

CHAPTER X

Mr. Norris Vine

STELLA walked briskly down Fifth Avenue and turned into Broadway. Here she took a car down town, and presented herself in the space of twenty minutes or so before the offices of Mr. Norris Vine, at the top of a great flight of buildings near Maddison Square. Vine himself opened the door, and led her through the clerks' office into his own small but luxurious apartment.

"You were just going out?" she asked.

"It is no matter," he answered. "I have at least half an hour that I can spare."

He led her to his easy-chair, and seated himself in the chair before his desk. The sunshine fell upon his thin, somewhat hard face, and she looked at him thoughtfully.

"Are you getting older, Norris?" she asked, "or are things going the wrong way with you just now?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"It is a very strenuous life this," he remarked. "One has to crush all one's nervous instincts, and when one has succeeded in doing that, one finds one's self a little aged."

She nodded.

"You look like that," she said. "You look as though a good many of the fires had burned out, and left you—well, something of a machine. Is it worth while?"

"I don't know," he answered listlessly.

"You ought to go to Europe more often," she said softly. "I do not understand how men can make the slaves of themselves that you do here. Don't you long sometimes to feel your feet off the treadmill?"

"Perhaps," he answered; "but the life here becomes like one of those pernicious habits of cigarette smoking, and morphia taking. It grips hold of you—grips hold very tight," he added in a lower tone.

"I wonder," she said, "whether there is anything in the world which would tempt you to break away from it."

He struck the desk at which he was sitting suddenly with his clenched fist. His face was still colourless, but his black eyes held a touch of fire.

"Don't!" he said. "I am not such a slave, after all, as to love my chains; but don't you understand that one gets into this morass, and one can keep a foothold only by struggling."

"Is that how it is with you, Norris?" she asked.

"Yes!" he answered, with a sudden fierceness. "Six months ago I think that I might have freed myself. I shouldn't have been a rich man, but over there in Europe, where people have learned

how to live, wealth isn't in the least necessary. I had enough for Italy, for a season in Paris, for a little sport in Hungary, even for a month or two at Melton. I hesitated, and while I hesitated the thing closed in upon me again. Then your father and I came up against one another once more, and I began it all over again."

"Am I right," she asked softly, "in imagining that just now things are going a little wrong?"

He nodded.

"I am fighting for my life," he said tersely. "Wherever I have turned during the last few months I seem to have encountered the opposition of your father's millions. Our sales are going down day by day. The great advertisers are practically ignoring us. We are losing money fast. That is what happens to any one who dares to raise a finger against the accursed idols of this country. Three of the greatest advertisement contractors have given us notice that they have struck off our paper from their list. It is your father's doings, Stella. I had hoped something from this illness of his, but the thing goes on. Do you know whether he is really laid up, or whether this is part of a scheme?"

"I am not sure," she answered. "I have been told to-day that it is part of a scheme."

"Who told you?" he asked quickly.

"Peter Littleton," she answered. "I have been lunching with him."

"Peter Littleton!" he interrupted. "But he

is one of your father's allies! He and Bardsley and Weiss and your father are what they call here 'The Invincibles!'"

She nodded.

"I am not sure," she answered, "but I fancy there is going to be a split."

He was interested now, almost eager

"Tell me what you know!" he begged.

"I know this," she answered, "that Littleton asked me to lunch to-day, to find out whether my father's illness was genuine or not, and he gave me to understand that they suspected him of playing them false. I believe that as usual my father has the best of it. Peter Littleton admitted to me that just now, at any rate, he held them all in the hollow of his hand."

Norris Vine looked out of the window for a moment. His face was haggard.

"I have begun," he said slowly, "to lose faith in myself, and when one does that here the end is not far off. I believe that Littleton is right, Stella. I believe that your father, if it pleased him, could take them one by one and break them, as he is doing me."

"Supposing, on the other hand," she said, "something were to happen so that they were in a position to break him?"

"Then," he answered coolly, "it would be the very best thing that could happen for the country and for me. There's no morality about speculation, of course, and the finance of this country is one of

the most ghastly things in the world. All the same, there are legrees of rascality, and there is no one who has sinned against every law of decency and respect for his fellows like Phineas Duge. What are you doing to-night, Stella? Will you dine with me?"

She shook her head.

"Not to-night, Norris," she said. "I have something else to do; but before I go I want you to answer me a question. Once before, when my father had you in a corner, I helped you out, and you know the price I paid."

He leaned toward her, but she waved him away.

"No!" she said, "I am not reminding you of that because I want anything from you, but listen. Supposing I could help you out again? Supposing I could give you something for your paper which would produce the greatest sensation which New York has ever known? Would you promise to realize at any loss, and give it up? Leave America altogether and go to Europe?"

"Yes!" he said, "I think I would promise that."

She rose to her feet. He approached her a little hesitatingly, but she waved him back.

"No, don't kiss me, Norris," she said.

He protested, but she still drew herself away.

"My dear Norris," she said, "please do not think because I show some interest in your affairs, that you are forced to offer me this sort of payment. There, don't say anything, because I don't want to be angry with you. If you knew more about women,

you would know that there is nothing one resents so much in the world as affection that is offered in the way that you were offering me your kiss just then. Please come and put me in the elevator. I am going now. You will hear from me in a day or two. I shall write and ask myself to dinner."

He took her outside and rang the bell for the elevator. They stood for a moment in front of the steel gate.

"I am afraid," he said quietly, "that in your heart you must think me an ungrateful beast."

"Yes!" she answered, "I suppose I do! But then all men are ungrateful, and there are worse things even than ingratitude."

The lift shot up and the door was swung back. There was no time for any further adieux. Norris Vine walked slowly back into his office, with his hands clasped behind his back.