

CHAPTER II

Reflections

LITTLESON, before many hours of their voyage had passed, became conscious that Virginia was showing a slight but unmistakable desire to avoid his society. Being a Harvard graduate, something of an athlete, and a young man of fashion and popularity, he did not for a moment entertain the idea that there should be anything personal in her feeling. He came to the conclusion, therefore, that she had either discovered his connexion with Stella's behaviour, or that the object of her visit to Europe was one that she desired to conceal from him. On the afternoon of the day when he had received his first but distinct snub, he made a point of drawing his chair over to hers.

"I am not going to bother you very much, Miss Longworth," he said, "but I feel that I must ask you a question. I don't want you to break any confidences, and I haven't much to tell you myself, but I should like to know whether your visit to England has anything to do with what happened one night in the library of your uncle's house?"

"So you know about that then, do you?" she asked quietly.

"I do," he answered. "I know that a paper was stolen by your cousin, and handed over to a person whom we will not name, but who is now in Europe. I will tell you this much—I am going across so as to keep in touch with that person. It seems odd that you, who are involved in the same affair, should be going over by the same steamer."

"The object of my journey," Virginia said, looking out seaward, "concerns nobody but myself."

The young man nodded.

"I expected that you would say that," he remarked coolly. "Still, our meeting like this induced me to ask you the question. If I can be of any service to you in London, I hope you will not fail to let me know. Your uncle would never forgive me if I did not do everything I could in the way of looking after you."

Virginia smiled a little bitterly.

"My uncle," she said, "is not likely to trouble his head about me. He has dispensed with my services for the future. When I go home, I, am going back to my own people."

Littleton was genuinely sorry. To a certain extent he felt that this was his fault.

"That's just like Phineas," he said. "Hard as nails, and without a dime's worth of consideration. I don't see how you could help what happened. You gave nothing up voluntarily. You told nobody anything."

"My uncle," Virginia said, "judges only by results. After all, it is the only infallible way.

I am going to read a little now. Do you mind? Talking makes my head ache."

He bowed and went his way. For an hour or more he paced up and down on the other side of the deck, thinking. It was, of course, impossible that his child should have come across with the hope of wresting from Norris Vine the paper which all their offers and eloquence had failed to entice him to give up. And yet he did not understand her journey. He knew very well that Phineas Duge had neither connexions nor relatives in England. Only a few weeks ago, in talking to Virginia at dinner-time, she had told him that she had no hope, at present at any rate, of visiting Europe. Later in the day he sent a marconigram back to New York. Perhaps Weiss would see something suggestive in the presence of this child upon the steamer!

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"So you have found one friend on board," Mildmay remarked, pausing before her chair.

"He is not a friend," she answered, "and I do not like him. That is why I told him that it made my head ache to talk."

"Then I suppose——" he began.

"You are to suppose nothing, but to sit down," she said. "Talk to me about London, please, or anything, or any place. I am a little tired to-day. I suppose I should say really a little depressed. I cannot read, and I don't like my thoughts."

"You are such a child," he said softly, "to talk like that."

"I am nineteen," she answered, "and sometimes I feel thirty-nine."

"Nineteen!" he repeated, "and coming across to a strange country all by yourself. The American spirit is a wonderful thing."

She shook her head.

"It isn't the American spirit," she said simply. "It is necessity. I think that any girl in the world, English or American, would prefer having some one to take care of her, to going about alone."

"You make one feel inclined——" he began, bending forward and looking into her eyes.

"After all," she interrupted, "I think I had better read."

"Please don't!" he begged. "I promise to talk most seriously. It is not my fault if I forgot for a moment. You looked at me, you know, and we are not used to eyes like that in England."

"You are either very silly," she said, "or very impertinent. I think that I shall send you away."

"There is no one else," he said, looking around, "to entertain you, and I am really going to try very hard."

"Then please reach me up those chocolates and begin," she said. "Tell me about where you live in the country."

Mildmay, who had seven houses in different parts of the United Kingdom, was a little at a loss, but he talked to her about one, in which, by-the-by, he never lived, a gaunt grey stone building on the Northumbrian coast, whose windows were splashed

with the spray of the North Sea, but whose gardens were famous throughout the north of England. He very soon succeeded in interesting her. She felt something absurdly restful in the sound of his strong, good-natured voice, with its slightly protective intonation. They sat there until the luncheon gong rang, and then they rose and walked for a time together. The sun had come out, and the grey sea was changing into blue. The decks were dry. The syren had ceased to blow. The motion of the ship had become soothing, and the spray, which leaped now into the air, sparkled in the sunlight like diamond drops.

"What a change!" she murmured, looking around.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" he assented. "And what a gloriously salt breeze!"

"I declare," she said, "I am positively hungry! I believe, after all, that I am going to enjoy this voyage."

After luncheon she hesitated for a moment, and then with a little sigh turned into her state-room. She sat down upon her bunk, and leaning her elbow on the round space, gazed thoughtfully out of the open port-hole. Had she been foolish to forget for a little while, and was she in danger of being more foolish still! Her thoughts travelled back to the little farmhouse so far removed from civilization. She thought of the altered life they were all living there, her father freed from care, her brother at college, her mother with that anxious light

banished from her eyes, no more having to scheme day by day how to pay the slender tradesmen's bills which so quickly became formidable. To think that the old days might return was a nightmare to her. She felt that she would do anything, dare anything, to win her way back to her old position with her uncle. Only a few words had passed between them at parting. She had asked him to let her people know nothing, to let them believe that she had gone on a journey for him.

"Let them have a few more months!" she begged. "Then if I succeed in what I am going to try, it will be all right. If I fail, well, they will have been happy for a little longer."

He had spoken no word of hope to her. He had made no promises. All that he had said had been curt and to the point.

"What you lost it is open for you to find. If it is found, it will be as though it were not lost."

But what a wild-goose chase it seemed! How could she hope for success! Even Stella would laugh at her; and Vine, she had only seen him once, but she could imagine the smile with which he would greet any entreaties she could frame. She shook her head at her own thoughts. Entreaties! She would have to choose other weapons to these. By force and cunning she had been robbed; her only chance of effective reply would be to use the same means, only to use them more surely. Meanwhile she told herself that she must keep away from these distractions. After all, she was only a child,

and she had had so little kindness from any one. Her head sank a little lower, and her hands went up before her eyes. What an idiot she was, after all! Then she locked the door, and cried herself to sleep.