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By Edward Bellamy

1898

John Lansing first met Mary Hollister at the house of his friend Pinney, whose wife was her sister. She had soft gray eyes, a pretty color in her cheeks, rosy lips, and a charming figure. In the course of the evening somebody suggested mind-reading as a pastime, and Lansing, who had some powers, or supposed powers, in that direction, although he laughed at them himself, experimented in turn with the ladies. He failed with nearly every subject until it came Mary Hollister's turn. As she placed her soft palm in his, closed her eyes, and gave herself up to his influence, he knew that he should succeed with her, and so he did. She proved a remarkably sympathetic subject, and Lansing was himself surprised, and the spectators fairly thrilled, by the feats he was able to perform by her aid. After that evening he met her often, and there was more equally remarkable mind-reading; and then mind-reading was dropped for heart-reading, and the old, old story they read in each other's hearts had more fascination for them than the new science. Having once discovered that their hearts beat in unison, they took no more interest in the relation of their minds.

The action proper of this story begins four years after their marriage, with a very shocking event,--nothing less than the murder of Austin Flint, who was found dead one morning in the house in which he lived alone. Lansing had no hand in the deed, but he might almost as well have had; for, while absolutely guiltless, he was caught in one of those nets of circumstance which no foresight can avoid, whereby innocent men are sometimes snared helplessly, and delivered over to a horrid death. There had been a misunderstanding between him and the dead man, and only a couple of days before the murder, they had exchanged blows on the street. When Flint was found dead, in the lack of any other clue, people thought of Lansing. He realized that this was so, and remained silent as to a fact which otherwise he would have testified to at the inquest, but which he feared might now imperil him. He had been at Austin Flint's house the night of the murder, and might have committed it, so far as opportunity was concerned. In reality, the motive of his visit was anything but murderous. Deeply chagrined by the scandal of the fight, he had gone to Flint to apologize, and to make up their quarrel. But he knew very well that nobody would believe that this was his true object in seeking his enemy secretly by night, while the admission of the visit would complete a circumstantial evidence against him stronger than had often hanged men. He believed that no one but the dead man knew of the call, and that it would never be found out. He had not told his wife of it at the time, and still less afterward, on account of the anxiety she would feel at his position.

Two weeks passed, and he was beginning to breathe freely in the assurance of safety, when, like a thunderbolt from a cloud that seems to have passed over, the catastrophe came. A friend met him on the street one day, and warned him to escape while he could. It appeared that he had been seen to enter Flint's house that night. His concealment of the fact had been accepted as corroborating evidence of his guilt, and the police, who had shadowed him from the first, might arrest him at any moment. The conviction that he was guilty, which the friend who told him this evidently had, was a terrible comment on the desperateness of his position. He walked home as in a dream. His wife had gone out to a neighbor's. His little boy came to him, and clambered on his knee. "Papa, what makes your face so wet?" he asked, for there were great drops on his forehead. Then his wife came in, her face white, her eyes full of horror. "Oh, John!" she exclaimed. "They say you were at Mr. Flint's that night, and they are going to arrest you. Oh, John, what does it mean? Why don't you speak? I shall go mad, if you do not speak. You were not there! Tell me that you were not there!" The ghastly face he raised to hers might well have seemed to confess everything.

At least she seemed to take it so, and in a fit of hysterical weeping sank to the floor, and buried her face in her hands upon a chair. The children, alarmed at the scene, began to cry. It was growing dark, and as he looked out of the window, Lansing saw an officer and a number of other persons approaching the house. They were coming to arrest him. Animal terror, the instinct of self-preservation, seized upon his faculties, stunned and demoralized as he was by the suddenness with which this calamity had come upon him. He opened the door and fled, with a score of men and boys yelling in pursuit. He ran wildly, blindly, making incredible leaps and bounds over obstacles. As men sometimes do in nightmares, he argued with himself, as he ran, whether this could possibly be a waking experience, and inclined to think that it could not. It must be a dream. It was too fantastically horrible to be anything else.

Presently he saw just before him the eddying, swirling current of the river, swollen by a freshet. Still half convinced that he was in a nightmare, and, if he could but shake it off, should awake in his warm bed, he plunged headlong in, and was at once swirled out of sight of his pursuers beneath the darkening sky. A blow from a floating object caused him to throw up his arms, and, clutching something solid, he clambered upon a shed carried away by the freshet from an up-river farm. All night he drifted with the swift current, and in the morning landed in safety thirty miles below the village from which he had fled for life.

So John Lansing, for no fault whatever except an error of judgment, if even it was that, was banished from home, and separated from his family almost as hopelessly as if he were dead. To return would be to meet an accusation of murder to which his flight had added overwhelming weight. To write to his wife might be to put the officers of the law, who doubtless watched her closely, upon his scent.

Under an assumed name he made his way to the far West, and, joining the rush to the silver mines of Colorado, was among the lucky ones. At the end of three years he was a rich man. What he had made the money for, he could not tell, except that the engrossment of the struggle had helped him to forget his wretchedness. Not that he ever did forget it. His wife and babies, from whose embraces he had been so suddenly torn, were always in his thoughts. Above all, he could not forget the look of horror in his wife's eyes in that last terrible scene. To see her again, and convince her, if not others, that he was innocent, was a need which so grew upon him that, at the end of three years, he determined to take his life in his hand and return home openly. This life of exile was not worth living.

One day, in the course of setting his affairs in order for his return, he was visiting a mining camp remote from the settlements, when a voice addressed him by his old name, and looking around he saw Pinney. The latter's first words, as soon as his astonishment and delight had found some expression, assured Lansing that he was no longer in danger. The murderer of Austin' Flint had been discovered, convicted, and hanged two years previous. As for Lansing, it had been taken for granted that he was drowned when he leaped into the river, and there had been no further search for him. His wife had been broken-hearted ever since, but she and the children were otherwise well, according to the last letters received by Pinney, who, with his wife, had moved out to Colorado a year previous.

Of course Lansing's only idea now was to get home as fast as steam could carry him; but they were one hundred miles from the railroad, and the only communication was by stage. It would get up from the railroad the next day, and go back the following morning. Pinney took Lansing out to his ranch, some miles from the mining camp, to pass the interval. The first thing he asked Mrs. Pinney was if she had a photograph of his wife. When she brought him one, he durst not look at it before his hosts. Not till he had gone to his room and locked the door did he trust himself to see again the face of his beloved Mary.

That evening Mrs. Pinney told him how his wife and children had fared in his absence. Her father had helped them at first, but after his death Mary had depended upon needlework for support, finding it hard to make the two ends meet.

Lansing groaned at hearing this, but Mrs. Pinney comforted him. It was well worth while having troubles, she said, if they could be made up to one, as all Mary's would be to her when she saw her husband.

The upcoming stage brought the mail, and next day Pinney rode into camp to get his weekly newspaper, and engage a passage down the next morning for Lansing. The day dragged terribly to the latter, who stayed at the ranch. He was quite unfit for any social purpose, as Mrs. Pinney, to whom a guest in that lonely place was a rare treat, found to her sorrow, though indeed she could not blame him for being poor company. He passed hours, locked in his room, brooding over Mary's picture. The rest of the day he spent wandering about the place, smiling and talking to himself like an imbecile, as he dreamed of the happiness so soon to crown his trials. If he could have put himself in communication with Mary by telegraph during this period of waiting, it would have been easier to get through, but the nearest telegraph station was at the railroad. In the afternoon he saddled a horse and rode about the country, thus disposing of a couple of hours.

When he came back to the house, he saw that Pinney had returned, for his horse was tethered to a post of the front piazza. The doors and windows of the living-room were open, and as he reached the front door, he heard Pinney and his wife talking in agitated tones.

"Oh, how could God let such an awful thing happen?" she was exclaiming, in a voice broken by hysterical sobbing. "I 'm sure there was never anything half so horrible before. Just as John was coming home to her, and she worshiping him so, and he her! Oh, it will kill him! Who is going to tell him? Who can tell him?"

"He must not be told to-day," said Pinney's voice. "We must keep it from him at least for to-day."

Lansing entered the room. "Is she dead?" he asked quietly. He could not doubt, from what he had overheard, that she was.

"God help him! He 'll have to know it now," exclaimed Pinney.

"Is she dead?" repeated Lansing.

"No, she is n't dead."

"Is she dying, then?"

"No, she is well."

"It's the children, then?"

"No," answered Pinney. "They are all right."

"Then, in God's name, what is it?" demanded Lansing, unable to conceive what serious evil could have happened to him, if nothing had befallen his wife and babies.

"We can't keep it from him now," said Pinney to his wife. "You 'll have to give him her letter."

"Can't you tell me what it is? Why do you keep me in suspense?" asked Lansing, in a voice husky with a dread he knew not of what.

"I can't, man. Don't ask me!" groaned Finney. "It's better that you should read it."

Mrs. Finney's face expressed an agony of compassion as, still half clutching it, she held out a letter to Lansing. "John, oh, John," she sobbed; "remember, she's not to blame! She doesn't know."

The letter, was in his wife's handwriting, addressed to Mrs. Pinney, and read as follows:--

> *You will be surprised by what I am going to tell you. You, who know how I loved John, must have taken it for granted that I would never marry again. Not that it could matter to him. Too well I feel the gulf between the dead and living to fancy that his peace could be troubled by any of the weaknesses of mortal hearts. Indeed, he often used to tell me that, if he died, he wanted me to marry again, if ever I felt like doing so; but in those happy days I was always sure that I should be taken first. It was he who was to go first, though, and now it is for the sake of his children that I am going to do what I never thought I could. I am going to marry again. As they grow older and need more, I find it impossible for me to support them, though I do not mind how hard I work, and would wear my fingers to the bone rather than take any other man's name after being John's wife. But I cannot care for them as they should be cared for. Johnny is now six, and ought to go to school, but I cannot dress him decently enough to send him. Mary has outgrown all her clothes, and I cannot get her more. Her feet are too tender to go bare, and I cannot buy her shoes. I get less and less sewing since the new dressmaker came to the village, and soon shall have none. We live, oh so plainly! For myself I should not care, but the children are growing and need better food. They are John's children, and for their sake I have brought myself to do what I never could have done but for them. I have promised to marry Mr. Whitcomb. I have not deceived him as to why alone I marry him. He has promised to care for the children as his own, and to send Johnny to college, for I know his father would have wanted him to go. It will be a very quiet wedding, of course. Mr. Whitcomb has had some cards printed to send to a few friends, and I inclose one to you. I cannot say that I wish you could be present, for it will be anything but a joyful day to me. But when I meet John in heaven, he will hold me to account for the children he left me, and this is the only way by which I can provide for them. So long as it is well with them, I ought not to care for myself.*
>
> *Your sister,*
>
> *Maky Lansing.*

The card announced that the wedding would take place at the home of the bride, at six o'clock on the afternoon of the 27th of June.

It was June 27 that day, and it was nearly five o'clock. "The Lord help you!" ejaculated Pinney, as he saw, by the ashen hue which overspread Lansing's face, that the full realization of his situation had come home to him. "We meant to keep it from you till to-morrow. It might be a little easier not to know it till it was over than now, when it is going on, and you not able to lift a finger to stop it."

"Oh, John," cried Mrs. Pinney once more; "remember, she does n't know!" and, sobbing hysterically, she fled from the room, unable to endure the sight of Lansing's face.

He had fallen into a chair, and was motionless, save for the slow and labored breathing which shook his body. As he sat there in Pinney's ranch this pleasant afternoon, the wife whom he worshiped never so passionately as now, at their home one thousand miles away, was holding another man by the hand, and promising to be his wife.

It was five minutes to five by the clock on the wall before him. It therefore wanted but five minutes of six, the hour of the wedding, at home, the difference in time being just an hour. In the years of his exile, by way of enhancing the vividness of his dreams of home, he had calculated exactly the difference in time from various points in Colorado, so that he could say to himself, "Now Mary is putting the babies to bed;" "Now it is her own bedtime;" "Now she is waking up;" or "Now the church-bells are ringing, and she is walking to church." He was accustomed to carry these two standards of time always in his head, reading one by the other, and it was this habit, bred of doting fondness, which now would compel him to follow, as if he were a spectator, minute by minute, each step of the scene being enacted so far away.

People were prompt at weddings. No doubt already the few guests were arriving, stared at by the neighbors from their windows. The complacent bridegroom was by this time on his way to the home of the bride, or perhaps knocking at the door. Lansing knew him well, an elderly, well-to-do furniture-maker, who had been used to express a fatherly admiration for Mary. The bride was upstairs in her chamber, putting the finishing touches to her toilet; or, at this very moment, it might be, was descending the stairs to take the bridegroom's arm and go in to be married.

Lansing gasped. The mountain wind was blowing through the room, but he was suffocating.

Pinney's voice, seeming to come from very far away, was in his ears. "Rouse yourself, for God's sake! Don't give it all up that way. I believe there's a chance yet. Remember the mind-reading you used to do with her. You could put almost anything into her mind by just willing it there. That's what I mean. Will her to stop what she is doing now. Perhaps you may save her yet. There's a chance you may do it. I don't say there's more than a chance, but there 's that There's a bare chance. That's better than giving up. I 've heard of such things being done. I 've read of them. Try it, for God's sake I Don't give up."

At any previous moment of his life the suggestion that he could, by mere will power, move the mind of a person a thousand miles away, so as to reverse a deliberate decision, would have appeared to Lansing as wholly preposterous as no doubt it does to any who read these lines. But a man, however logical he may be on land, will grasp at a straw when drowning, as if it were a log. Pinney had no need to use arguments or adjurations to induce Lansing to adopt his suggestion. The man before him was in no mood to balance probabilities against improbabilities. It was enough that the project offered a chance of success, albeit infinitesimal; for on the other hand there was nothing but an intolerable despair, and a fate that truly seemed more than flesh and blood could bear.

Lansing had sprung to his feet while Pinney was speaking. "I 'm going to try it, and may God Almighty help me!" he cried, in a terrible voice.

"Amen!" echoed Pinney.

Lansing sank into his chair again, and sat leaning slightly forward, in a rigid attitude. The expression of his eyes at once became fixed. His features grew tense, and the muscles of his face stood out. As if to steady the mental strain by a physical one, he had taken from the table a horseshoe which had lain there, and held it in a convulsive grip.

Pinney had made this extraordinary suggestion in the hope of diverting Lansing's mind for a moment from his terrible situation, and with not so much faith even as he feigned that it would be of any practical avail. But now, as he looked upon the ghastly face before him, and realized the tremendous concentration of purpose, the agony of will, which it expressed, he was impressed that it would not be marvelous if some marvel should be the issue. Certainly, if the will really had any such power as Lansing was trying to exert, as so many theorists maintained, there could never arise circumstances better calculated than these to call forth a supreme assertion of the faculty. He went out of the room on tiptoe, and left his friend alone to fight this strange and terrible battle with the powers of the air for the honor of his wife and his own.

There was little enough need of any preliminary effort on Lansing's part to fix his thoughts upon Mary. It was only requisite that to the intensity of the mental vision, with which he had before imagined her, should be added the activity of the will, turning the former mood of despair into one of resistance. He knew in what room of their house the wedding party must now be gathered, and was able to represent to himself the scene there as vividly as if he had been present. He saw the relatives assembled; he saw Mr. Davenport, the minister, and, facing him, the bridal couple, in the only spot where they could well stand, before the fireplace. But from all the others, from the guests, from the minister, from the bridegroom, he turned his thoughts, to fix them on the bride alone. He saw her as if through the small end of an immensely long telescope, distinctly, but at an immeasurable distance. On this face his mental gaze was riveted, as by conclusive efforts his will strove to reach and move hers against the thing that she was doing. Although his former experiments in mental phenomena had in a measure familiarized him with the mode of addressing his powers to such an undertaking as this, yet the present effort was on a scale so much vaster that his will for a time seemed appalled, and refused to go out from him, as a bird put forth from a ship at sea returns again and again before daring to essay the distant flight to land. He felt that he was gaining nothing. He was as one who beats the air. It was all he could do to struggle against the influences that tended to deflect and dissipate his thoughts. Again and again a conviction of the uselessness of the attempt, of the madness of imagining that a mere man could send a wish, like a voice, across a continent, laid its paralyzing touch upon his will, and nothing but a sense of the black horror which failure meant enabled him to throw it off. If he but once admitted the idea of failing, all was lost. He must believe that he could do this thing, or he surely could not. To question it was to surrender his wife; to despair was to abandon her to her fate. So, as a wrestler strains against a mighty antagonist, his will strained and tugged in supreme stress against the impalpable obstruction of space, and, fighting despair with despair, doggedly held to its purpose, and sought to keep his faculties unremittingly streaming to one end. Finally, as this tremendous effort, which made minutes seem hours, went on, there came a sense of efficiency, the feeling of achieving something. From this consciousness was first born a faith, no longer desperate, but rational, that he might succeed, and with faith came an instantaneous tenfold multiplication of force. The overflow of energy lost the tendency to dissipation and became steady. The will appeared to be getting the mental faculties more perfectly in hand, if the expression may be used, not only concentrating but fairly fusing them together by the intensity with which it drove them to their object. It was time. Already, perhaps, Mary was about to utter the vows that would give her to another. Lansing's lips moved. As if he were standing at her side, he murmured with strained and labored utterance ejaculations of appeal and adjuration.

Then came the climax of the stupendous struggle. He became aware of a sensation so amazing that I know not if it can be described at all,--a sensation comparable to that which comes up the mile-long sounding-line, telling that it touches bottom. Fainter far, as much finer as is mind than matter, yet not less unmistakable, was the thrill which told the man, agonizing on that lonely mountain of Colorado, that the will which he had sent forth to touch the mind of another, a thousand miles away, had found its resting-place, and the chain between them was complete. No longer projected at random into the void, but as if it sent along an established medium of communication, his will now seemed to work upon hers, not uncertainly and with difficulty, but as if in immediate contact. Simultaneously, also, its mood changed. No more appealing, agonizing, desperate, it became insistent, imperious, dominating. For only a few moments it remained at this pitch, and then, the mental tension suddenly relaxing, he aroused to a perception of his surroundings, of which toward the last he had become oblivious. He was drenched with perspiration and completely exhausted. The iron horseshoe which he had held in his hands was drawn halfway out.

Thirty-six hours later, Lansing, accompanied by Pinney, climbed down from the stage at the railroad station. During the interval Lansing had neither eaten nor slept. If at moments in that time he was able to indulge the hope that his tremendous experiment had been successful, for the main part the overwhelming presumption of common sense and common experience against such a notion made it seem childish folly to entertain it.

At the station was to be sent the dispatch, the reply to which would determine Mary's fate and his own. Pinney signed it, so that, if the worst were true, Lansing's existence might still remain a secret; for of going back to her in that case, to make her a sharer of his shame, there was no thought on his part. The dispatch was addressed to Mr. Davenport, Mary's minister, and merely asked if the wedding had taken place.

They had to wait two hours for the answer. When it came, Lansing was without on the platform, and Pinney was in the office. The operator mercifully shortened his suspense by reading the purport of the message from the tape: "The dispatch in answer to yours says that the wedding did not take place."

Pinney sprang out upon the platform. At sight of Lansing's look of ghastly questioning, the tears blinded him, and he could not speak, but the wild exultation of his face and gestures was speech enough.

The second day following, Lansing clasped his wife to his breast, and this is the story she told him, interrupted with weepings and shudderings and ecstatic embraces of reassurance. The reasons which had determined her, in disregard of the dictates of her own heart, to marry again, have been sufficiently intimated in her letter to Mrs. Pinney. For the rest, Mr. Whitcomb was a highly respectable man, whom she esteemed and believed to be good and worthy. When the hour set for the marriage arrived, and she took her place by his side before the minister and the guests, her heart indeed was like lead, but her mind calm and resolved. The preliminary prayer was long, and it was natural, as it went on, that her thoughts should go back to the day when she had thus stood by another's side. She had ado to crowd back the scalding tears, as she contrasted her present mood of resignation with the mingling of virginal timidity and the abandon of love in her heart that other day. Suddenly, seeming to rise out of this painful contrast of the past and the present, a feeling of abhorrence for the act to which she was committed possessed her mind. She had all along shrunk from it, as any sensitive woman might from a marriage without love, but there had been nothing in that shrinking to compare in intensity with this uncontrollable aversion which now seized upon her to the idea of holding a wife's relation to the man by her side. It had all at once come oyer her that she could not do it. Nevertheless she was a sensible and rational woman as well as a sweet and lovely one. Whatever might be the origin of this sudden repugnance, she knew it had none in reason. She was fulfilling a promise which she had maturely considered, and neither in justice to herself nor the man to whom she had given it could she let a purely hysterical attack like this prevent its consummation. She called reason and common sense to her aid, and resolutely struggled to banish the distressing fancies that assailed her. The moisture stood out upon her forehead with the severity of the conflict, which momentarily increased. At last the minister ended his prayer, of which she had not heard a word. The bridal pair were bidden to take each other by the hand. As the bridegroom's fingers closed around hers, she could not avoid a shudder as at a loathsome contact. It was only by a supreme effort of self-control that she restrained from snatching her hand away with a scream. She did not hear what the minister went on to say. Every faculty was concentrated on the struggle, which had now become one of desperation, to repress an outbreak of the storm that was raging within. For, despite the shuddering protest of every instinct and the wild repulsion with which every nerve tingled, she was determined to go through the ceremony. But though the will in its citadel still held out, she knew that it could not be for long. Each wave of emotion that it withstood was higher, stronger, than the last. She felt that it was going, going. She prayed that the minister might be quick, while yet she retained a little self-command, and give her an opportunity to utter some binding vow which should make good her solemn engagement, and avert the scandal of the outbreak on the verge of which she was trembling. "Do you," said the minister to Mr. Whitcomb, "take this woman whom you hold by the hand to be your wife, to honor, protect, and love while you live?" "I do," replied the bridegroom promptly. "Do you," said the minister, looking at Mary, "take the man whom you hold by the hand to be your husband, to love and honor while you live?" Mary tried to say "Yes," but at the effort there surged up against it an opposition that was almost tangible in its overpowering force. No longer merely operating upon her sensibilities, the inexplicable influence that was conquering her now seized on her physical functions, and laid its interdict upon her tongue. Three times she strove to throw off the incubus, to speak, but in vain. Great drops were on her forehead; she was deadly pale, and her eyes were wild and staring; her features twitched as in a spasm, while she stood there struggling with the invisible power that sealed her lips. There was a sudden movement among the spectators; they were whispering together. They saw that something was wrong. "Do you thus promise?" repeated the minister, after a pause. "Nod, if you can't speak," murmured the bridegroom. His words were the hiss of a serpent in her ears. Her will resisted no longer; her soul was wholly possessed by unreasoning terror of the man and horror of the marriage. "No! no! no!" she screamed in piercing tones, and snatching her hand from the bridegroom, she threw herself upon the breast of the astonished minister, sobbing wildly as she clung to him, "Save me, save me! Take me away! I can't marry him,--I can't! Oh, I can't!"

The wedding broke up in confusion, and that is the way, if you choose to think so, that John Lansing, one thousand miles away, saved his wife from marrying another man.

"If you choose to think so," I say, for it is perfectly competent to argue that the influence to which Mary Lansing yielded was merely an hysterical attack, not wholly strange at such a moment in the case of a woman devoted to her first husband, and reluctantly consenting to second nuptials. On this theory, Lansing's simultaneous agony at Pinners ranch in Colorado was merely a coincidence; interesting, perhaps, but unnecessary to account for his wife's behavior. That John and Mary Lansing should reject with indignation this simple method of accounting for their great deliverance is not at all surprising in view of the common proclivity of people to be impressed with the extraordinary side of circumstances which affect themselves; nor is there any reason why their opinion of the true explanation of the facts should be given more weight than another's. The writer, who has merely endeavored to put this story into narrative form, has formed no opinion on it which is satisfactory to himself, and therefore abstains from any effort to influence the reader's judgment.