

CHAPTER VI - HAROLD PLAYS THE RAVEN.

Mason Compton, president and general manager, sat in his private office in the works of the International Machine Company, chewing upon an unlighted cigar and occasionally running his fingers through his iron-gray hair as he compared and recompared two statements which lay upon the desk before him.

"Damn strange," he muttered as he touched a button beneath the edge of his desk. A boy entered the room. "Ask Mr. Bince if he will be good enough to step in here a moment, please," said Compton; and a moment later, when Harold Bince entered, the older man leaned back in his chair and motioned the other to be seated.

"I can't understand these statements, Harold," said Compton. "Here is one for August of last year and this is this August's statement of costs. We never had a better month in the history of this organization than last month, and yet our profits are not commensurate with the volume of business that we did. That's the reason I sent for these cost statements and have compared them, and I find that our costs have increased out of all proportions to what is warranted. How do you account for it?"

"Principally the increased cost of labor," replied Bince. "The same holds true of everybody else. Every manufacturer in the country is in the same plight we are."

"I know," agreed Compton, "that that is true to some measure. Both labor and raw materials have advanced, but we have advanced our prices correspondingly. In some instances it seems to me that our advance in prices, particularly on our specialties, should have given us even a handsomer profit over the increased cost of production than we formerly received.

"In the last six months since I appointed you assistant manager I am afraid that I have sort of let things get out of my grasp. I have a lot of confidence in you, Harold, and now that you and Elizabeth are engaged I feel even more inclined to let you shoulder the responsibilities that I have carried alone from the inception of this organization. But I've got to be mighty sure that you are going to do at least as well as I did. You have shown a great deal of ability, but you are young and haven't had the advantage of the years of experience that made it possible for me to finally develop a business second to none in this line in the West.

"I never had a son, and after Elizabeth's mother died I have lived in the hope somehow that she would marry the sort of chap who would really take the place of such a son as every man dreams of--some one who will take his place and carry on his work when he is ready to lay aside his tools. I liked your father, Harold. He was one of the best friends that I ever had, and I can tell you now what I couldn't have you a month ago: that when I employed you and put you in this position it was with the hope that eventually you would fill the place in my business and in my home of the son I never had."

"Do you think Elizabeth guessed what was in your mind?" asked Bince.

"I don't know," replied the older man. "I have tried never to say anything to influence her. Years ago when she was younger we used to talk about it half jokingly and shortly after you told me of your engagement she remarked to me one day that she was happy, for she knew you were going to be the sort of son I had wanted.

"I haven't anybody on earth but her, Harold, and when I die she gets the business. I have arranged it in my will so you two will share and share alike in profits after I go, but that will be some time. I am far from being an old man, and I am a mighty healthy one. However, I should like to be relieved of the active management. There are a lot of things that I have always wanted to do that I couldn't do because I couldn't spare the time from my business.

"And so I want you to get thoroughly into the harness as soon as possible, that I may turn over the entire management to you. But I can't do it, Harold, while the profits are diminishing."

As the older man's gaze fell again to statements before him the eyes of the younger man narrowed just a trifle as they rested upon Mason Compton, and then as the older man looked up Bince's expression changed.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said, smiling. "Of course I realize, as you must, that I have tried to learn a great deal in a short time. I think I have reached a point now where I pretty thoroughly grasp the possibilities and requirements of my work, and I am sure that from now on you will note a decided change for the better on the right side of the ledger."

"I am sure of it, my boy," said Compton heartily. "Don't think that I have been finding fault with anything you have done. I just wanted to call your attention to these figures. They mean something, and it's up to you to find out just what they do mean."

And then there came a light tap on the door, which opened immediately before any summons to enter had been given, and Elizabeth Compton entered, followed by another young woman.

"Hello, there!" exclaimed Compton. "What gets us out so early? And Harriet too! There is only one thing that would bring you girls in here so early."

"And what's that?" asked Elizabeth.

"You are going shopping, and Elizabeth wants some money."

They all laughed. "You're a regular Sherlock Holmes!" exclaimed Harriet Holden.

"How much?" asked Compton of his daughter, still smiling.

"How much have you?" asked Elizabeth. "I am utterly broke."

Compton turned to Bince. "Get her what she needs, Harold," he said.

The young man started to the door.

"Come with me, Elizabeth," he said; "we will go out to the cashier's cage and get you fixed up."

They entered Bince's office, which adjoined Compton's.

"Wait here a minute, Elizabeth," said Bince. "How much do you want? I'll get it for you and bring it back. I want to see you a moment alone before you go."

She told him how much she wanted, and he was back shortly with the currency.

"Elizabeth," he said, "I don't know whether you have noticed it or not, because your father isn't a man to carry his troubles home, but I believe that he is failing rapidly, largely from overwork. He worries about conditions here which really do

not exist. I have been trying to take the load off his shoulders so that he could ease up a bit, but he has got into a rut from which he cannot be guided.

"He will simply have to be lifted completely out of it, or he will stay here and die in the harness. Everything is running splendidly, and now that I have a good grasp of the business I can handle it. Don't you suppose you could persuade him to take a trip? I know that he wants to travel. He has told me so several times, and if he could get away from here this fall and stay away for a year, if possible, it would make a new man of him. I am really very much worried about him, and while I hate to worry you I feel that you are the only person who can influence him and that something ought to be done and done at once."

"Why, Harold," exclaimed the girl, "there is nothing the matter with father! He was never better in his life nor more cheerful."

"That's the side of him that he lets you see," replied the man. "His gaiety is all forced. If you could see him after you leave you would realize that he is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Your father is not an old man in years, but he has placed a constant surtax on his nervous system for the last twenty-five years without a let-up, and it doesn't make any difference how good a machine may be it is going to wear out some day, and the better the machine the more complete will be the wreck when the final break occurs."

As he spoke he watched the girl's face, the changing expression of it, which marked her growing mental perturbation.

"You really believe it is as bad as that, Harold?" she asked.

"It may be worse than I think," he said. "It is surely fully as bad."

The girl rose slowly from the chair. "I will try and persuade him to see Dr. Earle."

The man took a step toward her. "I don't believe a doctor is what he needs," he said quickly. "His condition is one that even a nerve specialist might not diagnose correctly. It is only some one in a position like mine, who has an opportunity to observe him almost hourly, day by day, who would realize his condition. I doubt if he has any organic trouble whatever. What he needs is a long rest, entirely free from any thought whatever of business. At least, Elizabeth, it will do him no harm, and it may prolong his life for years. I wouldn't go messing around with any of these medical chaps."

"Well," she said at last, with a sigh, "I will talk to him and see if I can't persuade him to take a trip. He has always wanted to visit Japan and China."

"Just the thing!" exclaimed Bince; "just the thing for him. The long sea voyage will do him a world of good. And now," he said, stepping to her side and putting an arm around her.

She pushed him gently away.

"No," she said; "I do not feel like kissing now," and turning she entered her father's office, followed by Bince.