

"Oh, dear," uttered the dismayed Nettie, very pale now, "What did your Mr. Wilson tell him, Elsinore?"

"He told him that Mr. Lane was out of town but that she should come to the office here and sort of hang around and see if there really was anything the matter with the business. Then if he was satisfied there was no immediate danger of his falling, to go back home and visit Mr. Lane when he returned."

"Oh, thank you, dear!" said Nettie, gratefully but nervously. "I must see Mr. Ballentyne about this at once."

Nettie timidly approached the office manager when Elsinore departed. She led him aside out of the hearing of the others. Then she told him all that her friend Elsinore had revealed to her.

John Ballentyne woke up. "Still waters run deep," and the very expression of his intelligent face told Nettie clearly that in times of stress he had the firm reserve anchor of a quick intuition and the mental force to decide quickly.

"My dear Miss Durant," he said quietly and with a faint smile lurking about the corners of his lips, "this is indeed valuable and timely information. I think I am justified in telling you that business affairs here are not as they should be. We owe some bills past due and it is in the power of Mr. Manville or other creditors to close us out if they take alarm."

"Oh, I am so sorry for Mr. Lane!" quavered Nettie, ready to cry.

"But I also have every assurance," went on Mr. Ballentyne confidently, "that if we can keep the enemy at bay, and this Mr. Manville particularly, for a day or two, the business is saved."

"I sincerely hope so," murmured Nettie fervently.

"Under the circumstances I can see only one way to avoid trouble—a little harmless deceit. Mr. Manville is selfish enough to take advantage of our unfortunate situation for his own

benefit and security. I see no harm in disarming him, as no one will be injured, but all parties concerned benefited by the operation."

"What do you mean, Mr. Ballentyne?" questioned Nettie wonderingly.

And then, in a low, cautious tone, John Ballentyne imparted a plan, almost a plot, to his bright little friend. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, she gazed with admiration and reliance upon the "stone man."

"Oh, you are so clever," she breathed, and then ushered hotly, fearing he would think her too familiar.

About fifteen minutes later Mr. Manville walked into the office. His face was stern, suspicious, prejudiced.

"Mr. Lane in?" he inquired.

"No, sir," responded Ballentyne. "He is out of the city for two or three days."

"H'm! Came quite a distance to meet him. My train does not go back for an hour or two. Believe I'll sit down and rest, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, sir. Morning papers?" and in a cheery, helpful way, John Ballentyne made the dreaded guest comfortable. The latter pretended to read, but in reality kept eyes and ears on the alert, as Ballentyne knew well.

Never was a plot to inspire confidence more successful than that of John and his faithful ally, Nettie. The Lane office employees were posted as to the part they were to play.

Checks, notes, drafts and currency were flashed freely; over the telephone charming Nettie took all kinds of impossible orders. Everything about the place was brisk and busy.

Scarcely able to keep her face straight Nettie took dictation for two letters. They were addressed to two of the leading business men of another city. They showed a closeness of business interests that fairly staggered the foxy creditor, who finally arose and left the office, saying that he would come to town again in about two weeks.