

CHAPTER XIII

An Introduction

HE helped Virginia to descend from the automobile, and led her up the steps in front of the great house in Grosvenor Square.

"You are not frightened, dear?" he asked.

"I am terrified to death," she answered frankly. He touched her hand reassuringly.

"Silly child!" he said "I am sure you will like my aunt."

The door flew open before them. A footman stood aside to let them pass. An elderly servant in plain black clothes came hurrying down from a little office.

"I trust that your Grace is well?" he said.

"Very well indeed thank you, Jameson," Mildmay said. "Is my aunt in?"

"Her ladyship is in the morning-room, your Grace," the man answered, with an almost imperceptible glance towards Virginia. "Shall I announce you?"

"Is she alone?" Mildmay asked.

"For the moment, yes, your Grace," the man answered.

Guy led Virginia across the hall, knocked at a

door, and entered. A tall, grey-haired lady was sitting on a sofa with a tea-tray by her side. She was very good-looking, and absurdly like Mildmay, to whom she held out her right hand. Guy stooped and raised it to his lips.

"My dear aunt," he said, "can you stand a shock?"

"That depends," she answered, glancing at Virginia. "My nerves are not what they were, you know. However, go on."

"I am trying you rather high, I know," he said, "but there are reasons for it which I can explain later on. I have brought a young lady to see you, Miss Virginia Longworth. I want you to like her very much, because she has promised to be my wife."

Lady Medlincourt held out her hand, long and slim and delicate, and made room for Virginia by her side on the sofa.

"How are you, my dear?" she said quite calmly. "Will you have some tea? It's beastly, I know, been standing for hours, but Guy can ring for some fresh. So you are really going to marry my nephew?"

Virginia raised her eyes, and looked for a moment into the face of the woman who sat by her side.

"Yes, Lady Medlincourt," she answered. "I do hope you will not be angry."

"Angry! My dear child, I am never angry," Lady Medlincourt declared. "I have arrived at that time in life when one cannot afford the luxury

of giving way to emotion. You won't mind my asking you a few questions though, both of you. To begin with, I do not know your name. Who are you?"

Guy leaned a little forward.

"She will be Duchess of Mowbray in a very short time, aunt," he said. "Please don't forget that."

Lady Medlincourt raised her eyebrows.

"Bless the boy!" she exclaimed. "As though I were likely to! I can feel it go shivering down my backbone all the time. Sit here for a moment, both of you. I am going to give Jameson orders myself not to admit any one for a few minutes."

She crossed the room and they were alone for a moment. They exchanged quick glances, and Guy laughed at the consternation in Virginia's face.

"Don't be scared, little woman," he said. "You'll get on all right with my aunt, I am sure. She is a little odd just at first, and she hates to show any feeling about anything, but she's a thundering good sort."

"She seems just a little casual, doesn't she?" Virginia asked—"rather as though you had brought me to call?"

"Don't you worry, dear," he answered, smiling. "That's only her manner. Just drink your tea and you'll feel better."

Virginia shook her head.

"I can't, Guy," she declared. "It's just too poisonous."

"I'll ring for some fresh," he said, moving toward the bell.

"Please don't," she begged. "I hate tea anyway. Guy, you are not sorry, are you?"

He took her hand and laughed reassuringly

"You little idiot!" he said. "Do you want me to kiss you?"

"I don't much care," Virginia answered. "I have a sort of feeling in my throat that I want—some one to kiss me. You're quite, quite sure that whatever your aunt may say you will never regret this?"

"Absolutely, positively certain!" he declared. "And you?"

"It isn't the same thing with me," Virginia declared, shaking her head. "I am not going to marry a pig in a poke."

"It's a very dear little pig," he said, resting his hand for a moment upon her shoulder.

Lady Medlinccurt reappeared. She resumed her seat, and motioned Guy to sit opposite to her.

"Now we shall not be disturbed for at least a quarter of an hour," she said, "and I want to hear all about it. You are very pretty, I am glad to see, dear," she said, looking at Virginia contemplatively. "I hate plain girls. What did you say that your name was?"

"Virginia Longworth!" Virginia answered, blushing.

"Quite a charming name!" Lady Medlinccurt said, shutting her eyeglasses with a snap. "Tell me all about her, Guy."

"My dear aunt," he answered, laughing, "we aren't married yet."

Lady Medlincourt nodded.

"Ah!" she said. "No doubt you'll have plenty to discover later on. Put it another way. Tell me the things that I must know about the Duchess of Mowbray."

"As for instance?" he asked quietly.

"Her people," Lady Medlincourt said. "You are American I suppose, child?" she continued. "You have very little accent, but I fancy that I can just detect it, and we don't see eyes like yours in England."

"Yes, I am American, Lady Medlincourt," Virginia answered.

"Who are your people, then?" Lady Medlincourt asked. "Where did you meet? Who introduced you? Don't look at one another like a pair of stupid. Remember that, however pointed my questions may sound, they are things which I must know if I am to be of any use to you."

Virginia went a little pale.

"Lady Medlincourt," she said, "I am sorry, but I cannot answer any questions just now."

Lady Medlincourt drew a little back in her place. She looked at the girl in frank amazement.

"What!" she exclaimed.

Guy leaned forward in his chair.

"Dear aunt," he pleaded, "don't think that we are both mad, but I have promised Virginia that she shan't be bothered with questions for a short

time. I met her on the steamer coming over from America, and that is all we can tell you just now."

Lady Medlincourt looked from one to the other. She was more than a trifle bewildered.

"Bless the boy!" she exclaimed. "You don't call this bothering her with questions, do you? She can tell me about her people, can't she?"

"Her people," he answered firmly, "are going to be my people."

Lady Medlincourt gasped.

"You have known her, then," she said, "about three weeks?"

"I have known her long enough to realize that she is the girl whom I have been waiting for all my life."

Lady Medlincourt shrugged her shoulders.

"All your life!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Twenty-eight silly years! Have you nothing more to say to me than this, either of you? Do you seriously mean that you bring this very charming young lady here, and ask me to accept her as your fiancée, without a single word of explanation as to her antecedents, who she is, or where she came from?"

Virginia rose to her feet.

"Guy," she said, turning towards him, "we ought never to have come here. Lady Medlincourt has a perfect right to ask these questions. Until we can answer them we ought to go away."

Guy took her hand in his.

"Aunt," he said, "can't you trust a little in my

judgment? Look at her. She is the girl whom I love, and whom I am going to trust with my name. Can't you let it go at that for the present?"

Lady Medlincourt shook her head.

"No, I cannot, Guy!" she said, "and if you weren't a silly fool you would not ask me. The future Duchess of Mowbray has to explain her position, whether she is a gentlewoman or a chorus girl. There's plenty of rope for her nowadays. She may be pretty well anything she pleases, but she must be some one. Don't think I am a brute, dear," she added, turning not unkindly to Virginia. "I like your appearance all right, and I dare say we could be friends. But if you wish me to accept you as my nephew's future wife, you must remember that the position which he is giving you is one that has its obligations as well as its pleasures. You'll have to open your pretty little mouth, or I am afraid I can't do anything for you."

Virginia turned to Guy.

"Your aunt is quite right," she said. "I know, it must sound very foolish, but I came over here on an errand which I cannot tell any one about just yet."

"That, of course, is for you to decide," Lady Medlincourt said, rising, "but I wouldn't be silly about it if I were you. I must go and change my gown, as I have some people coming for bridge. Supposing you show her the house, Guy, and when I come back perhaps you may both of you have changed your minds and be a little more reasonable.

Remember," she added, turning to Virginia, "that I am quite serious in what I say. It will give me very great pleasure to be of any possible use to the affianced wife of my favourite nephew, but there must be no secrets. I hate secrets, especially about women. If your father is a market-gardener it's all right, so long as you can explain exactly who you are and where you came from; but there must be no mystery. Talk it over with her, Guy. I'll look in here on my way out."

She nodded a little curtly but not unkindly, and swept toward the door, which Guy opened and closed after her. Then he came slowly back, and putting his arm around Virginia's waist, kissed her.

"You don't want to see the house, do you?" he asked.

Virginia shook her head.

"Not a bit," she answered. "I think that we had better go away."

"There is no hurry," he answered slowly. "We may as well stay and talk it over a bit. When one comes to think of it, it is trying the old lady pretty high, isn't it? Suppose we just review the situation for a minute or two. Something might occur to us."

Virginia leaned back against the cushions.

"Certainly," she answered. "You review it and I'll listen."

"Right!" Guy answered. "I met you first, then, never mind exactly how long ago, on the steamer coming from America. You were quite alone, unescorted, and unchaperoned. That in

itself, as of course you know, was a very remarkable thing. Nevertheless, I think you will admit that it did not terrify me. We became—well, pretty good friends, didn't we?"

"I think we did," she admitted.

"Afterwards," he continued, "we met again at Luigi's restaurant. There again I found you alone, in a restaurant where the women who know what they are doing would not dream of entering without a proper escort. Forgive me, but I want you to understand the position thoroughly. I see, of course, that you are being annoyed by the attentions of almost every man who entered the place, and in my very best manner I came over and made a suggestion."

Virginia sighed.

"You did it very nicely," she murmured.

"I rather flatter myself," he continued, "that I showed tact. I asked simply to be allowed to sit at your table. Before we had finished dinner I asked you, for the second time, to marry me."

"That," she declared, "was distinctly forward."

"You will remember that I refused to discuss things with you then. I told you that I was coming for you the next morning, and I mentioned what I thought of bringing with me. When I arrived at your boarding-house you had gone. You left no word nor any message. I don't consider that that was treating me nicely."

"It wasn't," she admitted, "but you have forgiven me for it."

He nodded.

"Of course I have. Well, a few nights later I see you dining with a man whom I know slightly, a clever fellow, distinctly a man of the world. You were dining with him alone. I followed you home to Coniston Mansions. Then I came away, and hesitated for some time whether to get drunk or go for a swim in the Thames. Eventually I went home to bed."

"It was very sensible," she murmured.

"The next night," he continued, "you were dining with the same man again, only this time he did not go back with you to Coniston Mansions. I did, and before I left you, you had promised to be my wife. You warned me to ask you no questions, and I didn't. I know as little of you now as I did on the steamer. I know that this man Norris Vine has a flat within a few yards of yours, and in the same building, but I ask no questions. I think that you must certainly acquit me of anything in the shape of undue curiosity. I was content to know that I had fallen in love with the sweetest little girl I had ever set eyes on."

She pressed his hand and sighed.

"Guy, you're a dear!" she said.

"It was quite sufficient for me," he continued, "that you are what you are. It is sufficient for me even now. The trouble is that it won't be sufficient for everybody. You can see that for yourself, dear, can't you?"

Virginia drew a little away. He fancied that the hand which still rested in his was growing colder.

"I suppose so," she murmured.

"I am glad you realize that," Guy said earnestly. "Now look here, Virginia. You saw the line my aunt took. There's no doubt that from a certain point of view she's right. I wonder whether, under the circumstances, it would be better"—he hesitated, and looked at her for a moment—"better—you see what I mean, don't you?"

"I am not quite sure," she said. "Hadn't you better tell me?"

Guy looked at her in surprise.

"Why, that was just what I thought I had done," he declared. "What I mean is that after all, although for my own sake I wouldn't ask a question, it might be as well for you to tell my aunt what she wants to know. It would make things much more comfortable."

"I think you are quite right," Virginia said softly.

Guy stooped and kissed her.

"Dear little lady!" he declared. "I'll go and tell her, and bring her back."

He found his aunt descending the stairs, but when they reached the morning-room it was empty. Guy looked around in surprise, and stepped out into the hall. Jameson hurried up to him.

"The young lady has just gone, sir," he said deferentially. "I called a hansom for her myself. She seemed rather in a hurry."

Guy stood for a moment motionless.

"Do you happen to remember the address she gave you?" he asked the man.

"I am sorry, your Grace. I did not hear it."

Lady Medlincourt opened the door of the morning-room.

"I think, Guy," she said, "you had better come in and talk to me."