

CHAPTER XIX

The Crisis

IN a small, shabbily furnished room at the top of a tall apartment house, Virginia was living through what seemed to her, and indeed it was, a grim little tragedy. On the table before her was her little purse, turned inside out, and by its side a few, a very few coins. The roll of notes, which she had not changed, and which formed the larger part of her little capital, was gone, hopelessly, absolutely gone. It was nothing less than a disaster this, which she was forced to face. She had left the purse about in her rooms in Coniston Mansions or there were many other places in which an expert thief would have found it a very easy matter to remove the little bundle, and replace it with that roll of paper which she found in its place.

Her first wild thought of rushing to the police-station she had dismissed as useless. She had no idea when or where the theft had been accomplished; only she knew that she was alone in a strange city, and that the few shillings left to her were not even sufficient to pay for the rent she already owed for her room.

She dragged herself to the window and stood

looking out across the grimy house-tops. Her eyes were blurred with tears. It is doubtful whether she saw anything of the uninspiring view, but it seemed to her that she could certainly see the wreck of her own short life. She seemed to realize then the mad folly of her journey, the hopelessness of it from beginning to end. Quite apart from her failure, there was also a madness of which she refused even to think, the aftertaste of those few hours of delicious happiness. Had he ever tried to find her out, she wondered, since that day when she had fled with burning cheeks and aching heart from her rooms in Coniston Mansions, and sought to hide herself in the cold bosom of this unlovely city. In any case she would never see him again. Her one desire now, if it amounted to a desire, when all ways in life seemed to her alike flat and profitless, was to find her way somehow or other back to America, and to carry the bad news herself to the little farmhouse in the valley.

She looked at her pitiful little store of coins, and the problem of existence seemed to become more and more difficult. After all, there was another way for those who did not care to live. She found herself harbouring the thought without a single sign of any revulsion of feeling, accepting it as a matter to be seriously considered with dull, calculating fatalism. What was the use of life when nothing remained to hope for? It was, after all, an easy way out.

She opened the window and looked below. The seven stories made her dizzy. Nevertheless, she

looked with a curious fascination to the stone courtyard immediately underneath the window. Death would probably be instantaneous. She leaned a little farther out and then started suddenly back into the room. A revulsion of feeling had overtaken her. It was a hideous idea, this. For the sake of the others she must put it away from her. She walked up and down the narrow confines of her room, and then the necessity for action of some sort drove her out into the street. Curiously enough, though she was being searched for by at least half a dozen detectives and inquiry agents, she had taken no particular pains to conceal herself beyond the fact that she had chosen a crowded and low-class neighbourhood, and had seldom ventured out before dark. She walked now to the office of a shipping agent which she had noticed on her way here, and addressed herself to the clerk who hastened forward to meet her.

"I want," she said, "to get to America, and I have no money. All that I had has been stolen. Could I get a passage and pay for it when I arrive? A second class passage, of course."

The clerk shook his head dubiously.

"Have you no friends in London," he asked, "to whom you could apply for a loan?"

"Not a single one," she answered.

"Why not cable?" he suggested. "You could have money wired over here to your credit."

"I do not wish to do that," Virginia answered.

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"The only other course," he said, "would be to apply to the Embassy. They might advance the money."

Virginia walked out thoughtfully. After all, why not? Mr. Deane, she knew, was a friend of her uncle's. He would perhaps let her have the money, and she could send it him back later on. She walked to the great house in Ormande Gardens and asked to see Mr. Deane. The servant who admitted her hesitated a little.

"There is no one in just now, miss," he said, "except Mr. Deane, and he is busy with a gentleman. If you will come into the waiting-room, I will ask him whether he can spare you a moment when the gentleman has gone."

Virginia sat upon a very hard horsehair chair in a barely furnished room, and waited. The table was covered with magazines, but she did not touch them. She sat nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers. Then the sudden sound of voices outside attracted her attention. The door of the room in which she sat had been left ajar, and apparently two men, passing down the hall from a room on the other side, had paused just outside it.

"Of course, I don't know what you will do with it, Vine," she heard some one say, "but if you take my advice, you will find a secure hiding place without a moment's delay. I am very sorry indeed that I cannot help you out any longer, but I know you don't want me to run risks."

"Rather not," Vine answered. "To tell you the

truth, I think my mind is made up. I am going to spend a little fortune cabling to-night."

"Well, I am not sure but that you are wise," was the reply. "It's one of those things the result of which it is quite impossible to prophesy. Good luck to you anyway, Vine, and do for the next few hours take care of yourself."

Then Virginia heard a parting between the two men. One of them apparently left the house, the other returned to the room from which they had issued. Virginia did not hesitate for a moment. She passed on tiptoe out of the room into the hall. A servant stood at the front door, having that moment let Vine out.

"I have decided not to wait for Mr. Deane any longer," she said. "I will call and see one of the secretaries sometime to-morrow."

The man let her out without question. She was just in time to see Vine turn the corner of the square. She followed him breathlessly, then paused and stopped a passing hansom.

"Coniston Mansions," she told the man. "Please go as quickly as you can."

She was driven there, and passed quickly through the hall and entered the lift. The commissionaire hurried up to her.

"Several people, miss, have been asking for your address since you left," he announced.

"I will leave it before I go," she answered hurriedly.

She got out at the fifth floor, and without hesita-

tion she walked straight across to Norris Vine's rooms. She was as pale as death. After that last visit of hers she felt a horrible shyness from entering the place. Nevertheless, she drew a key from her pocket, turned the lock, entered, and found, as she supposed, that she was there first. She looked around, at first in vain, for some hiding place. All the while she was struggling to put everything else out of her mind except two great facts. Norris Vine was going to bring that paper back to his rooms ! It was her last chance ! If she failed this time, there was nothing left for her but despair ! On the right of the outside door was a small clothes cupboard. It was the only place in the two rooms where concealment seemed in any way possible, and Virginia, with beating heart, stepped into it and drew the door to after her. She was scarcely there before she heard the sound of a key in the lock. She drew back, holding her breath as he passed. Norris Vine entered and stepped into the sitting-room. She heard him take off his hat and coat and throw them down. She heard the sound of a chair drawn up to the table. He was preparing, then, to write out his cable !