

CHAPTER XXV - SIMPLE JUSTICE

All eyes were turned upon Mr. Hathaway, who had laid a hand upon the head of his grandchild and was softly stroking her hair. At last he said brokenly, repeating his former assertion:

"I cannot prove my innocence."

"But I can," declared O'Gorman positively, "and I'm going to do it."

"No--no!" said Hathaway, startled at his tone.

"It's this way, sir," explained the little man in a matter-of-fact voice, "this chase after you has cost the government a heavy sum already, and your prosecution is likely to make public an affair which, under the circumstances, we consider it more diplomatic to hush up. Any danger to our country has passed, for information obtained ten years ago regarding our defenses, codes, and the like, is to-day worthless because all conditions are completely changed. Only the crime of treason remains; a crime that deserves the severest punishment; but the guilty persons have escaped punishment and are now facing a higher tribunal-- both the principal in the crime and his weak and foolish tool. So it is best for all concerned, Mr. Hathaway, that we get at the truth of this matter and, when it is clearly on record in the government files, declare the case closed for all time. The State Department has more important matters that demand its attention."

The old man's head was bowed, his chin resting on his breast. It was now the turn of Mary Louise to smooth his thin gray locks.

"If you will make a statement, sir," continued O'Gorman, "we shall be able to verify it."

Slowly Hathaway raised his head.

"I have no statement to make," he persisted.

"This is rank folly," exclaimed O'Gorman, "but if you refuse to make the statement, I shall make it myself."

"I beg you--I implore you!" said Hathaway pleadingly.

The detective rose and stood before him, looking not at the old man but at the young girl--Mary Louise.

"Tell me, my child," he said gently, "would you not rather see your grandfather-- an honorable, high-minded gentleman--acquitted of an unjust accusation, even at the expense of some abasement and perhaps heart-aches on your part, rather than allow him to continue to suffer disgrace in order to shield you from so slight an affliction?"

"Sir!" cried Hathaway indignantly, starting to his feet; "how dare you throw the burden on this poor child? Have you no mercy--no compassion?"

"Plenty," was the quiet reply. "Sit down, sir. This girl is stronger than you think. She will not be made permanently unhappy by knowing the truth, I assure you."

Hathaway regarded him with a look of anguish akin to fear. Then he turned and seated himself, again putting an arm around Mary Louise as if to shield her.

Said Irene, speaking very slowly:

"I am quite sure Mr. O'Gorman is right. Mary Louise is a brave girl, and she loves her grandfather."

Then Mary Louise spoke--hesitatingly, at first, for she could not yet comprehend the full import of the officer's words.

"If you mean," said she, "that it will cause me sorrow and humiliation to free my grandfather from suspicion, and that he refuses to speak because he fears the truth will hurt me, then I ask you to speak out, Mr. O'Gorman."

"Of course," returned the little man, smiling at her approvingly; "that is just what I intend to do. All these years, my girl, your grandfather has accepted reproach and disgrace in order to shield the good name of a woman and to save her from a prison cell. And that woman was your mother."

"Oh!" cried Mary Louise and covered her face with her hands.

"You brute!" exclaimed Hathaway, highly incensed.

"But this is not all," continued O'Gorman, unmoved; "your mother, Mary Louise, would have been condemned and imprisoned--and deservedly so in the eyes of the law--had the truth been known; and yet I assure you she was only guilty of folly and of ignorance of the terrible consequences that might have resulted from her act. She was weak enough to be loyal to a promise wrung from her in extremity, and therein lay her only fault. Your grandfather knew all this, and she was his daughter--his only child. When the accusation for your mother's crime fell on him, he ran away and so tacitly admitted his guilt, thus drawing suspicion from her. His reason for remaining hidden was that, had he been caught and brought to trial, he could not have lied or perjured himself under oath even to save his dearly loved daughter from punishment. Now you understand why he could not submit to arrest; why, assisted by a small but powerful band of faithful friends, he has been able to evade capture during all these years. I admire him for that; but he has sacrificed himself long enough. Your mother's recent death renders her prosecution impossible. It is time the truth prevailed. In simple justice I will not allow this old man to embitter further his life, just to protect his grandchild from a knowledge of her mother's sin."

Again a deathly silence pervaded the room.

"You--you are speaking at random," said Hathaway, in a voice choked with emotion. "You have no proof of these dreadful statements."

"But I have!" said Irene bravely, believing it her duty to support O'Gorman.

"And so have I," asserted the quiet voice of Sarah Judd, who had entered the room unperceived.

Hathaway regarded both the girls in surprise, but said nothing.

"I think," said Officer O'Gorman, "it will be best for us to read to Mr. Hathaway that letter."

"The letter which I found in the book?" asked Irene eagerly.

"Yes. But do not disturb yourself," as she started to wheel her chair close to the wall. "Josie will get it."

To Irene's astonishment Sarah Judd walked straight to the repeating rifle, opened the sliding plate in its stock and took out the closely folded letter. Perhaps Nan Shelley and Agatha Lord were no less surprised than Irene; also they were deeply chagrined. But O'Gorman's slip in calling Sarah Judd "Josie" had conveyed to his associates information that somewhat modified their astonishment at the girl's cleverness, for everyone who knew O'Gorman had often heard of his daughter Josie, of whom he was accustomed to speak with infinite pride. He always said he was training her to follow his own profession and that when the education was complete Josie O'Gorman would make a name for herself in the detective service. So Nan and Agatha exchanged meaning glances and regarded the freckled-faced girl with new interest.

"I'm not much of a reader," said Josie, carefully unfolding the paper. "Suppose we let Miss Irene read it?"

Her father nodded assent and Josie handed the sheet to Irene.

Mr. Hathaway had been growing uneasy and now addressed Officer O'Gorman in a protesting voice:

"Is this reading necessary, sir?"

"Very necessary, Mr. Hathaway."

"What letter is this that you have referred to?"

"A bit of information dating nearly ten years ago and written by one who perhaps knew more of the political intrigues of John and Beatrice Burrows than has ever come to your own knowledge."

"The letter is authentic, then?"

"Quite so."

"And your Department knows of its existence?"

"I am acting under the Department's instructions, sir. Oblige us, Miss Macfarlane," he added, turning to Irene, "by reading the letter in full."