

CHAPTER XV

The Warning

NORRIS VINE shook hands with neither of the two men he greeted upon entering the room. Weiss, now that he felt that a crisis of some sort was at hand, recovered altogether from the nervous excitement of the last few minutes. He bowed courteously, if a little coldly, to Vine, and motioning him to a chair, took his own place in the seat before his desk. His manner was composed, his face was set and stern. Behind his spectacles his eyes steadfastly watched the countenance of the man whose coming might mean so much. Little-son, taking his cue, did his best also to feign indifference. He leaned against a writing-table, close to where Vine was sitting, and taking out his case, carefully selected and lit a cigarette.

"Well, Mr. Vine," Weiss said, "what can we do for you? Are you too going to join in the hustle for wealth? Have you any commissions for us? You will forgive me if I ask you to come to the point quickly. Things are moving about here just now, and we have little time to ourselves. By the by, you know Little-son, I suppose? Your business

with me is not so private that you object to his remaining ? ”

“ Certainly not,” Vine answered calmly. “ As a matter of fact, my business concerns also Mr. Littleton. In fact, there are two other of your friends whom I should have been equally glad to have seen here.”

“ Indeed ! ” Weiss answered. “ You mean ? ”

“ Mr. Bardsley and Mr. Seth Higgins,” Vine replied.

“ No doubt,” Weiss said, “ Littleton and I will be able to convey to them anything you may have to say. Come to the point ! What is it ? Are you going to write another of your sledge-hammer articles, damning us all to hell ? Perhaps you have come here for a little information as to our methods. We will do our best to help you. There are times when we fear enemies less than friends.”

“ I, certainly,” Vine remarked, “ do not come here as a friend, and yet,” he added, “ I am not sure that mine might not be called to some extent a visit of friendship. I have come here to warn you.”

Weiss reached out his hand for a box of cigars, and biting the end off one, put it unlit into his mouth. He half offered the box to Vine, who, however, shook his head.

“ Come,” he said, “ you are a little enigmatic. There is only one sort of business we understand here. People come to buy or to sell. Have you anything to sell ? ”

Norris Vine smiled quietly, as though at some thought which was passing through his brain. He raised his eyes to Weiss', and looked him steadily in the face.

"I am in possession," he said, "of something which I think, Mr. Weiss, you would give half your fortune to buy, but I have not come here to sell. I have come here to warn you of the instant use to which I propose to put a certain document, signed by you and Littleton, Bardsley and Seth Higgins. It seems that you have entered into a conspiracy to remove from their places in the Government of this country the men who are pledged to the fight against the Trusts which you control. By chance that document has come into my hands. I propose to let the people of America know what sort of men you are, who have become the virtual governors of the country."

Stephen Weiss' surprise was exceedingly well simulated.

"I presume, Mr. Vine," he said, "that you are not here to poke fun at us. Tell me, if you please, what document it is to which you refer."

"I think," Vine answered, "that I need not enter into too close details. It is a document which you and your friends signed at Phineas Duge's house, not many nights ago."

Weiss rose to his feet, crossed the office, and turned the key in the lock of the door. He was a big man, and his face was a little flushed. Littleton, too, had slid softly from the edge of the table, and was

watching his friend's face as though for a signal. Norris Vine, long, angular, unathletic, showed not the slightest signs of discomposure. He was leaning back in his chair, gently twirling by its thin black ribbon the horn-rimmed eyeglass which he usually wore.

"Mr. Vine," Weiss said, "whatever attitude we may take up afterwards, there isn't the slightest need to play a part with you. We did sign that document, and we have been kicking ourselves ever since for doing so. It was Phineas Duge's idea, and we are fairly well convinced that he pressed us for our signatures as subscribers to the fund, simply for the purpose of having in his possession a document which might, if its contents were known, cause us some inconvenience. Am I right in assuming that he deceived us that night, that he himself never signed the paper?"

"His signature," Norris Vine answered, "certainly does not appear."

Weiss nodded.

"Just as I thought," he remarked. "There was every indication a few weeks ago of what has actually happened, namely a split between us and Phineas Duge. This document was the weapon with which he had hoped to obtain the master-hand over us. Now, instead of finding it in his hands, we find it in yours. What are you going to do about it?"

"I am going to use it," Vine answered. "I am going to use it to strike a blow against the

abominable system of robbery and corruption which is ruining the finest of all God's countries."

"Very well," Weiss said, "I am not going to give away our defence, of course. We may treat the document as a forgery, concocted by you or by Phineas Duge, either of whom would have sufficient motives. We may insist upon it that it was an after-dinner joke. We may contest the meaning of the text, and swear that we intended to use none but legitimate methods in this fight. Or, to put the whole matter before you, we may use such powers as we possess to see that you are put out of harm's way before you have an opportunity to make use of that paper. You see we have alternatives. We are not absolutely without hope. Now I ask you this, as man to man. The value of that document is, after all, a matter of speculation to you. Put a price on it, and fight us with our own dollars."

Norris Vine shook his head gently.

"I think not," he said. "If you gave me half your fortunes, we should only come into the field, level."

"We are not small men," Stephen Weiss said slowly. "We represent a great power, and a power for which we mean to fight. When I talk to you of money, I mean it. We will raise a million dollars for you before midday to-morrow, if you leave that paper in our hands."

"We may shorten this discussion," Norris Vine answered, "by my assuring you solemnly that neither one nor twenty million dollars would purchase

from me this document. I have spent years, and every scrap of such ability as I possess, in writing against, and lecturing upon, and attacking in every way that occurred to me, your abominable methods for collecting into the hands of a few what should be the comfort and happiness of the many. I mean the wealth of this country. Not even at the peril of my life would I part with the most efficient weapon which has ever yet come into my hands."

"Then why, Mr. Vine," Littleton asked, bending over from his place, "have you come here to see us?"

"I have come," Vine answered, "because against you personally I bear no malice. I am not well acquainted with the laws of this country, but it seems to me that the verbatim publication of this paper would mean for you something more than financial ruin. It would probably mean the inside of a prison. Personally, I have not the least doubt that every one of you deserves to see the inside of a prison, but I am not vindictive. I give you your chance. If a trip to Europe in the *Kaiser Wilhelm* to-morrow morning seems to you opportune, you will certainly escape reading the record of your own folly in the evening papers."

Weiss threw away his half-chewed cigar, and taking another from the box, lit it deliberately.

"Now, Mr. Vine," he said, "you are a young man whose attention has never been turned to the practical affairs of life. You are a literary person, and you walk a good deal with your head in the

clouds. You haven't the hard common sense of us business men to be able to determine exactly what the result in a commonplace world is of any definite action. I can assure you that no prison in America could ever hold me and my friends, and that our risk is not in any way so serious as you imagine. But, leaving out the question of our personal safety or convenience, I want to put this to you. If you publish the contents of that document in the evening papers to-morrow, you will produce in America the greatest and most ruinous financial crisis that the country has ever known."

For the first time Vine's cold, immobile face showed some signs of interest. He abandoned his somewhat negligent attitude, and sat up with an attentive expression.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Weiss struck the table in front of him with his open hand.

"Don't you know," he said, "that Bardsley, Littleton, Higgins, Phineas Duge, and myself, are the blood and the muscle of this country, so far as regards finance. Every one of the great railroad stocks are controlled by us. Prices are more or less what we make them. Three of the greatest industrial undertakings which the world has ever known, in which is invested hundreds of millions of honest American capital, are still controlled by us. If you publish that document, whatever the ultimate results may be, there will be the worst scare in the American money-market which the world has ever

known. London and Paris were never so ill-prepared to come to the rescue, as a glance at the morning papers will show you. You will not find a city nor a village in this country, or a street, I was going to say almost a house, in New York, where there will not be a ruined man to curse you and your ill-considered action. The shrinkage in values in a few hours, of good and honest stocks, will come to twice as much as would pay for the Russo-Japanese war. I doubt whether this country would ever recover from the shock. That, Mr. Vine, is precisely what would happen if you adopt the methods of which you have just warned us."

Weiss ceased speaking and replaced the cigar in his mouth. Littleton, a few feet off, felt the perspiration breaking out upon his forehead. His breath was coming fast. The slow, crushing words of his partner had worked him into a state of excitement such as he had scarcely believed himself capable of. And Norris Vine, the imperturbable, was obviously impressed. Weiss had spoken almost as a man inspired. To treat his words lightly seemed impossible.

"You have given me something," Vine said slowly, "to think over. I should be very sorry, of course, to bring about such a state of things as you have spoken of. At the same time, I am not, as you say, a practical man. I cannot follow you in all you say. It seems to me that if this immense depreciation of funds really took place, especially in the case of undertakings of solid value, the pendu-

lum would swing back to its place very soon. Values always assert themselves."

"And the people who would benefit," Weiss said, leaning forward, "are the foreigners who stepped in with their gold and bought for themselves a share in our country at half its value."

He stopped to answer for a moment an insistent ringing of the telephone from the outer office. As he laid the receiver down he turned to Vine.

"Look here," he said, "you doubt my statement. Outside in the office there is waiting to see me, upon a matter of business, a man who is as much my enemy as you are. I mean John Drayton, Governor of New York. Would you call him an honest man?"

"Absolutely!" Vine answered.

"Would you consider him a shrewd man?"

"Certainly," Vine assented.

"Then look here," Weiss said. "I am going to ask him to come into this office. I am going to treat this matter as an academic discussion, and I am going to ask him then what the result would be of such a step as you propose."

"Very well," Vine answered. "I pledge myself to nothing, but I should like to hear John Drayton's opinion."