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Chapter 47 - The Wife's Confession

"GLENINCH, October 19, 18--.

"MY HUSBAND--

"I have something very painful to tell you about one of your oldest friends.

"You have never encouraged me to come to you with any confidences of mine. If you had allowed me to be as familiar with you as some wives are with their husbands, I should have spoken to you personally instead of writing. As it is, I don't know how you might receive what I have to say to you if I said it by word of mouth. So I write.

"The man against whom I warn you is still a guest in this house--Miserrimus Dexter. No falsier or wickeder creature walks the earth. Don't throw my letter aside! I have waited to say this until I could find proof that might satisfy you. I have got the proof.

"You may remember that I ventured to express some disapproval when you first told me you had asked this man to visit us. If you had allowed me time to explain myself, I might have been bold enough to give you a good reason for the aversion I felt toward your friend. But you would not wait. You hastily (and most unjustly) accused me of feeling prejudiced against the miserable creature on account of his deformity. No other feeling than compassion for deformed persons has ever entered my mind. I have, indeed, almost a fellow-feeling for them; being that next worst thing myself to a deformity--a plain woman. I objected to Mr. Dexter as your guest because he had asked me to be his wife in past days, and because I had reason to fear that he still regarded me (after my marriage) with a guilty and a horrible love. Was it not my duty, as a good wife, to object to his being your guest at Gleninch? And was it not your duty, as a good husband, to encourage me to say more?

"Well, Mr. Dexter has been your guest for many weeks; and Mr. Dexter has dared to speak to me again of his love. He has insulted me, and insulted you, by declaring that he adores me and that you hate me. He has promised me a life of unalloyed happiness, in a foreign country with my lover; and he has prophesied for me a life of unendurable misery at home with my husband.

"Why did I not make my complaint to you, and have this monster dismissed from the house at once and forever?

"Are you sure you would have believed me if I had complained, and if your bosom friend had denied all intention of insulting me? I heard you once say (when you were not aware that I was within hearing) that the vainest women were always the ugly women. You might have accused me of vanity. Who knows?

"But I have no desire to shelter myself under this excuse. I am a jealous, unhappy creature; always doubtful of your affection for me; always fearing that another woman has got my place in your heart. Miserrimus Dexter has practiced on this weakness of mine. He has declared he can prove to me (if I will permit him) that I am, in your secret heart, an object of loathing to you; that you shrink from touching me; that you curse the hour when you were foolish enough to make me your wife. I have struggled as long as I could against the temptation to let him produce his proofs. It was a terrible temptation to a woman who was far from feeling sure of the sincerity of your affection for her; and it has ended in getting the better of my resistance. I wickedly concealed the disgust which the wretch inspired in me; I wickedly gave him leave to explain himself; I wickedly permitted this enemy of yours and of mine to take me into his confidence. And why? Because I loved you, and you only; and because Miserrimus Dexter's proposal did, after all, echo a doubt of you that had long been gnawing secretly at my heart.

"Forgive me, Eustace! This is my first sin against you. It shall be my last.

"I will not spare myself; I will write a full confession of what I said to him and of what he said to me. You may make me suffer for it when you know what I have done; but you will at least be warned in time; you will see your false friend in his true light.

"I said to him, 'How can you prove to me that my husband hates me in secret?'

"He answered, 'I can prove it under his own handwriting; you shall see it in his Diary.'

"I said, 'His Diary has a lock; and the drawer in which he keeps it has a lock. How can you get at the Diary and the drawer?'

"He answered, 'I have my own way of getting at both of them, without the slightest risk of being discovered by your husband. All you have to do is to give me the opportunity of seeing you privately. I will engage, in return, to bring the open Diary with me to your room.'

"I said, 'How can I give you the opportunity? What do you mean?'

"He pointed to the key in the door of communication between my room and the little study.

"He said, 'With my infirmity, I may not be able to profit by the first opportunity of visiting you here unobserved. I must be able to choose my own time and my own way of getting to you secretly. Let me take this key, leaving the door locked. When the key is missed, if you say it doesn't matter--if you point out that the door is locked, and tell the servants not to trouble themselves about finding the key--there will be no disturbance in the house; and I shall be in secure possession of a means of communication with you which no one will suspect. Will you do this?'

"I have done it.

"Yes! I have become the accomplice of this double-faced villain. I have degraded myself and outraged you by making an appointment to pry into your Diary. I know how base my conduct is. I can make no excuse. I can only repeat that I love you, and that I am sorely afraid you don't love me. And Miserrimus Dexter offers to end my doubts by showing me the most secret thoughts of your heart, in your own writing.

"He is to be with me, for this purpose (while you are out), some time in the course of the next two hours I shall decline to be satisfied with only once looking at your Diary; and I shall make an appointment with him to bring it to me again at the same time to-morrow. Before then you will receive these lines by the hand of my nurse. Go out as usual after reading them; but return privately, and unlock the table-drawer in which you keep your book. You will find it gone. Post yourself quietly in the little study; and you will discover the Diary (when Miserrimus Dexter leaves me) in the hands of your friend.*

----- * Note by Mr. Playmore:

The greatest difficulties of reconstruction occurred in this first portion of the torn letter. In the fourth paragraph from the beginning we have been obliged to supply lost words in no less than three places. In the ninth, tenth, and seventeenth paragraphs the same proceeding was, in a greater or less degree, found to be necessary. In all these cases the utmost pains have been taken to supply the deficiency in exact accordance with what appeared to be the meaning of the writer, as indicated in the existing pieces of the manuscript. -----

"October 20.

"I have read your Diary.

"At last I know what you really think of me. I have read what Miserrimus Dexter promised I should read--the confession of your loathing for me, in your own handwriting.

"You will not receive what I wrote to you yesterday at the time or in the manner which I had proposed. Long as my letter is, I have still (after reading your Diary) some more words to add. After I have closed and sealed the envelope, and addressed it to you, I shall put it under my pillow. It will be found there when I am laid out for the grave--and then, Eustace (when it is too late for hope or help), my letter will be given to you.

"Yes: I have had enough of my life. Yes: I mean to die.

"I have already sacrificed everything but my life to my love for you. Now I know that my love is not returned, the last sacrifice left is easy. My death will set you free to marry Mrs. Beauly.

"You don't know what it cost me to control my hatred of her, and to beg her to pay her visit here, without minding my illness. I could never have done it if I had not been so fond of you, and so fearful of irritating you against me by showing my jealousy. And how did you reward me? Let your Diary answer: 'I tenderly embraced her this very morning; and I hope, poor soul, she did not discover the effort that it cost me.'

"Well, I have discovered it now. I know that you privately think your life with me 'a purgatory.' I know that you have compassionately hidden from me the 'sense of shrinking that comes over you when you are obliged to submit to my caresses.' I am nothing but an obstacle--an 'utterly distasteful' obstacle--between you and the woman whom you love so dearly that you 'adore the earth which she touches with her foot.' Be it so! I will stand in your way no longer. It is no sacrifice and no merit on my part. Life is unendurable to me, now I know that the man whom I love with all my heart and soul secretly shrinks from me whenever I touch him.

"I have got the means of death close at hand.

"The arsenic that I twice asked you to buy for me is in my dressing-case. I deceived you when I mentioned some commonplace domestic reasons for wanting it. My true reason was to try if I could not improve my ugly complexion--not from any vain feeling of mine: only to make myself look better and more lovable in your eyes. I have taken some of it for that purpose; but I have got plenty left to kill myself with. The poison will have its use at last. It might have failed to improve my complexion--it will not fail to relieve you of your ugly wife.

"Don't let me be examined after death. Show this letter to the doctor who attends me. It will tell him that I have committed suicide; it will prevent any innocent persons from being suspected of poisoning me. I want nobody to be blamed or punished. I shall remove the chemist's label, and carefully empty the bottle containing the poison, so that he may not suffer on my account.

"I must wait here, and rest a little while--then take up my letter again. It is far too long already. But these are my farewell words. I may surely dwell a little on my last talk with you!

"October 21. Two o'clock in the morning.

"I sent you out of the room yesterday when you came in to ask how I had passed the night. And I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace, after you had gone, to the hired nurse who attends on me. Forgive me. I am almost beside myself now. You know why.

"Half-past three.

"Oh, my husband, I have done the deed which will relieve you of the wife whom you hate! I have taken the poison--all of it that was left in the paper packet, which was the first that I found. If this is not enough to kill me, I have more left in the bottle.

"Ten minutes past five.

"You have just gone, after giving me my composing draught. My courage failed me at the sight of you. I thought to myself, 'If he look at me kindly, I will confess what I have done, and let him save my life.' You never looked at me at all. You only looked at the medicine. I let you go without saying a word.

"Half-past five.

"I begin to feel the first effects of the poison. The nurse is asleep at the foot of my bed. I won't call for assistance; I won't wake her. I will die.

"Half-past nine.

"The agony was beyond my endurance--I awoke the nurse. I have seen the doctor.

"Nobody suspects anything. Strange to say, the pain has left me; I have evidently taken too little of the poison. I must open the bottle which contains the larger quantity. Fortunately, you are not near me--my resolution to die, or, rather, my loathing of life, remains as bitterly unaltered as ever. To make sure of my courage, I have forbidden the nurse to send for you. She has just gone downstairs by my orders. I am free to get the poison out of my dressing-case.

"Ten minutes to ten.

"I had just time to hide the bottle (after the nurse had left me) when you came into my room.

"I had another moment of weakness when I saw you. I determined to give myself a last chance of life. That is to say, I determined to offer you a last opportunity of treating me kindly. I asked you to get me a cup of tea. If, in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take the second dose of poison.

"You obeyed my wishes, but you were not kind. You gave me my tea, Eustace, as if you were giving a drink to your dog. And then you wondered in a languid way (thinking, I suppose, of Mrs. Beaulieu all the time), at my dropping the cup in handing it back to you. I really could not help it; my hand would tremble. In my place, your hand might have trembled too--with the arsenic under the bedclothes. You politely hoped, before you went away? that the tea would do me good--and, oh God, you could not even look at me when you said that! You looked at the broken bits of the tea-cup.

"The instant you were out of the room I took the poison--a double dose this time.

"I have a little request to make here, while I think of it.

"After removing the label from the bottle, and putting it back, clean, in my dressing-case, it struck me that I had failed to take the same precaution (in the early morning) with the empty paper-packet, bearing on it the name of the other chemist. I threw it aside on the counterpane of the bed, among some other loose papers. My ill-tempered nurse complained of the litter, and crumpled them all up and put them away somewhere. I hope the chemist will not suffer through my carelessness. Pray bear it in mind to say that he is not to blame.

"Dexter--something reminds me of Miserrimus Dexter. He has put your Diary back again in the drawer, and he presses me for an answer to his proposals. Has this false wretch any conscience? If he has, even he will suffer--when my death answers him.

"The nurse has been in my room again. I have sent her away. I have told her I want to be alone.

"How is the time going? I cannot find my watch. Is the pain coming back again and paralyzing me? I don't feel it keenly yet.

"It may come back, though, at any moment. I have still to close my letter and to address it to you. And, besides, I must save up my strength to hide it under the pillow, so that nobody may find it until after my death.

"Farewell, my dear. I wish I had been a prettier woman. A more loving woman (toward you) I could not be. Even now I dread the sight of your dear face. Even now, if I allowed myself the luxury of looking at you, I don't know that you might not charm me into confessing what I have done--before it is too late to save me.

"But you are not here. Better as it is! better as it is!

"Once more, farewell! Be happier than you have been with me. I love you, Eustace--I forgive you. When you have nothing else to think about, think sometimes, as kindly as you can, of your poor, ugly

"SARA MACALLAN."

----- * Note by Mr. Playmore:

The lost words and phrases supplied in this concluding portion of the letter are so few in number that it is needless to mention them. The fragments which were found accidentally stuck together by the gum, and which represent the part of the letter first completely reconstructed, begin at the phrase, "I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace;" and end with the broken sentence, "If in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take--" With the assistance thus afforded to us, the labor of putting together the concluding half of the letter (dated "October 20") was trifling, compared with the almost insurmountable difficulties which we encountered in dealing with the scattered wreck of the preceding pages. -----