

# The STORY of the MISSING SUIT CASE.

## By George Barton.

THE reputation and the future career of a promising young American diplomat depended upon the solution of the sudden and mysterious disappearance of his suit case. The newspapers were full of it at the time, but none of them ever learned the inside facts, and they are now presented in their entirety for the first time.

The incident upon which the story hinges can be briefly summarized. Francis Lane, consul general to Pinar Islands, had been summoned from his post to appear at Washington to answer charges of gross favoritism. If not corruption, in the management of his office. The charge had been made by the powerful Consolidated Coconut company, and although Lane was absolutely innocent of wrongdoing the corporation had managed to make out a very plausible case against him.

By rare good fortune Lane got possession of a black covered letter book belonging to a rival company which furnished a complete vindication of his official acts. He packed it in his suit case, with some personal belongings, and during the voyage over never let it out of his sight. He held the suit case in his hand when the Capricorn reached her dock. When the gang plank was lowered he hurried on to the wharf, and the first person to greet him was Helen Thomson, his fiancée. The sight of her bright brown eyes and blushing cheeks threw the young diplomat into an ecstasy of delight. Involuntarily he dropped the suit case and rushed over to greet the girl. The next minute he turned to pick up his valuable piece of property. It was gone—had disappeared as completely as if the wharf had opened and swallowed it.

Lane, frantic at his loss, hurried to the custom house and told his story to Barnes, the chief inspector. When he had concluded, Barnes sat back in the revolving chair in front of the flat top desk in his office and carefully scrutinized a fly that was slowly making its way across the decorated ceiling. From the intensity of his glance it might be supposed that the fate of nations depended upon the certainty with which the insect made its journey. But although Barnes' eyes were on the fly, his thoughts were elsewhere. It was simply one of the methods he employed to concentrate his mind and to regulate and quicken his mental process. Presently the chief turned to Lane and said abruptly:

"Might I ask what passed between you and Miss Thomson?"

"It was purely personal."

"But what was it?"

The diplomat hesitated for a moment, then spoke unreservedly:

"She said John Buckingham, her guardian, was opposed to my engagement with her. She said I was a very positive man, and I said I could be very positive, too—where she was concerned."

"Haven't you even a slight clew to the theft?" asked Barnes, musingly.

Lane laughed ironically.

"One of the inspectors said he saw a man leave the wharf with a suit case."

"What was he like?"

"He didn't know, except that he had on a red cravat and wore a long rain coat."

After a long silence the chief said, indignantly:

"Come see me this afternoon; there is nothing you can do just now."

Once outside Lane started in the direction for the purpose of calling on Miss Thomson. Arriving at the brown stone residence he handed his card to the grave faced butler. Presently that functionary returned with the reply that Mr. Buckingham, as the guardian of Miss Thomson, was "averse" to the fact that Mr. Lane was at present under a cloud, and in view of that fact would respectfully request that Mr. Lane discontinue his visits and acquaintanceship with Mr. Buckingham's ward.

The unexpectedness of this blow made Lane gasp for breath. He was instantly filled with resentment against John Buckingham. What right had that person to treat him in such a scurrilous manner? He would return and have it out with him like a man. So he second thought, however, convinced him that he was under a cloud and that a careful guardian had a perfect right to look after the interests of his ward.

Early in the afternoon Lane returned to Barnes' office flourishing a letter.

"I've just received this at my hotel," he said excitedly. "Possibly you can make something out of it. I can't."

Barnes examined the letter carefully. The name and address were typewritten on a plain envelope, which was free from any other printed or written matter. The markings of the canceling machine indicated that it had been mailed at the main postoffice at 6 o'clock the night before. Inside the envelope was a round brass check and a plain headed visiting card. The metal check was numbered and had the imprint of the package room of the Grand Trunk railroad station. The card had on it in old Gothic type these words:

COMPLIMENTS  
OF  
JOHN SMITH.

Barnes paid very little attention to the check, but looked so long and earnestly at the bit of parchment that Clancy, his assistant, who stood nearby, was moved to say, with some show of impudence:

"I don't suppose you'll get any information out of that silly card."

"Who knows?" said Barnes, slowly.

He turned to the door and called to the butler:

"Bring me the black book."

The butler bowed and disappeared.

While they were waiting for the return of the black book, Barnes cleared up some of the loose threads of his investigation. A man who had been taken to "ape" the officials and employees of the Consolidated company reported that he had been unable to establish any connection between the corporation and the missing suit case. Another subordinate said he had discovered some men who wore long striped ulsters, and others who had on red cravats, but was unable to find any one with both ulsters and cravats answering that description.

"Almost absurd to send these men out," said Barnes to Lane as he dismissed the detectives. "You might as well tell 'em to go find the missing link. But some people expect us to operate in that way. It's just a tribute we pay to the traditions of the profession."

"But, measure," said the young diplomat curiously, "the motive must count."

"Assuredly. Get the motive—if you can. In your case it seems self-evident. Miss Thomson's suit case, which has felt the weight of your official hand, desires to get even with you. Of course, they have shrewd representatives in the Pinar Islands, through whom they are informed of the date of your sailing, the steamer you took and the fact that your valuable documentary evidence was in your suit case. Through your gross carelessness the suit case is stolen. Now, assuming that some one employed by the Consolidated Coconut company got the valuable bit of luggage, what do you suppose the person would do with it? Carry it to the office of the warehouse of the company? Not at all. It would be taken as far away from those places as possible. Hence the futility of searching about the premises of the company."

While they were talking Clancy bustled into the room with a letter in his hand. The moment the young diplomat saw it he gave a shout of recognition and delight. He grabbed it and quickly laid it open on a nearby table. Everything in it seemed just the same as it had been when it was originally packed. Lane hurried through it with feverish haste. As he concluded his task his face fell. One article was missing.

It was the little black bound letter book.

Lane turned to Barnes; but the chief, leaning back in his chair, was engaged in his favorite recreation of watching the fly cross the ceiling. This calmness irritated the young man.

"The letter book is missing," he snapped.

Barnes came out of his reverie; he looked at the speaker with a charitable smile.

"Of course, it's missing. It was a question in my mind whether to send for the suit case at all. Still it contains your belongings, and frequently a new move, no matter how aimless, leads to the suspicion of a clue. But the fellow who has stolen the black letter book wanted to taunt you with the sight of your suit case. He must be a vindictive cuss. He—"

The speaker was interrupted by a faint tap on the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened timidly and Helen Thomson entered. The half veiled eyes, nor could it entirely hide the fact that she was blushing most charmingly. She gave a cry of delight at sight of Lane and exclaimed involuntarily:

"I thought I should find you here."

The next moment she could have bitten her tongue for speaking so impulsively, and she hung her head, her face scarlet. Lane, overjoyed but smarting from the treatment of the morning, replied:

"I thought I'd find you at home, too, but I was mistaken."

"What do you mean?" she cried, partly recovering her self-possession.

"That I called on you and your refusal to see me."

She raised her veil, and the eyes flashed fire.

"I never refused to see you—I never knew that you called—I—"

"Oh," cried Lane grasping her meaning instantly. "Then my card was intercepted?"

She nodded her head.

The diplomat involuntarily clenched his fist. The girl noted the movement and asked him to explain it.

"He proposed to me this morning," Lane jumped to her side as if he had been catapulted across the room.

"What?" she shrieked. "That old man Buckingham?"

"He's only 45," interjected Barnes.

The interruption dampened the young man's powder. He did not finish his denunciation of the guardian. He turned to her with a query.

"You—you—he began.

"I refused him, you silly goose," with a happy smile.

He felt like hugging her. He contented himself with fresh denunciations of Buckingham. Barnes interrupted the verbal storm.

"Give me 48 hours to my own device."

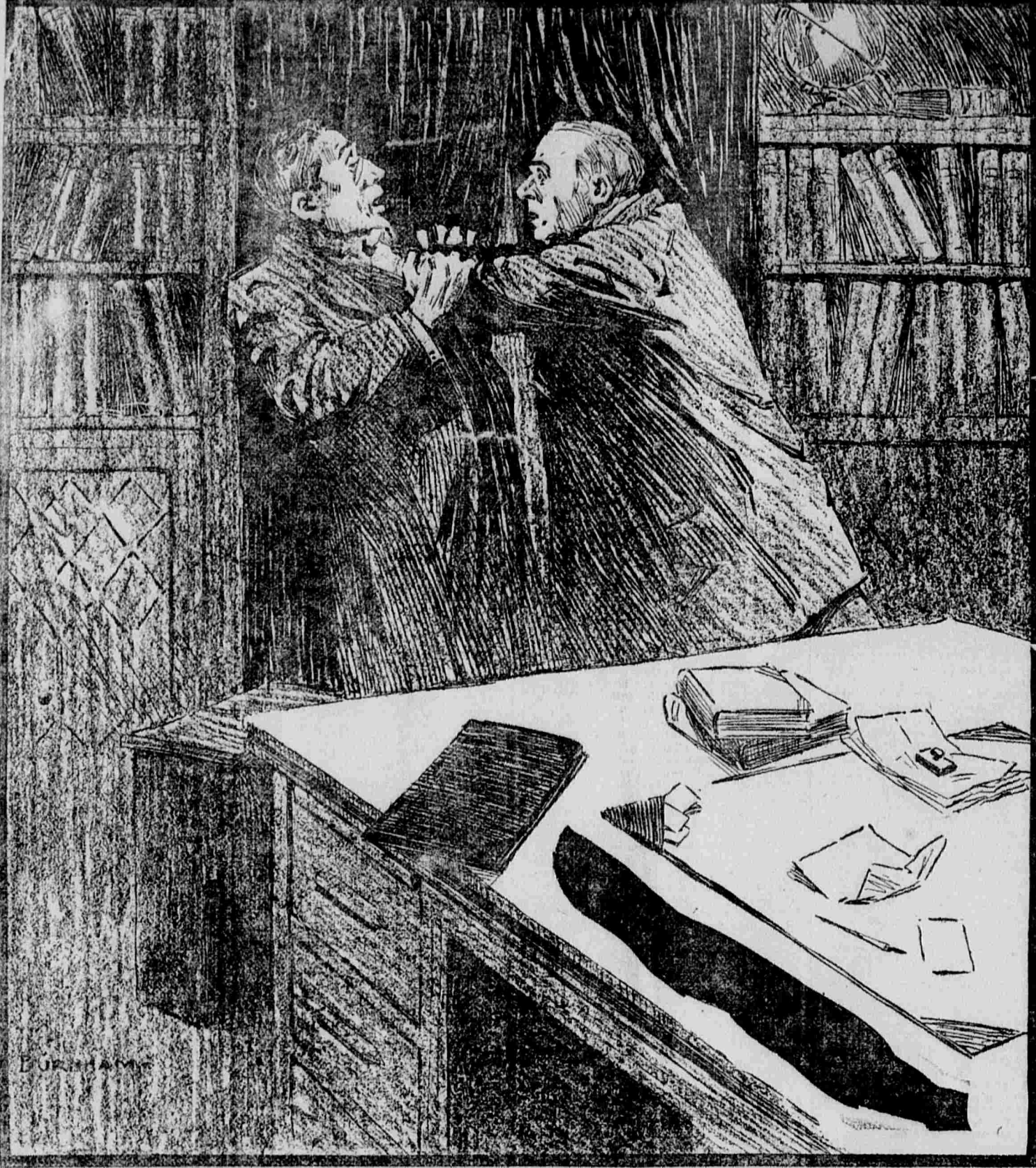
An hour later the chief began exploring the financial district. He spent the remainder of the afternoon there. The next day he took a cab and started out to visit the principal printing and engraving establishments of the city. At dusk he returned to his office and said to Clancy:

"I want you to go out with me tonight. I'm going to make a call on one of our prominent citizens."

At 8 o'clock that night Barnes and his faithful satellite hovered about the neighborhood of a three story brown stone house on the avenue. Having satisfied himself that a light was burning in the library, the chief, followed by his assistant, mounted the steps of the house and pushed the electric button. The well trained butler who responded to the call ushered them into the reception hall and solemnly accepted the card which Barnes handed him.

Giving the man time to reach the top flight of stairs, the chief whisperingly directed Clancy to remain where he was, while he swiftly and noiselessly followed the servant. On reaching the landing he heard the murmur of voices in the library. There was a scraping sound as of a chair or bit of furniture being moved, and all was silent again. Barnes did not hesitate. A handsome portiere covered the doorway leading to the room. The chief thrust it aside and stalked into the library. The servant on his way out almost collided with the newcomer. Barnes murmured something incoherent about thinking he was expected to follow the man upstairs and in the momentary play of words managed to take a mental photograph of the room.

It was a long, narrow apartment, plainly furnished. In the center of the far end, before a flat top desk, sat a squat looking, smooth faced man, who did not appear to be either young or old. He had expressionless blue eyes, which stared steadily at Barnes without betraying the slightest emotion. His large, bald head was covered with the merest fringe of faded brown hair. A broad, flat nose indicated a hardness of disposition and a mouth curled up in a sarcastic smile suggested cunning. His double chin sank in the folds of a white



SUDDENLY THE FAT HANDS SHOT OUT AND THE STUBBY FINGERS CLOSED ABOUT THE NECK OF THE CUSTOMS OFFICIAL.

collar and grazed the nap of a silk cravat. He held the chief's card in one fat little hand, while the stubby, blunt fingers of the other grasped a pen with the intensity with which one usually clutches a weapon at the opening of a battle.

This was John Buckingham, retired

ness man, stock market manipulator and guardian of Miss Helen Thomson.

He never moved those lustreless eyes from his unabashed visitor. Barnes from his vacant stare with equanimity bore the vacant stare with equanimity. There was nothing in the face to frighten him. The key to the man's power was in his pudgy hands. Presently he spoke, and while the tone was querulous the words, coming in short, jerky gasps, were fairly hurled at the intruder.

"What do you want here?"

Barnes pulled all of his mental faculties together before replying. He did not underestimate his task. It would not do to be beaten by this man with his forbidding face and masterful hands. The chief adopted his most caressing tone. He would spar for points first and later, if need be, reply with body blows.

"I beg your pardon for this intrusion, but I wanted to know if you would aid me in a little government investigation in which I am engaged?"

The blue orbs wandered feebly in the direction of the card that was still clutched in the strong hand. Again the words, short, sharp and crisp:

"You're in the wrong shop; I know nothing of customs."

"But let me tell you my story."

Without waiting for his assent Barnes went on and rehearsed the theft of the suit case down to the minutest detail. All the time he watched the face of the man before him. It betrayed merely a languid interest until the chief told about the reception of the visiting card with "the compliments of John Smith," and then, to his astonishment, Mr. John Buckingham leaned back in his chair and gave vent to a series of very loud and very disagreeable chuckles. Barnes had been hat and buried down the stairs, standing all this time. Now he cut off into a chair opposite Buckingham. He concluded his narrative by saying:

"And that black letter book is still missing."

The unwilling host yawned openly to signify that the interview was becoming wearisome. Barnes showed no mind. He leaned across the table and, lowering his voice to make it more impressive, said:

"Buckingham, I want you to give me Frank Lane's letter book."

The chief waited anxiously for the effect of his words, but the fatty face opposite him was a perfect mask. Those stupid eyes had a look of blind innocence. The curl of the lip was unchanged. But the hands! Barnes could have shouted for joy. His startling request scarcely came from his lips when Buckingham's left hand twitched and the card he was holding fluttered to the floor. At the same instant the stubby fingers on the other hand became nerveless and the pen between them fell on the flat desk.

Barnes felt instant confidence in these unmistakable manifestations. But he was fencing with a clever man, and a single misplay might spoil the game. He waited for Buckingham's response.

"There came that disagreeable chuckle again. The reply was almost languid in tone."

"If you're quite through with this nonsense I'll bid you good-night."

"Not quite. By the way, you wear a very becoming red cravat."

The upper lip curled.

"There are 10,000 men in this town wearing red cravats."

"You are still a stockholder in the Consolidated Coconut company."

"No news in that—to me."

"But you tried to keep it a secret."

"Did I?"

"Yes, and you made the corporation file the charges against young Lane. It cost me three hours of my time to find this out yesterday."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed," snapped Barnes, in danger of losing his temper.

The cynical smile about the other man's mouth deepened.

"You say this—this suit case was returned to you with the compliments of John Smith?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, then, it seems to me—if such a bright person will condescend to take a bit of advice—that what you want to do is to get John Smith."

"I have him."

"The astonishment that accompanied this declaration made Barnes blink."

"Yes," repeated Barnes, "I have."

"Where?" And the voice was loud and commanding.

The chief arose from his chair and walked quickly to the other side of the desk. He clapped his right hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Here!" he shouted. "You are John Smith!"

Buckingham's hands unloosed themselves and hung limply by his side. His

face showed no emotion. When he spoke it was with less energy than before.

"You seem positive."

"Sure; you have betrayed yourself by your sense of humor."

Buckingham's stare was a simulation of innocence.

"When you decided to send the suit case back you made a mistake. For the chief. And when you put the visiting card in the envelope with the baggage check you sealed your own fate. Any man of ordinary discernment could see that it was a specimen of card and type sent out by an engraving and printing house. The only traits required to trace it were industry and infinite patience, and I flatter myself that I have both. I visited the establishments of 16 printers today. Some had type like this and some had cards like this; but not until I struck the sixth man did I find the combination of card and type. He readily recognized it as one of a number of samples he had sent out during the week. He had a list of 10 persons to whom the samples were mailed. When I saw your name among the number I didn't bother with the others."

"Very clever," said Buckingham, with the characteristic curl of the lip. "But there is nothing about it to show that I have this—this wonderful letter book."

"Oh, you have the book all right," chuckled the chief.

"Well, with a sudden burst of anger, 'even if I had you don't suppose I'd be fool enough to keep it on the premises, do you?'"

During this unexpected show of feeling, Barnes' eager eyes had been searching the apartment. Finally, the chief's real eye on several rows of shelves, filled with books, by the side of the flat top desk. A little three step footstool, such as are found in libraries, was on the floor next to the shelves. As the sound of Buckingham's voice died out, the chief took a hurried stride and walked up the three steps of the stool. Before his companion realized what he was doing he reached up to the fifth shelf and from between two volumes of Macaulay's essays pulled out a thin, black, official looking document.

It was Frank Lane's letter book.

"Yes," said the chief triumphantly answering Buckingham's query. "You were fool enough to keep it on the premises. For a normally shrewd man you have committed all kinds of blunders. Why, you even directed me to the hiding place of this little book."

The expressionless eyes gave no sign of intelligence. Barnes continued:

"You were looking at the book when I came in the house. You might have destroyed it and possibly ruined this young man; but the same faulty which induced you to send back the suit case and to enclose the visiting card also prompted you to hold on to this book and to gleam over the mere possession of it. When your servant came up stairs I followed him, and I heard the scraping sound of the footstool when it was moved next to the bookcase in order to permit you to conceal this valuable bit of property on the top shelf. The more haste the less speed. I have eyes, and when I came in the room I used my eyes and didn't require any wonderful amount of brains to know that a shabbily bound book of this kind was out of place between two elegant looking copies of Lord Macaulay."

Buckingham dropped his eyes. He was nearing the end of his rope. He looked up presently with the air of a man about to plead for mercy. But those eloquent hands told a different story. They twitched nervously, opening and closing repeatedly. Barnes was standing by the side of the footstool. Buckingham approached him with an air of great humility, and suddenly the fat hands shot out and the stubby fingers closed about the neck of the customs official. Just when Barnes was becoming purple in the face the villain gave him a shove and threw him head first over the footstool where he lay all in a heap on the floor. Buckingham grabbed his hat and hurried down the stairs, two steps at a time. In the hallway he met with an unexpected obstruction. Something glistened ominously in the dim light, and something cold, touching the tip of his nose, sent a shiver down his spinal column. The ever faithful Clancy was back of the shining barrel, and when he spoke it was through his closed teeth:

"If you dare to move I'll shoot, and if I do you'll be sorry!"

There was a convincing earnestness about these words. While Buckingham was thinking them over Barnes, deeply mortified at having been caught unawares, slipped down stairs and dutifully fastened a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of his late antagonist.

It did not take long to prove the guilt of Mr. John Buckingham. When he first prompted the charges of the Consolidated company against Lane, he was actuated solely by his motives; but when he discovered that to his ward his aim became vindictive as well as mercenary. He had gone to the wharf to get a clandestine look at the man who was his personal and business rival. He noticed the jealousy with which Lane guarded his suit case, and when the young man rushed over to greet Helen, Buckingham, on the spur of the moment, conceived the idea of stealing the bag. It was a bold act, but he was a bold man, and he succeeded. He jumped into a waiting cab, and for want of a better direction ordered the man to drive to the Grand Trunk railway station. On the way there he broke the lock of the suit case and abstracted the letter book. Strapping the bag up again he deposited it in the package room of the station.

His first idea on reaching home was to destroy the book, but he became deeply interested in the letter and its destruction. The possession of the brass check suggested some sport at the expense of his victim. He put it in a typed envelope and, as he put it to the typewriter, he noticed that Barnes had surmised, noting the John Smith visiting card on his desk, slipped that in the envelope also.

A fortunate thing for Helen Thomson in more ways than one. While publicly pretending to lead the life of a retired merchant he was secretly a confirmed stock market gambler. He became heavily involved, and in order to tide himself over a crisis began to use the money he held in trust for the girl. His proposal of marriage, the purpose of covering up his financial transactions, his failure to run young Lane and his own delinquencies. The guardianship, foolishly arranged by his father with a man he had only known in a business way, was terminated just in time to save the remainder of Helen's little fortune.

Three weeks later, while Barnes sat in his office indulging in day dreams, the doorway was darkened by a very attractive young woman and a stylishly dressed young man.

"Let me speak to him," said the girl, two pink spots glowing on her smooth cheeks.

"No, Helen," protested the young man, laughing. "I think I should do it."

Barnes greeted his visitors warmly and then raised his hand to command silence. He spoke like a man who has made a momentous decision.

"You needn't speak. I know what you're going to say. I haven't done it for 40 years, but I'll make an exception in this case. I'll promise to dance at your wedding."

And he did.

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