflection before taking the next step in her life. These at least were the reasons she gave herself for deciding not to leave; and if any less ostensible lurked beneath, they were not as yet visible even to her searching self-scrutiny.

At first she was embarrassed by the obligation of meeting Dr. Wyant, on whom her definite refusal had produced an effect for which she could not hold herself free from blame. She had not kept her promise of seeing him on the day after their encounter at the post-office, but had written, instead, in terms which obviously made such a meeting unnecessary. But all her efforts to soften the abruptness of her answer could not conceal, from either herself or her suitor, that it was not the one she had led him to expect; and she foresaw that if she remained at Lynbrook she could not escape a scene of recrimination.

When the scene took place, Wyant's part in it went far toward justifying her decision; yet his vehement reproaches contained a sufficient core of truth to humble her pride. It was lucky for her somewhat exaggerated sense of fairness that he overshot the mark by charging her with a coquetry of which she knew herself innocent, and laying upon her the responsibility for any follies to which her rejection might drive him. Such threats, as a rule, no longer move the feminine imagination; yet Justine's pity for all forms of weakness made her recognize, in the very heat of her contempt for Wyant, that his reproaches were not the mere cry of wounded vanity but the appeal of a nature conscious of its lack of recuperative power. It seemed to her as though she had done him an irreparable harm, and the feeling might have betrayed her into too great a show of compassion had she not been restrained by a salutary fear of the result.

The state of Bessy's nerves necessitated frequent visits from her physician, but Justine, on these occasions, could usually shelter herself behind the professional reserve which kept even Wyant from any open expression of feeling. One day, however, they chanced to find themselves alone before Bessy's return from her ride. The servant had ushered Wyant into the library where Justine was writing, and when she had replied to his enquiries about his patient they found themselves face to face with an

awkward period of waiting. Justine was too proud to cut it short by leaving the room; but Wyant answered her commonplaces at random, stirring uneasily to and fro between window and fireside, and at length halting behind the table at which she sat.

"May I ask how much longer you mean to stay here?" he said in a low voice, his eyes darkening under the sullen jut of the brows.

As she glanced up in surprise she noticed for the first time an odd contraction of his pupils, and the discovery, familiar enough in her professional experience, made her disregard the abruptness of his question and softened the tone in which she answered. "I hardly know—I suppose as long as I am needed."

Wyant laughed. "Needed by whom? By John Amherst?"

A moment passed before Justine took in the full significance of the retort; then the blood rushed to her face. "Yes—I believe both Mr. and Mrs. Amherst need me," she answered, keeping her eyes on his; and Wyant laughed again.

"You didn't think so till Amherst came back from Hanaford. His return seems to have changed your plans in several respects."

She looked away from him, for even now the expression of his eyes moved her to pity and self-reproach. "Dr. Wyant, you are not well; why do you wait to see Mrs. Amherst?" she said.

He stared at her and then his glance fell. "I'm much obliged—I'm as well as usual," he muttered, pushing the hair from his forehead with a shaking hand; and at that moment the sound of Bessy's voice gave Justine a pretext for escape.

In her own room she sank for a moment under a rush of self-disgust and misery; but it soon receded before the saner forces of her nature, leaving only a residue of pity for the poor creature whose secret she had surprised. She had never before suspected Wyant of taking a drug, nor did she now suppose that he did so habitually; but to see him even momentarily under such an influence explained her instinctive sense of his weakness. She felt now that what would have been an insult on other lips was only a cry of distress from his; and once more she blamed herself and forgave him.

But if she had been inclined to any morbidness of self-reproach she would have

been saved from it by other cares. For the moment she was more concerned with Bessy's fate than with her own—her poor friend seemed to have so much more at stake, and so much less strength to bring to the defence of her happiness. Justine was always saved from any excess of self-compassion by the sense, within herself, of abounding forces of growth and self-renewal, as though from every lopped aspiration a fresh shoot of energy must spring; but she felt that Bessy had no such sources of renovation, and that every disappointment left an arid spot in her soul.

Even without the aid of her friend's confidences, Justine would have had no difficulty in following the successive stages of the Amhersts' inner history. She knew that Amherst had virtually resigned his rule at Westmore, and that his wife, in return for the sacrifice, was trying to conform to the way of life she thought he preferred; and the futility of both attempts was more visible to Justine than to either of the two concerned. She saw that the failure of the Amhersts' marriage lay not in any accident of outward circumstances but in the lack of all natural points of contact. As she put it to herself, they met neither underfoot nor overhead: practical necessities united them no more than imaginative joys.

There were moments when Justine thought that Amherst was hard to Bessy, as she suspected that he had once been hard to his mother—as the leader of men must perhaps always be hard to the hampering sex. Yet she did justice to his efforts to accept the irretrievable, and to develop in his wife some capacity for sharing in his minor interests, since she had none of her own with which to fill their days.

Amherst had always been a reader; not, like Justine herself, a flame-like devourer of the page, but a slow and silent absorber of its essence; and in the early days of his marriage he had fancied it would be easy to make Bessy share this taste. Though his mother was not a bookish woman, he had breathed at her side an air rich in allusion and filled with the bright presences of romance; and he had grown to regard this commerce of the imagination as one of the normal conditions of life. The discovery that there were no books at Lynbrook save a few morocco "sets" imprisoned behind the brass trellises of the library had been

one of the many surprises of his new state. But in his first months with Bessy there was no room for books, and if he thought of the matter it was only in a glancing vision of future evenings, when he and she, in the calm afterglow of happiness, should lean together over some cherished page. Her lack of response to any reference outside the small circle of daily facts had long since dispelled that vision; but now that his own mind felt the need of inner sustenance he began to ask himself whether he might not have done more to waken her imagination. During the long evenings over the library fire he tried to lead the talk to books, with a parenthesis, now and again, from the page beneath his eye; and Bessy met the experiment with conciliatory eagerness. She showed, in especial, a hopeful but misleading preference for poetry, leaning back with dreaming lids and lovely parted lips while he rolled out the immortal measures; but her outward signs of attention never ripened into any expression of opinion, or any after-allusion to what she had heard, and before long he discovered that Justine Brent was his only listener. It was to her that the words he read began to be unconsciously addressed; her comments directed him in his choice of subjects, and the ensuing discussions restored him to some semblance of mental activity.

Bessy, true to her new rôle of acquiescence, shone silently on this interplay of ideas; Amherst even detected in her a vague admiration for his power of conversing on subjects which she regarded as abstruse; and this childlike approval, combined with her submission to his will, deluded him with a sense of recovered power over her. He could not but note that the new phase in their relations had coincided with his first decided assertion of mastery; and he rashly concluded that, with the removal of the influences tending to separate them, his wife might gradually be won back to her earlier sympathy with his views.

To accept this theory was to apply it; for nothing could long divert Amherst from his main purpose, and all the thwarted strength of his will was only gathering to itself fresh stores of energy. He had never been a skilful lover, for no woman had as yet stirred in him those sympathies which call the finer perceptions into play; and there was no instinct to tell him that Bessy's sudden con-

formity to his wishes was as unreasoning as her surrender to his first kiss. He fancied that he and she were at length reaching some semblance of that moral harmony which should grow out of the physical accord, and that, poor and incomplete as the understanding was, it must lift and strengthen their relation.

He waited till the early winter had brought solitude to Lynbrook, dispersing the hunting colony to various points of the compass, and sending Mr. Langhope to Egypt and the Riviera, while Mrs. Ansell, as usual, took up her annual tour of a social circuit whose extreme points were marked by Boston and Baltimore—and then he made his final appeal to his wife.

His pretext for speaking was a letter from Duplain, definitely announcing his resolve not to remain at Westmore. A year earlier Amherst, deeply moved by the letter, would have given it to his wife in the hope of its producing the same effect upon her. He knew better now—he had learned her instinct for detecting “business” under every serious call on her attention. His only hope, as always, was to reach her through the personal appeal; and he put before her the fact of Duplain’s withdrawal as the open victory of his antagonists. But he saw at once that even this expedient could not infuse new life into the question.

“If I go back he will stay—I can hold him, can gain time till things take a turn,” he urged.

“Another? I thought they were definitely settled,” she objected languidly.

“No—they’re not; they can’t be, on such a basis,” Amherst broke out with sudden emphasis. He walked across the room, and came back to her side with a determined face. “It’s a delusion, a deception,” he exclaimed, “to think that I can stand by any longer and see things going to ruin at Westmore! If I’ve made you think so, I’ve unconsciously deceived us both. As long as you’re my wife we’ve only one honour between us, and that honour is mine to take care of.”

“Honour? What an odd expression!” she said with a forced laugh, and a little tinge of pink in her cheek. “You speak as if I had—had made myself talked about—when you know I’ve never even looked at another man!”

“Another man?” Amherst looked at her

in wonder. “Good God! Can’t you conceive of any vow to be kept between husband and wife but the primitive one of bodily fidelity? Heaven knows I’ve never looked at another woman—but, by my reading of our compact, I shouldn’t be keeping faith with you if I didn’t help you to keep faith with better things. And you owe me the same help—the same chance to rise through you, and not sink by you—else we’ve betrayed each other more deeply than any adultery could make us!”

She had drawn back, turning pale again, and shrinking a little at the sound of words which, except when heard in church, she vaguely associated with oaths, slammed doors, and other evidences of ill-breeding; but Amherst had been swept too far on the flood of his indignation to be checked by such minor signs of disapproval.

“You’ll say that what I’m asking you is to give me back the free use of your money. Well! Why not? Is it so much for a wife to give? I know you all think that a man who marries a rich woman forfeits his self-respect if he spends a penny without her approval. But that’s because money is so sacred to you all! It seems to me the least important thing that a woman entrusts to her husband. What of her dreams and her hopes, her belief in justice and goodness and decency? If he takes those and destroys them, he’d better have had a millstone about his neck. But nobody has a word to say till he touches her dividends—then he’s a calculating brute who has married her because he wanted her money!”

He had come close again, facing her with outstretched hands, half-commanding, half in appeal. “Don’t you see that I can’t go on in this way—that I’ve *no right* to let you keep me from Westmore?”

Bessy was looking at him coldly, under the half-dropped lids of indifference. “I hardly know what you mean—you use such peculiar words; but I don’t see why you should expect me to give up all the ideas I was brought up in. Our standards *are* different—but why should yours always be right?”

“You believed they were right when you married me—have they changed since then?”

“No; but——” Her face seemed to harden and contract into a small expressionless mask, in which he could no longer read anything but blank opposition to his will.

"You trusted my judgment not long ago," he went on, "when I asked you to give up seeing Mrs. Carbury——"

She flushed, but with anger, not compunction. "It seems to me that should be a reason for your not asking me to make other sacrifices! When I gave up Blanche I thought you would see that I wanted to please you—and that you would do something for me in return. . . ."

Amherst interrupted her with a laugh. "Thank you for telling me your real reasons. I was fool enough to think you acted from conviction—not that you were simply striking a bargain——"

He broke off, and they looked at each other with a kind of fear, each hearing between them the echo of irreparable words. Amherst's only clear feeling was that he must not speak again till he had beaten down the horrible sensation in his breast—the rage of hate which had caught him in its grip, and which made him almost afraid, while it lasted, to let his eyes rest on the fair weak creature confronting him. Bessy, too, was in the clutch of a mute anger which slowly poured its benumbing current around her heart. Strong waves of passion did not quicken her vitality: she grew inert and cold under their shock. Only one little pulse of self-pity continued to beat in her, trembling out at last on the cry: "Ah, I know it's not because you care so much for Westmore—it's only because you want to get away from me!"

Amherst stared at her as if her words had flashed a light into the darkest windings of his misery. "Yes—I want to get away. . . ." he said; and he turned and walked out of the room.

He went down to the smoking-room, and ringing for a servant, ordered his horse to be saddled. The footman who answered his summons brought the afternoon's mail, and Amherst, throwing himself down on the sofa, began to tear open his letters mechanically while he waited.

He ran through the first few without knowing what he read; but suddenly his attention was arrested by the hand-writing of a man whom he had known well in college, and who had lately come into possession of a large cotton-mill in the south. He wrote now to ask if Amherst could recommend a good superintendent—"not one of your old routine men, but a young fellow with the

new ideas. Things have been in pretty bad shape down here," the writer added, "and now that I'm in possession I want to see what can be done to civilize the place"; and he went on to urge that Amherst should come down himself to inspect the mills, and propose such improvements as his experience suggested. "We've all heard of the great things you're doing at Westmore," the letter ended; and Amherst cast it from him with a groan. . . .

It was Duplain's chance, of course . . . that was his first thought. He caught up the letter and read it over. He knew the man who wrote—no sentimentalist seeking emotional variety from vague philanthropic experiments, but a serious student of social conditions, now unexpectedly provided with the opportunity to apply his ideas. Yes, it was Duplain's chance—if indeed it might not be his own! . . . Amherst sat upright, dazzled by the thought. Why Duplain—why not himself? Bessy had spoken the illuminating word—what he wanted was to get away—to get away at any cost! Escape had become his dominating thought: escape from the bondage of Lynbrook, from the bitter memory of his failure at Westmore; and here was the chance to escape back into life—into independence, activity and usefulness! Every atrophied faculty in him suddenly started from its torpor, and his brain throbbed with the pain of the awakening. . . . The servant came to tell him that his horse waited, and he sprang up, took his riding-whip from the rack, stared a moment, absently, after the man's retreating back, and then dropped down again upon the sofa. . . .

What was there to keep him from accepting? His wife's affection was dead—if her sentimental fancy for him had ever deserved the name! And his momentary mastery over her was gone too—he smiled to remember that, hardly two hours earlier, he had been fatuous enough to think he could still regain it! Now he said to himself that she would sooner desert a friend to please him than sacrifice a fraction of her income; and the discovery cast a stain of sordidness on their whole relation. He could still imagine struggling to win her back from another man, or even to save her from some folly into which mistaken judgment or perverted enthusiasm might have hurried her; but to go on battling against the dull unimaginative

subservience to personal luxury—the slavery to houses and servants and clothes—ah, no, while he had any fight left in him it was worth spending in a better cause than that!

Through the open window he could hear, in the mild December stillness, his horse's feet coming and going on the gravel. *Her* horse, led up and down by *her* servant, at the door of *her* house! . . . The sound symbolized his whole future . . . the situation his marriage had made for him, and to which he must henceforth bend, unless he broke with it then and there. . . . He tried to look ahead, to follow up, one by one, the consequences of such a break. That it would be final he had no doubt. There are natures which seem to be drawn closer by dissension, to depend, for the renewal of understanding, on the spark of generosity and compunction that anger strikes out of both; but Amherst knew that between himself and his wife no such clearing of the moral atmosphere was possible. The indignation which left him with tingling nerves and a burning need of some immediate escape into action, crystallized in Bessy into a hard kernel of obstinacy, into which, after each fresh collision, he felt that a little more of herself had been absorbed. . . . No, the break between them would be final—if he went now he would not come back. And it flashed across him that this solution might have been foreseen by his wife—might even have been deliberately planned and led up to by those about her. His father-in-law had never liked him—the disturbing waves of his activity had rippled even the sheltered surface of Mr. Langhope's existence. He must have been horribly in their way! Well—it was not too late to take himself out of it. In Bessy's circle the severing of such ties was regarded as an expensive but unhazardous piece of surgery—nobody bled to death of the wound. . . . The footman came back to remind him that his horse was waiting, and Amherst started to his feet.

"Send him back to the stable," he said with a glance at his watch, "and order a trap to take me to the next train for town."

XXII

WHEN Amherst woke, the next morning, in the hotel to which he had gone up from Lynbrook, he was oppressed by the sense

that the most difficult step he had to take still lay before him. It had been almost easy to decide that the moment of separation had come, for circumstances seemed to have closed every other issue from his unhappy situation; but how tell his wife of his determination? Amherst, to whom decisive action was the first necessity of being, became a weak procrastinator when he was confronted by the need of writing instead of speaking.

To account for his abrupt departure from Lynbrook he had left word that he was called to town on business; but, since he did not mean to return, some farther explanation was now necessary, and he was paralyzed by the difficulty of writing. He had already telegraphed to his friend that he would be at the mills the next day; but the southern express did not leave till the afternoon, and he still had several hours in which to consider what he should say to his wife. To postpone the dreaded task, he invented the pretext of some business to be despatched, and taking the Subway to Wall Street consumed the morning in futile activities. But since the renunciation of his work at Westmore he had no active concern with the financial world, and by twelve o'clock he had exhausted his imaginary affairs and was journeying uptown again. He left the train at Union Square, and walked along Fourth Avenue, now definitely resolved to go back to the hotel and write his letter before lunching.

At Twenty-fourth Street he had struck into Madison Avenue, and was striding onward with the fixed eye and aimless haste of the man who has interminable hours to consume, when a hansom drew up ahead of him and Justine Brent sprang out. She was trimly dressed, as if for travel, with a small bag in her hand; but at sight of him she paused with an exclamation of pleasure.

"Oh, Mr. Amherst, I'm so glad! I was afraid I might not see you for goodbye."

"For goodbye?" Amherst paused, embarrassed. How had she guessed that he did not mean to return to Lynbrook?

"You know," she reminded him with a smile, "I'm going to some friends near Philadelphia for ten days—" and he remembered confusedly that a long time ago—probably yesterday morning—he had heard her speak of her projected departure.

"I had no idea," she continued, "that you were coming up to town yesterday, or

I should have tried to see you before you left. I wanted to ask you to send me a line if Bessy needs me—I'll come back at once if she does." Amherst continued to listen to her blankly, as if making a painful effort to regain some consciousness of what was being said to him; and she went on: "She seemed so nervous and poorly yesterday evening that I was sorry I had decided to go——"

The unusual intentness of her gaze reminded him that the emotions of the last twenty-four hours must still be visible in his face; and the thought of what she might detect helped to restore his self-possession. "You must not think of giving up your visit," he began hurriedly—he had meant to add "on account of Bessy," but he found himself suddenly unable to utter his wife's name.

Justine was still looking at him. "Oh, I'm sure everything will be all right," she rejoined, smiling. "You go back this afternoon, I suppose? I've left a little note for you, with my address, and I want you to promise——"

She broke off, for Amherst had made a motion as though to interrupt her. The old confused sense that there must always be truth between them was struggling in him with the strong restraints of habit and character; and suddenly, before he was conscious of having decided to speak, he heard himself say: "I ought to tell you that I am not going back."

"Not going back?" A flash of apprehension crossed her face. "Not till tomorrow, you mean?" she added, recovering her clear look.

Amherst hesitated, glancing vaguely up and down the street. At that noonday hour it was nearly deserted, and Justine's driver dozed on his perch above the hansom. They could speak almost as openly as if they had been in one of the wood-paths at Lynbrook.

"Nor tomorrow," Amherst said in a low voice. There was another pause before he added: "It may be some time before——" He broke off, and then continued with sudden decision: "The fact is, I am thinking of going back to my old work."

She caught him up with an exclamation of surprise and sympathy. "Your old work? You mean at——"

She was checked by the quick contraction of pain in his face. "Not that! I mean that I'm thinking of taking a new job—as

superintendent in a Georgia mill. . . . It's the only thing I know how to do, and I've got to do something——" He forced a laugh. "The habit of work is incurable!"

Justine's face had grown as grave as his. She hesitated a moment, looking down the street toward the angle of Madison Square which was visible from the corner where they stood.

"Will you walk back to the square with me? Then we can sit down a moment."

She began to move as she spoke, and he walked beside her in silence till they had gained the seat she pointed out. Her hansom trailed after them, drawing up at the corner of Twenty-sixth Street.

As Amherst sat down beside her, Justine turned to him with an air of quiet resolution. "Mr. Amherst—will you let me ask you something? Is this a sudden decision?"

He met her eyes steadily. "Yes. I decided yesterday."

"And Bessy——?"

His glance dropped for the first time, but Justine pressed her point. "Bessy approves?"

"She—she will, I think—when she knows——"

"When she knows?" Her emotion sprang into her face, bathing it with a brightness which was more like light than colour. "When she knows? Then she does not—yet?"

"No. The offer came suddenly. I must go at once."

"Without seeing her?" She cut him short with a quick commanding gesture. "Mr. Amherst, you can't do this—you won't do it! You will not go away without seeing Bessy!" she said.

Her eyes sought his and drew them upward, constraining them to meet the full beam of her rebuking gaze.

"I must do what seems best under the circumstances," he answered hesitatingly. "She will hear from me, of course; I shall write today—and later——"

"Not later! *Now*—you will go back now to Lynbrook! Such things can't be told in writing—if they must be said at all, they must be spoken. Don't tell me that I don't understand—or that I'm meddling in what doesn't concern me. I don't care a fig for that! I've always meddled in what didn't concern me—I always shall, I suppose, until I die! And I understand enough to know

that Bessy is very unhappy—and that you're the wiser and stronger of the two. I know what it's been to you to give up your work—to feel yourself useless," she interrupted herself, with softening eyes, "and I know how you've tried. . . . I've watched you . . . but Bessy has tried too; and even if you've both failed—if you've come to the end of your resources—it's for you to face the fact, and help her face it—not to run away from it like this!"

Amherst sat silent under the sudden assault of her eloquence. He was conscious of no instinctive movement of resentment, no sense that she was, as she confessed, meddling in matters which did not concern her. His ebbing spirit was revived by the shock of an ardour like his own. She had not shrunk from calling him a coward—and it did him good to hear her call him so! Her words put life back into its true perspective, restored their meaning to obsolete qualities: to truth and manliness and courage. He had lived so long among equivocations that he had forgotten how to look a fact in the face; but here was a woman who judged life by his own standards—and by those standards she had found him wanting!

Still, he could not forget the bitter experience of the last hours, or change his opinion as to the futility of attempting to remain at Lynbrook. He felt as strongly as ever the need of moral and mental liberation—the right to begin life again on his own terms. But Justine Brent had made him see that his first step toward self-assertion had been the inconsistent one of trying to evade its results.

"You are right—I will go back," he said.

She thanked him with her eyes, as she had thanked him on the terrace at Lynbrook, on the autumn evening which had witnessed their first strange, broken exchange of confidences; and he was struck once more with the change that strong feeling produced in her face. Emotions flashed across her like the sweep of sun-rent clouds over a quiet landscape, bringing out the gleam of hidden waters, the fervour of smouldering colours, all the subtle delicacies of modelling that are lost under the flat light of an open sky. And it was extraordinary how she could infuse into a principle the warmth and colour of a passion! If conduct, to most people, seemed a cold matter of social prudence or inherited habit, to

her it was always the newly-discovered question of her own relation to life—as most women see the great issues only through their own wants and prejudices, so she seemed always to see her personal desires in the light of the larger claims.

"But I don't think," Amherst went on, "that anything can be said to convince me that I ought to alter my decision. These months of idleness have shown me that I'm one of the members of society who are a danger to the community if their noses are not kept to the grindstone——"

Justine lowered her eyes musingly, and he saw she was undergoing the reaction of constraint which always followed on her bursts of unpremeditated frankness.

"That is not for me to judge," she answered after a moment. "But if you decide to—to go away for a time—surely it ought to be in such a way that your going does not seem to cast any reflection on Bessy, or subject her to any unkind criticism."

Amherst, reddening slightly, glanced at her in surprise. "I don't think you need fear that—I shall be the only one criticized," he said drily.

"Are you sure—if you take such a position as you spoke of? So few people understand the love of hard work for its own sake. They will say that your quarrel with your wife has driven you to support yourself—and that will be cruel to Bessy."

Amherst shrugged his shoulders. "They will be more likely to say that I tried to play the gentleman and failed, and wasn't happy till I got back to my own place in life—which is true enough," he added with a touch of irony.

"They may say that too; but they will make Bessy suffer first—and it will be your fault if she is humiliated in that way. If you decide to take up your factory work for a time, can't you do so without—without accepting a salary? Oh, you see I stick at nothing," she broke in upon herself with a laugh, "and Bessy has said things which make me see that she would suffer horribly if—if you put such a slight upon her." He remained silent, and she went on urgently: "From Bessy's standpoint it would mean a decisive break—the repudiating of your whole past. And it is a question on which you can afford to be generous because I know . . . I think . . . it's less important in your eyes than hers. . . ."

Amherst glanced at her quickly. "That particular form of indebtedness, you mean?"

She smiled. "Yes: the easiest to cancel, and therefore the least galling; isn't that the way you regard it?"

"I used to—yes; but—" He was about to add: "No one at Lynbrook does," but the flash of intelligence in her eyes restrained him, while at the same time it seemed to answer: "There's my point! To see their limitation is to allow for it, since every enlightenment brings a corresponding obligation."

She made no attempt to put into words the argument her look conveyed, but rose from her seat with a rapid glance at the clock-tower above them.

"And now I must go, or I shall miss my train," she said, signalling to her drowsy cabman; and as she held out her hand, and Amherst's met it, he said in a low tone, as if in reply to her unspoken appeal: "I shall remember all you have said."

It was a new experience for Amherst to be acting under the pressure of another will; but during his return journey to Lynbrook that afternoon it was pure relief to surrender himself to this pressure, and the surrender brought not a sense of weakness but of recovered energy. It was not in his nature to analyze his motives, or spend his strength in weighing closely balanced alternatives of conduct; and though, during the last purposeless months, he had grown to brood over every spring of action in himself and others, this scrutinizing tendency disappeared at once in contact with the deed to be done. It was as though a tributary stream, gathering its crystal speed among the hills, had been suddenly poured into the stagnant waters of his will; and he saw now how thick and turbid those waters had become—how full of the slime-bred life that chokes the springs of courage.

His whole desire now was to be generous to his wife: to bear the full brunt of whatever pain their parting brought. Justine had said that Bessy seemed nervous and unhappy: it was clear, therefore, that she also had suffered from the wounds they had dealt each other, though she kept her unmoved front to the last. Poor child! Perhaps that insensible exterior was the only way she knew of expressing courage! It seemed to Amherst

that all means of manifesting the finer impulses must slowly wither in the Lynbrook air. As he approached his destination, his thoughts of her were all pitiful: nothing remained of the personal resentment which had debased their parting. He had telephoned from town to announce the hour of his return, and when he emerged from the station he half-expected to find her seated in the brougham whose lamps signalled him through the early dusk. It would be like her to undergo such a reaction of feeling, and to express it, not in words, but by taking up their relation as if there had been no break in it. He had once condemned this facility of renewal as a sign of lightness, a result of that continual evasion of serious issues which made the life of Bessy's world a thin crust of custom above a void of thought. But now he saw that, if she was the product of her environment, that constituted but another claim on his charity, and made the more precious any impulses of natural feeling that had survived the unifying pressure of her life. As he approached the brougham, he murmured mentally: "What if I were to try once more?"

Bessy had not come to the station to meet him; but he said to himself that he should find her alone at the house, and that he would make his confession at once. As the carriage passed between the lights on the tall stone gate-posts, and rolled through the bare shrubberies of the winding avenue, he felt a momentary tightening of the heart—a sense of stepping back into the trap from which he had just wrenched himself free—a premonition of the way in which the smooth systematized organization of his wife's existence might draw him back into its revolutions as he had once seen a careless factory hand seized and dragged into a flying belt. . . .

But it was only for a moment; then his thoughts reverted to Bessy. It was she who was to be considered—this time he must be strong enough for both. . . .

The butler met him on the threshold, flanked by the usual array of footmen; and as he saw his portmanteau ceremoniously passed from hand to hand, Amherst once more felt the cold steel of the springe on his neck.

"Is Mrs. Amherst in the drawing-room, Knowles?" he asked, advancing into the hall.

"No, sir," said Knowles, who had too high a sense of fitness to volunteer any information beyond the immediate fact required of him.

"She has gone up to her sitting-room, then?" Amherst continued, turning toward the broad sweep of the oak stairway.

"No, sir," said the butler slowly; "Mrs. Amherst has gone away."

"Gone away?" Amherst stopped short, staring blankly at the man's smooth official mask.

"This afternoon, sir; by motor—to Mapleside."

"To Mapleside?"

"Yes, sir—to stay with Mrs. Carbury."

There was a moment's silence. It had all happened so quickly that Amherst, with the dual vision which comes at such moments, noticed that the third footman—or was it the fourth?—was just passing his portmantau on to a shirt-sleeved arm behind the door which led to the servant's wing. . . .

He roused himself to look at the tall clock facing the door. It was six o'clock. He had telephoned from town at two.

"At what time did Mrs. Amherst leave?" he asked.

The butler meditated. "Sharp at four, sir. The maid took the three-forty with the luggage."

With the luggage! So it was not a mere one-night visit. The blood rose slowly to Amherst's face. The footmen had disappeared, but presently the door at the back of the hall reopened, and one of them came out, carrying an elaborately-appointed teatray toward the smoking-room. The routine of the house was going on as if nothing had happened. . . . The butler looked at Amherst with respectful—too respectful—interrogation, and he was suddenly conscious that he was standing motionless in the middle of the hall, with one last intolerable question on his lips.

Well—it had to be spoken! "Did Mrs. Amherst receive my telephone message?"

"Yes, sir. I gave it to her myself."

It occurred confusedly to Amherst that a well-bred man—as Lynbrook understood the phrase—would, at this point, have made some tardy feint of being in his wife's confidence, of having, on second thoughts, no reason to be surprised at her departure. It was humiliating, he supposed, to be thus laying bare his discomfiture to his depend-

ents—he could see that even Knowles was affected by the manifest impropriety of the situation—but no pretext presented itself to his mind, and after another interval of silence he turned slowly toward the door of the smoking-room.

"My letters are here, I suppose?" he paused on the threshold to enquire; and on the butler's answering in the affirmative, he said to himself, with a last effort to suspend his judgment: "She has left a line—there will be some explanation—"

But there was nothing—neither word nor message; nothing but the reverberating retort of her departure in the face of his return—her flight to Blanche Carbury as the final answer to his final appeal.

XXIII

JUSTINE was coming back to Lynbrook.

She had been, after all, unable to stay out the ten days of her visit: the undefinable sense of being needed, so often the determining motive of her actions, drew her back to Long Island at the end of the week. She had received no word from Amherst or Bessy; only Cicely had told her, in a big round hand, that mother had been away three days, and that it had been very lonely, and that the housekeeper's cat had kittens, and she was to have one; and were kittens christened, or how did they get their names?—because she wanted to call hers Justine; and she had found in her book a bird like the one father had shown them in the swamp; and they were not alone now, because the Telfers were there, and they had all been out sleighing; but it would be much nicer when Justine came back. . . .

It was as difficult to extract any sequence of facts from Cicely's letter as from an early chronicle. She made no reference to Amherst's return, which was odd, since she was fond of her step-father, yet not significant, since the fact of his arrival might have been crowded out by the birth of the kittens, or some incident equally prominent in her perspectiveless grouping of events; nor did she name the date of her mother's departure, so that Justine could not guess whether it had been contingent on Amherst's return, or wholly unconnected with it. What puzzled her most was Bessy's own silence—yet that too, in a sense, was reas-

suring, for Bessy thought of others chiefly when it was painful to think of herself, and her not writing implied that she had felt no need of appealing to her friend's sympathy.

Justine did not greatly count on finding Amherst at Lynbrook. She had felt convinced, when they parted, that he would persist in his plan of going south; and the fact that the Telfer girls were again in possession made it seem probable that he had already left. Under the circumstances, Justine thought the separation advisable; but she was eager to be assured that it had been effected amicably, and without open affront to Bessy's pride.

She arrived on a Saturday afternoon, and when she entered the house the sound of voices from the drawing-room, and the prevailing sense of bustle and movement, amid which her own coming was evidently an unconsidered detail, showed that the normal life of Lynbrook had resumed its course. The Telfers, as usual, had brought a lively throng in their train; and amid the bursts of merriment about the drawing-room tea-table she caught Westy Gaines's impressive accents, and the screaming laughter of Blanche Carbury. . . .

So Blanche Carbury was back at Lynbrook! The discovery gave Justine fresh cause for conjecture. Whatever reciprocal concessions might have resulted from Amherst's return to his wife, it seemed hardly probable that they included a renewal of relations with Mrs. Carbury. Had his mission failed then—had he and Bessy parted in anger, and was Mrs. Carbury's presence at Lynbrook Bessy's retort to his assertion of independence?

In the school-room, where Justine was received with the eager outpouring of Cicely's minutest experiences, she dared not put the question that would have solved these doubts; and she left to dress for dinner without knowing whether Amherst had returned to Lynbrook. Yet in her heart she never questioned that he had done so; all her fears revolved about what had since taken place.

She saw Bessy first in the drawing-room, surrounded by her guests; and their brief embrace told her nothing, except that she had never beheld her friend more brilliant, more triumphantly in possession of recovered spirits and health.

That Amherst was absent was now made evident from Bessy's requesting Westy

Gaines to lead the way to the dining-room with Mrs. Ansell, who was one of the reasssembled visitors; and the only one, as Justine presently observed, not in key with the prevailing gaiety. Mrs. Ansell, usually so tinged with the colours of her environment, preserved on this occasion a grey neutrality of tone which was the only break in the general brightness. It was not in her graceful person to express anything as gross as disapproval, yet that sentiment was manifest, to the nice observer, in the delicate aloofness which made the waves of laughter fall back from her, and spread a circle of cloudy calm about her end of the table. Justine had never been greatly drawn to Mrs. Ansell. Her own adaptability was not in the least akin to the older woman's studied self-effacement; and the independence of judgment which Justine preserved in spite of her perception of divergent standpoints made her a little contemptuous of an excess of charity that seemed to have been acquired at the cost of all individual convictions. Tonight for the first time she felt in Mrs. Ansell a secret sympathy with her own fears; and the sense of this tacit understanding made her examine with sudden interest the face of her unexpected ally. . . . After all, what did she know of Mrs. Ansell's history—of the hidden processes which had gradually subdued her own passions and desires, making of her, as it were, a mere decorative background, a connecting link between other personalities? Perhaps, for a woman alone in the world, without the power and opportunity that money gives, there was no alternative between letting one's individuality harden into a small dry nucleus of egoism, or diffuse itself thus in the interstices of other lives—and there fell upon Justine the chill thought that just such a future might await her if she missed the liberating gift of personal happiness. . . .

Neither that night nor the next day did she have a private word with Bessy—and it became evident, as the hours passed, that Mrs. Amherst was deliberately postponing the moment when they should find themselves alone. But the Lynbrook party was to disperse on the Monday; and Bessy, who hated early rising, and all the details of household administration, tapped at Justine's door late on Sunday night to ask her to speed the departing visitors.

She pleaded this necessity as an excuse for her intrusion, and the playful haste of her manner showed a nervous shrinking from any renewal of confidence; but as she leaned in the doorway, fingering the diamond chain about her neck, while one satin-tipped foot emerged restlessly from the edge of her lace gown, her face lost the bloom of animation which lights and laughter always produced in it, and she looked so pale and weary that Justine needed no better pretext for drawing her into the room.

It was not in Bessy to resist a soothing touch in her moments of nervous reaction. She sank into the chair by the fire and let her head rest wearily against the cushion which Justine slipped behind it.

Justine dropped into the low seat beside her, and laid a hand on hers. "You don't look as well as when I went away, Bessy. Are you sure you've done wisely in beginning your house-parties so soon?"

It always alarmed Bessy to be told that she was not looking her best, and she sat upright at once, a wave of pink rising under her sensitive skin.

"I am quite well, on the contrary; but I was dying of inanition in this big empty house, and I suppose I haven't got the boredom out of my system yet!"

Justine recognized the echo of Mrs. Carbury's manner.

"Even if you *were* bored," she rejoined, "the inanition was probably good for you. What does Dr. Wyant say to your breaking away from his régime?" She named Wyant purposely, knowing that Bessy had that respect for the medical verdict which is the last trace of reverence for authority in the mind of the modern woman. But Mrs. Amherst surprised her by a gently malicious laugh.

"Oh, I haven't seen Dr. Wyant since you went away. His interest in me died out the day you left."

It was beyond Justine's self-control to conceal the annoyance which this allusion caused her. She had not yet recovered from the shrinking disgust of her last scene with Wyant.

"Don't be foolish, Bessy. If he hasn't come, it must be because you've told him not to—because you're afraid of letting him see that you're disobeying him."

Bessy laughed again. "My dear, I'm afraid of nothing—nothing! Not even of

your big eyes when they glare at me like coals. I suppose you must have looked at poor Wyant like that to frighten him away! And yet the last time we talked of him you seemed to like him—you even hinted that it was because of him that Westy had no chance."

Justine uttered an impatient exclamation. "If neither of them existed it wouldn't affect the other's chances in the least! Their only merit is that they both enhance the charms of celibacy!"

Bessy's smile dropped, and she turned a grave glance on her friend. "Ah, most men do that—you're so clever to have found it out!"

It was Justine's turn to smile. "Oh, but I haven't—as a generalization. I mean to marry as soon as I get the chance!"

"The chance——?"

"To meet the right man. I'm gambler enough to believe in my luck yet!"

Mrs. Amherst sighed compassionately. "There *is* no right man! As Blanche says, matrimony's as uncomfortable as a ready-made shoe. How can one and the same institution fit every individual case? And why should we all have to go lame because marriage was once invented to suit an imaginary case?"

Justine gave a slight shrug. "You talk of walking lame—how else do we all walk? It seems to me that life's the tight boot, and marriage the crutch that may help one to hobble along!" She drew Bessy's hand into hers with a caressing pressure. "When you philosophize I always know you're tired. No one who feels well stops to generalize about symptoms. If you won't let your doctor prescribe for you, your nurse is going to carry out his orders. What you want is quiet. Be reasonable and send away everybody before Mr. Amherst comes back!"

She dropped the last phrase carelessly, glancing away from Bessy as she spoke; but the stiffening of the fingers in her clasp sent a little tremor through her hand.

"Thanks for your advice. It would be excellent but for one thing—my husband is not coming back!"

The mockery in Bessy's voice seemed to pass into her features, hardening and contracting them as frost shrivels a flower. Justine's face, on the contrary, was suddenly illuminated by compassion, as though a light

had struck up into it from the cold glitter of her friend's unhappiness.

"Bessy! What do you mean by not coming back?"

"I mean that he's had the tact to see that we shall be more comfortable apart—without putting me to the unpleasant necessity of telling him so."

Again the piteous echo of Blanche Carbury's phrases! The laboured mimicry of her ideas!

Justine looked anxiously at her friend. It seemed horribly false not to mention her own talk with Amherst, yet she felt it was wiser to feign ignorance, since Bessy could never be trusted to interpret rightly any departure from the conventional.

"Please tell me what has happened," she said at length.

Bessy, with a smile, released her hand from Justine's. "John has gone back to the life he prefers—which I take to be a hint to me to do the same."

Justine hesitated again; then the pressure of truth overcame every barrier of expediency. "Bessy—I ought to tell you that I saw Mr. Amherst in town the day I went to Philadelphia. He spoke of going away for a time . . . he seemed unhappy . . . but he told me he was coming back to see you first—" She broke off, her clear eyes on her friend's; and she saw at once that Bessy was too self-engrossed to feel any surprise at her avowal. "Surely he came back?" she went on.

"Oh, yes—he came back for a night." Bessy sank into the cushions, watching the firelight play on her diamond chain as she repeated the restless gesture of lifting it up and letting it slip through her fingers.

"Well—and then?" Justine persisted.

"Then—nothing! I was not here when he came."

"You were not here? What had happened?"

"I had gone over to Blanche Carbury's for a day or two. I was just leaving when I heard he was coming back, and I couldn't throw her over at the last moment."

Justine tried to catch the glance that fluttered evasively under Bessy's lashes. "You knew he was coming back—and you chose that time to go to Mrs. Carbury's?"

"I didn't choose, my dear—it just happened! And it really happened for the best. I suppose he was annoyed at my going—

you know he has a ridiculous prejudice against Blanche—and so the next morning he rushed off to his cotton mill."

There was a pause, while the diamonds continued to flow in threads of fire through Mrs. Amherst's fingers.

At length Justine said: "Did Mr. Amherst know that you knew he was coming back before you left for Mrs. Carbury's?"

Bessy feigned to meditate the question for a moment. "Did he know that I knew that he knew?" she mocked. "Yes—I suppose so—he must have known." She stifled a slight yawn as she drew herself languidly to her feet.

"Then he took that as your answer?"

"My answer——?"

"To his coming back——"

"So it appears. I told you he had shown unusual tact." Bessy stretched her softly tapering arms above her head and then dropped them along her sides with another yawn. "But it's almost morning—it's wicked of me to have kept you so late, when you must be up to look after all those people!"

She flung her arms with a light gesture about Justine's shoulders, and laid a dry kiss on her cheek.

"Don't look at me with those big eyes—they've eaten up the whole of your face! And you needn't think I'm sorry for what I've done," she declared. "I'm *not*—the—least—little—atom—of a bit!"

XXIV

JUSTINE was pacing the long library at Lynbrook, between the caged sets of standard authors.

She felt as much caged as they: as much a part of a conventional stage-setting totally unrelated to the action going on before it. Two weeks had passed since her return from Philadelphia; and during that time she had learned that her usefulness at Lynbrook was over. Though not unwelcome, she might almost call herself unwanted; life swept by, leaving her tethered to the stake of inaction; a bitter lot for one who chose to measure existence by deeds instead of days. She had found Bessy ostensibly preoccupied with a succession of guests; no one in the house needed her but Cicely, and even Cicely, at times, was caught up into

the whirl of her mother's agitated life, swept off on sleighing parties and motor-trips, or carried to town for a dancing-class or an opera matinée.

Mrs. Fenton Carbury was not among the visitors who left Lynbrook on the Monday after Justine's return.

Mr. Carbury, with the other bread-winners of the party, had hastened back to his treadmill in Wall Street after a Sunday spent in silently studying the files of the Financial Record; but his wife stayed on, somewhat aggressively in possession, criticizing and rearranging the furniture, ringing for the servants, making sudden demands on the stable, telegraphing, telephoning, ordering fires lighted or windows opened, and leaving everywhere in her wake a trail of cigarette ashes and empty cocktail glasses.

Ned Bowfort had not been included in the house-party; but on the day of its dispersal he rode over unannounced for luncheon, put up his horse in the stable, threaded his way familiarly among the dozing dogs in the hall, greeted Mrs. Ansell and Justine with just the right shade of quiet deference, produced from his pocket a new puzzle-game for Cicely, and sat down beside her mother with the quiet urbanity of the family friend who knows his privileges but is too discreet to abuse them.

After that he came every day, sometimes riding home late to the Hunt Club, sometimes accompanying Bessy and Mrs. Carbury to town for dinner and the theatre; but always with his deprecating air of having dropped in by accident, and modestly hoping that his intrusion was not unwelcome.

The following Sunday brought another influx of visitors, and Bessy seemed to fling herself with renewed enthusiasm into the cares of hospitality. She had avoided Justine since their midnight talk, contriving to see her in Cicely's presence, or pleading haste when they found themselves alone. The winter was unusually open, and she spent long hours in the saddle when her time was not taken up with her visitors. For a while she took Cicely on her daily rides; but she soon wearied of adapting her hunter's stride to the pace of the little girl's pony, and Cicely was once more given over to the coachman's care.

Then there came snow and a long frost, and Bessy grew restless at her imprisonment, and grumbled that there was no way

of keeping well in a winter climate which made regular exercise impossible.

"Why not build a squash-court?" Blanche Carbury proposed; and the two fell instantly to making plans under the guidance of Ned Bowfort and Westy Gaines. As the scheme developed, various advisers suggested that it was a pity not to add a bowling-alley, a swimming tank and a gymnasium; a fashionable architect was summoned from town, measurements were taken, sites discussed, sketches compared, and engineers consulted as to the cost of artesian wells and the best system for heating the tank.

Bessy seemed filled with a feverish desire to carry out the plan as quickly as possible, and on as large a scale as even the architect's invention soared to; but it was finally decided that, before signing the contracts, she should run over to New Jersey to see a building of the same kind on which a sporting friend of Mrs. Carbury's had recently lavished a fortune.

It was on this errand that the two ladies, in company with Westy Gaines and Bowfort, had departed on the day which found Justine restlessly measuring the length of the library. She and Mrs. Ansell had the house to themselves; and it was hardly a surprise to her when, in the course of the afternoon, Mrs. Ansell, after a discreet pause on the threshold, advanced toward her down the long room.

Since the night of her return Justine had felt sure that Mrs. Ansell would speak; but the elder lady was given to hawk-like circlings about her subject, to hanging over it and contemplating it before her wings dropped for the descent.

Now, however, it was plain that she had resolved to strike; and Justine had a sense of relief at the thought. She had been too long isolated in her anxiety, her powerlessness to help; and she had a vague hope that Mrs. Ansell's worldly wisdom might accomplish what her inexperience had failed to achieve.

"Shall we sit by the fire? I am glad to find you alone," Mrs. Ansell began, with the pleasant abruptness that was one of the subtlest instruments of her indirection; and as Justine acquiesced, she added, yielding her slight lines to the luxurious depths of an arm-chair: "I have been rather suddenly asked by an invalid cousin to go to Europe

with her next week, and I can't go contentedly without being at peace about our friends."

She paused, but Justine made no answer. In spite of her growing sympathy for Mrs. Ansell she could not overcome an inherent distrust, not of her methods, but of her ultimate object. What, for instance, was her conception of being at peace about the Amhersts? Justine's own conviction was that, as far as their final welfare was concerned, any terms were better between them than the external harmony which had prevailed during Amherst's stay at Lynbrook.

The subtle emanation of her distrust may have been felt by Mrs. Ansell; for the latter presently continued, with a certain nobleness: "I am the more concerned because I believe I must hold myself, in a small degree, responsible for Bessy's marriage—" and as Justine looked at her in surprise, she added: "I thought she could never be happy unless her affections were satisfied—and even now I believe so."

"I believe so too," Justine said, surprised into assent by the simplicity of Mrs. Ansell's declaration.

"Well, then—since we are agreed in our diagnosis," the older woman went on, smiling, "what remedy do you suggest? Or rather, how can we administer it?"

"What remedy?" Justine hesitated.

"Oh, I believe we are agreed on that too. Mr. Amherst must be brought back—but how to bring him?" She paused, and then added, with a singular effect of appealing frankness: "I ask you, because I believe you to be the only one of Bessy's friends who is in the least in her husband's confidence."

Justine's embarrassment increased. Would it not be disloyal both to Bessy and Amherst to acknowledge to a third person a fact of which Bessy herself was unaware? Yet to betray any embarrassment under Mrs. Ansell's eyes was to risk giving it a dangerous significance.

"Bessy has spoken to me once or twice—but I know very little of Mr. Amherst's point of view; except," Justine added, after another moment's weighing of alternatives, "that I believe he suffers most from being cut off from his work at Westmore."

"Yes—so I think; but that is a difficulty that time and expediency must adjust. All we can do—their friends, I mean—is to get them together again before the breach is too wide."

Justine pondered. She was perhaps more ignorant of the situation than Mrs. Ansell imagined, for since her return Bessy had alluded only once, and in general terms, to Amherst's absence, and she could only conjecture that he had carried out his plan of taking a position in the southern mill he had spoken of. What she most desired to know was whether he had listened to her entreaty, and taken the position temporarily, without binding himself by the acceptance of a salary; or whether, stung by the outrage of Bessy's flight to Blanche Carbury, he had freed himself from financial dependence on her by engaging himself definitely as Superintendent.

"I really know very little of the present situation," she said, looking at Mrs. Ansell. "Bessy merely told me that Mr. Amherst had taken up his old work in a cotton mill in the south."

As her eyes met Mrs. Ansell's it flashed across her that the latter did not believe what she said, and the perception made her instantly shrink back into herself.

But there was nothing in Mrs. Ansell's tone to confirm the doubt which her eyes betrayed.

"Ah—I hoped you knew more," she said simply; "for, like you, I have only heard from Bessy that her husband went away suddenly to help a friend who is reorganizing some mills in Georgia. Of course, under the circumstances, such a temporary break is natural enough—perhaps inevitable—only he must not stay away too long."

Justine was silent. Mrs. Ansell's momentary self-betrayal had checked all farther possibility of frank communion, and the discerning lady had seen her error too late to remedy it.

But her hearer's heart gave a leap of joy. It was evident from what Mrs. Ansell said that Amherst had not bound himself definitely, since he would not have done so without making the fact clear to his wife. And with a secret thrill of happiness Justine recalled his last word to her: "I will remember all you have said."

He had kept that word and acted on it; in spite of Bessy's last assault on his pride, he had borne with her, and deferred the day of final rupture; and the sense that she had had a part in his decision filled Justine with a glow of hope. The uneasy consciousness of Mrs. Ansell's suspicions

faded to insignificance—Mrs. Ansell and her kind might think what they chose, since all that mattered now was that she herself should act bravely and circumspectly in her last attempt to save her friends.

"I am not sure," Mrs. Ansell continued, gently scrutinizing her companion, "that I think it unwise of him to have gone; but if he stays too long Bessy may listen to bad advice—advice disastrous to her happiness." She paused, and turned her eyes meditatively toward the fire. "As far as I know," she said, with the same air of serious candour, "you are the only person who can tell him this."

"I?" exclaimed Justine, with a leap of colour to her pale cheeks.

Mrs. Ansell's eyes continued to avoid her. "My dear Miss Brent, Bessy has told me something of the wise counsels you have given her. Mr. Amherst is also your friend. As I said just now, you are the only person who might act as a link between them—surely you will not refuse the rôle."

Justine controlled herself. "My only rôle, as you call it, has been to urge Bessy to—to try to allow for her husband's views——"

"And have you not given the same advice to Mr. Amherst?"

The eyes of the two women met. "Yes," said Justine, after a moment.

"Then why refuse your help now? The moment is crucial."

Justine's thoughts had flown beyond the stage of resenting Mrs. Ansell's gentle pertinacity. All her faculties were really absorbed in the question as to how she could most effectually use whatever influence she possessed.

"I put it to you as one old friend to another—will you write to Mr. Amherst to come back?" Mrs. Ansell urged her.

Justine was past considering even the strangeness of this request, and its oblique reflection upon the kind of power ascribed to her. Through the confused beatings of her heart she merely struggled for a clearer sense of guidance.

"No," she said slowly. "I cannot."

"You cannot? With a friend's happiness in extremity?" Mrs. Ansell paused a moment before she added: "Unless you believe that Bessy would be happier divorced?"

"Divorced—? Oh, no," Justine shuddered.

"That is what it will come to."

"No, no! In time——"

"Time is what I am most afraid of, when Blanche Carbury disposes of it."

Justine drew a deep, shrinking sigh.

"You'll write?" Mrs. Ansell murmured, laying a soft touch on her hand.

"I have not the influence you think——"

"Can you do any harm by trying?"

"I might——" Justine faltered, losing her exact sense of the words she used.

"Ah," the other flashed back, "then you *have* influence! Why will you not use it?"

Justine waited a moment; then her resolve gathered itself into words. "If I have any influence, I am not sure it would be well to use it as you suggest."

"Not to urge Mr. Amherst's return?"

"No—not now."

She caught the same veiled gleam of incredulity under Mrs. Ansell's lids—caught and disregarded it.

"It must be now or never," Mrs. Ansell insisted.

"I can't think so," Justine held out.

"Nevertheless—will you try?"

"No—no! It might be fatal."

"To whom?"

"To both." She considered. "If he came back now I know he would not stay."

Mrs. Ansell was upon her abruptly. "You *know*? Then you speak with authority?"

"No—what authority? I speak as I feel," Justine faltered.

The older woman drew herself slowly to her feet. "Ah—then you shoulder a great responsibility!" She moved nearer to Justine, and once more laid a fugitive touch upon her. "You won't write to him?"

"No—no," the girl flung back; and the voices of the returning party in the hall made Mrs. Ansell, with an almost imperceptible gesture of warning, turn musingly away toward the fire.

Bessy came back brimming with the wonders she had seen. A glazed "sun-room," mosaic pavements, a marble fountain to feed the marble tank—and outside, a water-garden, descending in successive terraces, to take up and utilize—one could see how practically!—the overflow from the tank. If one did the thing at all, why not do it decently? She had given up her new motor, had let her town house, had pinched

and stinted herself in a hundred ways—if ever woman was entitled to a little compensating pleasure, surely she was that woman!

The days were crowded with consultations. Architect, contractors, engineers, a landscape gardener, and a dozen minor craftsmen, came and went, unrolled plans, moistened pencils, sketched, figured, argued, persuaded, and filled Bessy with the dread of appearing, under Blanche Carbury's eyes, subject to any restraining influences of economy. What! She was a young woman, with an independent fortune, and she was always wavering, considering, secretly referring back to the mute criticism of an invisible judge—of the husband who had been first to shake himself free of any mutual subjection? The accomplished Blanche did not have to say this—she conveyed it by the raising of painted brows, by a smile of mocking interrogation, a judiciously placed silence or a resigned glance at the architect. So the estimates poured in, were studied, resisted—then yielded to and signed; then the hour of advance payments struck, and an imperious appeal was despatched to Mr. Tredegar, to whom the management of Bessy's affairs had been transferred.

Mr. Tredegar, to his client's surprise, answered the appeal in person. He had not been lately to Lynbrook, dreading the cold and damp of the country in winter; and his sudden *déplacement* had therefore an ominous significance.

He came for an evening in mid-week, when even Blanche Carbury was absent, and Bessy and Justine had the house to themselves. Mrs. Ansell had sailed the week before with her invalid cousin. No farther words had passed between herself and Justine—but the latter was conscious that their talk had increased instead of lessening the distance between them. Justine herself meant to leave soon. Her hope of regaining Bessy's confidence had been deceived, and seeing herself definitely superseded, she chafed anew at her purposeless inactivity. She had already written to one or two doctors in New York, and to the matron of Saint Elizabeth's. She had made herself a name in surgical cases, and it could not be long before a summons came. . . .

Meanwhile Mr. Tredegar arrived, and the three dined together, the two women bending meekly to his discourse, which was

never more oracular and authoritative than when delivered to the gentler sex alone. Amherst's absence, in particular, seemed to loose the thin current of Mr. Tredegar's eloquence. He was never quite at ease in the presence of an independent mind, and Justine often reflected that, even had the two men known nothing of each other's views, there would have been between them an instinctive and irreducible hostility—they would have disliked each other if they had merely jostled elbows in the street.

Yet even freed from Amherst's disturbing presence Mr. Tredegar showed a darkling brow, and as Justine slipped away after dinner she felt that she left Bessy to something more serious than the usual business conference.

How serious, she was to learn that very night, when, in the small hours, her friend burst in upon her tearfully. Bessy was ruined—ruined—that was what Mr. Tredegar had come to tell her! She might have known he would not have travelled to Lynbrook for a trifle. . . . She had expected to find herself cramped, restricted—to be warned that she must "manage," hateful word! . . . But this! This was incredible! Unendurable! There was no money to build the gymnasium—none at all! And all because it had been swallowed up at Westmore—because the ridiculous changes there, the changes that nobody wanted, nobody approved of—that Truscomb and all the other experts had opposed and derided from the first—that these changes, even modified and arrested, had already involved so much of her income, that it might be years—yes, he said *years!*—before she should feel herself free again—free of her own fortune, of Cicely's fortune . . . of the money poor Dick Westmore had meant his wife and daughter to enjoy!

Justine listened anxiously to this confused outpouring of resentments. Bessy's born incapacity for figures made it indeed possible that the facts came on her as a surprise—that she had quite forgotten the temporary reduction of her income, and had begun to imagine that what she had saved in one direction was hers to spend in another. All this was conceivable. But why had Mr. Tredegar drawn so dark a picture of the future? Or was it only that, thwarted of her immediate desire, Bessy's disappointment blackened the farthest

verge of her horizon? Justine, though aware of her friend's lack of perspective, suspected that a conniving hand had helped to throw the prospect out of drawing. . . .

Could it be possible, then, that Mr. Tredegar was among those who desired a divorce? That the influences at which Mrs. Ansell had hinted proceeded not only from Blanche Carbury and her group? Helpless amid this rush of forebodings, Justine could do no more than soothe and restrain—to reason would have been idle. She had never till now realized how completely she had lost ground with Bessy.

"The humiliation—before my friends! Oh, I was warned . . . my father, every one . . . for Cicely's sake, I was warned . . . but I wouldn't listen—and *now!* From the first it was all he cared for—in Europe, even, he was always dragging me to factories. *Me?*—I was only the owner of Westmore! He wanted power—power, that's all—when he lost it he left me . . . oh, I'm glad now my baby is dead! Glad there's nothing between us—nothing, nothing in the world to tie us together any longer!"

The disproportion between this violent grief and its trivial cause would have struck Justine as simply grotesque, had she not understood that the incident of the gymnasium, which followed with cumulative pressure upon a series of similar episodes, seemed to Bessy like the reaching out of a retaliatory hand—a mocking reminder that she was still imprisoned in the consequences of her unhappy marriage.

Such folly seemed past weeping for—it froze Justine's compassion into disdain, till she remembered that the sources of our sorrow are sometimes nobler than their means of expression, and that a baffled, unappeased love was perhaps the real cause of Bessy's childish anger against her husband.

At any rate, the moment was a critical one, and Justine remembered with a pang that Mrs. Ansell had foreseen such a contingency, and implored her to take measures against it. She had refused, from a sincere dread of precipitating a definite estrangement—but had she been right in judging the situation so logically? With a

creature of Bessy's emotional uncertainties the result of contending influences was really incalculable—it might still be that, at this juncture, Amherst's return would bring about a reaction of better feelings. . . .

Justine sat and mused on these things in her room, after leaving her friend exhausted upon a tearful pillow. She felt that she had perhaps taken too large a survey of the situation—that the question whether there could ever be ultimate happiness between this tormented pair was not one to concern those who struggled for their welfare. Most marriages are a patch-work of jarring tastes and ill-assorted ambitions—if here and there, for a moment, two colours blend, two textures are the same, so much the better for the pattern! Justine, certainly, could foresee in reunion no positive happiness for either of her friends; but she saw positive disaster for Bessy in separation from her husband. . . .

Suddenly she rose from her chair by the falling fire, and crossed over to the writing-table. She would write to Amherst herself—she would tell him to come. The decision once reached, hope flowed back to her heart—the joy of action so often deceived her into immediate faith in its results!

"Dear Mr. Amherst," she wrote, "the last time I saw you, you told me you would remember what I said. I ask you to do so now—to remember that I urged you not to be away too long. I believe you ought to come back now, though I know Bessy will not ask you to. I am writing without her knowledge, but with the conviction that she needs you, though perhaps without knowing it herself. . . ."

She paused, and laid down her pen. Why did it make her so happy to write to him? Was it merely the sense of recovered helpfulness, or something warmer, more personal, that made it a joy to trace his name, and to remind him of their last intimate exchange of words? Well—perhaps it was that too. There were moments when she was so mortally lonely that any sympathetic contact with another life sent a glow into her veins—that she was thankful to warm herself at any fire.

(To be continued.)



Drawn by Alonzo Kimball.

Her face lost the bloom of animation, and she looked pale and weary.—Page 106.
VOL. XLII.—12

FOR A SMALL BOY

By Samuel McCoy

O PRAIRIE, Mother of my West,
Take this small waif to your broad breast:

Let his feet love your changeless ways,
To teach him firmness all his days;

Let your fields, stretching to the sky,
That sets no boundary to the eye,

Give him their own deep breadth of view,
The largeness of the cloudless blue;

Give him to drink your freshening breath
That will not brook a thought of death;

So he may go eternal young
Along your marshes, that have flung

Their yellowing willows' draperies
To the keen sweetness of the breeze;

And, prodigal of April hours,
Take benediction of her showers;

And when across the prairies come
The yellowhammer's fife and drum,

Then let him wander as he will,
From hill to ever-rising hill,

From your spring mornings, warm and bright,
Surcharged with quivering, living light,

Until the hazy sun at last
Withdraws and leaves the pallid, vast

Immensity of sky and moor
And gray dusk closing swift and sure.

In quiet let him bow his face
Before the Presence in that space,

When ghostly white the primrose stands,
The spirit of your twilight lands;

See the pale jewel of the evening skies
And hear the meadow's drowsy cries,

And, last sweet challenge through the dark—
The clear, thin whistle of the lark.

So, prairie that I loved and blessed,
The boy may know *your* way is best.