

TALES OF TEN TRAVELERS.

BARRETT BILLINGSBY'S COMPASSION

BY EDGAR L. WAKEMEN.

(Copyright, 1894. All rights reserved.) An unpleasant atmosphere had settled like a dense fog upon the great Trust and Security bank.

Even ordinary civilities between officials and employees had given place to the coldest and charest of greetings, while something like frowns of suspicion and anxiety rested upon the faces of all, from President Barrett Billingsby down to jolly Harry Everett, the lusty messenger of the bank.

Only this very morning, Mr. Billingsby, as he was entering the bank, had accidentally overheard a most ominous conversation between a large depositor and one of the receiving tellers.

"What in the Old Harry's name the matter with you folks here, anyhow? Bank in trouble?"

"Eh—What? Why, certainly not! Never had a larger surplus than this very minute," replied the teller in almost offended surprise.

"That's straight?"

"Lead morally, incontrovertibly straight!"

"Well, you don't look it. Nobody has looked it here for a month. All seem to be in the dumps; seem to be in mourning; seem to have a funeral on hand. Anything to weep over, honest now?"

"Nonsense! Not a thing," returned the teller with assumed heartiness, as he blotted the entry and returned the customer's book.

"Don't believe it. Looks like speculation, or check-kiting, or the bank's been hard hit with forgery, or balloon loans. See here, now, young man," continued the customer, lowering his voice confidentially, and speaking closely to the window, "you just say for me to friend Billingsby, on the quiet, you know, that this confounded churlishness and down-in-the-mouthness, are really hurting the Trust and Security."

"Hurting it?"

"Yes, hurting it. Friends of the bank are whispering it over and shaking their heads. First thing you know here, deposits will be quietly withdrawn. Then there'll be a run. Then up you'll go! See?"

"Two million more than we can use, in the vaults," replied the teller with an incredulous smile.

"Don't matter. Two days of the right kind of a crowd'll leave the balance the other way. You just mention what I've said to Billingsby. Good morning!"

"I will, sure. Thanks!" replied the teller with genuine activity, as he shook himself into something like cheerfulness, but, on the departure of the customer, instantly relapsed into his previous look of gravity and concern.

"That settles it!" said Mr. Billingsby stoutly to himself, as he entered his private office, removed his overcoat and immediately returned to the exchange.

He passed quickly behind the oak and brass-grated partitions and moved rapidly from one little compartment to another, speaking a few quiet and earnest words to each occupant.

This had an almost electrical effect in reinforcing, whether enforced or real, that demeanor of satisfaction and general content which has often been known to stand a bank in the stead of sorely needed cash in times of great emergency and peril.

Mr. Billingsby, after observing with satisfaction the marked change his brief conference with his employees had created, returned to his private office with the remark:

"I told them I would end this annoyance at once, and now I will do it!"

With only a mere glance at a huge pile of unopened letters upon his desk, he immediately went to his telephone and gave the instrument a peremptory ring.

He made his order to the central office, and, while waiting for a response to his call, stood looking worriedly through the strong iron bars of his window into the walled court below. Suddenly he gave a little start.

"Wonder what old Everett's doing down there?" he reflected. "That's no place for him at this hour. I didn't know any of our employees had access to the court before noon or after one."

"Yes," turning to the instrument. "The Trust and Security—Mr. Billingsby's at the phone. Is that you, Dingleton? Good morning! Busy?"

A little silence ensued.

"Sorry; but can't you postpone your preliminary investigation on that jewelry robbery until a little later in the day? My word is in a measure involved in straightening out a little matter here immediately. Greatly obliged if you would step down for a few minutes—yourself, you know?"

Another short silence followed, during which Mr. Billingsby's face expressed hopefulness, perturbation and satisfaction by turns.

"All right. Very much obliged. Just run in for a few minutes on your way to the train. Um-m-m?—All right. Good-bye!"

He rang off the call; stepped to the window; peered closely about the court, and with the remark "I sometimes don't know just what to make of old Everett. But it isn't him, that's sure enough!" began a hasty examination of his morning's mail.

He was thus deeply engrossed when Dingleton, the head of a great detective agency, entered his private office, seated himself close to his desk, and, with a slight inclination of his head backward, toward the tellers and the vaults, said cheerily:

"No trouble out there, I hope?"

"Not like any of the detectives in the stories and the books, was Dingleton; those detectives with blue-black beards and black-blue moustaches, dreadful voices and steely, glittering eyes, who ramp and rend and roar through time and space, the Nemesis of avenging justice, and who should all be clapped into the vacuum of forgetfulness by one triumphant sweep of the stern hand of justice averaged."

He was a stocky, pudgy man, with a fine paunch as good living ever grew, a comfortable way of resting his hands upon it, a knobby head which had room to repose on a big neck set close down within broad shoulders, and with such a pleasant and merry smile lighting his gray eyes and pursing his kindly mouth, that any one, knowing him, would almost welcome trouble for the pleasure of having Dingleton help him out.

"Nothing serious," answered Mr. Billingsby, brightening up.

"That's good!" said Dingleton heartily. "It might lead to worse, though," continued the banker reflectively.

"That's so," assented Dingleton pleasantly. "The entire amount taken has not exceeded three months' salary of our lowest paid clerk. But the nature of the peculations is mystifying and annoying."

"Most always is," mused Dingleton sympathetically.

"One day it is in one department; the next, in another. It is never more than a bill or two of small denomination. Sometimes, again, it is even postage stamps; and yesterday a bond coupon was missed."

"Umph!" ejaculated the detective half daintily.

"You can see it is not the loss itself. It is the doubt and anxiety everyone suffers. The entire force is becoming demoralized, and, as I learned this morning, this is being unfavorably noticed by the bank's customers."

"That's bad," murmured Dingleton. "Suspect anybody?"

"No one; positively no one."

"Oh, no; to be sure." This softly and musically from the detective. "We ran out and reported on all your folks here sometime ago, Mr. Billingsby?"

"Yes, just twenty months since; when the new directory came in."

"From—ah—the president down to the messenger and night watchman?"

"Every one. Treated us all alike."

"Have you those reports handy?"

"The bank president unlocked his desk; reached into one of its compartments, and handed a small packet of neatly-rolled reports to the detective."

The latter edged his chair around a little to the light and ran them over hastily, occasionally fipping the dust from one or another.

"Too dusty?" he observed quietly.

"What do you mean, Dingleton?"

"Good idea to look such things over, about—well, about quarterly, Mr. Billingsby. Any good man can run a long way off the track in less than a quarter's time. In much less than a quarter's time," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Why, I know the habits and environment of every one of our employes like a book, sir."

"Do you?"

The detective said this so politely, so casually and yet so pointedly, that the banker instantly knew it meant: Then why these thefts, and why have you sent for Dingleton? And he flushed noticeably.

"Good showing here; remarkably good showing, Mr. Billingsby," added the detective heartily. "Have you taken on any employes since these reports?"

"Why, yes. There's old Everett."

"Old Everett?"

"He's not far beyond my age; but I've come to think of him as 'old Everett,' he's so gray-haired, quiet, ambling and hollow-eyed."

"Quiet, ambling and hollow-eyed?" repeated Dingleton with the infection of interrogation. "And what are his duties?"

"On the depositors' accounts—third or fourth assistant, I believe."

"Has access back and forth, to the vaults and passes and repasses the tellers' compartments?"

"Certainly. A dozen other employes of necessity have also. Now, see here, Dingleton, I don't want you to involve that poor old fellow in any of your detective stratagems. You fellows have a way of jumping at conclusions and then weaving all sorts of assumptions and devices to sustain your theories. Let old Everett alone. I wouldn't have him hurt with even the suspicion of a suspicion for my position here. Why, you might as well pounce upon my boy, Harry, our messenger; as thorough a personification of frankness and sunshine as ever helped bless the labors of a great city."

"Taken on together?"

"Not exactly. The old gentleman first, a little over a year since; and Harry, two or three months later, at the time our old messenger went out on a pension."

You don't mind telling me under just what circumstances?"

Mr. Billingsby flushed again. A man of his judgment, and his position, pique easily at implied criticism of policy or sentiment.

"Certainly not." This a little coolly.

"You know I believe in physical training for business men? For years I have kept up my habit of taking long walks every morning before and after breakfast; the after-breakfast jaunt always terminating here at the bank."

"Excellent idea," observed Dingleton, taking another comfortable clutch at his fat fingers.

"When the first pinch of the hard times was upsetting monetary affairs generally I made it a rule to get here unusually early. I saw a good deal on my way through the city that worried me—thousands of men out of work, hungry, distracted and desperate. One morning on reaching the bank I saw this very man, old Everett, shuffling back and forth in a panting sort of way along the side of the bank building, looking as though he were determined to do something for which he could be taken in charge by the police."

"Sort of anarchical tendencies?" suggested Dingleton dozingly again.

"Yes, if an utterly discouraged man with a boulder in his pocket and his hand clutching the boulder, may be looked upon in that light."

"Umph!" murmured the detective.

"I was miserably depressed by the condition of business affairs; but somehow I could not pass that man, and, thank God! I did not. As I stood at the corner hesitatingly our eyes met. He turned quickly and hastened away, as if he knew I were conscious of his guilty purpose. I overtook him in a moment, told him to wait about that little matter of the stone-throwing until after breakfast; soon had him outside of a hearty meal, and his story briefly told."

"Interesting, probably?"

"Yes; and sad."

"Umph!"

There was a faint flash of resentment in the banker's glance at the imperious Dingleton; but he continued,

as when one able man, in his tone and inflection rather than in his words, sets his own views stolidly against another able man's possibly differing theories.

"He was simply a man of good birth, surroundings and ambitions, a scholar, a thinker, a writer—at one time a college professor, I believe—who had drifted out of lucrative employment. Then relatives and friends fell off, one by one, and as hard times are fiercest and most merciless on this class, he had at last come to such desperate straits that his family was starving and he himself was maddened into a peculiar determination."

The detective for the first time here exhibited a trace of interest.

"It was to do something," continued the banker, "so desperate, and yet so unique and unusual, as to secure public attention to and sympathy for his family; whatever the result to himself. My timely arrival at the bank alone prevented him destroying one of our huge plate windows."

"Was this the result on his part of sudden impulse or of deliberation?" casually inquired the detective.

"Thorough deliberation, he told me, as the only means open to him to save his family from actual starvation."

"Well!"

"I examined a few letters and papers he had with him; was satisfied his situation was precisely as he represented it; gave him quite a sum of money with which to relieve the immediate necessities of his family; carefully looked up his references; and, within a week saw he had the place here in the bank which he has since filled with an almost abject and slavish regard for the minutest detail of his duties. Why, if you could just once look in his face—fifth desk to the right, book-keeping department—and in the face of that boy of his, I even think the great detective, Allan Dingleton, would melt for a moment into something like compassion for and confidence in human-kind!"

"No doubt; no doubt," the latter rejoined assuringly. But he immediately inquired with some earnestness:

"How about the boy?"

"Harry Everett? Why, he came and went with his father for time, and I was so taken with his engaging ways, his bright, energetic and chipper determination in all little things about him coming under my notice, that I gave him the place of messenger the moment it was vacant. That boy will make his mark in the world, if I am any judge of character, Dingleton."

"Rather fond of him, aren't you?"

The detective said this with a good deal of searching keenness.

"Yes, I am. I don't mind telling you, in confidence, that entirely aside from his splendid character, his face is startlingly like—like—well, Dingleton, almost every man can open the book of his life to a well-thumbed and sacred page."

"Decidedly! Decidedly!" said the detective uneasily but sympathetically.

"On that page, in my book, is the face of the first—not the only one, bless my good wife!—woman I ever loved. We quarreled about some trifling thing; and as I was only just starting then and had everything to acquire, a man of better station happened along and—"

"Of course; of course. You can't always depend on 'em. Just walked off with her, I s'pose?" interrupted the detective compassionately.

"Yes; just walked off with her. Ah, me! That was nearly twenty-five years ago. Well, Harry Everett's face is her face, Dingleton; her face as nearly as a boy's can be a woman's! But he's a noble fellow, on his own account; and I really think the world of him."

"Just so; just so! Now see here, Mr. Billingsby," remarked the detective crisply, as he fussily looked at his watch.

"You want these speculations stopped?"

"They must be."

"Well, I won't try to stop them unless I am free to stop them my way!"

The president of the Trust and Security bank arose as if about to terminate the interview with a heated protest.

"My way, mind!" repeated Dingleton quietly. But he added quickly: "We'll begin by suspecting nobody."

The banker's face relaxed.

"We'll leave the Everetts out." Mr. Billingsby took the detective's hand heartily.

"We'll just play it wide open, for general results; and shadow and 'run out' very one in the bank again thoroughly?"

"Good, good!"

"And if a supposititious 'Bank Examiner'—understand?—happens in suddenly meantime, it will be all right?"

"Certainly; certainly. I understand. Be thorough, now; so thorough that you'll come back here when we have the right party, and apologize for your half suspicions of my proteges!"

"Oh, sure, sure. Morning; morning!"

"And the two men of affairs separated; each thoroughly respecting the other, but each as thoroughly decided and determined in his own convictions."

The banker turned to his morning's mail, but his anxiety for the outcome of the Dingleton investigation was uppermost.

He tried to reason himself out of this, and to analyze his own strange disturbance of mind. The figure of old John Everett in the court, and his furtive glance up to his window, as if to assure himself that the banker had not yet arrived.

(Continued on Seventh Page.)

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