

CHAPTER I

“ My Name is Mildmay ”

“ I AM quite sure,” Virginia protested, a little shyly, “ that you will want it yourself before long.”

The young man laughed pleasantly.

“ I am going to run that risk, anyhow,” he said.

“ Please let me wrap it round you properly, so.”

He did not wait for her consent, but after all she was scarcely prepared to withhold it, for it was a very cold morning, and the young man who had been sitting on the next chair, with an unused rug by his side, was wearing a particularly heavy fur coat.

“ I think,” he said, “ that it is quite plucky of you to stay up on deck a morning like this. I suppose your people are all below ? ”

She shook her head.

“ My people,” she said, “ are a very long way away.”

“ Your maid, then,” he suggested. “ Useless creatures maids, at a time like this. They are nearly always sea-sick, especially the first day out.”

Again she shook her head.

"I am travelling quite alone," she said.

He looked at her in astonishment.

"Alone!" he repeated. "Why, you seem to me much too young. Forgive me, please," he added apologetically, "I did not mean to be impertinent. I suppose that you are an American?"

"I am," she admitted.

"Ah! that explains everything," he remarked, with a little gesture of relief. "You belong, then, to the most wonderful race on earth, to the only race who have dared to cross swords with Mrs. Grundy and disarm her."

"On the contrary," she declared, "Mrs. Grundy of New York is quite as formidable as Mrs. Grundy of London, only we don't invoke her quite so often. Still, I will admit that, strictly speaking, I ought not to be travelling alone. The circumstances are very exceptional."

"I hope," he said earnestly, "that you will give me the opportunity of looking after you some of the time. I am quite alone too, and I know no one on board."

She let her eyes rest for a moment or two upon his face. He was very fair, young, certainly not more than seven or eight and twenty, and reasonably good-looking; but apart from these things, he had eyes which she liked, a voice which was indubitable, and manners which left no possible room for doubt as to his status. She bowed her head a little gravely.

"You are very kind indeed," she said. "I have

never crossed before, and I am quite sure that if you have the time to spare, you can be ever so useful to me.”

He smiled reassuringly.

“ That’s settled then,” he said. “ I can assure you that I feel very much more interested in the voyage already. By-the-by, my name is Mildmay.”

“ And mine,” she replied, after a moment’s hesitation, “ is Virginia Longworth.”

“ Virginia,” he repeated with a smile. “ I think that is one of the most delightful of your American names.”

“ You are English, aren’t you ? ” she asked.

He nodded.

“ I,” he said, “ am returning from my first visit to the States. I have been to stay with a cousin who has a ranch out west. We had ever such a good time.”

She looked at his sunburnt skin, and smiled to herself.

“ Did you stay in New York ? ” she asked.

“ Only two days,” he answered. “ Somehow or other those big places are rather terrifying. I had no friends there, and I wandered about as though I were in a wilderness.”

“ What a pity ! ” she murmured. “ Americans are so hospitable. Surely you could have found some friends if you had wished to ! ”

He smiled a little whimsically.

“ Yes ! ” he said, “ I daresay I could, but I hadn’t the time to spare to look them up. Now tell me

about your visit to England. Where are you going to stay, in the country or in London ? ”

“ I am not sure,” she answered, “ but I think in London, at first at any rate.”

“ You have relations there, of course ? ” he asked.

“ None,” she answered.

“ Friends, then ? ”

She turned her dark eyes upon him. He felt himself suddenly embarrassed.

“ I am awfully sorry,” he said. “ I’ve no right to ask you all these questions. The fact is, I was only trying to make sure that I should be able to see something of you after we had landed.”

“ I am afraid,” she said, “ that that will be scarcely possible, but, if you don’t mind, you mustn’t ask me any questions about my journey. I will admit that it is rather a peculiar one, that I have no friends in England, that I made up my mind to come all of a sudden. My journey has an object, of course, but I cannot tell you what it is, and you must not ask me.”

“ Of course I will not,” he answered, “ but I shall talk to you again about this before we land. I mean to say that you must let me give you my card, and you will know, at any rate, that there is some one in England to whom you can send if you are in need of a friend.”

She smiled at him delightfully.

“ And I have always been told,” she said, “ that Englishmen were so slow ! Why, I have scarcely known you a quarter of an hour.”

"But I have watched you," he answered, "for two days."

"Well," she declared, "I like impulsive people, so I daresay I'll ask you for the card before we land. Do you live in London?"

"I have a house there," he answered. "I am there for about two months in the year, and odd week-ends during the hunting season."

"Tell me about London, please," she said.

"Historically," he began, a little doubtfully. "I am afraid——"

She interrupted him, shaking her head.

"No!" she said, "tell me about the best restaurants and theatres, and the way the people live."

"That's a large order," he answered, "but I'll try."

They talked for an hour or more; neither, in fact, took an exact account of the time. Suddenly they looked up to see a dark-faced, correct-looking servant standing before them.

"The luncheon gong has gone, your Grace," he said. "Shall I take the rugs?"

They made their way into the saloon together. Virginia looked up at him curiously.

"You said that your name was Mildmay," she remarked. "What did your servant mean by calling you 'your Grace'?"

He laughed.

"Oh! I haven't had the fellow very long," he said, "and he came straight to me from some Italian

Duke, or nobleman of some sort. I suppose he hasn't got out of the habit yet. I wonder whether I can arrange to come and sit at your table. The purser seems rather a decent fellow."

"I haven't been in the saloon at all yet," Virginia said, "but it would be very nice if you could sit somewhere near me."

Mr. Mildmay found it an easy matter to arrange. His seat at the captain's table was exchanged for one at the purser's, and the two were side by side. Then Virginia, looking around, received a little shock. She heard her name pleasantly spoken across the table, and, looking up, found that she was exactly opposite Mr. Littleton.

"How do you do, Miss Longworth?" he said. "I had no idea that we were to be fellow passengers."

She was almost too surprised to answer him coherently, but she faltered out something about an unexpected journey. Afterwards, on the way to her state-room, she overtook him near one of the companion ways, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Mr. Littleton," she said, "would you do me a favour?"

"Why, I should say so," he answered. "Nothing I'd like better."

"Don't tell anybody anything about me," she begged. "I mean about my uncle, or anything of that sort at all. I am going over to England on a very foolish errand, I think, and I wish to keep it to myself."

Littleton became a triple grave. He was not a

bad sort of a fellow, and Virginia seemed little more than a charming child as she stood in the passage, looking up at him with appealing eyes and slightly parted lips.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that you have run away from your uncle?"

"Not exactly that," she answered. "My uncle was quite willing to have me leave him, but he does not know exactly where I am, nor do my people. Will you keep my secret, please?"

"Certainly!" he answered.

"From every one on board, as well as from your letters if you write from Queenstown?"

"Well, I'll try to do as you say," he answered, "but I should like to have a talk with you before we land."

He went to his state-room a little thoughtfully. It had not yet occurred to him that Virginia's errand to London and his might possibly have something in common.