

## CHAPTER II

### Cousin Stella

“WELL,” he said, smiling kindly at her over the bank of flowers which occupied the centre of the small round table at which they were dining, “what do you think of it all?”

Virginia shook her head.

“I cannot tell you,” she said. “I haven’t any words left. It is all so wonderful. You have never been to our home at Wellham Springs, or else you would understand.”

He smiled.

“I think I can understand,” he said, “what it is like. I, too, you know, was brought up at a farmhouse.”

Her eyes smiled at him across the table.

“You should see my room,” she said, “at home. It is just about as large as the cupboard in which I am supposed to keep my dresses here.”

“I hope,” he said, “that you will like where Mrs. Ferrin has put you.”

“Like!” she gasped. “I don’t believe that I could have ever imagined anything like it. Do you know that I have a big bathroom of my own, with a marble floor, and a sitting-room so beautiful that

I am afraid almost to look into it. I don't believe I'll ever be able to go to bed."

"In a week," he said indulgently, "you will become quite used to these things. In a month you would miss them terribly if you had to give them up."

Her face was suddenly grave. He looked across at her keenly.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"I was thinking," she answered, after a moment's hesitation, "of Stella. I was wondering what it must be to her to have to give up all these beautiful things."

His expression hardened a little. The smile had passed from his lips.

"You never knew your cousin, I think?" he asked.

"Never," she admitted.

"Then I do not think," he said, "that you need waste your sympathy upon her. Tell me, do you see that young lady in a mauve-coloured dress and a large hat, sitting three tables to the left of us?"

She looked across and nodded.

"Of course I do," she answered. "How handsome she is, and what a strange-looking man she has with her! He looks very clever."

Her uncle smiled once more, but his face lacked its benevolent expression.

"The man is clever," he answered. "His name is Norris Vine, and he is a journalist, part owner of a newspaper, I believe. He is one of those foolish

persons who imagine themselves altruists, and who are always trying to force their opinions upon other people. The young lady with him—is my daughter and your cousin.”

Virginia's great eyes were opened wider than ever. Her lips parted, showing her wonderful teeth. The pink colour stained her cheeks.

“Do you mean that that is Stella?” she exclaimed.

Her uncle nodded, and paused for a moment to give an order to a passing *maitre d'hôtel*.

“Yes!” he resumed, “that is Stella, and that is the man for whose sake she robbed me.”

Virginia was still full of wonder.

“But you did not speak to her when she came in!” she said. “You nodded to the man, but took no notice of her!”

“I do not expect,” he said quietly, “ever to speak to her again. I have been a kind father, I think that on the whole I am a good-natured man, but there are things which I do not forgive, and which I should forgive my own flesh and blood less even than I should a stranger.”

The colour faded from her cheeks.

“It seems terrible,” she murmured.

“As for the man,” he continued, “he is my enemy, although it is only a matter of occasional chances which can make him in any way formidable. We speak because we are enemies. When you have had a little more experience, you will find that that is how the game is played here.”

She was silent for several minutes. Her uncle

turned his head, and immediately two *maitres d'Hotel* and several waiters came rushing up. He gave a trivial order and dismissed them. Then he looked across at his niece, whose appetite seemed suddenly to have failed her.

"Tell me," he said, "what is the matter with you, Virginia?"

"I am a little afraid of you," she answered frankly. "I should be a little afraid of any one who could talk like that about his own child."

He smiled softly.

"You have the quality," he said, "which I admire most in your sex, and find most seldom. You are candid. You come from a little world where sentiment almost governs life. It is not so here. I am a kind man, I believe, but I am also just. My daughter deceived me, and for deceit I have no forgiveness. Do you still think me cruel, Virginia?"

"I am wondering," she answered frankly. "You see I have read about you in the papers, and I was, terribly frightened when mother told me that I was to come. Directly I saw you, you seemed quite a different person, and now again I am afraid."

"Ah!" he sighed, "that terrible Press of ours! They told you, I suppose, that I was hard, unscrupulous, unforgiving, a money-making machine, and all the rest of it. Do you think that I look like that, Virginia?"

"I am very sure that you do not," she answered.

"You will know me better, I hope, in a year or so's time," he said. "If you wish to please me, there

are two things which you have to remember, and which I expect from you. One is absolute implicit obedience, the other is absolute unvarying truth. You will never, I think, have cause to complain of me, if you remember those two things."

"I will try," she murmured.

Her thoughts suddenly flitted back to the poor little home from which she had come with such high hopes. She thought of the excitement which had followed the coming of her uncle's letter; the hopes that her harassed, overworked father had built upon it; the sudden, almost trembling joy which had come into her mother's thin, faded face. Her first taste of luxury suddenly brought before her eyes, stripped bare of everything except its pitiful cruelty, that ceaseless struggle for life in which it seemed to her that all of them had been engaged, year after year. She shivered a little as she thought of them, shivered for fear she should fail now that the chance had come of some day being able to help them. Absolute obedience, absolute truth! If these two things were all, she could hold on, she was sure of it.

A messenger boy was brought in, and delivered a letter to her uncle. He read and destroyed it at once.

"There is no answer," he said.

The messenger protested.

"I am to wait, sir, until you give me one," he said. "The gentleman said it was most important. I was to find you anywhere, anyhow, and get an answer of some sort."

"How much," Mr. Phineas Duge asked, "were you to receive if you took back an answer?"

"The gentleman promised me a dollar, sir," the boy answered.

"Mr. Duge put his hand into his pocket.

"Here are two dollars," he said. "Go away at once. There is no answer. There will not be one. You can tell Mr. Hamilton that I said so."

The boy departed. Her uncle looked across at Virginia and smiled.

"That is how we have to buy immunity from small annoyances here," he said. "All the time it is the same thing—dollars, dollars, dollars! That messenger boy was clever to get in. When we leave this restaurant, you will find that there are at least half a dozen people waiting to speak to me. It will be telephoned to several places in the city that I am dining here to-night. From where I am sitting, I can see two reporters standing by the entrance. They are waiting for me."

She looked at him with interested eyes

"But why?" she asked timidly.

"Oh! it is simply a matter," he said, "of the money-markets. I have been doing some things during the last few days which people don't quite understand. They don't know whether to follow me or stand away, and the Press doesn't know how to explain my actions; so you see I am watched. You heard what I said," he asked, somewhat abruptly, "about those two things, obedience and truth?"

"Yes!" she answered.

"They say," he resumed, "that a wise man trusts no one. I, on the other hand, do not believe this. There are times when one must trust. Your mother and your father were both as honest as people could be, whatever their other faults may have been. I like your face. I believe that you, too, are honest."

"Remember," she said, smiling, "that I have never been tempted."

"There could be no bidders for your faithfulness," he answered, "whom I could not outbid. I am going to trust you, Virginia. There are sometimes occasions when I do things, or am concerned in matters, which not even my secretaries have any idea of. You only, in the future, will know. I think, dear, that we shall get on very well together. I am not going to offer you a great deal of money, because you would not know what to do with it, but so long as you remain with me, and serve me in the way that I direct, I am going to do what I feel I ought to have done long ago for your people down at Wellham Springs."

Her face shone, and her beautiful eyes were more brilliant still with unshed tears.

"Uncle!" she murmured breathlessly.

He nodded.

"That will do," he said. "I only wanted you to understand. For the next week or two, all that you have to do is to get used to your position. The small services which I shall require of you will

commence later on. Now try some of that ice. It has been prepared specially. How do you like our New York cooking ? ”

“ It is all too marvellous,” she declared.

Then there came a sudden interruption. She heard the rustle of a gown close to their table, and looking up found to her amazement that it was Stella who was standing there.

“ So you are my cousin ! ” Stella said, “ little Virginia ! I only saw you once before, but I should have known you anywhere by your eyes. No ! of course you don't remember me ! You see I am six years older. I mustn't stop, because, as I dare say you know, I am not on speaking terms with my father, but I felt that I must just shake hands with you, and tell you that I remembered you.”

“ You are very kind,” Virginia faltered.

Her uncle had risen to his feet, and was standing in an attitude of polite inattention, as though some perfect stranger had addressed the lady who was under his care. He appeared quite indifferent ; in his daughter's voice there had not been the slightest trace of any sentiment. A careless word or two passed between him and the man Norris Vine, who was waiting for Stella. Then they passed out together, and Phineas Duge calmly resumed his chair. Virginia, who had expected to find him angry, was herself amazed.

“ By-the-by,” Mr. Duge said, as he lit a cigarette, always remember what I told you about that man. Be especially on your guard if ever you are brought



into contact with him. A year ago I happen to know that he registered a vow, that before five years were past he would ruin me."

"I will remember," Virginia faltered,