

Solved by Woman's Curiosity

By FRANK H. WILLIAMS

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Susie Cunningham had been sick—more sick at heart than anything else—but so sick that she hadn't been able to work for days. Now she was slowly recovering, though there was a sad, wistful look in her eyes that hadn't been there before her illness and a dull ache at her heart that seemed as though it would never leave her.

The trouble was that—young John Hammond, the cashier in the office where she had been employed and to whom she had been engaged, had disappeared, his accounts had been short and there had been but a brief word of explanation to Susie for his conduct. It was this brief word which had brought on Susie's illness.

The only message from John since his disappearance had come to her on a postal card on the day after he failed to come to work. It had been mailed from a nearby town and it bore these words in John's unmistakable handwriting:

"Dear Susie: I've treated you pretty roughly. Please forgive me. I was married here today. Forget me, John."

Of course Susie hadn't believed that John was a thief—she didn't yet, even these many weeks after his disappearance when the shortage still stood unexplained against his record. It was not because of the charge of theft against John that her illness came, it was because of those words on the postcard. "I was married here today."

She had loved him so deeply, devotedly, wholeheartedly. There had never been any man in her life save John. Everything had looked so rosy for them too. The little bungalow in which they were to have lived was nearing completion and they were just in the midst of happily buying furniture for it when the blow fell.

No wonder there was a wistful look in Susie's eyes, and a droop to her young lips, and an unfading ache in her heart.

Small wonder, too, that now, two weeks after John's disappearance, as Susie was getting her normal strength back, there should be a deep and abiding curiosity in her soul.

Who was it that John had married?

It was because this curiosity demanded an immediate answer that Susie, as soon as she was able, went to the neighboring town of Brampton, where the fatal postal card had been mailed, and bravely mounted the steps in the courthouse to the office of the county clerk.

"I want to look at the marriage license book, please," she said to the clerk.

The clerk, looking at her curiously, shoved a big book across the counter to her.

Susie covertly referred again to the postal card to make sure she had the right date when it was mailed in mind. Then quickly she thumbed through the pages until the proper date was found and then went over the licenses issued on that day, one by one.

When, some moments later, Susie left the courthouse there was a new light in her eyes and new resolution in her step. Her curiosity was satisfied, but in satisfying her curiosity she had found something that she must do—a task which she must put through as quickly as possible.

In furtherance of this task she did some telephoning to several different people at a public booth. Then, late in the afternoon, she boarded the train for home.

In the train she examined her postal card from John with new interest. She held it to the light; she viewed it from different angles, all with a new purpose in mind.

At last, as she caught the light on the card from a new angle, she gave a little gasp. She had discovered something—something very much worth while.

Susie returned to work the next day.

Of course there were many expressions of sympathy from fellow employees and from the executives, for her story had become known in the office on the day when she had received the postal. (Susie had promptly fainted upon receiving it, and the card had then been read by the others in the office.)

But now Susie showed little of the effects of her illness.

At the noon hour she ate lunch with one of her firm friends, Anna Habecker.

"What's new at the office, Anna?" Susie asked. "What are they doing about John? Who's doing his work?"

"They've been trying to trace John everywhere, but haven't got a single hint where he is," said Anna. "Otto Duemling is doing his work."

Duemling had been John's assistant before John's disappearance, and upon returning to the office Susie viewed Otto with great interest. Never before

had she paid much attention to him, but now she looked at him carefully and thoughtfully.

She saw in Duemling a sleek young man of not very prepossessing appearance and no outstanding characteristics. There was nothing about him that marked his personality. He was self-effacing, very evidently efficient, and not very much inclined to hobnob or chat with the other employees.

All the afternoon Susie was busily thinking of the task she had set for herself. There was a certain definite something she must do that night, a something which rather made her shiver as she contemplated it.

And it was to enable her to do this definite something that Susie, before leaving the office that afternoon, slyly unfasted one of the ground floor windows.

It was 1 o'clock that night before Susie felt the time was propitious for doing this thing she had decided must be done. At that hour the night was pitch dark—there was no moon—and the town was almost wholly silent.

Through the night Susie stole to the window she had unfasted. Softly she raised this window and crept into the dark office, her heart beating furiously and only her determination to go through with the task she had set herself enabling her to push onward.

In the office she made her way past the furniture to the desk which had been John's.

There was a certain locked drawer in this desk she wanted to investigate.

A handy, heavy envelope opener enabled her to pry the drawer open. Greedily she caught up the papers in the drawer and took them to an inner room, where she cautiously turned on a light.

A tremulous sigh of satisfaction came from her as she examined the papers.

"I thought so," she exclaimed to herself. "I thought so!"

But hark, what was that?

Some one was stealthily opening the side door into the office.

Susie switched off the light. Fear clutched at her soul. What if she should be discovered?

She heard the sound of voices and finally made out that the intruders were a man and a woman.

She heard them move to the far end of the room, where the vault was located. Peering through the door she saw the flash of a light, then heard the sound of a clicking. The door of the safe was being opened.

Susie, taking all her determination and courage in hand, crept from her hiding place into the larger room and down the darkened aisles toward the

little partitioned space where the huge vault was located.

As she came nearer she saw that the door of the vault was open. She crept to one side and looked into the vault. By a candlelight held in the hand of a man she saw that with his companion, a woman, he was opening the drawers at the back of the vault where the firm's money was kept.

She heard the two talking distinctly. The woman spoke first.

"It sure was lucky for you that Hammond had to leave so suddenly," said the woman.

"Sure was," said the man. "It was a great chance—chance of a lifetime. Trust me to grab it. I've been afraid his old mother out West would croak before this and he'd come back before I could get enough money in this vault to make it worth while to take it."

"Well," said the woman, with a short laugh, "the stuff you've already taken and charged up to Hammond isn't so bad, you know."

"Not so bad," said the man. "That was a happy thought—forging that postal and sending it to Hammond's girl—that put the final touch of truth to the thing."

A wild rage surged in Susie. She leaped at the vault door, banged it shut and whirled the combination!

Some days later Susie was safe in John's arms.

"That was an outrageously clever forgery," John cried, looking at the postal which had caused Susie so much pain. "Otto intercepted the letter I sent to you telling about my mother's sickness and traced words from that letter onto the postal. Later he inked them in. It was just his luck that there were words in the letter which enabled him to make the message the postal carried."

"Yes and then he got all the other letters you sent me and held them out. I found them in his desk the night we arrested him and that girl he was with."

"But what I can't understand," said John, "is how you got started on finding out the truth."

"Easy enough," Susie smiled. "My woman's curiosity took me to Brampton to see whom you'd married. I looked at the marriage licenses and I called up the ministers. And I found you hadn't been married at all."

"And, oh, dearest," she cried, holding him tight in her arms, "I was so glad!"

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