

CHAPTER XIV

Stella Proves Obstinate

LITTLESON reached the hotel where Stella lived, just in time to find the hall full of her trunks, and Stella herself, in dark travelling clothes and heavily veiled, in the act of saying farewell to the manager. He came up to her eagerly.

"I seem to be just in time, Miss Duge," he said.

"You are going away?"

"I am certainly going away," she answered.

"Did you wish to see me?"

Her manner took him a little aback. Nevertheless he reflected that there were a good many people within hearing, and she was right to be cautious.

"Can I have three words with you?" he begged, "alone, anywhere?"

She led him into a sitting-room, which was fortunately empty.

"Well," she said, continuing to draw on her gloves, "what do you want, Mr. Littleson?"

"You know very well what I want," he answered quickly. "I have my cheque-book in my pocket, and I am ready to pay over the hundred thousand dollars. I know that you have the paper. If you

like to wait for ten minutes, you can have the money in dollars."

"How do you know that I have the paper?" she asked calmly.

"Your cousin, Miss Virginia, has been to our office," he answered. "She thought, naturally, that you had brought it straight to us. I don't know whether she seriously expected that we should give it up again, but that seemed to be the object of her visit. At any rate, we learnt that you had succeeded."

Stella was busy with the last finger of her glove.

"Yes!" she said, "I succeeded. It was a brutal action, and I shall never quite forgive myself for it, but I got the paper."

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" she answered calmly.

A horrible misgiving came over him.

"You haven't parted with it?" he demanded. "You haven't let your father have it back again?"

"I have not parted with it," she answered, "to my father. On the other hand, I certainly have not got it. A hundred thousand dollars is a good deal of money, Mr. Littleton; but I did not commit theft for the benefit of you and your friends."

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Exactly what I say," she answered. "The paper is in safe keeping. You will probably hear before long who has it."

Littleton was speechless. All manner of horrible fears oppressed him.

"You must tell me," he insisted hoarsely, "where it is, who has got it! This is infamous! Why, if I had not have told you——"

"I should not have known anything about it," she interrupted. "Quite true! I suppose I ought to thank you. However, as I say, the paper is in safe hands, but not my father's. You will probably hear something about it before long."

"For God's sake, tell me who has it, Miss Duge!" he implored. "You can't understand what this means to us. We were fools to sign it, I know; but your father insisted, and we had, I suppose, a weak moment. After all, there isn't anything so very terrible about it. We have a right to protect ourselves, we of the Trusts, whether our cause be just or not."

"Exactly!" she admitted. "No doubt you will have a case. I hope you will find, supposing the worst happens, that popular sympathy will be on your side. Most things are bought and sold in this country. I don't quite know how the American public will appreciate this attempted buying of the conscience of her public men. It might perhaps make you temporarily a little unpopular, a trip to Europe perhaps, or something of that sort. Well, I wish you well out of it, and now I must really go. If you do have to come across in a hurry, Mr. Littleton, I may see something of you in Paris."

"You are going to Europe, then?" he asked breathlessly.

"By to-morrow morning's boat," she answered. "I am going to send my trunks down to the steamer, and stay with some friends to-night."

"At least," he begged, "come down and see Bardsley and Weiss. I'll take you down in the automobile. It shall not detain you five minutes."

She shook her head.

"I cannot see the faintest use," she answered "in my going to visit your friends. I have really and absolutely parted with the paper, and the person to whom I have parted with it will no doubt communicate with you."

"His name?" Littleton demanded. "I must know his name."

"That," she answered, "I decline to tell you; but I dare say, if you hurry back to Mr. Weiss' office, you will find some news for you. Don't look so angry. We all have our own game to play, you know, Mr. Littleton. I dare say I have behaved a little shabbily to you, but, you see, I had myself to consider, and in New York you know what that means. *Au revoir!* I have an idea that I may see something of you in Europe."

She left Littleton, who went round to the bar of the hotel and had a big drink. Then he lit a cigarette and returned to his automobile.

"Well," he muttered, as he swung round toward the city, "I may as well go back and face the music!" . . .

Weiss' offices were crowded when Littleton returned. There was excitement upon 'Change, clerks were rushing about, telephones were ringing. Weiss himself, with his coat off, stood in the midst of it all, giving orders, answering the telephone, exchanging a few hurried words with numberless callers. He had a big unlit cigar in his mouth, which he was constantly chewing. He pushed Littleton into his private office, but he did not follow him for some time. When at last he came in, the uproar outside was declining. It was five o'clock, and business was over for the day. Weiss went to a small cupboard and took out a whisky bottle and some glasses. Before he spoke a word he had tossed off a drink.

"Big day?" Littleton asked, mechanically.

"The devil's own day!" Weiss groaned. "We are in it now thick, all of us, you and I, Higgins and Bardsley. Do you know that every minute of the time Phineas Duge was supposed to be lying on his back, he was buying on the Chicago market?"

"I am not surprised," Littleton answered. "It seems to me we ought to be able to hold our own, though."

"We may," Weiss answered, "but it's a big thing. Even if we come out safe, we shall come out losers. Well, did you see the girl?"

Littleton nodded.

"I saw her," he answered drily. "I fancy things are not moving our way, particularly just now, Weiss."

"She has not the paper after all?" Weiss exclaimed.

"She has had it and parted with it," Littleton answered.

Weiss removed his unlit cigar from his mouth, and drew a little breath.

"You d——d fool!" he said. "You bungled things, then?"

"I scarcely see where the bungling comes in," Littleton answered. "I offered her a hundred thousand dollars for that paper. She took the tip and got it somehow. How could I tell that she had another scheme in her mind?"

"One hundred thousand dollars!" Weiss muttered. "Better have offered her a million and made sure of it. We shall have to pay that now, I expect. Who's got it?"

"She would not tell me," Littleton answered.

Weiss felt his forehead. It was wringing wet. He went to the cupboard, poured out another drink, and lit his cigar.

"Did she give you any idea?" he asked.

"None at all!" Littleton answered. "Some one seems to have outbid us. I only know that it was not Phineas."

Weiss leaned back in his chair.

"It just shows," he said under his breath, "what fools the shrewdest of us can be sometimes. There were you and I, and Higgins and Bardsley, four men who have held our own, and more than held our own, in the innermost circle of this thieves'

kitchen. And yet, when Phineas Duge sprung that thing upon us, and we saw the thunderbolt coming, we were like frightened sheep, glad to do anything he suggested, glad to sign our names even to that d—d paper. Do you realize, Littleson, that we may have to leave the country?"

Littleson nodded.

"If we do," he answered, "we are done for—I am at least. I am in Canadian Pacific too deep. If I cannot keep the ball rolling here, I can never pull through."

"It all depends," Weiss said, "into whose hands that paper has gone. A week's grace is all I want, time enough to fight this thing out with Duge."

"Has he been near you?" Littleson asked. "Has he offered any explanation?"

Weiss shrugged his shoulders.

"None," he answered. "That little fool of a Leslie, the outside broker, must have given us away. I was afraid of him from the first. He was always Duge's man."

A clerk knocked at the door. He entered, bearing a card.

"Mr. Norris Vine wishes to see you, sir," he announced.

Weiss and Littleson exchanged swift glances. The same thought flashed into both their minds. Neither spoke for fully a minute. Then Weiss, with the card crumpled up in his hand, turned to the clerk, and his voice sounded to come from a great distance.

"Show him in," he said.

Littleton sank into a chair. His eyes were still fixed upon his companion's.

"God in heaven!" he muttered.