

The Long Run

from the Edith Wharton story, adapted by John Hadden ©1214

Prologue

A high-society New York City apartment. Discreetly spirited party noises peak and dwindle. AMES passes MERRICK in a remote passageway before turning toward him.

AMES

Merrick, is that you?

MERRICK

Ames? By god, you're back. I thought you'd disappeared

AMES

I did, in a way.

MERRICK

Ames... my god. Ames. You're done then? With your derricks and bridges? The great wall is finished?

AMES

I left China about ten years ago. Africa since then.

MERRICK

The heart of darkness.

AMES

It keeps me busy.

MERRICK

Well I'm glad you're back. I can't begin to tell you. I'm alone in this crowd. I've missed you, goddammit.

AMES

Listen, old friend, I'm not back really; I'm only here to see my father into the ground. I'll never get away from my cranes and my riggers. And you, Merrick, are you well?

MERRICK

Oh... yes, well enough. Well. You're here now. There's something to be said for someone to talk to. If there's anything to talk about nowadays.

AMES

Are you still at the Iron Works?

MERRICK

I am, I am...

AMES

I thought you'd move on.

MERRICK

No, I'm the same old bland industrialist you left behind.

AMES

I liked your sonnet-making, do you remember?

MERRICK

Oh, I remember...I remember that. Yes. Running the old man's factory has become a kind of religious discipline for me. A way to remind me that... Well. I tell myself that it suits me often enough to believe it. We find our place and then we're condemned to it.

AMES

Yes, I suppose so... Tell me, who is the lady in gray?

MERRICK

You know her, don't you? It's Mrs. Reardon. But you must not have heard of her marriage? You knew her as Mrs. Trent. Oh come on now, you knew her well.

AMES

Mrs. Philip Trent.

MERRICK

Mrs. Philip Trent.

AMES

Ah. Penelope?

MERRICK

Yes—Penelope. You find her so changed?

AMES

No... no, not so much.

MERRICK

Only different?

AMES

Yes—different.

MERRICK

I suppose we're all very different. To you, I mean—coming from a different world and time.

AMES

I recognized the rest of you, but she used to be the one who stood out.

MERRICK

Yes, she did.

AMES

Mrs. Trent. Mrs. *Reardon*. Trent...?

MERRICK

Died.

AMES

She—she looks worn down. Blurred, like the figures in that tapestry behind her.

MERRICK

That's a little cruel. Life wears everybody down.

AMES

Yes—except those it makes more distinct. They're the rare ones, of course; but she *was* rare.

MERRICK

I can't stay here—I can't bear it. Listen, I want to see more of you. I was sorry to hear about your father. I think he missed you quite a lot. As did I. Will you come down to my place this weekend?... No, don't see me out—I want to slip away quietly.

AMES

Yes, I'll come.

MERRICK

All right. Good-bye.—*She remembers you.* You should speak to her.

AMES

I will. (*Merrick starts to go*) Merrick! How soon after Trent's death did she remarry?

MERRICK

Seven years ago.

AMES

And is Reardon here to-night?

MERRICK

Yes; over there, talking to our hostess.

AMES

Is *that* her husband? What's he like?

MERRICK

Oh, the best fellow in the world. But they've spotted us. I'm not here.

Merrick goes; for a moment Ames is alone. Then he prepares himself for the entrance of PENELOPE and REARDON. Penelope enters first.

PENELOPE

Hello.

AMES

Hello.

PENELOPE

How long have you been back?

AMES

A week at the most.

PENELOPE

Are you here to stay?

AMES

No, my father died.

PENELOPE

Oh, I'm sorry... I thought you hated these affairs.

AMES

No, not at all.

PENELOPE

I do.

AMES

Why do you come?

PENELOPE

Reardon brings me along. It's good for business. *(pause)* Well, you're as voluble as ever. Was that Merrick just now?

AMES

Yes.

PENELOPE

He was fond of you, as I remember.

AMES

I was fond of him.

PENELOPE

Why did you go?

AMES

I went to work. I thought I might try being useful to someone.

PENELOPE

And have you been useful to someone?

AMES

I've helped a great number of people get from here to there.

PENELOPE

Has anyone been useful to you?

AMES

I don't know what you mean.

PENELOPE

Yes you do.

AMES

Then, no.

PENELOPE

It was a little abrupt. Your leaving us all behind. Never mind... Merrick seemed in a hurry to be gone.

AMES

He was afraid of running into you and your husband, I believe.

PENELOPE

Nonsense. We spoke with him at length earlier this evening. We see him all the time.

AMES

Ah, then I was mistaken.

PENELOPE

What did you say to him? (*Reardon enters*) Ames, my husband—Tony Reardon.

REARDON (*genuinely friendly*)

Mr. Ames? The elusive Mr. Charles Ames? I've heard quite a lot about you. Our own Dr. Livingstone, I presume! Hah! How the devil are you? And how the devil is the rest of the world? Amaze us, sir. You know my wife, Penelope.

AMES

Yes.

REARDON

And how do you find your old haunts? Has the jungle changed much since you went into exile? This side of the Park, I mean, of course.

AMES

It's changed. But not surprisingly. Nothing is at rest.

REARDON

Oh? I should have thought some things never change. The sweet stench of Wall Street, the martini lunch, the Harvard-Yale game. I don't suppose you miss it.

AMES

Not really, I have other preoccupations.

REARDON

Healing sick natives? Shining a light into the darkness?

AMES

Building bridges.

REARDON

You build bridges! Well then, build us a bridge or two—don't we need one, darling?

PENELOPE

Yes.

REARDON

Ha! Very good. Well, we must be off. The evening fades. It's good to meet you. We'll see more of one another I hope. I want to hear all the good news from afar. I want to gain a little something from your perspective. Next time I will ply you with whatever it takes. Say goodnight, my love.

PENELOPE

Good night, Mr. Ames.

AMES

Good night.

The Reardons leave the room. Ames' smile fades.

The Scene

Merrick's house outside the city. There is a dining table and a comfortable sitting area by a fireplace. Merrick is at breakfast; Ames enters.

MERRICK

Good morning! Did you sleep well?

AMES

Very well, thanks.

MERRICK

It's the air out here in Yonkers. You sleep better. Coffee? Tea? A large Yonkers breakfast—eggs, muffins, bacon and coffee! Will that do the trick? I've eaten.

AMES

No thank you, coffee will do. (*serves himself*) You've been up long?

MERRICK

Force of habit. I like to imagine that all my fellow mortals are asleep and I am truly alone in the world every day before dawn.

AMES

Are they so bothersome, your fellow mortals?

MERRICK

Yes, they are. Bothersome. Did I tell you about my foreman?

AMES

No...

MERRICK

Well, there's nothing much to tell.

Pause

AMES

I read your manuscript.

MERRICK

Ah! I didn't mean to keep you up with reading.

AMES

I thought it might be another volume of poetry.

MERRICK

No, no, I haven't written a line of verse since before you left for China, sorry—just general considerations, essays. The fruits of fifty years of inexperience. What do you think? It's worn down—blurred? Like the figures in an old tapestry?

AMES

Hmm... what about your foreman?

MERRICK

No, dammit, tell me what you think.

AMES

It's a little... resigned.

MERRICK

Ha! Well, so am I. Resigned. A man can't serve two masters.

AMES

You mean business and literature?

MERRICK

Yes... You've got to choose your fruit; and you never know till afterward which of them has the rotten core.

AMES

Merrick, there's never been a fruit since time began that didn't go rotten by and by. The ripeness is all. You bite when it's fresh. Before you die.

MERRICK

You've been gone too long, Ames. Nowadays we can our fruit so it doesn't rot.

AMES

You eat canned fruit?

MERRICK

Yes, I do.

AMES

I'm sorry to hear it. Damn it, Merrick, you need an outlet of some kind. You had something in you once—

MERRICK

You think I can turn it on and off like a garden hose? You think a man can come back to his Muse the same way... the same way he comes back to his wife after other women have lost interest in him?

AMES

No; as he comes back to his wife—his true calling, that is—after the day's work is done... You should have done that, Merrick. You put in your day's work.

MERRICK

Well you see, there's the problem with poetry! I don't know what the hell you mean! I should have gotten a wife? So that there'd have been some one waiting for me when the Muse decamped? Or should I have clung to the Muse? As it happens I never tried—in fact, for fear they'd ditch me, I put them both out of doors. Out of that very door they went—the two of 'em, one rainy night: and one stopped and looked back, to see if I wasn't going to beg her to stay—and I didn't—so off they went, the both of them....

AMES

I don't follow you. The Muse and...?

MERRICK

You met the Muse's shadow once in that little collection of sonnets you say you liked; well, you've met the woman too, and you used to like her; though you nearly didn't recognize her when you saw her the other evening.... No, I won't ask you how she struck you when you talked to her: I know well enough. She struck you as dully as my latest essays struck you. Don't argue. I know. The world is cruel. And we men have no pity. But you remember what she *was*...

AMES

Yes. She did not have that perpetual smile pinned to her face. She had some deep magnetic pull; I always waited for her to say something true all of a sudden. I think we all did. I might have said the same thing of you. Merrick, you should have gotten the hell out.

MERRICK

(getting up, restless) All right. I wanted to. You know after my father's death I tried to sell the factory. I don't dislike my trade, and I've made a good thing of it in the end; but I was sick to death of being a pleasant young man with a long line of dinner parties on my list, meeting the same people again and again. The same matrons inspecting me on behalf of their over-watered post-debutante daughters,

MERRICK (*cont'd*)

as if at a flower show. Well—I became moody. I was cold and unsociable and then I had sudden flushes of curiosity—I would go out and collect stray bits of conversation in railway stations... strange faces that I passed in the street... I had to be among things that were unexpected and unknown; and it seemed to me that nobody could understand this, but I wanted to believe that somewhere just out of reach there might be some one who *did*. I wanted to believe that but I had no hope of it.... And then, one evening, I saw Mrs. Trent as if for the first time.

PENELOPE, as she used to be, not in grey, enters the room. There is no contact between her and Ames. She exists only in Merrick's imagination. She plays the part of his perfect anima, watching him quietly.

MERRICK (*cont'd*)

It was at a dinner party—and there she was, standing in front of the same damned tapestry we saw the other evening; she was nothing so extraordinary at first glance; but then she turned to look at me and for the first time in my life I saw something like a picture walking out of its frame. I felt that she was looking steadily at me, that her eyes were resting on me with the weight of the very question I'd been asking for many months. I went over to her and she walked with me into the music-room. Some one had been singing. There were low lights there, and a few couples sat in those confidential corners our hostesses so thoughtfully provide; but they were just painted in. We were real. We knew that the whole of life was flowing back and forth between us. We talked, of course—I mean, we used *words*:

They play the scene. Ames, still seated at the table, sees her now.

MERRICK

Mrs. Trent...

PENELOPE

Mr. Merrick.

MERRICK

Do you have a cigarette?

PENELOPE

No, nor a cigar, nor a derringer. I'm no Emma Goldman.

MERRICK

I know you're not.

PENELOPE

Good.

MERRICK

What are your plans... for the Spring?

PENELOPE

Nothing too radical. A visit to my sister and her family in Kitty Hawk.

MERRICK

Is she a pioneer of flight?

PENELOPE

No, but she lives not far from the dunes... And you?

MERRICK

And I what?

PENELOPE

Are you a pioneer of flight?

MERRICK

That remains to be seen. Only I can't go alone.

PENELOPE

Oh?

MERRICK

No, Orville must have his Wilbur.

PENELOPE

And who is your Wilbur?

MERRICK

I'm speaking metaphorically.

PENELOPE

You're a poet.

MERRICK

I've tried my hand at it.

PENELOPE

I know. Mrs. Dunmoor has shown me your sonnets.

MERRICK

Ah. You've the advantage over me.

PENELOPE

No, you have the advantage, Mr. Merrick.

MERRICK

I will believe you, Mrs. Trent, though I'm not sure what will become of it.

PENELOPE

I am.

MERRICK

Sorry?

PENELOPE

I *am* sure what will become of it.

MERRICK

Speak, Oracle.

PENELOPE

Something of merit, no doubt. And then nothing, after all.

MERRICK

I believe you.

PENELOPE

So you said.

MERRICK

Well, it's all one.

PENELOPE

I don't agree. But we've gone astray... What are your plans for the Spring, Mr. Merrick?

MERRICK

I have no plan, let alone plans, plural. I run a factory.

PENELOPE

It doesn't stop for plans? To catch its breath? To breathe a little?

MERRICK

No, it doesn't.

PENELOPE

A pity.

MERRICK

(to Ames, though still looking at Penelope; they shake hands goodbye, lingering)
As if there were any sense in plans, now that this thing had happened! By the end of the evening I had said nothing to her that I might not have said to any other woman there; but I knew we should meet the next day—and the next...

AMES

Merrick...

MERRICK

Oh, I resisted. I knew I was not the first to think—to feel—these things. I tried to laugh it away—what was I looking for, a soul? I didn't want to be a dupe; and Penelope Trent was not that kind of woman. But my resistance was only half-hearted. What I really felt—*all* I really felt—was that flood of joy she had given me. That's about as analytical as I could get about it.

AMES

What of her marriage? Did you think of that?

Merrick returns to the table; Penelope withdraws to watch him.

MERRICK

Oh, don't play the vicar with me, Ames! She had married that pompous stick Philip Trent because she needed a home, and maybe she wanted a little luxury. She'd been poor—and what use would she have been to anyone in that condition?

AMES

Yes, I know her story. It was appalling. We all had our own thoughts about the marriage and so on, but there it was—and it worked out as far as anyone could tell.

MERRICK

(letting his gaze shift to Penelope) Which was all the more surprising, since Penelope had never made any attempt to hide her colours. “She was made of prismatic fires...” She took up smoking, she talked subversively...

AMES

...she did as she liked and she went where she chose...

MERRICK

...She danced all over the Trent prejudices and the Trent principles as if upon an old barn floor; all without apparent offence to her solemn husband and his cloud of cousins. I believe her frankness and directness struck them dumb. And she never, for an instant, used her position to any advantage. With a husband like Trent it would have been so easy! Maybe she felt there was no need. She knew Trent could no more help being Trent than she could help being herself—and there was the end of it. But there was a place—a little hotel room. When we met...

PENELOPE

(to Ames, looking at him for the first time) It was like having been shut up for months in the hold of a ship, and coming suddenly on deck on a day that was all flying blue and silver...

MERRICK

It was like starting out on an ocean voyage. You might understand this if anyone can. The glorious plunge into the unknown, and the thought: “If only I never had to come back!” And the air! And, oh, the wind, and the islands, and the sunsets!

Penelope goes behind Merrick and puts her hands on his cheek and his breast, briefly looking at Ames.

PENELOPE

Darling...

MERRICK

My Penny, my own wild thing.

PENELOPE

This... I've been longing for this all my life.

MERRICK

Mmm...

PENELOPE

And what shall I do, now that longing is done, hm?

MERRICK

This dingy room...

PENELOPE

Don't. This room is beautiful in its tired old way.

MERRICK

This place? This ugly nowhere, at the end of a railroad-line where no one goes unless...

PENELOPE

Go on...

MERRICK

Unless they are ashamed to be who they are.

PENELOPE

Or afraid. That they will lose something that is forbidden in this world, without which they might as well be... what?

MERRICK

An old chair?

PENELOPE

A broken jug?

MERRICK

A bright penny in the dark bottom of a wishing well.

PENELOPE

A Merrick without his concubine.

MERRICK

No.

PENELOPE

Yes, look at me, his bingo!

MERRICK

No!

PENELOPE

Or something else...

MERRICK

What?

PENELOPE

Whatever you want, unless ...

MERRICK

Unless... Merrick's love is taken.

PENELOPE

Merrick...

MERRICK

I'm sorry, I...

PENELOPE

Never... never mind... But don't call this place ugly. Not while I'm within earshot. Its ungainliness is what allows us, and many before us, and many to come, who wish to obey their souls' longing, for once in eternity, to be left alone with something real. This place is a heaven. All the more so for its stained curtains and its rutted bed.

MERRICK

I don't want to leave this room. Much as I hate it.

PENELOPE

There, that's my Merrick.

MERRICK

It goes too fast. Too soon we stagger out into the darkness.

PENELOPE

Yes. But... this was magnificent.

MERRICK

You don't think we jumped the gun?

PENELOPE (*laughing*)

What a hideous expression! Jumped the gun. My love, shall we jump the gun, what say you?

He grapples with her.

MERRICK

Yes, let's! We'll jump the gun...

PENELOPE

No, stop! Stop! ... No, my only regret is that *this one moment* will never come again.

She kneels to be at eye-level with him.

PENELOPE (*cont'd*)

As I say it, it's gone forever.

MERRICK

Yes... Dear God, you make me happy. I'm almost sick with happiness.

They look into one another's eyes for a long moment before she rises and goes to the corner again, giving Ames a quick look as she passes him.

MERRICK (*to Ames*)

And we were calm, subdued, physically. We savored it. We were friends. Love is deeper than friendship, but friendship is a good deal wider. We had both. Our thoughts met the way our eyes met: as if we loved each other because we liked each other. We had a healthy passion that could stand there on the open deck. It was not a beautiful madness shrinking away below...

We took our time—we were in no hurry to reach what we knew it was leading to! No. We were going there willy-nilly. We relaxed, we grew confident. In time, less time than I remember, probably, we found ourselves on the very border.

The scene shifts. We are in a café. Now Ames withdraws to watch, as Penelope has been doing. She takes Ames' chair at the table.

PENELOPE

Oh, Merrick, it's you. I wanted to speak with you. Have you got a cigarette?

MERRICK

Penelope! Of course, have a seat. Coffee? *(to an invisible waiter)* Another coffee, please.

PENELOPE

My husband's not feeling well.

MERRICK

I'm sorry to hear it. Is it serious?

PENELOPE

It's a cold that's gone to his chest. The doctor recommends travel.

MERRICK

Travel?

PENELOPE

We're making preparations to see the world.

MERRICK

The world?

PENELOPE

Drier climates.

MERRICK

But he can't *go* anywhere! What would happen if he didn't show up at the club in the afternoon and make pronouncements about the financial state of affairs as revealed in his morning paper? The state would totter.

PENELOPE

Trent's very interested in the idea. He sees it as a blessing.

MERRICK

How soon will you be gone?

PENELOPE

I don't know, a few weeks. Soon. Merrick...

She hesitates; he says nothing. She gets up; steps away from the table. He watches and listens as in a dream.

MERRICK

It was a shock, something we could never have foreseen. Philip Trent had seemed so utterly indifferent to anything but his almighty routine. Wall Street, the Clubs, his metropolitan rituals. Penelope was busy preparing him for the journey. To move him was like mobilizing an army.

The looming separation brought our feelings to the surface. Yet I was powerless, so I pretended that I was deliberately letting her go—there was no help for it, no way of preventing it. It was as if I were flailing uselessly against something in a nightmare. She belonged to Trent: she was part of his luggage when he traveled as she was part of his household furniture when he stayed at home. I saw her now barely at all—listless moments here and there...

One rare November afternoon, in her drawing-room in town—

Merrick and Penelope, three weeks later. At first, all three maintain their positions in the space.

PENELOPE

We're booked for Rome. We sail on the twelfth.

MERRICK

It can't be—it can't be!

PENELOPE

What can't be?

MERRICK

This—this! Two weeks?

PENELOPE

We're thinking of Spain after Rome—

MERRICK

Two weeks—two weeks! And the months we've lost—the days that belonged to us!

PENELOPE

Yes... *(pause)* I'm thankful it's settled.

She turns away from him as tears begin streaming down her face. Ames sees what Merrick does not.

MERRICK

Don't you *feel* anything at all? You understand this *closes the door* on us.

PENELOPE

I understand.

She goes without looking at him. Out in the hall we hear her speaking to someone.

PENELOPE (off)

Yes, we're really going. We sail on the twelfth.

Back at Merrick's breakfast room. Ames settles slowly in a chair by the fire.

MERRICK

I wrote her a long letter that night—and waited. On the third day I had a brief line saying that she was coming up to visit friends nearby, and that she would find a way to see me. I came out here that night. There was rain the next morning and I was angry, because I'd wanted to take her for a drive or a long walk. It was impossible to talk to her inside the house. And only eleven days were left! I won't tell you about every hellish moment I waited that she didn't come, but I'll never forget a single one. In any case I stared at the door one way or another all day long till well after dark. Finally here I was standing on the rug like an automaton, noticing a bad crack in one of the door panels, when I heard the sound of wheels on the gravel. The door opened and she came in.

She enters, in from the rain.

PENELOPE

Well, you see, I've come.

MERRICK

You've come—you've come! You're here, here, here!

PENELOPE

You said the door was closed—

MERRICK

I know, but thank god you've come!

PENELOPE

Wait.

She undoes her hair as he draws her to the chair by the fire. Ames gets up in time and steps back. Merrick kneels by her, hides his face in her lap. She puts her hand on his head. He looks up, weeping; she smiles.

PENELOPE (*cont'd*)

Oh, before I forget—I left my trunk at the station. Here's the check. Can you send for it?

Merrick's reaction is slow, dull.

PENELOPE

Then you didn't expect me to stay?

MERRICK

I hadn't dared dream.... your trunk?

PENELOPE

You thought I'd come—just for an hour?

MERRICK

How could I think anything else? I thought you'd have come earlier. You brought a trunk? I adore you. I'm bowled over! But it would be *known* if you—if you stayed here overnight. Everyone around here sees everything.

PENELOPE

Yes; but you don't understand—I haven't come for a night; if you want me I've come for always.

Merrick's reaction is too slow, again.

MERRICK

I've no right to expose you to the risk. I love you. Give me the next few hours, I beg you: there's a train that will get you to town by midnight. And then we'll arrange something—in town, where it's safer for you—more easily managed... It's beautiful, it's heavenly of you to have come, but I love you too much—I must take care of you and think for you—It's my duty, dearest heart, as a man. The more I love you the more I'm bound to—

PENELOPE

It's raining. I suppose you can telephone for a carriage?... *Will* you telephone, please?

MERRICK

Not yet! You can't go like this!

PENELOPE

I can't stay like this.

MERRICK

You don't know in the least what you're asking for!

PENELOPE

Yes, I do: *everything*.

MERRICK

Or nothing? The closed door?

PENELOPE

That's your phrase.

MERRICK

It's not fair. That's why—

PENELOPE

Why you won't?

MERRICK

Why I cannot—may not!

PENELOPE

Why you'll take another night and not a life? Oh, Merrick. I often don't tell you everything—I think you'll agree; you've been on the verge of telling me so; you dislike that "Never mind" of mine, that I use when I don't know what to say without crushing your poor feeling about yourself; it's not as if I don't see you—well, allow me to break the habit, and my proper place as a woman, and speak. You think I'm beside myself—raving? I'm not: I was never saner. I've often thought this might happen. This thing we have is no ordinary thing. If it had been we wouldn't have drifted so placidly, so confidently all these months. We would have skipped to the last page—and then thrown down the book. We wouldn't have felt that we could trust the future as we did. We were in no hurry because we knew we wouldn't get tired; and when two people feel that about each other they must live together—or not see each other at all. I don't see what else they can do. A little paddle across the bay won't do—I'm for the high seas, my dear!

MERRICK

Give me a chance to catch my breath. Let me catch up, my wild being. You are too wild; this is too sudden, you're asking me in a moment to know something

MERRICK (*cont'd*)

you've worked out in exquisite detail over I don't know how long. It's as if you've set sail without me.

PENELOPE

I had to know what was in your heart.

MERRICK

And so you had to make me nearly lose my mind with waiting, and then ambush me with... with this proposition that is sure to bring us both to ruin? And it would be much worse for you than for me.

PENELOPE

To ruin? To our lives as they have been, yes... You ask me to think of myself. But the beauty of our being together will be that, for the first time, I shall. I shall dare to! Now I have to think of all the tedious trifles I can pack the days with, because I'm afraid—I'm afraid—to hear the voice of the real me, down below, in the windowless underground hole where I keep her...

MERRICK

But my darling, society is a dreadful, dangerous thing. Man and Woman are no match for it.

PENELOPE

I'm not talking about Man and Woman, I'm talking about you and me. I don't know what's best for the Woman-in-general. Very likely she'll bolt when she should stay at home. And it's the same with the man: he'll always do the wrong thing. The weak heads commit follies, but it's the strong ones that ought to: and my point is that you and I are both strong enough to behave like fools if we want to... Think, for the first time we should be able to dictate our own terms, one of which will be that no bores need apply. Think of being cured of all one's chronic bores! We shall feel as jolly as people do after a successful operation!

MERRICK

Penny, you frighten me. You seem almost to enjoy my predicament.

PENELOPE

It's not yours I'm speaking of. And I'm not enjoying it, no, my dear, I'm pleading for my life.

MERRICK

Penny! Have you considered the moment after? Have you thought of the pack of dogs, angry at our our glorious declaration of independence in the face of their own enforced docility, waiting for a sign of weakness, of failure? Do you know what people are?

PENELOPE

Ah, you think me naïve. You think I idealize the situation. No, I don't think it ideal. I've been taught the sex codes that preserve our pious congregation of little monarchies; I know what happens to women who break the order of things and I've seen the consequences—the loss of dignity, the blast of contempt from all sides—you think I haven't imagined how it would feel never to know when we might run into someone who *knew*, to be pointed at, and shunned? But there is *the hypothesis* of a man and a woman whose love is stronger than all of that. Is there not? And if there is, how would not such a power destroy these two, from starved passion, fever in the blood, concealed, distorted, consuming all other interests, wilting, hardening, and dying at last of silence, unless embraced openly for what it is? Would you settle for the usual solution? What would become of our love if we had to keep it like a pretty useless animal that we went to peek at sometimes in a cage?

Long pause

But it's plain that I've misjudged the strength it: you don't want the real thing. Call me a carriage! I may seem composed to you now but I cannot maintain the act much longer.

Penelope gathers her things to go. She pauses to look at him once more before leaving.

MERRICK

Oh, if only you hadn't come to me here!

PENELOPE

Forgive me; there was no other way.

The scene dissolves.

MERRICK

There was more to this agonizing scene, of course. She was many more times the courageous and deep-perceiving soul than I was. I was no match. I pretended to follow her lead and invited her to examine point by point—and she agreed to this pitiless examination—the possible outcomes of what had been our transcendent

MERRICK (*cont'd*)

love until it became a cadaver on a pathologist's table. It took most of the night to cut it to pieces.

I ordered the carriage and I watched her drive off into the rain. I made her promise that she would see me again at her house in town, and that we should then have what I called 'a decisive talk' but I don't think even I fell for that. I knew, and she knew, that the end had come.

AMES

... and for what? Merrick! You'd have to have given up the Iron Works: which you don't much care about—you'd have to have given up New York: which you despise. And you knew that your best chance of self-development, and consequently of general usefulness, lay in thinking rather than doing. You always planned to sell the business anyway, and travel, and write. Well! Those ambitions wouldn't have been harmed by dropping out of your social setting. On the contrary, your work would have gained by it, because you'd have been brought nearer to life-as-it-is, in contrast to life-as-a-visiting-card....

MERRICK

And the joy of not having any more visits to make! No more invitations to answer! Don't you think I thought of *that*? (*laughs*) You're right of course, but after that, a rage of conformity possessed me. Poetry, ideas—all that had to go. A kind of dull self-discipline seemed to me the only exercise worthy of a reflecting mind. I had to justify my great refusal, and I did it by plunging myself up to the eyes into the very routine I had been struggling to get away from. But nothing worked. Every half-effort negated itself. I even tried falling in love with another woman. But the experience was trivial, the risk being so slight, and...

AMES

So you came to understand the truth of what she'd been saying.

MERRICK

It would be wrong to say I *understood*—but one sleepless night when I was on the torture wheel of our last conversation, as usual those nights, going over it again and again, one unassuming phrase of hers, the last thing she said to me, took on a certain light, and the meaning of her words finally exploded in my head: 'There was no other way.' the phrase I had half-smiled at—at the time—as an echo of the heroine's stock farewell. I had never really understood why Penelope had come to my house that night. I had never been able to make that particular act—which could hardly be dismissed as a blind surge of passion—square with my conception of her character. She had come to my house, had brought her trunk with her, had thrown herself at my feet with all possible violence and publicity, in order to give me a pretext, a loophole, an honorable excuse, for doing and

MERRICK (*cont'd*)

saying... what?—precisely what I had said and done! Of course she had known all along how I would react... She knew. I was not so unlike the rest of them.

AMES

You were unlike the rest—if only... But look at you now, quoting your old poems—“A prismatic fire!”... What happened to *her*?

MERRICK

(*after a pause*) The Trents stayed away for two years; a year after they got back Trent was killed in a car accident. (*after a somber moment they share a very small chuckle*) After a decent interval I wrote her a few lines, to which she sent a friendly answer. I went to her house to ask her to marry me—but I left without saying anything real at all. Why? I don't know. There wasn't an appeal I could make that wouldn't mock the appeal I had rejected. Instead I sat there and talked of her husband's death, of her plans, of my sympathy; I knew she understood—and knowing that made it harder. She wanted me to go—I could tell. I left after five minutes or so.

Merrick has pointed at the mantelpiece. When Ames looks, he finds a small box and opens it: an engagement ring.

AMES

And after having staked your life on a socially acceptable consummation, when the chance came, you rejected that as well.

MERRICK

Yes... Yes, I did. The next time we met she had married again, to that walking billboard Reardon... The worst of it is that now she and I meet as old friends. We dine at the same houses, we talk about the same people, we play bridge together and I lend her books. And sometimes Reardon slaps me on the back and says: “Come and dine with us, old fellow! What you need is some cheering up!” And I go and dine with them, and he tells me how comfortable she makes him, and what an ass I am not to marry; and she smiles and presses on me a second helping of her *Poulet Maryland*, and I smoke one of Reardon's cigars, and at half-past ten I get into my overcoat, and walk back to my rooms alone...

Pause.

AMES

I must go. It's time to see my father off. I've got a funeral to attend. It's good to see you, though I wish I could convince you to take up your own life in spite of it all, but I see that's no easy thing. You've taken the voyage and you've weathered

AMES (*cont'd*)

the storms but you won't take what you went for—and I'm not talking about Mrs. Reardon.

They stand and shake hands warmly.

MERRICK

And you?

AMES

And me? Your story moves me. I recognize the problem. In the long run, we each pay for our own brand of cowardice.

He starts to go, then hesitates and looks back.

At least you told your love. Something I nearly went mad to do but never did. The ache in me was strong but the sense of disaster was stronger. We're figures in a tapestry, you and I... and the Lady in Grey. Goodbye, Merrick. I'll be returning to Khartoum before the week is out.

Ames leaves quickly; the light dims out on a puzzled and disconsolate Merrick. He goes to the mantle; takes a pen and considers it. Pause, then –

CURTAIN