

CHAPTER VIII

Defeated

VIRGINIA drew a little breath of relief. After all it had been so easy. She had simply walked into the flats, entered the lift, ascended to the fifth floor, opened the door of No. 57, and walked in. She had had a moment of fear lest there should be a servant in the rooms, but it was a fear which proved groundless. She had found herself in a tiny hall, with closed doors in front and on the right of her, and an open one on the left leading into a small, plainly furnished but comfortable sitting-room. This she entered, and closed the door behind her. At last she was in Norris Vine's sanctum.

She drew a little breath, half of relief, half of excitement, and then repenting of the closed door, quietly opened it, and left it about a foot ajar. She looked round the room with a swift comprehensive glance. There was only one place where it seemed possible that papers of importance might be hidden, a small desk with pigeon holes, before the window. She sat down in front of it, and methodically, one by one, she examined every paper she found, bills, receipts, prospectuses, charitable appeals, circulars memoranda of literary matter. She found many

of these, but nothing in the least like the paper for which she was in search.

With a little sigh she closed the desk, and, turning away from it, seated herself in the easy-chair in front of the fireplace. Almost as she did so she received a shock which sent the blood tingling through her body. The outer door had opened very softly. She had the idea that some one was standing outside hesitating whether to enter. Thoughts flashed quickly through her mind. This was not Norris Vine, or he would have entered his own room without hesitation. She affected to be absorbed in the magazine which she had picked up, but it was almost certain, from the fact that the door was gently pushed open another inch or two, that some one was looking through the chink. She read on unmoved, although she even fancied that she could hear the stifled breathing of some one peering into the room. Then she heard the door of the room outside, his bedroom without a doubt, softly opened. The intruder, whomever he might be, had evidently stolen in there.

Virginia laid down her magazine for a moment, and with half-closed eyes tried to think. Within the next room, only a few yards away, and nearer to the door leading into the flat that she herself was, was hiding the person who for two thousand five hundred pounds was proposing to rid the world of Norris Vine. What would happen if she sat still? If Norris Vine should come in, and it was almost the time at which he was expected, his assail-



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ant would probably be waiting behind the door. She had no doubt but that the attack would be swift and sudden, and that once made some means would be taken to keep her a prisoner in the room where she now was or perhaps there might be even worse things in store for her. In any case, within a few yards of her a man lay in hiding with murder in his heart, and between these two the closed door which might at any moment be opened. What chance would she have to warn Norris Vine? None at all!

She rose to her feet and sat down again. The very thought of moving nearer to the room where this man was waiting filled her with horror, and yet it was surely as dangerous to remain where she was, too far away to warn any one entering, and herself at the mercy of the conqueror in the brief struggle. Her breath began to come more quickly as she realized that she was trapped. Probably that man in the next room knew all about her, knew just why she was there, and had made up his mind how to deal with her. She found herself listening in ever-deepening horror for that turn of the handle which should signal the coming of the man for whom they were both waiting. Intervention of any sort she felt would be thankful.

An intervention came, in a manner as commonplace as it was startling. The bell of a telephone instrument on the top of the desk began to ring. A moment's breathless indecision, and then she walked to the instrument and took the receiver in

her hand. Simultaneously she heard a stealthy movement outside. Her fellow-watcher, whomever he might be, had also made up his mind to hear whom it might be who was ringing up Norris Vine so late.

"Who's that?" the voice asked abruptly.

"Coniston Mansions, No. 57." Virginia answered, disguising her voice as much as possible.

"Yes! but who is it in my rooms? That isn't Janion's voice, is it?"

Then Virginia knew that the person who spoke was Norris Vine himself, and before every word she uttered she hesitated, thinking always of the listener outside.

"No, it's not Janion," she answered. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to know whether my servant was there," the voice replied. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my rooms?"

"Gone into the country?" Virginia said, speaking in a loud tone of surprise. "You mean that he will not be here to-night, after all?"

The voice down the telephone came angry and perplexed.

"What the devil are you talking about?" it asked. "I am Norris Vine, and I am speaking into my own rooms. I want to know who you are, and what are you doing there."

"Then I think," Virginia continued, still speaking loudly, "that you might be a little more careful before you send me on a fool's errand like this.

Here have I been waiting for half an hour for a man whom you declared was certain to come here before eleven o'clock. Now you tell me that he is not returning to-night at all, gone into the country, or some rubbish. Why can't you make sure of your facts? You seem to repeat any stuff that's told you, and then think that it doesn't matter so long as you say that you're sorry. How about my wasted time sitting here, to say nothing of the risk of being taken for a thief!"

"If you don't tell me who you are at once," the voice came back, "I shall send a policeman round. Can't you understand that I want my man Janion? I want him to bring my evening clothes to the club. If you don't tell me who you are, and what you are doing in my rooms, I shall be round there with a policeman in five minutes."

"Of course I shan't stop," Virginia replied, still in a loud voice. "What on earth is there to stop for if the man isn't coming back for several days? I shall be away before the police can come. Ring off, please."

"I don't know who the devil you are," the voice came back, "but I jolly soon will. You'll have to hurry, my friend, if you mean to get away. I am going to ring up the manager's office."

Virginia threw down the receiver. She hesitated for a moment before the looking-glass, as though straightening her hat—in reality to give the listener outside time to get back once more into hiding. Then she walked with fast beating heart and steady

footsteps towards the door. She opened it boldly. The little hall was empty; the door of the room opposite, which had been closed when she had entered, was ajar now, but there were no signs of any living person. She opened the door leading into the corridor and safety. For the first time she noticed that the key was in the inside. She withdrew it, passed out, closed the door, and stood in safety in the corridor. Thoughts chased one another through her mind. She had only to lock the door on the outside, call for help, and the person who had waited with her for Norris Vine's return was caught in a trap. Would there be any advantage in it? Would she be able to clear herself?

Reluctantly she decided that it was better to let them go. She rang for the lift, and then turned with fascinated eyes to watch the door leading into Norris Vine's apartments. The lights were very dim on the landing. There were no servants or any one about. She watched the closed door with fascinated eyes. What if it should open before the lift came! She rang again, kept her finger upon the bell; then with a great sense of relief she heard the creaking of the wire rope, and saw the top of the lift beginning to ascend. It drew level with her, and the page-boy threw open the iron door. Almost at that moment she saw the door of Norris Vine's apartment softly opened from the inside. She sank down upon the cushioned seat.

"Down, please!" she said, and the lift began

to descend. Her safety was assured. She turned to the boy. "Does Mr. Vine generally come up this way to his rooms?" she asked.

"Always at night, miss," the boy answered. "The other lift don't run after eleven."

She reached the hall. The commissionaire opened the doors and she passed out into the street. She crossed the road, and stood perfectly still watching the entrance. Five, ten minutes passed; then a man came out in evening dress, with silk hat, and a white handkerchief around his neck. He was smoking a cigarette, and he carried a silver-headed cane. Virginia crossed the road once more, and, trusting to the crowd, kept within a few yards of him. He turned to the edge of the curb and called a hansom.

"Claridge's Hotel!" he said. "As quick as you can, cabby!"

She gave a little start. Not only had she recognized the voice of the man who had sat behind her in the café that afternoon, but she knew at once that this was also one of the three men who had sat opposite her only an hour or so ago at dinner'