

## CHAPTER XII

### Stella Succeeds

VIRGINIA crossed the hall with rapid footsteps, and entered the library. She realized at once that she had not been deceived, but she started back in surprise when she discovered who it was standing before the roll-top desk and regarding it contemplatively. Stella looked up, and the eyes of the two girls met. Stella nodded, apparently quite at her ease.

"How are you, cousin Virginia?" she said. "You see I have come back home to play the part of the repentant Jaughter."

Virginia was a little distressed. She came further into the room, having closed the door behind her.

"Stella," she said, "I am very sorry, but while your father is ill he does not like any one to come into this room."

Stella seated herself in his chair.

"Quite right," she said. "I hope you will be careful to keep them out. He always has such a lot of secrets, and I know that he hates to have people prying around."

Virginia felt that she had never received a more embarrassing visitor.

"Would you mind, Stella," she said, "coming into the drawing-room with me? This room is supposed to be locked up. You knew the catch in the door, of course, or you could not have come in."

"Yes! I know the catch," Stella answered, "and, my dear child, you must forgive my saying so, but I have lived here for some years, and it is still home to me. You, on the other hand, have been here a few weeks. I know you don't mean anything unkind, but just because I have quarrelled a little with my father, you must not tell me which rooms I may enter, and which I may not. I am going to stay here for half an hour, and write some letters."

"You can write them in any other room in the house," Virginia declared, "but not here. It is impossible."

Stella smiled and shrugged her shoulders as she sat down.

"I am sorry," she said, "but this is where I mean to write them. You must remember that this house belongs to my father. You are here temporarily in my place. I have not bothered you very much, and it is a very simple thing that I ask. I want to make use of this room, to write a few letters here. After that I shall go away."

The troubled frown on Virginia's face grew deeper.

"My dear Stella," she said, "although nothing would please me better than to see your father and you friends again, you must know that he allows no one to enter these rooms when his secretary is

away. In fact, as you know, the door was closed, and if you had not known the secret of the catch, you could not have entered."

"Well," Stella repeated carelessly, "since I am here, I am here. Please unlock this desk and give me some writing paper."

"I cannot unlock it," Virginia answered. "You must know that."

"But you have the keys," Stella interposed.

"If I have," Virginia declared, "it is because your father trusted me with them."

"Perhaps," Stella said, leaning a little forward in her chair, "you have also the keys of that wonderful little hiding place of his that he showed me one day."

"Perhaps I have," Virginia answered, "but if so, no other person in the world will ever know about it."

"You won't even open the desk for me, then?" Stella said.

"Certainly not," Virginia answered. "Your father's orders to me were quite explicit."

"You do not suppose," Stella asked, "that he meant to exclude his own daughter?"

"How can I tell?" Virginia answered. "I know nothing of the trouble there was between you two," she added more softly. "It is not my affair, although nothing would please me more than to see you friends again. If you will come into the drawing-room and wait, I will go upstairs and try and persuade him to see you."

Stella shook her head.

"It would be no use," she said. "He is frightfully obstinate, and I shall never have a chance of making my peace with him again unless I can come upon him unexpectedly."

"Well," Virginia said, "he is not likely to be downstairs to-day, and, Stella, don't be angry with me, but I must really ask you to leave this room."

"Thank you," Stella answered coldly. "I am at home here, and I mean to stay so long as I choose. It is you who are the intruder. If you have any sense at all, you will go away and play with your dolls. You can't have left them very long, and I'm sure it is a more fitting amusement for you than ordering me about my father's house."

Virginia moved up and down the room. The tears were already in her eyes; she was utterly and completely perplexed.

"Stella," she said, "you know what sort of a man your father is. If he learns that you have been here in this room, he will never forgive me. He will send me home, and that would be hateful, for many, many reasons. Do please be reasonable, and come away with me now into one of the other rooms. I will do all that I can to bring you two together."

Stella seemed to have made up her mind to quarrel with her cousin. Her face was white and hard. She laughed a little scornfully before she answered.

"You bring us together!" she exclaimed. "Do

“You think that I don’t understand you, better than that? I know very well that you are much too pleased with your position here, and you are afraid that if my father forgave me and I came back, you would have to go home again. Don’t think that I don’t understand.”

Virginia walked to the window, and stood there several moments looking out upon the avenue. Her eyes were quite dry now, and a spot of colour was burning in her cheeks. The injustice of her cousin’s words had checked the tears, but they had also achieved their purpose. She turned slowly round.

“Very well, Stella,” she said, “I will not interfere with you any more, but I am going to do exactly what is my duty. Will you leave this room or not?”

“When I am ready,” Stella answered, “not before!”

Virginia crossed the room, meaning to ring the bell. Stella, springing quickly from her seat, caught her cousin up, and seizing her by the shoulders, turned her round. Then she calmly locked the door of the room in which they were, on the inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

About an hour afterwards, the elder of Phineas Duge’s secretaries, Robert Smedley, entered the bedroom at the top of the house with some precipitation, and turned a white face towards his master. Phineas Duge, fully dressed, was entering

some figures in a small memorandum book on the table before him.

"Mr. Duge," the young man exclaimed, "forgive me for disturbing you, but I think that if you feel strong enough you ought to come downstairs into the library at once."

Phineas Duge did not hesitate. There was a light in his eyes which transformed his face. He knew as though by inspiration something of what had happened. He took the back stairs, and descending at a pace quite extraordinary for a sick man, he was inside the library in less than a minute. It was easy to see that Smedley's alarm had not been altogether ill-founded. A chair was overturned; Virginia was lying face downwards upon the floor in front of the desk. Phineas Duge dropped his cigarette, and fell on his knees by her side. Then he saw that her hands and feet were tied with an antimacassar torn into strips, and a rude sort of gag was in her mouth. She opened her eyes at his touch, and moaned slightly. In a moment or two he had released her from her bonds, and removed the handkerchief which had been tied into her mouth.

"Fetch some brandy," he told the young man, "and keep your mouth shut about this. You understand?"

"Sure, sir!"

The young man hurried away. Duge was still stooping down, with his arm around Virginia's waist. Gradually she began to recover herself. She looked

all round the room, as though in search of some one. Her uncle asked her no questions. He saw that she was rapidly regaining consciousness, and he waited. Smedley returned with the brandy. Together they forced a little between her lips, and watched the colour coming back into her cheeks. Then Phineas Duge withdrew his arm and walked to the other side of the desk. On the floor were the broken fragments of Virginia's locket. The carpet had been torn up. The steel coffer, with the keys still in it, was there half open. He slid back the lid, and taking out a few of the topmost papers, ran them through his fingers. There was no doubt about it, of course. The document was missing. He returned to the chair into which he had carried Virginia.

"Are you well enough now," he asked, "to tell me about this?"

She raised herself in her chair, and looked with fascinated eyes toward that spot in the carpet.

"Has anything gone?" she asked.

"Yes!" her uncle answered shortly. "I want to know how it was that any one got into this room, and who it was. Quickly, please!"

"I was in the drawing-room talking to Mr. Little-son," Virginia said, "when I heard the small alarm bell that I had had fitted on to the library door, ring. I came in and found Stella here. She locked me in. She is very strong. I had no idea that she was so strong," Virginia murmured, half closing her eyes and fainting away.

He hurried to her side, and forced some more brandy between her lips. Then he laid her flat on the floor, and began to walk up and down.

"So this is Stella's work," he muttered to himself. "That accounts for the message I had yesterday, that she was seen driving with Littleson. What she did for that blackguard Vine, she has done for them!"

His face, no longer an amiable one, grew sterner as he walked backwards and forwards, his hands behind him, his eyes fixed upon the carpet. He had staked a good deal on his possession of this hold upon the men who had been his associates. The whole situation had to be readjusted in the altered light of events. The first impulse of the man, to act, seemed strangled almost at its birth by the absolute futility of any move he could possibly make. He had no idea where to find his daughter, with whom she was living, or how. Any publicity of any sort was of course out of the question. No wonder that his frown grew heavier as he realized more completely the helplessness of his position. He was a man unaccustomed to failure, whose career through life had been one smooth road of success and triumph. His touch seemed to have transformed the very dust heaps into gold, and the barren wastes into prosperous cities. The shadow of failure had never fallen across his path. Now that it had come he was bewildered. An ordinary reverse he could have met resolutely enough. This was something stupendous, something against which



the ordinary weapons of his will were altogether powerless. Try as he might, he could not see his way ahead. He was too deeply involved for any one to gauge the position accurately. A knock at the door. Phineas Duge looked up, and paused for a moment in his restless walk. He opened it cautiously and let in young Smedley, a tall, broad-shouldered young man.

"Come in, Smedley," he said shortly. "I have been wanting you."

The young man looked straight across at Virginia, still stretched upon the floor, and he took a quick step in her direction.

"What did you find was the matter with Miss Longworth, sir?" he asked. "Is she ill?"

Duge glanced carelessly towards his niece.

"She's only a little faint," he said. "There's matter enough here without that."

"What is it, sir?" the young man asked.

Phineas Duge looked at him for a moment in silence, while he decided how much to tell.

"You remember my daughter Stella?" he asked abruptly.

The young man looked serious.

"I remember Miss Duge quite well," he answered.

"She has been here this afternoon. This is her work," Duge said grimly. "We had some trouble before, you know, about that Canadian Pacific report. It was after that, that I was obliged to send her away altogether."

The young man looked swiftly around the room.

"Has she taken anything?" he began.

"Nothing of importance," Phineas Duge answered calmly, "but that doesn't alter the fact that she might have done!"