

CHAPTER XXIV - IN THE TOILS.

At the office of the International Machine Company the work of the C.P.A.'s was drawing to a close. Their report would soon be ready to submit to Mr. Compton, and as the time approached Bince's nervousness and irritability increased. Edith noticed that he inquired each day with growing solicitude as to the reports from the hospital relative to Jimmy's condition. She knew that Bince disliked Jimmy, and yet the man seemed strangely anxious for his recovery and return to work.

In accordance with Jimmy's plan, the C.P.A.'s were to give out no information to any one, even to Mr. Compton, until their investigation and report were entirely completed. This plan had been approved by Mr. Compton, although he professed to be at considerable loss to understand why it was necessary. It was, however, in accordance with Jimmy's plan to prevent, if possible, any interference with the work of the auditors until every available fact in the case had been ascertained and recorded.

In the investigation of the pay-roll Bince had worked diligently with the accountants. As a matter of fact, he had never left them a moment while the pay-roll records were in their hands, and had gone to much pain to explain in detail every question arising therefrom.

Although the investigators seemed to accept his statements at their face value, the assistant general manager was far from being assured that their final report would redound to his credit.

On a Thursday they informed him that they had completed their investigation, and the report would be submitted to Mr. Compton on Saturday.

When Edith reached the hospital that evening she found Jimmy in high spirits. He was dressed for the first time, and assured her that he was quite able to

return to work if the doctor would let him, but the nurse shook her head. "You ought to stay here for another week or ten days," she admonished him.

"Nothing doing," cried Jimmy. "I'll be out of here Monday at the latest." But when Edith told him that the C.P.A.'s had finished, and that their report would be handed in Saturday, Jimmy announced that he would leave the hospital the following day.

"But you can't do it," said the nurse.

"Why not?" asked Jimmy.

"The doctor won't permit it."

Edith tried to dissuade him, but he insisted that it was absolutely necessary for him to be at the office when the C.P.A.'s report was made.

"I'll be over there Friday evening or Saturday morning at the latest," he said as she bid him good-bye.

And so it was that, despite the pleas of his nurse and the orders of his physician, Jimmy appeared at the plant Friday afternoon. Bince greeted him almost effusively, and Mr. Compton seemed glad to see him out again.

That evening Harold Bince met Murray at Feinheimer's, and still later the Lizard received word that Murray wanted to see him.

"Everything's ready," the boss explained to the Lizard. "The whole thing's framed for to-morrow night. The watchman was discharged to-day. Another man is supposed to have been hired to take the job, but of course he won't show up. You meet me here at seven thirty to-morrow night, and I'll give you your final instructions and tell you how to get to the plant." The C.P.A.'s were slow in completing their report. At noon on Saturday it looked very much to Bince that there would be no report ready before Monday. He had spent most of the forenoon pacing his office, and at last, unable longer to stand the strain, he had announced that he was going out to his country club for a game of golf.

He returned to his down-town club about dinner-time, and at eight o'clock he called up Elizabeth Compton.

"Come on up," said the girl. "I'm all alone this evening. Father went back to the office to examine some reports that were just finished up late this afternoon."

"I'll be over," said Bince, "as soon as I dress." If there was any trace of surprise or shock in his tones the girl failed to notice it.

At ten o'clock that night a figure moved silently through the dark shadows of an alleyway in the area of the International Machine Company's plant on West Superior Street. As he moved along he counted the basement windows silently, and at the fifth window he halted. Just a casual glance he cast up and down the alley, and then, kneeling, he raised the sash and slipped quietly into the darkness of the basement.

At about the same time Jimmy's landlady called him to the telephone, where a man's voice asked if "this was Mr. Torrance?" Assured that such was the fact, the voice continued: "I am the new watchman at the plant. There's something wrong here. I can't get hold of Mr. Compton. I think you better come down. I'll be in Mr. Compton's office--" The message ceased as though central had disconnected them.

"Funny," thought Jimmy, "that he should call me up. I wonder what the trouble can be." But he lost no time in getting his hat and starting for the works.

Although the Lizard knew that there was no danger of detection, yet from long habit he moved through the plant of the International Machine Company with the noiselessness of a disembodied spirit. Occasionally, and just for the briefest instant, he flashed his lamp ahead of him, but though he had never been in the place before he found it scarcely necessary, so minute had been his instructions for reaching the office from the fifth basement window.

The room he sought was on the second floor, and the Lizard had mounted the steps from the basement to the first floor when he was brought to a sudden stop by a noise from the floor above him. The Lizard listened intently. No, he could not be mistaken. Too often had he heard a similar sound.

Some one was tiptoeing across the floor above. The Lizard was in the hallway close beside the stairs when he realized the footsteps were coming toward the stairway, and a moment later that they were cautiously descending. The Lizard flattened himself against the wall, and if he breathed his lungs gave forth no sound.

If one may interpret footsteps--and the Lizard, from the fund of a great experience, felt that he could--those descending the stairway from above him might have been described as nervous and repressed; for at least they gave the Lizard the impression of one who desired to flee in haste and yet dared not do so, for fear of attracting attention by the increased noise that greater speed might entail.

At least the Lizard knew that those were the footsteps of no watchman, but whether it be guardian of the law or fellow criminal the Lizard had no wish to be

discovered. He wondered what had gone wrong with Murray's plans, and, suddenly imbued with the natural suspicion of the criminal, it occurred to him that the whole thing might be a frame-up to get him; and yet why Murray should wish to get him he could not imagine. He ran over in his mind a list of all those who might feel enmity toward him, but among them all the Lizard could cast upon none who might have sufficient against him to warrant such an elaborate scheme of revenge.

The footsteps passed him and continued on toward the foot of the stairs where was the main entrance which opened upon the street. At the door the footsteps halted, and as the Lizard's eyes bored through the darkness in the direction of the other prowler the latter struck a match upon the panel of the door and lighted a cigarette, revealing his features momentarily but distinctly to the watcher in the shadow of the stairway. Then he opened the door and passed out into the night.

The Lizard, listening intently for a few moments to assure himself that there was no one else above, and that the man who had just departed was not returning, at last continued his way to the foot of the stairs, which he ascended to the second floor. Passing through the outer office, he paused a moment before the door to Compton's private office, and then silently turning the knob he gently pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

Beyond the threshold he halted and pressed the button of his flash-lamp. For just an instant its faint rays illumined the interior of the room, and then darkness blotted out the scene. But whatever it was that the little flash-lamp had revealed was evidently in the nature of a surprise, and perhaps something of a shock, to the Lizard, for he drew back with a muttered oath, backed quietly out of the room, closed the door after him, and, moving much more swiftly than he had entered, retraced his steps to the fifth window on the alley, and was gone from the scene with whatever job he had contemplated unexecuted.

A half-hour later detective headquarters at the Central Station received an anonymous tip: "Send some one to the office of the International Machine Company, on the second floor of West Superior Street."

It was ten thirty when Jimmy reached the plant. He entered the front door with his own latchkey, pressed the button which lighted the stairway and the landing above, and, ascending, went straight to Mr. Compton's office, turned the knob, and opened the door, to find that the interior was dark.

"Strange," he thought, "that after sending for me the fellow didn't wait." As these thoughts passed through his mind he fumbled on the wall for the switch, and, finding it, flooded the office with light.

As he turned again toward the room he voiced a sudden exclamation of horror, for on the floor beside his desk lay the body of Mason Compton! As Jimmy stepped quickly toward Compton's body and kneeled beside it a man tiptoed quietly up the front stairway, while another, having ascended from the rear, was crossing the outer office with equal stealth.

Jimmy felt of Compton's face and hands. They were warm. And then he placed his ear close against the man's breast, in order to see if he could detect the beating of the heart. He was in this position when he was startled by a gruff voice behind him.

"Put 'em up!" it admonished curtly, and Jimmy turned to see two men standing in the doorway with pistols leveled at him.