

CHAPTER XIII

Bearding the Lion

EARLY the next morning, Littleton's automobile dashed up to the door of Weiss' office. Without even waiting to be announced, its owner pushed his way through the clerks' office and entered the private room of his friend.

"Heard the news?" he demanded quickly.

"No! What is it?" Weiss asked.

"Phineas Duge is in the city. He was going into Harrigold's as I came out. I tried to speak to him, but he cut me dead. They say that he has sent for all his brokers, and is coming on this market heavily!"

"Then his illness was a fake after all," Weiss declared. "We can't stand this, though. I'll get on to his office. We must speak to him."

He gave some rapid instructions to a clerk whom he had summoned, then took a printed sheet of prices from a machine which ticked at his elbow.

"If it's war," he muttered, "we shall have to fight hard, but what I don't understand is why he wants to break with us."

The clerk re-entered the room.

"There is a young lady here," he said, "who wishes to speak to you, sir."

"Name?" Weiss demanded curtly.

"Miss Virginia Longworth," he answered.

Weiss and Littleton exchanged quick glances.

"Show her in at once," Weiss ordered. "What do you suppose this means?" he asked, turning to Littleton.

The young man had no time to reply. Almost immediately Virginia was ushered into the office. She was very pale, and there were dark lines under her eyes. Stephen Weiss rose at once, and Littleton hastened to offer her a chair, but she took no notice. They could see that she was agitated, and she seemed to find some difficulty in commencing what she had to say.

"What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, Miss Longworth?" Weiss asked. "I hope that you have come to tell me——"

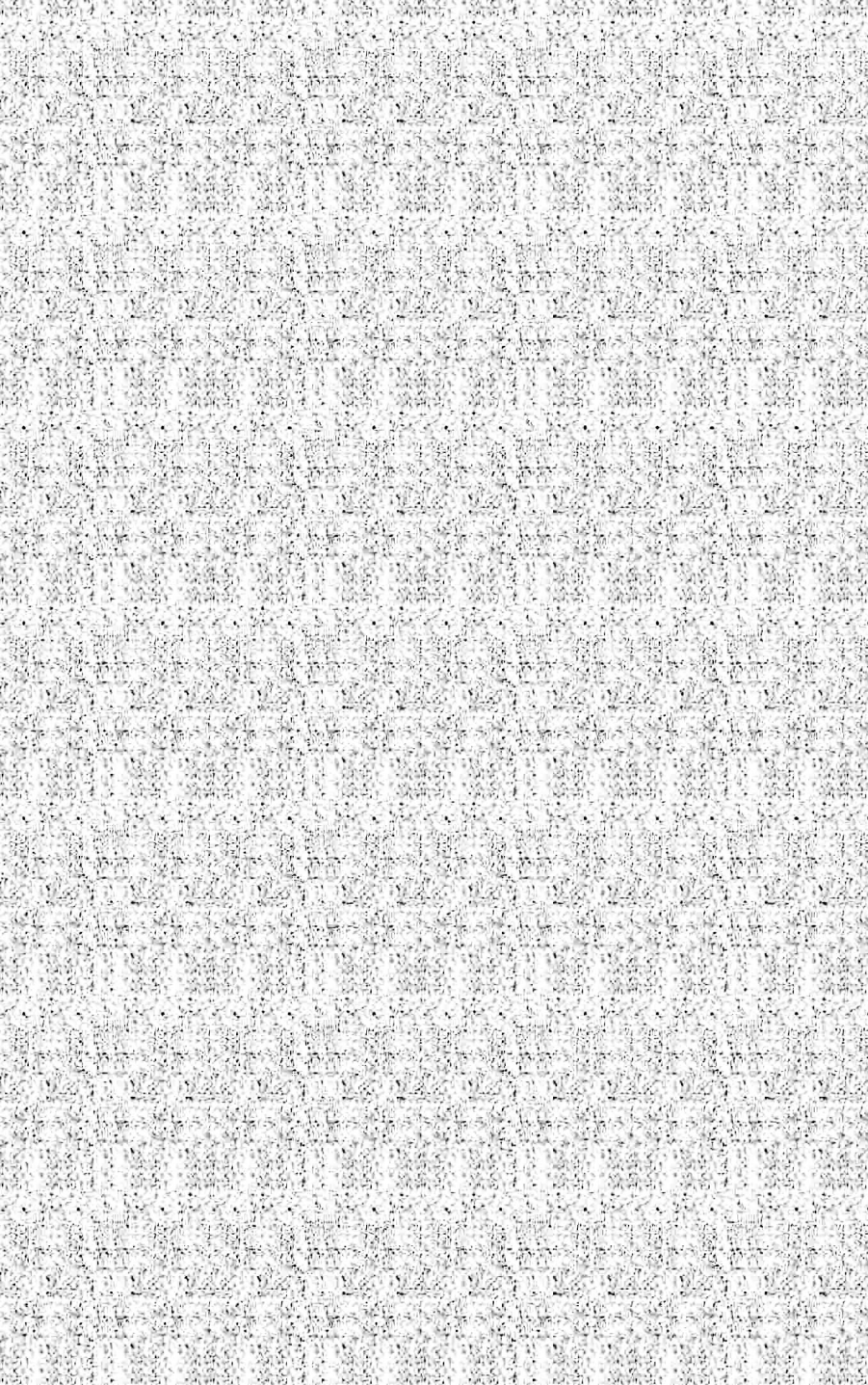
"I have come to tell you that you are both thieves!" she interrupted. "If you do not give me back that paper, I don't care what my uncle says, I shall go to the police station."

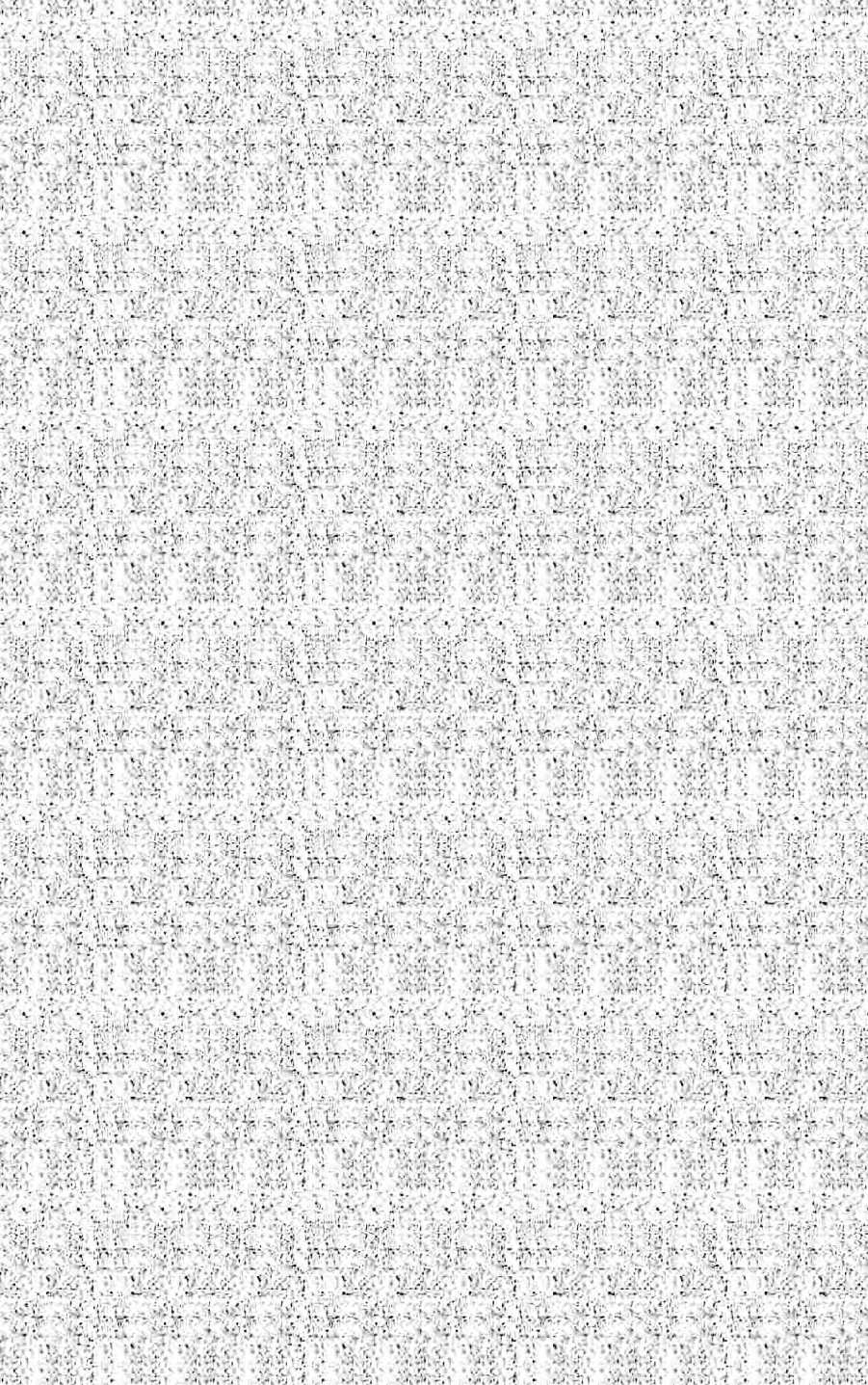
The men exchanged swift glances. Littleton suddenly started. He drew Weiss on one side.

"Stella has got it," he whispered, in a tone of triumph. "Get rid of this girl easily. That is what she must mean."

Weiss turned round and faced her.

"My dear Miss Longworth," he said, "a thief I would have been if I could have found the chance, and a thief I would have made of you if you would have stolen that paper for me, because I considered





it all and send me back to them. You can't imagine what it means to be thrown back into such poverty. It isn't for myself I mind ; it is for their sakes."

"I don't see," Stella answered, "how my father can blame you."

Virginia shook her head sadly.

"Your father is one of those men," she said, "who judges only by results. He trusted me, and whether it was my fault or my misfortune, I was a failure. Stella, does it mean so much to you, after all, that you should keep that paper? Why don't you bring it back and be reconciled to your father? I should be quite content to go away; anything so long as he gets it back. Don't you understand that after he has been so kind, I hate the feeling that I have been so abject a failure?"

Stella smiled a little bitterly.

"It is my turn," she said, "to tell you that you do not understand my father. He would never forgive me, nor do I want him to. If you think that I was the tool of these men Littleton and Weiss, you make a mistake. What I did, I did for the sake of the only man I have ever cared for. Never mind his name, never mind who he is. But if it makes my father any happier, you can tell him that his friends are no nearer safety now than they were when the paper was in his keeping."

Virginia looked around the room drearily.

"You are going away?" she said.

"I am going to Europe," Stella answered. "I hate America. I hate the whole atmosphere here."

It is a vile unnatural life. I am going to try and live somewhere where people are simpler, and where life is not made up of gambling and plotting and senseless luxuries. I am tired to death of it all!"

"You are going to be married?" Virginia asked.

Stella turned away and hid her face.

"No!" she said, "I do not think so."

There was a short silence. Virginia rose to her feet.

"Well," she said, "I think you have been a little unkind to me, Stella. I could have reached the bell and stopped you, only I hated to seem rude in your father's house."

"I am sorry," Stella said simply. "You see I am like all those other poor fools who care for a man. I put him first, and everybody else nowhere. Don't be afraid that I shall not have to suffer for it. I dare say if you know me, or anything about me, in five years' time, you will feel that you have had your revenge. If you take my advice, little girl," she added, speaking more kindly, "you will go back to your farmhouse and take up your simpler life there. I do not fancy that you were made for cities, or the ways of cities. I lived in the country once, and I was a very different sort of person. Run away now. I can do nothing for you, so it is no use staying, but if ever you need help, the ordinary commonplace sort of help I mean, write to me to Baring's, either in London or Paris. I'll do what I can."

Virginia went out again into the street and drove back home. Mechanically she changed her clothes

and dressed for dinner. At eight o'clock she descended, shivering. Her uncle was already in his place. He rose as she entered, gravely, and took his place again as she sank into hers. His face was like a mask. He said nothing, and the few remarks which he made during dinner-time were on purely ordinary topics. There was only a minute or two, after the dessert had been placed upon the table and the remaining manservant had gone out with a message, during which they were alone. Then Virginia summoned up her courage to speak of the matter which was all the time like a nightmare in her thoughts.

"Uncle," she said, "I think you ought to know this. I went to Mr. Weiss' office. He did not know that the paper was not still in your keeping. I went to Stella, and she told me that she had not taken it for them. She told me that they had offered her one hundred thousand dollars for it, but she never had any idea of letting them have it."

If Phineas Duge was surprised, he showed no signs of it, only he looked steadily into his niece's face for a moment or two before he replied.

"Stella," he said coldly, "has taken her goods to a poor market. Norris Vine is on the brink of ruin. If I turn the screw to-morrow, he must come down."

He sipped his wine for a moment thoughtfully. Then a grim, hard smile parted his lips.

"No wonder," he said, "that my friends are still in something of a panic."

Virginia rose in her place. It seemed as though her appearance was woebegone enough to soften the heart of any man, but Phineas Duge looked into her face unmoved.

"Uncle," she said, "I have failed in my trust. I am no longer any use to you. I think that I had better go home."

He took out his pocket-book, looked through its contents, and passed it across the table to her.

"As you will," he answered. "I have a great weakness which I am always ready to admit. I cannot bear the presence about me of people who have failed. You have become one of them, and I do not wish you to remain here. If," he added, speaking more slowly, and looking meditatively into the decanter by his side, "if you saw any chance by which, with the help of what you will find in that pocket-book, a little application, a little ingenuity, and a good deal of perseverance, you could undo some part of the mischief which your carelessness has caused, then, of course, I should lose that feeling concerning you, and your place here would be open for your return. It would probably, also, be to the advantage of your people if any such idea as this resulted in successful action on your part. There is enough in that pocket-book," he added, "to take you where you will, and to enable you to live as you will for the remainder of the year, and during that time your people also are provided for. I leave the matter in your hands."

He turned and left the room. Virginia stood at

the end of the table, clasping the pocket-book in her hands, and watching his retreating figure. He opened and closed the door. She sank back into her place for a moment and covered her face with her hands. For a moment she forgot where she was. The perfume of the roses, with which the table was laden, had somehow reminded her of the little farmhouse with its humble garden, far up amongst the hills.