

CHAPTER XVI

Trapped

PHINEAS DUGE carefully drew off his gloves and laid them inside his hat. He declined a chair, however, and stood facing the man whom he had come to visit.

"I scarcely understand, Mr. Duge," Vine said, "what you can possibly want with me. Our former relations have scarcely been of so pleasant a nature as to render a visit from you easily to be understood."

"I will admit," Phineas Duge said coldly, "that personally I have no interest or any concern in you. But nevertheless there are two matters which must bring us together so far as the holding of a few minutes' conversation can count. In the first place, I want to know whether you are going to make use of the paper which my daughter stole, and which you feloniously received? In the second place, I want to know how much or what you will accept for the return of that paper? And thirdly, I want to know what the devil you have done with my niece, Virginia Longworth?"

"Your niece, Virginia Longworth," Norris Vine repeated thoughtfully. "Are you in earnest, sir?"

"I am in earnest," Duge answered.

"Then I have done nothing with her," Vine declared. "I do not know where she is. I do not know why you should ask me."

"You lie!" Phineas Duge said quietly. "But let that go. It is your trade, of course. I came here to give you the opportunity of answering questions. I scarcely expected that such direct methods would appeal to you."

"Your methods, at any rate," Vine said, moving toward the bell, "are not such as I am disposed to permit in my own apartment."

Phineas Duge stretched out his hand.

"One moment, Mr. Vine," he said.

Vine stopped.

"Well?" he asked.

"I refer again," Phineas Duge said, "to the question of my niece. As regards those other matters, if you do not wish to discuss them with me, let them go. Even in this country you will find that I am not powerless. But as regards my niece, I insist upon some explanation from you."

"Some explanation of what?" Vine asked.

"When she left New York a few months ago, Phineas Duge continued, "you and she were strangers. Granted that she came upon a silly errand, still it was not wholly her own fault, and she was only a simple child who ought never to have been permitted to have left America."

"Up to that point, Mr. Duge," Vine said drily, "I am entirely in accord with you."

"She made your acquaintance somehow," Phineas Duge continued, "and you were seen out with her at different restaurants; once, I believe, at a place of amusement. She left her boarding-house and took rooms here in this building. Her room, I find, was across the corridor, only a few feet away from yours. What is there between you and my niece, Norris Vine?"

Vine leaned against the table, and a faint smile flickered over his face.

"Really, Mr. Duge," he said, "you must forgive my amusement. The idea that anything so trivial as the well-being of a niece should interest you in the slightest, seems to me almost paradoxical."

Phineas Duge was silent for several moments, his keen eyes fixed upon Vine's face.

"Pray enjoy your jests as much as you will, Mr. Vine," he said, "but answer my questions."

"Your niece," Norris Vine said, "came over here to rob me, at whose instigation I can only surmise. My first introduction to her was in this room, where she came as a thief. What consideration have you ever shown, Phineas Duge, even to the innocent who have crossed your paths? Why should you expect that I should show consideration to this simple child, who came across the ocean to steal from me?"

There was still no change in Duge's face, but a little breath came quickly through his teeth, and as though insensibly, he moved a little nearer to the man opposite him.

"Where is she now, Norris Vine?" he asked.

"If she is not in her rooms," Vine answered, "I do not know."

"She has given up her rooms, taken her luggage, and gone away," Duge said. "Perhaps it is you who have driven her out of this place."

"I was not aware of it," Vine answered. "As a matter of fact I expected her to lunch with me to-day."

Phineas Duge looked down upon the table before which he stood. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind, and opposite to him Norris Vine waited. When Duge looked up again Vine seemed to notice for the first time that his visitor was ageing.

"Norris Vine," he said, "you and I have been enemies since the day when we became aware of one another's existence. We represent different principles. There is not a point in life on which our interests, as well as our theories, do not clash. But there are things outside the battle for mere existence which men with any fundamental sense of honour can discuss, even though they are enemies. I wish to ask you once more whether you can give me any news of my niece."

"I can give you none," Norris Vine answered. "All that I can tell you is that I found her a charming, simple-minded girl, in terrible trouble because of your anger, and the fear that you would impoverish her people; and goaded on by that fear to attempt things which, in her saner moments, she would never have dreamed of thinking of. Where she

is now, what has become of her, I do not know; but I would not like to be the person on whom rests the responsibility of her presence here and anything that may happen to her."

Phineas Duge took up his hat and gloves.

"I thank you, Mr. Vine," he said. "Your expression of opinion is interesting to me. In the meantime, to revert to business, am I right in concluding that you have nothing to say to me, that you do not wish even to discuss a certain matter?"

"You are right in your assumption, sir," Norris Vine answered. "I see no purpose in it. What I may do or leave undone would never be influenced by anything that you might say."

Phineas Duge turned toward the door. Norris Vine followed him. There was not, however, any motion on the part of either to indulge in any form of leave-taking; but Phineas Duge half opened the door, stood for a moment with his hand upon the handle, and looked back into the room.

"I fear, Mr. Vine," he said, "that you are developing an insular weakness. You are forgetting to be candid, and you are just a little too self-reliant."

He opened the door suddenly quite wide, but he made no motion to depart. On the contrary two men, who must have been standing within a foot or so of it, stepped quickly in. Phineas Duge closed the door.