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Chapter 4 - On The Way Home

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LEFT by ourselves, there was a moment of silence among 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? Where 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 preoccupied 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 question 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 behavior 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 who doesn't understand herself," he answered. "But I will try. The key to my poor dear mother's character is, in 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 recognize 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 honor, 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 prevarication 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 assert 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 probabilities 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 learned to know well. Among the hundred thousand mysterious influences which a man exercises over a 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! it's 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 what 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--ordinarily 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 further and further 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 harbor. Was he afraid of his own thoughts, if he were 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.