

CHAPTER XVIII

Advice for Mr. Vine

MR. DEANE was on the point of accompanying his wife for their usual afternoon's drive in the park. A glance at the card which was brought to him just as he was preparing to leave the house, however, was sufficient to change his plans

"My dear," he said to his wife, "you will have to excuse me this afternoon. I have a caller whom I must see."

"Shall I wait for a few minutes?" she asked

"Better not," he answered. "I imagine that I may be detained some time."

He took off his hat and coat, and made his way to the library, where Phineas Duge was awaiting him. The ambassador was a broad-minded man, loath to take sides unless he was compelled in the huge struggle, the coming of which he had prophesied years ago. He recognized in Phineas Duge one of the great powers at the back of the nation which he represented, and as a diplomatist he was fully prepared to receive him and welcome him as one.

"I am very glad to see you again, Mr. Duge," he said, hospitably, extending his hand. "I hope that you have changed your mind, and are going

to let us put you in the way of a few social amusements while you are over here."

"You are very kind," Duge answered, "but I think not. My visit here has to do with two matters only, to both of which I think I have already referred. You have heard nothing of my niece?"

Nothing whatever, I am sorry to say," Mr. Deane answered.

"Well, there remains the other matter," Duge answered. "You and I have already had a few words concerning that, and I am pleased to see that up to the present, at any rate, our friend Mr. Vine has been governed by the dictates of common sense. Still, I think you can understand that so long as that paper exists the situation is an unpleasant one."

Mr. Deane inclined his head slowly.

"Without a doubt," he admitted, "it would be more comfortable for you and your friends to feel that the document in question was no longer in existence."

"I am here in the interests," Mr. Duge answered a little stiffly. "of my friends only. My own name does not appear upon it. However, my anxiety to discover its whereabouts is none the less real."

"You have seen Mr. Vine?" the ambassador asked.

"I have," Duge answered, "and I have come to the conclusion, for which I have some grounds, that the document is not for the moment in his possession. I have therefore asked myself the question—to whom on this side would he be likely

to entrust it? It occurred to me that it might be deposited at a bank, but I find that he has no banking account over here. The American Express Company have no packet in their charge consigned by him. Therefore I have come to the conclusion that he has placed it in the care of some friend in whom he has unlimited confidence. Foolish thing that to have, Mr. Deane," Phineas Duge continued slowly, with his eyes fixed upon his companion. "One is likely to be deceived even by the most unlikely people."

"Your business career," Mr. Deane replied courteously, "no doubt has taught you that caution is next to genius."

"I would have you," Phineas Duge said impressively, "lay that little axiom of yours to heart, Mr. Deane. I think you will agree with me that a man in your position especially, the accredited ambassador of a great country, should show himself more than ordinarily cautious in all his doings and sayings, especially where the interests of any portion of his country-people are concerned."

"I trust, Mr. Duge," the ambassador replied, "that I have always realized that."

"I too hope so," Duge answered. "I told you, I think, that I had come to the conclusion that Norris Vine, not having that paper any longer in his possession, has passed it on to some other person in whom his faith is unbounded."

"You did, I believe, mention that supposition," Mr. Deane assented.

"I ask myself, therefore," Phineas Duge continued, "who, amongst his friends in London, Norris Vine would be most likely to trust with the possession of a document of such vast importance. Need I tell you the first idea which suggested itself to me! It is for your advice that Norris Vine has crossed the ocean. You have read the document. You know its importance. There would, I imagine, be no hiding place in London so secure as the Embassy safe which I see in the corner of your study!"

"You suggest then," Mr. Deane said slowly, "that Norris Vine has deposited that document in my keeping?"

"I not only suggest it," Duge answered, "but I am thoroughly convinced that such is the fact. Can you deny it?"

Mr. Deane shrugged his shoulders.

"The matter, so far as I am concerned in it," he answered, "is a personal one between Vine and myself. I cannot answer your question."

Phineas Duge shook his head thoughtfully.

"That, Mr. Deane," he said, "is where you make a great mistake. Permit me to say that your official position should, I am sure, preclude you from taking any part in this business. The matter, you say, is a private one. There can be no private matters between you, the paid and accredited agent of your country, and one of its citizens. To speak plainly, you have not the right to offer the shelter of the Embassy to the document which Norris Vine has committed to your charge."

"How do you know that he has done so?" Deane asked.

"Call it inspiration if you like," Duge answered. "In any case I am sure of it."

There was a short silence. Then Mr. Deane rose to his feet a little stiffly.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, "and yet I am not sure."

"A little reflection will, I think, convince you," Phineas Duge said quietly. "Your retention of that document means that you take sides in the civil war which seems hanging over my country. Further than that, it also means—and although it pains me to say so, Mr. Deane, I assure you I say it without any ill-feeling—a serious interruption to your career."

The ambassador was silent for several moments.

"Mr. Duge," he said, "I am inclined to admit that up to a certain point you have reason on your side. It is true that I am guarding the document in question for Norris Vine, and it is also true that in doing so I am perhaps departing a little from the strict propriety which my position demands. I will therefore return to him the document, but I should like you to understand that with every desire to retain your goodwill, I shall give Mr. Vine such advice with regard to the use of it which seems to me, as a private individual and a citizen of the United States, judicious."

Phineas Duge took up his hat.

"As to that," he said, "I have nothing to say,

beyond this. However things may shape themselves in the immediate future, my influence will, I believe, still prove something to be reckoned with on the other side. That influence, Mr. Deane, I use for those who show themselves my friends."

The two men parted with some restraint. Deane, after a few minutes' hesitation, went to the telephone and called up Vine at his club.

"I want to talk to you, Vine, at once," he said. "Can you come round?"

"In ten minutes," was the answer.

"I shall wait for you," the ambassador answered, ringing off.