

The Storyteller

NEIL BAILEY'S DILEMMA

It was a May morning in New York, and even the great city seemed eagerly to greet the milder season. The trees in the small parks that have withstood the encroachments of commerce hung out their leafy banners as if in welcome to a gracious guest. The hitherto forlorn, scraggy bushes hidden away beyond the kitchens of the tall houses, like little floral Cinderellas, suddenly found themselves arrayed in royal robes of green; while before them, in the patches of grass in the backyards, gleamed here and there a few dandelions, like a handful of golden coins scattered by a beneficent fairy.

The sun shone, the skies were blue, the air was balmy; and as Neil Bailey walked down Broadway on his way to business, with a long, steady stride which told of his athletic training, he felt that all the energy and hope and courage of the young conqueror Spring thrilled through his own veins also. He was only one of thousands of young clerks hastening to their employment, and of thousands of older, prosperous men going more leisurely to their offices and counting-rooms. No one turned a second glance, therefore, upon his well-knit figure and pleasant, manly face.

As he crossed Union Square he noted that, in its budding foliage, it appeared transformed into a beautiful garden. Then he plunged amid the prose of life again in the vortex of the noisy thoroughfare below Fourteenth Street. And as his eyes, speeding before his feet, followed the throng that formed a black moving mass as far as his gaze could reach, he thought, with a boyish exuberance of spirits, that no individual among this multitude was so happy as himself.

For Bailey was frankly in love, and only a few days earlier 'the dearest girl in the world' had promised to be his wife. Claire Milner was convent-bred. Her pretty face had been the magnet that first attracted the young man; just as, the world over, youth finds in beauty, or its ideal of beauty, a woman's greatest charm. But, fortunately, this 'dearest girl' possessed, moreover, the qualities that go to make a good helpmate; and thus her lover had more reason to congratulate himself than even he was aware.

Neil was in the employment of the well known wool brokers, Van Nostrand and Co. His desk was in Mr. Van Nostrand's own office; and one of his especial duties at the beginning of the day was to open the safe where the books of the firm were kept, and to lock it at the close of business hours.

During the week just passed, the young man had worked particularly well. He and Claire were agreed that they could not afford to marry for a year; but the necessity of obtaining promotion in order that he might earn a larger salary, and his anxiety to make a home to which he might take his bride in the blissful future beyond this period of waiting, were spurs to his industry.

On this particular morning even the head of the firm condescended to notice his punctuality with a word of commendation.

'I am glad to see that you get to work in good season, Bailey,' said Mr. Van Nostrand, sententiously. 'To succeed in business, a man must make a practice of being in time.'

'Yes, sir,' answered Neil. And as he glanced at the clock, he saw with satisfaction that he had still five minutes to his credit.

Mr. Van Nostrand himself was not usually so early. He had reached the age and the degree of prosperity that confer the right to comparative leisure; but the recollection of his years of assiduous application made him something of a martinet in keeping those under him up to their tasks.

Neil felt that he had scored a point in the favor of the old gentleman in this apparently small matter of five minutes, and he smiled as he turned away and unlocked the safe as usual.

How often is joy changed to sadness as though by the opening of a door! The errand boy came in, and, receiving the books from him, laid them on the desks of the clerks in the counting-room outside, making several trips before all were in place. Then he went out again, leaving Neil with the senior partner. Now it was that the young man remembered a transaction of the day before.

Mr. Gellert, of Gellert and Larum, paid us fifteen hundred dollars in cash yesterday,' he said. 'I suppose, sir, I had better deposit this morning, with the cheques that came in after the bank closed?'

Mr. Van Nostrand nodded assent.

Neil opened a small drawer in the safe, took out several cheques, placed them in an envelope, and, picking up the packet of bank-notes, began to count them over. Presently he started, and an expression of incredulity and alarm flitted across his face as he counted them again. The next moment he turned to his chief, who was engaged in reading a portion of the mail.

'Mr. Van Nostrand,' he said excitedly, 'here is something apparently inexplicable! Yesterday I put the fifteen hundred dollars paid by Mr. Gellert in the safe. Now five hundred dollars of the amount have disappeared.'

Mr. Van Nostrand stared, and extended his hand for the packet.

'When did you count the money?' he inquired after several seconds of ominous silence.

'About five o'clock—shortly before we closed. I was alone here at the time.'

'And did you go home immediately after locking the safe?'

'No, sir. Mr. James Van Nostrand sent for me to go up to the warerooms.'

'Humph! My son! But you locked the safe before you went up?'

'Yes, sir. I am certain that I did; because I remember that, to make sure it was locked, I tried it again when I came down.'

'Have you ever confided the combination to any one?'

Neil was indignant at the intimation.

'I alone have the combination. Even you do not know it, sir,' he answered. 'And all the clerks were gone before I went up.'

Mr. Van Nostrand coughed dryly.

'Since, by your own showing, no one has had access to the money but you, Mr. Bailey,' he said, 'we shall hold you responsible for its disappearance.'

A hot flush swept over the countenance of the young man, and as swiftly a determined expression settled upon it.

'If you mean to insinuate that I stole the notes, sir, I beg you to accept my resignation,' he broke out impetuously. 'I will not continue in a position where my honesty is questioned.'

'I insinuate nothing,' replied Mr. Van Nostrand. 'But I naturally expect you to account for the money. That the safe could have been burglarised is impossible: there is no mark upon it to indicate that any attempt has been made to open it by force. As for your resignation, Mr. Bailey, you are not in a position to resign; and, although I have no wish to resort to harsh measures, I shall not permit you to leave us until this matter is settled.'

Neil averted his face. He realised that he was indeed in a dilemma. Of what avail was it to be angry? Circumstantial evidence was, of a truth, strongly against him. He must be patient until he could clear himself.

'One injunction I lay upon you, however,' continued Mr. Van Nostrand, without so much as raising his voice. 'Do not mention this matter of the disappearance of the money to any one in my employment, or to any one from whom my employees might hear of it.'

'And am I to remain under an unjust suspicion without making an attempt to discover the man upon whom the real guilt rests?' protested Neil.

'Mr. Bailey, you will do as I desire,' rejoined Mr. Van Nostrand. 'Further, at ten o'clock every morning you will go to the bank as usual and deposit the cheques or draw moneys as directed. Do not mention the subject of the deficit to me again, unless I refer to it.'

In gloomy hopelessness, the young clerk devoted himself to his duties; and as he sat at his desk he was rendered still more miserable by the consciousness that the senior partner was covertly watching him. He was glad enough when the time came for him to go to the bank. How he got through the rest of the day which had begun so brightly, he could not have told. He did not understand how it was that Mr. Van Nostrand appeared to trust him in one respect and not in another.

Neil was so disheartened by what had occurred that he would not have visited Claire that evening, had he not promised her a glimpse of the upper Bohemia, which is, after all, so like the other provinces of the workaday world. The girl had caught the fad of wanting to see one of the cafes where the literary men, artists, and musicians of the metropolis are supposed to congregate; and Bailey was too newly-accepted a lover to venture to disappoint her on this occasion.

But when he called for her, Claire perceived at once that something was wrong.