

CHAPTER IV

The American Ambassador

CONVERSATION had begun to languish between the two men. Vine had answered all his host's inquiries about old friends and acquaintances on the other side, inquiries at first eager, then more spasmodic, until at last they were interspersed with brief periods of silence. And all the time Vine had said nothing as to the real object of his visit. Obviously he had come with something to say; almost as obviously he seemed to find a certain difficulty in approaching the subject. It was his host, after all, who paved the way.

"Tell me, Vine," he said, knocking the ash from his cigar, and leaning a little forward in his chair, "what has brought you to London just now. It was only a fortnight ago that I heard you were up to your neck in work, and had no hopes of leaving New York before the autumn."

Vine nodded.

"I thought so then," he said quietly. "The fact is, something has happened which brought me over here with one object, and one object only—to ask your advice."

The elder man nodded, and if he felt any surprise,

successfully concealed it. Even then Vine still hesitated.

"It's a difficult matter," he said, "and a very important one. I have thought it out myself from every point of view, and I came to the conclusion that it would be better for me to come over to Europe for a week or two, and change my environment completely. Besides, I believe that you are the one man whom I can rely upon to give me sound and practical advice."

"It does not concern," the other asked, "my diplomatic position in any way?"

"Not in the least," Vine answered. "You see it is something like this. You know that since I became editor and part proprietor of the *Post*, I have tried to take up a strong position with regard to our modern commercial methods."

"You mean," his host interrupted, "that you have taken sides against the Trusts?"

"Exactly!" Vine answered. "Of course, from a money-making point of view I know that it was a mistake. The paper scarcely pays its way now, and I seem to find enemies wherever I turn, and in whatever way I seek to develop it as a proprietor. However, we have held our own so far, although I don't mind telling you that we have been hard pushed. Well, a few days before I left New York there came into my hands, I won't say how, a most extraordinary document. You know within the last few months the Trusts have provoked an enmity far greater and more dangerous than mine."

His host nodded.

"I should say so," he answered. "I am told that you are going to see very exciting times over there."

"The first step," Vine continued, "has already been taken. There is a bill coming before the Senate very shortly, which if it is passed into law, will strike at the very foundation of all these great corporations. Five of the men most likely to be affected met together one night, and four of them signed a document, guaranteeing a fund of one million dollars for the purpose of bribing certain members of the Senate, who had already been approached, and whose names are also upon the document. You must not ask me how or in what manner, but that document has come into my possession."

Vine's companion looked at him in astonishment.

"Are you sure of your facts, Vine?" he asked.

"Are you sure that the thing is not a forgery?"

"Absolutely certain!" Vine answered

"Then you know, of course," his host continued, "that you hold all these men in the hollow of your hand."

"Yes, I know it," Vine answered, "and so do they! They have offered me a million dollars already for the document, but I have declined to sell. While I considered what to do, I thought it better, for more reasons than one, that I did not remain in New York."

"I should say so," the other remarked softly.

"This is a big thing, Vine. I could have scarcely realized it."

He rose to his feet, and took a few quick steps backwards and forwards. The two men were sitting in wicker chairs on a small flat space on the roof of the American Embassy in Ormande Square. Vine's host, tall, with shrewd, kindly face, the stoop of a student, and the short uneven footsteps of a near-sighted man, was the ambassador himself. He had been more famous, perhaps, in his younger days, as Philip Deane, the man of letters, than as a diplomatist. His appointment to London had so far been a complete success. He had shown himself possessed of shrewd and far-reaching common-sense, for which few save those who had known him well, like Norris Vine, had given him credit. He stood now with his back to Vine, looking down across the Square below, glittering with lights, aflame with the busy night life of the great city. The jingle of harsh bells, and the distant roar of traffic down one of the great thoroughfares, was never out of their ears; but in this place, cut off from the house by the trap-door through which they had climbed, it was cooler by far than the smoke-room, which they had deserted half an hour before.

For some reason Deane seemed to wish to let the subject rest for a moment. He stood close to the little parapet, looking towards the horizon, watching the dull glare of lights, whose concentrated reflection was thrown upon a bank of heavy clouds.

"You have not told me, Norris," he remarked, "what you think of my attempted roof-garden."

"It is cool, at any rate," Norris Vine answered. "I wonder why one always feels the heat more in London than anywhere else in the world."

"It is because they have been so unaccustomed to it over here that they have made no preparations to cope with it," Deane answered. "Then think of the size of the place! What miles of pavements, and wildernesses of slate roofs, to attract the sun and keep out the fresh air. Vine, who are these men?" he asked, turning towards him abruptly.

Norris Vine smiled.

"Don't you think," he said, "that you can give me your advice better if you do not know? I can tell you this, at any rate. They are men who deserve whatever may happen to them. They are not of your world, my friend. They are the men who have sucked the life-blood out of many and many a prosperous town-village in our country. Don't think that I hesitate for one moment for their sakes. I tell you frankly that my first idea was to give the whole thing away in the *Post*."

"It would have been," Deane remarked, with a faint smile, "the biggest journalistic scoop of the century."

Vine nodded.

"Well," he said, "I should have done it but for one man's advice. It was John Drayton who showed me what the other side of the thing might be. He pointed out that the innocent would suffer for the

guilty, in fact hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the innocent, would be ruined that these few men might be punished. It was his belief that the publication of this document, and the arrest of the men concerned in it, would cause the worst panic that had ever been known in America. That is why I stayed my hand and came over here to consult you."

The ambassador sighed, as he resumed his seat, and lit another cigar.

"Drayton was right," he remarked softly. "He is a man of common-sense, and yet we must remember that great reforms are never instituted without sacrifices. Could the country stand such a sacrifice as this? It is not a matter to be decided in a moment."

"There is no heed for haste," Vinc answered. "I have the document with me, and I do not mean to do anything in a hurry. Think it all over, Deane, and tell me when I may come and see you again."

"Whenever you will," the ambassador answered, heartily. "You know very well that I am always glad to see you. By-the-by, do you carry this document about with you?"

Vinc shook his head.

"No!" he answered drily. "I have too much regard for my personal safety. The men whose names are there are fairly desperate, and they would not stick at a trifle to get rid of me."

"You are very wise," Deane answered. "I should take care even over here. I have heard of strange things happening in London. By-the-by,

that reminds me. A young lady was here only two days ago, asking for your address."

"Did she leave her name?" Vine asked, with a faint curiosity.

"I think not," the ambassador answered. "Wolfe saw her, and I asked him the question particularly."

"I cannot imagine whom she could have been," Vine said, thoughtfully. "I have not many acquaintances *cl'er* here."

"Another man who was asking after you," Deane remarked, "was Littleton. He was dining here last night."

Vine smiled.

"I can imagine him," he said, "being curious as to my whereabouts. I have taken rooms where I don't think any one is likely to find me out except by accident."

Deane rose.

"I think," he said, "we had better go downstairs. The ladies will be wondering what has become of us. My wife is expecting a young woman in this evening whom I think you know—Stella Duge."

Vine started slightly.

"Yes," he said, "I have often met Miss Duge in New York."