Marrying Mark

Violette Kimball Dunn

CHAPTER I

The morning following Ellen's departure from the earthly scene, Mark woke to confusion. Then he looked through the open doorway into the emptiness that was Ellen's room, and remembered. But oddly enough, it was not his wife's going that came back to him. It was the memory of the horridly sweet fumes from hundreds of blossoms—the curious mingling of dissolution and festivity—that had risen to the upstairs sitting room where he and young Valerie had sat the day before in deference to custom.

He was indignant that after submitting to the conventions thrust upon him, he must be shut up here in the sitting room as if he were a criminal, while people thronged his house at will. And indignant that anything as joyous as a rose should be forced into unwilling contact with what could be at worst only a colossal blunder.

He stirred the logs in the fireplace. When they blazed he sat down on a deep sofa and held out a hand to Valerie. She rose obediently and sat beside him, and he put a casual arm around her. He looked at her almost as if he had never seen her before, hardly realizing that in reality he never had. People who lived with Ellen were barred from any real knowledge of each other, since her necessity had been interpretation.

From below rose the sound of singing. Mark had no idea who the singer was. Her voice was smooth and bland, tuned to consolation. He wanted to get up and shut the sitting room door, but Ellen's sister Dorothy, who had taken charge of him and his grief, had left it open so that he and Valerie could hear the service.

Instead, he talked softly and incessantly to Valerie. About the rose garden, and the spring that was almost on them. About anything he could think of connected with life and joy, until Valerie's tense young slimness relaxed against him, and her eyes like pools in her small white face lost some of their daze.

"Dorothy said you would probably sell Wide Acres now," she told him. Mark started.

"Sell Wide Acres?" The idea was purely fantastic.

Valerie smiled a little. "She said you wouldn't want an enormous house all alone."

"But I'm not alone while there's you. Besides, I built it when there was nobody else here."

"Dorothy said she and Paul could make room for me. She said nobody could expect you to—to keep me—now—"

"Let's get us some more fire," said Mark. He leaned forward, bringing her with him, and laid a log on the flames. He had entirely forgotten for the moment what was going on below. "My darling child, you're not a piece of furniture I had sent home on approval. You see, the law gave you to me. Dorothy can't take you away—unless, of course, you want to go."

He was astonished that the thought of her leaving filled him with sudden fear.

Valerie turned suddenly and clasped her thin young arms as far around him as they would go. As he had an ingrained distrust of too many words, and no intention of adding to the emotion which seemed to drench his house, he merely added his other arm to the one already around her; and they sat and held each other tightly.

"So that's settled," he said presently. "If Dorothy says any more about it, just send her to me."

Soft footsteps in the hall, and Dorothy's face full of sorrow and authority at the door. Behind her Paul, her husband.

"It was a lovely service," said Dorothy. Mark felt relief that she stated the fact, instead of asking him a question. "I know darling Ellen would be happy if she could know all the people who came to be with her. Or maybe she does know—"

She drew a wisp of black-and white chiffon from her sleeve. Her husband patted her arm consolingly. "There will be another brief service at the cemetery, of course. Get your things on, Valerie. It's time to leave."

"But surely—a child—" began Mark. He found himself trembling curiously. So much so that it was hard to speak clearly.

"I hope Valerie is old enough to show her devotion to her mother. It's the last thing she will ever be able to do for her."

Valerie began to cry softly, with little nervous sobs. Mark clenched his fists, as if he could in this way stop the ridiculous chattering of his teeth. Having inherited his money, and so being quite accustomed to it, he wondered as he faced Dorothy why she had always disliked him so.

"I forbid Valerie to go the cemetery—" he managed to say.

As a matter of fact, further rites for Ellen proceeded without either of them, for after he had issued this command, he suddenly folded up on the rug before the fire in the first faint of his life. He dimly remembered that Paul said something about "shock" and that Valerie flung herself beside him stammering words that sounded like "no food—or sleep—"

After that he knew very little about anything until he woke in a flood of sunlight in his own room the following morning.

"Of course mother was always right," she said

Sitting with Valerie over a late breakfast, he found himself making plans.

"Isn't it—exciting?" asked Valerie over the rim of a tall glass of milk.

"What?"

"Just sitting here like this—together. No lessons for me and no office for you." She had apparently forgotten for the moment the reason for all this. Let her forget, thought Mark. He had no intention of turning the place into a house of mourning.

"Don't you like your school?" He asked.

She hesitated for a long moment, facing him with a sort of shy speculation. "Not—very much."

"Why not?"

"Of course, everybody is very nice," she hurried to tell him. "But you see——Nobody seems to care. I mean, you feel like a machine—"

Mark nodded, watching her. Her small face gave him the curious impression of almost visible thought.

"Maybe you'd like to change?" he suggested. "Me I'm not so crazy about this school thing anyway."

"Of course mother is—was always right, and she said the machine part didn't matter. She said it was the very best school. And that we ought to be thankful—"

Mark finished his coffee before he answered. "I don't say she wasn't right. But look at it this way: we have to stick together. Who's going to see that I stay home night, if you are off up the state being educated? So just say I'm a selfish guy, and we'll hunt us a learning factory somewhere in town. There must be one. I mean the kind you should go to. Or maybe you can stay at home and have a governess or tutor, or whatever beautiful young women almost fourteen have. We can let it ride a while, anyway, and see. There's no hurry."

"I like it! I mean, the idea. But does it matter what you like?"

Mark looked at her quickly. She had no business with that blend of wistfulness and renunciation. "I hope to tell you it matters! Look at me. I like work. Even in college I knew I was going to be like that. So what do I do? Go and take up room in a plant being a chemical engineer that somebody else might fit much better."

"But it's your plant," Valerie reminded him.

"So it is." He realized suddenly with a pang that he had not even thought of Ellen during the conversation.

"Miss Weatherbee said it was a mark of character. I mean, not just spending money because your father left it to you. She said if we were boys, we should take you for an example. And anyway, that we could learn a lesson from you. She is the head mistress at Bolton—Miss Weatherbee, I mean."

"What a horrible idea," said Mark, "being taken for an example!" He pushed back his chair and got up. Sunlight flooded the room, and outside on the lawn a lone robin strutted. Mark picked Valerie out of her chair and walked with her to the window.

"This is sort of trippish weather. How would you like to take a car and drive? Anywhere—just as it comes? Before we go back to work. Or how about your not going back to work? I mean, not until fall?"

Valerie leaned a little shyly against his arm. "You? I suppose—"

"What?"

"We couldn't really start this morning—"

"The reason we can't go away today," he told her, "is that we have to hear your mother's will. We have to meet her lawyer here at three. Shall you mind?"

"Not if you are there."

He looked out over Valerie's head across the lawns and gardens.

"Is mother—somewhere?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," said Mark flatly. He realized that he had been expecting the question. That he was prepared to answer. "What they put away was no more Ellen than her sable coat. I mean, there wouldn't be any fun in creating just for the purpose of extinction, would there? I mean, they haven't hurt Ellen's thought. She's taken it along with her, wherever she is. Really, she is her thought. I don't want to muddle you—"

"I see—just a little—" said Valerie. Mark wondered if he only imagined that the nervous tensity that always gripped her was giving way. "I feel much better about it. I only thought—it was such a sad time—to go away—just when everything is starting to bloom—if that was all there is to it."

"I'm quite sure it isn't. If it were things wouldn't make sense. Every thing has to make sense, doesn't it?"

"Most times," she stood quietly beside him for a long time.

He had thought of her during the five years he had been married to Ellen as a small shadow in a state of perpetual acquiescence. With the glitter of Ellen gone, he was beginning to see Valerie.

Ellen had fascinated him at first by the very qualities that afterward proved disastrous: unearthly loveliness combined with an almost ludicrous efficiency, and a voracious capacity for absorbing people. With the spell of her beauty on him, he could escape in work. And now she had suddenly and permanently left him. And already he was dwelling on her imperfections.

He came into the library at three that afternoon, with Valerie, sedate, beside him. Lee Dagnall, Ellen's friend and lawyer for many years, sat at the table looking over papers, and to Mark's surprise there were four other people in the room.

He had not realized there would be anybody but himself and Valerie and saw from the slightly reproachful looks they bent on him that they felt he should have been told when they arrived and some notice taken of them. Dorothy and Paul had come and gone in the house at will during the last wretched week, and Elise Waterford and Shirley Endicott, being Ellen's dearest friends, were on anything but a formal footing.

Mark sat on the sofa and drew Valerie down beside him. Lee at once unfolded Ellen's will, and began to read. The formal phases fascinated Valerie as he proceeded.

After a few minutes however, they fell more and more into a sort of cadence, like some somber music, and she found trouble in keeping her mind on them except as an accompaniment to her thoughts.

She looked up and found Lee had stopped reading, and was putting his papers back in his brief case. Her Aunt Dorothy got up, and Elise and Shirley with Mark beside them. She followed and slipped her hand into his.

"Your darling mother still watches over you," said Elise sentimentally.

Valerie looked up nervously. Elise had a tear in each of her large dark eyes. Valerie watched them, fascinated, waiting for them to roll down.

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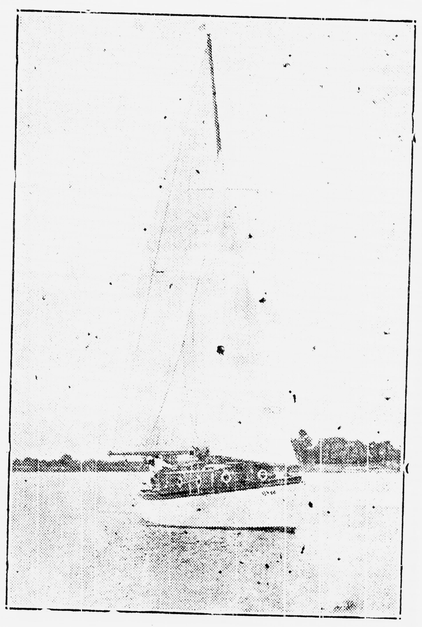

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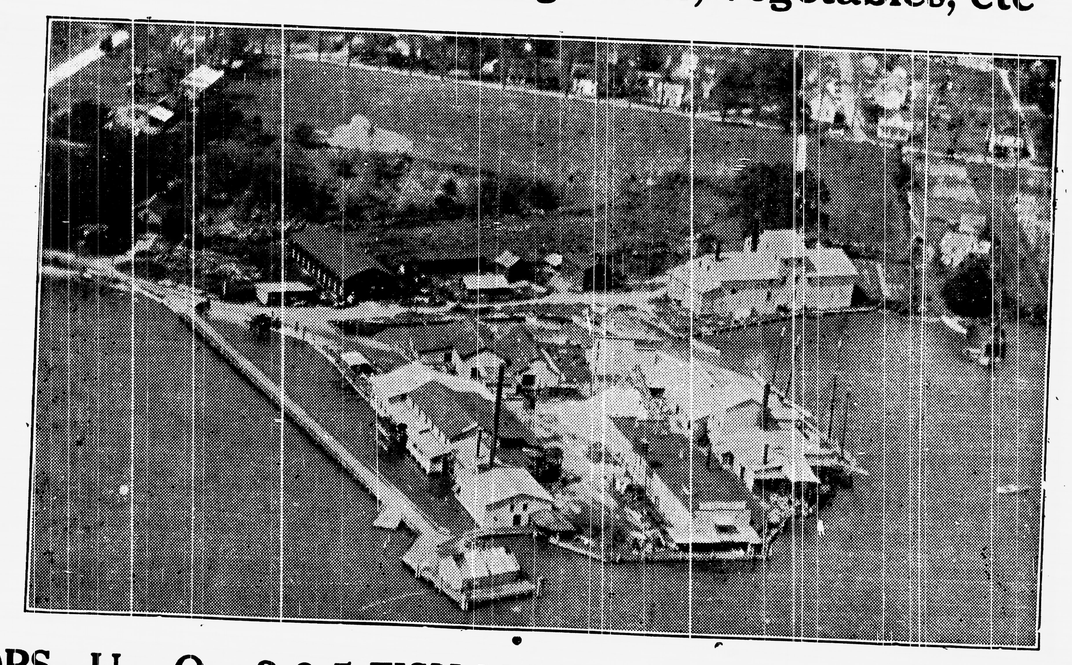

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