

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Littleton, Flatterer

ONCE more a little luncheon was in progress at the corner table in the millionaires' club. This time Littleton also was of the party. He had been describing his luncheon of the day before to his friends.

"I am dead sure of one thing," he declared. "She is on our side, and I honestly believe that she means getting that paper."

"But she hasn't even the entrée to the house now," Weiss objected.

"There are plenty of the servants there," Littleton answered, "whom she must know very well, and through whom she could get in, especially if Phineas is really up in his room. I tell you fellows I really believe we'll have that wretched document in our hands by this time to-morrow."

"The day I see it in ashes," Bardsley muttered. "I'll stand you fellows a magnum of Pomery '92."

"I wonder," Weiss remarked, "what sort of terms she is on with her cousin, the little girl with the big eyes."

"I wish to Heaven one of you could make friends with that child!" Bardsley exclaimed. "I'd give

a tidy lot to know whether Phineas Duge lies there on his bed, or whether his hand is on the telephone half the time. You are sure, Littleton, that Dick Loring is in Europe?"

"Absolutely certain," Littleton answered. "I had a letter from him dated Paris only yesterday."

"Then who in God's name is shaking the Chicago markets like this!" Bardsley declared, striking the newspaper which lay by his side with the palm of his hand. "You notice, too, the stocks which are being hit, all our own, every one of them. D——n! If Phineas should be sitting up there in his room with that hideous little smile upon his lips, talking and talking across the wires hour after hour, while we hang round like idiots and play his game! It's maddening to think of."

"Oh, rot!" Littleton declared. "You can imagine everything if you try. There are the doctor's bulletins! We've had a dozen detectives all round the place, and there is not a single murmur of his having been seen by any one, or known to have even dictated a letter."

"I've never known him sick for a day in my life," Bardsley said thickly.

"It must come some time," Littleton answered. "It's always these men who've never been ill at all, who come down suddenly. I'm not going to worry myself about nothing. Our only mistake was in the way that child was handled. I think Weiss frightened her."

Weiss shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps I did," he said. "You see I'm not a fashionable young spark like you. Why the devil don't you go and call on her? It's only a civil thing to do. You are supposed to be one of her uncle's greatest friends, and he's supposed to be dangerously ill. Go and call on her this afternoon. Put on your best clothes and your Paris manners. You ought to be able to get something out of a child from the backwoods. If you talk to her cleverly you can at least find out whether Phineas is playing the game or not."

Littleton nodded.

"I'll call directly after lunch," he said. "Perhaps I could get her to come out for a ride. I'll try, anyhow, and ring you fellows up afterwards at the club."

"Don't bother her any more about the paper," Weiss said. "She'll get suspicious at once if you do. Try and make friends with her. This thing may drag on for a week or so."

Littleton nodded and left them soon afterwards. He went to his rooms, changed into calling attire, and before four o'clock his automobile was outside the mansion in Fifth Avenue, and he himself waiting in the drawing-room for Virginia. She came to him with very little delay, and welcomed him quite naturally.

"I am afraid," he said, "that you must look upon callers as rather a nuisance just now, but we are all very anxious about your uncle, and I thought

"I would like to hear something more than that little bulletin outside tells us."

She motioned him to sit down.

"You are very kind," she said. "My uncle is really about the same. The doctor thinks he may be able to get up in about a week."

"Is there any—specific disease?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"I think not," she answered. "I don't understand all that the doctor says. It seems to me that all you men here lead such strenuous lives that you have no time to be ill. You simply wait until you collapse."

"I'm afraid that's true, Miss Longworth," he said, "and if you will forgive my saying so, I fancy you have been doing a little too much yourself, worrying and looking after your uncle. Can't I tempt you out for a little way in my automobile? It's a delightful afternoon."

She shook her head.

"You are very kind," she said, "but I seem to be the only person for whom my uncle asks sometimes, and he is awake just now. I should not like to be away."

"He is conscious, then?" Littleton asked.

"Perfectly," she answered.

"I suppose it is quite useless asking to see him?"

She shook her head.

"Quite! The doctor would never allow it. He has to be kept absolutely quiet, and free from excitement."

"I hope," he said, "that he did not hear anything of the attempted burglary the other night?"

Virginia smiled very faintly, and her dark eyes rested for a moment upon his.

"No!" she answered, "we kept that from him. You see nothing was really stolen. As a matter of fact there was so little in that room which could have been of any value to any one."

"Exactly!" he answered, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"There are so many lovely things all over the house," she continued, "that it has puzzled me very much why they should have chosen to try only and break open that desk in the library. It seems queer, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps it does," he admitted. "On the other hand, they might have thought that your uncle had bonds and papers worth a great deal more than any of the ordinary treasures they could collect."

"Well," she said, "they got nothing at all. Somehow, I don't fancy," she added, "that my uncle is the sort of man to keep valuable things where they could possibly be stolen."

He determined to be a little daring. He raised his eyebrows, and looked at her with a smile which was meant to be humorous.

"Fortunate for him that he doesn't," he answered, "for, frankly, if I knew where to find it, I should certainly steal that document that Mr. Weiss came and worried you about. We ought to have it. If it got into any one's hands except your uncle's,

it would be the most serious thing that ever happened to any of us."

"I don't think," she said reassuringly, "that you need worry. My uncle does not part easily with things which he believes have value."

He laughed, not quite naturally.

"I see," he said, "that you are beginning to appreciate your uncle."

"One learns all manner of things," she answered, "very quickly here."

He looked at her with more attention than he had as yet bestowed upon her. She was very slim, but wonderfully elegant, and her clothes, though simple, were absolutely perfect. Her eyes, of course, were marvellous. Her complexion had not altogether lost the duskiness which came from her outdoor life. Her hair was parted in the middle, after a fashion of her own, and coming rather low on the back of her head, gave her the appearance of being younger even than she was. Stella's beauty was perhaps the most pronounced, but this girl, he felt was unique. He looked thoughtfully into her eyes. Her whole expression and manner were so delightfully simple and girlish, that he found it almost impossible to believe that she was playing a part.

They talked for a little while upon purely general subjects, the Opera, her new friends, the whole social life of the city, in which he took a somewhat prominent part. She talked easily and naturally, and he flattered himself that he was making a good

impression. When at last he rose to take his leave, he made one more venture.

"I don't know," he said, "whether you get bothered by your uncle's business affairs at all while he is laid up, but I hope you will remember that if I can be of any service, I am practically one of his partners, and I understand all his affairs. You must please send for me if I can be of the slightest use to you."

She had apparently listened to him for the first part of his sentence with her usual air of polite interest. Suddenly, however, she started, and her attention wandered. She crossed quickly toward the bell and rang it.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Littleton," she said. "I won't forget what you have said. Do you mind excusing me? I fancy that I am wanted."

She left the room as the servant whom she had summoned arrived to show her visitor out. Was it her fancy, or had she indeed heard the soft ringing of the burglar alarm which she had had attached to the library door on the other side of the hall!