

CHAPTER V

A Question of Courage

STELLA turned towards him with a slight frown upon her forehead.

"Do you mean, Norris, then, that, after all, you will not use your power over these men, that you will let them go free?"

"Not if I can help it," he answered, "but there are many things to be considered. I shall be guided largely by what Deane advises."

"It is absurd," she declared. "You have wanted money all your life, money and power. You have both now in your grasp. If you do not use them, I shall think——"

She hesitated. He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Go on!" he said.

"I shall think that you are a coward," she said quietly. "I shall think that you are afraid to use what I risked—well, a great deal—to win for you."

"It isn't a question of courage," he protested.

"It is," she answered. "You are afraid to do what in your heart you must know is the right thing, because for a year or two, perhaps even a decade of years, it will mean a great upheaval. The end must be good. I am sure of it."

"If Deane and I," he answered, "can also convince ourselves of this, I shall act. You need not be afraid of that."

"Deane and you!" she repeated, contemptuously. "Who am I, then, in your counsels? Just a puppet, I suppose? Anyhow, it was I who ran the risk, I who gave these men into your hands. If you play the poltroon, everything is over between us, Norris."

He raised his eyes and looked at her in half-unwilling admiration. She and their hostess had come out on to the roof, just as the two men had been in the act of descending. A telephone call a few moments later had summoned Deane away, and his wife, who found the air a little chilly, had accompanied him. Stella was standing with her head thrown back, her figure tall and splendid in her evening gown of white satin, thrown into vivid relief against the background of empty air. She was angry, and the pose suited her. The slight hardness of her expression was lost in the dim blue twilight which still waited for the moon. Vine, an unemotional man, felt with a curious strength the charm of this isolation on the housetop, this tranquillity, so much more suggestive of solitude than anything which could be realized within the walls of a room. He shivered a little when he saw how close she was to the low parapet, and he held out his hand. She took it at once, and her face softened.

"Dear Norris," she said, "forgive me if I am dis-

agreeable, but think what I went through to get that paper. Think how much I have hoped that it might mean everything to you, perhaps to us."

She faltered, and it was in his mind then to speak the words which she had waited so long to hear from him, and yet he hesitated. He was a man who loved his freedom, not perhaps in the ordinary sense of the word, but he had still an almost passionate objection to lessening in any degree his individual hold upon life, to giving any one else a permanent right to share its struggles and its ambitions. He owed it to her, he was very sure of that, and yet he hesitated. She bent towards him. Perhaps she too felt that the moment was one not likely to be let go.

"Norris," she said, "don't listen to Deane or any of them. Strike your blow. Your paper will become famous. Trust to that for your reward if you will. If not, a child could use your knowledge of what will happen on the morning of its appearance, to make a fortune. Do you know I have grown to hate those men? If my father goes too, I do not care. I owe him very little, and I have had enough of luxury. There is more to be got out of a cottage in Italy or Switzerland, or even in England here, than a mansion in our country. I wish I could convert you."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is different with us," he said. "A man must be where life is. I do not think that I could ever be content with idleness."

"And yet when it comes," she reminded him, "you love it. Who was it who spent a year in some little village near the Carpathians, and had almost to be dragged back to civilization? Norris, sometimes I think that you are a *poseur*."

He looked down into the street. A carriage had driven up, and was waiting at the door below.

"We must go down," he said. "Mrs. Deane said ten minutes, and they are more than up. You see the carriage waiting there to take you to the Opera."

She turned away reluctantly.

"Come with us," she begged, "or give us some supper afterwards. Mrs. Deane would like that."

"I'll meet you afterwards," he said. "I am not in the mood for music to-night."

"Very well," she answered. "If Mrs. Deane doesn't care about supper you can drive me home. Our talks always seem to be interrupted, and there is so much I want to say to you"

In the lobby of Covent Garden he met Littleton, who had paused to light a cigarette on his way out. He stepped forward and addressed Vine eagerly.

"I was trying to find you only this afternoon," he said. "Can you come round to the club with me now, and have a talk?"

"Sorry," Vine answered. "I am here to meet some friends who will be out directly."

"Will you lunch with me to-morrow?" Littleton asked.

"No!" Vine answered. "To tell you the truth,

nothing would induce me to accept any hospitality at your hands."

"You have made up your mind, then?" Littleton asked slowly.

"Never mind about that," Vine answered. "I have said all that I have to say to you and your friends."

Littleton laid his hand for a moment upon the other's shoulder.

"Look here, Vine," he said, "you're what I call a crank of the first order, but you are not a bad chap, and I'd hate to see you make the mistake of your life. Weiss and the others are not the sort of men to take an attack such as you threaten, sitting down. You take my advice and leave it alone. Come round to my rooms, and we'll make a bargain of it. I can promise you that you'll never need to go back to America to make dollars."

"Life isn't all a matter of dollars," Vine answered contemptuously. "There are other things worth thinking about. If I strike at you and your friends, it is not for the money or the notoriety I could make out of it. It is because I want to attack a villainous system, because I consider that you and Weiss and the rest of you are really doing your best to throttle the greatest country on God's earth."

"Well," Littleton said, "I have warned you. You are a crank, and a foolish one at that. You are going about asking for trouble, and I think you will find it. If you change your mind, come to me at Claridge's."

He walked away, and Vine turned to greet Mrs. Deane and Stella, who were just coming out. Stella, whose eyes were still bright with the excitement of the music, laid her hand for a moment softly in his.

"Where are you taking us for supper?" she answered.

"To the *Carlton*, or anywhere you choose," he answered. "Let me find the carriage first."

Mrs. Deane held up her finger, and a tall footman, touching his hat, hurried away.

"James has seen us," she said. "The carriage will be here in a moment. I am going to speak to Lady Engelton. Will you look after Stella for a moment, Mr. Vine?"

She turned away to speak to a little group of people who were standing in one of the entrances. Stella and Vine stepped outside to escape the crush, and Stella suddenly seized his arm.

"Look in that hansom," she said, pointing out to the street.

Vine's eyes followed her finger. He recognized Littleton, and with him a man in morning clothes and low hat, a man whose face seemed familiar to him, but whom he failed to recognize.

"I think," she said, drawing a little closer to him "that you must not hesitate any longer, if ever you mean to strike that blow. You saw Peter Littleton."

"Yes!" he answered, "I have been talking to him."

"Do you know who that was with him?"

Vine shook his head.

"I can't remember," he said.

"That is Dan Prince," she whispered. "You know who he is. They call him the most dangerous criminal unhung. I should like to know what Littleton wants with him."

Vine smiled a little grimly, as he stepped forward to help Mrs. Deane into the carriage.

"I think," he murmured, "I can guess."