

## CHAPTER VI

### Mr. Mildmay Again

IT was her third day in London, and Virginia was discouraged. Neither at the Embassy nor at his club had she been able to obtain any tidings of the man of whom she was in search. There remained only a list of places given her in New York by his servant, where he was likely to be met. She went through them conscientiously, but without the slightest success. Gradually she began to realize the difficulty, perhaps the hopelessness, of her task. To find the man in London with such scanty information as she possessed was difficult enough, and there remained the question, as yet unanswered in her thoughts, as to what she would say or do if chance ever should bring them face to face.

Her experiences in those days became almost a nightmare to her. Dressed always in her quietest clothes, and with her natural reserve of manner intensified by the circumstances in which she found herself, she was yet more than once supremely uncomfortable. She became used to the doubtful looks of the waiters to whom she presented herself

and asked for a table alone, at the different restaurants on her list. She found herself often at such times the only unescorted woman in the place, and the cynosure of a good many curious glances. Even when there were other women, they were of a class which she instinctively recognized, and from whom she shrank. But of actual adventures she had few. Apart from the fact of her appearing alone, there was nothing in her manner to invite attention.

There came a day, however, when she found herself suddenly plunged into the midst of more exciting events. She was sitting one afternoon in a café in Regent Street, at a table near the door, from whence she could watch every one who came and went. Exactly behind her were two men, both strangers to her, who had been talking in low tones ever since her entrance. Her attention had been in no way attracted to them, and it was only by chance that she suddenly caught the name of Noris Vine.

Her heart gave a little beat. It was only by a strong exercise of will that she forbore to turn round. She pushed her chair a little further backwards, saying something to the waiter about a draught, and taking up a French newspaper which some one had left behind, she listened intently. All that she could remember of the men was that one was small, clean-shaven, very neatly dressed, and having rather the appearance of an American ; and that the other was a larger and more florid man, with red face and burly

shoulders. It was apparently the former who was speaking.

"It is a matter of five thousand pounds," she heard him say, "that is to say, two thousand five hundred pounds each, and it can be done without risk. The man is little known here, and has few friends. He has rooms in a flat to which there is plenty of access, two lifts on each floor and separate exits, and he lives quite alone."

"Two thousand five hundred pounds!" the other man uttered. "It sounds well, but——"

Then his voice dropped, and she could hear nothing else for a minute or two. She called a waiter and ordered something, she scarcely knew what. The voices behind had sunk lower and lower. She could hear nothing at all now, but she gathered that the smaller man was pressing some enterprise upon the other, and that his companion, although inclined to accept, found difficulties. She waited for a little time, and presently she began again to catch odd scraps of the conversation.

"Of course," she heard the smaller man say, "if we had him in New York the thing would be absolutely easy. It is probably because he knows that, that he came over here."

"He knows he is in danger, then?" the other voice asked.

"He knows that he carries his life in his hand," was the answer. "He must know that he has done so since a few days before he sailed for Europe. He is being watched the whole of the time, and

from what I have seen, I should say his nerves were beginning to give way a little under the strain."

The other man muttered something which she could not hear.

"It is not your concern or mine," his companion answered. "He has chosen to court the enmity of some of the most powerful men in America, and it is his own fault if he suffers for it. He has been plying a pretty big game, but he doesn't hold quite all the cards."

There were more questions and answers, all unintelligible. She pushed her chair a little farther back, still apparently without awakening their suspicions, and then at last she heard something more definite.

"No. 57, Coniston Mansions. It is absolutely easy to get in. Nearly every one in the flats is connected with the stage, and they are almost deserted between half-past seven and eleven. To-night we know his movements exactly. He will dine at his club, and return some time before eleven to change, as he is going to a reception at the American Embassy."

"To-night is too soon," she heard the other man say. "I must have time to look about the place. I want to understand exactly where the risks are, and the easiest way to leave without being noticed. There are a lot of small things like that to be considered, if the matter is to be done artistically."

"Every day's delay is dangerous," the smaller

man said, doubtfully. "Look here, Dick. It's a lot of money, and the offer may be withdrawn at any moment."

It occurred to Virginia suddenly that if these men were to see her face, she might be recognized. She could see that they were on the point of leaving, and their conversation was obviously at an end. She called for a waiter, paid her bill, and went out.

She walked slowly down Regent Street, and turning up Shaftesbury Avenue, made her way on foot to the boarding house near the British Museum where she was living. She went straight up to her room and sat down to think. She had decided that these men were probably employed by Littleton, and that they were going to make an attempt, that night apparently, upon the life of Norris Vine. In any case her first impulse would have been to warn him, but she had also personal reasons for doing so. If this paper which Vine held, was recovered by some one else, her own mission would be a failure. In the hands of Littleton and his friends, it would without a doubt be promptly destroyed, and nothing would be left for her to do but to go back to America and own her defeat. She decided that Norris Vine must be warned. At first she thought of writing or telegraphing. Then she remembered that it was already past six, and that Vine was not expected to return to his rooms until after dinner. He would probably, therefore, receive neither telegram or letter before he had walked into the trap. There was only

one thing left for her to do. If these men could obtain ingress to Vine's rooms, so could she. She must be there first and warn him.

She changed her clothes, and after a few minutes' hesitation, set out to dine at one of the restaurants which she had on her list. It was a smart and somewhat Bohemian place, but even here women dining alone were subjected to a good deal of remark, and her cheeks grew hot as she remembered her first visit there, and the whispered discussion between the waiters as to whether she should be given a table. She had become a fairly regular customer there now, though, and to-night she was given a table near the wall, an excellent vantage ground for her, but exactly opposite three men, who had apparently been drinking heavily, and whose whole attention, from the moment of her entrance, seemed fixed upon her. She ordered her dinner, steadfastly ignoring them, and sat as usual with her eyes fixed upon the door, but her indifference was not sufficient to chill the ardour of the youngest of the three men. She saw him call a waiter and write something on the back of a card, and immediately afterwards the waiter, with some hesitation, and a half-expressed apology, presented it to her. She tore it in pieces, and went on with her dinner without a word. Then a voice at her elbow startled her.

"Miss Longworth," it said, "would you allow me to sit at your table? I will promise not to intrude in any way, and you may possibly be saved from such impertinences as that."

He pointed to the waiter, retiring discomfited, and Virginia, with a little murmur of delight, recognized Mr. Mildmay standing before her.

"Mr. Mildmay!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand. "Why, how glad I am to see you again!"

"And I you, Miss Longworth," he answered heartily, "but to be frank with you, I would rather have met you somewhere else."

The colour which had suddenly streamed into her cheeks faded away, and she sighed. Tall, and very immaculate in the neat simplicity of his severe evening dress, he seemed to her a more formidable person than ever he had done on the steamer. The disapproval, too, which he felt, he could scarcely help showing in some measure in his face.

"Perhaps," she said, "I ought not to have asked you to do anything so compromising as to sit with me. Please don't hesitate to say so if you would rather not."

He seated himself by her side and drew the carte toward him.

"Have you ordered?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I am so sorry," she said, "but I am in no hurry. You can catch me up."

He ordered something from the waiter who was standing by, and then turned again towards her.

"You mustn't be unfair to me, please," he said. "It is only because I hate to see you subjected to such affronts, that I have any feeling in the matter

at all. Couldn't you have a companion, or some thing of that sort, if you *must* come to these places?"

She laughed softly.

"No!" she said, "I am afraid I couldn't do that, but if it really gives you any satisfaction to hear it, I think that my search—I told you that I had come to look for some one, didn't I?—will be over to-night, and then it will not be necessary for me to do this sort of thing."

"I am glad," he answered heartily. "I am glad, that is to say, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless it means your going back to America.

She raised her eyes to his.

"And how does that concern you?" she asked, simply.

"I wish to God I knew why it should!" he answered, almost bitterly. "Do you know what a fool I have been making of myself for the last week or so? I have given up my club and all my friends, refused every invitation, and spent all my time going about from restaurant to restaurant, café to café, hoping to somewhere come across you."

"Mr. Mildmay!"—she began.

"Oh! you need not look like that," he interrupted. "It's perfectly true. I think you knew it upon the steamer. I suppose that last day I made myself a nuisance to you, with my advice and fears, and all that sort of thing. Well, you see, now I ask no questions. I am content to take you as you are.



You want some one to look after you, Virginia.  
Will you marry me ? ”

She set down her glass, which was half raised to her lips, and looked at him with wide open eyes and trembling lips.