

CHAPTER XXVI

SUNSHINE AFTER RAIN

Of course not one of our friends agreed with the judge. Indignation and resentment were written on every face--except that of Goldstein. The manager rubbed his hands softly together and, approaching Maud, he whispered:

"You needn't speak to Jones about me. It's all right. I guess he won't be interfering with me any more, eh? And come early to-morrow morning. We've got a lot of rehearsing to do. To-day I will call a holiday for you. And, believe me, Miss Stanton, this is nothing to worry any of us. The judge settles it, right or wrong, for the law defies us all."

As the manager hurried away Uncle John looked after him and said:

"I wonder if he realizes how true his words are? 'The law defies us all.' How helpless we are to oppose injustice and oppression when one man, with a man's limitations and prejudices, is clothed with authority to condemn us!"

Colby stood silent. The poor fellow's eyes were full of unshed tears.

"This is my first case, and my last," said he. "I won it honestly. It was

the judge, not the evidence, that defeated me. I'm going to rent my office and apply for a job as a chauffeur."

Jones was the least affected of the group. "Never mind, friends," he said to them, "it will all come right in the end. If you will stand by me, Colby, I'll retain you to plead my case in the Austrian court, or at least advise my Austrian lawyers. I've an idea they will treat me fairly, over there in Vienna."

"It's outrageous!" quoth indignant Patsy Doyle. "I'd like to give that judge a piece of my mind."

"If you did," replied Arthur, "he'd fine you for contempt."

"It would be a just line, in that case," said Patsy; "so I'm sure he wouldn't do it."

The jailer had come to take the prisoner back to his cell. He smiled whimsically at Miss Doyle's speech and remarked:

"There's always one side to kick, Miss, whichever way the judge decides. It was only Solomon who could satisfy everybody."

"Clear the room!" shouted the bailiff.

Captain Carg's men took the empty chest back to the launch. The captain

followed them, after pressing the hand of his young master, who said: "Wait for orders, Captain." Uncle John took his flock back to the hotel, where they gathered in his room and held an indignation meeting. Here it was safe to give full vent to their chagrin and disappointment.

"Every bit of honest evidence was on our side," declared Maud. "I shall never be able to understand why we lost."

"Bribery and corruption," said Flo. "I'll bet a cookie Le Drieux divided the reward with the judge."

"I suppose it's all up with Ajo now," sighed Beth, regretfully.

"Yes," replied Colby, who had accompanied them; "there is nothing more to be done for him at present. From the judge's order there is no appeal, in such a case. Mr. Jones must go to Vienna for trial; but there he may secure an acquittal."

"He is very brave, I think," said Patsy. "This affair must have hurt his pride, but he smiles through it all. In his condition of health, the confinement and humiliation may well shorten his life, yet he has made no murmur."

"He's good stuff, that boy," commented Uncle John. "Perhaps it is due to that John Paul blood his father was so proud of."

When Arthur went into the lobby a little later he found Le Drieux seated comfortably and smoking a long cigar. The pearl expert nodded to the young ranchman with so much evident satisfaction that Arthur could not resist engaging him in conversation.

"Well, you won," he remarked, taking a vacant chair beside Le Drieux.

"Yes, of course," was the reply; "but I'll admit that fellow Andrews is a smooth one. Why, at one time he had even me puzzled with his alibis and his evidence. That flash of the pearls was the cleverest trick I ever heard of; but it didn't go, I'd warned the judge to look out for a scoop. He knew he was dealing with one of the most slippery rogues in captivity."

"See here, Le Drieux," said Arthur; "let us be honest with one another, now that the thing is settled and diplomacy is uncalled for. Do you really believe that Jones is Jack Andrews?"

"Me? I know it, Mr. Weldon. I don't pose as a detective, but I'm considered to have a shrewd insight into human character, and from the first moment I set eyes on him I was positive that Jones was the famous Jack Andrews. I can understand how you people, generous and trusting, have been deceived in the fellow; I admire the grit you've all shown in standing by him to the last. I haven't a particle of malice toward any one of you, I assure you--not even toward Andrews himself."

"Then why have you bounded him so persistently?"

"For two reasons." said Le Drieux. "As a noted pearl expert, I wanted to prove my ability to run down the thief; and, as a man in modest circumstances, I wanted the reward."

"How much will you get?"

"All together, the rewards aggregate twenty thousand dollars. I'll get half, and my firm will get half."

"I think," said Arthur, to test the man, "that Jones would have paid you double that amount to let him alone."

Le Drieux shook his head; then he smiled.

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Weldon--in strict confidence, of course--that I approached Jones on that very subject, the day he was placed in jail. He must have been sure his tricks would clear him, for he refused to give me a single penny. I imagine he is very sorry, right now; don't you, sir?"

"No," said Arthur, "I don't. I still believe in his innocence."

Le Drieux stared at him incredulously.

"What, after that examination of to-day?" he demanded.

"Before and after. There was no justice in the decision of Judge Wilton; he was unduly prejudiced."

"Be careful, sir!"

"We are talking confidentially."

"To be sure. But you astonish me. I understand the character of Andrews so thoroughly that I fail to comprehend how any sensible person can believe in him. Talk about prejudice!"

"I suppose you are to remain at this hotel?" said Arthur, evading further argument.

"Yes, until the papers arrive. They ought to be here by Monday. Then I shall take Andrews to New York and we will board the first steamer for Europe."

Arthur left him. Le Drieux puzzled him more than he puzzled Le Drieux. The expert seemed sincere in the belief that he had trapped, in Jones, a noted criminal. Weldon could not help wondering, as he walked away, if possibly he and his friends had been deceived in A. Jones of Sangoa. The doubt was but momentary, yet it had forced itself into his mind.

On Saturday afternoon they all made a visit to the prisoner and tried to cheer him. Again on Sunday they called--the Stantons and Merricks and Weldons and all. Young Jones received them with composure and begged them not to worry on his account.

"I am quite comfortable in this jail, I assure you," said he. "On my journey to Vienna I shall be able to bribe Le Drieux to let me have such comforts as I desire. There is but one experience I shrink from: the passage across the Atlantic. If it brings a return of my former malady I shall suffer terribly."

"It may not be so bad as you fear," Patsy assured him, although in her heart she realized it might be the death of the boy. "Often those who are distressed by a voyage on the Pacific endure the Atlantic very well."

"That is encouraging," said he. "It is my dread of the water that has prevented me from returning to Sangoa, or even visiting my yacht. And this reminds me of a favor I wish to ask."

"You may rely upon our friendship," said Maud.

"I believe that. Here is a letter to Captain Carg, putting the Arabella at your disposal until my return from Vienna. I have named Mr. Merrick as the commander of the yacht, in my absence, and if you feel inclined to make the trip and can spare the time I would like you all to make a voyage to Sangoa."

"To Sangoa!" they cried in chorus.

"Yes. I am ambitious to prove to you, who have been my staunch friends, that the island is indeed there. Incidentally you will become acquainted with the prettiest place in all the world. My house will be at your disposal while you remain and I am sure you will find it fairly comfortable."

They were so amazed at this proposition that at first no one found words to answer the boy. It was Flo, naturally, who first collected her thoughts.

"It will be awfully jolly!" she cried, clapping her hands with delight.

"I'm sure Maud and I need a vacation. Let's stick up our noses at Goldstein and sail away to the mysterious isle. What do you say, girls? And you, Mr. Merrick?"

"I believe, my boy," said Uncle John, laying a kindly hand on the youth's shoulder, "that all of us are inclined to take advantage of your offer. That is, if you are sure we can be of no further use to you in your difficulties."

"I am taking Colby abroad with me and he can do all that may be done until after my trial. Then I hope to rejoin you here and am looking forward to a jolly reunion."

Uncle John took the letters which Ajo had written to Captain Carg, to his superintendent in Sangoa and to his housekeeper. Then they all pressed the boy's hand and went away.

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Monday morning the extradition papers arrived. Le Drieux exhibited them proudly to young Weldon, to Mr. Merrick, and even to the girls, who regarded the documents with shuddering awe.

"We'll take the night train," said the man. "That will get us to New York on Friday, in time to catch the Saturday steamer for Calais."

As he spoke a boy approached and handed Le Drieux a telegram.

"Excuse me," said he, and opened it with an important flourish. The next moment his face fell. He staggered and sank half fainting into a chair which Mr. Merrick pushed toward him.

Patsy ran for some water. Maud Stanton fanned the man with a folded newspaper. Arthur Weldon picked up the telegram which had fluttered from Le Drieux's grasp and deliberately read it. Then he, too, sank gasping into a chair.

"Listen, girls!" he cried, his voice shrill with emotion. "What do you

think of this?

"Jack Andrews arrested here in New York to-day by Burns detectives. Countess Ahmberg's collection of pearls was found in his possession, intact. Return here first train.'

"Signed: 'Eckstrom & Co.'"

There was a moment of tense silence.

Flo clapped her hands.

"Come on," she shouted in glee, "let's go and tell Ajo!"