

## CHAPTER IX

### Conspirators

THE great automobile swung out of the park into the avenue, and Stella drew a little sigh of regret.

"Mine is the next turning," she said. "Thank you so much, Mr. Littleton. I have enjoyed every minute of it."

Littleton smiled, but he did not slacken speed.

"I was very fortunate indeed to meet you," he said, "but I shall not think of letting you go until you have had some lunch. It is nearly one o'clock."

Stella settled down again in her seat.

"That is very kind of you," she said. "I had an idea that you were such a tremendously busy person, that you never stopped work for luncheon or trifles of that sort."

"A mistake, I can assure you," he said. "Which do you prefer, Sherry's or Dalmonico's?"

"Martin's, if you don't mind," she answered. "I like watching a crowd of people."

They found a quiet table in one of the balconies, and Littleton devoted several minutes to ordering

a luncheon which should be worthy of his reputation. Then he leaned across the table and looked steadily at his companion.

"Miss Duge," he said, "we have known one another for some time, although chance has never been very kind to me in the way of bringing us together. Now I am going to tell you something which I dare say will surprise you. When I saw you in the park this morning, I was on my way to call upon you."

She raised her eyebrows. She was certainly surprised.

"Do you mean that?" she asked.

"I mean it," he answered.

"But why? I have seen so little of you. I had no idea that you knew even what had become of me since I had left my father."

"I am going to explain everything by and by," he said, "but first of all I want to ask you one question. Do you know anything about this illness of your father's? Do you believe that it is a genuine thing, or that he has some motive of his own for keeping to his room?"

A faint smile parted Stella's lips.

"I begin to understand," she murmured. "I must admit that I was puzzled at your sudden interest in me."

"Does it need any particular reason?" he asked looking at her admiringly.

Stella, who was conscious of a new hat and a very becoming gown, laughed softly.

"Well, perhaps it shouldn't," she said, "but, you see, you have given yourself away. But I may as well warn you at once that I know nothing about my father. He has even forbidden me the house, and I have not seen him for weeks."

He nodded.

"So I understood," he said. "May I be quite frank?"

"Of course," she answered. "If you really have anything to say to me, I should prefer it."

"Then after the oysters I will undertake to be," he declared, smiling.

He turned away to send a boy out for some flowers and order some wine, and afterwards they proceeded with their lunch, talking of the slight things of the moment. Littleton, in that little group of millionaires, represented youth, and to a certain extent fashion. He came from one of the better-known families in New York. He had rooms and connexions in London and Paris. He was fairly good looking, and always irreproachably dressed. Stella looked at him more than once approvingly. He was certainly a desirable companion. For the rest, she had little vanity, and she knew well enough that he had some purpose of his own in seeking her out. She had only known of him as one of her father's allies, and she was puzzled to know the meaning of that first question of his.

He seemed in no hurry, however, to satisfy her curiosity. He had ordered a wonderful lunch, and not until they had reached its final stage did he

refer again to anything approaching serious conversation. Then he leaned a little across the table towards her, and she felt the change in his expression and tone, as he began to speak in lowered voice.

"Miss Duge," he said, "I dare say you were surprised at my question to you. Let me explain. Your father and several others of us have been allies for some time in some very important matters connected with finance. For the last few months, however, we have all felt a sort of vague uneasiness one with the other. Apparently we were all still pulling the same way, yet I think that each one of us had the feeling that there was something wrong. We all began to distrust one another. To come to an end quickly, I hope I do not offend you, Miss Duge, when I say that it is my belief that your father has been and is trying to deceive us for his own benefit."

Stella nodded assent.

"Well," she said, "I don't know why you should imagine that it could offend me to hear you say that. I understood that amongst you who control the money-markets there is no friendship, nor any right and wrong. At least if there is, it is the man who succeeds who is right, and the man who fails who is wrong."

"To a certain extent you are right, Miss Duge," he answered, "but you must remember that there is an old adage, 'Honour amongst thieves!'"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "we won't discuss that. You have got so far in your story as to tell me that you believe my father is trying to get the best of you all, and you seem to be a little nervous about it. Well, I know my father, and I don't mind telling you that I should not be in the least surprised if you were right."

He lit a cigarette and passed the box across the table to her.

"Good!" he said. "It is a pleasure to talk to you, Miss Duge. You grasp everything so quickly. Now you understand the position, then. There are three or four of us, including myself, on one side, and your father on the other. Supposing it was in your power to help either, and your interests lay with us," he added, speaking with a certain meaning in his tone—"well, to cut it short, how would you feel about it?"

"You mean," she said slowly, "would my filial devotion outweigh—other considerations?"

He looked at her admiringly.

"You are a marvel, Miss Duge," he said. "That is exactly what I do mean."

She leaned back in her chair for a moment, and looked thoughtfully through the little cloud of cigarette smoke into the face of the man opposite to her.

"You have probably heard," she said, "that my father turned me out of his house."

"There was a rumour——" he began hesitatingly.

"Oh! it was no rumour," she interrupted. "He took care that every one knew that I had given Norris Vine some information about his doings in Canadian Pacifics. If I were back at home, which I never shall be, I would do the same thing again. I have lived with my father since I came back from Europe, and I know what manner of a man he is. I think," she continued, looking away from him, and speaking more thoughtfully, "that I was just like the average girl when I came back to New York. I lived with my father for two or three years, and—well—it would be a severe lesson for any one. However, this doesn't matter. You can see that I am not over-sensitive. If you have anything to say to me, say it."

"I will," he answered. "We have an idea that at any moment there may be war between us and your father. I think that the odds would be very much in our favour but for one thing. Your father has a paper which we foolishly enough all signed one night, which places us practically in his power. If that paper were given to the Press, we should all of us be ruined men—I mean so far as prestige and position are concerned. Further, I am not sure that we should not have to leave the country altogether."

She looked at him in wonder.

"Whatever made you sign such a paper?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Heaven knows!" he answered. "We were a

little mad We did not mean to leave it in your father's charge, however. That is why this illness of his is so embarrassing to us. We can't help an idea that it is to keep out of our way for a few days, and to retain possession of that wretched document, that he is lying by. If, on the other hand, his illness is genuine, and he were, to put it bluntly, to die, that paper would be discovered by his lawyer, and Heaven knows what he would do with it!"

"I am beginning to understand," Stelia said. "Now please tell me where I come in."

"We are willing," Littleton said quietly, "to give a hundred thousand dollars to the person who places that paper in our charge. To any one who knew your father's house, and where he keeps his important documents, the task would not be an impossible one."

She looked at him fixedly for several moments. He was half afraid that she was going to get up and leave him. Instead, however, she broke into a hard little laugh, and helped herself to another cigarette.

"You forget," she said, "that I have no longer the entrée to my father's house."

"It should be perfectly easy for you," he answered, "to go there, especially with your father out of the way upstairs. I presume that you know where he keeps his important papers?"

"Yes! I know that," she answered. "It is a pity," she added, with a faint smile upon her lips, "that those burglars didn't, isn't it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"A clumsy effort that, of course," he admitted, especially when your father has a detective always round the place. He is well guarded, but I think that you could do better than that if you would, Miss Duge."

"About the paper?" she asked.

"It is simply," he answered, "a sheet of foolscap, I will not tell you exactly what is written upon it, but it contains a proposal with reference to raising a certain sum of money, to remove from office certain prominent politicians who are supporting this Anti-Trust Bill. Our names are all there, Bardsley's, Weiss', Seth Higgins', and my own. Your father's should have been there, but I believe he was too clever for us."

She began drawing on her gloves.

"Well," she said, "I have had a delightful morning, thanks to you, and these roses are lovely. Supposing I should feel that my gratitude still requires some expression, where could I write you?"

He handed her a card, which she tucked into her muff. They left the restaurant together, talking again of the people whom they passed, of a play at the theatre, of which they were reminded by the sight of a popular actress, and other indifferent matters. He offered his automobile, which she declined.

"I am going to make a call quite close here," she said. "Good-bye!"



“ I hope that I shall hear from you soon,” he said, bowing over her hand.

“ You may,” she answered, smiling, as she turned away.