

## CHAPTER XII

### Duke of Mowbray

THIS time Milkmay was angry. He showed it alike in his speech and expression. Virginia looked at him like a terrified child.

"So, Virginia," he said, "I have found you at last!"

"What do you want?" she asked breathlessly.

He looked at her for quite thirty seconds without replying. Her eyes fell before his. More than ever she felt the shame of her position.

"What do I want?" he repeated, a little bitterly. "You ask me that, Virginia, seriously?"

She covered her face with her hands.

"Oh! please go away," she said. "It is not kind of you to come here."

"I do not mean to be unkind," he answered, "but I want to understand. Why did you leave your boarding-house in Russell Street and run away from me?"

"It was not only to run away from you," she answered. "There were other reasons."

"Why should you wish to run away from me at all?" he asked.

"Because," she answered, "I am afraid, and you ask me things which are impossible."

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

"Of myself, of you, of everything," she murmured pathetically.

Virginia was a little worried. Day after day of disappointment had tried her sorely. He felt himself softening, but he showed no signs of it in his face.

"Is there anywhere here where we can talk?" he asked. "You have rooms in the building, have you not. Are you alone?"

He could have bitten his tongue out for that question, but its significance never occurred to her.

"Yes!" she answered. "Since you are here, perhaps you had better come in."

They had met on the landing of the fifth floor of Coniston Mansions. She led him down the corridor, and, opening a door, ushered him into a tiny sitting-room.

"How did you find me out?" she asked.

"I saw you dining at Luigi's yesterday and to-day," he answered sternly. "You were with the same man both times. I followed you yesterday. You both came back here. To-day you came back alone. Is this man your brother?"

"No!" she answered.

"Your cousin? Is he any relation to you?"

"No!" she repeated.

"Who is he, then?"

"A friend," she answered, "or an enemy perhaps. What does it matter to you?"

He looked at her steadfastly. She was dressed



"He laughed as he took her into his arms."

in white muslin, and she wore a big black hat without any touch of colour. Her clothes were those which her uncle had ordered in New York. She was slim and dainty and elegant, and he found it hard indeed to keep his heart steeled against her.

"How can you ask me that, Virginia?" he replied. "Have you forgotten that I have asked you to marry me?"

"And I have told you that I cannot," she replied desperately. "I cannot and I will not. You have no right to come here and worry me."

"So my coming does worry you?" he asked.

"Yes!" she answered desperately, "you know that it does."

"Virginia," he said, "what is this man's name?"

"It is no concern of yours," she answered.

"Are you in love with him?"

"I shall not tell you," she said.

"Is he in love with you?"

"If you ask me any more such questions, I shall go into my room and lock the door," she declared.

Mildmay took a turn up and down the little apartment. The child was impossible, yet all the time he seemed to read her soft frightened eyes.

"Virginia," he said suddenly, stopping in front of her, "I have the licence in my pocket. Won't you come out with me and be married?"

"No!" she answered, "I will not."

"Think!" he begged her. "It would be so easy. We could walk out of this place together,

and in an hour's time you would have some one else to take your little troubles on their shoulders. Don't you think that mine are broad enough, little girl?"

"Please don't!" she begged. "I cannot. I wish you would not ask me."

"I don't know whether it makes any difference," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "but I have plenty of money. In fact I am very rich. If there is any possible way in which money could help your troubles, they would soon be over."

"Oh! I know that you have," she answered. "It is not that."

He looked at her fixedly.

"You know that I have? Perhaps you know who I am?"

"I do," she answered. "You are Guy Mildmay, Duke of Mowbray."

He was taken aback.

"How did you find that out?" he asked.

"On the steamer," she answered, "the last few days. People got to know, I am not sure how, and in any case it does not matter."

A light began to break in upon him.

"I believe," he said "that it is because you know that you will not marry me."

"Oh! it isn't only that," she answered. "It is utterly, absolutely impossible. My people live on a little farm in America, and have barely enough money to live on. We are terribly poor."

He frowned for a moment thoughtfully. He

was looking at her expensive clothes. He did not understand.

"And besides," she continued, "there is another reason why I should never think of it. Now, please, won't you believe me and go away? It is not kind of you to make it so difficult for me."

"Very well, Virginia," he said quietly, "for the present I will ask you no more. But can you tell me any reason why I should not be your friend?"

"None at all," she answered. "You can be what you like if you will only go away and leave me alone."

"That," he answered, "is not my idea of friendship. If we are friends, I have the right to help you in your troubles, whatever they may be."

"That," she declared, "is impossible."

Then he began to realize that this child, with her soft great eyes, her delightful mouth, her girlish face, which ever since he had first seen it had seemed to him the prototype of all that was gentle and lovable, possessed a strength of character incredible in one of her years and appearance. He realized that he was only distressing her by his presence. The timidity of her manner was no sign of weakness, and there was finality even in that earnest look which she had fixed upon him.

"You decline me as a husband, then, Virginia," he said, "and you decline me as a friend. You want to have nothing more to do with me. Very well, I will go away."

She drew a sharp breath between her teeth,

and if he noticed it he made no sign. He drew a paper from his pocket and calmly tore it into pieces.

"That," he said, "was the paper which was to have made us happy. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" she gasped, tearfully.

He laughed as he took her into his arms. She did not make the least resistance.

"You little idiot!" he said. "Do you know that I very nearly went?"

Her head was buried upon his shoulder, and she was not in the position for a moment to make any reply.