

CHAPTER VIII - BREAD FROM THE WATERS.

The next day, worn out from loss of sleep, the young man started out upon a last frenzied search for employment. He had no money for breakfast, and so he went breakfastless, and as he had no carfare it was necessary for him to walk the seemingly interminable miles from one prospective job to another. By the middle of the afternoon Jimmy was hungrier than he had ever been before in his life. He was so hungry that it actually hurt, and he was weak from physical fatigue and from disappointment and worry.

"I've got to eat," he soliloquized fiercely, "if I have to go out to-night and pound somebody on the head to get the price, and I'm going to do it," he concluded as the odors of cooking food came to him from a cheap restaurant which he was passing. He stopped a moment and looked into the window at the catsup bottles and sad-looking pies which the proprietor apparently seemed to think formed an artistic and attractive window display.

"If I had a brick," thought Jimmy, "I would have one of those pies, even if I went to the jug for it," but his hunger had not made him as desperate as he thought he was, and so he passed slowly on, and, glancing into the windows of the store next door, saw a display of second-hand clothes and the sign "Clothes Bought and Sold."

Jimmy looked at those in the window and then down at his own, which, though wrinkled, were infinitely better than anything on display.

"I wonder," he mused, "if I couldn't put something over in the way of high finance here," and, acting upon the inspiration, he entered the dingy little shop. When he emerged twenty minutes later he wore a shabby and rather disreputable suit of hand-me-downs, but he had two silver dollars in his pocket.

When Jimmy returned to his room that night it was with a full stomach, but with the knowledge that he had practically reached the end of his rope. He had been unable to bring himself to the point of writing his father an admission of his failure, and in fact he had gone so far, and in his estimation had sunk so low, that he had definitely determined he would rather starve to death now than admit his utter inefficiency to those whose respect he most valued.

As he climbed the stairway to his room he heard some one descending from above, and as they passed beneath the dim light of a flickering gas-jet he realized that the other stopped suddenly and turned back to look after him as Jimmy continued his ascent of the stairs; and then a low voice inquired:

"Say, bo, what you doin' here?"

Jimmy turned toward the questioner.

"Oh!" he exclaimed as recognition of the other dawned slowly upon him. "It's you, is it? My old and esteemed friend, the Lizard."

"Sure, it's me," replied the Lizard. "But what you doin' here? Looking for an assistant general manager?"

Jimmy grinned.

"Don't rub it in," he said, still smiling.

The other ascended toward him, his keen eyes appraising him from head to foot.

"You live here?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Jimmy; "do you?"

"Sure, I been livin' here for the last six months."

"That's funny," said Jimmy; "I have been here about two months myself."

"What's the matter with you?" asked the Lizard. "Didn't you like the job as general manager?"

Jimmy flushed.

"Forget it," he admonished.

"Where's your room?" asked the Lizard.

"Up another flight," said Jimmy. "Won't you come up?"

"Sure," said the Lizard, and together the two ascended the stairs and entered Jimmy's room. Under the brighter light there the Lizard scrutinized his host.

"You been against it, bo, haven't you?" he asked.

"I sure have," said Jimmy.

"Gee," said the other, "what a difference clothes make! You look like a regular bum."

"Thanks," said Jimmy.

"What you doin'?" asked the Lizard.

"Nothing."

"Lose your job?"

"I quit it," said Jimmy. "I've only worked a month since I've been here, and that for the munificent salary of ten dollars a week."

"Do you want to make some coin?" asked the Lizard.

"I sure do," said Jimmy. "I don't know of anything I would rather have."

"I'm pullin' off something to-morrow night. I can use you," and he eyed Jimmy shrewdly as he spoke.

"Cracking a box?" asked Jimmy, grinning.

"It might be something like that," replied the Lizard; "but you won't have nothin' to do but stand where I put you and make a noise like a cat if you see anybody coming. It ought to be something good. I been working on it for three months. We'll split something like fifty thousand thirty-seventy."

"Is that the usual percentage?" asked Jimmy.

"It's what I'm offerin' you," replied the lizard.

Thirty per cent of fifty thousand dollars! Jimmy jingled the few pieces of silver remaining in his pocket. Fifteen thousand dollars! And here he had been walking his legs off and starving in a vain attempt to earn a few paltry dollars honestly.

"There's something wrong somewhere," muttered Jimmy to himself.

"I'm taking it from an old crab who has more than he can use, and all of it he got by robbing people that didn't have any to spare. He's a big guy here. When anything big is doing the newspaper guys interview him and his name is in all the lists of subscriptions to charity--when they're going to be published in the papers. I'll bet he takes nine-tenths of his kale from women and children, and he's an honored citizen. I ain't no angel, but whatever I've taken didn't cause nobody any sufferin'--I'm a thief, bo, and I'm mighty proud of it when I think of what this other guy is."

Thirty per cent of fifty thousand dollars! Jimmy was sitting with his legs crossed. He looked down at his ill-fitting, shabby trousers, and then turned up the sole of one shoe which was worn through almost to his sock. The Lizard watched him as a cat watches a mouse. He knew that the other was thinking hard, and that presently he would reach a decision, and through Jimmy's mind marched a

sordid and hateful procession of recent events--humiliation, rebuff, shame, poverty, hunger, and in the background the face of his father and the face of a girl whose name, even, he did not know.

Presently he looked up at the Lizard.

"Nothing doing, old top," he said. "But don't mistake the motives which prompt me to refuse your glittering offer. I am moved by no moral scruples, however humiliating such a confession should be. The way I feel now I would almost as lief go out and rob widows and orphans myself, but each of us, some time in our life, has to consider some one who would probably rather see us dead than disgraced. I don't know whether you get me or not."

"I get you," replied the Lizard, "and while you may never wear diamonds, you'll get more pleasure out of life than I ever will, provided you don't starve to death too soon. You know, I had a hunch you would turn me down, and I'm glad you did. If you were going crooked some time I thought I'd like to have you with me. When it comes to men, I'm a pretty good picker. That's the reason I have kept out of jail so long. I either pick a square one or I work alone."

"Thanks," said Jimmy, "but how do you know that after you pull this job I won't tip off the police and claim the reward."

The Lizard grinned his lip grin.

"There ain't one chance in a million," he said. "You'd starve to death before you'd do it. And now, what you want is a job. I can probably get you one if you ain't too particular."

"I'd do anything," said Jimmy, "that I could do and still look a policeman in the face."

"All right," said the Lizard. "When I come back I'll bring you a job of some sort. I may be back to-night, and I may not be back again for a month, and in the mean time you got to live."

He drew a roll of bills from his pocket and commenced to count out several.

"Hold on!" cried Jimmy. "Once again, nothing doing."

"Forget it," admonished the Lizard. "I'm just payin' back the twenty you loaned me."

"But I didn't loan it to you," said Jimmy; "I gave it to you as a reward for finding my watch."

The Lizard laughed and shoved the money across the table.

"Take it," he said; "don't be a damn fool. And now so-long! I may bring you home a job to-night, but if I don't you've got enough to live on for a couple of weeks."

After the Lizard had gone Jimmy sat looking at the twenty dollars for a long time.

"That fellow may be a thief," he soliloquized, "but whatever he is he's white. Just imagine, the only friend I've got in Chicago is a safe-blower."