

CHAPTER III

Storm Clouds

MR PHINEAS DUGE, since the death of his wife, had closed his doors to all his friends, and entertained only on rare occasions a few of the men with whom he was connected in his many business enterprises. On the arrival of Virginia, however, he lifted his finger, and Society stormed at his doors. The great reception rooms were thrown open, the servants were provided with new liveries, an entertainment office was given carte blanche to engage the usual run of foreign singers and the best known entertainers of the moment. Mrs. Trevor Harrison, the woman whom he had selected as chaperon for Virginia, more than once displayed some curiosity, when talking to her charge, as to this sudden change in the habits of a man whose lack of sociability had become almost proverbial.

"If it were not, my dear," she said one day to Virginia when they were having tea together in her own more modest apartment, "that I firmly believe your uncle incapable of any affection for any one, we should all have to believe that he had lost his heart to you."

Virginia, who had heard other remarks of the same nature, looked puzzled.

"I cannot think," she exclaimed, "wily every one speaks of my uncle as a heartless person, I do not think that I ever met any one more kind, and he looks it, too. I do not think that I ever saw any one with such a benevolent face."

Mrs. Trevor Harrison laughed softly as she rocked herself in her chair.

"Dear child," she said, "New York has known your uncle for twenty-five years, and suffered for him. These men who make great fortunes must make them at the expense of other people, and there are very many who have gone down to make Phineas Duge what he is."

Virginia shook her head.

"I cannot understand it," she said.

"Your uncle," Mrs. Trevor Harrison continued, "has a will of iron, is absolutely self-centred, sentiment has never swayed him in the least. He has climbed up on the bodies of weaker men. But there, in America we blame no one for that. It is the strong man who lives, and the others must die. Only I cannot quite understand this new development. I have never known your uncle do a purposeless thing."

"You say," Virginia remarked slowly, "that he has no heart. Why did he send for me, then? Since I have been here, he has paid off the mortgage which was making my father an old man, he has sent my brother to college, and has promised, so

long as I am with him, to allow them so much money that they have no more anxiety, at all. If you only knew what a change this has made in all our lives, you would understand that I do not like to hear you say that my uncle has no heart."

Mrs. Trevor Harrison stopped rocking her chair, and looked at the girl thoughtfully.

"Well," she said, "what you tell me sounds very strange. Still, I don't see what motive he could have had for doing all this."

"Why should you suspect a motive?" Virginia demanded.

"Because he is Phineas Duge," Mrs. Harrison said drily. "But there, my dear child, I mustn't say a word against your uncle. He has been nice enough to me because I have promised to look after you. Does he want me to marry you, I wonder. I don't think that it would be very difficult."

Virginia blushed, and moved uneasily in her chair.

"Please don't," she begged. "I do not wish to think of anything of the sort. My uncle says that presently I am to help him."

"To help him," Mrs. Trevor Harrison repeated thoughtfully.

Virginia nodded.

"Yes! I don't exactly know how, but that is what he said."

Her chaperon looked thoughtful for a moment. So there was a motive somewhere, then! But, after all, what concern was it of hers? She was an

old friend of the Duge family, and Phineas Duge had made it very well worth her while to look after his niece.

They were interrupted by some callers. It was an informal "At Home" which Mrs. Harrison was giving in honour of her young charge. Soon the rooms were crowded with people, and Virginia, slim, elegant, perfectly gowned, looking like a picture, with her pale oval face and wonderful dark grey eyes, was the centre of a good deal of attention. And in the midst of it all a girl, whom as yet she had not noticed, touched her on the arm and drew her a little away. She started with surprise when she saw that it was Stella.

"Come, my dear cousin," Stella said, "I want to have a little talk with you. Won't you sit down with me here? I am sure you have been doing your duty admirably."

Virginia was a little shy. She was not quite sure whether she ought to talk to her cousin. Nevertheless, she obeyed the stronger personality.

"Of course I know," Stella said, spreading herself out on a sofa, and smiling in amusement at the other's slight embarrassment, "that I am in disgrace with my beloved parent, and that you are half afraid to talk to me. Still, you must remember that you owe me a little consideration, for you have taken my place, and turned me out into the cold world."

"You must not talk like that, please," Virginia said quietly. "You know very well that I have done done nothing of the sort. When my uncle sent for

me, I had no idea that you were not still living with him."

"I lived with him for three years," Stella said, "ever since I got back from Europe. I call that a very wonderful record. I give you about three months."

"I don't know why you should say this," Virginia answered. "I find my uncle very easy to get on with so long as he is obeyed."

Stella smiled.

"Ah, well!" she said, "I don't want to dishearten you, only you seem rather a nice little thing, and I am afraid you don't quite understand the sort of man my father is. However, you'll find out, and until you do I should have as good a time as you can, if I were you. How do you like New York?"

"How could I help liking it?" Virginia answered. "I came here from a little wooden farmhouse in a desolate part of the country. I did not know what luxury was. Here I have a maid, a suite of rooms, an automobile, and all manner of wonderful things, all of my own."

"Will you be willing," Stella asked calmly, "to pay the price when the time comes?"

Virginia looked at her wonderingly.

"The price?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

Stella laughed a little hardly.

"Little girl," she said, "you are very young. Let me tell you this. My father never did a kind action in his life for its own sake. He never be-

friendly any one for any other motive than that some day or other he meant to exact some return for it. Your time hasn't come yet, but there will be something some day which will help you to understand."

Virginia sat upright in her seat. A very becoming touch of colour had stolen into her cheeks, and her eyes were bright.

"I like to talk to you, Stella," she said, "because you are my cousin, and none of these other people are even my friends yet, but I cannot listen to you if you talk like this of the man who has been so kind to me, especially," she added, "as he is your father and my uncle."

Stella leaned over and patted her hand patronizingly.

"Silly little girl!" she said. "Never mind, we shall be friends some day, I daresay. You daren't come and see me, I suppose?"

Virginia shook her head.

"Not without my uncle's permission," she said.

"Quite right," Stella agreed. "Don't run any risks. We shall come across one another now and then, especially since my father seems determined to throw open his doors once more to the usual mob. By-the-by, does he ever say anything about me?"

"Nothing," Virginia answered, "except that you deceived him. He has told me that."

"Any particulars?" Stella asked.

"I am not sure," Virginia said, "that I ought to repeat them."

Stella sat quite still for a moment, and a slight frown was on her forehead.

"He has told you, then, why he sent me away?" she asked.

"Yes!" Virginia answered.

Stella shrugged her shoulders and rose up.

"Well," she said, "I mustn't monopolize you any longer, or I shall be in disgrace."

She walked away with a little nod, leaving behind her a faint but uncomfortable impression. Virginia, an hour or so later, thought it best to tell her uncle of this meeting. They were standing together in one of the reception rooms, waiting for some guests who were coming to dine, and were alone except for a couple of footmen, who were lighting a huge candelabrum of wax candles.

"Uncle," Virginia said, "I met Stella this afternoon, and she came and spoke to me."

He looked at her without change of countenance.

"Well?" he said.

"I thought I ought to tell you," Virginia continued.

"I was not sure how you felt about it."

"I have no objection," he said, resting his hand for a moment upon her shoulder, "to your talking to her whenever you may happen to meet. Only remember one thing! She must not enter this house. You must never ask her here. You must never suffer her to come. You understand that?"

"I understand," Virginia answered.

"And this man Vine, Mr. Norris Vine, have you met him?" he asked.

Virginia shook her head.

"No!" she said, "I have never seen him since that night at the restaurant."

"The same thing," Phineas Duge said, "applies to him. Neither of them must cross the threshold of this house. It is a hard thing to say of one's own daughter, but those two are in league against me, if their combination is worth speaking of seriously."

Virginia looked hopelessly puzzled. Phineas Duge hesitated for a moment, and then continued—

"There are phases of our life here," he said, "which you could not hope to understand, even if you had been born in this city. But you can perhaps understand as much as this. In the higher regions of finance there is very much scheming and diplomacy required. One carries always secrets which must not be known, and one does things which it is necessary to conceal for the good of others, as well as for one's own benefit. I have been for some years engaged in operations whose success depends entirely upon the secrecy with which they are conducted. Naturally, there is an opposing side. There always must be. There are buyers and sellers. If one succeeds, the other must fail, so you can understand that one has enemies always."

"It sounds," she murmured, "almost romantic, like diplomacy or politics."

He smiled.

"The secret history of the lives and operations of some of us, who have made names in this country during the last few years," he said, "would make the

modern romance seem stale. Even odd scraps of news or surmises are fought for by the Press. The journalists know well enough where to come for their sensation. Our guests at last, I believe. Don't forget what I have been saying to you, Virginia."