

CHAPTER XXI - JIMMY TELLS THE TRUTH.

Mr. Compton returned to the room before Jimmy had discovered whether the girl intended to expose him or not. She said nothing about the matter during dinner, and immediately thereafter she excused herself, leaving the two men alone.

During the conversation that ensued Jimmy discovered that Bince had been using every argument at his command to induce Compton to let him go, as well as getting rid of the certified public accountants.

"I can't help but feel," said Compton, "that possibly there may be some reason in what Mr. Bince says, for he seems to feel more strongly on this subject than almost any question that has ever arisen in the plant wherein we differed, and it may be that I am doing wrong to absolutely ignore his wishes in the matter.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Torrance, I have reached the point where I don't particularly relish a fight, as I did in the past. I would rather have things run along smoothly than to have this feeling of unrest and unpleasantness that now exists in the plant. I do not say that you are to blame for it, but the fact remains that ever since you came I have been constantly harassed by this same unpleasant condition which grows worse day by day. There is no question but what you have accomplished a great deal for us of a practical nature, but I believe in view of Mr. Bince's feelings in the matter that we had better terminate our arrangement."

Jimmy suddenly noted how old and tired his employer looked. He realized, too, that for a week he had been fighting an incipient influenza and that doubtless his entire mental attitude was influenced by the insidious workings of the disease, one of the marked symptoms of which he knew to be a feeling of despondency and mental depression, which sapped both courage and initiative.

They were passing through the hallway from the dining-room to the library, and as Compton concluded what was equivalent to Jimmy's discharge, he had stopped and turned toward the younger man. They were standing near the entrance to the music-room in which Elizabeth chanced to be, so that she overheard her father's words, and not without a smile of satisfaction and relief.

"Mr. Compton," replied Jimmy, "no matter what you do with me, you simply must not let those C.P.A.'s go until they have completed their work. I know something of what it is going to mean to your business, but I would rather that the reports come from them than from me."

"What do you mean?" asked Compton.

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you," replied Jimmy. "I preferred that the C.P.A.'s discover it, as they will within the next day or two--you are being systematically robbed. I suspected it before I had been there ten days, and I was absolutely sure of it at the time I suggested you employ the C.P.A.'s. You are being robbed at the rate of approximately one thousand dollars a week."

"How?" asked Compton.

"I would rather you would wait for the report of the C.P.A.'s," returned Jimmy.

"I wish to know now," said Compton, "how I am being robbed."

Jimmy looked straight into the older man's eyes. "Through the pay-roll," he replied.

For a full minute Compton did not speak.

"You may continue with your work in the plant," he said at last, "and we will keep the accountants, for a while at least. And now I am going to ask you to excuse me. I find that I tire very quickly since I have been threatened with influenza."

Jimmy bid his employer good night, and Mr. Compton turned into the library as the former continued along across the hall to the entrance. He was putting on his overcoat when Elizabeth Compton emerged from the music-room and approached him.

"I overheard your conversation with father," she said. "It seems to me that you are making a deliberate attempt to cause him worry and apprehension--you are taking advantage of his illness to frighten him into keeping you in his employ. I should think you would be ashamed of yourself."

"I am sorry that you think that," said Jimmy. "If it was not for your father and you I wouldn't have urged the matter at all."

"You are just doing it to hold your position," retorted the girl, "and now, by threats of blackmail you prevent me from exposing you--you are a despicable cur."

Jimmy felt the blood mounting to his face. He was mortified and angry, and yet he was helpless because his traducer was a woman. Unconsciously he drew himself to his full height.

"You will have to think about me as you please," he said; "I cannot influence that, but I want you to understand that you are not to interfere with my work. I think we understand one another perfectly, Miss Compton. Good night."

And as he closed the door behind him he left a very angry young lady biting her lower lip and almost upon the verge of angry tears.

"The boor," she exclaimed; "he dared to order me about and threaten me."

The telephone interrupted her unhappy train of thoughts. It was Bince.

"I am sorry, Elizabeth," he said, "but I won't be able to come up this evening. I have some important business to attend to. How is your father?"

"He seems very tired and despondent," replied Elizabeth. "That efficiency person was here to dinner. He just left."

She could not see the startled and angry expression of Bince's face as he received this information. "Torrance was there?" he asked. "How did that happen?"

"Father asked him to dinner, and when he wanted to discharge the fellow Torrance told him something that upset father terribly, and urged that he be kept a little while longer, to which father agreed."

"What did he tell him?" asked Bince.

"Oh, some alarmist tale about somebody robbing father. I didn't quite make out what it was all about, but it had something to do with the pay-roll."

Bince went white. "Don't believe anything that fellow says," he exclaimed excitedly: "he's nothing but a crook. Elizabeth, can't you make your father realize that he ought to get rid of the man, that he ought to leave things to me instead of trusting an absolute stranger?"

"I have," replied the girl, "and he was on the point of doing it until Torrance told him this story."

"Something will have to be done," said Bince, "at once. I'll be over to see your father in the morning. Good-by, dear," and he hung up the receiver.

After Jimmy left the Compton home he started to walk down-town. It was too early to go to his dismal little room on Indiana Avenue. The Lizard was still away. He had seen nothing of him for weeks, and with his going he had come to realize that he had rather depended upon the Lizard for company. He was full of interesting stories of the underworld and his dry humor and strange philosophy amused and entertained Jimmy.

And now as he walked along the almost deserted drive after his recent unpleasant scene with Elizabeth Compton he felt more blue and lonely than he had for many weeks. He craved human companionship, and so strong was the urge that his thoughts naturally turned to the only person other than the Lizard who seemed to have taken any particularly kindly interest in him. Acting on the impulse he turned west at the first cross street until he came to a drugstore. Entering a telephone-booth he called a certain number and a moment later had his connection.

"Is that you, Edith?" he asked, and at the affirmative reply, "this is Jimmy Torrance. I'm feeling terribly lonesome. I was wondering if I couldn't drag you out to listen to my troubles?"

"Surest thing you know," cried the girl. "Where are you?" He told her. "Take a Clark Street car," she told him, "and I'll be at the corner of North Avenue by the time you get there."

As the girl hung up the receiver and turned from the phone a slightly quizzical expression reflected some thought that was in her mind. "I wonder," she said as she returned to her room, "if he is going to be like the rest?"

She seated herself before her mirror and critically examined her reflection in the glass. She knew she was good-looking. No need of a mirror to tell her that. Her youth and her good looks had been her stock in trade, and yet this evening she appraised her features most critically, and as with light fingers she touched her hair, now in one place and now in another, she found herself humming a gay little tune and she realized that she was very happy.

When Jimmy Torrance alighted from the Clark Street car he found Edith waiting for him.

"It was mighty good of you," he said. "I don't know when I have had such a fit of blues, but I feel better already."

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"I just had a talk with Mr. Compton," he replied. "He sent for me and I had to tell him something that I didn't want to tell him, although he's got to find it out sooner or later anyway."

"Is there something wrong at the plant?" she asked.

"Wrong doesn't describe it," he exclaimed bitterly. "The man that he has done the most for and in whose loyalty he ought to have the right of implicit confidence, is robbing him blind."

"Bince?" asked the girl. Jimmy nodded. "I didn't like that pill," she said, "from the moment I saw him."

"Nor I," said Jimmy, "but he is going to marry Miss Compton and inherit the business. He's the last man in the place that Compton would suspect. It was just like suggesting to a man that his son was robbing him."

"Have you got the goods on him?" asked Edith.

"I will have as soon as the C.P.A.'s get to digging into the pay-roll," he replied, "and I just as good as got the information I need even without that. Well, let's forget our troubles. What shall we do?"

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

He could not tell by either her tone or expression with what anxiety she awaited his reply. "Suppose we do something exciting, like going to the movies," he suggested with a laugh.

"That suits me all right," said the girl. "There is a dandy comedy down at the Castle."

And so they went to the picture show, and when it was over he suggested that they have a bite to eat.

"I'll tell you," Edith suggested. "Suppose we go to Feinheimer's restaurant and see if we can't get that table that I used to eat at when you waited on me?" They both laughed.

"If old Feinheimer sees me he will have me poisoned," said Jimmy.

"Not if you have any money to spend in his place."

It was eleven thirty when they reached Feinheimer's. The table they wanted was vacant, a little table in a corner of the room and furthest from the orchestra. The waiter, a new man, did not know them, and no one had recognized them as they entered.

Jimmy sat looking at the girl's profile as she studied the menu-card. She was very pretty. He had always thought her that, but somehow to-night she seemed to be different, even more beautiful than in the past. He wished that he could forget what she had been. And he realized as he looked at her sweet girlish face upon which vice had left no slightest impression to mark her familiarity with vice, that it might be easy to forget her past. And then between him and the face of the girl before him arose the vision of another face, the face of the girl that he had set upon a pedestal and worshiped from afar. And with the recollection of her came a realization of the real cause of his sorrow and depression earlier in the evening.

He had attributed it to the unpleasant knowledge he had been forced to partially impart to her father and also in some measure to the regrettable interview he had had with her, but now he knew that these were only contributory causes, that the real reason was that during the months she had occupied his thoughts and in the few meetings he had had with her there had developed within him, unknown to himself, a sentiment for her that could be described by but one word--love.

Always, though he had realized that she was unattainable, there must have lingered within his breast a faint spark of hope that somehow, some time, there would be a chance, but after to-night he knew there could never be a chance. She had openly confessed her contempt for him, and how would she feel later when she realized that through his efforts her happiness was to be wrecked, and the man she loved and was to marry branded as a criminal?