

CHAPTER XIV

Another Disappearance

IT was between half-past four and five o'clock in the morning, and London for the most part slept. Down in the street below, the roar of traffic, which hour after hour had grown less and less, had now died away. Within the building itself every one seemed asleep. Floor after floor looked exactly the same. The lights along the corridors were burning dimly. Every door was closed except the door of the service-room, in which a sleepy waiter lay upon a couch and dreamed of his Fatherland. The lift had ceased to run. The last of the belated sojourners had tramped his way up the carpeted stairs. On the fifth floor, as on all the others, a complete and absolute silence reigned.

Suddenly a door was softly opened. Virginia, dressed in a loose gown, and wearing felt slippers which sank noiselessly into the thick carpet, came slowly out from her room. She looked all around and realized the complete solitude of the place. Then she crossed the corridor swiftly, and without a moment's hesitation fitted the key which she was carrying in her hand into the lock of Norris Vine's room. The door opened noiselessly. She closed it

behind her and paused to listen. There was not a sound in the place, and the door on the left, which led into the sitting-room, was ajar. She stepped in, and, after another moment's hesitation, closed the door softly behind her and gently raised the blind. The sunlight came streaming in. There was no need for the electric light. The sitting-room, none too tidy, showed signs of its owner's late return. There was a silk hat and a pair of white kid gloves upon the table, and on the sideboard a half-empty glass of whisky and soda. Several cigarette ends were in the grate. An evening paper lay upon the hearthrug. She knew from these things that a few yards away Norris Vine lay sleeping.

Without hesitation, with swift and stealthy fingers, she commenced a close and careful scrutiny of every inch of the room. In a quarter of an hour she had satisfied herself. There was no hiding-place left which could possibly have escaped her. The more dangerous part of her enterprise was to come. Very softly she opened the door, leaving it ajar as she had found it. She stood before the closed door of the bedroom. Very slowly, and with the tips of her fingers, she turned the handle. It opened without a sound. She had no garments on that rustled, and the soles of her slippers were of thick felt. She stood inside the room without having made the slightest sound. She held her breath for a moment, and then summoning up her courage, she looked toward the bed. The close-drawn curtains were unable to altogether exclude the

early morning sunlight which streamed in through the chinks of the curtains and the uncovered part of the window.

Virginia stood as though she had been turned to stone. Every nerve in her body seemed tense and quivering. The cry which rose from her heart parted her death-white lips, but remained unuttered. Wider and wider grew her eyes as she gazed with horror across the room. The power of action seemed to be denied to her. Her knees shook; a sort of paralysis seemed to stifle every sense of movement. She swayed and nearly fell, but her hand met the corner of the mantelpiece and she held herself erect. Gradually, second by second, the arrested life commenced to flow once more through her veins. She had but one impulse—to fly. She thought nothing of the motive of her coming, only to place the door between her and this! Unsteadily, but without accident, she passed through the door, and though her hand shook like a leaf, she managed to close it noiselessly again. Somehow, she never quite knew how, she found herself outside in the corridor, and a moment later safe in her own room with the door bolted. Then she threw herself upon the bed, and it seemed to her afterwards that she must have fainted!

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Only a few hours later Guy, who had slept little that night, and had woken with a desperate resolve, stepped out of the lift and knocked at Virginia's

door. There was no answer. The waiter came out from the service-room and approached him.

"The young lady has left, sir," he announced.

"Left?" Guy repeated aimlessly. "When? How long ago?"

"Barely half an hour, sir," the man answered. "She paid up her bill, as I know, and left the key behind. The rooms belong to her for another fortnight, but she didn't seem as though she were coming back."

"Did she leave any address for letters?" Guy asked.

"If you inquire at the office, sir, they will tell you," the man answered.

Guy went down to the office.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "if Miss Longworth has left any address?"

The man shook his head.

"She left an hour ago, sir," he said. "She said there would be no letters, and if we liked we could let her rooms, as she was certain not to come back."

"You cannot help me to find her, then?" Guy asked. "I am the Duke of Mowbray, and I should be exceedingly obliged to any one who could help me to discover this young lady."

They were all sent for at once, porter, commissioner, hall-boy. The information he was able to obtain, however, was scanty indeed. Virginia had simply told the cabman, who had taken her

and her luggage away, to drive along the Strand toward Charing Cross.

Guy drove back to Grosvenor Square, and insisted upon going up to his aunt's room. She received him under protest in her dressing-gown.

"My dear Guy," she expostulated, "what is the meaning of this? You know that I am never visible until luncheon time."

"Forgive me!" he said. "I scarcely know what I am doing this morning."

"Well, what is it?" she demanded.

"Virginia has gone!" he answered, "left her rooms, left no address behind her. What a fool I was not to follow her up last night! She waited until this morning. She must have expected that I would come, and I didn't. I was a d——d silly ass!"

Lady Medlincourt yawned.

"Have you come here to tell me that, my dear Guy?" she said. "So unnecessary! You might at least have telephoned it."

"Look here," he said, "we were too rough on her yesterday afternoon. I made no conditions as to what she should tell me when I asked her to be my wife. I was quite content that she should say yes. I know she's all right, I feel it, and she's the only girl I shall ever care a fig for!"

"I really cannot see," Lady Medlincourt murmured, "why you should drag me from my bed to talk such rubbish. If you feel like that, go and look for her. It is open for you to marry whom you

choose, the lady who is selling primroses at the corner of the Square if you wish. The only thing is that you cannot expect your friends to marry them too. What did you come here for, advice or sympathy? I have none of the latter for you, and you wouldn't take the former. Do, there's a good boy, leave me! I want to have my bath, and the hairdresser is waiting."

Guy turned on his heel and left the house. There was only one thing left to be done, although he hated doing it. He went to the office of a private detective.

"Mind," he said, when he had told them what he wanted, "I will not have the young lady worried or annoyed in any form if you should happen to find her. Simply let me know where she is living. The rest is my affair. You understand?"

"Perfectly!" the man answered. "We are to spare no expense, I presume?"

It did him good to be able to answer fervently, "None whatever, only find her!"