

CHAPTER III

“Will you Marry Me”

“THIS time,” he said firmly, “you cannot escape me. Will you sit down in your chair, or shall we talk here?”

She glanced up at him, and the words which she had prepared died away on her lips. She led the way quite meekly to where their chairs remained side by side.

“We will sit down if you like, for a short time,” she said, hesitatingly. “I cannot stay long. I still have a good deal of packing to do.”

He did not answer until he had arranged her rug and made her comfortable. It was the last few hours of their voyage. Facing them they could see in the distance the lights of Wales. Next morning would see them in dock.

“I will not keep you very long,” he said, drawing his chair quite close to hers, so that they could not be overheard, “but I insist upon knowing why for the last twenty-four hours you have done nothing but avoid me? I have not offended you in any way, have I?”

“No!” she answered, looking steadily away at one of the lights, “you know that you have not.”

"On the contrary," he continued, "I have done what little I could to make the voyage more endurable to you. Of course I know the pleasure of your society more than compensated me for any little services I have been able to render, but still I have done nothing to deserve this altered treatment from you, and I am determined to know what it means."

"You are exaggerating trifles," she said coldly. "I have felt nervous and depressed all day, and I did not care to talk to any one. I have not avoided you more than anybody else."

"That," he answered, "is not true."

She turned slowly round till he could see her face, still and pale and cold, almost, it seemed to him, luminously white in the heavy darkness of the moonless hour.

"You can contradict me if you choose," she said, "but you can scarcely expect me to sit here and listen to you."

He leaned a little closer, and she suddenly felt her hand clasped in his.

"Virginia," he said, "—yes, I mean it—Virginia, don't be unkind to me, our last night. You know very well that it hurts me to have you speak and look at me so. Besides, we are going to be friends; you promised me that, you know."

"If I did," she answered, "it was very foolish. Friends means the giving and taking of confidences, and I have none to give. I am going to do strange things, and in an odd way and I have no explanations

to offer. If I had friends, they would think that I had taken leave of my senses, and they would want me to explain. That is just what I cannot do. That is why I am sure it would be better if you would let me alone."

"I shall not do that," he answered firmly. "I am not a morbidly curious person, nor do I want to pry into your affairs, but I cannot help feeling that you are in some sort of trouble, and that it would be good for you, in a strange country, to have some one on whose help you could rely in case of need."

"You mean well, I know," she answered, "but you are asking impossibilities. If you should happen to come across me over here, you will understand what I mean. I am going to do things which very likely you would be ashamed to think that any friend of yours would do."

He turned upon her a little angrily.

"Child," he said, "if I wasn't so fond of you I think you would make me lose my temper. How old are you?"

"Nineteen," she answered, "but it isn't any business of yours."

"No business of mine!" he repeated. "Heavens! Isn't it the business of any man to look after a child like you? Nineteen years old, indeed, and most of them spent in a farmhouse! How do you know that these things which you talk about doing are right or necessary? Don't you see you are not old enough to judge of the serious things of life?"

You want some one to take care of you, Virginia. Will you marry me ? ”

“ Will I what ? ” she gasped.

“ Wasn't I explicit enough ? ” he asked. “ I said marry me.”

She would have risen from her chair, but he calmly took her arm and drew her down again.

“ I will not stay here,” she declared, “ and hear you talk such rubbish.”

“ It is not rubbish,” he answered, “ but I will admit that I should not have said anything about it yet, if it had not been for your vague threats of what you were going to do. Virginia,” he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, “ you know that I am fond of you. I have been fond of you ever since I first saw you here.”

“ Six days ago,” she murmured drearily.

“ Six days or six weeks, it's all the same,” he declared. “ I wasn't going to say anything just yet, but I can't bear the thought of leaving you at Liverpool, in a strange country, and without any friends. Be sensible, dear, and tell me all about it later on. First of all, I want my answer.”

“ Is that necessary ? ” she replied quietly. “ Even in America, you know, we don't promise to marry people whom we have known for six days.”

“ Wait until you have known me longer, then,” he answered, “ but give me at least the chance of knowing you.”

“ You are a very foolish person,” she said, a little more kindly. “ You do not know who I am, or

anything about me. Some day or other you will be very glad that I did not take advantage of your kindness.”

“You think that I ask you this,” he said, “because I am sorry for you?”

“I don’t want to think about it at all,” she answered, rising. “I am not going to sit here any longer. We will walk for a little time, if you like.”

They paced together up and down the deck. She asked him questions about the lights, the landing at Liverpool, the train service to London, and she kept always very near to one of the other promenading couples. At last she stopped before the companion-way, and held out her hand.

“This must be our good-night,” she said, “and good-bye if I do not see anything of you in the morning. I suppose it will be a terrible crush getting on shore.”

“It will not be good-bye,” he said, “because however great the rush is I shall see you in the morning. As for the rest, you have been very unkind to me to-night, but I can wait. London is not a large place. I daresay we shall meet again.”

The look in her eyes puzzled him no less than her words:

“Oh! I hope not,” she said fervently. “I don’t want to meet any one in London except one person. Good-night Mr. Mildmay!”

He turned away, and almost ran into the arms of Littleton, who had been watching them curiously.

“Come and have a drink,” the latter said.

The two men made their way to the smoke-room. Littleton lit a cigarette as he sipped his whisky and soda.

"Charming young lady, Miss Longworth," he remarked nonchalantly.

Mildmay agreed, but his acquiescence was stiff, and a little abrupt. He would have changed the subject, but Littleton was curious.

"Can't understand," he said, "what she's doing crossing over here alone. I saw her the first day out. She came and asked me, in fact, to forget that I had ever seen her before. Queer thing, very!"

Mildmay deliberately set down his glass.

"Do you mind," he said, "if we don't discuss it? I fancy that Miss Longworth has her own reasons for wishing not to be talked about, and in any case a smoking-room is scarcely the proper place to discuss her. I think I will go to bed, if you don't mind."

Littleton shrugged his shoulders as the Englishman disappeared.

"Touchy lot these Britishers," he remarked.