

That Japanned Box

by Jared L. Fuller

The story of a responsible charge, a horrifying discovery, a stern chase and a mortifying outcome, suggesting the name of one Shakspeare comedy and involving a sequel that smacks of another.

“NOW, Herman, I leave things in your charge, trusting to your good sense to keep them running right,” said Mr. Allan Cameron, picking up his satchel and umbrella and preparing to leave the office of the *Smithville Comet*, “Have an eye to things today, and see if you can smell out an item or two that the *Bugle* won’t get. You needn’t bother about the editorials,” and Mr. Cameron laughed; “Wilson will attend to those when he comes in tomorrow. But I don’t limit you at all in the line of news.”

“All right, father,” returned Herman Cameron hitching his chair nearer to the desk. “I’ll keep my ‘heagle heye’ on things, as McNeal says. You’ll be home before the paper’s out?”

“I hope to; Saturday morning at the latest. There’s the whistle now, and I must hurry.” He turned toward the door and then came back quickly. “Oh, by the way, there is something of special importance I want to tell you about, Herm. Did you notice that box?”

He pointed to a japanned box which stood just inside the safe door at Herman’s back. It was about as large as a good sized lunch box, but was made of much heavier metal and was fastened with a small brass padlock.

“I want you to be particularly careful of that box. It contains papers of great value. To be frank with you, my boy, if the contents of that box should get into the hands of certain parties the entire phase of the State election

next month would be changed.”

“Do the ‘certain parties’ know you have the papers?” asked Herman, smiling.

“Yes, they do; that’s the worst of it. I should have deposited them with Fernald, I suppose, but I forgot it this morning. Old Smith and his henchmen are quite capable of committing common burglary to save their skins, and they might try something of the kind. If they should get that box, not only would our man be beaten and Smith elected but the *Comet* would be likely to go up, too. I tell you honestly, Herm, that with all those back bills and the present state of the money market, it wouldn’t take much to give the whole *Smithville* field to our friend the *Bugle*. But they’re little better off themselves, I fancy,” and Mr. Cameron, whom a dozen impending financial disasters apparently could not worry, laughed again.

Herman had been much more interested and excited for the moment in the important contents of the box. which related to the candidates in the coming election, than he was in the knowledge of the precarious position of his father’s business affairs, and he asked:

“Hadn’t I better take the box over to Mr. Fernald’s? It would be more safe in his vault than here.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s much danger of their trying such reprehensible means of getting the papers into their possession. Another thing: Fernald is going,

away with me and is doubtless at the station now while I am fooling around here. Just take care that nobody whom you haven't perfect confidence in goes near the safe. There's no one in our employ—by Jove! there's Chittenden. I had forgotten him."

"Who? The new man who took Frank Jackson's place?"

"Yes, and he's a better man than Jackson in every way; but I don't know him. He brought no references that I know anything about, nor do I know anything about him personally. Still, he's all right, I fancy, so don't you be prejudiced by what I said, Herman. He seems like a first rate fellow. There, I must go! Good by."

The office door slammed and Herman heard his father go down the stairs two steps at a time, and glancing out of the window he saw him making a quick run to the railway station where the train was already standing.

Herman Cameron was a bright fellow just out of college, with no small literary taste and some journalistic ability which his father had sought to cultivate to its fullest extent. He was familiar with all the practical workings of a live semi weekly like the *Comet* and was deeply interested in the town's political situation, which at the present time was extremely stormy.

Smithville was named for a man who not only possessed a vast mill property in that part of the State, but who had a great amount of political ambition. He had just about "run" not only the town, but the county, for ten years or more, and seeing an opportunity to make the *Comet* a power in the State, Mr. Cameron had organized, with Judge Fernald, Mr. Smith's opponent for a legislative seat, an opposition faction which, by divulging certain shady transactions of the Smithville magnate, a knowledge of which had come into their possession, would thin the ranks of Smith's supporters so that there would be little doubt of his defeat.

It was, in fact, a plan to cripple the "machine," and put new and better men in power.

Mr. Cameron's suggestion that Smith's friends might make an attempt to obtain the papers in the case by force (they had already sought to buy them from the opposition) gave the affair a coloring of excitement that pleased Herman greatly, and he sat idly before the desk for some time after his father's departure, picturing to himself the manner in which the precious box might fall into the hands of Smith.

"But, great Scott, I forgot all about Kingsley!" exclaimed Herm, jumping up out of his day dreaming. "If I'm to take charge of the office I can't ride over to Dover with him this afternoon. I'll telephone him."

The telephone was in a closet at the right, where the operator could shut out all the noises of the office or the press room beyond, and before stepping inside to call up his friend, Herm snapped the lock which fastened the office door. Any one might come in, go to the safe, and get safely away again without being heard from the telephone closet.

After calling up his chum and explaining the difficulty in the way of his taking the run to Dover, Herm returned to the office.

As he approached his desk the breeze from the open window sent a slip of paper fluttering to the floor at his feet Picking it up he thrust it into the waste basket without vouchsafing it a glance and unlocking the outer door returned to his work.

He had hardly done so when a quiet step sounded on the stairs and the door opened, admitting a young man, one of the "staff" of the *Comet*, Chittenden by name.

It was the new man whom Mr. Cameron had mentioned as the only person about the office whom he had not known long enough to trust implicitly, and naturally Herm glanced at him with some curiosity.

He was favorably impressed with Chittenden at once. The man was not over twenty four or five, with clear cut, rather aristocratic features, a skin as fair and smooth as a boy's and with a thin, drooping, straw colored mustache.

Chittenden's face was not particularly attractive, but it was a perfectly honest face and inspired Herman with confidence at once, and he immediately banished from his mind all thoughts of his father's suggestion.

"So you and I are to run things today, are we?" inquired Mr. Chittenden with a smile, going to his own desk before the window and spreading out a bundle of notes preparatory to making a transcription for the printers.

"Yes," responded the proprietor's son. "Father's gone to the convention and won't be back until Saturday, maybe, and Mr. Wilson won't be in until tomorrow."

"We ought to get something sensational while they're gone, so as to prove ourselves worthy of the *Comet*," said Chittenden, with a smile, as he sharpened a lead pencil.

"Yes, we ought, but unless you're a great deal luckier than any one else so far this week I'm afraid we shan't get anything of exciting interest," replied Herman, looking over a little pile of manuscript on his desk. "An account of that break down at the upper mill, a runaway, and a dozen or so personals are all that have been handed in so far."

"Well, I've got the court notes—though there's nothing of special interest in 'em—and just as I came in a fellow told me that the 11.30 train blew out a cylinder head just as she was starting and was delayed until they could run another engine up from the yard."

"Is that so? Then father needn't have hurried after all," replied Herman, and then there was silence in the office for some time.

Herman had just finished editing a

particularly bad batch of copy from an out of town correspondent when the office door opened timidly and he looked up to see a young lady standing upon the threshold.

"Is this the office of the *Comet*?" she asked.

Herman bowed politely. She was a rather prettily dressed young woman, and had nothing of the appearance of the numerous bores who infest newspaper offices.

The lady advanced into the room, closing the door behind her. At the sound of her voice Chittenden had turned sharply about and for an instant their eyes met.

She blushed furiously, but the man turned away his head at once and she shortly recovered her composure.

Herman who had hastened to place a chair for his guest, was, however, oblivious to this by play and seating himself at his desk again waited for his visitor to divulge her business.

"I came in to give you an account of a garden party held for a charitable object at Abbotsfield, last night," said the young lady. "We saw no reporter from the *Comet* there, and thought you had possibly overlooked us."

"I feel sure that it was an unintentional oversight," Herman hastened to assure her. "We had not heard of it before. Let me thank you for coming in, before you give me the facts," and he pulled his pad toward him and picked up his pencil.

Just at this instant Chittenden arose and came to the desk.

"Here is my report of the court proceedings," he said, in a voice which sounded strange and unnatural.

Young Cameron looked up quickly and as he did so saw a piece of paper flutter from Chittenden's hand into the lap of the young lady by his side. Greatly to his surprise her hand closed upon it quickly and, except for a deeper flush, she betrayed no knowledge of the occurrence.

Herman was immeasurably astonished, but the young lady began rapidly to give him an account of the Abbotsfield garden party to cover her embarrassment, and he was forced to pay attention to what she said.

Abbotsfield was the aristocratic portion of Smithville and it would never do for the *Comet* to slight any occurrence of more than ordinary interest in that locality.

Meanwhile Chittenden had returned to his desk and picking up his hat, passed between the back of Herman's chair and the safe, as the visitor was on the other side of the desk, and went hastily out.

The young lady remained ten minutes or so longer and then, after gracefully acknowledging Herman's thanks, withdrew.

The young journalist read over his short account of the party, adding a word or changing an expression here and there, and placed the manuscript on top of the others on the desk.

"But I just wonder who she is and what connection there is between her and Chittenden. Isn't he a sly dog, though?"

He pushed back his chair, rose, and glanced casually into the safe. The next instant he gave a shout that might have been heard across the street.

The japanned box with the brass padlock, the box which his father had left in his especial charge, had disappeared!

For a moment Herman was almost stunned by the discovery, but he was quick to think, and an explanation of the mystery crossed his mind at once.

"Oh, what a chump I am!" he groaned, slamming the heavy door of the safe and seizing his hat from a hook near by. "The whole thing was a put up job on me. But wasn't it slick? I'd never believe such a nice appearing girl would have anything to do with such a dirty piece of business."

He dashed open the composing room door and sang out for the foreman.

"Look out for the office, McNeal," he shouted. "I'm going out"

Another moment he was tearing along the street, where, nearly three blocks ahead, he caught sight of the trim figure of the girl who had been

Chittenden's confederate in the abstraction of the japanned box. What he should do when he caught her he did not stop to decide.

But as fortune willed it, he did not catch her. When he arrived, breathless, at the corner around which she had turned, he saw a private carriage just driving away with the object of his pursuit inside.

The carriage, it did not take a second glance to tell him, was that of the Hon. Jason Smith, and oh, ye gods and little fishes! the young woman must have been the great mill owner's niece.

Herman had never met the lady in question, but this was the most feasible explanation of her connection with the plot which had resulted, for the Smith faction, so successfully.

"Like enough that Chittenden got on the *Comet* for this very purpose," groaned Herman, gazing helplessly after the fast disappearing carriage. "Perhaps he'll meet her somewhere and deliver the box into her hands, to be given to old Smith."

Suddenly he was struck by another thought. The carriage was not going to Abbotsfield at all, but in quite the opposite direction. It had turned up the road toward Fairfax Park, in fact.

A horse car line ran between the center of the town and the park, but at this time of the day the cars ran only every half hour.

Perhaps Chittenden was to meet the young woman at the park and there deliver the box. A car had started in that direction just ten minutes before; Chittenden had left the office at the right time to catch it.

"By Jove! there may be a chance to do something yet," thought Herman, bounding

back toward the office. "I'm a match for that fellow any day in a rough and tumble, and if the coachman don't interfere I may be able to get away with the box."

His bicycle, which he had ridden down town that morning, intending to run over to Dover upon it with Kingsley, stood in the lower hall of the *Comet* building. Trundling the wheel into the road, he was speedily in the saddle and was riding by the shortest cut in the direction of Fairfax Park.

Young Cameron was an enthusiastic wheelman, and was always prominent in the fall races, but never in his life had he done such work as he was doing now. It was a good road to the park—better for wheels in fact than for horses—and a bicycle was probably never before so swiftly propelled along that particular turnpike.

Not alone did he wish to recover the papers for the purpose of assisting in Mr. Smith's overthrow, but he now vividly remembered his father's declaration that if the opposition to Mr. Smith was beaten the *Comet* would go to the wall.

It meant, a good deal more to him than the mere fact of a corrupt politician winning an honorable position which he did not deserve; his father's honor as well as his business was at stake.

It was four miles to Fairfax Park. The park was a generous strip of land which had recently been presented to the town, and which had thus far been but little reclaimed from its wild state.

There would likely be but few people there, and if by a sudden attack he could regain possession of the box, Herman was determined to do it.

If Chittenden *did* meet Mr. Smith's niece and give her the box before his arrival, and he should meet the carriage returning, Herman felt even desperate enough to play highwayman, stop the carriage, and try to recover the precious box by force.

With such chaotic thoughts as these he pedaled on, covered with the dust which arose from the road, his face dripping with perspiration.

Not far from the entrance to the park Herman passed the horse car returning. Chittenden was not aboard. A few minutes later he arrived in sight of the entrance from which a wide, hard path led into the woods to the shore of the little lake.

Before this entrance stood the carriage of the Hon. Jason Smith, with his liveried coachman sitting stiffly upright on the box and the pair of glossy black horses impatiently pawing the ground. Neither Chittenden nor the young lady was in sight.

Like a flash Herman passed the carriage, the passage of the wheel setting the blacks to prancing until the coachman had his hands full in holding them. Without the slightest decrease of his speed the youth sped down the wood path, around the first turn and then—the objects of his chase were before him.

Beside the path stood Chittenden and the girl. The japanned box was nowhere in sight, but for the moment the surprise he felt at the scene quite overwhelmed everything else in his mind.

Chittenden stood with his arms about the girl, and her face was hidden on his shoulder.

Herman sprang off his wheel, the young lady gave a little scream and broke away from the man, while the bicycle rolled off at its own discretion into the bushes.

"Who is it?" exclaimed Miss Smith, evidently greatly frightened at Herman's sudden appearance.

"Upon my soul, it's young Mr. Cameron!" gasped Chittenden. "What is it? Is anything the matter at the office?"

Their surprise had given Herman time to collect his thoughts. There was nothing guilty in the appearance of either Chittenden

or the young lady, although he *had* discovered them in a rather embarrassing position.

A chill went all over him as the fact was brought home to his mind with a certainty that was not to be disbelieved. *These two had nothing to do with the disappearance of the box!*

"What's the matter?" repeated Chittenden anxiously, seizing Herman by the shoulder.

Looking into his honest eyes, young Cameron wondered how he could ever have thought him a party to such a plot.

"The papers—a box of papers have disappeared from the safe," said Herman, feeling fearfully uncomfortable. "They are very important and father left them in my charge particularly."

"And you thought I took them?" demanded Chittenden, more in sorrow than in anger.

"I don't know what to think," declared Herman desperately. "They were papers relating to Mr. Smith and have a bearing on the election. Father said that the 'machine' might try to get them in some way and told me to watch them carefully. I noticed that you passed a note to Miss Smith while she was in the office and as soon as she went out I discovered the loss of the box. It naturally made me suspicious. I thought you took the box out with you while Miss Smith secured my attention."

Chittenden burst into a ringing laugh.

"I beg your pardon, Cameron," he said, "but this must be the 'something sensational' we want for the *Comet*, and you have woven a very good bit of sentiment out of it indeed. But we can hardly blame you for your suspicions, can we, Mary?"

"I'm sure I think the circumstances would bear him out," returned Miss Smith kindly. "But what will you do about the loss of the papers?"

"That's what I don't know," replied

Herman helplessly. "If they are gone the *Comet's* as good as dead."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Chittenden seriously. "What did you say the papers were in? A box? Stay!" he exclaimed; "was it a japanned box with a brass padlock, and a wooden handle on the top?"

"That is it to a T."

"Then I saw your father with it just before I came into the office this noon."

"But father's gone away—went on the 11.30, you know."

"Why, don't you remember I told you the 11.30 was delayed? Your father certainly came out of the *Comet* building and went across the street to Judge Fernald's office just before I came in with my court notes. The train was standing at the station then, waiting for the engine."

Herman thought rapidly a moment.

"I have it," he exclaimed. "I went into the closet to telephone to Fred Kingsley. Father spoke of locking the box up in Mr. Fernald's vault and, finding the train delayed, he must have come back, got the box, and carried it over there. He had a key to the *Comet* office and could have got in, although I locked the door when I went in to telephone. But why didn't he leave me word?"

"Perhaps he did, and you have overlooked it among the papers on your desk," suggested Chittenden. "Come, I want to see this mystery cleared up. There will be no objection to Mr. Cameron's riding back to town in your carriage, eh? And I'll use the wheel. What a story this would make if it were possible to write it up for the *Comet*."

But Herman was still too anxious to realize the journalistic beauties of the situation and eagerly followed Miss Smith to the carriage. Then they went back to town, Chittenden keeping a little ahead of the carriage all the way.

Miss Smith seemed to consider it her duty to explain the embarrassing situation of

herself and Chittenden and the cause of their meeting secretly in the park.

Mr. Smith, who was her guardian as well as uncle, was violently opposed to Chittenden as a husband for his niece, and as he held all her property until she was twenty one, she and the journalist had determined to get married at once and wait until the law should give them what was due her from her father's estate.

Chittenden had come to Smithville for that purpose, and in a few days they expected to be quietly married and then let Mr. Smith do what he pleased. And would Mr. Cameron please keep their secret for a few days?

Of course Herman promised and secretly hoped that there would be no hitch in the arrangements, and that the mill owner would receive still another set back.

Miss Smith dropped him at the corner nearest the office and Herman and Chittenden hurried up stairs.

"Look among all your papers and on the floor—even in the waste basket,"

suggested Chittenden, as they entered the room. "Look here; what's this?"

He plunged his hand into the basket beside Herman's desk and drew forth a crumpled piece of paper.

Herman recognized his father's handwriting upon it and seized it at once. Smoothing it out he read, with a feeling of great relief, as follows:

DEAR HERM:

Train delayed, so I could ran back, and get box. Fernald will put it in his vault, so have no further worry about it. Yours,

A. C.

To complete my story I should like to add that Chittenden and Miss Smith were married, and that the Hon. Jason Smith was defeated by his political opponent. The *Comet* is still booming, with Chittenden in the editorial chair.