

'Let us give up our plan for this evening,' she said sensibly. 'And now, Neil, tell me what has happened to make you so despondent?'

After some hesitation he explained his predicament.

'Of course you did not take the money!' she exclaimed, in an assured tone, when he finished his story.

'Sweetheart, how do you know I did not?' he asked moodily. 'Are you not afraid you may have been mistaken in me? Perhaps I am not at all the kind of fellow you thought me.'

For a second her eyes sought his with a troubled perplexity. Then she shook her head gaily.

'No, I have made no mistake. You did not take the money because you are just—yourself,' she laughed.

'Claire, I thank you—I thank God for your trust in me!' he said fervidly, as he caught her hands and pressed them to his lips. 'No, I did not take the money. But who did, and how did he get it, that is the enigma!'

'Perhaps you made a note of the combination that unlocks the safe, and the slip of paper was found by somebody,' she suggested, puckering her forehead into a fascinating little frown. 'Her deep concern for him rendered her more charming than ever.'

'No; I always carry the combination in my head,' he responded.

Claire admired him in spite of his discomfiture. To be able to carry figures in one's head was, to her mind, a proof of genius.

'Ha! at last I have a clue to the mystery!' she exclaimed, with feminine alertness, after a moment. 'You were alone in the office, you say, yesterday afternoon?'

'Yes, writing letters to be sent by the European steamer.'

'Then, you see, probably you grew drowsy over your work, lost consciousness for a few moments, and, being troubled lest the money might not be secure in the drawer, while under the spell of a dream you secreted it in another part of the safe.'

'I am not a somnambulist, and I have searched through every corner and compartment of the safe,' Neil rejoined disconsolately. 'Besides, I should like to see anyone go to sleep in that office.'

'Well, I can imagine no other solution of the problem,' she sighed. 'But I can do better than thank so idly. I will pray every day that you may be vindicated, Neil.'

Her conviction of his innocence, and her confidence that everything would come right in the end, were a great encouragement to him in the time that followed. Claire was beginning really to help him. His trouble was teaching him how it strengthens the heart of a man when a good woman whom he loves, stands by him, though the world seems against him.

A few days later Bailey observed a new clerk in the outer office or counting-room. Phillips, the stranger, soon proved himself a good-natured fellow, and before the end of the week he was a favorite with 'the boys.' Even Nichols, an unsociable chap with whom the others had little to do, became friendly with him.

Neil was too preoccupied with his own affairs to become acquainted with Phillips. Yet before long he began to meet this fellow-clerk elsewhere. The man, it seems, boarded in the same street with him. If Bailey escorted Claire to a concert or the play, he frequently caught sight of Phillips in the foyer of the theatre or seated not far from them in the hall. It was singular how he and Phillips chose the same shops, the same restaurants. Why, even on Sunday morning when Bailey went to Mass, he could almost have sworn that a man kneeling with bowed head in one of the pews was Phillips. Yet some one had told him that Phillips was not a Catholic.

At last the truth dawned upon Neil: he was being shadowed by a detective employed by the firm, and this man was tracing his steps and watching his every act. The detective was Phillips.

Did Nichols know this? Nichols seemed strangely attracted to Phillips, and followed him like a dog; yet the detective appeared to make no special effort to win his friendship. Was Nichols trying to help the man in his work?

Neil's heart was hot with an anger which burned none the less fiercely because it was a fire that he must keep hidden. In this interval, to betray that he was conscious of the espionage to which he was subjected would be, he felt, to relinquish something of his self-respect. Yet the remembrance of various little happenings, that might lend color to the suspicion against him, caused him some uneasiness.

Since he had known Claire, he had been rash in expenditure, for one of his means. What generous lover is not? During his ardent courtship he had drawn recklessly against his modest bank account, and the evenings when he had escorted her to the opera and the

theatre represented to him literally golden moments. Since their engagement he had lavished presents of pretty trinkets upon her. A lover's purse is tied with cobwebs, says the old proverb; and was not Neil ready to lay all he had at Claire's feet? Nevertheless, from the time of the mysterious disappearance of a part of the sum paid by Gellett and the young man's discovery that he was being pursued by the detective, he felt that a knowledge of the free way in which he had been spending money might be construed into a confirmation of his guilt.

Matters could not go on long in this way. Accordingly, one morning Mr. Van Nostrand said to him:

'Mr. Bailey, I have concluded that now is the time thoroughly to sift the circumstances of the disappearance of the money of which you can give no account. I propose to summon two men who may be able to assist your memory as to what happened on the afternoon that resulted so unfortunately for you.'

As he spoke he touched a bell on his table.

It was Phillips who answered the call.

'Be so kind as to ask Nichols to step here,' said the senior partner, tersely.

Nichols came, smiling in an effort to appear at ease, but evidently perturbed and surprised.

'Mr. Bailey,' continued the senior partner, pointing to Phillips, 'I have to tell you that this man knows all about the disappearance of the five hundred dollars from the safe. He can name the thief. Nichols, you may as well confess. We have proof that you stole the money. Mr. Gellett is rather an eccentric man, and I found he had taken the numbers of some of the notes. With those notes you paid certain debts of your own. Tell me how you got the money out of the safe?'

Nichols grew pale as death. He cast a glance of hatred at Phillips, who had trapped him; he trembled like one stricken with the palsy, and caught hold of the back of a chair to steady himself. Denial or dissimulation would be, he knew, useless. Perhaps if he were to admit his crime, Mr. Van Nostrand might be lenient.

'Oh, sir, I did not mean to do it!' he faltered, bursting into tears. 'I knew the cash was there. Mr. Bailey told you, when you questioned him about its disappearance, that he locked the safe before he went to Mr. James Van Nostrand. I heard him tell you so—the door of the office was open and I was at my desk in the counting-room. I, too, was early that morning. But Mr. Bailey made a mistake: all the clerks were not gone home. I was still there on that evening. After he went upstairs in answer to the message from the junior partner, I came into the office. The door of the safe was almost closed, but it was not locked. I pulled it open, drew out the money drawer, and, as I expected, there lay the packet of bank-notes. It was a great temptation. My creditors were pressing me. If I had shut the door at once and fled, I would have conquered. But I took the packet into my hands, and in that moment my good resolution vanished. "Sometime I will pay it back," I said to myself. I took five hundred dollars from the packet. I might have taken all there was, but this sum would pay my immediate needs. So I thrust the rest back and locked the safe. That is how it happened. Mr. Bailey found the door locked when he returned, and thus was so sure he had made everything secure before leaving the office. Any one could lock it, but of course, not having the combination, I could not have opened it. O sir, I will work to make up the amount of the money I took. I have a wife and family who are respectable and honest, spare them this disgrace, I beg of you. Give me a chance to restore what I have taken.'

'For the sake of your wife and family, Nichols, I will not prosecute you,' said Mr. Van Nostrand, contemptuously. 'But from this day you are discharged. If you can ever repay any portion of the money, come to me and offer to do so. I shall then have more faith in your repentance.'

Nichols slunk away, and Phillips also withdrew. This was Bailey's opportunity.

'Mr. Van Nostrand,' he said, in confusion, 'although I did not take the money, I was indeed guilty of flagrant carelessness in leaving the safe unlocked. And through my negligence all this trouble has come about. To atone for it, I will not resent the humiliation of having been shadowed like a criminal, yet I have felt it bitterly.'

Mr. Van Nostrand's face clouded with regret.

'Phillips exceeded his instructions. I did not intend to have you followed, Neil,' he said, with the gentleness of a father. 'I never for a moment thought you took the money. You were too positive in asserting that you locked the safe. A young fellow like you is apt to think he cannot possibly be mistaken; I dare say I thought the same once. But the unfortunate result of your carelessness has, I am sure, taught you a