

## CHAPTER IV

### A Meeting of Gaints

PHINEAS DUGE, if his manners preserved still that sense of restraint which seemed part of the man himself, still made an excellent host. He sat at the head of his table, a distinguished, almost handsome personality, his grey hair accurately parted, every detail of his toilette in exact accordance with the fashions of the moment, his eyes everywhere, his tongue seldom silent.

Virginia watched him more than once from her seat, in half-unwilling admiration. She was ashamed to admit that her personal enthusiasm for him had in any way abated, and yet she was becoming conscious of that absolute lack of any real cordiality, of any evidence of affection in his demeanour towards her and every one else with whom he was brought into contact. She knew very well what the world's account of him was, for in the old days they had read sketches of his career up in the little farmhouse amongst the mountains. They had read of his indomitable will, of his absolute heartlessness, the stern persistent individuality which climbs and climbs, heedless of those who must fall by the way. Perhaps he was really like this. Perhaps her first

impressions had been wrong. The 1, with a sudden wave of shame, she remembered the joyous, affectionate letters which every post brought her from the home, which notwithstanding all her sufferings, she had loved so dearly. She looked down at the pearls which hung from her neck. She saw herself in her spotless muslin gown. She felt the touch of laces and silk, all the nameless effect of this environment of luxury thrilled in her blood. It was better, she decided, that she did not think of the future at all. It was better that she should nurse the gratitude which she most assuredly felt.

The dinner-party that night consisted of men only, and although the conversation was fairly general, even Virginia had a suspicion that these men had not been brought together absolutely as ordinary guests for social purposes. Lightly though they all talked, there was something in the background. More than once the voices were lowered, allusions were made which she failed to understand, and half-doubting glances were thrown in her direction. One of these her uncle appeared to notice, and, leaning a little forward in his chair, he said a few words to the man at his side in such a way that they were obviously intended for the information of all.

"My niece," he said, "is going to take the part which I had once hoped my daughter might fill. If the occasion arises, you can speak of any matter of business in which we may be interested, before her. It is necessary," he continued, after a slight

pause, "that there should be some one in my household who is above suspicion, I might almost say, above temptation. My niece will hold that post."

Then they all looked at her, and Virginia was a little frightened. It did not seem to her necessary, however, to say anything. Two of the men she met for the first time, but all were known to her by sight. There was Stephen Weiss, the head of a great trust; long, lean, with inscrutable face, and eyes hidden behind thick spectacles; Higgins, who virtually controlled a great railway system; Little-son and Bardsley, millionaires both, and politicians. It was a gathering of men of almost limitless power; men who, according to the democratic papers, lived with their hands upon their country's throat. Little-son leaned over and spoke to her not unkindly.

"I am sure," he said, "that your uncle has made a wise choice. There are some secrets too great to be in one man's charge alone, and besides——"

Phineas Duge lifted his hand.

"Never mind the rest," he said. "I have not explained those circumstances as yet to my niece. If you are quite ready, we will take our coffee in the library." He turned to Virginia, who had risen at once to leave them. "In an hour and a half exactly, Virginia," he said, "come into the library. Not before."

She glanced at her watch and made a note of the hour. Then she wandered off to one of the smaller drawing-rooms, and, to relieve a certain strain of which she was somehow conscious, she played the

piano softly. In the middle of a nocturne of Chopin's the door was opened, and a young man was shown into the room.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "you are Miss Longworth?"

She rose at once from the piano seat. He was not dressed for the evening, and he carried a felt hat in his hand. Nevertheless his bearing was pleasant enough, and he seemed to her a gentleman.

"I am Miss Longworth," she answered. "You want to see my uncle, I suppose? They have made a mistake in showing you in here."

"Not at all," he answered, with an ingratiating smile. "I know that your uncle is very busy, so I took the liberty of asking to see you. It is such a simple matter I required, that it was not worth while interrupting him. My name is Carr, and I am on the *Sun*. There was just an ordinary question or two I was going to put to your uncle, but you can answer them just as well if you will."

"You mean that you are a reporter?" she asked. He nodded.

"That's so," he assented. "Odd sort of life in a way, because it sends us round seeking sometimes for the most trivial information. For instance, your uncle had a dinner-party to-night, and I have stepped round for a list of the guests."

"I do not see," she answered slowly, "what possible concern that can be of your paper's."

He smiled indulgently.

"Ah, Miss Longworth!" he said, "you have just

come from the country, I believe. You do not understand the way we do things in New York. Your uncle is a famous man, and the public who buy papers to-day are dead keen upon knowing even the most trifling things that such men do. In fact, I have been sent all the way up from down town simply to find out that simple matter. Of course, I could have asked the servants, but we always prefer to get our information from one of the family where possible. Now, let me see. Mr. Weiss was here, of course ? ”

Virginia hesitated, but only for a moment.

“ If you really wish for these details,” she said, “ you must ask my uncle. I do not care to tell you.”

“ But say, isn't that rather rough upon your uncle ? ” he asked doubtfully. “ We can't bother him with every little thing. Surely there can be nothing indiscreet in your giving me the names of your guests. Most people send them to the papers themselves.”

“ I do not know,” Virginia said, “ whether my uncle would wish me to do so. In any case, I shall do nothing without his consent.”

The young man frowned slightly. This was not to be so easy as he thought.

“ Well,” he said, “ I can get the names from your servants, without bothering your uncle. Must be rather interesting for you, Miss Longworth, to hear these famous men talk.”

She snook her head.

“ I do not understand one half of what they say,”

she answered, "but what I do understand doesn't sound in the least wonderful."

He smiled appreciatively.

"I can quite understand that," he said; "but there must have been some of the conversation that you understood. For instance, the Trusts Impeachment Bill that is coming before the House in a few weeks. They ought to have said some interesting things about that."

Virginia moved calmly across the room, and before the young man had perceived her intention she had rung the bell.

"I think," she said, "that you are a very impertinent person. Please go away at once."

He shrugged his shoulders as he turned towards the door. His expression was still entirely good-humoured.

"Don't be angry with me, Miss Longworth," he said, as he paused for a moment with his hand upon the knob of the door; "it's all in my day's work, you know. One has to try and find out these things, or one wouldn't be worth one's place. We had word down at the office that you had just come from the country, and that something might be done with you."

"And I think it was most unfair and ungentlemanly," Virginia began.

"It seems so, I daresay," he admitted, "from your point of view; but you must remember, Miss Longworth, that it is all part of a game which is played here all the time. Each side knows the other's moves;

there is no deceit about it. Men like your uncle, who want to cover up their actions, take as much pains to hoodwink us, and use any means that occur to them to keep us in the dark when they want to. They just make use of us, and we have to try and make use of them. Good-night, Miss Longworth!"

He left the room, and Virginia returned to the piano. Her fingers were shaking, however, and she was unable to play. She took up a book and tried to read. All the time she kept glancing at the clock. At last she rose to her feet and left the room. The hour and a half was up.