

THE SKETCH BOOK

WHY LIE?

By Mrs. Joseph Conrad

I HAVE often wondered what satisfaction people get from that fictitious form of lying. Such as, for instance, claiming an intimate acquaintance with some person more or less in the public eye at the moment. I imagine many well known writers have been victimized in this manner; once it was my unique experience to overhear a most romantic version of my own husband's life and habits, related with every appearance of truth and complete conviction.

It happened, for some now forgotten reason, that I traveled down from town unattended by either my husband or the boys. I was rather late for the train at Charing Cross, and was somewhat agitated by the time I was settled in my corner of a first class carriage. My porter, who from an excess of zeal had hurried me rather unnecessarily, announced triumphantly as he opened the carriage door, "'Ere you are ma'am, ladies only, fust stop Ashford." I gasped my thanks and tendered him my tip, and as I waited then some few minutes till the train started, I regretted that I had not had the good fortune to fall to the care of one of the many officials known to me on that line, who would not have hurried me so much. However, I had caught the train. As we drew out of the station I glanced across at my fellow travelers, two ladies no longer in their first youth. They were in animated discussion at the time of my entry. After favoring me with that appraising glance which seems to price your garments and at

the same time intimate how very insignificant a person you are really, they turned their gaze away and resumed their former discussion. I in my turn, completely uninterested, subsided in my corner and watched the fields and countryside slipping past the carriage windows with restful interest. I had a book with me but I have never been able to read in the train.

We had just cleared the outskirts of London when the mention of my own name, or rather I should say my husband's name, arrested my attention and I heard one of my two fellow travelers asserting that he was known to her intimately. I half rose in my seat, but the next moment I heard the rather shrill voice declaring that the man to whom I had then been married for nearly twenty years was still a bachelor. I gasped. "Yes, dear", the voice continued. "I should think you would have heard something from someone in our set. You remember the time when I was staying with Lady Milne; I met him there. He is a near neighbor of hers. There was even . . ." She lowered her voice and there followed a whispered confidence too low to be audible to me above the rumble of the train. "But Agnes, my dear," interrupted the other, "isn't that a trifle indiscreet of you? He's a foreigner, he may have a wife in his own country."

"Oh, as to that, I can assure you it's perfectly safe. I was reading in the paper only a few days ago that he left his country when he was only seventeen and hasn't been back since. He's a most charming man with the most perfect manners. I am simply devoted to him."

Here followed a pause, in which I longed to proclaim the fact that I was the wife of the man they were discussing. Then I reflected that to one at least of these women I might appear to be lying, and I hesitated. Meanwhile the conversation began again and I listened, appalled, to the tissue of lies that flowed. The good lady, now fairly embarked on the tale of her conquest of my husband, began to enlarge freely; but as she mentioned dates in order to convince her friend, I was quite unruffled. I knew these statements to be a parcel of lies. From time to time she favored me with a somewhat hostile glance, while her friend indulged in a haughty stare. I perceived that quite unwittingly some of my interest must have appeared in my face. I half turned my back and kept my gaze fixed on the flying landscape. I was wondering how on earth I could acclaim myself with any show of truth, for my fighting spirit was aroused and I felt a passionate desire to speak out before I left the carriage.

Just then the train slowed down and I had a sudden brain wave. I would manage to make the railway official address me by name. I knew my husband would be at the station to meet me, and I knew that, owing to a recent attack of gout, he would not leave the car. I was also perfectly certain that some official would be told off to assist me from the train. Everything happened as I had foreseen, except that the official greeted me with a cheerful "Good morning, ma'am", without the prefix of my name. For a moment I was stumped, then I questioned: "Is my car here, do you know?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Conrad, and Mr. Conrad is here too."

This was all I wanted. With what I hope was becoming dignity, I turned

to the lady who had claimed such intimate acquaintance with my husband and who I noticed was looking a trifle confused, and remarked quietly, "Madam, I am Mrs. Joseph Conrad!"