

CHAPTER XVI

A Truce

WEISS unlocked and threw open the office door, and a moment later returned with a tall, grey-headed man, with closely cropped beard and gold-rimmed eyeglasses. He shook hands with Vine warmly, and nodded to Littleton.

"What, you here in the lions' den, Vine?" he remarked, smiling. "Be careful or they will eat you up."

Vine smiled.

"I am not afraid," he said, "especially now that you are here to support me."

"Mr. Vine," Weiss said, "shows himself possessed of our natural quality, audacity. He is here, I frankly believe, to pick up damaging information against us, for use the next time he issues his thunders. We have been led into an interesting discussion, and we have a point to refer to you."

John Drayton sat down and accepted the cigar which Weiss passed him.

"Sure," he said, "I'll be very pleased to join in; but you are a rash man, Weiss, to refer to me, for you know very well my sympathies are with Mr. Vine here. I hate you millionaires and your Trusts, on

principle of course, although I must admit that some of you are very good fellows, and smoke thundering good cigars," he added, taking his from his mouth for a moment and looking at it.

"I don't care," Weiss answered. "The point I want you to decide scarcely calls upon your sympathies so much as your judgment. We were imagining a case in which say half a dozen men, who held the position of myself and Phineas Duge and Littleton here, I think I might say the half-dozen most powerful men in America, were suddenly, without a moment's warning, to lose in the eyes of the whole of the public every scrap of character and stability, were to be threatened with absolute ruin, and a term of imprisonment for misdemeanour. What would be the effect upon this country for the next forty-eight hours or so?"

John Drayton removed his cigar from his mouth.

"The one reason," he said impressively, "why I hate your Trusts, why I loathe to see all the power of this country gathered together in the hands of a few men such as you have mentioned, is that, in the event of such a happening as you have put forth, the country would have to face a crisis that would mean ruin to hundreds of thousands of her innocent subjects."

Then for the first time during this interview Weiss' full round lips receded in a smile. His spectacles could not hide the flash of triumph that leapt out. He turned to Vine.

"You hear?" he said simply.

"Yes, I hear!" Norris Vine answered.

"Of course," John Drayton continued, "I do not know how you drifted into a conversation such as this, but in my last article in the *North American Review*, which Mr. Vine here will probably remember, I took the case of even a single man controlling one of the huge mercantile Trusts in this country, and tried to show what would happen to the small investors in a perfectly sound undertaking should a collapse happen to a holder of shares to this excessive extent. It is a painful thing to have to confess, but there is no doubt that it exists. We Americans are a great commercial people, and the dollar fever runs a little too hotly in our blood. We stretch out our hands too far. Vine, I know, agrees with me."

Yes," Vine answered, "I agree with you!"

He rose to his feet. John Drayton followed his example.

"My business is really concluded," he remarked. "I had to see your manager on behalf of a client of mine. Are you coming my way, Vine? I am going to the club."

"I will follow you in a few minutes," Vine answered.

John Drayton went out, and once more the three men were alone.

"You see, Mr. Vine," Weiss said slowly, "this isn't the country or the age for Don Quixotes. Fight against our Trusts and our monetary system with all your eloquence, if you will, but don't tamper with things you don't understand, or you

may do harm where you meant to do good. Now what can we say to you about that document?"

"I am not prepared," Vine said, rising, "to come to any definite decision at this moment. Frankly, I want to use it so as to do you the greatest possible amount of harm. On the other hand, I never contemplated any such developments as you and John Drayton have suggested. I am going to think this matter over."

"We are open enemies," Weiss said, "and there is no reason why we should not respect one another as such. We ask you to abide by the ways of civilized warfare. Don't strike without a word, at any rate, of warning. It will be in the interests of others, as well as ourselves."

"Very well," Vine said. "I promise that."

He left the office without any further word, without shaking hands with either of the two men. Weiss sat down in his seat, and Littleton, who was trembling all over, came to his side.

"Stephen," he said, "you're a great man. Come right along out of this and go to Parker's and have a bottle. My nerves are all on the twitch."

Weiss rose and put on his hat. The two men left the office together, and climbed into Littleton's automobile.

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Vine walked thoughtfully down to his club. Amongst the letters which the hall-porter handed to him was one from Stella. He tore it open and read it standing there.

"MY DEAR NORRIS," it began,—

"Events have been marching a little too rapidly for me lately, and I am going away. I cannot stand New York any longer. Fifth Avenue gives me the horrors, and I am afraid to open an American paper. Besides, there are other things, to which I need not allude, which make me think that it would perhaps be better for me to take a journey. You will see from where I am writing I am on board the *Kaiser Wilhelm*. Where I shall go to in Europe, or what I shall do, I am not sure. I am not sure either that it would interest you to know. You are very absorbed in your profession, and I do not think that the things outside it mean much to you. I suppose that is the usual fate of us women. We are always willing to give, and we make no bargains. Don't think that I am reproaching you, only I have made America an impossible place for me just now. I could not bear to see that poor little cousin of mine, with her big reproachful eyes. Nor if you fulfil your purpose, and the storm comes, do I care to feel that I am responsible for the trouble which must surely follow.

"Good-bye, Norris! I wish you every sort of good fortune, and if I dared I would say that I wish you a little more heart, a little more understanding, and a little more gratitude!

"STELLA."

He folded the letter up and placed it carefully in