

CHAPTER XI

Conscience

VIRGINIA slept little that night. Her room, one of the smallest and least expensive in the cosmopolitan boarding-house where she was staying, was high up, almost in an attic. The windows were small, and opened with difficulty. The heat, combined with her own restlessness, made the weary hours one long nightmare for her.

Early in the morning she rose and sat in front of the little window, looking out across the wilderness of house-tops, where a pall of smoke seemed to convert to luminous chaos the rising sun. There was a lump in her throat, and gathering tears in her eyes. It seemed to her that no one could ever realize a loneliness more absolute and complete than hers. She thought of the early summer mornings in that tiny farmhouse perched on the side of the lonely valley, where the air at least was clear and pure and bright, musical with the song of birds, and the west wind which stirred always in the pine-woods behind heralded the coming morning. If only she could have dropped from her shoulders the burden of the last few months,

and found herself back there once more. Then a pang of remorse shook her heart. She remembered the happiness which through her had come to those whom she loved, and the thought was like a tonic to her. She forgot her own sorrows, she forgot that dim tremendous feeling, which had shone through her life for a minute or two, only to pass away and leave behind longings and regrets which were in themselves a constant pain. She forgot everything except the thought of what it might mean to those others who were dear to her if she should fail in her task. Her face seemed suddenly aged as she sat there, crushing down the sweeter things, clenching her fingers upon the window sill, and telling herself that at any cost she must succeed, hopeless though the task might seem.

Presently she began to move about the room and collect her clothes. At half-past nine she had left the boarding-house and departed without leaving any address behind her. At ten o'clock a great automobile swung round the corner, stopped before the door, and Mr. Mildmay descended and ran lightly up the steps. Miss Longworth had gone away, he was told by the shabby German waiter in soiled linen coat and greasy black trousers. She had left no address. She had left no message for any one who might be calling for her. The largest tip which he had ever received could only send him into the inner regions to interview the proprietress, who came out and confirmed his

words. Mildmay turned slowly around and drove away.

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Stella and Norris Vine lunched together that day in a small West End restaurant. He had telephoned asking her to come, and she had at once thrown over another engagement. They were scarcely seated before he asked her a question.

"Do you know that your cousin is in London?" he asked.

"What! Virginia?" Stella exclaimed.

He nodded, and Stella was genuinely amazed.

"Whom did she come with?" she asked.

"What does she want here?"

"She came alone, poor little thing," he answered, "and on a wild-goose chase. I never heard anything so pathetic in my life. She ought to be in short frocks, playing with her dolls, and she has come here four thousand miles to a city she knows nothing of, to steal back—well, you know what. One could laugh if it were not so pathetic."

"Little fool!" Stella said, half contemptuously, and yet with a note of regret in her tone.

"I thought, perhaps," Vine said, "you might find out where she is and go and talk common sense to her. If there is anything else we can do, I'd like to, only I hate the thought of a pretty child like that wandering about London on such an absurd quest."

"Do you know where she is to be found?" Stella asked quietly.

"I have no idea," Vine answered. "The last time I saw her was in my own rooms. I am only sorry that I let her go."

Stella looked up at him quickly.

"Your own rooms!" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well," he answered, "with the extraordinary luck which comes sometimes to babies, she overheard two men talking about me and arranging to meet at a certain hour at my flat. She actually had the nerve to be there herself at the same time. While she sat in my sitting-room, they waited in the bedroom. Mind a great part of this may be her invention. I have only her word for it, but she certainly seemed as though she were telling the truth. I rang up for some one to bring me a change of clothes, and she answered the telephone. What she said to me sounded such rank nonsense that I jumped in a hansom and went straight back to my rooms. However, the men who were listening gathered from what she said that I was not coming back, and they gave it up and stole out. When I returned I found her waiting there, and she demanded that I should give her up the paper she wanted as a matter of gratitude."

"Do you believe her story?" Stella asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "I know that I am being followed about, and if she could get into my rooms, it is quite as easy for them to do so."

They may have been there, and I dare say that if I had entered unsuspectingly, and Dan Prince had anything to do with it, I shouldn't have had much chance. It amused me to see all my drawers turned out and my papers disturbed."

"Little idiot!" Stella said impatiently. "She ought to be at home, feeding her father's chickens. She is hopelessly out of place here, just as she was in New York."

"I wish we could send her back there," Vine declared.

Stella looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"My dear Norris," she said, "isn't this rather a new departure for you? I don't seem to recognize you in this frame of mind."

He sipped his wine thoughtfully for a minute or two, and helped himself to some curry.

"I believe after all, Stella," he said, "that you know very little about me. I am naturally a most tender-hearted person."

"You have managed," she remarked drily, "to conceal your weakness most effectively."

"A journalist," he reminded her, "is used to conceal them. Without the arts of lying and acting, we might as well abandon our profession. Seriously, Stella, I am sorry for the child! I wish you could find her and pack her off home."

Stella shrugged her shoulders.

"In the first place," she said, "I have no idea where to look; and in the second, she is one of

those obstinate children who never do what they are told, or see reason."

"I admit," he replied, "that finding her is rather a difficulty, but after all, you see, it is you directly, and I indirectly, who are responsible for her troubles. I think we ought to do what we can. I wish I hadn't let her go the other night."

"I am becoming," Stella said, smiling, "a little jealous of my cousin."

He looked at her with steady scrutiny, as though he were curious to decide how much of truth there might be in her words.

"You have no need, my dear Stella," he said, "to be jealous of Virginia or any other girl. This is simply the dying kick of a nearly finished conscience."

"If I come across her," Stella said, "I will do what I can. If you see her again, and I should think you are the more likely, find out her address and I will go and see her. By the by," she added, leaning across the table towards him, "you seem very confident of preserving it. Tell me, where do you keep that paper?"

He smiled.

"Ah!" he said. "All my secrets save one are yours, but I think that that one I will not tell you."

She frowned at him, obviously annoyed.

"Do you mean that?" she asked. "Surely you do not hesitate to trust me?"

"Not for one moment," he answered. "On the other hand, the knowledge of a thing of that sort is better in as few hands as possible. You will be none the better for knowing. Circumstances might arise to make even the knowledge an embarrassment to you. Take my advice, and do not ask me that question."

Stella's face had grown darker.

"It is I," she said, "whom you have to thank for the possession of it. Considering that you go in danger every moment, I think that some one else save yourself should share in the knowledge of what you have done with it."

"Let me recommend," he said, studying the menu for a moment with his horn-rimmed eyeglass, "an artichoke with sauce mayonnaise, or would you prefer asparagus?"

"I should prefer," she insisted, "an answer to my question."

He looked at her steadily. His face was utterly impassive, his forefinger was tapping lightly upon the table-cloth. It was a look which she knew very well.

"The knowledge of where that paper is, Stella, would do you no good," he declared. "Forgive me, but I do not intend to tell a soul."

They finished their luncheon almost in silence. She only once recurred to the subject.

"Perhaps," she said, looking quietly up at him, "as your conscience is growing so susceptible, you will think it right to restore that paper to my

little cousin. Those are wonderful eyes, you know, of hers, now she has learnt to use them a little."

Norris Vine did not answer, and they parted with the briefest of farewells.