

CHAPTER XXV - CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

At first Jimmy thought they were the perpetrators of the deed, but almost immediately he recognized one of them as O'Donnell, the erstwhile traffic officer who had been promoted to a detective sergeancy since Jimmy had first met him.

"Compton has been murdered," said Jimmy dully. "He is dead."

"Put up your hands," snapped O'Donnell for the second time, "and be quick about it!"

It was then for the first time that Jimmy realized the meaning that might be put upon his presence alone in the office with his dead employer. O'Donnell's partner searched him, but found no weapon upon him.

"Where's the gat?" he asked.

"Whoever did this probably took it with him," said Jimmy. "Find the watchman."

They made Jimmy sit down in a corner, and while one of them guarded him the other called up central, made his report, and asked for an ambulance and the wagon. Then O'Donnell commenced to examine the room. A moment later he found an automatic behind the door across the room from where Compton's body lay.

"Ever see this before?" asked O'Donnell, holding the pistol up to Jimmy.

"If you're asking me if it's mine, no," said Jimmy. "I have a gun, but it's home. I never carry it. I didn't do this, O'Donnell," he continued. "There was no reason why I should do it, so instead of wasting your time on me while the murderer escapes you'd better get busy on some other theory, too. It won't do any harm, anyway."

The wagon came and took Jimmy to the station, and later he was questioned by the lieutenant in charge.

"You say this is not your pistol?" asked the police officer.

"It is not," replied Jimmy.

"You never saw it before?"

"No, I have not."

The lieutenant turned to one of his men, who went to the door, and, opening it, returned almost immediately with Bince.

"Do you know this man, Mr. Bince?" asked the lieutenant.

"I certainly do," said Bince.

"Did you ever see this pistol before?"

Bince took the weapon and examined it.

"Yes," he said.

"Under what circumstances?" asked the lieutenant.

"It was one of two that Mr. Compton had in his desk. This one he loaned to Torrance two or three weeks ago. I was in the office at the time."

The officer turned toward Jimmy.

"Now do you recognize it?" he asked.

"I haven't denied," said Jimmy, "that Mr. Compton had loaned me a pistol. As a matter of fact, I had forgotten all about it. I do not particularly recognize this one as the weapon he loaned me, though it is of the same type. There is no way that I could identify the particular weapon he handed me."

"But you admit he loaned you one?"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"What did you do with it?" asked the policeman.

"I put it in my desk within five minutes after he gave it to me, and I haven't seen it since."

"You say you couldn't identify the pistol?" said the officer.

Jimmy nodded.

"Well, we can, and have. The number of this pistol was recorded when Mr. Compton bought it, as was the number of the other one which is still in his desk. They were the only two pistols he ever bought, according to Mr. Bince, and his daughter, aside from one which he had at home, which has also been accounted for. The drawer in which Mr. Bince saw you place this pistol we found open and the pistol gone. It looks pretty bad for you, young fellow, and if you want a chance to dodge the rope you'd better plead guilty and tell us why you did it."

Jimmy was given little opportunity for sleep that night. A half-dozen times he was called back to the lieutenant's office for further questioning. He commenced to realize that the circumstantial evidence was strongly against him, and now, as the girl had warned him, his entirely innocent past was brought up against him simply because his existence had been called to the attention of a policeman, and the same policeman an inscrutable Fate had ordained should discover him alone with a murdered man.

O'Donnell made the most of his meager knowledge of Jimmy. He told the lieutenant with embellishments of Jimmy's association with such characters as the Lizard and Little Eva; but the police were still at a loss to discover a motive.

This, however, was furnished the next morning, when Elizabeth Compton, white and heavy-eyed, was brought to the station to identify Jimmy. There was deep compassion in the young man's face as he was ushered into the presence of the stricken girl, while at sight of him hers mirrored horror, contempt, and hatred.

"You know this man?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," she replied. "His name is Torrance. I have seen him a number of times in the past year. He worked as a clerk in a store, in the hosiery department, and waited on me there. Later I"--she hesitated--"I saw him in a place called Feinheimer's. He was a waiter. Then he was a sparring partner, I think they call it, for a prizefighter. Some of my friends took me to a gymnasium to see the fighter training, and I recognized this man.

"I saw him again when he was driving a milk-wagon. He delivered milk at a friend's house where I chanced to be. The last time I saw him was at my father's home. He had obtained employment in my father's plant as an efficiency expert. He seemed to exercise some strange power over father, who believed implicitly in him, until recently, when he evidently commenced to have doubts; for the night that the man was at our house I was sitting in the music-room when they passed through the hallway, and I heard father discharge him. But the fellow pleaded to be retained, and finally father promised to keep him for a while longer, as I recall it, at least until certain work was completed at the plant. This work was completed yesterday. That's all I know. I do not know whether father discharged him again or not."

Harriet Holden had accompanied her friend to the police station, and was sitting close beside her during the examination, her eyes almost constantly upon the face of the prisoner. She saw no fear there, only an expression of deep-seated sorrow for her friend.

The lieutenant was still asking questions when there came a knock at the door, which was immediately opened, revealing O'Donnell with a young woman, whom he brought inside.

"I guess we're getting to the bottom of it," announced the sergeant. "Look who I found workin' over there as Compton's stenographer."

"Well, who is she?" demanded the lieutenant.

"A jane who used to hang out at Feinheimer's. She has been runnin' around with this bird. They tell me over there that Compton hired her on this fellow's recommendation. Get hold of the Lizard now, and you'll have the whole bunch."

Thus did Sergeant Patrick O'Donnell solve the entire mystery with Sherlockian ease and despatch.

At Jimmy's preliminary hearing he was held to the grand jury, and on the strength of the circumstantial evidence against him that body voted a true bill. Edith Hudson, against whom there was no evidence of any nature, was held as a witness for the State, and a net was thrown out for the Lizard which dragged in nearly every pickpocket in town except the man they sought.

Jimmy had been in jail for about a week when he received a visitor. A turnkey brought her to his cell. It was Harriet Holden. She greeted him seriously but pleasantly, and then she asked the turnkey if she might go inside.

"It's against the rules, miss," he said, "but I guess it will be all right." He recalled that the sheriff had said that the girl's father was a friend of his, and so assumed that it would be safe to relax the rules in her behalf. He had been too long an employee of the county not to know that rules are often elastic to the proper pressure.

"I have been wanting to talk to you," said the girl to Jimmy, "ever since this terrible thing happened. Somehow I can not believe that you are guilty, and there must be some way in which you can prove your innocence."

"I have been trying to think out how I might," said Jimmy, "but the more I think about it the more damning the circumstantial evidence against me appears."

"There must always be a motive for a crime like that," said Harriet. "I cannot believe that a simple fear of his discharge would be sufficient motive for any man to kill his employer."

"Not to kill a man who had been as good to me as Mr. Compton was," said Jimmy, "or a man whom I admired so much as I did him. As a matter of fact, he was not going to discharge me, Miss Holden, and I had an opportunity there for a very successful future; but now that he is dead there is no one who could verify such a statement on my part."

"Who could there be, then, who might wish to kill him, and what could the motive be?"

"I can only think," said Jimmy, "of one man; and even in his case the idea is too horrible--too preposterous to be entertained."

Harriet Holden looked up at him quickly, a sudden light in her eyes, and an expression of almost horrified incredulity upon her face. "You don't mean--" she started.

"I wouldn't even use his name in connection with the thought," Jimmy interrupted; "but he is the only man of whom I know who could have profited by Mr. Compton's death, and, on the other hand, whose entire future would have been blasted possibly had Mr. Compton lived until the following morning."

The girl remained for half an hour longer, and when she left she went directly to the home of Elizabeth Compton.

"I told you, Elizabeth," she said, "that I was going to see Mr. Torrance. You dissuaded me for some time, but I finally went today, and I am glad that I went. No one except yourself could have loved your father more than I, or have been more horrified or grieved at his death; but that is no reason why you should aid in the punishment of an innocent man, as I am confident that this man Torrance is, and I tell you Elizabeth if you were not prejudiced you would agree with me.

"I have talked with Torrance for over half an hour to-day, and since then nothing can ever make me believe that that man could commit a cold-blooded murder. Harold has always hated him--you admit that yourself--and now you are permitting him to prejudice you against the man purely on the strength of that dislike. I am going to help him. I'm going to do it, not only to obtain justice for him, but to assist in detecting and punishing the true murderer."

"I don't see, Harriet, how you can take any interest in such a creature," said Elizabeth. "You know from the circumstances under which we saw him before father employed him what type of man he is, and it was further exemplified by the evidence of his relationship with that common woman of the streets."

"He told me about her to-day," replied Harriet. "He had only known her very casually, but she helped him once--loaned him some money when he needed it--and when he found that she had been a stenographer and wanted to give up the life she had been leading and be straight again, he helped her.

"I asked Sergeant O'Donnell particularly about that, and even he had to admit that there was no evidence whatever to implicate the girl or show that the relations between her and Mr. Torrance had been anything that was not right; and you know yourself how anxious O'Donnell has been to dig up evidence of any kind derogatory to either of them."

"How are you going to help him?" asked Elizabeth. "Take flowers and cake to him in jail?"

There was a sneer on her face and on her lips. "If he cares for flowers and cakes," replied Harriet, "I probably shall; but I have another plan which will probably be more practical."