

CHAPTER XXVIII - THE VERDICT.

For a moment there was tense silence in the court-room which was broken by the defense's perfunctory "Take the witness" to the prosecuting attorney, but again cross-examination was waived.

"Call the next witness, please," and a moment later the Lizard emerged from the witness-room.

"I wish you would tell the jury," said the counsel for defense after the witness had been sworn, "just what you told me in my office yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, sir," said the Lizard. "You see, it was like this: Murray there sent for me and tells me that he's got a job for me. He wants me to go and crack a safe at the International Machine Company's plant. He said there was a fellow on the inside helping him, that there wouldn't be any watchman there that night and that in the safe I was to crack was some books and papers that was to be destroyed, and on top of it was three or four thousand dollars in pay-roll money that I was to have as my pay for the job. Murray told me that the guy on the inside who wanted the job done had been working some kind of a pay-roll graft and he wanted the records destroyed, and he also wanted to get rid of the guy that was hep to what he had been doin'. All that I had to do with it was go and crack the safe and get the records, which I was to throw in the river, and keep the money for myself, but the frame-up on the other guy was to send him a phony message that would get him at the plant after I got through, and then notify the police so they could catch him there in the room with the cracked safe.

"I didn't know who they were framin' this job on. If I had I wouldn't have had nothin' to do with it.

"Well, I goes to the plant and finds a window in the basement open just as they tells me it will be, but when I gets on the first floor just before I go up-stairs to the office, which is on the second floor, I heard some one walking around up-stairs. I hid in the hallway while he came down. He stopped at the front door and lighted a cigarette and then he went on out, and I went up-stairs to finish the job.

"When I gets in Compton's office where the safe is I flashes my light and the first thing I sees is Compton's body on the floor beside his desk. That kind of stuff ain't in my line, so I beats it out without crackin' the safe. That's all I know about it until I sees the papers, and then for a while I was afraid to say anything because this guy O'Donnell has it in for me, and I know enough about police methods to know that they could frame up a good case of murder against me. But after a while Miss Hudson finds me and puts it up to me straight that this guy Torrance hasn't got no friends except me and her.

"Of course she didn't know how much I knew, but I did, and it's been worryin' me ever since. I was waiting, though, hopin' that something would turn up so that he would be acquitted, but I been watchin' the papers close, and I seen yesterday that there wasn't much chance, so here I am."

"You say that a man came down from Mr. Compton's office just before you went up? What time was that?"

"It was about ten o'clock, about half an hour before the cops finds Torrance there."

"And then you went upstairs and found Mr. Compton dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"You say this man that came downstairs stopped and lighted a cigarette before he left the building. Did you see his face?"

"Yes, I did."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Sure."

"Look around the court-room and see if you can find him here."

"Sure I can find him. I seen him when I first came in, but I can't see his face because he's hiding behind the prosecuting attorney."

All eyes were turned in the direction of the prosecuting attorney to see Bince leap suddenly to his feet and lean forward upon the desk before him, supported by a trembling arm as he shook his finger at the Lizard, and in high-pitched tones screamed, "It's a lie! It's a lie!"

For a moment longer he stood looking wildly about the room, and then with rapid strides he crossed it to an open window, and before any one could interfere he vaulted out, to fall four stories to the cement sidewalk below.

For several minutes pandemonium reigned in the court-room. Elizabeth Compton Bince swooned, and when she regained consciousness she found herself in the arms of Harriet Holden.

"Take me home, Harriet," she asked; "take me away from this place. Take me to your home. I do not want to go back to mine yet."

Half an hour later, in accordance with the judge's charge to the jury, a verdict of "Not guilty" was rendered in the case of the People of Illinois versus James Torrance, Jr.

Mr. Holden and Jimmy's attorney were the first to congratulate him, and the former insisted that he come home with him to dinner.

"I am sorry," said Jimmy; "I should like to immensely, but there is some one I must see first. If I may I should like to come out later in the evening to thank you and Miss Holden."

Jimmy searched about the court-room until he found the Lizard. "I don't know how to thank you," he said.

"Don't then," said the Lizard. "Who you ought to thank is that little girl who is sick in bed up on the north side."

"That's just where I am going now," said Jimmy. "Is she very sick?"

"Pneumonia," said the Lizard. "I telephoned her doctor just before I came over here, and I guess if you want to see her at all you'd better hurry."

"It's not that bad, is it?" Jimmy said.

"I'm afraid it is," said the Lizard.

Jimmy lost no time in reaching the street and calling a taxi. A nurse admitted him to the apartment. "How is she?" he asked.

The nurse shook her head.

"Can she see any one?"

"It won't make any difference now," said the nurse, and Jimmy was led into the room where the girl, wasted by fever and suffering, lay in a half-comatose condition upon her narrow bed. Jimmy crossed the room and laid his hand upon her forehead and at the touch she opened her eyes and looked up at him. He saw that she recognized him and was trying to say something, and he kneeled beside the bed so that his ear might be closer to her lips.

"Jimmy," she whispered, "you are free? Tell me."

He told her briefly of what had happened. "I am so happy," she murmured. "Oh, Jimmy, I am so happy!"

He took one of her wasted hands in his own and carried it to his lips. "Not on the hand," she said faintly. "Just once, on the lips, before I die."

He gathered her in his arms and lifted her face to his. "Dear little girl," he said, "you are not going to die. It is not as bad as that."

She did not reply, but only clung to him tightly, and against his cheek he felt her tears and a little choking sob before she relaxed, and he laid her back again on her pillow. He thought she was dead then and he called the nurse, but she still breathed, though her eyes were closed. Jimmy sat down on the edge of the bed beside her and stroked her hand. After a while she roused again and opened her eyes.

"Jimmy," she said, "will you stay with me until I go?" The man could make no articulate response, but he pressed her hand reassuringly. She was silent again for some time. Once more she whispered faintly, so faintly that he had to lean close to catch her words:

"Miss Holden," she whispered, "she is a--good girl. It is--she--who hired--the attorney for you. Go to her--Jimmy--when I--am gone--she loves--you." Again there was a long pause.

"Good-by--Jimmy," she whispered at last.

The nurse was standing at the foot of the bed. She came and put her hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "It is too bad," she said; "she was such a good girl."

"Yes," said Jimmy, "I think she was the best little girl I ever knew."

It was after nine o'clock when Jimmy, depressed and sorrowing, arrived at the Holden home. The houseman who admitted him told him that Mr. Holden had been called out, but that Miss Holden was expecting him, and he ushered Jimmy to the big living-room, and to his consternation he saw that Elizabeth Compton was there with Harriet. The latter came forward to greet him, and to his surprise the other girl followed her.

"I discovered to-day, Mr. Torrance," she said, "that I have wronged you. However unintentionally it was the fact remains that I might have done you a very great harm and injustice. I realize now how very different things might have been if I had listened to you and believed in you at first. Harriet told me that you were coming tonight and I asked to see you for just a moment to tell you this and also to ask you if you would continue with the International Machine Company.

"There is no one now whom I feel I would have so much confidence in as you. I wish you would come back and take charge for me. If you will tell me that you will consider it we will arrange the details later."

If an archangel had suddenly condescended to honor him with an invitation to assist in the management of Heaven Jimmy could not have been more surprised. He realized at what cost of pride and self-esteem the offer must have been made and acknowledgment of error. He told her that he would be very glad to assist her for the present, at least, and then she excused herself on the plea of nervous exhaustion and went to her room.

"Do you know," said Harriet, after Elizabeth had gone, "she really feels worse over her past attitude toward you than she does over Harold's death? I think she realizes now what I have told her from the first, that she never really loved him. Of course, her pride has suffered terribly, but she will get over that quickly enough.

"But do you know I have not had an opportunity before to congratulate you? I wish that I might have been there to have heard the verdict, but really you don't look half as happy as I should think you would feel."

"I am happy about that," said Jimmy, "but on top of my happiness came a sorrow. I just came from Edith's apartment. She died while I was there."

Harriet gave a little cry of shocked surprise. "Oh, Jimmy," she cried, laying her hand upon his arm. "Oh, Jimmy, I am so sorry!" It was the first time that she had ever addressed him by his given name, but there seemed nothing strange or unusual in the occurrence.

"She was such a good little girl," said Harriet.

It was strange that so many should use these same words in connection with Edith Hudson, and even this girl, so far removed from the sphere in which Little Eva had existed and who knew something of her past, could yet call her "good."

It gave Jimmy a new insight into the sweetness and charity of Harriet Holden's character. "Yes," he said, "her soul and her heart were good and pure."

"She believed so in you," said the girl. "She thought you were the best man who ever lived. She told me that you were the only really good man she had ever known, and her confidence and belief in you were contagious. You will probably never know all that she did for you. It was really she that imbued my father and his attorney with a belief in your innocence, and it was she who influenced the Lizard to take the stand in your behalf. Yes, she was a very good friend."

"And you have been a good friend," said Jimmy. "In the face of the same circumstances that turned Miss Compton against me you believed in me. Your generosity made it possible for me to be defended by the best attorney in Chicago, but more than all that to me has been your friendship and the consciousness of your sympathy at a time when, above all things, I needed sympathy. And now, after all you have done for me I came to ask still more of you."

"What do you want?" she asked.

She was standing very close to him, looking up in his face.

"You, Harriet," he said.

She smiled tremulously. "I have been yours for a long time, Jimmy, but you didn't know it."