

# **The Letters**

Edith Wharton



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# The Letters

**Edith Wharton**

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The Letters

# **PART I**

## The Letters

### I

UP the long hill from the station at St.-Cloud, Lizzie West climbed in the cold spring sunshine. As she breasted the incline, she noticed the first waves of wistaria over courtyard railings and the high lights of new foliage against the walls of ivy-matted gardens; and she thought again, as she had thought a hundred times before, that she had never seen so beautiful a spring.

She was on her way to the Deerings' house, in a street near the hilltop; and every step was dear and familiar to her. She went there five times a week to teach little Juliet Deering, the daughter of Mr. Vincent Deering, the distinguished American artist. Juliet had been her pupil for two years, and day after day, during that time, Lizzie West had mounted the hill in all weathers; sometimes with her umbrella bent against a driving rain, sometimes with her frail cotton parasol unfurled beneath a fiery sun, sometimes with the snow soaking through her patched boots or a bitter wind piercing her thin jacket, sometimes with the dust whirling about her and bleaching the flowers of the poor little hat that had to "carry her through" till next summer.

At first the ascent had seemed tedious enough, as dull as the trudge to her other lessons. Lizzie was not a heaven-sent teacher; she had no born zeal for her calling, and though she dealt kindly and dutifully with her pupils, she did not fly to them on winged feet. But one day something had happened to change the face of life, and since then the climb to the Deering house had seemed like a dream-flight up a heavenly stairway.

Her heart beat faster as she remembered it — no longer in a tumult of fright and self-reproach, but softly, peacefully, as if brooding over a possession that none could take from her.

It was on a day of the previous October that she had stopped, after Juliet's lesson, to ask if she might speak to Juliet's papa. One had always to apply to Mr. Deering if there was anything to be said about the lessons. Mrs. Deering lay on her lounge up-stairs, reading greasy relays of dog-eared novels, the choice of which she left to the cook and the nurse, who were always fetching them for her from the cabinet de lecture; and it was understood in the house that she was not to be "bothered" about Juliet. Mr. Deering's interest in his daughter was fitful rather than consecutive; but at least he was approachable, and listened sympathetically, if a little absently, stroking his long, fair mustache, while Lizzie stated her difficulty or put in her plea for maps or copy-books.

"Yes, yes — of course — whatever you think right," he would always assent, sometimes drawing a five-franc piece from his pocket, and laying it carelessly on the table, or oftener saying, with his charming smile: "Get what you please, and just put it on your account, you know."

But this time Lizzie had not come to ask for maps or copy-books, or even to hint, in crimson misery, — as once, poor soul! she had had to do, — that Mr. Deering had overlooked her last little account — had probably not noticed that she had left it, some two months earlier, on a corner of his littered writing-table. That hour had been bad enough, though he had done his best to make it easy to carry it off gallantly and gaily; but this was infinitely worse. For she had come to complain of her pupil; to say that, much as she loved little Juliet, it was useless, unless Mr. Deering could "do something," to go on with the lessons.

"It wouldn't be honest — I should be robbing you; I'm not sure that I haven't already," she half laughed, through mounting tears, as she put her case. Little Juliet would not work, would not obey. Her poor, little, drifting existence floated aimlessly between the kitchen and the lingerie, and all the groping tendrils of her curiosity were fastened about the doings of the backstairs.

It was the same kind of curiosity that Mrs. Deering, overhead in her drug-scented room, lavished on her dog-eared novels and on the "society notes" of the morning paper; but since Juliet's horizon was not yet wide enough to embrace these loftier objects, her interest was centered in the anecdotes that Celeste and Suzanne brought back from the market and the library. That these were not always of an edifying nature the child's artless prattle too often betrayed; but unhappily they occupied her fancy to the complete exclusion of such nourishing items as dates and dynasties, and the sources of the principal European rivers.

At length the crisis became so acute that poor Lizzie felt herself bound to resign her charge or ask Mr. Deering's intervention; and for Juliet's sake she chose the harder alternative. It was hard to speak to him not only because one hated still more to ascribe it to such vulgar causes, but because one blushed to bring them to the notice of a spirit engaged with higher things. Mr. Deering was very busy at that moment: he had a new picture

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"on." And Lizzie entered the studio with the flutter of one profanely intruding on some sacred rite; she almost heard the rustle of retreating wings as she approached.

And then — and then — how differently it had all turned out! Perhaps it wouldn't have, if she hadn't been such a goose — she who so seldom cried, so prided herself on a stoic control of her little twittering cageful of "feelings." But if she had cried, it was because he had looked at her so kindly, so softly, and because she had nevertheless felt him so pained and shamed by what she said. The pain, of course, lay for both in the implication behind her words — in the one word they left unspoken. If little Juliet was as she was, it was because of the mother up-stairs — the mother who had given her child her futile impulses, and grudged her the care that might have guided them. The wretched case so obviously revolved in its own vicious circle that when Mr. Deering had murmured, "Of course if my wife were not an invalid," they both turned with a simultaneous spring to the flagrant "bad example" of Celeste and Suzanne, fastening on that with a mutual insistence that ended in his crying out, "All the more, then, how can you leave her to them?"

"But if I do her no good?" Lizzie wailed; and it was then that, — when he took her hand and assured her gently, "But you do, you do!" — it was then that, in the traditional phrase, she "broke down," and her conventional protest quivered off into tears.

"You do me good, at any rate — you make the house seem less like a desert," she heard him say; and the next moment she felt herself drawn to him, and they kissed each other through her weeping.

They kissed each other — there was the new fact. One does not, if one is a poor little teacher living in Mme. Clopin's Pension Suisse at Passy, and if one has pretty brown hair and eyes that reach out trustfully to other eyes — one does not, under these common but defenseless conditions, arrive at the age of twenty-five without being now and then kissed, — waylaid once by a noisy student between two doors, surprised once by one's gray-bearded professor as one bent over the "theme" he was correcting, — but these episodes, if they tarnish the surface, do not reach the heart: it is not the kiss endured, but the kiss returned, that lives. And Lizzie West's first kiss was for Vincent Deering.

As she drew back from it, something new awoke in her — something deeper than the fright and the shame, and the penitent thought of Mrs. Deering. A sleeping germ of life thrilled and unfolded, and started out blindly to seek the sun.

She might have felt differently, perhaps, — the shame and penitence might have prevailed, — had she not known him so kind and tender, and guessed him so baffled, poor, and disappointed. She knew the failure of his married life, and she divined a corresponding failure in his artistic career. Lizzie, who had made her own faltering snatch at the same laurels, brought her thwarted proficiency to bear on the question of his pictures, which she judged to be extremely brilliant, but suspected of having somehow failed to affirm their merit publicly. She understood that he had tasted an earlier moment of success: a mention, a medal, something official and tangible; then the tide of publicity had somehow set the other way, and left him stranded in a noble isolation. It was extraordinary and unbelievable that any one so naturally eminent and exceptional should have been subject to the same vulgar necessities that governed her own life, should have known poverty and obscurity and indifference. But she gathered that this had been the case, and felt that it formed the miraculous link between them. For through what medium less revealing than that of shared misfortune would he ever have perceived so inconspicuous an object as herself? And she recalled now how gently his eyes had rested on her from the first — the gray eyes that might have seemed mocking if they had not been so gentle.

She remembered how he had met her the first day, when Mrs. Deering's inevitable headache had prevented her from receiving the new teacher, and how his few questions had at once revealed his interest in the little stranded, compatriot, doomed to earn a precarious living so far from her native shore. Sweet as the moment of unburdening had been, she wondered afterward what had determined it: how she, so shy and sequestered, had found herself letting slip her whole poverty-stricken story, even to the avowal of the ineffectual "artistic" tendencies that had drawn her to Paris, and had then left her there to the dry task of tuition. She wondered at first, but she understood now; she understood everything after he had kissed her. It was simply because he was kind as he was great.

She thought of this now as she mounted the hill in the spring sunshine, and she thought of all that had happened since. The intervening months, as she looked back at them, were merged in a vast golden haze, through



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which here and there rose the outline of a shining island. The haze was the general enveloping sense of his love, and the shining islands were the days they had spent together. They had never kissed again under his own roof. Lizzie's professional honor had a keen edge, but she had been spared the vulgar necessity of making him feel it. It was of the essence of her fatality that he always "understood" when his failing to do so might have imperiled his hold on her.

But her Thursdays and Sundays were free, and it soon became a habit to give them to him. She knew, for her peace of mind, only too much about pictures, and galleries and churches had been the one bright outlet from the grayness of her personal atmosphere. For poetry, too, and the other imaginative forms of literature, she had always felt more than she had hitherto had occasion to betray; and now all these folded sympathies shot out their tendrils to the light. Mr. Deering knew how to express with unmatched clearness and competence the thoughts that trembled in her mind: to talk with him was to soar up into the azure on the outspread wings of his intelligence, and look down dizzily yet distinctly, on all the wonders and glories of the world. She was a little ashamed, sometimes, to find how few definite impressions she brought back from these flights; but that was doubtless because her heart beat so fast when he was near, and his smile made his words like a long quiver of light. Afterward, in quieter hours, fragments of their talk emerged in her memory with wondrous precision, every syllable as minutely chiseled as some of the delicate objects in crystal or ivory that he pointed out in the museums they frequented. It was always a puzzle to Lizzie that some of their hours should be so blurred and others so vivid.

On the morning in question she was reliving all these memories with unusual distinctness, for it was a fortnight since she had seen her friend. Mrs. Deering, some six weeks previously, had gone to visit a relation at St.-Raphael; and, after she had been a month absent, her husband and the little girl had joined her. Lizzie's adieu to Deering had been made on a rainy afternoon in the damp corridors of the Aquarium at the Trocadero. She could not receive him at her own pension. That a teacher should be visited by the father of a pupil, especially when that father was still, as Madame Clopin said, *si bien*, was against that lady's austere Helvetian code. From Deering's first tentative hint of another solution Lizzie had recoiled in a wild unreasoned flurry of all her scruples, he took her "No, no, no!" as he took all her twists and turns of conscience, with eyes half-tender and half-mocking, and an instant acquiescence which was the finest homage to the "lady" she felt he divined and honored in her.

So they continued to meet in museums and galleries, or to extend, on fine days, their explorations to the suburbs, where now and then, in the solitude of grove or garden, the kiss renewed itself, fleeting, isolated, or prolonged in a shy, silent pressure of the hand. But on the day of his leave-taking the rain kept them under cover; and as they threaded the subterranean windings of the Aquarium, and Lizzie looked unseeingly at the monstrous faces glaring at her through walls of glass, she felt like a poor drowned wretch at the bottom of the sea, with all her glancing, sunlit memories rolling over her like the waves of its surface.

"You'll never see him again — never see him again," the waves boomed in her ears through his last words; and when she had said good-by to him at the corner, and had scrambled, wet and shivering, into the Passy omnibus, its great, grinding wheels took up the derisive burden — "Never see him, never see him again."

All that was only two weeks ago, and here she was, as happy as a lark, mounting the hill to his door in the spring sunshine. So weak a heart did not deserve such a radiant fate; and Lizzie said to herself that she would never again distrust her star.

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### II

THE cracked bell tinkled sweetly through her heart as she stood listening for the scamper of Juliet's feet. Juliet, anticipating the laggard Suzanne, almost always opened the door for her governess, not from any unnatural zeal to hasten the hour of her studies, but from the irrepressible desire to see what was going on in the street. But on this occasion Lizzie listened vainly for a step, and at length gave the bell another twitch. Doubtless some unusually absorbing incident had detained the child below—stairs; thus only could her absence be explained.

A third ring produced no response, and Lizzie, full of dawning fears, drew back to look up at the shabby, blistered house. She saw that the studio shutters stood wide, and then noticed, without surprise, that Mrs. Deering's were still unopened. No doubt Mrs. Deering was resting after the fatigue of the journey. Instinctively Lizzie's eyes turned again to the studio; and as she looked, she saw Deering at the window. He caught sight of her, and an instant later came to the door. He looked paler than usual, and she noticed that he wore a black coat.

"I rang and rang — where is Juliet?"

He looked at her gravely, almost solemnly; then, without answering, he led her down the passage to the studio, and closed the door when she had entered.

"My wife is dead — she died suddenly ten days ago. Didn't you see it in the papers?"

Lizzie, with a little cry, sank down on the rickety divan. She seldom saw a newspaper, since she could not afford one for her own perusal, and those supplied to the Pension Clopin were usually in the hands of its more privileged lodgers till long after the hour when she set out on her morning round.

"No; I didn't see it," she stammered.

Deering was silent. He stood a little way off, twisting an unlit cigarette in his hand, and looking down at her with a gaze that was both hesitating and constrained.

She, too, felt the constraint of the situation, the impossibility of finding words that, after what had passed between them, should seem neither false nor heartless; and at last she exclaimed, standing up: "Poor little Juliet! Can't I go to her?"

"Juliet is not here. I left her at St.—Raphael with the relations with whom my wife was staying."

"Oh," Lizzie murmured, feeling vaguely that this added to the difficulty of the moment. How differently she had pictured their meeting!

"I'm so — so sorry for her!" she faltered out.

Deering made no reply, but, turning on his heel, walked the length of the studio, and then halted vaguely before the picture on the easel. It was the landscape he had begun the previous autumn, with the intention of sending it to the Salon that spring. But it was still unfinished — seemed, indeed, hardly more advanced than on the fateful October day when Lizzie, standing before it for the first time, had confessed her inability to deal with Juliet. Perhaps the same thought struck its creator, for he broke into a dry laugh, and turned from the easel with a shrug.

Under his protracted silence Lizzie roused herself to the fact that, since her pupil was absent, there was no reason for her remaining any longer; and as Deering again moved toward her she said with an effort: "I'll go, then. You'll send for me when she comes back?"

Deering still hesitated, tormenting the cigarette between his fingers.

"She's not coming back — not at present."

Lizzie heard him with a drop of the heart. Was everything to be changed in their lives? But of course; how could she have dreamed it would be otherwise? She could only stupidly repeat: "Not coming back? Not this spring?"

"Probably not, since our friends are so good as to keep her. The fact is, I've got to go to America. My wife left a little property, a few pennies, that I must go and see to — for the child."

Lizzie stood before him, a cold knife in her breast. "I see — I see," she reiterated, feeling all the while that she strained her eyes into impenetrable blackness.

"It's a nuisance, having to pull up stakes," he went on, with a fretful glance about the studio.

She lifted her eyes slowly to his face. "Shall you be gone long?" she took courage to ask.

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"There again — I can't tell. It's all so frightfully mixed up." He met her look for an incredibly long, strange moment. "I hate to go!" he murmured as if to himself.

Lizzie felt a rush of moisture to her lashes, and the old, familiar wave of weakness at her heart. She raised her hand to her face with an instinctive gesture, and as she did so he held out his arms.

"Come here, Lizzie!" he said.

And she went — went with a sweet, wild throb of liberation, with the sense that at last the house was his, that she was his, if he wanted her; that never again would that silent, rebuking presence in the room above constrain and shame her rapture.

He pushed back her veil and covered her face with kisses. "Don't cry, you little goose!" he said.

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### III

THAT they must see each other again before his departure, in some place less exposed than their usual haunts, was as clear to Lizzie as it appeared to be to Deering. His expressing the wish seemed, indeed, the sweetest testimony to the quality of his feeling, since, in the first weeks of the most perfunctory widowhood, a man of his stamp is presumed to abstain from light adventures. If, then, at such a moment, he wished so much to be quietly and gravely with her, it could be only for reasons she did not call by name, but of which she felt the sacred tremor in her heart; and it would have seemed incredibly vain and vulgar to put forward, at such a crisis, the conventional objections by means of which such little-exposed existences defend the treasure of their freshness.

In such a mood as this one may descend from the Passy omnibus at the corner of the Pont de la Concorde (she had not let him fetch her in a cab) with a sense of dedication almost solemn, and may advance to meet one's fate, in the shape of a gentleman of melancholy elegance, with an auto-taxi at his call, as one has advanced to the altar—steps in some girlish bridal vision.

Even the experienced waiter ushering them into an upper room of the quiet restaurant on the Seine could hardly have supposed their quest for seclusion to be based on sentimental motives, so soberly did Deering give his orders, while his companion sat small and grave at his side. She did not, indeed, mean to let her private pang obscure their hour together: she was already learning that Deering shrank from sadness. He should see that she had courage and gaiety to face their coming separation, and yet give herself meanwhile to this completer nearness; but she waited, as always, for him to strike the opening note.

Looking back at it later, she wondered at the mild suavity of the hour. Her heart was unversed in happiness, but he had found the tone to lull her apprehensions, and make her trust her fate for any golden wonder. Deepest of all, he gave her the sense of something tacit and confirmed between them, as if his tenderness were a habit of the heart hardly needing the support of outward proof.

Such proof as he offered came, therefore, as a kind of crowning luxury, the flower of a profoundly rooted sentiment; and here again the instinctive reserves and defenses would have seemed to vulgarize what his trust ennobled. But if all the tender casuistries of her heart were at his service, he took no grave advantage of them. Even when they sat alone after dinner, with the lights of the river trembling through their one low window, and the vast rumor of Paris inclosing them in a heart of silence, he seemed, as much as herself, under the spell of hallowing influences. She felt it most of all as she yielded to the arm he presently put about her, to the long caress he laid on her lips and eyes: not a word or gesture missed the note of quiet union, or cast a doubt, in retrospect, on the pact they sealed with their last look.

That pact, as she reviewed it through a sleepless night, seemed to have consisted mainly, on his part, in pleadings for full and frequent news of her, on hers in the assurance that it should be given as often as he asked it. She had felt an intense desire not to betray any undue eagerness, any crude desire to affirm and define her hold on him. Her life had given her a certain acquaintance with the arts of defense: girls in her situation were commonly supposed to know them all, and to use them as occasion called. But Lizzie's very need of them had intensified her disdain. Just because she was so poor, and had always, materially, so to count her change and calculate her margin, she would at least know the joy of emotional prodigality, would give her heart as recklessly as the rich their millions. She was sure now that Deering loved her, and if he had seized the occasion of their farewell to give her some definitely worded sign of his feeling — if, more plainly, he had asked her to marry him, — his doing so would have seemed less like a proof of his sincerity than of his suspecting in her the need of a verbal warrant. That he had abstained seemed to show that he trusted her as she trusted him, and that they were one most of all in this deep security of understanding.

She had tried to make him divine all this in the chariness of her promise to write. She would write; of course she would. But she would be busy, preoccupied, on the move: it was for him to let her know when he wished a word, to spare her the embarrassment of ill-timed intrusions.

"Intrusions?" He had smiled the word away. "You can't well intrude, my darling, on a heart where you're already established, to the complete exclusion of other lodgers." And then, taking her hands, and looking up from them into her happy, dizzy eyes: "You don't know much about being in love, do you, Lizzie?" he laughingly

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ended.

It seemed easy enough to reject this imputation in a kiss; but she wondered afterward if she had not deserved it. Was she really cold and conventional, and did other women give more richly and recklessly? She found that it was possible to turn about every one of her reserves and delicacies so that they looked like selfish scruples and petty pruderies, and at this game she came in time to exhaust all the resources of an over-abundant casuistry.

Meanwhile the first days after Deering's departure wore a soft, refracted light like the radiance lingering after sunset. He, at any rate, was taxable with no reserves, no calculations, and his letters of farewell, from train and steamer, filled her with long murmurs and echoes of his presence. How he loved her, how he loved her — and how he knew how to tell her so!

She was not sure of possessing the same aptitude. Unused to the expression of personal emotion, she fluctuated between the impulse to pour out all she felt and the fear lest her extravagance should amuse or even bore him. She never lost the sense that what was to her the central crisis of experience must be a mere episode in a life so predestined as his to romantic accidents. All that she felt and said would be subjected to the test of comparison with what others had already given him: from all quarters of the globe she saw passionate missives winging their way toward Deering, for whom her poor little swallow-flight of devotion could certainly not make a summer. But such moments were succeeded by others in which she raised her head and dared inwardly to affirm her conviction that no woman had ever loved him just as she had, and that none, therefore, had probably found just such things to say to him. And this conviction strengthened the other less solidly based belief that he also, for the same reason, had found new accents to express his tenderness, and that the three letters she wore all day in her shabby blouse, and hid all night beneath her pillow, surpassed not only in beauty, but in quality, all he had ever penned for other eyes.

They gave her, at any rate, during the weeks that she wore them on her heart, sensations even more complex and delicate than Deering's actual presence had ever occasioned. To be with him was always like breasting a bright, rough sea, that blinded while it buoyed her: but his letters formed a still pool of contemplation, above which she could bend, and see the reflection of the sky, and the myriad movements of life that flitted and gleamed below the surface. The wealth of his hidden life — that was what most surprised her! It was incredible to her now that she had had no inkling of it, but had kept on blindly along the narrow track of habit, like a traveler climbing a road in a fog, who suddenly finds himself on a sunlit crag between blue leagues of sky and dizzy depths of valley. And the odd thing was that all the people about her — the whole world of the Passy pension — were still plodding along the same dull path, preoccupied with the pebbles underfoot, and unconscious of the glory beyond the fog!

There were wild hours when she longed to cry out to them what one saw from the summit — and hours of tremulous abasement when she asked herself why her happy feet had been guided there, while others, no doubt as worthy, stumbled and blundered in obscurity. She felt, in particular, a sudden urgent pity for the two or three other girls at Mme. Clopin's — girls older, duller, less alive than she, and by that very token more appealingly flung upon her sympathy. Would they ever know? Had they ever known? — those were the questions that haunted her as she crossed her companions on the stairs, faced them at the dinner-table, and listened to their poor, pining talk in the dim-lit slippery-seated salon. One of the girls was Swiss, the other English; the third, Andora Macy, was a young lady from the Southern States who was studying French with the ultimate object of imparting it to the inmates of a girls' school at Macon, Georgia.

Andora Macy was pale, faded, immature. She had a drooping Southern accent, and a manner which fluctuated between arch audacity and fits of panicky hauteur. She yearned to be admired, and feared to be insulted; and yet seemed tragically conscious that she was destined to miss both these extremes of sensation, or to enjoy them only at second hand in the experiences of her more privileged friends.

It was perhaps for this reason that she took a wistful interest in Lizzie, who had shrunk from her at first, as the depressing image of her own probable future, but to whom she had now suddenly become an object of sentimental compassion.

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### **PART II**

THE story opens in the August CENTURY, with a scene between Vincent Deering, an American artist living in Paris, and Lizzie West, who for two years has been day-governess to the artist's young daughter, a discouraging pupil, mainly because she is neglected by an indolent, novel-reading mother. In the privacy of the studio, Lizzie West tells the artist that she must resign her fruitless charge. Deering pleads that in such case little Juliet will be hopelessly neglected, and in the teacher's wavering attitude he kisses her and establishes a relation of confidence and affection, which is discreetly cultivated, until, through the sudden death of Mrs. Deering, the teacher has reason to expect a devotion without evasion or concealment. But Deering's reserved attitude awakens feelings of uncertainty, until the affectionate interview which precedes his departure for America to settle his late wife's estate. His fervent letters of farewell from train and steamer, and one on his arrival in New York, make her eager for the next. This is the situation at the opening of the part which follows. — THE EDITOR.

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### IV

MISS MACY's room was next to Miss West's, and the Southerner's knock often appealed to Lizzie's hospitality when Mme. Clopin's early curfew had driven her boarders from the salon. It sounded thus one evening just as Lizzie, tired from an unusually long day of tuition, was in the act of removing her dress. She was in too indulgent a mood to withhold her "Come in," and as Miss Macy crossed the threshold, Lizzie felt that Vincent Deering's first letter — the letter from the train — had slipped from her loosened bodice to the floor.

Miss Macy, as promptly noting the fact, darted forward to recover the letter. Lizzie stooped also, fiercely jealous of her touch; but the other reached the precious paper first, and as she seized it, Lizzie knew that she had seen whence it fell, and was weaving round the incident a rapid web of romance.

Lizzie blushed with annoyance. "It's too stupid, having no pockets! If one gets a letter as she is going out in the morning, she has to carry it in her blouse all day."

Miss Macy looked at her with swimming eyes. "It's warm from your heart!" she breathed, reluctantly yielding up the missive.

Lizzie laughed, for she knew better: she knew it was the letter that had warmed her heart. Poor Andora Macy! She would never know. Her bleak bosom would never take fire from such a contact. Lizzie looked at her with kind eyes, secretly chafing at the injustice of fate.

The next evening, on her return home, she found Andora hovering in the entrance hall.

"I thought you'd like me to put this in your own hand," Miss Macy whispered significantly, pressing a letter upon Lizzie. "I couldn't bear to see it lying on the table with the others."

It was Deering's letter from the steamer. Lizzie blushed to the forehead, but without resenting Andora's divination. She could not have breathed a word of her bliss, but she was not altogether sorry to have it guessed, and pity for Andora's destitution yielded to the pleasure of using it as a mirror for her own abundance. DEERING wrote again on reaching New York, a long, fond, dissatisfied letter, vague in its indication of his own projects, specific in the expression of his love. Lizzie brooded over every syllable of it till they formed the undercurrent of all her waking thoughts, and murmured through her midnight dreams; but she would have been happier if they had shed some definite light on the future.

That would come, no doubt, when he had had time to look about and get his bearings. She counted up the days that must elapse before she received his next letter, and stole down early to peep at the papers, and learn when the next American mail was due. At length the happy date arrived, and she hurried distractedly through the day's work, trying to conceal her impatience by the endearments she bestowed upon her pupils. It was easier, in her present mood, to kiss them than to keep them at their grammars.

That evening, on Mme. Clopin's threshold, her heart beat so wildly that she had to lean a moment against the door-post before entering. But on the hall table, where the letters lay, there was none for her.

She went over them with a feverish hand, her heart dropping down and down, as she had sometimes fallen down an endless stairway in a dream — the very same stairway up which she had seemed to fly when she climbed the long hill to Deering's door. Then it suddenly struck her that Andora might have found and secreted her letter, and with a spring she was on the actual stairs and rattling Miss Macy's door-handle.

"You've a letter for me, haven't you?" she panted.

Miss Macy, turning from the toilet-table, inclosed her in attenuated arms. "Oh, darling, did you expect one to-day?"

"Do give it to me!" Lizzie pleaded with burning eyes.

"But I haven't any! There hasn't been a sign of a letter for you."

"I know there is. There must be," Lizzie persisted, stamping her foot.

"But, dearest, I've watched for you, and there's been nothing, absolutely nothing."

Day after day, for the ensuing weeks, the same scene reenacted itself with endless variations. Lizzie, after the first sharp spasm of disappointment, made no effort to conceal her anxiety from Miss Macy, and the fond Andora was charged to keep a vigilant eye upon the postman's coming, and to spy on the bonne for possible negligence or perfidy. But these elaborate precautions remained fruitless, and no letter from Deering came.

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During the first fortnight of silence Lizzie exhausted all the ingenuities of explanation. She marveled afterward at the reasons she had found for Deering's silence: there were moments when she almost argued herself into thinking it more natural than his continuing to write. There was only one reason which her intelligence consistently rejected, and that was the possibility that he had forgotten her, that the whole episode had faded from his mind like a breath from a mirror. From that she resolutely turned her thoughts, aware that if she suffered herself to contemplate it, the motive power of life would fail, and she would no longer understand why she rose up in the morning and lay down at night.

If she had had leisure to indulge her anguish she might have been unable to keep such speculations at bay. But she had to be up and working: the blanchisseuse had to be paid, and Mme. Clopin's weekly bill, and all the little "extras" that even her frugal habits had to reckon with. And in the depths of her thought dwelt the dogging fear of illness and incapacity, goading her to work while she could. She hardly remembered the time when she had been without that fear; it was second nature now, and it kept her on her feet when other incentives might have failed. In the blankness of her misery she felt no dread of death; but the horror of being ill and "dependent" was in her blood.

In the first weeks of silence she wrote again and again to Deering, entreating him for a word, for a mere sign of life. From the first she had shrunk from seeming to assert any claim on his future, yet in her aching bewilderment she now charged herself with having been too possessive, too exacting in her tone. She told herself that his fastidiousness shrank from any but a "light touch," and that hers had not been light enough. She should have kept to the character of the "little friend," the artless consciousness in which tormented genius may find an escape from its complexities; and instead, she had dramatized their relation, exaggerated her own part in it, presumed, forsooth, to share the front of the stage with him, instead of being content to serve as scenery or chorus.

But though to herself she admitted, and even insisted on, the episodic nature of the experience, on the fact that for Deering it could be no more than an incident, she was still convinced that his sentiment for her, however fugitive, had been genuine.

His had not been the attitude of the unscrupulous male seeking a vulgar "advantage." For a moment he had really needed her, and if he was silent now, it was perhaps because he feared that she had mistaken the nature of the need and built vain hopes on its possible duration.

It was of the very essence of Lizzie's devotion that it sought instinctively the larger freedom of its object; she could not conceive of love under any form of exaction or compulsion. To make this clear to Deering became an overwhelming need, and in a last short letter she explicitly freed him from whatever sentimental obligation its predecessors might have seemed to impose. In this studied communication she playfully accused herself of having unwittingly sentimentalized their relation, affirming, in self-defense, a retrospective astuteness, a sense of the impermanence of the tenderer sentiments, that almost put Deering in the fatuous position of having mistaken coquetry for surrender. And she ended gracefully with a plea for the continuance of the friendly regard which she had "always understood" to be the basis of their sympathy. The document, when completed, seemed to her worthy of what she conceived to be Deering's conception of a woman of the world, and she found a spectral satisfaction in the thought of making her final appearance before him in that distinguished character. But she was never destined to learn what effect the appearance produced; for the letter, like those it sought to excuse, remained unanswered.



## The Letters

### V

THE fresh spring sunshine which had so often attended Lizzie Weston her dusty climb up the hill of St.-Cloud beamed on her, some two years later, in a scene and a situation of altered import.

The horse-chestnuts of the Champs-Elysees filtered its rays through the symmetrical umbrage inclosing the graveled space about Daurent's restaurant, and Miss West, seated at a table within that privileged circle, presented to the light a hat much better able to sustain its scrutiny than those which had sheltered the brow of Juliet Deering's instructress.

Her dress was in keeping with the hat, and both belonged to a situation rich in such possibilities as the act of a leisurely luncheon at Daurent's in the opening week of the Salon. Her companions, of both sexes, confirmed and emphasized this impression by an elaborateness of garb and an ease of attitude implying the largest range of selection between the forms of Parisian idleness; and even Andora Macy, seated opposite, as in the place of co-hostess or companion, reflected, in coy grays and mauves, the festal note of the occasion.

This note reverberated persistently in the ears of a solitary gentleman straining for glimpses of the group from a table wedged in the remotest corner of the garden; but to Miss West herself the occurrence did not rise above the usual. For nearly a year she had been acquiring the habit of such situations, and the act of offering a luncheon at Daurent's to her cousins, the Harvey Mearses of Providence, and their friend Mr. Jackson Benn, produced in her no emotion beyond the languid glow which Mr. Benn's presence was beginning to impart to such scenes.

"It's frightful, the way you've got used to it," Andora Macy had wailed in the first days of her friend's transfigured fortune, when Lizzie West had waked one morning to find herself among the heirs of an old and miserly cousin whose testamentary dispositions had formed, since her earliest childhood, the subject of pleasantry and conjecture in her own improvident family. Old Hezron Mears had never given any sign of life to the luckless Wests; had perhaps hardly been conscious of including them in the carefully drawn will which, following the old American convention, scrupulously divided his hoarded millions among his kin. It was by a mere genealogical accident that Lizzie, falling just within the golden circle, found herself possessed of a pittance sufficient to release her from the prospect of a long gray future in Mme. Clopin's pension.

The release had seemed wonderful at first; yet she presently found that it had destroyed her former world without giving her anew one. On the ruins of the old pension life bloomed the only flower that had ever sweetened her path; and beyond the sense of present ease, and the removal of anxiety for the future, her reconstructed existence blossomed with no compensating joys. She had hoped great things from the opportunity to rest, to travel, to look about her, above all, in various artful feminine ways, to be "nice" to the companions of her less privileged state; but such widenings of scope left her, as it were, but the more conscious of the empty margin of personal life beyond them. It was not till she woke to the leisure of her new days that she had the full sense of what was gone from them.

Their very emptiness made her strain to pack them with transient sensations: she was like the possessor of an unfurnished house, with random furniture and bric-a-brac perpetually pouring in "on approval." It was in this experimental character that Mr. Jackson Benn had fixed her attention, and the languid effort of her imagination to adjust him to her requirements was seconded by the fond complicity of Andora and the smiling approval of her cousins. Lizzie did not discourage these demonstrations: she suffered serenely Andora's allusions to Mr. Benn's infatuation, and Mrs. Mears's casual boast of his business standing. All the better if they could drape his narrow square-shouldered frame and round unwinking countenance in the trailing mists of sentiment: Lizzie looked and listened, not unhopeful of the miracle.

"I never saw anything like the way these Frenchmen stare! Doesn't it make you nervous, Lizzie?" Mrs. Mears broke out suddenly, ruffling her feather boa about an outraged bosom. Mrs. Mears was still in that stage of development when her countrywomen taste to the full the peril of being exposed to the gaze of the licentious Gaul.

Lizzie roused herself from the contemplation of Mr. Benn's round baby cheeks and the square blue jaw resting on his perpendicular collar. "Is some one staring at me?" she asked with a smile.

"Don't turn round, whatever you do! There — just over there, between the rhododendrons — the tall fair man

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alone at that table. Really, Harvey, I think you ought to speak to the head-waiter, or something; though I suppose in one of these places they'd only laugh at you," Mrs. Mears shudderingly concluded.

Her husband, as if inclining to this probability, continued the undisturbed dissection of his chicken wing; but Mr. Benn, perhaps aware that his situation demanded a more punctilious attitude, sternly revolved upon the parapet of his high collar in the direction of Mrs. Mears's glance.

"What, that fellow all alone over there? Why, he's not French; he's an American," he then proclaimed with a perceptible relaxing of the facial muscles.

"Oh!" murmured Mrs. Mears, as perceptibly disappointed, and Mr. Benn continued carelessly: "He came over on the steamer with me. He's some kind of an artist — a fellow named Deering. He was staring at me, I guess: wondering whether I was going to remember him. Why, how d' 'e do? How are you? Why, yes, of course; with pleasure — my friends, Mrs. Harvey Mears — Mr. Mears; my friends Miss Macy and Miss West."

"I have the pleasure of knowing Miss West," said Vincent Deering with a smile.

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### VI

EVEN through his smile Lizzie had seen, in the first moment, how changed he was; and the impression of the change deepened to the point of pain when, a few days later, in reply to his brief note, she accorded him a private hour.

That the first sight of his writing — the first answer to his letters — should have come, after three long years, in the shape of this impersonal line, too curt to be called humble, yet confessing to a consciousness of the past by the studied avoidance of its language! As she read, her mind flashed back over what she had dreamed his letters would be, over the exquisite answers she had composed above his name. There was nothing exquisite in the conventional lines before her; but dormant nerves began to throb again at the mere touch of the paper he had touched, and she threw the little note into the fire before she dared to reply to it.

Now that he was actually before her again, he became, as usual, the one live spot in her consciousness. Once more her tormented throbbing self sank back passive and numb, but now with all its power of suffering mysteriously transferred to the presence, so known, yet so unknown, at the opposite corner of her hearth. She was still Lizzie West, and he was still Vincent Deering; but the Styx rolled between them, and she saw his face through its fog. It was his face, really, rather than his words, that told her, as she furtively studied it, the tale of failure and slow discouragement which had so blurred its handsome lines. She kept afterward no precise memory of the actual details of his narrative: the pain it evidently cost him to impart it was so much the sharpest fact in her new vision of him. Confusedly, however, she gathered that on reaching America he had found his wife's small property gravely impaired; and that, while lingering on to secure what remained of it, he had contrived to sell a picture or two, and had even known a brief moment of success, during which he received orders and set up a studio. But inexplicably the tide had ebbed, his work remained on his hands, and a tedious illness, with its miserable sequel of debt, soon wiped out his small advantage. There followed a period of eclipse, still more vaguely pictured, during which she was allowed to infer that he had tried his hand at divers means of livelihood, accepting employment from a fashionable house-decorator, designing wall-papers, illustrating magazine articles, and acting for a time, she dimly understood, as the social tout of a new hotel desirous of advertising its restaurant. These disjointed facts were strung on a slender thread of personal allusions — references to friends who had been kind (jealously, she guessed them to be women), and to enemies who had darkly schemed against him. But, true to his tradition of "correctness," he carefully avoided the mention of names, and left her trembling conjectures to grope dimly through an alien crowded world in which there seemed little room for her small shy presence.

As she listened, her private pang was merged in the intolerable sense of his unhappiness. Nothing he had said explained or excused his conduct to her; but he had suffered, he had been lonely, had been humiliated, and she suddenly felt, with a fierce maternal rage, that there was no conceivable justification for any scheme of things in which such facts were possible. She could not have said why: she simply knew that it hurt too much to see him hurt.

Gradually it came to her that her unconsciousness of any personal grievance was due to her having so definitely determined her own future. She was glad she had decided, as she now felt she had, to marry Jackson Benn, if only for the sense of detachment it gave her in dealing with the case of Vincent Deering. Her personal safety insured her the requisite impartiality, and justified her in dwelling as long as she chose on the last lines of a chapter to which her own act had deliberately fixed the close. Any lingering hesitations as to the finality of her decision were dispelled by the imminent need of making it known to Deering; and when her visitor paused in his reminiscences to say, with a sigh, "But many things have happened to you too," his words did not so much evoke the sense of her altered fortunes as the image of the protector to whom she was about to intrust them.

"Yes, many things; it's three years," she answered.

Deering sat leaning forward, in his sad exiled elegance, his eyes gently bent on hers; and at his side she saw the solid form of Mr. Jackson Benn, with shoulders preternaturally squared by the cut of his tight black coat, and a tall shiny collar sustaining his baby cheeks and hard blue chin. Then the vision faded as Deering began to speak.

"Three years," he repeated, musingly taking up her words. "I've so often wondered what they'd brought you."

She lifted her head with a quick blush, and the terrified wish that he should not, at the cost of all his notions of

## The Letters

correctness, lapse into the blunder of becoming "personal."

"You've wondered?" She smiled back bravely.

"Do you suppose I haven't?" His look dwelt on her. "Yes, I daresay that was what you thought of me."

She had her answer pat — "Why, frankly, you know, I didn't think of you." But the mounting tide of her poor dishonored memories swept it indignantly away. If it was his correctness to ignore, it could never be hers to disavow.

"Was that what you thought of me?" she heard him repeat in a tone of sad insistence; and at that, with a quick lift of her head, she resolutely answered: "How could I know what to think? I had no word from you."

If she had expected, and perhaps almost hoped, that this answer would create a difficulty for him, the gaze of quiet fortitude with which he met it proved that she had underestimated his resources.

"No, you had no word. I kept my vow," he said.

"Your vow?"

"That you shouldn't have a word — not a syllable. Oh, I kept it through everything!"

Lizzie's heart was sounding in her ears the old confused rumor of the sea of life, but through it she desperately tried to distinguish the still small voice of reason.

"What was your vow? Why shouldn't I have had a syllable from you?"

He sat motionless, still holding her with a look so gentle that it almost seemed forgiving.

Then abruptly he rose, and crossing the space between them, sat down in a chair at her side. The deliberation of his movement might have implied a forgetfulness of changed conditions, and Lizzie, as if thus viewing it, drew slightly back; but he appeared not to notice her recoil, and his eyes, at last leaving her face, slowly and approvingly made the round of the small bright drawing-room. "This is charming. Yes, things have changed for you," he said.

A moment before she had prayed that he might be spared the error of a vain return upon the past. It was as if all her retrospective tenderness, dreading to see him at such a disadvantage, rose up to protect him from it. But his evasiveness exasperated her, and suddenly she felt the inconsistent desire to hold him fast, face to face with his own words.

Before she could reiterate her question, however, he had met her with another.

"You did think of me, then? Why are you afraid to tell me that you did?"

The unexpectedness of the challenge wrung an indignant cry from her.

"Didn't my letters tell you so enough?"

"Ah, your letters!" Keeping her gaze on his in a passion of unrelenting fixity, she could detect in him no confusion, not the least quiver of a sensitive nerve. He only gazed back at her more sadly.

"They went everywhere with me — your letters," he said.

"Yet you never answered them." At last the accusation trembled to her lips.

"Yet I never answered them."

"Did you ever so much as read them, I wonder?"

All the demons of self-torture were up in her now, and she loosed them on him, as if to escape from their rage.

Deering hardly seemed to hear her question. He merely shifted his attitude, leaning a little nearer to her, but without attempting, by the least gesture, to remind her of the privileges which such nearness had once implied.

"There were beautiful, wonderful things in them," he said, smiling.

She felt herself stiffen under his smile.

"You've waited three years to tell me so!"

He looked at her with grave surprise. "And do you resent my telling you even now?"

His parries were incredible. They left her with a breathless sense of thrusting at emptiness, and a desperate, almost vindictive desire to drive him against the wall and pin him there.

"No. Only I wonder you should take the trouble to tell me, when at the time — "

And now, with a sudden turn, he gave her the final surprise of meeting her squarely on her own ground.

"When at the time I didn't? But how could I — at the time?"

"Why couldn't you? You've not yet told me?"

He gave her again his look of disarming patience. "Do I need to? Hasn't my whole wretched story told you?"

## The Letters

"Told me why you never answered my letters?"

"Yes, since I could only answer them in one way — by protesting my love and my longing."

There was a long pause of resigned expectancy on his part, on hers, of a wild confused reconstruction of her shattered past. "You mean, then, that you didn't write because —"

"Because I found, when I reached America, that I was a pauper; that my wife's money was gone, and that what I could earn — I've so little gift that way! — was barely enough to keep Juliet clothed and educated. It was as if an iron door had been suddenly locked and barred between us."

Lizzie felt herself driven back, panting upon the last defenses of her incredulity. "You might at least have told me — have explained. Do you think I shouldn't have understood?"

He did not hesitate. "You would have understood. It wasn't that."

"What was it then?" she quavered.

"It's wonderful you shouldn't see! Simply that I couldn't write you that. Anything else — not that!"

"And so you preferred to let me suffer?"

There was a shade of reproach in his eyes. "I suffered too," he said.

It was his first direct appeal to her compassion, and for a moment it nearly unsettled the delicate poise of her sympathies, and sent them trembling in the direction of scorn and irony. But even as the impulse rose, it was stayed by another sensation. Once again, as so often in the past, she became aware of a fact which, in his absence, she always failed to reckon with — the fact of the deep irreducible difference between his image in her mind and his actual self, the mysterious alteration in her judgment produced by the inflections of his voice, the look of his eyes, the whole complex pressure of his personality. She had phrased it once self-reproachfully by saying to herself that she "never could remember him," so completely did the sight of him supersede the counterfeit about which her fancy wove its perpetual wonders. Bright and breathing as that counterfeit was, it became a gray figment of the mind at the touch of his presence; and on this occasion the immediate result was to cause her to feel his possible unhappiness with an intensity beside which her private injury paled.

"I suffered horribly," he repeated, "and all the more that I couldn't make a sign, couldn't cry out my misery. There was only one escape from it all — to hold my tongue, and pray that you might hate me."

The blood rushed to Lizzie's forehead. "Hate you — you prayed that I might hate you?"

He rose from his seat, and moving closer, lifted her hand gently in his. "Yes; because your letters showed me that, if you didn't, you'd be unhappier still."

Her hand lay motionless, with the warmth of his flowing through it, and her thoughts, too — her poor fluttering stormy thoughts — felt themselves suddenly penetrated by the same soft current of communion.

"And I meant to keep my resolve," he went on, slowly releasing his clasp. "I meant to keep it even after the random stream of things swept me back here in your way; but when I saw you the other day, I felt that what had been possible at a distance was impossible now that we were near each other. How was it possible to see you and want you to hate me?"

He had moved away, but not to resume his seat. He merely paused at a little distance, his hand resting on a chair-back, in the transient attitude that precedes departure.

Lizzie's heart contracted. He was going, then, and this was his farewell. He was going, and she could find no word to detain him but the senseless stammer "I never hated you."

He considered her with his faint grave smile. "It's not necessary, at any rate, that you should do so now. Time and circumstances have made me so harmless — that's exactly why I've dared to venture back. And I wanted to tell you how I rejoice in your good fortune. It's the only obstacle between us that I can't bring myself to wish away."

Lizzie sat silent, spellbound, as she listened, by the sudden evocation of Mr. Jackson Benn. He stood there again, between herself and Deering, perpendicular and reproachful, but less solid and sharply outlined than before, with a look in his small hard eyes that desperately wailed for reembodyment.

Deering was continuing his farewell speech. "You're rich now, you're free. You will marry." She vaguely saw him holding out his hand.

"It's not true that I'm engaged!" she broke out. They were the last words she had meant to utter; they were hardly related to her conscious thoughts; but she felt her whole will suddenly gathered up in the irrepressible impulse to repudiate and fling away from her forever the spectral claim of Mr. Jackson Benn.

## PART III

THIS story opened in the August CENTURY, with a scene between Vincent Deering, an American artist living in Paris, and Lizzie West, who for two years had been day-governess to the artist's young daughter, a discouraging pupil, mainly because she was neglected by an indolent, novel-reading mother. In the privacy of the studio, Lizzie West told the artist that she must resign her fruitless charge. Deering pleaded that in such case little Juliet would be hopelessly neglected, and in the teacher's wavering attitude he kissed her and established a relation of confidence and affection, which was discreetly cultivated, until, through the sudden death of Mrs. Deering, the teacher had reason to expect a devotion without evasion or concealment. Deering departed for America to settle his late wife's estate, but his fervent letters of farewell from train and steamer, with one on his arrival in New York, were his only messages to her.

In the Second Part, the hard-working teacher after sending many letters to Deering, which were unanswered, adjusted herself to the situation, and finally, through a moderate legacy, rearranged her life on a scale of comparative comfort. After an interval of three years Deering returned to Paris. He protested that his silence had been due to his unwillingness to make her a partner to the ill-fortune which had marked his return to America, and tactfully reawakened her love. The concluding chapters, given below, begin at a period in their married life after the birth of their child. — THE EDITOR.

VII

IT was the firm conviction of Andora Macy that every object in the Vincent Deerings' charming little house at Neuilly had been expressly designed for the Deerings' son to play with.

The house was full of pretty things, some not obviously applicable to the purpose; but Miss Macy's casuistry was equal to the baby's appetite, and the baby's mother was no match for them in the art of defending her possessions. There were moments, in fact, when Lizzie almost fell in with Andora's summary division of her works of art into articles safe or unsafe for the baby to lick, or resisted it only to the extent of occasionally substituting some less precious or less perishable object for the particular fragility on which her son's desire was fixed. And it was with this intention that, on a certain fair spring morning — which wore the added luster of being the baby's second birthday — she had murmured, with her mouth in his curls, and one hand holding a bit of Chelsea above his dangerous clutch: "Wouldn't he rather have that beautiful shiny thing over there in Aunt Andorra's hand?"

The two friends were together in Lizzie's little morning-room — the room she had chosen, on acquiring the house, because, when she sat there, she could hear Deering's step as he paced up and down before his easel in the studio she had built for him. His step had been less regularly audible than she had hoped, for, after three years of wedded bliss, he had somehow failed to settle down to the great work which was to result from that privileged state; but even when she did not hear him she knew that he was there, above her head, stretched out on the old divan from Passy, and smoking endless cigarettes while he skimmed the morning papers; and the sense of his nearness had not yet lost its first keen edge of bliss.

Lizzie herself, on the day in question, was engaged in a more arduous task than the study of the morning's news. She had never unlearned the habit of orderly activity, and the trait she least understood in her husband's character was his way of letting the loose ends of life hang as they would. She had been disposed at first to ascribe this to the chronic incoherence of his first menage; but now she knew that, though he basked under the rule of her beneficent hand, he would never feel any active impulse to further its work. He liked to see things fall into place about him at a wave of her wand; but his enjoyment of her household magic in no way diminished his smiling irresponsibility, and it was with one of its least amiable consequences that his wife and her friend were now dealing.

Before them stood two travel-worn trunks and a distended portmanteau, which had shed their contents in heterogeneous heap over Lizzie's rosy carpet. They represented the hostages left by her husband on his somewhat precipitate departure from a New York boarding-house, and indignantly redeemed by her on her learning, in a curt letter from his landlady, that the latter was not disposed to regard them as an equivalent for the arrears of Deering's board.

Lizzie had not been shocked by the discovery that her husband had left America in debt. She had too sad an acquaintance with the economic strain to see any humiliation in such accidents; but it offended her sense of order that he should not have liquidated his obligation in the three years since their marriage. He took her remonstrance with his usual disarming grace, and left her to forward the liberating draft, though her delicacy had provided him with a bank-account which assured his personal independence. Lizzie had discharged the duty without repugnance, since she knew that his delegating it to her was the result of his good-humored indolence and not of any design on her exchequer. Deering was not dazzled by money; his altered fortunes had tempted him to no excesses: he was simply too lazy to draw the check, as he had been too lazy to remember the debt it canceled.

"No, dear! No!" Lizzie lifted the Chelsea figure higher. "Can't you find something for him, Andora, among that rubbish over there? Where's the beaded bag you had in your hand just now? I don't think it could hurt him to lick that."

Miss Macy, bag in hand, rose from her knees, and stumbled through the slough of frayed garments and old studio properties. Before the group of mother and son she fell into a raptured attitude.

"Do look at him reach for it, the tyrant! Isn't he just like the young Napoleon?"

Lizzie laughed and swung her son in air. "Dangle it before him, Andora. If you let him have it too quickly, he won't care for it. He's just like any man, I think."

## The Letters

Andora slowly lowered the shining bag till the heir of the Deerings closed his masterful fist upon it. "There — my Chelsea's safe!" Lizzie smiled, setting her boy on the floor, and watching him stagger away with his booty.

Andora stood beside her, watching too. "Have you any idea where that bag came from, Lizzie?"

Mrs. Deering, bent above a pile of dis-collared shirts, shook an inattentive head. "I never saw such wicked washing! There isn't one that's fit to mend. The bag? No; I've not the least idea."

Andora surveyed her dramatically. "Doesn't it make you utterly miserable to think that some woman may have made it for him?"

Lizzie, bowed in anxious scrutiny above the shirts, broke into an unruffled laugh. "Really, Andora, really — six, seven, nine; no, there isn't even a dozen. There isn't a whole dozen of anything. I don't see how men live alone!"

Andora broodingly pursued her theme. "Do you mean to tell me it doesn't make you jealous to handle these things of his that other women may have given him?"

Lizzie shook her head again, and, straightening herself with a smile, tossed a bundle in her friend's direction. "No, it doesn't make me the least bit jealous. Here, count these socks for me, like a darling."

Andora moaned, "Don't you feel anything at all?" as the socks landed in her hollow bosom; but Lizzie, intent upon her task, tranquilly continued to unfold and sort. She felt a great deal as she did so, but her feelings were too deep and delicate for the simplifying process of speech. She only knew that each article she drew from the trunks sent through her the long tremor of Deering's touch. It was part of her wonderful new life that everything belonging to him contained an infinitesimal fraction of himself — a fraction becoming visible in the warmth of her love as certain secret elements become visible in rare intensities of temperature. And in the case of the objects before her, poor shabby witnesses of his days of failure, what they gave out acquired a special poignancy from its contrast to his present cherished state. His shirts were all in round dozens now, and washed as carefully as old lace. As for his socks, she knew the pattern of every pair, and would have liked to see the washerwoman who dared to mislay one, or bring it home with the colors "run"! And in these homely tokens of his well-being she saw the symbol of what her tenderness had brought him. He was safe in it, encompassed by it, morally and materially, and she defied the embattled powers of malice to reach him through the armor of her love. Such feelings, however, were not communicable, even had one desired to express them: they were no more to be distinguished from the sense of life itself than bees from the lime-blossoms in which they murmur.

"Oh, do look at him, Lizzie! He's found out how to open the bag!"

Lizzie lifted her head to smile a moment at her son, who sat throned on a heap of studio rubbish, with Andora before him on adoring knees. She thought vaguely, "Poor Andora!" and then resumed the discouraged inspection of a buttonless white waistcoat. The next sound she was aware of was a fluttered exclamation from her friend.

"Why, Lizzie, do you know what he used the bag for? To keep your letters in!"

Lizzie looked up more quickly. She was aware that Andora's pronoun had changed its object, and was now applied to Deering. And it struck her as odd, and slightly disagreeable, that a letter of hers should be found among the rubbish abandoned in her husband's New York lodgings.

"How funny! Give it to me, please."

"Give the bag to Aunt Andora, darling! Here — look inside, and see what else a big big boy can find there! Yes, here's another! Why, why — "

Lizzie rose with a shade of impatience and crossed the floor to the romping group beside the other trunk.

"What is it? Give me the letters, please." As she spoke, she suddenly recalled the day when, in Mme. Clopin's pension, she had addressed a similar behest to Andora Macy.

Andora had lifted a look of startled conjecture. "Why, this one's never been opened! Do you suppose that awful woman could have kept it from him?"

Lizzie laughed. Andora's imaginings were really puerile. "What awful woman? His landlady? Don't be such a goose, Andora. How can it have been kept back from him, when we've found it here among his things?"

"Yes; but then why was it never opened?"

Andora held out the letter, and Lizzie took it. The writing was hers; the envelop bore the Passy postmark; and it was unopened. She stood looking at it with a sudden sharp drop of the heart.

"Why, so are the others — all unopened!" Andora threw out on a rising note; but Lizzie, stooping over,



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stretched out her hand.

"Give them to me, please."

"Oh, Lizzie, Lizzie — " Andora, still on her knees, continued to hold back the packet, her pale face paler with anger and compassion. "Lizzie, they're the letters I used to post for you — the letters he never answered! Look!"

"Give them back to me, please."

The two women faced each other, Andora kneeling, Lizzie motionless before her, the letters in her hand. The blood had rushed to her face, humming in her ears, and forcing itself into the veins of her temples like hot lead. Then it ebbed, and she felt cold and weak.

"It must have been some plot — some conspiracy!" Andora cried, so fired by the ecstasy of invention that for the moment she seemed lost to all but the esthetic aspect of the case.

Lizzie turned away her eyes with an effort, and they rested on the boy, who sat at her feet placidly sucking the tassels of the bag. His mother stooped and extracted them from his rosy mouth, which a cry of wrath immediately filled. She lifted him in her arms, and for the first time no current of life ran from his body into hers. He felt heavy and clumsy, like some one else's child; and his screams annoyed her.

"Take him away, please, Andora."

"Oh, Lizzie, Lizzie!" Andora wailed.

Lizzie held out the child, and Andora, struggling to her feet, received him.

"I know just how you feel," she gasped out above the baby's head.

Lizzie, in some dark hollow of herself, heard the echo of a laugh. Andora always thought she knew how people felt!

"Tell Marthe to take him with her when she fetches Juliet home from school."

"Yes, yes." Andora gloated over her. "If you'd only give way, my darling!"

The baby, howling, dived over Andora's shoulder for the bag.

"Oh, take him!" his mother ordered.

Andora, from the door, cried out: "I'll be back at once. Remember, love, you're not alone!"

But Lizzie insisted, "Go with them — I wish you to go with them," in the tone to which Miss Macy had never learned the answer.

The door closed on her outraged back, and Lizzie stood alone. She looked about the disordered room, which offered a dreary image of the havoc of her life. An hour or two ago everything about her had been so exquisitely ordered, without and within; her thoughts and emotions had lain outspread before her like delicate jewels laid away symmetrically in a collector's cabinet. Now they had been tossed down helter-skelter among the rubbish there on the floor, and had themselves turned to rubbish like the rest. Yes, there lay her life at her feet, among all that tarnished trash.

She knelt and picked up her letters, ten in all, and examined the flaps of the envelopes. Not one had been opened — not one. As she looked, every word she had written fluttered to life, and every feeling prompting it sent a tremor through her. With vertiginous speed and microscopic vision she was reliving that whole period of her life, stripping bare again the black ruin over which the drift of three happy years had fallen.

She laughed at Andora's notion of a conspiracy — of the letters having been "kept back." She required no extraneous aid in deciphering the mystery: her three years' experience of Deering shed on it all the light she needed. And yet a moment before she had believed herself to be perfectly happy! Now it was the worst part of her anguish that it did not really surprise her.

She knew so well how it must have happened. The letters had reached him when he was busy, occupied with something else, and had been put aside to be read at some future time — a time which never came. Perhaps on his way to America, on the steamer, even, he had met "some one else" — the "some one" who lurks, veiled and ominous, in the background of every woman's thoughts about her lover. Or perhaps he had been merely forgetful. She had learned from experience that the sensations which he seemed to feel with the most exquisite intensity left no reverberations in his mind — that he did not relive either his pleasures or his pains. She needed no better proof of that than the lightness of his conduct toward his daughter. He seemed to have taken it for granted that Juliet would remain indefinitely with the friends who had received her after her mother's death, and it was at Lizzie's suggestion that the little girl was brought home and that they had established themselves at Neuilly to be near her school. But Juliet once with them, he became the model of a tender father, and Lizzie wondered that he had not

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felt the child's absence, since he seemed so affectionately aware of her presence.

Lizzie had noted all this in Juliet's case, but had taken for granted that her own was different; that she formed, for Deering, the exception which every woman secretly supposes herself to form in the experience of the man she loves. Certainly, she had learned by this time that she could not modify his habits, but she imagined that she had deepened his sensibilities, had furnished him with an "ideal" — angelic function! And she now saw that the fact of her letters — her unanswered letters — having, on his own assurance, "meant so much" to him, had been the basis on which this beautiful fabric was reared.

There they lay now, the letters, precisely as when they had left her hands. He had not had time to read them; and there had been a moment in her past when that discovery would have been the sharpest pang imaginable to her heart. She had traveled far beyond that point. She could have forgiven him now for having forgotten her; but she could never forgive him for having deceived her.

She sat down, and looked again vaguely about the room. Suddenly she heard his step overhead, and her heart contracted. She was afraid he was coming down to her. She sprang up and bolted the door; then she dropped into the nearest chair, tremulous and exhausted, as if the pushing of the bolt had required an immense muscular effort. A moment later she heard him on the stairs, and her tremor broke into a cold fit of shaking. "I loathe you — I loathe you!" she cried.

She listened apprehensively for his touch on the handle of the door. He would come in, humming a tune, to ask some idle question and lay a caress on her hair. But no, the door was bolted; she was safe. She continued to listen, and the step passed on. He had not been coming to her, then. He must have gone down — stairs to fetch something — another newspaper, perhaps. He seemed to read little else, and she sometimes wondered when he had found time to store the material that used to serve for their famous "literary" talks. The wonder shot through her again, barbed with a sneer. At that moment it seemed to her that everything he had ever done and been was a lie.

She heard the house-door close, and started up. Was he going out? It was not his habit to leave the house in the morning.

She crossed the room to the window, and saw him walking, with a quick decided step, between the budding lilacs to the gate. What could have called him forth at that unwonted hour? It was odd that he should not have told her. The fact that she thought it odd suddenly showed her how closely their lives were interwoven. She had become a habit to him, and he was fond of his habits. But to her it was as if a stranger had opened the gate and gone out. She wondered what he would feel if he knew that she felt that.

"In an hour he will know," she said to herself, with a kind of fierce exultation; and immediately she began to dramatize the scene. As soon as he came in she meant to call him up to her room and hand him the letters without a word. For a moment she gloated on the picture; then her imagination recoiled from it. She was humiliated by the thought of humiliating him. She wanted to keep his image intact; she would not see him.

He had lied to her about her letters — had lied to her when he found it to his interest to regain her favor. Yes, there was the point to hold fast. He had sought her out when he learned that she was rich. Perhaps he had come back from America on purpose to marry her; no doubt he had come back on purpose. It was incredible that she had not seen this at the time. She turned sick at the thought of her fatuity and of the grossness of his arts. Well, the event proved that they were all heneeded. But why had he gone out at such an hour? She was irritated to find herself still preoccupied by his comings and goings.

Turning from the window, she sat down again. She wondered what she meant to do next. No, she would not show him the letters; she would simply leave them on his table and go away. She would leave the house with her boy and Andora. It was a relief to feel a definite plan forming itself in her mind — something that her uprooted thoughts could fasten on. She would go away, of course; and meanwhile, in order not to see him, she would feign a headache, and remain in her room till after luncheon. Then she and Andora would pack a few things, and fly with the child while he was dawdling about up — stairs in the studio. When one's house fell, one fled from the ruins: nothing could be simpler, more inevitable.

Her thoughts were checked by the impossibility of picturing what would happen next. Try as she would, she could not see herself and the child away from Deering. But that, of course, was because of her nervous weakness. She had youth, money, energy: all the trumps were on her side. It was much more difficult to imagine what would become of Deering. He was so dependent on her, and they had been so happy together! The fact struck her as

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illogical, and even immoral, and yet she knew he had been happy with her. It never happened like that in novels: happiness "built on a lie" always crumbled, and buried the presumptuous architect beneath the ruins. According to the laws of every novel she had ever read, Deering, having deceived her once, would inevitably have gone on deceiving her. Yet she knew he had not gone on deceiving her.

She tried again to picture her new life. Her friends, of course, would rally about her. But the prospect left her cold; she did not want them to rally. She wanted only one thing — the life she had been living before she had given her baby the embroidered bag to play with. Oh, why had she given him the bag? She had been so happy, they had all been so happy! Every nerve in her clamored for her lost happiness, angrily, unreasonably, as the boy had clamored for his bag! It was horrible to know too much; there was always blood in the foundations. Parents "kept things" from children — protected them from all the dark secrets of pain and evil. And was any life livable unless it were thus protected? Could any one look in the Medusa's face and live?

But why should she leave the house, since it was hers? Here, with her boy and Andora, she could still make for herself the semblance of a life. It was Deering who would have to go; he would understand that as soon as he saw the letters.

She pictured him in the act of going — leaving the house as he had left it just now. She saw the gate closing on him for the last time. Now her vision was acute enough: she saw him as distinctly as if he were in the room. Ah, he would not like returning to the old life of privations and expedients! And yet she knew he would not plead with her.

Suddenly a new thought rushed through her mind. What if Andora had rushed to him with the tale of the discovery of the letters — with the "Fly, you are discovered!" of romantic fiction? What if he had left her for good? It would not be unlike him, after all. Under his wonderful gentleness he was always evasive and inscrutable. He might have said to himself that he would forestall her action, and place himself at once on the defensive. It might be that she had seen him go out of the gate for the last time.

She looked about the room again, as if this thought had given it a new aspect. Yes, this alone could explain her husband's going out. It was past twelve o'clock, their usual luncheon hour, and he was scrupulously punctual at meals, and gently reproachful if she kept him waiting. Only some unwonted event could have caused him to leave the house at such an hour and with such marks of haste. Well, perhaps it was better that Andora should have spoken. She mistrusted her own courage; she almost hoped the deed had been done for her. Yet her next sensation was one of confused resentment. She said to herself, "Why has Andora interfered?" She felt baffled and angry, as though her prey had escaped her. If Deering had been in the house, she would have gone to him instantly and overwhelmed him with her scorn. But he had gone out, and she did not know where he had gone, and oddly mingled with her anger against him was the latent instinct of vigilance, the solicitude of the woman accustomed to watch over the man she loves. It would be strange never to feel that solicitude again, never to hear him say, with his hand on her hair: "Why, you foolish child, were you worried? Am I late?"

The sense of his touch was so real that she stiffened herself against it, flinging back her head as if to throw off his hand. The mere thought of his caress was hateful; yet she felt it in all her traitorous veins. Yes, she felt it, but with horror and repugnance. It was something she wanted to escape from, and the fact of struggling against it was what made its hold so strong. It was as though her mind were sounding her body to make sure of its allegiance, spying on it for any secret movement of revolt.

To escape from the sensation, she rose and went again to the window. No one was in sight. But presently the gate began to swing back, and her heart gave a leap — she knew not whether up or down. A moment later the gate opened slowly to admit a perambulator, propelled by the nurse and flanked by Juliet and Andora. Lizzie's eyes rested on the familiar group as if she had never seen it before, and she stood motionless, instead of flying down to meet the children.

Suddenly there was a step on the stairs, and she heard Andora's agitated knock. She unbolted the door, and was strained to her friend's emaciated bosom.

"My darling!" Miss Macy cried. "Remember you have your child — and me!"

Lizzie loosened herself gently. She looked at Andora with a feeling of estrangement which she could not explain.

"Have you spoken to my husband?" she asked, drawing coldly back.

"Spoken to him? No." Andora stared at her in genuine wonder.

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"Then you haven't met him since he left me?"

"No, my love. Is he out? I haven't met him."

Lizzie sat down with a confused sense of relief, which welled up to her throat and made speech difficult.

Suddenly light came to Andora. "I understand, dearest. You don't feel able to see him yourself. You want me to go to him for you." She looked about her, scenting the battle. "You're right, darling. As soon as he comes in I'll go to him. The sooner we get it over the better."

She followed Lizzie, who without answering her had turned mechanically back to the window. As they stood there, the gate moved again, and Deering entered the garden.

"There he is now!" Lizzie felt Andora's fervent clutch upon her arm. "Where are the letters? I will go down at once. You allow me to speak for you? You trust my woman's heart? Oh, believe me, darling," Miss Macy panted, "I shall know just what to say to him!"

"What to say to him?" Lizzie absently repeated.

As her husband advanced up the path she had a sudden trembling vision of their three years together. Those years were her whole life; everything before them had been colorless and unconscious, like the blind life of the plant before it reaches the surface of the soil. They had not been exactly what she dreamed; but if they had taken away certain illusions, they had left richer realities in their stead. She understood now that she had gradually adjusted herself to the new image of her husband as he was, as he would always be. He was not the hero of her dream, but he was the man she loved, and who had loved her. For she saw now, in this last wide flash of pity and initiation, that, as a solid marble may be made out of worthless scraps of mortar, glass and pebbles, so out of mean mixed substances may be fashioned a love that will bear the stress of life.

More urgently, she felt the pressure of Miss Macy's hand.

"I shall hand him the letters without a word. You may rely, love, on my sense of dignity. I know everything you're feeling at this moment!"

Deering had reached the door-step. Lizzie continued to watch him in silence till he disappeared under the glazed roof of the porch below the window; then she turned and looked almost compassionately at her friend.

"Oh, poor Andora, you don't know anything — you don't know anything at all!" she said.

THE END