Marrying Mark

Violette Kimball Dunn

CHAPTER IX

Elise emerged, cool in pastel chiffons, under a huge hat. Her dark, rather heavy eyes were veiled as they rested on him. They made him vaguely uncomfortable. This was his frequent reaction to Elise these days.

He wished ridiculously that he could take a running jump into his car and be off, waving his hat as he went. Instead, he found himself telling her how charming she looked, and how even midsummer became her.

She laid her hand on his arm, and looked up at him reproachfully. "Don't go conventional, darling," she said. Mark decided he would never get used to "darling" as the current output in salutations. "I'm quite sure what your opinion is of women who pursue men to their offices. But how else am I to see you? And I truly must. Will you drive me home? Oh Harmon, just take the car back. I shan't be needing it again until tonight."

Mark almost put out a protesting hand, as the man touched his cap and drove off. Elise was moving flowingly toward his roadster, and there was nothing to do but follow her.

"I don't think you'll be very happy," he said opening the door. "Picture hats and chiffons don't mix specially well with roadsters."

She tucked her flowing skirts around her and leaned back with a wistful sigh. "But I adore roadsters. And you have the top up, so I shan't be too terribly windblown. Don't stand there staring at me, silly. Aren't you getting in?"

Mark brought his thoughts back with an effort. "I just remembered—A telephone call. Excuse me a second. I'll be with you—"

He was halfway up the walk before she could answer. He felt childishly defrauded as he called his house from the superintendent's office. He had hardly realized how he counted on the hour in the pool with Valerie and Lucy. He was glad when he heard Chiltern's voice. Sometimes if Valerie happened to be passing when the telephone rang she answered, just in case it might be Mark.

"Please tell Miss Tredway and Miss Valerie I've been detained, and to have their swim without me," he said. "And Chiltern—I say—tell them I'm terribly sorry, will you?"

"Yes, sir," said Chiltern. "Will you be coming home for dinner?"

"Yes?" said Mark loudly. He felt his voice would banish the faint fear that seized him at the question.

"I see, sir," said Chiltern "Thank you."

Mark almost suspected he really did see. He would not have put it past the man!

He said "Thank you," and went back to Elise. He got in beside her and started his car. The wind lifted the light brim of Elise's enormous hat, and she caught it closer.

She could hardly imagine a man with a chauffeur and three closed cars driving himself to work in a two-year-old roadster, like any laborer. It was difficult to look out from under a shadowy brim with lustrous eyes, when that brim surged and billowed in playful leaps that kept both her hands at her head.

Finally, as a stronger gust tilted it coyly over one ear, she took the thing off entirely, anchoring it firmly on her knees, and thanking heaven for a hair net. She was struggling with a rage that included even Mark, although reason told her he had nothing to do with it. The last straw was when she looked up and found him laughing. Men seldom laughed with, and never at, Elise.

"Sorry—but you should have seen yourself," said Mark. "I mean, the way you looked when we started, and the way you looked after a couple of bouts with the breeze."

Elise managed a kind of smile. "It must have been terribly funny," she agreed.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've carried you off," she said. She had almost mastered her temper.

Mark was not quite so successful at hiding his curiosity over the whole proceeding. "Of course—it was sweet of you—" he began.

"I simply had to see you. And it's practically impossible to get you to myself even for a minute. Of course, I simply adore Valerie, as you know. And Miss Treadle is—well, of course she's quite—stimulating—if you know what I mean."

Mark nodded. He didn't in the least know.

She hurried on without waiting for an answer. "You see, I can't beg, lure, or even abduct you to my apartment. I can't think what you're afraid of—"

"Perhaps it isn't excactly fear," he explained. "Maybe I'm catering a trifle to the tongues of men—to say nothing of women. Silly rot, I know. And even if one doesn't go in for stereotyped mourning, it does curtail social activities a bit."

"You're just talking off the top of your mind," said Elise sadly. "Keeping me on the outside. Just as if we hadn't been friends for ages. It isn't fair—when I miss you. You are so—so sort of sweet, Mark. But when others are involved—"

Mark asked a surreptitious question of his wrist watch. He was appalled to find only half an hour had passed since Elise met him. It seemed to him that he had been shut up here with her for weeks.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he told her. "I suppose it's stupid of me. Do you mean somebody we know is talking about somebody? They generally are, aren't they? Who is it this time, and what are they saying?"

"They're talking about you, darling, of course. Did you imagine you could bring an attractive young woman from nowhere, like a rabbit out of a hat, and put her unchaperoned into your house, and nobody would talk about it?"

Mark drew up by the side of the road and stared at her. "Do you mean—are you by any chance telling me—that Lucy Tredway—"

"Who else? Really, Mark, I admit your right to do as you please. But after all, you're over ten—"

"Come over sometime," he grinned.

Ellen so anyway—"

Mark was horrified, after the fashion of men, to see her loose one hand from the still struggling hat and wipe her eyes on a gay bit of chiffon.

"I—I'm frightfully sorry. I'm probably a clumsy brute—" He laid his hand over hers on the big hat, and held it closely.

Elise looked up at him from undampened lashes. She even smiled plaintively.

"No, darling," she sighed "It's just that you don't always think. Of course, I know you can't go dashing around to parties. Amusing yourself like that. But surely nobody could criticize you for coming to see me! As a matter of fact, it's criticism that made me hunt you up. It's terribly hard to tell

She stopped, a little frightened at what she had said. She had never seen Mark angry before. It was distinctly disturbing.

"If people are over ten before they begin to make up rotten stories out of thin air, "I'll never grow up!" he declared. "I never at my worst moments imagined anything like this! A young woman paid a salary to tutor my daughter—"

Elise again laid her hand on his arm. The arm quivered, as if he were thinking twice before throwing it off, like the boy she accused him of being.

"Dear heart," she purred, "please don't bark at me. After all, I haven't done anything. After all, this is an adult age."

"I'm darned if what you say sounds like it! Well—go on—you might just as well tell me all there is of it."

"There isn't any more," said Elise.

Mark was staring at the horizon. His face was quite cold. She began to be very much afraid. Perhaps the idea was not so clever as it had seemed when she invented it.

"All I mean is," she went on rather sadly "people seem to think you're not being quite fair to Valerie." Watching him closely, she could see that the shot went home. She continued more confidently, "After all, the child is very young, and susceptible to impressions. It doesn't seem quite playing the game to let people gossip. Of course it's only for Valerie. I'm just a ittle afraid nobody is bothering a great deal about Miss Speedwell."

Mark turned on her like a man who has suddenly had enough. "The name is Tredway," he said. There was something in the way he said it that made Elise jump.

"Of course it is, darling! You know what an imbecile I am about names! The point is, well—she she doesn't seem to be so terribly popular with the few people who have met her."

"I wonder if it keeps her awake nights. She's popular with Valerie and after all, that's what she's at Wide Acres for. The child has been made over new since Lucy came. I hardly know her. And that makes her popular with me. Lucy. I mean. Damned popular, if you want to know!"

Elise grew suddenly cold. "But, of course, if you're in love with her, darling—"

The words were hardly cold before she knew what a fatal mistake they were. She gathered up her courage and looked at him. His face was far from reassuring.

"Why do you women always imagine a man must be in love?" he asked. "Anyway, count me out. Absolutely."

Elise tried not to read anything more into it than just the bare words. But his emphasis on "absolutely" was a bit terrifying. She looked out and saw with astonishment that they had entered the town, and were even now stopping before her apartment house.

Mark got out at once and opened the door. Her big hat dropping at her side, she faced him with lowered eyes.

"I suppose you'll never forgive me," she sighed. I suppose you wouldn't come in and share my dinner. I was going to the Weightman's party tonight, but you don't know how I'd love to cut it—for you—"

Mark could have laughed. He was riding a wave of freedom. He had seen through Elise. Never again would intangible uneasiness fill him because of her or her great dark eyes or her subtle perfume.

"I'm afraid not tonight," he said. "You see, I must be getting home to the children."

Elise chose one more from her bag of tricks. "Are you furious with me," managed what sounded faintly like a sob. "I suppose it's what we must expect when we try to help those we—love—I've stayed awake night trying to decide whether or not I should tell you about this—and now—"

"And now," said Mark pleasantly, "run along in and catch up on your sleep."

"You're—angry—"

"Not a bit. Why on earth should I be?" Tossing off the whole thing as if it were less than nothing.

He was really wondering how much longer she intended standing there talking inanities. He could forgive her, suddenly, for the whole silly business. Even for making him miss his swim.

"Good-bye—" She tried to put heartbreak into it, and loneliness.

Mark turned as if on a released spring, and held out his hand. "Come over sometime," he grinned. "If you're not afraid of our reputation."

Real tears sprang to her eyes. She turned quickly away and walked up to the house. She was afraid he would see the tears. They were of rage, and even a man would know the difference. By the time she turned at the door, Mark and the roadster had vanished.

(To Be Continued)

WILLIAMSBURG CLUB TO ATTEND BANQUET

At a recent meeting of the Williamsburg 4-H Club girls, arrangements were made to attend the 4-H Club banquet, to be held Saturday in Zion Church, Cambridge.

The banquet will be held from 6:00 to 9:00 P. M. and all 4-H girls and others interested are welcome to attend.

The meeting of the Williamsburg club was presided over by Lucinda Holloway, president.

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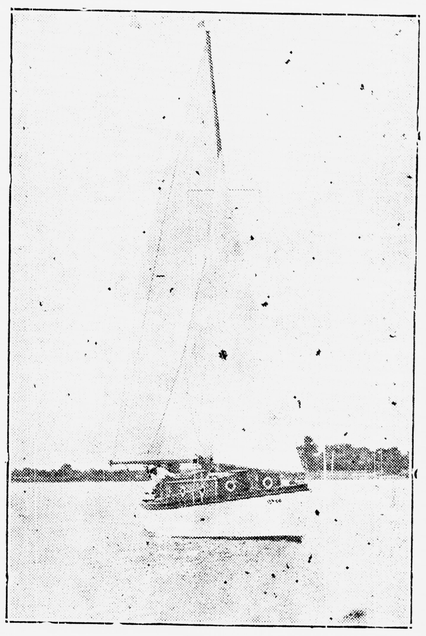

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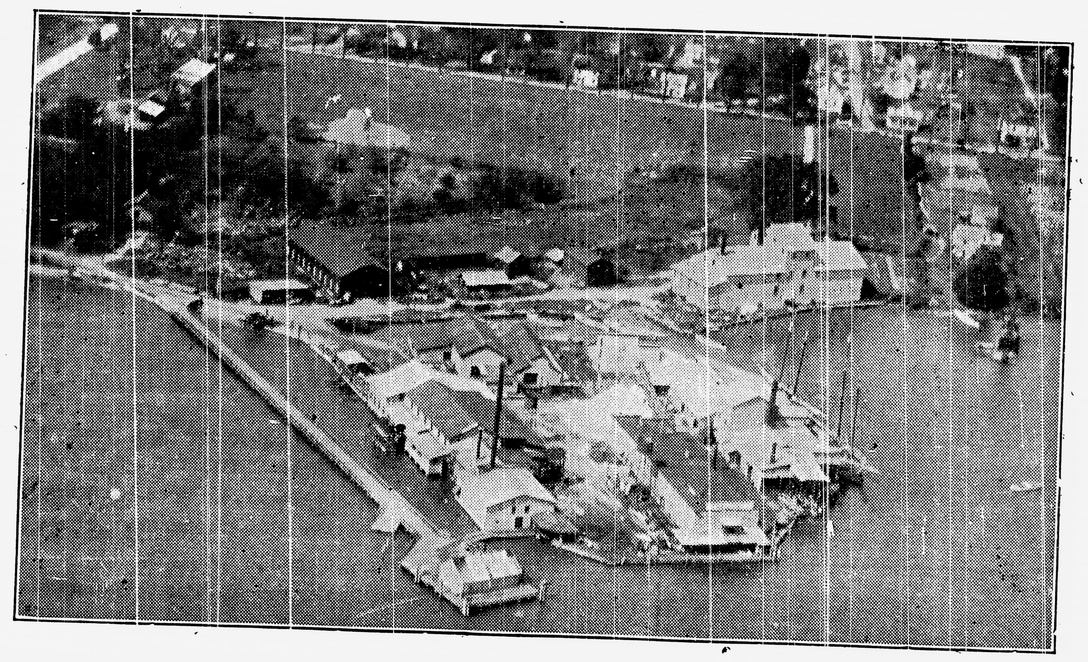

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