

CHAPTER XVII

UNCLE JOHN IS PUZZLED

Uncle John was off on his errands even before Jones and Arthur Weldon had driven away from the hotel with the officer and Le Drieux. There had been no "scene" and none of the guests of the hotel had any inkling of the arrest.

Uncle John had always detested lawyers and so he realized that he was sure to be a poor judge of the merits of any legal gentleman he might secure to defend Jones.

"I may as well leave it to chance," he grumbled, as he drove down the main boulevard. "The rascals are all alike!"

Glancing to this side and that, he encountered a sign on a building:
"Fred A. Colby, Lawyer."

"All right; I mustn't waste time," he said, and stopping his driver he ascended a stairway to a gloomy upper hall. Here the doors, all in a row, were alike forbidding, but one of them bore the lawyer's name, so Mr. Merrick turned the handle and abruptly entered.

A sallow-faced young man, in his shirt-sleeves, was seated at a table

littered with newspapers and magazines, engaged in the task of putting new strings on a battered guitar. As his visitor entered he looked up in surprise and laid down the instrument.

"I want to see Colby, the lawyer," began Uncle John, regarding the disordered room with strong disapproval.

"You are seeing him," retorted the young man, with a fleeting smile, "and I'll bet you two to one that if you came here on business you will presently go away and find another lawyer."

"Why?" questioned Mr. Merrick, eyeing him more closely.

"I don't impress people," explained Colby, picking up the guitar again.

"I don't inspire confidence. As for the law, I know it as well as anyone--which is begging the question--but when I'm interviewed I have to admit I've had no experience."

"No practice?"

"Just a few collections, that's all I sleep on that sofa yonder, eat at a cafeteria, and so manage to keep body and soul together. Once in a while a stranger sees my sign and needs a lawyer, so he climbs the stairs. But when he meets me face to face he beats a hasty retreat."

As he spoke, Colby tightened a string and began strumming it to get it

tuned. Uncle John sat down on the one other chair in the room and thought a moment.

"You've been admitted to the bar?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Graduate of the Penn Law School."

"Then you know enough to defend an innocent man from an unjust accusation?"

Colby laid down the guitar.

"Ah!" said he, "this grows interesting. I really believe you have half a mind to give me your case. Sir, I know enough, I hope, to defend an innocent man; but I can't promise, offhand, to save him, even from an unjust accusation."

"Why not? Doesn't law stand for justice?"

"Perhaps; in the abstract. Anyhow, there's a pretty fable to that effect. But law in the abstract, and law as it is interpreted and applied, are not even second cousins. To be quite frank, I'd rather defend a guilty person than an innocent one. The chances are I'd win more easily. Are you sure your man is innocent?"

Uncle John scowled.

"Perhaps I'd better find another lawyer who is more optimistic," he said.

"Oh, I'm full of optimism, sir. My fault is that I'm not well known in the courts and have no arrangement to divide my fees with the powers that be. But I've been observing and I know the tricks of the trade as well as any lawyer in California. My chief recommendation, however, is that I'm eager to get a case, for my rent is sadly overdue. Why not try me, just to see what I'm able to do? I'd like to find that out myself."

"This is a very important matter," asserted Mr. Merrick.

"Very. If I'm evicted for lack of rent-money my career is crippled."

"I mean the case is a serious one."

"Are you willing to pay for success?"

"Liberally."

"Then I'll win it for you. Don't judge my ability by my present condition, sir. Tell me your story and I'll get to work at once."

Uncle John rose with sudden decision.

"Put on your coat," he said, and while Colby obeyed with alacrity he gave

him a brief outline of the accusation brought against Jones. "I want you to take my car," he added, "and hasten to the police station, that you may be present at the preliminary examination. There will be plenty of time to talk afterward."

Colby nodded. His coat and hat made the young lawyer quite presentable and without another word he followed Mr. Merrick down the stairs and took his seat in the motorcar. Next moment he was whirling down the street and Uncle John looked after him with a half puzzled expression, as if he wondered whether or not he had blundered in his choice of a lawyer.

A little later he secured a taxicab and drove to the office of the Continental Film Manufacturing Company. Mr. Goldstein was in his office but sent word that he was too busy to see visitors. Nevertheless, when Mr. Merrick declared he had been sent by A. Jones, he was promptly admitted to the manager's sanctum.

"Our friend, young Jones," he began, "has just been arrested by a detective."

Goldstein's nervous jump fairly raised him off his chair; but in an instant he settled back and shot an eager, interested look at his visitor.

"What for, Mr. Merrick?" he demanded.

"For stealing valuable pearls from some foreign woman. A trumped-up charge, of course."

Goldstein rubbed the palms of his hands softly together. His face wore a look of supreme content.

"Arrested! Ah, that is bad, Mr. Merrick. It is very bad indeed. And it involves us--the Continental, you know--in an embarrassing manner."

"Why so?" asked Uncle John.

"Can't you see, sir?" asked the manager, trying hard to restrain a smile. "If the papers get hold of this affair, and state that our president--our biggest owner--the man who controls the Continental stock--is a common thief, the story will--eh--eh--put a bad crimp in our business, so to speak."

Uncle John looked at the man thoughtfully.

"So Jones controls the Continental, eh?" he said. "How long since, Mr. Goldstein?"

"Why, since the January meeting, a year and more ago. It was an astonishing thing, and dramatic--believe me! At the annual meeting of stockholders in walks this stripling--a mere kid--proves that he holds the majority of stock, elects himself president and installs a new board

of directors, turning the tired and true builders of the business out in the cold. Then, without apology, promise or argument, President Jones walks out again! In an hour he upset the old conditions, turned our business topsy-turvy and disappeared with as little regard for the Continental as if it had been a turnip. That stock must have cost him millions, and how he ever got hold of it is a mystery that has kept us all guessing ever since. The only redeeming feature of the affair was that the new board of directors proved decent and Jones kept away from us all and let us alone. I'd never seen him until he came here a few days ago and began to order me around. So, there, Mr. Merrick, you know as much about Jones as I do."

Mr. Merrick was perplexed. The more he heard of young Jones the more amazing; the boy seemed to be.

"Has the Continental lost money since Jones took possession?" he inquired.

"I think not," replied Goldstein, cautiously. "You're a business man, Mr. Merrick, and can understand that our machinery--our business system--is so perfect that it runs smoothly, regardless of who grabs the dividends. What I object to is this young fellow's impertinence in interfering with my work here. He walks in, reverses my instructions to my people, orders me to do unbusinesslike things and raises hob with the whole organization."

"Well, it belongs to him, Goldstein," said Uncle John, in defense of the boy. "He is your employer and has the right to dictate. But just at present he needs your help. He asked me to come here and tell you of his arrest."

Goldstein shrugged his shoulders.

"His arrest is none of my business," was his reply. "If Jones stole the money to buy Continental stock he must suffer the consequences. I'm working for the stock, not for the individual."

"But surely you will go to the station and see what can be done for him?" protested Uncle John.

"Surely I will not," retorted the manager. "What's the use? There isn't even a foot of good picture film in so common a thing as the arrest of a thief--and the censors would forbid it if there were. Let Jones fight his own battles."

"It occurs to me," suggested Mr. Merrick, who was growing indignant, "that Mr. Jones will be able to satisfy the court that he is not a thief, and so secure his freedom without your assistance. What will happen then, Mr. Goldstein?"

"Then? Why, it is still none of my business. I'm the manager of a motion picture concern--one of the biggest concerns in the world--and I've

nothing to do with the troubles of my stockholders."

He turned to his desk and Mr. Merrick was obliged to go away without farther parley. On his way out he caught a glimpse of Maud Stanton passing through the building. She was dressed in the costume of an Indian princess and looked radiantly beautiful. Uncle John received a nod and a smile and then she was gone, without as yet a hint of the misfortune that had overtaken A. Jones of Sangoa.

Returning to the hotel, rather worried and flustered by the morning's events, he found the girls quietly seated in the lobby, busy over their embroidery.

"Well, Uncle," said Patsy, cheerfully, "is Ajo still in limbo?"

"I suppose so," he rejoined, sinking into an easy chair beside her. "Is Arthur back yet?"

"No," said Louise, answering for her husband, "he is probably staying to do all he can for the poor boy."

"Did you get a lawyer?" inquired Beth.

"I got a fellow who claims to be a lawyer; but I'm not sure he will be of any use."

Then he related his interview with Colby, to the amusement of his nieces, all three of whom approved the course he had taken and were already prepared to vouch for the briefless barrister's ability, on the grounds that eccentricity meant talent.

"You see," explained Miss Patsy, "he has nothing else to do but jump heart and soul into this case, so Ajo will be able to command his exclusive services, which with some big, bustling lawyer would be impossible."

Luncheon was over before Arthur finally appeared, looking somewhat grave and perturbed.

"They won't accept bail," he reported. "Jones must stay in jail until his formal examination, and if they then decide that he is really Jack Andrews he will remain in jail until his extradition papers arrive."

"When will he be examined?" asked Louise.

"Whenever the judge feels in the humor, it seems. Our lawyer demanded Jones' release at once, on the ground that a mistake of identity had been made; but the stupid judge is of the opinion that the charge against our friend is valid. At any rate he refused to let him go. He wouldn't even argue the case at present. He issues a warrant on a charge of larceny, claps a man in jail whether innocent or not, and refuses to let him explain anything or prove his innocence until a

formal examination is held."

"There is some justice in that," remarked Uncle John. "Suppose Jones is guilty; it would be a mistake to let him go free until a thorough examination had been made."

"And if he is innocent, he will have spent several days in jail, been worried and disgraced, and there is no redress for the false imprisonment. The judge won't even apologize to him!"

"It's all in the interests of law and order, I suppose," said Patsy; "but the law seems dreadfully inadequate to protect the innocent. I suppose it's because the courts are run by cheap and incompetent people who couldn't earn a salary in any other way."

"Someone must run them, and it isn't an ambitious man's job," replied Uncle John. "What do you think of the lawyer I sent you, Arthur?"

The young ranchman smiled.

"He's a wonder, Uncle. He seemed to know more about the case than Jones or I did, and more about the law than the judge did. He's an irrepressible fellow, and told that rascal Le Drieux a lot about pearls that the expert never had heard before. Where did you find him, sir?"

Uncle John explained.

"Well," said Arthur, "I think Jones is in good hands. Colby has secured him a private room at the jail, with a bath and all the comforts of home. Meals are to be sent in from a restaurant and when I left the place the jailer had gone out to buy Jones a stock of books to while away his leisure hours--which are bound to be numerous. I'd no idea a prisoner could live in such luxury."

"Money did it, I suppose," Patsy shrewdly suggested.

"Yes. Jones wrote a lot of checks. Colby got a couple of hundred for a retaining fee and gleefully informed us it was more money than he had ever owned at one time in all his previous career. I think he will earn it, however."

"Where is he now?" asked Uncle John.

"Visiting all the newspaper offices, to 'buy white space,' as he put it. In other words, Colby will bribe the press to silence, at least until the case develops."

"I'm glad of that," exclaimed Beth. "What do you think of this queer business, Arthur?"

"Why, I've no doubt of the boy's innocence, if that is what you mean. I've watched him closely and am positive he is no more Jack Andrews than

I am. But I fear he will have a hard task to satisfy the judge that he is falsely accused. It would be an admission of error, you see, and so the judge will prefer to find him guilty. It is this same judge--Wilton, I think his name is--who will conduct the formal examination, and to-day he openly sneered at the mention of Sangoa. On the other hand, he evidently believed every statement made by Le Drieux about the identity of the pearls found in Jones' possession. Le Drieux has a printed list of the Ahmberg pearls, and was able to check the Jones' pearls off this list with a fair degree of accuracy. It astonished even me, and I could see that Jones was equally amazed."

"Wouldn't it be queer if they convicted him!" exclaimed Beth.

"It would be dreadful, since he is innocent," said Patsy.

"There is no need to worry about that just at present," Arthur assured them. "I am placing a great deal of confidence in the ability of Lawyer Colby."