

## CHAPTER X

### A New Venture

PHINEAS DUGE, notwithstanding an absence of anything approaching vulgarity in his somewhat complex disposition, was, for a man of affairs and an American, singularly fond of the small elegancies of life. Although he sat alone at dinner, the table was heaped with choice flowers and carefully selected hothouse fruit. His one glass of wine, the best of its sort, he sipped meditatively, and with the air of a connoisseur. The soft lights upon the table were such as a woman, mindful of her complexion, might have chosen. Behind his chair stood his English butler, grave, solemn-faced, attentive. The cigars and matches were already on his left-hand side, ready for the moment when he should have finished his wine. Outside a footman was waiting for a signal to bring in the after-dinner coffee.

Across his luxurious table, through the waving clusters of sweet-smelling flowers to the dark mahogany panellèd wall beyond, the eyes of Phineas Duge seemed to be seeking that night something which they failed to find. The last few weeks seemed in a way to

have aged the man. His lips had come closer together, there were faint lines on his forehead and underneath his eyes. The butler from behind his chair looked down upon his master's carefully parted and picturesque hair, wondering why he sat so still, wondering what he saw that he looked so steadily at that one particular spot in the panelled wall, and lingered so unusually long over the last few drops of his wine. Phineas Duge himself wondered still more what had come to him. For many years men and women had come and gone, leaving him indifferent as to their coming and going, their pains and their joys; and to-night, though there were many matters with which his mind might well have been occupied, he found himself in the curious position of indulging in vague and almost regretful memories. The place at the other end of his table was empty, as it had been for many nights; for during the period of his titanic struggle with those men against whom he had declared war, he had shunned all society, and lived a life of stern and absolute seclusion.

To-night that steady gaze which wandered over the drooping flowers was really fixed upon that empty chair at the other end of the table. A man of few fancies, he was never quite without imagination. His thoughts had travelled easily back to a few weeks ago. He saw Virginia sitting there, watched the delightful smile coming and going, the large grey eyes that watched him so ceaselessly, the little ripple of pleasant conversation, which he had

never dreamed that he could ever miss. After all, what a child! As a matter of justice, and he told himself that it was justice only which had power to sway his judgment, what right had he to blame her for what was really nothing but a freak of ill-fortune! Had he punished himself in sending her away? Somehow, during these last few nights, the room had seemed curiously cold and empty. He had missed her little timidly offered ministrations, the touch of her fingers upon his shoulder, the whole nameless delicacy which her presence had brought into the cold, magnificent surroundings, which seemed to him now as though they could never be quite the same again.

These thoughts had come to him before, but it was only to-night he had suffered them to linger in his mind. Once or twice he had caught them lurking in his brain and thrown them out. To-night they had come with a soft, invincible persistence, so that he had felt even his will powerless to strangle them. He was forced to face the truth, that he, Phineas Duge, the man of many millions, sat there while the minutes fled past, looking with empty eyes into empty space, thinking of the child which he would have given at that moment more than he would have cared to confess, to have found sitting within a few feet of him, peeling his walnuts, or pouring out her impressions of this wonderful new life into which she had come.

Some trifle it was which broke the thread of his reflections. When he realized what he had been

doing, he was conscious of a feeling almost of shame. In a moment he was himself again. He calmly drank up his wine, and as he set the glass down held out a cigar from the box to the man who stood with the cigar cutter in hand ready. A little silver spirit lamp burning with a blue flame stood all ready at his elbow. The butler gave the signal, and his coffee, strong and fragrant, in a little gold cup, was placed before him.

"You will tell Smedley to be in the study at nine o'clock," he ordered.

"Very good, sir!" the man replied. "You will not be going out to-night, sir? There are no orders for the garage?"

"Not to-night," Phineas Duge answered.

There was an unexpected sound of voices outside in the hall. Phineas Duge looked toward the door with a frown upon his face.

"What is that?" he asked sharply.

The butler was perplexed.

"I will go and see, sir," he said. "It sounds as though James were having trouble with some one."

The door was suddenly opened. Weiss and Higgins entered quickly, followed by the protesting and frightened footman. Phineas Duge rose from his seat, and, resting one hand upon the table, peered forward at the two men. His face, even under the rose-shaded electric lamp, was cold and set. The gleam of white teeth was visible between his lips. He looked like a man, metaphorically, about to spring

upon his foes. One hand had stolen round to the pocket of his dinner coat, and was holding something hard, but to him very comforting. He offered no word of greeting. He uttered no exclamation of surprise. He simply waited.

"These gentlemen pushed past me in the hall, sir," the footman explained, deprecatingly. "My back was turned only for a moment, and Wilkins was down having his supper."

"You can go," Phineas Duge said coldly, waving him out of the room. "What do you want with me, Weiss?"

"A few minutes' sensible talk," Weiss answered. "It will do you no harm to listen to us. Send your servant away and give us a quarter of an hour."

Phineas Duge hesitated, but only for a moment. These men had come openly, and they were known to be his enemies. It was not possible that they intended to use any violence. He turned to the butler, who stood behind his chair.

"Place chairs for these gentlemen," he ordered, "and leave the room."

They sat on his left-hand side. Phineas Duge pushed the decanter of Burgundy toward them, and the cigars. Then he leaned back in his chair and waited.

"Duge, we ought to have come to you before," Weiss began. "We are playing a child's game, all of us."

"Whatever the game may be," Duge answered, "it is not I who invented it."

“ We grant that to start with,” Weiss answered. “ We were in the wrong. You have done a little better than hold your own against us. We are several millions of dollars the poorer and you the richer for our split. Let it go at that. We have other things to think about just now besides this juggling with markets. I take it that we are none of us particularly anxious to learn what the interior of a police court looks like.”

Phineas Duge made no motion of assent or dissent.

“ You refer,” he said, “ to the action against the Trusts which the President is supposed to be supporting so vigorously ? ”

Weiss nodded.

“ The thing's further advanced than we were any of us inclined to believe,” he answered. “ Every one of us is interested in this, you more than any of us. If Harrison's Bill passes the Senate, we are liable to imprisonment at any moment. We are up against it hard, Duge, and we can't face it as we ought while we're squabbling amongst ourselves like a set of children.”

“ You propose then,” Phineas Duge said slowly, “ to close our accounts on a mutual basis ? ”

“ Precisely ! ” Weiss answered. “ You have had the best of it, and it might be our turn to-morrow, so you can well afford to do this. We want to rest on our oars for a time, while we look round and face this new danger.”

“ Very well,” Phineas Duge said, “ I agree. We will meet at your office to-morrow and bring our

brokers. I am quite willing to end this fight. It was not I who began it."

Higgins drew a little breath of relief. He was perhaps the poorest of the group, and it was his stock which Duge had been handling so roughly.

"Thank heavens!" he said. "Now we can have a moment's breathing time, to see what we can do for these fellows who want to teach us how to manage our affairs."

"In the first place," Weiss said, "what about that paper we signed? I can understand your wanting to hold it over us while we were at war. It was a fair weapon, and you had a right to it, but now we are united again you can see, of course, that although your name isn't on it, it would practically mean ruin to our interests if the other side once got hold of it."

"If I had that paper," Duge said quietly, "I would tear up it at this moment; but I regret to say that I have not. It was stolen during my illness."

"We know that," Weiss answered. "We know even in whose hands it is."

Phineas Duge looked up inquiringly.

"Norris Vine has it," Weiss continued. "We have offered him a million, but he declines to part. He would have used it for his paper before now, and we should have been on the other side of the ocean, but for the fact that John Drayton, advised him not to. Now he has taken it with him to London. He

is going to ask Deane's advice. At any moment the thing may come flashing back. We may wake up to find a copy of that document in black and white in every paper in New York State."

"You have offered him a reasonable sum for it," Phineas Duge said, "and he declines to part. Very well, what do you propose to do?"

"It was stolen from you," Weiss said. "He may justly decline to treat with us; but it is your property, and you have a right to it."

"You propose, then?" Phineas Duge asked.

"That you should catch the *Kaiserin* to London to-morrow," Higgins said, "and find out this man Vine. The rest we are content to leave with you, but I think that if you try you will get it."

Phineas Duge sat quite still for several moments. He sipped his wine thoughtfully, threw his cigar, which had gone out, into the fire, and lit a cigarette. He appreciated the force of the suggestion, and a trip to Europe was by no means distasteful to him, but he was not a man to decide upon anything of this sort without reflection.

"A week ago," he said softly, "even a day ago, and my absence from New York would have meant ruin. If I leave the country to-morrow, and trust myself upon the ocean for six days, what guarantee have I that you will keep to any arrangement which we might make to-morrow?"

"We will sign affidavits," Weiss declared, "that we will not, directly or indirectly, enter into any operations in any one of our stocks during your



absence, except for your profit as well as our own. We will execute a deed of partnership as regards any transactions which we might enter into during your absence."

Phineas Duge nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose," he said, "we might be able to fix things up that way. I should be glad enough to get the paper back again, but Vine is not an easy man to deal with, and he is pleased to call himself my enemy."

"The men who have called themselves that," Higgins remarked grimly, "have generally been sorry for it."

"And so may he," Phineas Duge answered, "but I am not sure that his time has come yet. You must let me think this over, gentlemen, until tomorrow morning. I will meet you with my broker and lawyer at ten o'clock at your office, Weiss, and if I make up my mind to go to Europe, my luggage will be on the steamer by that time. On the whole I might tell you that I am inclined to go."

Weiss drew a great breath of relief. He poured himself out a glass of wine and drank it off.

"It's good to hear you say that, Duge," he said. "I tell you we have come pretty near being scared the last week or so. I feel a lot more comfortable fighting with you in the ranks."

Phineas Duge forbore from all recrimination. He filled Higgins' glass and his own. He could afford to be magnanimous. He had fought them one

against four, and they had come to him for mercy!

“ We will drink,” he said, “ to the new President. This one has tilted against the wind. nills once too often. He must learn his lesson.”