

CHAPTER IX

Ingratitude

NORRIS VINE stood in the middle of his room, his hat still upon his head, and his overcoat on his arm. Before him stood the waiter and the watchman of the flats.

"My rooms," he was saying, "have been occupied within the last ten minutes by strangers, and by people who have no right here whatever. I have certain proof of this. Do you allow any one who chooses to come into the building and use the lift, and enter whatever apartment they choose?"

"We cannot employ detectives," the manager answered, "and every one who lives here has visitors."

There was a soft knock at the door, and almost immediately it was opened. Virginia entered, and guessed immediately the meaning of the little scene before her.

"You want an explanation as to that telephone message," she said quietly. "I have come to give it to you. If you will send these people away, I will explain everything."

Norris Vine looked at her in amazement. Her

face seemed somehow familiar, but he failed at first to place her. The two men whom Vine was interviewing were only too glad of the opportunity to take their departure.

"Am I to understand," Vine asked, "that it was you whose voice I heard at the telephone?"

"You are," Virginia answered, "and you may be very thankful for it. I do not know whether it was wise of me or not, but I am quite sure that I saved your life."

"In which case," Vine remarked, with an incredulous smile, "I must at least ask you to sit down."

Virginia seated herself and pushed back her veil.

"You do not remember me," she said. "I am Phineas Duge's niece."

"I remember you now quite well," he answered. "You were having dinner with your uncle one night at Sherry's."

She nodded.

"That is quite true," she said. "I have been looking for you for some days. In fact, I came to London to look for you."

"That," he remarked drily, "sounds somewhat mysterious, considering that I have not yet had the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"There is nothing mysterious about it," she answered. "You are a receiver of stolen goods. Some papers were stolen from my uncle's study by Stella, my cousin, and given to you. They were

stolen through my carelessness. Unless I can recover them I am ruined."

"Go on," Norris Vine said. "You have not finished yet."

"No!" she answered, "I have not. I followed you to England to get those papers back, either by theft, or by appealing to your sense of honour, or any means which presented themselves. I found by accident that I was not the only American in London who was over here in search of you. This afternoon I overheard part of a plot in a café in Regent Street between two men, strangers to me, but who had both apparently made up their minds that this particular paper was worth a little more than your life. From them I heard your address. Your valet must be in their pay, for they knew exactly your movements for the night. I heard them plan to come here, and I knew what the end of that would be. I determined to anticipate them. It was not out of any feeling for you, but simply because if the paper got into their hands my cause was lost. So I came on here to warn you, but I had scarcely entered your room before I was aware that some one who had come with very different intentions was already here. We waited—I in the sitting-room, he in that bedroom—waited for you. I pretended to be unconscious of his existence. He seemed to be content to ignore mine. While I was wondering how I should warn you, the telephone bell rang. I answered it, and it was you who spoke. Then I had the idea of carrying on some imaginary

conversation with you, which would induce the man who was listening to go away. I did it and he went away. It must have sounded terrible nonsense to you, of course, but it was the only way I could think of to get him out of the place. He left convinced that you were not coming here to-night."

"Do you know who he was, this man?" Vine asked.

"I do not," she answered, "but I can guess who his employers are."

"And so can I," Vine said grimly. "It seems to me that you are a very plucky young lady, Miss Longworth."

"Not at all," she answered. "What I have done, I have done for the sake of reward."

"Will you name it?" he asked

"I want that paper to take back to my uncle," she said. "Stella stole it from me brutally, and unless I can get it back again, my uncle is going to send me back to the little farmhouse where I came from, and is going to leave off helping my people. I want that paper back, Mr. Vine, and you must give it to me."

He looked at her with utterly impassive face.

"I am afraid, Miss Longworth," he said, "that I must disappoint you. If I gave you back that paper, it would go into the hands of one of the most unprincipled men in America. It is not only your uncle whom I dislike, but his methods, his craft, his infernal, incarnate selfishness. He wants this paper

as a whip to hold over other people. He obtained it by subtlety. The means by which it was taken from him, although I had nothing to do with them, were on the whole justified. I cannot give it you back, Miss Longworth. I have not made up my mind yet what to do with it, and I certainly have no friendship for the men whom it implicates; but all the same, for the present it must remain in my possession."

"Do you know," she reminded him, "that I have saved your life to-night?"

He laughed softly.

"My dear child," he said, "my life is not so easily disposed of. I believe that you have tried to do me a kindness, but you ask too great a return. Even if the paper you speak of was stolen, it is better in my keeping than in your uncle's."

"You will not give it me, then?" she asked.

"I will not," he answered.

She rose from her place.

"Very well," she said; "I am going now, but I think that we shall meet again before very long."

He opened the door for her and walked out toward the lift.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I hope you will forgive my saying so, but this is certainly a wild-goose chase of yours. If you will take my advice, and I know something about life, you will go back to your farmhouse in the Connecticut valley. These larger places in the world may seem fascinat-

ing to you at first, but believe me you will be better off and happier in the backwoods. Ask Stella. I think that she would give you the same advice."

Virginia looked at him steadily. The faint note of sarcasm which was seldom absent from his tone was not lost upon her.

"I thank you for your advice," she said. "It sounds so disinterested—and convincing. Such an excellent return, too, for a person who has risked something to do you a kindness."

"My dear young lady," Vine answered, "it was not for my own sake that you warned me. You have admitted that yourself. It was entirely from your own point of view that you judged it well for me to remain a little longer on the earth. Why, therefore, should I be grateful? As a matter of fact, I am not sure that I am. I too go about armed, and it is by no means certain that I might not have had the best of any little encounter with our friend who you say was hiding there."—He motioned his head towards his bedroom.—"In that case, you see, I should have known exactly who he was, possibly even have been able to hand him over to the police."

Virginia pressed the little bell and the lift began to ascend.

"I am glad to know, Mr. Vine," she said, "what sort of a man you are."

He bowed, and she stepped into the lift without any further form of farewell. Vine walked thought-

fully back to his rooms. He was a man who had grown hard and callous in the stress of life, but somehow the memory of Virginia's pale face and dark reproachful eyes remained with him.