

CHAPTER VIII

Firearms

IN the middle of the night Virginia was awakened by the sound of a revolver shot. She put on her dressing-gown, and, with an electric torch in her hand, started to descend the stairs. The house was already, however, a blaze of light. Electric alarm bells were ringing, and servants were hurrying toward the library. The man Leverson was sitting in an easy-chair, with an ugly gash across the temple, and one of his men had a revolver wound through the shoulder. One of the two burglars, however, whom they had surprised, was a prisoner in their hands, a pale, sullen-looking man, who had apparently accepted his fate quite philosophically. He was just being marched off by the uniformed police when Virginia arrived.

“Has anything been taken?” she asked Leverson.

“Not a thing, miss,” the man answered. “There were three of them, but two escaped. One was Bill Danes, I’m sure o’ that, and we can lay our hands upon him at any time. This one I don’t know, but they meant business. They had enough dynamite with them to blow the house up.”

She crossed to her uncle's desk and looked downward. The carpet had apparently not been disturbed. There were no signs that it had been touched at all.

"Are these men ordinary burglars?" she asked Leverson.

"He hesitated.

"Why, I imagine so," he answered. "Their tools are as smart a lot as ever I saw in my life. They had spies all round the house to help them escape, and this one would have got away too, if I hadn't tripped him up."

"Curse you!" the bound man muttered.

Virginia looked at him and shivered.

"Well, I am glad you caught one of them," she said. "I will go and tell my uncle."

But Phineas Duge already knew all about it. He smiled when Virginia brought him her news.

"They must be desperate indeed," he said, "to run such risks. However, I suppose they have bought these fellows' silence safe enough."

The midday papers were full of the attempted burglary. Before the magistrates, the man who had been apprehended said not a word. He seemed to accept his position with stolid fatalism. The cross-examination as to his associates, and the motive of the attempted robbery, was absolutely futile.

Phineas Duge kept up during the day the assumption of severe indisposition. No one was allowed to see him. A bulletin posted outside announced

that he had been ordered complete and entire rest ; and all the time the telephone wires from his bedroom, high up in the back of the house, were busy flashing messages east and west, all over the country. The work in which he had been engaged was zealously pushed home. No one saw his secretaries coming and going so often from his room, and neither of them was willing to admit, in fact they flatly denied when questioned, that they had seen their chief at all. Towards afternoon, Virginia returned from a short drive in the park to be told that two gentlemen were waiting to see her. She found no one in the drawing-room or waiting-room, however, or any of the usual reception-rooms, and rang the bell for the butler.

"Where are these people, Groves," she asked, "who want to see me?"

"They are in the library, madam," the man answered.

"You mean in your master's room?" she asked, with a sudden presentiment.

"Yes, madam!" the man answered. "You see, they are Mr. Weiss and Mr. Higgins, two of the master's greatest friends, and they wished to see the room where the burglary took place."

Virginia looked at the man in cold anger.

"Groves," she said, "you had my orders that no one was to be admitted into that room."

"I am sorry if I did wrong, madam," the man answered. "I made exception in favour of these two gentlemen, because they were constant visitors

here, and old friends of Mr. Duge's and I scarcely thought that your orders would apply to them."

Virginia stepped past him and across the hall. She entered the room suddenly and closed the door behind her. Mr. Weiss, with a bunch of keys in his hand, was trying to find one that fitted her uncle's desk. Higgins, who held an open penknife, seemed to have been attempting to prize the lid. They started as they saw Virginia enter, and it flashed into her mind at once that they had waited to pay their visit until they had seen her go out, and that her return so quickly had disconcerted them.

"Mr. Weiss," she said, crossing the room towards them, "this room is in my charge. It is by my uncle's orders that no one enters it. I regret that you were shown here by a servant who misunderstood his instructions. Will you come into the morning-room with me at once?"

Mr. Weiss stood up. Higgins had moved a little toward the door, and Virginia suddenly realized that her retreat was cut off.

"Young lady," the former said, "you must forgive us both, and me especially, if we speak to you very plainly. I told you about the document in which we were interested, which your uncle was holding yesterday. We were willing to let it remain here under ordinary circumstances, but after the events of last night, we do not propose to let it stay here another hour. If your uncle is not well enough to be spoken to, then we must take the matter into our own hands. You can see for yourself what

a risk we run, when only last night an attempt was very nearly successfully made to steal these papers."

"I hear what you say," Virginia answered. "May I ask what you intend to do?"

"To break open this desk, if necessary," Mr. Weiss said, "and to find our way somehow or other into the interior of the coffer where these papers are."

"And supposing I tell you," she answered calmly, "that I shall not permit a second burglary in this room within twenty-four hours?"

Higgins came forward.

"Miss Virginia," he said, "pardon me, Miss Longworth, you look like a sensible young woman. I believe you are. Consider our position. Our whole future as men of influence and character depends upon certain papers, of which your uncle has charge, being kept absolutely secret. We entrusted him with the care of them in health, but we are not prepared to let them stay here now that he is lying upstairs dangerously ill, and one attempt to steal them has already been made. Take the case at its worst, if your uncle should die, a seal would be put upon all his effects, and nothing in the world could stop those documents becoming public property. You can't realize what that would mean to us. It would mean ruin not only to ourselves, but to hundreds of others. It would mean a panic in all the money-markets of the world. We only meant that paper to remain in existence for a matter of twenty-four hours. We are fully deter-

mined that it shall not remain in this room any longer, guarded or unguarded. Can't you sympathize with us? Don't you see the position we are placed in?"

"Whatever is in this room," Virginia said, "is safe until my uncle is well enough to decide what shall be done. While he remains in his present condition I shall not allow anything to be disturbed."

"You have relations," Higgins said to her meaningly, "whom you would like to help. One could not offer to bribe you. Don't think that I mean anything of the sort. But between us we will give one hundred thousand dollars for those papers, and I guarantee that when your uncle recovers he will be quite willing to give you another hundred thousand for having been sensible enough to let us have them."

Virginia turned her back upon him.

"This is not a matter," she said, "if you please, Mr. Weiss, which I can discuss with you or your friend. I cannot let you stay in this room. If you will not go away, I must ring for the servants."

Higgins made a sudden movement, as though to seize her by the arms, but she was too quick for him. She wheeled suddenly round, and something very small but very deadly looking flashed out in her hand.

"You will force me," she said, "to treat you like a thief. I know that you are not, but I shall treat you as though you were if you don't leave this room. Don't think that this is a toy either," she con-

tinued. "Revolver shooting was one of our favourite recreations up in the country. Will you get up from that desk, Mr. Weiss?"

He stooped down and tried one of the keys from his bunch. Virginia did not hesitate. She pulled the trigger of her revolver, and a bullet whistled only a few inches from his head. He sprang upright in a minute.

"D——n the girl!" he said. "Higgins, take that thing away from her."

But Virginia was standing with her back to the wall, and Higgins, after one look into her face, shook his head.

"Don't be a fool, Weiss," he said. "This sort of thing won't do. You've lost your head. Beg Miss Longworth's pardon and come away. She is quite right. There is no excuse for our behaving like this."

Weiss hesitated for a moment, looked into Virginia's face himself, and with a shrug of the shoulders admitted defeat. The two men moved toward the door.

"I am going to call now upon your uncle's physician," Weiss said. "I am going to tell him that whatever the risk to your uncle may be, we must have an interview with him."

"As you please," Virginia answered. "That has nothing to do with me."

They left the room and closed the door behind them. Virginia, breathing a little quickly, crossed the room and tried the desk, but it was still fast

locked. She looked down at the carpe and found it undisturbed. Then she stood up, and started violently. The inner door leading into the secretaries' room was open, and her uncle was standing there upon the threshold. He smiled at her benevolently.

"I congratulate you, Virginia," he said. "You have routed two of the worst scoundrels in New York. Now please help me to get upstairs again without being seen."