

ped. I think I heard the name" (she turned to the landlady)—"Mrs. Woodville, was it not?" My husband's fingers unconsciously closed on my hand with a grasp that hurt me. He set his mother right, it is only just to say, without one cowardly moment of hesitation. "Mother," said he to her very quietly, "this lady is my wife." She had hitherto kept her seat. She now rose slowly, and faced her son in silence. The first expression of surprise passed from her face. It was succeeded by the most terrible look of mingled indignation and contempt that I ever saw in a woman's eyes. "I pity your wife," she said. With those words, and no more, lifting her hand she waved him back from her, and went on her way again, as we had first found her, alone.

CHAPTER IV.  
ON THE WAY HOME

Left by ourselves, there was a moment of silence amongst us. Eustace spoke first. "Are you able to walk back?" he said to me. "Or shall we go on to Broadstairs, and return to Ramsgate by the railway?" He put those questions as composedly, so far as his manner was concerned, as if nothing remarkable had happened. But his eyes and his lips betrayed him. They told me that he was suffering keenly in secret. The extraordinary scene that had just passed, far from depriving me of the last remains of my courage, had strung up my nerves and restored my self-possession. I must have been more or less than woman if my self-respect had not been wounded, if my curiosity had not been wrought to the highest pitch, by the extraordinary conduct of my husband's mother when Eustace presented me to her. What was the secret of her despising him, and pitying me? Were was the explanation of her incomprehensible apathy when my name was twice pronounced in her hearing? Why had she left us, as if the bare idea of remaining in our company was abhorrent to her? The foremost interest of my life was now the interest of penetrating these mysteries. Walk I was in such a fever of expectation that I felt as if I could have walked to the world's end, if I could only keep my husband by my side, and question him on the way!

"I am quite recovered," I said. "Let us go back, as we came, on foot."

Eustace glanced at the landlady. The landlady understood him.

"I won't intrude my company on you, sir," she said sharply. "I have some business to do at Broadstairs—and, now I am so near, I may as well go on. Good morning, Mrs. Woodville." She laid a marked emphasis on my name; and she added one significant look at parting, which (in the pre-occupied state of my mind at that moment) I entirely failed to comprehend. There was neither time nor opportunity to ask her what she meant. With a stiff little bow, addressed to Eustace, she left us as his mother had left us; taking the way to Broadstairs, and walking rapidly.

At last, we were alone. I lost no time in beginning my inquiries; I wasted no words in prefatory phrases. In the plainest terms, I put the questions to him:

"What does your mother's conduct mean?" Instead of answering, he burst into a fit of laughter—loud, coarse, hard laughter, so utterly unlike any sound I had ever yet heard issue from his lips, so strangely and shockingly foreign to his character as I understood it, that I stood still on the sands, and openly remonstrated with him.

"Eustace! you are not like yourself," I said. "You almost frighten me."

He took no notice. He seemed to be pursuing some pleasant train of thought, just started in his mind.

"So like my mother!" he exclaimed, with the air of a man who felt irresistibly diverted by some humorous idea of his own. "Tell me all about it, Valeria!"

"Tell you?" I repeated. "After what has happened, surely it is your duty to enlighten me."

"You don't see the joke?" he said. "I not only fail to see the joke," I rejoined, "I see something in your mother's language and your mother's behaviour, which justifies me in asking you for a serious explanation."

"My dear Valeria! if you understood my mother as well as I do, a serious explanation of her conduct would be the last thing in the world that you would expect from me. The idea of taking my mother seriously!" He burst out laughing again. "My darling! you don't know how you amuse me."

It was all forced; it was all unnatural. He, the most delicate, the most refined of men—a gentleman in the highest sense of the word—was coarse and loud and vulgar! My heart sank under a sudden sense of misgiving which, with all my love for him, it was impossible to resist. In unutterable distress and alarm I asked myself: "Is my husband beginning to deceive me? is he acting a part, and acting it badly, before we have been married a week?"

I set myself to win his confidence in a new way. He was evidently determined to force his own point of view on me. I determined, on my side, to accept his point of view.

"You tell me I don't understand your mother," I said gently. "Will you help me to understand her?"

"It is not easy to help you to understand a woman will doesn't understand herself," he answered. "But I will try. The key to my poor dear mother's character is, one word—Eccentricity."

If he had picked out the most inappropriate word in the whole Dictionary to describe the lady whom I had met on the beach, "Eccentricity" would have been that word. A child who had seen what I saw, who had heard what I heard, would have discovered that he was trifling—grossly, recklessly trifling—with the truth.

"Bear in mind what I have said," he proceeded; "and, if you want to understand my mother, do what I asked you to do a minute since—tell me all about it. How came you to speak to her, to begin with?"

"Your mother told you, Eustace. I was walking just behind her, when she dropped a letter by accident—"

"No accident," he interposed. "The letter was dropped on purpose."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Why should your mother drop the letter on purpose?"

"Use the key to her character, my dear. Eccentricity! My mother's odd way of making acquaintance with you."

"Making acquaintance with me? I have just told you that I was walking behind her. She could not have known of the existence of such a person as myself until I spoke to her first."

"So you suppose, Valeria."

"I am certain of it."

"Pardon me—you don't know my mother as I do."

I began to lose all patience with him. "Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that your mother was out on the sands to-day for the express purpose of making acquaintance with me?"

"I have not the slightest doubt of it," he answered coolly.

"Why she didn't even recognise my name!" I burst out. "Twice over, the landlady called me Mrs. Woodville in your mother's hearing—and, twice over, I declare to you on my word of honour, it failed to produce the slightest impression on her. She looked, and acted, as if she had never heard her own name before in her life."

"Acted" is the right word," he said, just as composedly as before. "The women on the stage are not the only women who can act. My mother's object was to make herself thoroughly acquainted with you, and to throw you off your guard by speaking in the character of a stranger. It is exactly like her to take that roundabout way of satisfying her curiosity about a daughter-in-law she disapproves of. If I had not joined you when I did, you would have been examined and cross-examined about yourself and about me; and you would innocently have answered under the impression that you were speaking to a chance acquaintance. There is my mother all over! She is your enemy, remember—not your friend: she is not in search of your merits but of your faults. And you wonder why no impression was produced on her when she heard you addressed by your name! Poor innocent! I can tell you this—you only discovered my mother in her own character, when I put an end to the mystification by presenting you to each other. You saw how angry she was; and now you know why."

I let him go on without saying a word. I listened—oh, with such a heavy heart! with such a crushing sense of disenchantment and despair! The idol of my worship; the companion, guide, protector of my life—had he fallen so low? could he stoop to such shameless prevarications as this?

Was there one word of truth in all that he had said to me? Yes! If I had not discovered his mother's portrait, it was certainly true that I should not have known, not even have vaguely suspected, who she really was. Apart from this, the rest was lying; clumsy lying which said one thing at least for him, that he was not accustomed to falsehood and deceit. Good Heavens! if my husband was to be believed, his mother must have tracked us to London; tracked us to the church; tracked us to the railway station; tracked us to Ramsgate! To a sort that she knew me by sight as the wife of Eustace, and that she had waited on the sands, and dropped her letter for the express purpose of making acquaintance with me, was also to assert every one of these monstrous improbabilities to be facts that had actually happened!

I could say no more. I walked by his side in silence, feeling the miserable conviction that there was an abyss in the shape of a family secret between my husband and me. In the spirit, if not in the body, we were separated—after a married life of barely four days!

"Valeria," he asked, "have you nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing."

"Are you not satisfied with my explanation?"

I detected a slight tremor in his voice as he put that question. The tone was, for the first time since we had spoken together, a tone that my experience associated with him in certain moods of his which I had already learnt to know well. Among the hundred thousand mysterious influences which a man exercises over the woman who loves him, I doubt if there is any more irresistible to her than the influence of his voice. I am not one of those women who shed tears on the smallest provocation: it is not in my temperament, I suppose. But when I heard that little natural change in his tone, my mind went back (I can't say why) to the happy day when I first owned that I loved him. I burst out crying.

He suddenly stood still, and took me by the hand. He tried to look at me.

I kept my head down and my eyes on the ground. I was ashamed of my weakness and my want of spirit. I was determined not to look at him.

In the silence that followed, he suddenly dropped on his knees at my feet, with a cry of despair that cut through me like a knife.

"Valeria! I am vile—I am false—I am unworthy of you. Don't believe a word of what I have been saying—lies, lies, cowardly contemptible lies! You don't know what I have gone through; you don't know how I have been tortured. Oh, my darling, try not to despise me! I must have been beside myself when I spoke to you as I did. You looked hurt; you looked offended; I didn't know what to do. I wanted

to spare you even a moment's pain—I wanted to hush it up, and have done with it. For God's sake don't ask me to tell you any more! My love! my angel! its something between my mother and me; it's nothing that need disturb you, it's nothing to anybody now. I love you, I adore you; my whole heart and soul are yours. Be satisfied with that. Forget was has happened. You shall never see my mother again. We will leave this place to-morrow. We will go away in the yacht. Does it matter where we live, so long as we live for each other? Forgive and forget! Oh, Valeria, Valeria, forgive and forget!"

Unutterable misery was in his face; unutterable misery was in his voice. Remember this. And remember that I loved him.

"It is easy to forgive," I said sadly. "For your sake, Eustace, I will try to forget."

I raised him gently as I spoke. He kissed my hands, with the air of a man who was too humble to venture on any more familiar expression of his gratitude than that. The sense of embarrassment between us, as we slowly walked on again, was so unendurable that I actually cast about in my mind for a subject of conversation as if I had been in the company of a stranger! In mercy to him, I asked him to tell me about the yacht.

He seized on the subject as a drowning man seizes on the hand that rescues him.

On that one poor little topic of the yacht, he talked, talked, talked, as if his life depended upon his not being silent for an instant on the rest of the way back. To me, it was dreadful to hear him. I could estimate what he was suffering, by the violence which he—ordinary a silent and thoughtful man—was now doing to his true nature and to the prejudices and habits of his life. With the greatest difficulty I preserved my self-control, until we reached the door of our lodgings. There, I was obliged to plead fatigue, and ask him to let me rest for a little while in the solitude of my own room.

"Shall we sail to-morrow?" he called after me suddenly, as I ascended the stairs.

Sail with him to the Mediterranean the next day? Pass weeks and weeks absolutely alone with him, in the narrow limits of a vessel, with his horrible secret parting us in sympathy farther and farther from each other day by day? I shuddered at the thought of it.

"To-morrow is rather a short notice," I said. "Will you give me a little longer time to prepare for the voyage?"

"Oh, yes—take any time you like," he answered, not (as I thought) very willingly. "While you are resting—there are still one or two little things to be settled—I think I will go back to the yacht. Is there anything I can do for you, Valeria, before I go?"

"Nothing—thank you, Eustace."

He hastened away to the harbour. Was he afraid of his own thoughts, if he was left by himself in the house? Was the company of the sailing-master and the steward better than no company at all?

It was useless to ask. What did I know about him or his thoughts? I locked myself into my room.

CHAPTER V.

THE LANDLADY'S DISCOVERY

I sat down, and tried to compose my spirits. Now, or never, was the time to decide what it was my duty to my husband and my duty to myself to do next.

The effort was beyond me. Worn out in mind and body alike, I was perfectly incapable of pursuing any regular train of thought. I vaguely felt—if I left things as they were—that I could never hope to remove the shadow which now rested on the married life that had begun so brightly. We might live together, so as to save appearances. But to forget what had happened, or to feel satisfied with my position, was beyond the power of my will. My tranquillity as a woman—perhaps my dearest interests as a wife—depended absolutely on penetrating the mystery of my mother-in-law's conduct, and on discovering the true meaning of the wild words of penitence and self-reproach which my husband had addressed to me on our way home.

So far I could advance towards realising my position—and no farther. When I asked myself what was to be done next, hopeless confusion, maddening doubt, filled my mind, and transformed me into the most listless and helpless of living women.

I gave up the struggle. In dull, stupid, obstinate despair, I threw myself on my bed, and fell from sheer fatigue into a broken uneasy sleep.

I was awakened by a knock at the door of my room.

Was it my husband? I started to my feet as the idea occurred to me. Was some new trial of my patience and my fortitude at hand? Half nervously, half irritably, I asked who was there.

The landlady's voice answered me.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, if you please?"

I opened the door. There is no disguising it—though I loved him so dearly; though I had left home and friends for his sake—it was a relief to me, at the miserable time, to know that Eustace, had not returned to the house.

The landlady came in, and took a seat, without waiting to be invited, close by my side. She was no longer satisfied with merely asserting herself as my equal. Ascending another step on the social ladder, she took her stand on the platform of patronage, and charitably looked down on me as an object of pity.

"I have just returned from Broadstairs," she began. "I hope you will do me the justice to believe that I sincerely regret what has happened?"

I bowed, and said nothing.

"As a gentlewoman myself," proceeded the landlady—"reduced by family misfortunes to let lodgings, but still a gentlewoman—I feel

sincere sympathy with you. I will even go farther than that. I will take it on myself to say that I don't blame you. No, no. I noticed that you were as much shocked and surprised at your mother-in-law's conduct as I was; and that is saying a great deal, a great deal indeed. However, I have a duty to perform. It is disagreeable, but it is not the less a duty on that account. I am a single woman; not from want of opportunities of changing my condition—I beg you will understand that—but from choice. Situated as I am, I receive only the most respectable persons into my house. There must be no mystery about the positions of my lodgers. Mystery in the position of a lodger carries with it—what shall I say? I don't wish to offend you—I will say, a certain Taint. Very well. Now I put it to your own common sense. Can a person in my position be expected to expose herself to—Taint? I make these remarks in a sisterly and Christian spirit. As a lady yourself; I will even go the length of saying a cruelly-used lady, you will I am sure understand—"

I could endure it no longer. I stopped her there. "I understand," I said, "that you wish to give us notice to quit your lodgings. When do you want us to go?"

The landlady help up a long, lean, red hand, in sorrowful and sisterly protest.

"No," she said. "Not that tone; not those looks. It's natural you should be angry. But do—now do please try and control yourself. I put it to your own common sense (we will say a week for the notice to quit)—why not treat me like a friend? You don't know what a sacrifice, I have made—entirely for your sake."

"You!" I exclaimed. "What sacrifice?"

"What sacrifice?" repeated the landlady. "I have degraded myself as a gentlewoman. I have forfeited my own self-respect." She paused for a moment, and suddenly seized me by the hand, in a perfect frenzy of friendship. "Oh, my dear," cried this intolerable person, "I have discovered everything! A villain has deceived you. You are no more married than I am!"

I snatched my hand out of hers, and rose angrily from my chair.

"Are you mad?" I asked.

The landlady raised her eyes to the ceiling, with the air of a person who had deserved martyrdom, and who submitted to it cheerfully.

"Yes," she said. "I begin to think I am mad—mad to have devoted myself to an ungrateful woman, to a person who doesn't appreciate a sisterly and Christian sacrifice of self. Well! I won't do it again. Heaven forgive me—I won't do it again!"

"Do what again?" I asked.

"Follow your mother-in-law," cried the landlady, suddenly dropping the character of a martyr, and assuming the character of a vixen in its place. "I blush when I think of it. I followed that most respectable person every step of the way to her own door."

Thus far, my pride had held me up. It sustained me no longer. I dropped back again into my chair, in undisguised dread of what was coming next.

"I gave you a look when I left you on the beach," pursued the landlady; growing louder and louder, and redder and redder as she went on. "A grateful woman would have understood that look. Never mind! I won't do it again. I overtook your mother-in-law at the gap in the cliff. I followed her—oh, how I feel the disgrace of it now!—I followed her to the station at Broadstairs. She went back by train to Ramsgate. I went back by train to Ramsgate. She walked to her lodgings. I walked to her lodgings. Behind her. Like a dog. Oh, the disgrace of it! Providentially as I then thought—I don't know what to think of it now—the landlord of the house happened to be a friend of mine, and happened to be at home. We have no secrets from each other, where lodgers are concerned. I am in a position to tell you, madam, what your mother-in-law's name really is. She knows nothing about any such person as Mrs. Woodville, for an excellent reason. Her name is not Woodville. Her name (and consequently her son's name) is Macellan. Mrs. Macellan, widow of the late General Macellan. Yes! your husband is not your husband. You are neither maid, wife, nor widow. You are worse than nothing, madam—and you leave my house."

I stopped her as she opened the door to go out. She had roused my temper by this time. The doubt that she had cast on my marriage was more than mortal resignation could endure.

"Give me Mrs. Macellan's address," I said.

The landlady's anger receded into the background, and the landlady's astonishment appeared in its place.

"You don't mean to tell me you are going to the old lady yourself?" she said.

"Nobody but the old lady can tell me what I want to know," I answered. "Your discovery (as you call it) may be enough for you; it is not enough for me. How do we know that Mrs. Macellan may not have been twice married? and that her first husband's name may not have been Woodville?"

The landlady's astonishment subsided in its turn, and the landlady's curiosity succeeded as the ruling influence of the moment. Substantially, as I have already said of her, she was a good-natured woman. Her fits of temper (as is usual with good-natured people) were of the hot and the short-lived sort; easily roused and easily appeased.

"I never thought of that," she said. "Look here! if I give you the address, will you promise to tell me all about it when you come back?"

I gave the required promise, and received the address in return.

"No malice," said the landlady, suddenly resuming all her old familiarity with me.

"No malice," I answered, with all possible cordiality on my side.

In ten minutes more I was at my mother-in-law's lodgings.

(To be continued.)