

Marrying Mark

Violette Kimball Dunn

CHAPTER IV

Elise dropped her hand. "Of course, if Mark isn't coming home, I would probably bore you terribly, just as two—"

She sat down again just as Valerie was beginning to breathe freely once more. She suddenly asked a great many questions, where they were going, how long they'd be away, and especially if anybody else was going, too. Valerie said she didn't know, until they came to who was going.

Elise's rather sullen dark eyes rested on Valerie sharply until she found out the answer to that. Then they brightened, and she rose once more. She glanced out into the hall almost as if she were going to say something nobody must hear, and lowered her voice.

"But she spoke casually. 'I suppose you wouldn't know what your daddy did with darling Ellen's sabbie coat? I just happened to think of it. Punny, wasn't it?'"

Valerie thought it wasn't funny at all. "My father sent it to the furrier," she said. She felt somehow it was enough just to tell where it was.

Chiltern was standing by the door. She looked at him oddly as she went out.

"Can I my car, will you?" she said. She must have forgotten Valerie, for she didn't say good-bye.

They really started the next morning, in the early May sunshine. Alice, still smiling, had filled two of the cases in the luggage trunk with Valerie's new clothes, and didn't forget any of the things Mrs. Banwood was sure she would forget.

Mrs. Banwood silently disapproved of Alice's packing. She disapproved of Valerie's blue knitted suit, and her blue tweed coat to motor in. Of course Mr. Alexander was spoiling the girl.

She said as much to Chiltern, as they stood directly behind a drawing-room curtain and watched Mark open the door of the closed car.

"He'd much rather drive his roadster, but he thought this was better for Miss Valerie," said Chiltern. He almost forgot, and let a note of affection into his voice.

"He's spoiling the girl. It's not what her mother planned for her," said Mrs. Banwood grimly.

"Thank heaven for that," said Valerie. "I had Mark's check for fifty dollars in his pocket. Mark had slipped it into his hand not twenty minutes ago. Just in case he had said. He had looked at the father in the eye as he said it, and cringed. Not that the man's liking for Mark depended on checks."

"You never had any children, did you?" Chiltern asked Mrs. Banwood.

"No—no," she admitted slowly. "Did you?"

"No—no—no," she said. "No—no—no as it happens. He hadn't thought of being asked himself when he put the question to her."

"But it hasn't stopped me from keeping my eyes open. Mr. Alexander's what you might call a natural father."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Mrs. Banwood primly. But she didn't sound very convinced.

"Which is more than can be said for some people."

"If you mean Mrs. Alexander—"

"I'm not naming any names," Chiltern told her. He watched Mark's car round the drive and left the house-keeper standing by the window.

Valerie leaned back beside Mark, and looked out on the world. She supposed she was the same girl she had been six months ago. Three months ago. Even six weeks ago, she was smiling.

"When I was young, girls wanted to know things," he said. "You haven't spoken for at least ten miles. You haven't even asked where we're heading—"

"But it doesn't make much difference, does it?" asked Valerie.

"You see, this is the first trip I ever took, I mean, with my father. Because you can't call a chauffeur's driving you a trip, can you? It's the first time I ever had a friend. I mean really a friend. Are fathers always friends?"

"Well, anyway they always ought to be," said Mark. "As for where we're going, I thought at we'd just head north and let things ride. We'll loaf along, and if we see anything we like, we'll stop and look it over. It's nice not to hurry when you're just out to play, don't you think?"

"I think it's all nice," said Valerie.

Two days this side of home, they ran into adventure. They had made an early start, getting up at six, with a long day of driving ahead. The world still wore its early-morning face of innocence as they came out of the hotel and watched the head porter direct the stowing away of their bags.

Valerie sat beside Mark in the car looking up at him admiringly. "It's a nice day isn't it?" she asked as they swung out of the winding drive of the hotel into the highway. "There have been a lot of other—there? Just for us—The Trip." She still spoke of it as "The Trip."

"No, and if we did, what good would it do?"

"Philosopher! Want to drive your aged father?"

Valerie laughed.

"How did you know? I mean, that I wanted to drive?"

"As one good chauffeur to another—it's a kind of feeling in the air."

"I've often thought I'd get me a job with the weather bureau," he said. "However, I won't do that until I read it in the local paper last night. Probably show us. But we don't mind."

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"I'm afraid I didn't hear you knock," she said.

cover it by afternoon.

They stopped beside a great elm under which a little brook chattered, and ate their lunch from a hamper, sitting side by side on the running board, like children.

Getting back in the car, she could see why Mark had predicted rain. A heavy black cloud unrolled across the west. Like a dark blanket putting the sun to bed, she thought.

"You were right father—about the rain. Look!" she cried.

"I've often thought I'd get me a job with the weather bureau," he said. "However, I won't do that until I read it in the local paper last night. Probably show us. But we don't mind."

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nov, and occasional thunder rumbled. When the storm began, he would take the wheel.

Along the whole that stretch as far as he could see, there was nothing, not even another car, to share the coming storm. And then ahead, he caught sight of a streak beside the road.

In the rapidly changing perspective of the moving car, the speck grew. It became a boxlike developed form. It was a vehicle of sorts. A kind of van, drawn up alongside the road. Mark had never seen anything quite like it. A figure peered past the lifted hood. The figure wore breeches and boots, and a soft shirt. By the time they were beside it, he saw to his astonishment that it was a girl.

Valerie stopped before he spoke. "Good kid," said Mark. He opened the door and jumped out. The young woman straightened and looked up. For a minute they stared at each other. Mark got an impression of slim and medium height. Of very brown eyes and exceedingly golden hair. Of a sort of flower-petal skin, rather badly smudged with grease.

"Speaking of an answer to prayer," she said. "Would you have the least idea why the thing won't go?"

"Not yet." He bent beside her over the engine, and was immediately absorbed. No matter how perfectly his own car ran, the problem of another at once became his.

"I think it's a case of burned-out bearings. It's just my guess. Do you ever think of oil?"

"I don't think of much else," the girl told him.

"Maybe you've got an oil leak." "Which makes it even better!" She hopped down on the running board and looked up at him. "What do I do now? Oh, I know it's not your worry, but you're the first human being I've seen for an hour."

Mark stood off and looked with widening eyes at the aged vehicle. It was part truck and part delivery wagon, with a drop of passenger car—the worst highway hybrid he had ever seen. It was painted a bright green, and on its sides in enormous white letters were the words "Tredway's Traveling Library."

The girl still sat limply on the running board, staring at him.

"What's in it?" he asked.

"Books."

"Can you look the thing up?"

"Oh, yes—but what's the use? I suppose you wouldn't have a towline about you anywhere?" She cast an admiring eye over the long perfection of Mark's car.

"No—of course not."

"I'm sorry," said Mark. He felt apologetic, somehow—as he used

to feel when he was a small boy and his toys were more expensive than the others.

"I broke my third yesterday," she admitted. "You see, this isn't the first time the Ark has stranded—what with one thing and another—you wouldn't believe what can happen to an old car!"

The sky was quite black, and the rain was coming down faster. Mark held out his hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Let's talk it over inside," he suggested.

They made a dash for his car, and he opened the door and put her in the back, getting to his own place beside Valerie. The girl looked from the delicate fawn upholstery to her smudged breeches.

"Couldn't I just camp on the floor?" she asked.

Mark and Valerie laughed.

"Sit down at once," Mark said. "Now, then—" He looked back at the van, its white letters dimly visible through the steel sheet of the rain. "In the first place, where's Tredway?"

"Tredway is—she—I mean you see—I'm Tredway. Name of Lucy." There was pride and a bit of bravado in the confession. "I—I see," said Mark—though nothing could have been more obscure. "Well—I'm Mark Alexander, and this is my daughter Valerie."

(To be continued)

THE SEED BEFORE THE BLOSSOM

It will never rain roses. If you want more roses you must plant more trees.—George Eliot.

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