

The KEY of the MISSING SUIT CASE.

By George Barton.

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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 the Florida 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.

Through your gross carelessness in the case is evident. 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.

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.

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.

"I thought I should find you here," said 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 solemn, leads to the suspicion of a clue.

"The letter book is missing," he said. Barnes came out of his reverie, 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 solemn, leads to the suspicion of a clue.

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ple expect us to operate in that way. It's just a tribute we pay to the traditions of the profession."

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

"Get the motive—if you can. In your case it seems self-evident. Mind you, I don't say it is; but it seems self-evident. This corporation, which has felt the weight of your official hand, desires to get even with you."

While they were talking Clancy bustled into the room with a suit case 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.

"The door opened timidly and Helen Thomson entered. The hat veil did not conceal the unspoken sparkle in her 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:

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"Precisely," replied the chief in his careful, measured tones. "That's what makes it valuable to me at this time. This brass check is for Mr. Lane's suit case. The chief is returning it to him in a spirit of bravado. As he was about to mail it he noticed this sample card lying on his desk. That prompted him to be witty as well as courageous, so he enclosed the card with the check, and there you are."

"But," said Com. blankly, "if you get the suit case, the mystery will be solved." The chief chuckled.

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 the for-

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.

"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—

"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

bidding 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.

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between them fed on the flat desk. Barnes felt instant confidence at these unmistakable manifestations. But he was fencing with a clever man, and a single mislay might spoil the game.

"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 ten thousand men in this town wearing red cravats."

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

"No news in that to me."

"Did I?"

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

"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."

"Where?"

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

"Here!" he shouted. "You are John Buckingham, aren't you?"

"The astonishment that accompanied this exclamation could not be mistaken."

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

"When you decided to send the suit case back you made a mistake," said 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 of 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 sixteen printers today. Some had type like this and some had cards like this; but not until I struck the sixteenth 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 ten 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 they rested 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. At the sound of Buckingham's voice he took a hurried stride and walked up the three steps of the stool. Before his companion could utter a word he was down on the floor to the fifth shelf and from between two volumes of Macaulay's essays pulled out a thin, black, official looking document.

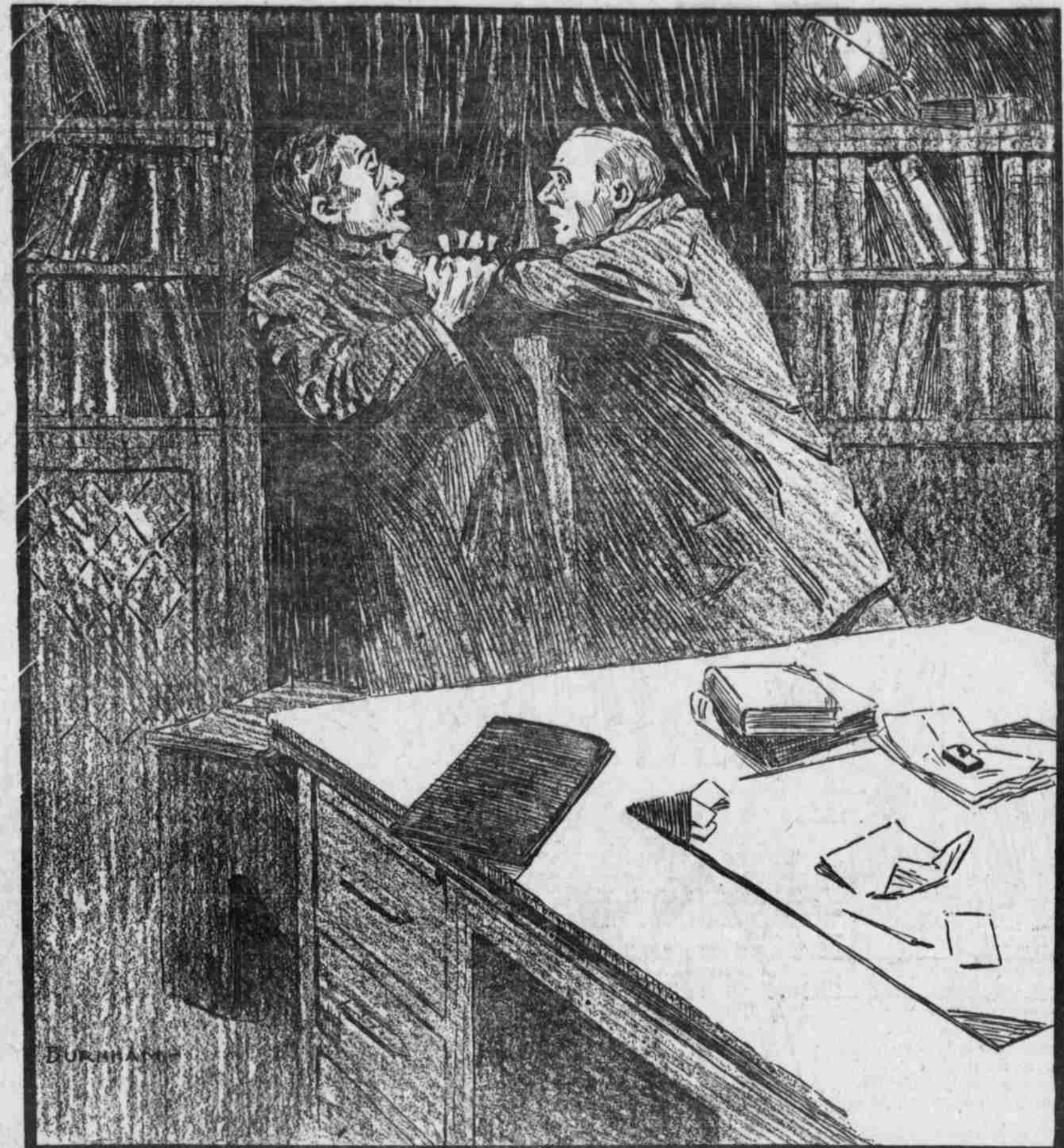
It was Frank Lane's letter book. "Yes," said the chief triumphantly, answering Buckingham's query. "You were fool enough to keep on the premises. For a normally shrewd man you have committed all kinds of blunders. Why, you even directed me to the hiding place of this little book."

"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 fatuity 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 gloat over the mere possession of it. When your servant came upstairs I followed him, and I heard the scraping sound of the footstool when it was moved next to the book case 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 I can see a man when I used 'em, and it didn't require any wonderful amount of brains to know that a shabby bound book of this kind was out of place between two aristocratic looking copies of Lord Macaulay."

Buckingham dropped his eyes. He was staring at the end of his rope. He looked up presently with the air of a man who pleads 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. 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 stairway, 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 barrier, 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 deftly 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 actually solely by means of a guarded promise. He discovered that the young consul general was engaged 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 fiancée, shrewdly guessed its contents, and when the young man rushed over to greet Helen, Buckingham's, 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 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.



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

Advertisement for Little Journeys Little Folks, featuring an illustration of children and a train.

Advertisement for My First Pants, by Ernest Arundel, age 9 years, 113 North Twenty-first street, Omaha, Neb.

Advertisement for A Trip to Bayfield, Wis., by Mildred Cane, age 16 years, Council Bluffs, Ia.

Advertisement for Building a City, indoor amusement for children, with an illustration of a city.

Advertisement for Hidden Name Puzzle, featuring an illustration of a building and a list of names.

Advertisement for Conundrums, with a list of riddles and answers.