

CHAPTER VII

A Professional Burglar

THERE were three men in New York that day, who, although they occupied their accustomed, the best, table in one of its most exclusive clubs, and although their luncheon was chosen with the usual care, were never really conscious of what they were eating. Weiss was one, John Bardsley another, and Higgins, the railway man, the third. They sat in a corner, from which their conversation could not be overheard, and many a time when their heads had been close together, people had looked across at them, always with interest, often with some envy, and wondered.

"I'd like you both to understand," Weiss said, speaking with unaccustomed emphasis as he leaned across the table, "that I don't like the look of things. We tackled something pretty big when we tackled Phineas Duge, and if he has the least idea that these Chicago brokers have been operating on our behalf, it's my belief we shall find ourselves up against it."

Higgins, who was the optimist of the party, a small man, with the unlined, clear complexion and face of a boy, shrugged his shoulders a little doubtfully.

"That's all very well, Weiss," he said, "but

if Phineas had been going to find us out at all, he'd have found us out three weeks ago, when the thing started. He wouldn't have sat still and let us sell ten million dollars' worth of stock without moving his little finger. I guess you've got the jumps, Weiss, all because we were d——d fools enough to sign that rotten paper last night. All the same I don't quite see how he could ever use that against us. His own name's there."

"I'm not so sure of that," Weiss said quietly. "I tell you it occurred to me to look across just as he was blotting the page, and I saw that he had his arm right round the paper, and it didn't seem to me that he was blotting the place where his signature ought to have been."

"Why didn't you ask to read the thing through again?" Higgins demanded.

"I wish I had," Weiss answered gloomily.

Bardsley, a large man, with grey beard and moustache, and coarse, hard face, spoke for the first time.

"Do any of you know," he asked, "whereabouts in that infernal little room of his Duge keeps his papers?"

Weiss looked up.

"I am not sure," he said. "I know that he has a small iron strong-box screwed into the inside of his roll-top desk, and of course there is a safe in the outer office; but I don't see how we're going to find out whether the paper we want is there."

"The girl seemed a fool," Higgins remarked. "Can't she be got at?"

"I have done my best," Weiss answered. "It strikes me she's just fool enough to stick to what she's been told, and she's too scared of her uncle to do more or less. She practically turned me out of his room this morning, when I was just having a look round."

"If there is really anything," Higgins said in a soft voice, "in what Weiss is hinting at, there's only one thing for us to do, and, difficult or easy, it's got to be done, even if we use our friends from down there."

He motioned with his head toward the window which was behind them, and which looked out over the river. They were all three silent for a moment. Then Weiss struck the table lightly with his clenched fist.

"Fools that we are!" he muttered—"babies! idiots! To think that such men as Bardsley and Higgins and myself are compelled to make use of criminals, to put ourselves practically in fear of the law, to get back a paper which we signed like babes in the wood. What if this illness of Duge's is a fake! Nowadays a man doesn't need to move from his room to do all the mischief in this world."

"I've been round to his broker's this morning," Higgins remarked. "He is doing nothing, has done nothing for weeks. He left off the day we all agreed to leave off."

"Why couldn't he be doing as we've done," Bardsley remarked, "and work from Chicago or Boston?"

Higgins grunted, and poured himself out a glass of wine.

"You fellows have got the nerves," he said contemptuously. "You're imagining things like a pack of frightened women. Duge can't swallow us up, even if he tumbled to our game. I don't believe there's anything in this funk of yours. As to signing that paper, well, we've got to run the Government of this country, as well as a good many other things, if the Government won't leave us alone. Duge's name is on it right enough, but if you fellows are really going to shake all day about it, let's have the paper, even if we blow up the house. I'll send for Danes to-night. We'll meet him down town somewhere—two of us, no more—and see what he can suggest. If we get that paper, and Duge's illness isn't a sham, he'll come downstairs to face the biggest smash that any man in New York has ever dreamed of, and serve him d——d well right. I'm sick of the fellow and his ways. For every million we've scooped, he's scooped two. Every deal we've been into, he's had a little the best of us. We are going to get our own back, but for Heaven's sake don't let us spoil the game because you fellows have got the shivers. We'll have another bottle of wine, and right after lunch I shall telephone down for Danes. Now let's chuck it. There's little Simpson and Henderson watching us like cats. They'll think we've got caught on something, or that we are going on the market. Eat your luncheon, and don't forget my supper-party to-night. The

whole crowd from the Eden Theatre are coming. I only hope the reporters don't get hold of it."

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Virginia a few hours later was summoned to her uncle's room. As she entered the door she passed a small, insignificant-looking man, plainly dressed, and of somewhat servile appearance, whom she remembered to have seen about the place several times since her arrival. He glanced at her in passing, and Virginia saw that his eyes, at any rate, were keen enough. She found her uncle, now fully dressed, walking up and down the room, with his hands behind his back.

"I have just had news of our friends, Virginia," he remarked. "They are evidently very much in earnest. If they can't get hold of that paper by strategy, they are going to try and steal it."

"Won't that be a little difficult?" she asked.

He smiled.

"More difficult than they imagine. The coffer itself is an inch thick, and the lock will stand any thing but dynamite. However, I hear that they've engaged a professional burglar, so we ought to get some amusement out of it."

"How did you hear this?" she asked.

"The little man who has just gone out," he answered. "He is one of Pinlerton's detectives, or rather he was. He is in my service now, and spends most of his time watching these precious friends of mine. I expect they will make the attempt to-night."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Send for the police?"

Her uncle, shook his head.

"Certainly not," he answered. "If it wasn't that I suppose they will arrange it so that the affair could not possibly be traced back to them, I should be in the room myself. As it is, I shall leave the matter to Levenson, the man who has just gone out. He will get as much help as he wants. Only if you hear a noise in the night, you will know what to expect."

Virginia shivered a little.

"There will be a fight, I suppose," she said.

"There may be some shooting," he answered. "In any case, I am not afraid of their opening my safe-box."