

CHAPTER XXIII

A Dinner Party

PHINEAS DUGE in London was still a man of affairs. With a cigar in his mouth, and his hands behind his back, he was strolling about his handsomely furnished sitting-room at Claridge's dictating to a secretary, while from an adjoining room came the faint click of a typewriter. Virginia entered somewhat unceremoniously, followed by Guy. Phineas Duge looked at them both in some surprise.

"Uncle," she said, "I met Guy coming away from Coniston Mansions. He was looking for me, and I have brought him to see you."

Phineas Duge held out his hand and in obedience to a gesture, the secretary got up and left the room.

"I am very glad to meet you, sir," he said. "By the by, my niece has only mentioned your first name."

"I am the Duke of Mowbray," Guy said simply, "and I am very glad indeed to meet you if you are Virginia's uncle. I think that she treated me rather badly a week ago, but I am disposed," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "to be forgiving. I want your niece to be my wife, sir."

"Indeed!" Mr. Duge answered a little drily.

"I can't say that I am glad to hear it, as I have only just discovered her myself."

"There is no reason, sir," Guy answered "why you should lose her."

"You don't even know my uncle's name yet," Virginia said, smiling

"I am Phineas Duge," Duge answered. "I dare say you have never heard of me. You see, I don't come often to England."

"Phineas Duge!" Guy gasped. "What, you mean the——?"

"Oh, yes! there is only one of us," Duge answered, smiling. "I am glad to hear that my, fame, or perhaps my infamy, has reached even you."

Guy laughed.

"I don't think there is much question of infamy," he answered. "I fancy that over here you will find yourself a very popular person indeed."

"Even," Phineas Duge answered, "although I allowed my niece to run away from home and come over here on a wild-goose chase. It was one of my mistakes, but Virginia has forgiven it. I suppose she has told you everything now."

"Everything," Guy answered, "and we should like to be married as soon as you will allow it."

"What about your people?" Duge asked.

Guy smiled.

"I do not fancy," he said, "that there will be any difficulty at all about that."

"You two," Phineas Duge said, "seem to have

come across one another in a very unconventional manner, and yet, after all, it seems as though you were doing the thing which your people over here look upon at any rate with tolerance. I have only two girls to leave my millions to. You must send your solicitor to see me to-morrow."

"Virginia knows," Guy answered, "that I should be only too glad to have her without a sixpence."

"I myself am fond of money," Phineas Duge answered, smiling, "but I think that if I were your age I should feel very much the same."

"Uncle," Virginia said, "I have seen Mr. Vine and Stella, and I have given them your message. They are coming to dine with us at eight o'clock to-night. Couldn't we—couldn't——?"

Phineas Duge interrupted with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"Make it into a family party, I suppose you were going to say?" he remarked. "My niece hopes that you too will join us," he added turning to the young man.

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Guy raced back to Grosvenor Square. He found Lady Mollincourt playing bridge in the card-room.

"Aunt," he said, after having greeted her guests, "I must see you at once. Please come into the morning-room. I have something most important to say."

"If you dare to disturb me until I have finished this hand, I shall never speak to you again," she

declared. "If we lose this rubber, my diamonds will have to go."

He walked about the room, trying to conceal his impatience. Fortunately Lady Medlincourt won the rubber and having collected her winnings, she followed him into the morning-room.

"Well, Guy, what is it?" she said resentfully. "I suppose you have found that child?"

"I have not only found her," he answered "but I have found out all about her. Do you know whose niece she is, and whom she is staying with?"

"How should I, my dear boy?" she answered.

"Her uncle is Phineas Duge," Guy said. "He has given his consent to our marriage, and told me to send my lawyer to him to-morrow."

"Bless the boy, what luck!" Lady Medlincourt exclaimed. "Why, he's the richest man in America."

Guy nodded.

"I don't care a bit," he said, "except that it will make all you people so much more decent to Virginia. Come along round to Claridge's and be introduced There's just time."

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The dinner-party that night was a great success. In the middle of it Lady Medlincourt laughed softly to herself.

"I must tell you all something," she said. "You know Guy went to America this year to see his cousin who is out ranching. He was so afraid that people would think he had gone out to find an

American heiress—you know we're all disgracefully poor—that he stayed in New York, and came back, under an assumed name. In fact, he was only in New York for two days, for fear that some one should find him out. And to think, Guy," she exclaimed, "that you are going to do the conventional thing after all!"

"My dear lady," Phineas Duge said, "the conventions in your wonderful country are not things to be trifled with. Somehow or other they will assert themselves. There is your nephew here trying to prove to the world that he will have nothing to do with them, and yet it will be his painful duty to receive as much of my hard-earned savings as my daughter's dowry and Virginia's trousseau will leave to me. Never, until I was inveigled into Doucet's this afternoon did I really understand the absolute recklessness of young women who are going to marry Englishmen."

Virginia laughed softly.

"What there is in me of extravagance," she said, laying her hand for a moment upon his arm, "I owe to you. Who else would have cabled to all my people to come over here for such an unimportant function as my wedding!"

Norris Vine caught his host's eye and raised his glass.

"May I be permitted," he asked, to propose a toast—or rather several toasts? I drink with you, sir," he added, with a slight bow, "to the extinction of an ancient enmity! I have been something of a

fanatic, I fear, as all those must be who take to their hearts a righteous cause. I drink to your charming niece, and to the fortunate young gentleman who is to be her husband! And lastly, I drink to our great country!"

"To America, and the extinction of all enmities!" Phineas Duge cried, holding his glass above his head.

"To America, and the sweetest of all her daughters!" Guy whispered in Virginia's ears