

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Duge Threatens

THE morning papers were full of the news. Phineas Duge had landed in London! The Stock Exchange was fluttered. Those whose hands were upon the money-markets of the world paused to turn their heads towards the hotel where he had taken a suite of rooms. Interviewers, acquaintances, actual and imaginary, beggars for themselves and for others, left their cards and hung around. In the hotel they spoke of him with bated breath, as though something of divinity attached itself to the person of the man whose power for good or for evil was so far-reaching.

Meanwhile Phineas Duge, who had had a tiresome voyage, and who was not a little fatigued, slept during the greater part of the morning following his arrival, with his faithful valet encamped outside the door. The first guest to be admitted, when at last he chose to rise, was Littleton. It was close upon luncheon time, and the two men descended together to the grill-room of the hotel.

"A quiet luncheon and a quiet corner," Littleton suggested, "somewhere where we can talk.

Duge, it's good to see you in London. I feel somehow that with you on the spot we are safe."

Phineas Duge smiled a little dubiously. They found their retired corner and ordered luncheon. Then Littleton leaned across the table.

"Duge," he said, "I'm thankful that we've made it up. Weiss cabled me that you had come to terms, and that you were on your way over here to deal with the other matter. It's cost us a few millions to try and get the blind side of you."

Phineas Duge smiled very slightly, that is to say, his lips parted, but there was no relaxation of his features.

"Littleton," he said, "before we commence to talk, have you seen anything of my niece over here?"

Littleton was a little surprised. He had not imagined that Phineas Duge would ever again remember his niece's existence.

"Yes," he answered, "I crossed over with her."

"And since then?"

"I have seen her once or twice," Littleton answered a little dubiously.

"Alone?" Phineas Duge asked.

"Not always," Littleton answered. "Twice I have seen her with Norris Vine, and twice with a young Englishman who was on the steamer."

Phineas Duge said nothing for a moment. He seemed to be studying the menu, but he laid it down a little abruptly.

"Do you happen to know," he asked, "where she is now?"

"I haven't an idea," Littleton answered truthfully. "To be frank with you, she was not particularly amiable when I spoke to her on the steamer. She evidently wanted to have very little to say to me, so I thought it best to leave her alone."

"How long is it," Phineas Duge asked, "since you saw her?"

"It is about a week ago," Littleton answered. "She was dining at Luigi's with Norris Vine. I remember that I was rather surprised to see her with him. He seems to possess some sort of attraction for your family."

Phineas Duge looked at the speaker coldly, and Littleton felt that somehow, somewhere, he had blundered. He made a great show of commencing his first course.

"Let me know exactly," Phineas Duge said, a moment or two later, "what you have done with regard to the man Vine."

Littleton glanced cautiously around.

"I have seen him," he said. "I have argued the matter from every possible side. I found him, I must say, absolutely impossible. He will not deal with us upon any terms. I fear that he is only biding his time. Every day I see by the papers that the agitation increases, and it seems to me that if this Bill passes, we shall all practically be criminals. I think that Norris Vine is waiting for the moment when he can do so with the greatest

dramatic effect, to fill his rotten paper with a verbatim copy of that document."

"It would be," Phineas Duge remarked, "uncommonly awkward for you and Weiss and the others."

"We couldn't be extradited," Littleton answered, "and I shall take remarkable good care not to cross the ocean again until this thing has blown over."

"If ever it does," Phineas Duge remarked quietly. "Well, go on about Norris Vine."

Once more Littleton looked around the room.

"You know Dan Prince is over here?" he said softly.

Duge nodded.

"So far," he remarked, "his being over here does not seem to have affected the situation."

"He has made one attempt," Littleton whispered. "He got inside, and he had certain information that Vine was going to return that night. Whether he had warning or not no one can tell, but he never came back. They followed him a few nights ago across Trafalgar Square, hoping that he was going down toward the Embankment, but he took a hansom and drove to his club. They followed, and waited for him to come out but there was a policeman standing at the very entrance, within a foot of them. This isn't New York, Duge. You can't depend upon getting the coast clear for this sort of thing over here, and Prince will take no risks. He is a rich man in his way, and he wants to live to enjoy his money. He's as clever as they

make them, although he's failed twice here. I fancy he has something else pending."

"And meanwhile," Duge said quietly, "tomorrow morning's paper may contain our damnation."

"It may, of course," Littleton answered. "I don't think so, though. He doesn't move a yard without being shadowed, and he hasn't written out a cable when some one hasn't been near his shoulder."

"That is the position, then, so far as you know it?" Duge asked.

"Absolutely!" Littleton answered. "I can tell you nothing more."

Duge finished his luncheon and signed the bill. Then he made an appointment to dine with Littleton, and sent out for an automobile. When it arrived he was driven to the American Embassy. At the mention of his name everything was made easy, and he found himself in a few minutes in the presence of the ambassador.

"Glad to meet you once more, Mr. Duge," he said. "You have forgotten me, I dare say, but I think we came across one another at a banquet in New York about four years ago."

"I remember it perfectly," Phineas Duge answered. "A dull affair it was, but we talked of the Asiatic Powers and kept ourselves amused. Since then, you see, all that I said has become justified."

Deane smiled.

"They say that with you, that is always the case,"

he answered. " 'Duge the Infallible' I heard a stockbroker once call you."

Duge smiled.

"Well," he said, "if I remember your politics, and I think I do, you are going to try and take away that title from me. You are amongst those, are you not, who have set themselves to dam the torrents?"

Deane shook his head a little stiffly.

"In the diplomatic service," he said, "we have no politics."

"Sometimes," Duge murmured, "you come in touch with them. For instance, I should like to know what advice you are going to give Norris Vine about the publication of that little document in his paper."

Deane looked for a moment annoyed.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I cannot answer you that question."

"If you advise him one way or the other," Phineas Duge said, "you give the lie to your own statement, that in diplomacy there are no politics. Your advice will show on which side you intend to stand."

"I have not given any advice," Deane replied.

"Nor must you," Phineas Duge said pleasantly enough. "It is not your affair at all, Mr. Deane. I grant your cleverness, your shrewdness, even your common-sense, but all three are academic. They have no direct relation to the actual things of the world. Wealth is one of those forces which only strong fingers can gather, a stream which if

you like you can divert, but you cannot dam. I want to tell you, Mr. Deane, that if you advise Norris Vine at all, you must see to it that you advise him to place that paper upon the fire, or to restore it from whence it was stolen."

"I am afraid, Mr. Duge," the ambassador said, "that I cannot recognize you as possessed of such authority as to justify the use of the word 'must.' I am in the habit of doing what I think right and well."

Phineas Duge bowed his head.

"I will only remind you, Mr. Deane," he said, "of the facts which led to the withdrawal of our ministers from Lisbon and Paris and Vienna. I am not proud of the power which undoubtedly lies in the palm of my right hand. On the other hand, I should be foolish if I did not remind you of these things at a time like this. I only ask you to take up a passive attitude. You escape that way all trouble, and if you fancy that the climate of Paris would suit you or Mrs. Deane better than London, it would be a matter of a few months only; but—you must not advise the other way!"

The ambassador was distinctly uneasy. Duge saw his embarrassment and hastened on.

"I ask you for no reply, Mr. Deane," he said; "not even for an expression of opinion. I have said all that I came to say. Apart from any question of self-interest, I can assure you, as a man who sees as clearly as his neighbors, that you could do no good, but much evil, by advising Norris Vine to

hold up these men to the ridicule and contempt of the world. He might sell a million copies of his paper, but he would create an enmity which in the end, I think, would swamp him. Mrs. Deane, I trust, is well?"

"She is in excellent health," the ambassador answered. "What can I do for you during your stay? I presume you know that anything you desire is open to you? You represent, you see, a great uncrowned royalty, to whom all the world bows. Will you come to Court?"

"Not I," Duge answered. "Those things are for another type of man. There was a further question which I wished to ask you. I have a niece who came over here on a foolish errand, a Miss Virginia Longworth. Do you happen to have seen or heard anything of her?"

"Nothing," the ambassador replied; "nothing personally, at any rate. I will inquire of my secretaries."

He left the room for a few minutes, and returned shaking his head.

"Nothing is known about her at all," he declared.

"If she should apply here," Duge said, rising and drawing on his gloves, "assist her in any way and let me know at once. She must be getting," he continued, "rather short of money. You can advance her whatever sum she asks for, and I will make it good."

Phineas Duge walked out into the sunlight and drove away in his automobile. Was it the glaring

light, he wondered, the perfume of the flowers, the evidences on every side of an easier and less strenuous life, which were accountable for a certain depression, a slackening of interests which certainly seemed to come over him that afternoon as he drove back to the hotel. If he could have summarized his thoughts afterwards, he would have scoffed at them, as a grown man might laugh at a toy which a lunatic had offered him. Yet it is certain that the empty place by his side was filled more than once during that brief ride. He looked into the faces of the women and girls who streamed along the pavements with a certain half-eager curiosity, as though he expected to find a familiar face amongst them, a pale oval face, with quivering lips and lustrous appealing eyes—eyes which had come into his thoughts more often lately than he would have cared to admit.

“It is that infernal voyage!” he said to himself, as he got out of the car and entered the hotel. “One cannot think about reasonable things on days when the marconigram fails.”

He bought a cigar at the stall and strolled over to the tane. It was a busy afternoon, and reports from America were coming in fast. He nodded as he turned away. Weiss and the rest had had their lesson. They were keeping, at any rate, to their part of the bargain.