

## CHAPTER XXI

### A Lesson Learned

THE American ambassador was giving the third of his great dinner-parties. At the last moment he had prevailed upon Phineas Duge to accept an invitation. Littleton also was of the party and the ladies having departed, these three, separated only by the German ambassador, who was engaged in an animated conversation with a Russian Grand Duke, found themselves for a minute or two detached from the rest of the party. Littleton took the opportunity to move his chair over until he was able to whisper into Duge's ear.

"Any news?"

"None!" Duge answered shortly.

Mr. Deane leaned forward in his chair.

"I suppose you have heard," he said, "that a warrant was issued this afternoon for the arrest of your friends, Higgins and Weiss?"

"It was a matter of form only," Duge replied. "Unless you pass this new Bill through the Senate, nothing more than a little temporary inconvenience can happen to them. I wonder why our great President has developed so sudden and violent an antipathy to capital."

"I am not sure," Mr. Deane replied, "whether his position is logical. Capital must be the backbone of any great country, and the very elements of human nature demand its concentration. I think myself that this will all blow over."

"Unless——" Littleton whispered.

"Unless," Mr. Deane continued, "some greater scandal than any at present known were to attach itself to our two friends."

"One cannot tell," Phineas Duge said slowly. "Such a scandal might come. It is hard to say. The ways that lead to great wealth are full of pitfalls, and they are not ways that stand very well the blinding glare of daylight."

Littleton was looking pale and nervous. He drew a little breath and fanned himself with his handkerchief.

"You men love to talk in riddles," he said, or rather whispered, hoarsely. "Why not admit that they are safe enough so long as Norris Vine does not move!"

A servant approached the ambassador and whispered in apologetic fashion in his ear.

"There is a young lady, sir," he said, "who has just arrived, and who insists upon seeing you. She says that her business is of the utmost importance. I have done my best to make her understand that you are engaged, but she will not listen to reason. She is, I think, sir, an American young lady, and she is very much disturbed."

Phineas Duge leaned forward in his place. His

eyes were fixed upon the servant. He said nothing. He only waited.

"A young American lady!" Mr. Deane repeated slowly. "Have you seen her before?"

"I believe, sir," the man answered, "that it is the same young lady who came here some weeks ago to inquire after Mr. Norris Vine."

Phineas Duge was on his feet with a sudden soft, half-stifled exclamation. Mr. Deane looked around the table. His other guests were all talking amongst themselves. Littleton, ignorant of what this might mean, was looking a little bewildered. The ambassador addressed one of the men a little lower down the table.

"Sinclair," he said, "will you take my place for a moment? A little matter of business has turned up, and I am wanted. I shall not be away long."

The man addressed nodded, and, pushing back his chair, strolled toward the ambassador's vacant seat, his cigar in his mouth. Phineas Duge and Mr. Deane left the room together, and close behind them Littleton followed. They left the room without any appearance of haste, but once in the hall Phineas Duge showed signs of a rare impatience, and pushed his way on ahead. The door of the waiting-room was half open. He strode in, and a little exclamation broke from his lips. It was Virginia who stood there, and her hands were crossed upon her bosom, as though there were something there which she was guarding. Never-

theless, at the sight of her uncle they fell away, and she started back.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Uncle Phineas! Here in London!"

He saw the signs stamped into her face of the evil times through which she had passed, and the more immediate traces of the crisis which lay so close behind her. He held out both his hands, and stepped quickly toward her. He was only just in time to save her from falling.

"I came," she faltered, "to get money from Mr. Deane to send you a cable, to catch a steamer to come back to America. I have got it!" she cried suddenly, her voice rising almost to a hysterical shriek. "I have got it! It is here! See!"

She dragged something from the front of her dress—a roll of papers, and held them out. She was swaying upon her feet now, and Phineas Duge, his arm around her waist, half led, half carried her to a chair. Littleton, who had darted out of the room, came back with a glass of water. All three men stood around her. The papers were there upon her knee, but her fingers seemed wound around them with some unnatural force. Her burning eyes were fixed upon her uncle's.

"Take them!" she begged. "Read them! Tell me that it is all right. Tell me that you will keep your promise."

He took them gently away. A single glance at the sheet of foolscap was enough.

"You are a wonderful child, Virginia," he said

calmly. "It is as you say. These are the papers which Stella stole. I blamed you for the loss of them too hardly, but you shall never be sorry that you succeeded in regaining them.

She drew a queer little breath of relief, and leaned back in her chair. She was still as pale as death, but the terrible strain had gone from her face.

"I snatched them up," she murmured, "and ran. I am sure they will come after me. And Vine—I think that that man will kill Vine. His fingers were upon his throat when I left."

"You brought them," Phineas Duge asked calmly, "from Norris Vine's rooms?"

She had no time to answer. The door was opened. Norris Vine stood there on the threshold. He looked in upon the little group and shrugged his shoulders.

"I am too late, then," he said slowly.

Phineas Duge thrust his hand into the flames and held the papers there. Norris Vine seemed for a moment as though he would have sprung forward, but Littleton intervened, and Deane himself.

"They shall burn!" Duge cried. "If you are really the altruist you claim to be, Mr. Vine, you need not fear their destruction. We are changing our tactics. If the Bill becomes law we will face its effect, whatever it may be. There shall be no bribery. There shall be no underground history. If the people of America attack us, we will fight our own battles."

Norris Vine sighed.

"In another half an hour," he said, "my cable would have been sent. To-morrow New York would have been indeed the city of unrest."

Phineas Duge turned upon him coldly.

"You," he said, "are one of those unpractical persons, who bring to the affairs of a purely utilitarian epoch the 'fainéant' scruples of the dilettante and romanticist. You can not regulate the flow of wealth any more than you can dam a river with shifting sand. Don't you know that destiny, whether it be guided by other powers or not, was never meant to be shaped by the lookers-on?"

Norris Vine shrugged his shoulders and turned toward the door.

"Well," he said, "I will not argue with you. Perhaps those papers are better where they are. You will learn your lesson. You, sir," he added, turning to Littleton, "and those other of your friends who, at any rate, have known the shadow of an American prison, in some other way."