

Punishment Deferred

by James Donald

Though Jasper Carlton knew that a man was embezzling money from his bank, he dared not discharge or accuse him.

JASPER CARLTON, president and treasurer of the Midford County Bank, sat behind his mahogany desk in deep perturbation. It was clear that a situation had arisen that baffled him. Every now and then he would shake his head and puff furiously at his cigar, as if his thoughts had reached a blind alley. So engrossed was he in his problem that for several moments he did not notice that some one had entered.

The newcomer was a tall elderly man, with the characteristic stoop of a bookkeeper. "Well, I've got what you wanted," he announced.

"You've figured out how much his shortage is?" asked the banker.

"Not exactly, but it's between eight and nine thousand dollars, more likely the higher figure."

Carlton winced. "I had no idea it was that much."

"It doesn't take a young fellow long to blow in that much when he begins going with a fast city crowd," pointed out the bookkeeper. "Especially if he's never been able to get along on his salary before."

"He used to borrow money from you, didn't he?"

"Only two or three dollars at a time, but I wasn't the only one."

"Figure out what he took from you and let me know. I'll make it good."

"Thanks, but it doesn't amount to enough to bother about. Funny thing, though, it was that which first started my suspicions of him. He stopped borrowing money toward the end of each week, yet seemed to have plenty."

"They always leave some clue," observed Carlton, wearily. "Where is he now?"

"In his teller's cage, as usual."

"Do you think he at all suspects that we know?"

"Not in the least." The bookkeeper's mouth became a hard thin line of indignation. "It would not surprise me if he were still continuing with his thievery right now!"

Carlton did not comment on this, instead, he fell into a brooding silence.

The bookkeeper waited impatiently a few moments, then asked, "Well, now that you have the goods on him, what are you going to do about it, Jasper?"

"I don't know," replied the banker, not the least bit annoyed by the interruption to his thoughts. "I don't know what I *can* do about it!"

It was significant of their relation that the bookkeeper and the banker exchanged such frank confidences and addressed each other by their first names. Jasper Carlton and Vincent Stagg had known each other for many years, indeed even before they both had entered the employ of the Midford County Bank twenty-odd years ago, when the late Clyde P. Woods owned it. The fact that one had risen far above the other did not interfere with their friendship. Jasper Carlton was that kind of a man, and everybody knew it and loved him for it.

Just now Stagg was obviously annoyed at his chief's reaction to the theft. "See here, Jasper," he asked, "you're not going to let this thing go just because the thief happens to be old Woods' son?"

"Clyde P. Woods was my friend and I owe a lot to him," replied Carlton. "Besides, he left Donald in my keeping."

"That's true enough, but you've done all a man can do for him. He was bad from the start. I remember when he went to college,

you were called away regularly every couple of weeks to get him out of some mess or other. And when he finally got kicked out of college and had run through his inheritance, you took him in here at a high salary, though he never was worth a damn. Now he shows his gratitude by robbing you of nine thousand dollars.”

When, after a lengthy pause, Carlton still remained silent, the bookkeeper continued indignantly, “You’ll only encourage him to do worse, if you don’t treat him like any other thief right now, Jasper. It isn’t as if you’ll have to worry about what people will say. There’s not a man or woman in town who doesn’t sympathize with you for what you’ve had to put up with from Donald Woods. If you sent him to jail now, everybody would say, ‘Good riddance to a scoundrel!’ ”

“But I can’t do that, Vincent!” insisted the banker, with finality.

“You mean you’re going to let him go scot free, without any punishment at all?”

“Punishment?” echoed Carlton, as if to himself. “It’s always seemed to me that every crime carries with it its own punishment.” He reached for his phone, and said into the transmitter, “Send Donald Woods in, please.”

“Are you going to speak to him about it?” asked Stagg.

“Yes, but you can stay, Vincent. In fact, I want you to be here.”

SEVERAL minutes later, a thin narrow-chested young man shuffled into the room. An ugly sneer crooked his mouth, as he demanded, “You sent for me?”

“Yes, Donald,” returned Carlton amiably. “Sit down, won’t you?”

“No, I’ll take anything you’ve got to say

standing.” He lit a cigarette. “What is it now?”

“We’ve just discovered a shortage in your accounts,” said the banker gravely.

The young man puffed insolently at his cigarette. “So you’ve found that out, have you?”

“Yes, and it’s a very serious matter, Donald,” returned Carlton with paternal patience.

“No more serious than your stealing of my father’s bank,” shot back the young man.

Carlton flushed, as if he had been struck. Nevertheless, he managed to say with relative calmness, “That isn’t so, Donald. I don’t know what gave you the idea, but it isn’t true.”

“Well, why don’t you have me arrested on this charge, then? Why don’t you have me brought to trial, if you’re not afraid?”

Carlton did not answer. Even Stagg, who had absolute confidence in his friend and chief, wondered why he let the young man go out with a triumphant sneer.

“Jasper,” finally said the bookkeeper, “why didn’t you tell him what everybody knows—that old Woods left you the bank for long and faithful services?”

“Because he didn’t!” Carlton quickly replied. “I’m going to tell you something in strictest confidence, Vincent. Old Woods knew his son, and was afraid to leave the bank to him. Before his death, therefore, he arranged to have it apparently left to me, whereas in reality I was merely to be its president and treasurer, and one of the three trustees of the estate, which eventually goes to Donald.

“That’s why I can’t press the charge against him. In a way he already has been punished. *The money he stole is really his own!*”