

A Rather Remarkable Case

E needed a suitcase. It seemed a simple enough desire, just a suitcase, a medium - sized suitcase with fasteners that fasten and hinges that hinge and a handle secure enough to carry the whole contraption. We had a simple enough reason for wanting the suitcase—we were going for a holiday and needed a serviceable suitcase to carry our clothes. There were no suitcases in the shops so we advertised, and from the number of replies that came back, you'd have thought that the whole city was just waiting for this opportunity to sell us a suitcase.

The first day after we advertised, the telephone rang and a pompous gentleman spoke on the other end.

"I have a portmanteau," he informed us. "It is really more suitable for a man than for a woman, but it is a very fine portmanteau. It is made of solid leather studded with brass. The hinges are brass, beautifully worked. It has a most dignified air. I will sell it to you for £7."

Gravely we told him that we needed something just a little less decorative, something just a little more suited to a flighty young female.

Heavily he answered: "But, Madam, what could be more calculated to bring a young woman to her senses than this portmanteau?"

We started to say that it would be sacrilege to put frivolous articles of female apparel into the sanctified depths of such a portmanteau. We started, in fact, to enumerate the articles, but he hung up with a scandalised "Psht!!"

THE next call was from a distant suburb. Could we visit her home, a woman asked, and view the suitcase in situ? We visited her home, but we didn't view the suitcase. As soon as we arrived she embarked on a long and very complicated story of her niece, who was a nurse, and her son, who was a soldier. It seemed that her niece had taken the suitcase that very morning and that her son had hinted that he was going A.W.L. She was sorry, but she could not now show us the case, for her niece had left no address. But if we liked to call back in a month perhaps?

THAT night when we reached home we found the letter-box full. It could almost have been Christmas. We pulled one letter out at random. It was from a woman who made netted bags, and netted bags, she assured us, would certainly take the place of suitcases in the very near future. They were easily handled, they didn't jab your knees as you carried them, you weren't worried about lost keys because there was nothing to lock; and—a very important point—you could see just what you'd packed.

"No need to worry about leaving anything behind if you have one of my netted bags," wrote the woman. "One bag is sufficient for three days, four bags will carry enough for a fortnight."

We weren't interested in netted bags; we wanted a suitcase.

The next letter was from a man. "Call any time after six o'clock, above address, for inspection," he laconically informed us. We called next evening. His house was gloomy beyond conception. In a dismal front room the man told us he lived alone. He'd been a widower for 11 years, but he couldn't move away. His heart was buried in his home. But we had not come to see his heart. We wanted to see the suitcase, and said so.

He went out and dragged in something wrapped in sacking. "Here's the trunk," he almost whispered. It was not a human trunk, however. It was the suitcase. We stared at it in astonishment. To say it was old would be feeble. It was rotten. The handle was tied with string and paper, the lock was broken, three of the corner caps were torn off, and the fourth gaped like a missing tooth. The whole thing was kept together, by a greasy strap tied round its middle. When the man undid the strap and pushed back the sagging lid, we looked at him weakly, muttered something about an urgent appointment, and fled from the house. There were still those other letters, we told ourselves.

BUT when we reached home we found that complications had set in. To-morrow was the only time there was a spare seat on the bus. It would have to be either to-morrow or a month later. A month later was too late, we'd have to go to-morrow. But what about our clothes? We had almost decided to ring up the netting woman when another member of the family strolled in.

"This any use?" he asked casually. Our eyes goggled.

"Where did you get it? Give it to us at once. Grey fibre with shining chromium fitting—why it's brand new," the rest of us shrieked.

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