

## CHAPTER V

### Treachery

SOMEWHAT to Virginia's surprise, when at last she stepped with beating heart into the library, she found her uncle alone. He was sitting in front of his open desk, a pile of papers before him, and a long, black-looking cigar between his teeth. Scarcely glancing up, he motioned her to a seat.

"In five minutes," he said, "I shall want to talk to you."

She sat down in one of the chairs, now vacant, which had been drawn up to the study table. The air of the room was heavy with tobacco smoke, and there were empty liqueur glasses upon the sideboard. Yet Virginia somehow felt that it was not only to take their after-dinner coffee, and enjoy a chat over their cigars, that these men had met together around the table before which she was sitting. She had the feeling somehow that things had been happening in that little room, of which she and Phineas Duge were now the only occupants.

"Virginia!"

She turned her head suddenly. Her uncle, was looking at her. His eyes had lost their far-away gleam, and were fixed upon hers, cold and expressionless.

"Yes, uncle!" she said.

"I want to talk to you for a few moments," he said. "Listen. and don't interrupt."

She leaned a little toward him in an attitude of attention. The words seemed to frame themselves slowly upon his lips.

"You have been wondering, I suppose, like all the rest of the world," he began, "why I sent for you here. I am going to tell you. But first of all let me know this. Are you satisfied with what I have done for you, and for your people? In other words, have you any feeling of what people, I believe, call gratitude towards me?"

"I wonder that you can ask me that," she answered, a little tremulously. "You know that I am very, very grateful indeed."

"You like your life?" he asked. "You find it"—he hesitated for a moment—"more amusing than at Wellham Springs?"

"I am only an ordinary girl," she answered simply, "and you must realize what the difference means. Life there was a sort of struggle which led nowhere. Here I don't see how any one could be happier than I. Apart from that, what you have done for the others counts, I think, for more than anything with me."

"I am glad," he answered, "that you are satisfied.

You think, perhaps, from what you have seen since you came here, that the power of money has no limits. I can tell you that it has very fixed and definite limits, and it was when I realized them that I sent for you. I hope to gain from you what in all New York I should not know where to buy."

She was careful not to interrupt him, but her eyes were full of mute questions.

"I mean," he continued, "fidelity, absolute unswerving fidelity. The four men who have been here to-night call themselves my friends. We are leagued together in enterprises of immense importance. Yet take them one by one, and there is not one whom I could trust. I have proved it. I pay my two secretaries more highly than any other employer in the city. They do their duty, but I know very well that they only wait for some one else to outbid me, and they would take themselves and their knowledge of my affairs to whomever might call them. It has become necessary that there should be one person in whose charge I could repose the knowledge of certain things. New York does not hold such a person. That is why I have sent for you.

He paused so long that she ignored his injunction of silence.

"You know very well, uncle," she said, "that I am not clever, and that I understand nothing whatever about business, or anything to do with it, but I can at least promise that I will be faithful.

That seems a very poor reward for all that you have done for me

"Yes!" he answered, "I believe that you mean that. Now I must tell you this, that these four men who have dined with me here to-night, with myself, are under a solemn covenant to conduct all our operations upon the market and in finance, whether in this country or in Europe, absolutely in unison. We control a practically unlimited capital, and we pool all profits. We never speculate individually, at least that is a condition of our agreement. You may not understand this, but such a combination as ours, honestly adhered to, can do what it likes with the money-markets anywhere. We can bend them to our will. We buy or sell, and our profits are sure. We keep our agreement secret, but even then it is guessed at. I can assure you that we are probably the five best hated men in America. During the last two years we have made great fortunes. Our system is perfect. So far as the acquisition of wealth goes, there could be no object in any treachery, and yet one of these five men is playing a double game, if not more."

"You have found him out?" she asked breathlessly.

He shook his head.

"It is not so easy," he said, "only I know. To-night," he continued, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "a new suspicion has come to me. I have an idea that there is a scheme, in which all

four are concerned, for ruining me and sharing the plunder."

"It is infamous!" she cried, turning pale.

He smiled slowly. It was the smile she hated. It seemed to change his face from the similitude of a benevolent divine to something hard, almost satanic.

"The odds," he continued, "seem heavy, but I have known one man hold his own against four before now. You may not understand all these different points, but I must tell you this. All through America, we millionaires, who operate largely upon the markets and control the finances of the country, are hated by the middle classes. We are hated by the merchants, the fairly well-off people, the labouring classes, and, more than any others, perhaps, by the politicians. Last month it was decided to strike a dangerous blow at us and our interests. A Bill is to come before the Senate before very long which is framed purposely to undermine our power. Can you understand that?"

"I think so," she answered.

"It was to discuss this," he continued, "that we met to-night. I laid a trap for my four friends, and they fell into it. They have signed a document pledging themselves to resist this Bill, in such a fashion that their doing so renders their parties to an illegal conspiracy. That document is in my possession. They all signed it, and it was left for me to be the last. No one noticed that my name was written across a piece of paper laid over the

document itself. Now this I keep as a hostage over them. Sooner or later, when their plans mature, it will occur to them what they have done. They will remember that, so long as I hold this document, I have them in my power. Weiss was uneasy before he left the room to-night. In less than a week they will be trying to regain possession of that document under some pretext or other. I am going to show you where I keep it."

He pushed his chair away and pulled up the rug from beneath it. Even then Virginia, who had obeyed his gesture and was standing by his side, could see nothing unusual in the appearance of the hardwood floor. She watched his finger, however, count the cracks from a knot in the wood. Then he pressed a certain spot, and one of the blocks sprang up a little way and was easily removed. Beneath it was the steel lid of a small coffer, with two key-holes.

"This is my hiding-place," he said calmly, "and these," he added, "are the keys."

He laid before her two keys of curious device, and he took from a drawer in his desk a thin chain of platinum and gold.

"Now he said, "you are going to be the guardian of these keys. You are going to wear this chain around your neck all the time, and the keys are going in here."

He drew from his pocket a gold locket, and touching the spring showed her that inside, instead of any place for a photograph, were little embedded

pads of velvet, shaped for the keys. He placed them in and hung the locket around her neck. She looked at it, half terrified.

"I do not understand," she said, "why you trust me with this. Surely it would be safer with you!"

He smiled grimly.

"You do not know my friends," he said. "Remember that in my possession is not only the document which must cause them to abandon their great scheme of attack upon me, but also that that same document, if made proper use of, means ruin and ridicule for them. New York is a civilized city, it is true, but money can buy the assassin's pistol to-day as easily as it bought the bravo's knife a few hundred years ago. Have you ever thought of the number of unexplained, if not undetected crimes you read of continually, in which the victims are generally rich men? Perhaps not, and you need not worry your little head about it; but take my word for it, the keys are safer with you."

Virginia laid her hand tremulously upon the locket.

"They shall be safe," she said, "but tell me this. I am never to give them up to any one but you?"

"Never under any conditions," he answered.

"Not even," she asked, "if any one should bring a written message from you?"

"Distrust it," he answered. "Do not give them up. Into my hands only, remember that."

The telephone bell rang suddenly at his elbow.

Phineas Duge took off the receiver and held it to his ear. The quiet, measured voice of Stephen Weiss came travelling along the wire.

"Say, Duge, I am half inclined to think we made a mistake in signing that paper," he said. "Of course, I know it's safe in your keeping, but I don't fancy my name standing written on a document that means quite what that means. I fancy that Higgins is a little nervous, too. We'll meet and talk it over to-morrow night."

Phineas Duge smiled faintly as he answered—

"Just as you like, only I must tell you that I entirely disagree. Unless we strike, and strike quickly, that Bill will become law, and we shall all have to print a European address upon our note-paper, if we get as far."

"I speak for the others, too," Weiss continued. "We'll meet right here to-morrow night to discuss it. Say at eight o'clock."

Phineas Duge laid down the receiver and turned away.

"Well," he said, "this will become interesting. They will not strike now until they have got hold of that foolish paper. If they are all determined to get it back, and I resist, they will know that the game is up, and that I have seen through their little scheme. This must be thought about. Virginia, do I look ill?"

She shook her head.

"I thought you were looking very well, uncle," she said.



He locked up his desk, and looked down to see that the surface of the carpet was unruffled.

“To-morrow,” he said, “I am going to be very ill indeed !”