

CHAPTER VI

Mr. Weiss in a Hurry

VIRGINIA walked along Fifth Avenue, enjoying the sunshine, the crowds of people, and the effect of a new hat. Every now and then she stopped to look in a shop, and more than once she smiled to herself as she remembered how she had escaped from her uncle's house by flitting out of the side entrance. For she had found herself within the last few hours a very important person indeed. From the moment the doctor's carriage had stopped before the door, a little stream of callers, reporters, business friends, and others whom she knew nothing of, had thronged the place, unwilling to depart without some definite news of this unexpected illness, and all of them anxious to obtain a word or two with her. Already a "Special" was being sold on the streets, and in big black letters she read of the alarming illness of Phineas Duge. She had left, both his secretaries, young men with whom as yet she had exchanged only a few words, hard at work opening letters and answering telegrams. She alone was free from all anxiety, for she had had a few words with her uncle before she came out, and at her entrance the languor of the sick man disappeared at

once, and he had spoken to her with something of the enjoyment of a boy enjoying a huge joke.

She paused every now and then to look in the shop windows, and make a few purchases. Then, just as she was leaving a store, and hesitating for a moment which way to continue her walk, a man stopped suddenly before her and raised his hat. It was Stephen Weiss, gaunt, ill-dressed, easily recognizable. He was evidently glad to see her.

"This is real good fortune, Miss Longworth," he said, holding her hand in his, as though afraid that she might slip away. "I have just left your house, but I couldn't seem to get hold of anything very definite about this sudden attack of your uncle's."

"I know very little about it myself," Virginia answered. "The doctor had only just been when I came away. He said, I believe, that it was only a matter of a complete rest for several days, perhaps a week, and then perhaps a short holiday."

Mr. Weiss shook his head thoughtfully.

"I am much relieved to hear that," he declared. "Your uncle is one of my oldest friends, and, apart from that, we are concerned in one or two very important speculations just now, things which you, young lady, would scarcely understand; but it would be very awkward if he were laid up."

"The doctor thinks," Virginia remarked, "that he will be able to attend to anything very necessary in four or five days. They will not allow him, however, to even look at a newspaper until then."

Mr. Weiss nodded thoughtfully.

"You were going back toward the house, I see," he remarked. "Permit me to walk with you a little way."

Virginia hesitated for a moment.

"I have a little more shopping to do" she said. "I was not going home just yet."

Mr. Weiss, however, was already leading her across the street.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I have something very important to say to you. I am sure you will not mind going back to the house with me now and continuing your walk afterwards. It is in your uncle's interests as much as my own."

She allowed herself to be led along, and Stephen Weiss, when they had reached the other side of the Avenue, speaking earnestly, and stooping a little towards her, commenced his explanation.

"Your uncle," he said, "and three or four of us whom you met last night, are engaged just now in a very important undertaking. I cannot explain it to you, but it involves a great many millions of dollars, more than we could any of us afford to lose, although, as you know, we are none of us poor men. Now we can carry this thing right through without bothering your uncle, and make a success of it, but there is just one thing we must have, and that is a paper which he has locked away in his study, and which is a sort of key to the situation. I spoke to your uncle about it last night over the telephone, and he agreed to have it ready for me when I called this morning. I could not find any one at the house,

however, who had received instructions about it, so I concluded that he had perhaps left word with you."

Virginia shook her head.

"No!" she answered, "he has not told me anything."

"Miss Longworth," he continued, laying his hand for a moment upon her arm, "you know from what your uncle said last night that we are all practically his partners. Now in his interests and all of ours, and naturally therefore in yours, we must have that paper. When we get home, just step into your uncle's room and say one sentence to him. Say that I am downstairs. He will know what I want, and I am sure he will tell you to give it to me. I hate to have to bother him just now, but I can assure you that it would do him a good deal more harm just when he is pulling round, to find that we were all on the wrong side of things, than to have just one sentence breathed into his ear now."

Virginia seemed to hesitate.

"The doctor's orders," she remarked, "were very strict. I am sure I don't know what to say."

"Doctors," Mr. Weiss said, "are all very well, but they do not know everything. Just those few words from you can do your uncle no possible harm, and they may save him a very bad relapse later on. I wouldn't press this thing, my dear young lady, if I wasn't convinced of its tremendous importance. You can trust me about that."

Virginia walked on for a few steps in silence. They were approaching her uncle's house, and

already a small crowd of people were collected reading the bulletin which was hung upon the railings. Mr. Weiss stopped short.

"Isn't there any way of getting in without being seen by all this crowd?" he asked. "They'll worry us to death with questions."

She nodded, and led him round the back way. Even here they were dodged, however, by a reporter, whom Mr. Weiss brushed unceremoniously away. Virginia took her companion into a morning-room upon the ground floor, and motioned him to a chair.

"If you will wait here," she said, "I'll go upstairs and see my uncle. If I see that it is in any way possible, I will do as you ask."

"That's good," he declared. "If you don't mind, Miss Longworth, I'll just step into the study, where we were last last night. I daresay one of your uncle's young men will be there, and there are a few minor details I'd like to talk over with young Smedley, if he's about."

"I will find Mr. Smedley for you," Virginia said, "when I come down. I am sure that he is not in the library, because my uncle uses that always as his private room. Please wait here until I come down."

She left him and made her way upstairs. The door of her uncle's bedroom was guarded by his manservant, who allowed her, however, to pass. Inside the room Phineas Duge was sitting in an easy-chair, carefully dressed, smoking a cigarette, and with a pile of newspapers by his side. On the

table a few feet away was a telephone, the receiver of which he had just laid down.

"Well," he asked, looking up as she entered, "have they made a move yet?"

"I met Mr. Weiss on Fifth Avenue," she said. "He explained that you were all partners in some business undertaking of very great importance. Then he went on to say that they could carry it on all right without you, but that they must have one paper, which he said was the key to the position. He remarked that he had telephoned to you last night about it, and he is quite sure that you will give me orders to find it and give it up to him. He persuaded me even, you see, to break the doctor's orders."

Phineas Duge smiled quietly.

"I am too ill to be disturbed about such things," he said, lighting a fresh cigarette. "I do not know what paper he means. If you come and talk to me again about business matters, I shall send for the doctor. It is most unreasonable. By-the-by where did you leave Mr. Weiss?"

"In the morning-room," she answered. "He wanted to go into the library, and he wanted to see Smedley, but I told him to wait where he was till I got down."

"I hope you'll find him there," Phineas Duge said. "He can see Smedley if he wants to, on your responsibility of course. Those boys know nothing. Come up and tell me how he takes it."

Virginia went down to the morning-room and

found it empty. She crossed the hall, opened the door of the outer library softly, and passed with swift silent footsteps into the smaller apartment. Mr. Weiss was standing there before her uncle's closed desk, regarding it contemplatively. He looked up quickly as she entered.

"Don't think I am taking a liberty, Miss Longworth," he said calmly. "This place has been a sort of office for us, and your uncle lets us do about as we please here. I trust you are going to unlock that desk and give me the paper I want."

Virginia shook her head slowly.

"I am sorry," she said, "but my uncle will not discuss business matters at all. He did not seem to remember anything about a paper, and he said that everything must wait until his head is a little clearer. I am sorry I disturbed him. I am afraid that the doctor will be very angry with me."

Mr. Weiss' face, clean-shaven and lined, with his spectacled eyes and thin, indrawn lips, was as expressionless as a face could be, but Virginia heard him draw a quick little breath, and his very attitude seemed to be the attitude of a man confronted with calamity

"Miss Longworth," he said slowly, "this is very unfortunate."

"I am sorry," she answered.

"Will you sit down?" he said. "I have something to say to you."

She shook her head.

"I am afraid that I cannot stay now," she said.

"I have so many things to do, and so many notes to write."

His spectacled eyes looked right into hers.

"This," he said quietly, "is important. There are times, Miss Longworth, when the junior in command of a great enterprise is faced with a crisis, when he or she is forced to act upon their own responsibility. The person who is great enough to rise to an occasion like this, is the person who wins and deserves success in life. You follow me, Miss Longworth?"

"I suppose so," Virginia answered, a little doubtfully, although in her heart she understood him very well indeed.

"Miss Longworth," he said, "have you pluck enough to save us all several millions of dollars, and to make your uncle grateful to you for life? In other words, will you help me look for that paper?"

"Without my uncle's permission?" she asked.

"Without a permission which he would give you in one moment," Mr. Weiss declared, "if he was in a fit state to look after his own affairs. Come, you shall not have to wait until he recovers. For a part of your reward, at any rate, there is a pearl necklace in Streeter's, which I saw yesterday marked forty thousand dollars. It shall be yours within half an hour of the time I get that paper, and I guarantee that your uncle will give you another like it when he knows what you have done."

Virginia shook her head sorrowfully. Her great eyes seemed full of real regret.

"Mr. Weiss," she said, "I am too dull and stupid to dare to do things on my own account. I can only obey, and I am afraid all these beautiful rewards are not for me. Even if my uncle sends me away when he gets well, I must do exactly as he told me, no more, nor any less, and one of those things," she added, turning and pressing the electric bell in the wall by her side, "was that no one, no one at all, should enter this room.

Mr. Weiss stood quite still. He seemed to be thinking, but Virginia could see that his hands were tightly clenched, and the bones of his long sinewy fingers were standing out, straining against the flesh.

"I am disappointed in you, Miss Longworth," he said. "You have a great opportunity. It need not be only a matter of the necklace——"

She held out her hands.

"You mustn't!" she begged. "I am too frightened of my uncle."

Then she turned suddenly and opened the door to the servant, whose approaching footsteps she had heard.

"Will you please show Mr. Weiss out?" she said. "He is in rather a hurry."

Mr. Weiss went without a word.