

# A "Con" Contretemps

## The Story of a Slow Touch and a Quick Get Away

By Kenneth Harris

YOU don't need to tell me that luck don't beat brains," said Honest John, a melancholy smile on his open and ingenuous countenance; "I know better. I've got all the brain I need in my business, but my luck is right out. Here's Cock-eyed Davis, with no more intelligence than a can of clam chowder, goes out on Saturday night with a pig of iron ripped from the foundry yard, and decorated with radiator gold paint, and comes back with enough long green to paper the front parlour. That's what. I sit down and evolve some original plan for the relief of the bundle-bearing—something neat, artistic and plausible, fresh, whiskerless and inviting, and my luck backs me against the ropes and puts it all over me when I try to carry it out. Sometimes I think a man might just as well plug along in the same old rut and never try to be a credit to his profession."

Honest John shook his head sadly, and delicately removing a speck of dust from his immaculate linen with a flick of his long white finger, continued, in the low and exquisitely modulated voice that was one of his most valuable assets:

"Last week I got into a street car. It was jammed tight and hard, and if I had wanted to lower myself I could have made a touch or two without any trouble. I've got too much self-respect for that, though. It's all very well for a kid, or a man who hasn't any capacity for headwork, to sink his hooks into wearing apparel; but I've got a reputation to sustain. There was a diamond locket that looked like the real goods, and the bulge of a watch pressing into my side and causing me real inconvenience, but I never attempted to remove either one. Not me. I doubt whether I'd have touched them if I had known the stones were all right and the watch eighteen carat."

"Well, at Eighteenth-street an old gent got on the car and squeezed through to the strap-hangers. He was a prosperous-looking old stiff, but grouchy in his manner. A young fellow who had got in on the first rush and grabbed a seat got up and offered it to the patriarch. Think he got any thanks for it! Not at all. His Whiskers just plunked himself down on the carpet upholstery as if he was entitled to it and anything else he happened to fancy, and pulling out an evening paper, began to entertain himself. The young man seemed to take it as a matter of course, but I was willing to bet that he was mad."

"I reflected on the incident. I'm of a reflective turn of mind, and when I ponder I generally turn my ponderings to account some way. It occurred to me that the old gent was one born to threaten and command—also to grab for what he wanted without any consideration of the convenience or the feeling of anybody else. That being the case, he was probably sinfully rich. As for the young man, it was equally plain that he was of the genus sucker—a amiable sucker, perhaps, but a sucker still. I seemed to smell blood every time the front door opened and the wind blew in from him to me. He was my diet, undoubtedly. But how was I to get at him?"

"Here's where brains count. At Thirty-first street there was a grand get-off. My natural prey got off. The elderly hog also alighted. I kept right on. I was due farther on. I didn't want to make myself too conspicuous, either. I had formulated a little plan. I still have an office, or, rather, an interest in one. Frankfurter Steggs, Headlight Johnson, and a few more of us, the elect, have an office between us. Sometimes it's one place and sometimes another, but it's always temporary. Frankfurter had just clear-

ed off a get-rich-quick novelty agency in it, and Suds Montgomery was holding it down, with Winsome Winnie in the role of stenographer, while he sold some half interests in a mine I owned. My name was Miguel Saltero—you may have seen it—and I was just in from Mexico. But that isn't here nor there.

"I went down and put an ad. in the paper:

If the young man in the light overcoat and dotted blue necktie, who gave his seat to an elderly gentleman in the Indiana Avenue car on the night of November 20, will call at Suite 49, Boracic Block, he will hear something to his advantage.

"Did he bite? What are suckers for? Why, he jerked my arm off, in a manner of speaking. It was 1:01 p.m. when there was a modest rap at the door of suite 49, and I heard Winnie say she'd see if I was engaged. Next moment she showed in my courteous young friend and went back to thump the everlasting gizzard out of the typewriter. She's a peach, is Winnie!

"I motioned him, in my best business manner, to a seat—no glad-hand work of a coarse nature. Then I said, 'You have called in answer to my advertisement?'

"Yes, sir," he replied; "I think perhaps I am the man you want."

"You answer my client's description exactly," I said; "I think there can be no mistake about it. Still, it is well to be certain. You were on an Indiana Avenue car the night before last at about half-past eight, were you not? And you chivalrously offered your seat to an old man?"

"I don't know about the chivalrous part," he said; "but I gave up my seat, all right."

"I rejoice to see that you are modest," I said. "I have no doubt that it seemed to you a perfectly natural action in no wise remarkable or deserving of especial credit, yet, believe me, such consideration for age is rare, and when met with should be recognised. That is the view my client takes of it."

"Who is your client?" he asked, and somehow, from the snappy way he asked the question, I had a faint, dawning suspicion that he wasn't precisely the pudding my fancy had painted him; yet, as I gazed on his fine, boyish countenance, I dismissed the thought as unworthy of me. Suspicion is not a thing that I have ever felt I could afford to entertain. I operate on the theory that every man has a Jay streak except me, and I win ninety-nine times out of every hundred. If I thought my fellow-creatures were taking advantage of my ignorance to con me, how long do you reckon I'd stay in the profession? No, sir; the guy who is all the time looking for the worst of it gets it.

"I'm sorry that I'm unable to satisfy your natural curiosity," I said. "My client is an eccentric man. He has the reputation of being a hard man among his business associates, and it is possible that the reputation has contributed to his business success very largely. In any case he is careful to do nothing open that would alter the—rather hard judgment the world passed on him. Do you understand me?"

"I think I do," he said.

"As the poet remarks, he 'does good by stealth and blushes to find it fame?'" I continued. "A man of rather forbidding exterior, as you may have noticed, and of brusque manners, he has got a wealth of kindness, and a generosity that almost amounts to prodigality."

"I'm glad to hear you speak so well of him," said the young man. "You must know him well."

"I know him as few do," I declared. "For years he has made me the instrument of his secret benefactions. Why, young man," I cried in a burst of enthusiasm, "if the world only knew the hap-

piness James P. Tapeticker has conferred on the poor but deserving men and women whose necessities have been brought under his notice it would have a different opinion of him."

"James P. Tapeticker!" repeated my young friend thoughtfully.

"Pshaw!" I said; "I've let the cat out of the bag now with a vengeance. Well, well! I don't see what I could have been thinking about. I wouldn't have had that happen for anything. James would never forgive me if he knew I had been so careless. I wasn't cut out for a diplomat, and that's a fact. Perhaps, though," I added, "you recognized Mr. Tapeticker before you gave up your seat to him?"

"If I had," he said earnestly, "I wouldn't have expected any gratitude from him. Do you think I could have?"

"No," I answered. "Pray forgive the question; but, whatever you do, don't mention the fact that I inadvertently disclosed his identity. He's so sensitive on that point that I know he would instantly reconsider the idea of rewarding your kindness. I should regret that."



He got out of that spasm and went into another.

"So should I," said the young man quite fervently, and with a sparkle of cupidity in his eyes.

"I think it would be better, in fact, not to mention the matter to any one," I suggested. Then I pulled a tablet toward him and asked him to write his name and address. He wrote: "Henry B. Jones, 6315 Wichita Avenue."

"What is your business, Mr. Jones?" I asked.

"I'm a clerk," he replied. "Not highly salaried, I presume? Clerks seldom are."

"£8 a week," he answered.

"Oh!" I said blandly, "I don't suppose you would object to waking up some fine morning and finding yourself the possessor of—say £1000?"

"The expression on his face was sufficient reply."

"Your habits are good, I take it for granted," I went on. "You're not a spendthrift, I hope?" Mr. Tapeticker has a horror of that quality in youth. Do you save?"

"I've nearly £40 in the bank," he said rather boastfully. "If I had £1000 I'd invest it in a business of my own."

"Good!" I said with a benevolent smile. "Well, Mr. Jones, I'm very glad to have met you, indeed, and you will hear from me again."

"I pushed back my chair, intimating that the meeting stood adjourned, but he lingered. I sort of thought he would."

"Do you think he will really make me a present of £1000?" he asked anxiously.

"It's possible that it may be more," I said. "If you really want to know, I'll tell you what Mr. Tapeticker's intention is. He will ask you, through me, of course, if you would like to have him invest your little savings for you. He takes this method in order that his beneficiaries may preserve their self-respect in a manner that they could hardly do, perhaps, if he made them an outright, downright gift of so much money. It amounts to the same thing in the end, of course. I've known him to take £200 from an invalid scrub woman in whom he was interested, and within two days send the poor creature a cheque for £200. With his control of the market, and his intimate knowledge of stocks, it was not a difficult thing to do."

"I should say not," said Mr. Jones; "from some of the deals he's been making lately, I should judge he might have made it £400 just as easy. He's a wonder! It seems to me I'm in luck."

"You deserve it," I told him. "Well, I'll say good-day to you."

"When shall I hear from you?" he asked. "Or shall I call? Perhaps I'd better draw my money out of the bank and bring it with me."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt," I said indifferently. "Could you look in next week some time?"

"I could look in to-morrow, if you'd be in," he eagerly replied.

"I'm always in," I said. "Say to-morrow morning then."

"I almost had to turn him out of the office. He was so keen that I half expected him to propose rushing over to the bank there and then to get his little wad. He didn't, though."

"As soon as he had gone I lit a cigar and gave myself up to golden dreams. If this thing panned out the way it promised I could see myself taking a long-desired trip to New Orleans. I never was much struck on Chicago as a winter resort; everything gets worked to death."

"It was nearly noon the next day before he waked lightly in. I had begun to think that a cog had slipped somewhere in the works, and I was getting nervous. He seemed anxious himself. They had kept him hard at it in the office, and he had not had time to get over to the bank. He thought he would run in and tell me as he happened to be passing on an errand over on the West Side. He hoped that it would not make any difference."

"Not the least," I replied. "Just take your time. By the way, it occurred to me after you had left that a young man like you with no bad habits and an ambition to succeed should have put by more than £40 out of a salary of 15 dollars per week. I'm not criticising you, you know. I was thinking more of the effect of my report upon Mr. Tapeticker. He began life by saving two-thirds of his wages. He paid 4/6 a week for the rent of his room, and allowed himself 10/ for food. He is rather proud of the circumstance, and often deplores the extravagance of the rising generation and its lack of thrift."

"Henry looked somewhat flabbergasted."

"Don't mind it," I said with cheerful re-assurance. "Of course, if you could have turned over two or three times the amount to him it might make a proportionate increase in the amount you would realise. But you will have no occasion to complain."

"He was thoughtful for a few moments."

"Do you mean if I had £80 or £100 I would get twice as much?" he stammered in an embarrassed way.

"Very likely," I said; "in fact, more than likely."

"Perhaps," he said, "I might!" Then he stopped. "Would it matter if I—if I got £40 or so somewhere else?" he added.

"I smiled indulgently. 'It would be deceiving Mr. Tapeticker, I'm afraid,' I said; 'but then it would be a harmless deception, after all. I don't think myself that a young man should live in too frugal a manner, even to save. I'm inclined—yes, if you do that, and Mr