

## CHAPTER I

### Mr. Phineas Duge

VIRGINIA, when she had torn herself away from the bosom of her sorrowing but excited family, and boarded the car which passed only once a day through the tiny village in Massachusetts, where all her life had been spent, had felt herself, notwithstanding her nineteen years, a person of consequence and dignity. Virginia, when four hours later she followed a tall footman in wonderful livery through a stately suite of reception rooms in one of the finest of Fifth Avenue mansions, felt herself suddenly a very insignificant person. The roar and bustle of New York were still in her ears. Bewildered as she had been by this first contact with all the distracting influences of a great city, she was even more distraught by the wonder and magnificence of these, her more immediate surroundings. She, who had lived all her life in a simple farmhouse, where every one worked, and a single servant was regarded as a luxury, found herself suddenly in the palace of a millionaire, a palace made perfect by the despoilment of more than one of the most ancient homes in Europe.

Very timidly, and with awed glances, she looked

around her as she was conducted in leisurely manner to the sanctum of the great man at whose bidding she had come. The pictures on the walls, magnificent and impressive even to her ignorant eyes; the hardwood floors, the wonderful furniture, the statuary and flowers, the smooth-tongued servants—all these things were an absolute revelation to her. She had read of such things, even perhaps dreamed of them, but she had never imagined it possible that she herself might be brought into actual contact with them.

At every step she took she felt her self-confidence decreasing; her clothes, made by the village dress-maker from an undoubted French model, with which she had been more than satisfied only a few hours ago, seemed suddenly dowdy and ill-fashioned. She was even doubtful about her looks, although quite half a dozen of the nicest young men in her neighbourhood had been doing their best to make her vain since the day when she had left college, an unusually early graduate, and returned to her father's tiny home to become the acknowledged belle of the neighbourhood. Here, though, she felt her looks of small avail; she might reign as a queen in Wellham Springs, but she felt herself a very insignificant person in the home of her uncle, the great railway millionaire and financier, Mr. Phineas Duge. Her courage had almost evaporated when at last, after a very careful knock at the door, an English footman ushered her into the small and jealously guarded sanctum in which the great man

was sitting. She passed only a few steps across the threshold, and stood there a timid, hesitating figure, her dark eyes very anxiously searching the features of the man who had risen from his seat to greet her.

"So this is my niece Virginia," he said, holding out both his hands. "I am glad to see you. Take this chair close to me. I am getting an old man, you see, and I have many whims. I like to have any one with whom I am talking, almost at my elbow. Now tell me, my dear, what sort of a journey you have had. You look a little tired, or perhaps it is because everything here is strange to you."

All her fears seemed to be melting away. Never could she have imagined a more harmless-looking, benevolent, and handsome old gentleman. He was thin, and of only moderate stature. His white hair, of which he still had plenty, was parted in the middle and brushed away in little waves. He was clean-shaven, and his grey eyes were at once soft and humorous. He had a delicate mouth, refined features, and his slow distinct speech was pleasant, almost soothing to listen to. She felt suddenly an immense wave of relief, and she realized perhaps for the first time how much she had dreaded this meeting.

"I am not really tired at all," she assured him, "only you see I have never been in a big city, and it is very noisy here, isn't it? Besides, I have never seen anything so beautiful as this house. I think it frightened me a little."

He laid his hand upon hers kindly.

"I imagine," he said, smiling, "that you will very soon get used to this. You will have the opportunity, if you choose."

She laughed softly.

"If I choose!" she repeated. "Why, it is all like fairyland to me."

He nodded.

"You come," he said, "from a very quiet life. You will find things here different. Do you know what these are?"

He touched a little row of black instruments, which stood on the top of his desk. She shook her head doubtfully.

"I am not quite sure," she admitted.

"They are telephones," he said. "This one"—touching the first—"is a private wire to my offices in Wall Street. This one"—laying a finger upon the second—"is a private wire to the Bank, of which I am President. These two," he continued, "are connected with the two brokers whom I employ. The other three are ordinary telephones—two for long distance calls and one for the city. When you came in I touched this knob on the floor beneath my foot. All the telephones were at once disconnected here and connected with my secretaries' room. I can sit here at this table and shake the money-markets of the world. I can send stocks up or down at my will. I can ruin if I like, or I can enrich. It is the fashion nowadays to speak lightly of the mere man of money, yet there is no king on

his throne who can shake the world as can we kings of the money-market by the lifting even of a finger.

"Are you a millionaire?" she asked timidly. "But, of course, you must be, or you could not live in a house like this."

He laid his hand gently upon hers.

"Yes, he said, "I am a millionaire a good many times over, or I should not be of much account in New York. But there, I have told you enough about myself. I sent for you, as you know, because there are times when I feel a little lonely, and I thought that if my sister could spare one of her children, it would be a kindly act, and one which I might perhaps be able to repay. Do you think that you would like to live here with me, Virginia, and be mistress of this house?"

She shrank a little away. The prospect was not without its terrifying side.

"Why, I should love it," she declared, "but I simply shouldn't dare to think of it. You don't understand, I am afraid, the way we live down at Wellham Springs. We have really no servants, and we did everything ourselves. I couldn't attempt to manage a house like this."

He smiled at her kindly.

"Perhaps," he said, "you would find it less difficult than you think. There is a housekeeper already who sees to all the practical part of it. She only needs to have some one to whom she can refer now and then. You would have nothing

whatever to do with the managing of the servants, the commissariat, or anything of that sort. Yours would be purely social duties."

"I am afraid," she answered, "that I should know even less about them."

"Well," he said, "I have some good friends who will give you hints. You will find it very much easier than you imagine. You have only to be natural, acquire the art of listening, and wear pretty gowns, and you will find it a simple matter to become quite a popular person."

She nerved herself to ask him a question. He looked so kind and good-natured that it did not seem possible that he would resent it.

"Uncle," she said, "of course I am very glad to be here, and it all sounds very delightful. But what about—Stella?"

He leaned back in his chair. There was a pained look in his face. She was almost sorry that she had mentioned his daughter's name.

"Perhaps," he said, "it is as well that you should have asked me that question. I have always been an indulgent father, as I think you will find me an indulgent uncle. But there are certain things, certain offences I might say, for which I have no forgiveness. Stella deceived me. She made use of information, secret information which she acquired in this room, to benefit some man in whom she was interested. She used my secrets to enrich this person. She did this after I had warned her. I never warn twice."

"You mean that you sent her away?" she asked timidly.

"I mean that my doors are closed to her," he answered gravely, "as they would be closed upon you if you behaved as Stella has behaved. But, my dear child," he added, smiling kindly at her, "I do not expect this from you. I feel sure that what I have said will be sufficient. If you will stay with me a little time, and take my daughter's place, I think you will not find me very stern or very ungrateful. Now I am going to ring for Mrs. Perrin, my housekeeper, and she will show you your room. To-night you and I are going to dine quite alone, and we can talk again then. By-the-by, do you really mean that you have never been to New York before?"

"Never!" she answered. "I have been to Boston twice, never anywhere else."

He smiled.

"Well," he said, "the sooner you are introduced to some of its wonders, the better. We will dine out to-night, and I will take you to one of the famous restaurants. It will suit me better to be somewhere out of the way for an hour or two this evening. There is a panic in Chicago and Illinois—but there, you wouldn't understand that. Be ready at eight o'clock."

"But uncle——" she began.

He waved his hand.

"I know what you are going to say—clothes. You will find some evening dresses in your room."

I have had a collection of things sent round on approval, and you will probably be able to find something you can wear. Ah! here is Mrs. Perrin."

The door had opened, and a middle-aged lady in a stiff black silk gown had entered the room.

"Mrs. Perrin," he said, "this is my niece. She comes from the country. She knows nothing. Tell her everything that she ought to know. Help her with her clothes, and turn her out as well as you can to dine with me at Sherry's at eight o'clock."

A bell rang at his elbow, and one of the telephones began to tinkle. He picked up the receiver and waved them out of the room. Virginia followed her guide upstairs, feeling more and more with every step she took that she was indeed a wanderer in some new and enchanted land of the *Arabian Nights*.