

The Inevitable Third

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I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE to account for Jimmie's success—in a particular way—except on the theory that a Divine Providence protects the weak. How many of us, after getting what we want, are able to hold onto it? It is not an unusual thing to see even a strong man knocked on the head by a detached chunk of what he had taken to be his astral glory, when his stars begin going sideways instead of pursuing their proper and natural courses.

Now and then we find an Avier or a Prometheus, able to stand unmoved and hurl defiance at Fate, but the best that most of us can do is to shut our eyes and dodge—quick.

That is what Jimmie did.

Jimmie was one of those disquieting creatures who are able to extract an astonishing amount of happiness out of a clerkship in Wall Street, a Harlem flat, and a wife. They make us wonder if we are not very silly indeed to worry about lost tribes and the ruins of Philæ and the value of post-impressionism.

Jimmie was abnormally happy. He took an immense pride in filling the flat with all sorts of horrible things known as modern furniture, for of course he was entirely without taste. He spent just a little more than he should on presents for his wife, and he fitted up the little room on the left of the kitchen as a den for himself.

Once, in a moment of unguarded optimism, he purchased a small white-enameled crib. It stood unused in a corner of the second bedroom, as a constant reminder to him of the only blank in Jimmie's life.

Jimmie liked his job at the office, and it showed in his work, so that his salary was raised regularly every six months. He came to have a room of his own, with a rolltop desk and a stenographer.

Certainly, Jimmie thought, he was getting on, and he began to be a little proud of himself. This lasted three years.

Still the little white-enameled crib remained unoccupied; and this, if only Jimmie had known it, was dangerous. A vacuum is as abhorrent to a woman as it is to Nature. Jimmie should have taken care to fill it up himself—at least with sympathy—instead of leaving it to the first one who should perceive it.

But Jimmie was undeniably a fool. He was not aware of the peculiar shades imparted to a word by the flicker of an eyelash, the moistening of lips, the tremulous closing of a hand. He knew merely that he loved his wife, and saw no reason why she should be otherwise than perfectly happy, since he always came directly home from the office and found pleasure in nothing without her.

He did not perceive the necessity of finding a new interest to take the place of the natural one, which had been denied her. In short, he was not versed in the workings of a woman's mind, as was the inevitable third.

The name of the inevitable third was Mason.

He came from somewhere across the Atlantic, and his chief business in life—though neither Jimmie nor Nell knew this—was picking up one or another of the Ten Commandments that had been shattered by somebody else, and amusing himself by fitting together the broken pieces in bizarre patterns of his own.

Nell met him at an afternoon recital in the tea-belt, and described him to Jimmie at the dinner table that evening as "the most interesting man she had ever met." Jimmie nodded absently and helped himself to another piece of steak.

He was in the middle of an intricate mental calculation which had to do with his wife's approaching birthday.

Nell grew quite eloquent in her eulogy of Mason, ending with, "What do you think of that?"

"Eh? What?" said Jimmie.

"You weren't listening at all!"

"Right," Jimmie admitted, laughing. "I was thinking of—er—an important matter. What were you saying?"

"Nothing."

"Come now! I was thinking of you."

"It doesn't matter. You wouldn't understand, anyway. All you know is your dirty old office."

Jimmie whistled.

“What the deuce—” he began, but his wife promptly burst into tears, and he spent the next thirty minutes trying to comfort her.

Twice during the following week Jimmie returned home from his office at half past five to find his wife absent.

The first time she answered his question with a brief “At a matinée”; the second, she told at some length of having spent the afternoon at the Museum of Art with Mason. Jimmie looked nonplussed for a moment.

He stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen, his hands in his pockets, watching his wife as she busied herself among the pots and pans. Then he walked through the flat to the windows in front and stood looking down on the street, his brow puckered into a puzzled frown; and finally he returned to the doorway.

“Who is this Mason?” he asked.

“I told you the other day.” Nell was slicing big, ripe tomatoes that were no redder than her lips. “I met him at Osborne’s.”

“I know—but who is he?”

“He is a gentleman.”

“Oh,” said Jimmie vaguely. He stood for a moment regarding his wife uncertainly, then continued: “But I say, Nell—”

“Well?”

“Nothing,” said Jimmie.

He went into the front room, seated himself, and picked up a newspaper. But when he was called to dinner a half-hour later the paper remained unread.

That was, of course, the proper time for an explanation. But how could Nell explain something which she didn’t understand herself?

She felt an incredible, an insatiable longing for something—but what? Jimmie bored and irritated her, and the very sight of her neat kitchen became hateful to her. Add to this the fact that she was both secretive and ignorant—in a restricted sense—and the curious conclusion at which she finally arrived loses much of its strangeness.

Its result was that she spent every afternoon of the following week riding or driving with Mason, whose sympathy and tenderness were never-failing, and curiously satisfying.

She lied to Jimmie. She told him each evening that she had spent the entire day at home, and that she was feeling under the weather.

“Want a doctor?” Jimmie would ask solicitously.

“No,” she would answer, “it’s just a headache.”

Then she would go to bed and cry herself to sleep, while Jimmie sat in his den staring at the wallpaper and wondering what the devil was the matter.

It was on Saturday that Jimmie’s married sister found herself shopping at Tenth Street round noon and decided to take lunch with him. She telephoned his office.

She was ten years older than Jimmie, and had two children; and she felt that he needed advice. Besides, being a woman, she had a right to be curious. She came to the point at once.

“Who was Nell riding with yesterday?”

“What?” said Jimmie blankly.

“I asked,” repeated his sister with emphasis, “whom Nell was riding with yesterday.”

Now Jimmie knew perfectly well that his wife had remained at home all of the previous day, for she had told him so. Therefore, it was obvious that she had not been riding with anyone. Still, he knew his sister. She usually knew what she was talking about.

Jimmie rose to the occasion like a gentleman.

“A chap named Mason,” said. “A friend of mine. Why?”

His sister eyed him shrewdly.

“Lord save us, Jimmie, you can’t fool me,” she declared. “You’re in trouble. What is it?”

But Jimmie turned the question aside, and many other similar ones, and, freeing himself as quickly as possible, returned to the office. He sat at his desk for two hours, chewing up unlighted cigars and gazing at the wall before him in a sort of hurt surprise.

It was Jimmie’s first glimpse of hell, and he didn’t at all understand it. Finally he put on his hat and went home.

He found no one there. He wandered to and fro through the flat a dozen or more times, then pulled a chair up close to the window and sat down to wait—and watch. For a full hour he sat, silent and still, his eyes glued on the street below; and gradually cold fear filled all his veins and chilled his heart.

Perhaps—the thought formed slowly—perhaps she would never return. Even now she had gone—

Perspiration covered his brow, and his face was white. He felt no anger, but a most potent and terrible fear. When Nell saw his face through the window as she came up the street ten minutes later she hardly recognized it.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nell calmly, as she entered the door which Jimmie had opened.

Jimmie folded his arms about her.

“Thank God!” he said devoutly. “Oh, Nell, I thought—”

Nell struggled from his embrace.

“Well? You thought?”

Then Jimmie stammered an incoherent account of his meeting with his sister and what she had told him.

“Of course,” he finished, “I didn’t believe her, but I thought—you might—so I told her it was Mason.”

There was a pause, then: “It was Mason,” said Nell calmly.

Jimmie gazed at her for a full minute, frankly disbelieving.

“But you told me—” he began.

“I know,” Nell interrupted wearily.

She hesitated, and looked at her husband uncertainly, then, clenching her hands and advancing a step toward him, she began to speak hurriedly and in a low tone.

She spoke of Mason. And when she had finished, and ended by sinking down onto the floor and bursting into tears, Jimmie stood as one stunned, watching his little world crumble and fall about his ears.

And yet the very worst of Nell’s conduct was the telling of a lie—not exactly an unique sin. But Jimmie could not perceive this. Being what he was, he was unable either to judge or consider—he merely felt. And Nell no longer loved him.

As she sat on the floor at his feet, her face buried in her hands and her body shaking with convulsive sobs, Jimmie actually felt that he was the one who needed sympathy and counsel. He trembled weakly and stared at his wife in a miserable silence.

When Nell had become calmer she rose and seated herself on a chair and spoke again, in a tone of weariness and despair. She explained that though she no longer loved Jimmie, she did not want to leave him. Not from a sense of duty, she simply preferred to remain.

No doubt it would be very hard for both of them, but she thought that was best. As for Mason, she would continue to regard him as her friend. He had been very kind to her, and Jimmie would never understand, and men were beasts anyway, and she didn't want to leave Jimmie, and she wanted to be left alone.

So Jimmie left the house, and returned two hours later to a silent and tasteless dinner. As soon as it was finished Nell went to bed, complaining of a headache; and Jimmie sat alone until late in the half-lighted dining room, fondling his misery.

A week passed by. Jimmie, racking his brain for an explanation or a solution, failed entirely to realize the meaning of the catastrophe. He was conscious only of the pain—the dull aching pain that filled every thought and movement and ate his soul. A stronger man would have dominated the situation—and the consequences would have been extremely unpleasant. Jimmie was fortunate enough to be helpless.

Each evening, as he returned home from the office, Jimmie determined to have the matter out with his wife, he perceived that he was being made ridiculous, which is of all things most intolerable to a man. And each evening, seeing Nell's white face and averted eyes, his courage failed him, and the words would not come.

He spent two afternoons sitting on a bench on Riverside Drive, both fearing and hoping to see Nell with Mason, and feeling a curious sense of disappointment when his quest failed. He wanted very much to see Mason, and he feared him—horribly.

Then, one evening, he found a note on the mantel in the dining room, addressed to Nell, who had evidently been at no pains to conceal it. It was from Mason, and contained the information that he would call at her home on the following afternoon.

Jimmie read it over twice, and found himself studying the handwriting with a sort of detached curiosity, when Nell entered from the kitchen. She stopped short, glancing at the note, then at Jimmie's face; and for some moments they stood looking at each other in silence.

When, a few minutes later, they seated themselves at the table, Jimmie, controlling his voice with difficulty, said simply:

“Have you answered it?”

“Yes,” said Nell. The meal proceeded in silence.

It was this that at last roused Jimmie to action. He decided on the weakest possible course—and the wisest.

After six hours of tortured thought and painful indecision, he sat down on the edge of his bed at three o'clock in the morning and wrote a farewell letter to his wife. It was a curious performance.

He declared that he had always loved her and always would, and she would never hear from him again, because she would be happy, and it was her fault, but he forgave her, and he knew that what he was doing wasn't manly but he couldn't help it, and he had never seen Mason anyway (he repeated this three times), and he didn't believe that she had ever loved him, and God bless her.

This he folded and sealed and left on the table in his own room.

At seven o'clock, while Nell was still asleep, he left the house with two full suitcases, which he carried to an express office and there ordered delivered at the home of his married sister.

Then, after an attempt at breakfast in a lunchroom, he wandered about the streets aimlessly until time to go to his office. He didn't at all realize what he had done, and he felt a curious sense of relief and freedom.

At one o'clock that afternoon, while Jimmie was standing at his thirtieth-story office window, staring with unseeing eyes at the antlike throng in the street below, Nell was sitting on the edge of her husband's bed, holding in her hand an open letter which she had just read for the third time.

She had found it only a half-hour before, and she was trying to reconcile the moisture in her eyes and the uncomfortable lump in her throat with the fact that there was now nothing—apparently—between her and her desire.

She understood Jimmie's action perfectly, and she felt that he deserved to be despised for his weakness. But she was conscious only of an intolerable pity. She refolded the note and placed it in the bosom of her dress.

She was, of course, glad that Jimmie had gone. But somehow—

In the meantime Mason was to come at three o'clock. Yesterday this thought had filled her with a keen pleasure. Now she experienced an unaccountable feeling of revulsion, and she hated herself for it.

If there had been nothing irrevocably wrong in her relations with Mason, it was more through good luck than her own wisdom; she had been willing to surrender everything except the hollow shell of outward appearances; and now that the shell was gone, she saw the naked folly, the common ugliness of the thing, and she shrank from it.

She contemplated the Nell of yesterday with an indescribable contempt, and wondered why. Then she threw herself, face downward, on the bed, and remained so, silent, for a long time.

When the doorbell rang she did not move. It rang again and again. During the pause that followed Nell heard her heart beating loudly, as it seemed, in protest.

Then the bell rang once more, long and violently—and then silence.

As Jimmie approached the entrance of his married sister's apartment that evening he felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to turn and run. He had had a whole day in which to consider his conduct, and he was beginning to be very much ashamed of it.

At the moment, it had appeared to be merely the means of escape from an intolerable situation; its desperateness and finality were only now beginning to be apparent to him. In short, he was in a very fair way to repent at leisure.

His sister met him at the door. She looked startled at the sight of his face. It was white and drawn, and his eyes were red.

“What’s the matter?” asked his sister. “What has happened to you?”

Then her face became stern and her lips set in a straight line.

“No,” said Jimmie. “Not that, sis. But, for God’s sake, tell me what to do.”

It was an interminable and considerably tangled story that he told her, after she had taken him into her own room, but his sister had no difficulty in understanding it. She sat in grim silence while he explained his part of the marital wreck, and confessed his utter inability to understand his wife’s conduct.

When he had finished his sister rose without a word and, going to her wardrobe, began to put on her hat and gloves. Jimmie rose of his feet in alarm and opened his mouth to protest. Before he could speak his sister said:

“You keep still. You’ve said enough.”

“But—where are you going?” stammered Jimmie.

His sister completed her preparations in silence. At the door she turned.

“Jimmie,” she said, “if you are my own brother, you’re a perfect idiot. Why, in the name of Heaven, didn’t you tell me before? You know very well you never had any sense—I’ve told you so. All this could have been prevented. Now maybe it’s too late. I’m going to see Nell, and I want you to follow me in two hours. I want to see her first alone. Remember—two hours—don’t come sooner.”

“But I say—” began Jimmie.

The door slammed in his face.

Jimmie sat down in a chair and wondered why she had called him an idiot, and how it could “all have been prevented,” and what she could possibly say to Nell. Then his brother-in-law arrived and insisted on Jimmie dining with him. Jimmie protested that he wasn’t hungry, but was finally dragged away.

“Is Nell sick?” asked the brother-in-law as they seated themselves at the table. He had been told that his wife had gone to see her.

Jimmie mumbled a negative.

“Anything wrong?”

“No.”

After which the brother-in-law remained discreetly silent, while Jimmie strove valiantly with a fierce desire to tell him everything, being restrained only by a sense of the weakness and folly of his own conduct.

He pretended to eat, fingered his napkin and knife and fork nervously, and looked at his watch every two minutes. As the brother-in-law pushed back his coffee cup and lit a cigar a maid appeared in the doorway.

“You’re wanted at home at once, sir,” she said to Jimmie. “Mrs. Thrawn just telephoned.”

Jimmie jumped to his feet and, without a word to the astonished brother-in-law, rushed through the hall, down the stairs, and out of the house.

“Say,” shouted the brother-in-law, “wait a minute! You forgot your hat!”

But Jimmie was already out of sight.

As he stepped from the car, which had made an incredible number of stops and had seemed to go forward at less than a snail’s pace, and approached the door of his own flat, Jimmie slackened his gait and finally halted.

There were so many possibilities behind that door that his heart stood still at the bare thought of them, and he hesitated, both dreading and longing to go on. His knees trembled disgracefully as he ascended the stairs. At the top he found his sister, who placed a finger on her lips to enjoin silence and led him into the front room.

“Where’s Nell?” Jimmie’s voice was harsh and unnatural.

His sister pointed toward the bedroom within.

“Sleeping. Goodness knows she needs it,” she said grimly. “You’ve worried her nearly to death.”

At the first word Jimmie had started for the bedroom, but she barred the way and pushed him back into a chair. He sat and glared at her.

“I worried her?” he said weakly. “What have I done?”

His sister appeared to consider.

“I suppose it’s been hard for you, too,” she said finally. “Your ignorance amounts to a positive crime, but you’ve had to suffer for it. How long has she known this Mason?”

Jimmie reflected. “About a month.”

“I thought so. Now, you listen to me—then go in and see her. There’s a certain period in a woman’s life, Jimmie, that no man will ever understand. Often we don’t understand it ourselves—Nell didn’t. We are filled with an impatient longing, a dissatisfaction, and a sort of haunting fear. It is indescribable.

“While it lasts we need sympathy, forbearance, understanding; and we are always more or less irresponsible and—queer. In Nell’s case”—she smiled grimly—“it was rather more than less. But she has done nothing really wrong, and if I ever hear of your saying anything to her—”

She paused and eyed Jimmie sternly.

“I won’t,” he promised. “But what do you mean? What’s been the matter with her?”

And then, leaning forward in her chair and speaking in a low tone, his sister released the great secret.

As she continued Jimmie’s face took on an expression of blank incredulity and astonishment, and when she had finished he sat and regarded her in speechless amazement.

His sister leaned forward and spoke again, and Jimmie found his tongue.

“Four months!” he shouted. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Because she didn’t know herself till I told her,” his sister replied—to an empty room.

Jimmie had cleared her chair with one bound and disappeared within.

He left the doors open behind him and there issued therefrom for the next fifteen minutes a series of curious sounds and noises and the mingling of two voices, utterly unintelligible and yet somehow full of meaning.

Jimmie’s sister sat, with a half-wistful, reminiscent smile, recalling a certain far-off period in her own life—the day when the amazing beauty and glory of a new and mysterious world had unfolded itself. Since then it had dimmed—but there was the memory.

Then Jimmie reappeared, his face radiant and joyous, and dragging after him—the white-enameled crib! His sister stared at him in wonder.

“What in the name of goodness are you going to do with that?” she demanded.

“Why,” said Jimmie, visibly embarrassed, “I thought—er—to get it ready, you know.”

His sister gasped; then she burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Then she commanded Jimmie to take the crib back where it belonged.

Jimmie regarded her with an air of dignified importance.

“Mind your own business,” said he. “This is mine. May I ask what you had to do with it?”

“Nothing whatever,” said his sister meekly.

Whereupon Jimmie took out his handkerchief and began to dust the crib with minute care and particularity—the crib which was destined, some five months later, to become the rhythmic resting-place of the inevitable third.

For Mason, of course, had lost his job.

