

## CHAPTER XXII

### A Surprise

NORRIS VINE put on his coat, lit a cigarette, and looked around the room with the satisfied air of a man who has successfully accomplished a difficult task. In front of him were two steamer trunks, a hold-all, hat-box, a case of guns, golf clubs, and some smaller packages, all fastened up and labelled "Vine, New York." He moved toward the bell, meaning to ring for a porter, but was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he called out, and Virginia entered. He looked at her in cold surprise. He recognized her, of course, but he recognized also that this young lady had nothing whatever to do with the pale-faced, desperate child, whose visits to him before had always seemed in a sense pathetic. He was an artist in such things and he realized at once the dainty perfection of her muslin gown and large drooping hat. Her whole expression, too, had changed. She had no longer the look of a hunted and frightened child. She carried herself with confidence and with colour in her cheeks, and though she held out her hand to him with some

show of timidity, the smile upon her lips was delightful, if a little appealing.

"Mr. Vine," she said, "please forgive my coming. I have something so important to say to you, when I heard that you were going back to the States. You will spare me a few minutes, will you not?"

Vine was only human, and hers was an appeal it was not easy to refuse. He placed a chair for her, and stood in a listening attitude.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I will listen gladly to anything that you have to say. But as I have nothing more left which it would be of any interest to you to steal, I scarcely understand to what I am indebted for this unexpected"—he hesitated for a moment and concluded his sentence with a not ungracious bow—"unexpected pleasure!" he said.

She smiled up at him delightfully.

"I am so glad, Mr. Vine," she said, "that you are going to be generous and nice, because what I have to say to you is so difficult, and if you were angry with me it would be very hard to say."

"I trust," he answered, "that I can accept a defeat; and you had all the luck, you know."

"I had," she admitted. "It was, after all, nothing to do with me. I see you have cleared your cupboard out. I can assure you that it was a terribly stuffy place with all those clothes of yours hanging there."

He smiled.

"Well," he said, "you were very patient and very persistent. You have won and I lost. I am not at all sure that it is not a good thing that I lost. My friend Deane tells me so even now. But let that go. I am sure you would like to tell me what it is that you have come here for."

"I have come," she answered, "to talk to you about Stella."

"Stella?" he repeated slowly.

Virginia nodded.

"Yes!" she said. "You see, I have all the time the feeling that I have somehow or other done Stella an injury by taking her place with my uncle, and do you know, Mr. Vine, since he has been in London he seems quite altered. He has been simply delightful, and I haven't felt frightened of him once. He keeps on giving me beautiful presents, and he does not seem in the least in a hurry to get back to America."

Norris Vine smiled grimly.

"I do not blame him," he said.

"Yesterday," she continued, "I could not help, it, I disobeyed his orders and I spoke to him about Stella, and do you know, he listened to me quite patiently. Mr. Vine, I am going to say something to you very serious. You must not ask me how I know, or exactly what I know, but I accidentally do know so much as this. You and Stella are very fond of one another, and I should like to see you married."

He raised his eyebrows slowly.

"You would like," he repeated, "to see us married!"

She looked away from him. He could see that for some reason or other she was embarrassed. The colour had streamed into her cheeks, but she went on bravely enough.

"Yes!" she said. "I talked to my uncle about it, and he was quite nice. He says that he does not want to see Stella again for a short time, but if you two have made up your minds to be married—that is how he put it—he is going to give Stella a million dollars."

"You must be a magician," he said coolly.

"I am nothing of the sort," she answered, "but I think that my uncle has been very much misunderstood, or else something has changed him wonderfully during the past few months. Now I came straight to see you and to tell you this, Mr. Vine because I do not know where to find Stella. Can't you be married here in London, and ask me to the wedding?"

There was a knock at the door and it was immediately opened. They both turned round. It was Stella who stood there. She looked at them both for a moment in surprise. Then she closed the door and came into the room.

"Virginia!" she exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I should have come to see you, Stella," Virginia said, "if I had known where to find you."

"Virginia has come," Vine said, "to tell us

that your father is inclined to play the part of a benevolent parent. I think that he must be either very ill, or going to be. Virginia has come here to tell us that we are to be married, and that he is going to give you some little trifle for a wedding present, a million dollars I think it was she mentioned.

Stella looked at her cousin in amazement.

"Do you mean this, Virginia?" she exclaimed.

"Absolutely," Virginia answered. "He has promised faithfully. There is no doubt about it at all."

"Thank goodness!" Stella declared. "I am tired of being poor, aren't you, Norris? Virginia, you're a dear."

Stella passed her arm around her cousin's neck. Virginia looked up a little timidly.

"And you will marry Mr. Vine, then," she said, "at once?"

Stella laughed softly.

"My dear child," she said, "we have been married for six weeks."

Virginia leaned back in her chair.

"Oh!" she said. Then suddenly she sprang to her feet. She was obviously delighted. A certain restraint had left her manner. It was obvious that the news was a relief to her.

"This," she said, "is delightful. You are both of you to come to dinner to-night at Claridge's. Your father told me that I was to ask you," she said, turning to Stella, "if I found you both."

"At eight o'clock, I suppose?" Vine remarked.  
"We will be there."

Virginia and Stella left together.

"I have an automobile outside," Virginia said a little shyly. "Your father is ever so much too kind to me, but I do hope, Stella, that you don't mind. I feel sure that he is going to be quite different now."

"Mind? Of course not," Stella answered. "I have been rather a beast to him myself, and I think it's very decent of you, after everything, to have anything to do with me. Who on earth is this young man?"

They were in the hall of the Mansions face to face with a young man who was in the act of entering. Virginia looked up, and gave a startled little cry.

"You!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Guy quite ignored her companion, and took her by the hands.

"Virginia!" he exclaimed. "At last! Where have you been hiding yourself, and how dared you run away from me?"

"There didn't seem to be much else for me to do," Virginia answered, smiling; "but I am very glad to see you again," she added in a lower tone.

"How well you look!" he exclaimed. "Where can we go and sit down? I want to talk to you, and remember I am not going to let you out of my sight again."

Stella, whom they had both forgotten, intervened

"It seems to me," she said, "that it is fortunate I have an engagement. At eight o'clock then, Virginia."

Guy lifted his hat, and Virginia murmured something.

"It is my cousin Stella," she said. "What is it that you want to say to me, Guy?" she added half shyly, as soon as they were alone.

"Come and get in my automobile," he said. "We will sit behind and let the man drive. Then we can talk. But the first thing I have to say to you is this: that I do not want to ask you a single question, nor am I going to permit any one else to ask you anything. Whoever you are and whatever you are, you are going to be my wife as soon as I can get another special licence."

She laughed softly.

"Very well," she said, "only you must come in my automobile instead, and send yours away. If you like I will take you for a little drive."

"Just as you like," he answered, looking with some surprise at the car which stood waiting for Virginia, with its two immaculate servants. "It seems to me, dear," he added, with a note of disappointment in his tone, "that you have reached the end of your troubles without my help."

"I think I have, Guy," she answered, "but I am just as pleased to see you. Would you like to come and be introduced to my uncle and guardian?"

"Rather!" he answered.

"Back to Claridge's," she told the footman, and they stepped inside.

"This isn't a dream, is it? Guy asked.

"I don't believe so," she answered. "You will find my uncle human enough, at any rate."