

CHAPTER XX

Bewitched

VERY softly Virginia pushed open the door one, two, three inches. She could see Vine now sitting at the table with several sheets of paper before him, and a book which seemed to be a code, the leaves of which he was turning over meditatively. Her eyes were fastened upon that roll of paper at his left-hand side. She had no doubt but that it was the document which had been stolen, the document to recover which had brought her upon this wild-goose chase. The very sight of it, even at this distance, thrilled her. Scheme after scheme rushed through her brain. There were overcoats hanging up in the closet. Could she steal out on tiptoe, throw one over his head, and escape with the paper before he could stop her? Even then, unless she had time to lock him in, what chance would she have of leaving the building?

She watched him write, without undue haste, but referring every now and then to the code-book by his side. If only he would get up and go into the bedroom for a moment, it might give her a chance. She could feel her heart beating underneath her gown. Every sense was thrilling with excitement; and

then, all of a sudden, she had a great surprise. Almost a cry broke from her lips, almost she had taken that swift involuntary movement forward, for she realized suddenly that she was not the only one who was watching Norris Vine. Very softly a man, coatless and in his socks, had stolen out from the bedroom where he had lain concealed, and was looking in through the hinges of the partly closed study door. Virginia felt her finger-nails dig into her flesh. She stood there rapt and breathless. Instinctively she felt that the cards had been taken from her hand, that she was to be a witness of events more swift and definite than any in which she herself could have borne the principal part.

Norris Vine was absorbed in his work. She saw him bend lower and lower over the table, and she heard his pen drive faster across the paper. His attention was riveted upon his task. She saw the man lurking behind the door come gradually more into evidence. He was a stranger to her, but she could see that he was an athlete by his broad shoulders, his long arms, and his graceful poise, as he lurked there almost like a tiger preparing for a spring. Of what his plan might be she could form no idea. Every pulse in her body was beating as it had never beat before. Her breath was coming sharply and quickly, and it was all that she could do to keep back the sobs which seemed to rise in her throat from pure excitement. What was he going to do, this man who crouched there, nerving himself

as though for some great effort! Very soon she knew.

He stole to the limit of the protection afforded him by the door. She saw his head turn a little sideways, and she saw his eyes fixed upon a certain spot in the wall. Then he glanced back again toward the man writing, as though he measured the distance between them, as though he wished even to calculate the exact nature of the movement which it was necessary to make. Then in the midst of her wondering came the elucidation of these things. The man poised himself. She could see him in the act of springing. He made a dash, hit something with his hand, and the room was in darkness! She heard him leap across the room toward the table, and she heard the low cry of Norris Vine as he sprang to his feet to meet this unknown assailant. She knew very well in the darkness which way the struggle must go. Norris Vine, slim, a hater of exercise, unmuscular, unprepared, could have no chance against an attack like this.

Virginia's brain moved swiftly in those few moments. She heard the quick breath of the two men as they swayed in one another's arms, and she did not hesitate for a moment. On tiptoe, and with all the grace and lightness which were hers, by right of her buoyant figure and buoyant youth, she crossed the room with swift, silent footsteps, and gathered into her hands the roll of papers upon the table. As softly as she had come she went. The deep sobbing breaths of the two men, the half-

stified cries with which Vine was seeking for outside help, effectually deadened the faint swish of her skirts and the tremor of her footsteps upon the carpeted floor.

She came and went like a dream, and when the man, in whose arms Norris Vine was after all but a child, finally dragged his victim across the floor by the collar and turned up the electric light, the table towards which he looked was bare. He dropped Vine heavily upon the floor, and stood there rooted to the spot, gazing at the place where only a few moments before he had seen that roll of paper. A hoarse imprecation broke from his lips, and Norris Vine, who was still conscious though badly winded, seeing what was amiss, sat up on the carpet and gazed too, bewildered, at the empty table. The papers were gone! There was no sign of them there. There was no sign of any one else in the apartment. There was nothing to indicate that any one had entered it or left it. The man who had thought himself the victor stood there with his hands to his head, an unimaginative person, but suddenly dazed with a curious crowd of apprehensions. Norris Vine staggered up to his feet, and groped his way toward the sideboard, where a decanter of brandy was standing.

"Good God!" he muttered to himself, as he poured some of the liquor into a glass and raised it to his lips. "Are we all mad or bewitched or what?"

His assailant did not answer. He raised the table-

cloth and looked underneath, retreated into the bedroom, sought in vain for any signs of an intruder. Then he came slowly back into the sitting-room, and the eyes of the two men met. Norris Vine was leaning back against the sideboard, his clothes disarranged, his collar torn, his tie hanging down in strips. In his shaking hand was the glass of brandy, half consumed. There was a livid mark upon his face, and his eyes were wide open and staring.

"My muscular friend," he said, "the ghosts have robbed you."

"Ghosts be d——d!" the other man answered, a little wildly. "I wish this job were at the bottom of the ocean before I'd touched it."