



Lester Dent

LADY TO KILL



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ONE

HE HEARD, FINALLY, THE streamliner moan in the distance; the sound came hurtling through the ice-glazed night, disembodied, but with a harsh, frozen-throated urgency.

All ready with his bag in hand, he strode forward and wrenched open the station door. The blizzard, its wind sleet-riddled, sprang on him instantly, beating his hat-brim down over his friend's brown eyes, ballooning his topcoat about his chubby thighs. Recoiling and gasping, he clutched at his hat and settled it firmly on his round head, then seized his tan muffler lest the gale snatch it away, and for a moment he seemed as awkwardly helpless as a fat brown hen tossed suddenly to the wild ferocity of the blizzard.

The other passengers lunged heedlessly past him, through the door he was holding open. Drawing back a little, politely, he kept the door open for them by jamming a knee against it. He lowered his bag and seized with his teeth the middle and index finger tips of his right-hand glove, tore off the glove, using the bared hand to turn up his coat collar and lap it over and button it securely, grimacing whenever the wind made the glove slap his face smartly. Then, grasping his bag again, he dove outside, shuddering and baring his teeth at the cold.

He saw, through opalescent darkness made shiny by driven ice, a sallow blur of headlight; it seemed to hang suspended in the lunatic night, spectral, soundless, motionless. He smiled eagerly, thinking of the comfortable warmth inside the coaches. A docile man, placid, he had no love for adventure or hardship, nor was he interested in competition with the malignant weather. Beside him the grimy little station was jacketed in ice and shiny as a wet seal; bitter gray rime coated the platform underfoot treacherously; at a nearby crossing a clanging warning signal almost stifled by the ravening storm was waving a frantic red light pendulum fashion; a heaped-up baggage hand truck reeled past him, its iron wheels grinding as if chewing sand.

Grimly drawing his lips over his customary smile—the cold was hurting his teeth, gums—he staggered after the other passengers, who now suddenly grouped like sheep and waited. He joined them, huddled close to them. Like most little fat men, he had a strong liking for the herd.

The headlight abruptly burst out of the semiconcealment of the void, grew swiftly to become a fabulous splintering glare. Hot, steaming, the diesel materialized as a great monster plunging behind the light. He shrank back as the engine slammed past, giantlike, because all big things—big machines, big buildings, big men—were repellent to him. The engine was coated and whiskered from the storm; the cylinders idled deeply and heavily, a crown of blue-tongued flames sat intermittently on the stacks. He had a fleeting glimpse of the red-faced engineer peering down from the cab shaped like a bomber cockpit. The baggage cars glided past, the mail cars; a mail car door snapped open to disclose the brightly lighted interior, mail bins, pouches of mail ready to be unloaded; air brakes hissed

strongly, there was a wailing of flange friction, clanking of coupler knuckles, the coaches glided past and the Streamliner came to a halt.

A reluctant coach porter swung down, overcoated and muffled. He dragged the portable step on and planted it. The conductor alighted. He was an old man, short and bag-bellied, and he eyed the intruder underfoot distrustfully.

“*Boarrrd!*” the conductor shouted.

Shivering passengers clambered inside. His eyes were watering from the wind, he was shivering but he waited his turn meekly.

“I have a berth reservation,” he explained.

“What car?”

“Car 11, lower 4.”

“That’s five to the rear. But you better get on here.” The conductor’s head, which had protruded turtlelike from his collar, quickly retracted. “You’ll have to walk back. Porter’ll take your bag.” His voice, louder, jumped directly at the porter. “Charlie ... lower 4, car 11.”

“Yes suh!”

The porter relieved him of his bag; the bag was lifted and flung inside, and he followed, eager for the warmth and protection, the security, of the cars. He was the last aboard. Instantly the train went into motion, conductor and porter scrambled in, the portable step banged at his feet, the hinges of the platform crashed down, the doors banged shut. His cheeks suddenly burned because the cold was no longer against them.

“Car 11, lower 4. Yes suh!” The porter swept up his bag.

Wheeling to follow the porter, he saw the station lights wink away, heard for a ghostly instant the clang-clang of the crossing warning. A hard feeling of force was flowing back from the engine through the cars, tightening couplers, setting the trucks to mumbling and clucking. A hand at his throat tugging with the overcoat button, he followed the porter. At once he liked the disorder, homely and human, of the day coaches through which he passed, and after he had warmed his teeth with the tip of his tongue he began smiling pleasantly. He threw open his overcoat, loosened his muffler, tilted his hat back jauntily; whoever glanced at him was warmed by his ruddy-cheeked pleasure. He was a little sorry to leave the sprawling informality of the day coaches, but when he saw he was going to like even more the quieter luxury of the pullmans his smile kindled again.

“Yes suh, lower 4!”

He allowed the porter to help him off with his overcoat, take his hat. He noted cheerily that he had the section to himself; he liked very much the air of well-bred comfort he saw throughout the cars relaxed, with a good book here and there. He passed the porter a dollar bill.

“Thank *you*, suh!”

“Where is the diner?”

“Yes suh. The second car back.”

“Have I time?”

“Yes suh, plenty of time. They serve until eighty-thirty.” A quick flick shot a cuff back from the thick wrist. “It is now seven-ten.”

He thanked the porter, then seated himself comfortably; a moment later he leaned forward and breathing heavily because he was so plump, removed his rubbers. He slid them under the seat. After straightening, he did not for a time do anything more at all except bask in the innocuous feeling of pleasure at having escaped the miserable little railway station and the fearful blizzard.

Then, in due time, he produced a telegram from his vest pocket and consulted it, confirmed his recollection of car and compartment numbers therein. The telegram went back into the pocket.

He arose lazily and walked toward the head of the train, back the way he had just come, to car 10. At compartment 2 in car 10 he halted, brought up his hand, and knocked.

“Yes? ... What is it?” demanded Walheim’s voice.

He did not reply for a moment. He grimaced. He was remembering some of Walheim’s traits that he didn’t like: the way Walheim’s very posture always seemed to threaten action, for example, and Walheim’s way of directly and freely expressing his attitude in any situation. He hoped Walheim had changed.

“Fleshman,” he said softly, lips close to the door.

Immediately the compartment door whipped open.

“Come in!” Walheim said sharply.

Walheim’s hair was very light, a yellowish white, but he was not old—thirty-two, it might be—and he was dressed with casual neatness in a brown Shetland tweed coat and natural tan covert slacks. There was about Walheim, particularly in his face, a wiry muscularity; in his face, this was the reason for quite a noticeable lack of expression; Walheim was plainly a direct, heedless man.

“How are you, Walheim?” Fleshman said. Then he added, not truthfully, “It’s good to see you again.” Walheim had not changed in two years, he could see.

Walheim whipped shut the door and locked it, then swung about.

“So you made it. ... Have any trouble?”

“Trouble?”

“Did anything go wrong?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Walheim was not satisfied. “I want to know exactly what you did after I telephoned you. Let me have it. Every move.”

Fleshman, not smiling now, upset by the younger man’s directness—there had been hard

greetings, not even a shaking of hands—hesitated uncomfortably. He had not previously given thought to revealing this information, but found now that he did not wish to do so. He momentarily postponed a decision by taking a chair, the one chair in the compartment, seating himself loosely. In reflection, he had not known Walheim as he did, he would have presented a refusal. But the unblushing straightforwardness was Walheim's way.

“Is that necessary?” he parried.

“I want to know.”

“Why?”

“If there's a slip anywhere—you can never tell about slips—I want to know what might need covering up.” Aggressive, firm of jaw, Walheim looked directly at him. “Where did you go? What did you do? Who did you see? Let's have it.”

Fleshman dropped his eyes, surrendering to the other man's directness. “After your telephonic call,” he said, “I made arrangements with a neighbor—Elmer Verril is his name—to take care of my chickens, feed my pig, and take my two cats home with him. I told him I was going to Florida to do some fishing. I have done that before. He owns a poultry farm, smaller than mine, half a mile down the road. I then drove to New York in my car and put the car in a garage—the Argus Garage, Seventy-first Street—and registered at the Hotel Claxon, as you had instructed during our telephonic conversation. Your telegram was waiting for me at the hotel, instructing me to board this train as soon as possible. I was able, fortunately, to charter a privately owned plane, a rather fast one. The pilot—Clyde Rice, the Rice Flying Service—was also the owner of the plane. I told him, and I am sure he believed me, that I was a businessman, a Mr. Borzoi, in the furniture business, hot on the trail of a deal. The plane brought me to that little town—Perryville—where this train stopped a few minutes ago. I got off there. There was plenty of time, and I was able to get a berth reservation on this train. I even arrived in Perryville ahead of the storm.” He paused, lips pursed thoughtfully; then his head came up, and he added, “That about covers it, unless you want exact details.”

“You married?” Walheim demanded bluntly.

“No.”

“Girl friend? One who might get ideas about where you are or what you are doing?”

“She thinks I am in Florida.”

“Sure?”

“Yes,” Fleshman said. “I'm sure.”

“What is her name?”

Fleshman was shocked. “Lucille”—his eyes dropped, fixed on the green carpet—“Steven's girl, Lucille Stevens, of 128 Armdale Avenue, Farmington.”

His gaze remained uncomfortably downcast. He had lied—there was no girl friend. The lie, which had sprung involuntarily from his lips, was embarrassing him, and he was a little surprised at himself.

for telling it, although he had told much the same sort of an untruth many other times. He had started lying—bragging—about women a long time ago, twenty-five years, when he was a fat, soft, uninviting youth who seemed unable to attract girls. The vice had remained with him through adolescence, early manhood, and he still, if less frequently, did it. Several years previously he had read in a book that such falsifying, common enough, was most usual in men who were poorly equipped to interest women, and since this he had been ashamed of the habit.

Head up now, eyes wide, Fleshman listened to the frenzy of the train as if hearing it for the first time. Daggers of ice, dirt, streaked the window; the darkness beyond it had a terrorized, squirming appearance. He felt trembling, a quick roar, knew a bridge had come, gone. The engine whistle bawled again. The car gave a jolt, a difficult grunt, another wrench that threatened to capsize it; underneath there was a mad clacking and pounding. Lights spun past, like cold driven sparks, and he saw flashes of village streets.

Walheim demanded, “How much did the plane cost you?”

“Four hundred and sixty miles at forty cents a mile.”

“A hundred and eighty-four dollars?”

“Yes.”

“Your train ticket?”

“Less than forty dollars.”

“Will a hundred cover the rest?”

“Yes.”

Walheim grunted with satisfaction, leaned forward. “Will you accept the same fee you got for that job two years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“The expenses are extra of course.”

“That’s all right; the same fee and say four hundred dollars for expenses—is that satisfactory?”

“Yes.”

With a quick gesture, a bringing up of a hand, the hand a clamped fist, Walheim signified it was a deal. The movement was typical of him, and served better than words to express the kind of satisfaction he felt; it said, grimly, plans were made, there must be no faltering.

“Care for a drink?”

Fleshman shook his head. “No, thank you,” he said. He had nothing against alcohol, but he did not wish to trust it tonight. And too, alcohol did not do much for him, except relax him and make him easier-going; it never aroused in him any tendency toward aggressiveness or assertiveness.

Crouching, Walheim hauled a cowhide bag from under the seat, planted it on the cushion, and snapped it open. The clothing in the bag had an unruly masculinity, a tweedy expensiveness. Fleshman

had glimpses of a fine camel-hair robe, brown shoes handmade and cord-stitched, rich shirtings, twenty-dollar cravat, silver hairbrushes; the traveling flask that came out was of pigskin and was silver-mounted.

“Sure you won’t join me?” Walheim demanded. The fine smoky odor of good scotch came from the flask.

“No, thanks.”

He watched Walheim strike a balance, toss scotch into a glass, and drink it neat, without a chase. The man had, Fleshman reflected, complete muscular control at all times, like a cat; and also Walheim had a disturbing trait of seeming never to be affected physiologically by anything he saw or heard, did. Men like Walheim made Fleshman feel uncomfortable; it was as though, by their unawareness of minor physical irritations, they offered a menace to his own appetite for soft ease. The blunt fact was that he did not like Walheim and was somewhat afraid of the man.

The train whistle hooted long defiant blasts, the trucks attacked a switch-over with detonating force, there was splintering of snow against the windowpanes. Walheim’s tweed topcoat, hanging from a hook, swayed drunkenly; a water glass danced a jig in the holder. The suitcase snapped shut. Walheim whipped it back beneath the seat.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll walk ahead of you,” Walheim said. “When I pass her, I’ll run my hand over my hair. That will point her out to you.”

“What does she look like?”

“Gray suit, black bag, black shoes, size about average. Twenty-two, I’d say, or twenty-five. Brown hair, blue eyes, no jewelry except a class ring. A good beautician could do more for her appearance than she does for it herself.”

“She know you?”

“No.”

“Noticed you?”

“I hope not.”

Fleshman nodded. He rested both chubby hands on the arms of the chair for a moment, then sighed and got to his feet. “I’m ready,” he said.

Walheim confronted him solidly. “I want her killed before she reaches New York,” he said.

Fleshman’s nod was agreeable.

“I understand,” he said.

TWO

FLESHMAN WAS RELIEVED WHEN the girl started for the diner.

He followed her.

Murder was not, any more, very difficult for Fleshman. Death had been the occasional companion of his mind too often for that. It was a job. It was the way he made a living, for his chicken farm, which he loved very much, was not a paying proposition. Murder was a disagreeable and frightening business during the act, but it was soon over with, and afterward, to Fleshman, it was not particularly shocking. He understood clearly that murder was a heinous crime—they hanged, electrocuted, gassed you for it—and he had heard murderers suffered tortures from their consciences, but his didn't bother him, so he thought this was a lot of bunk. There were infrequent times when he wondered if there was something wrong with him; he always decided there wasn't. People were different, was all.

He had learned of this dissimilarity in people very early in life. Between the ages five to twelve he was pudgy—he had always had this build—and something of a crybaby, with no desire for rivalry, no wish to do anything in particular; his athletic interests were nil. He found himself, as a result, associating mostly with misfits, crippled or smaller children, with queer children, or with girls a little older, usually, than himself. He was not accepted by boys his own age, who poked fun at him. Disappointments, hurts, came often, but he learned to recover quickly from them. It was at this period he believed—actually he hardly ever thought about the subject—that he acquired the ability to forgive quickly even the most tragic events. He should have been an unhappy youth, but he wasn't, generally speaking.

No close attachments were formed during youth. The possible exception was an intense love developed for two pets, a pet hen and a puppy, the hen when he was eight, the puppy when he was eleven. In each case he grew attached to the pets. The hen got the roup, and Fleshman's father gave the boy a dollar to kill it, which the boy did, and for the rest of that day was prostrated with grief. Later when the puppy suffered a broken leg, he again accepted pay for disposing of the victim; his grief-prostration this time was of much shorter duration.

In college he formed no friendships whatever; he was now a grossly fat boy, made unlikable by a cynical, sophisticated manner he had assumed. It was this sophistication that got him involved with bootleggers and led, eventually, to his killing a man for five hundred dollars. One murder merely led to another. A much older man now, still overly fat and with no tendency toward aggressiveness, and now understanding clearly that all he wanted out of life was pure physical comfort, he worked less often and for high prices. He was analogous to a wise old lawyer who—foxy, self-assured, competent—takes only the biggest cases, is satisfied to sit back and wait, years if necessary, for another big one.

Murder, however, was still an unpleasant job while he was actually in the act ...

The girl, he saw for sure, was going to the diner.

His step quickened. He considered, coldly, fairly, his chances of catching her alone between two of the cars. That was where he intended doing it. Between two of the cars, using his hands and a skill he had learned; then he would chuck the body off the train, consign it to the storm, to the mad snowflakes pinging past in the darkness.

The spasmodic force of the storm, the lashing and whining of wind, were getting a hold on him. He was beginning to respond, inwardly, to the unbridled mood of the train and the elements. He did not like it. He threw his weight against a door, it flew open with a hard gasp; he stepped into the vestibule, into darkness, wind, cold, noise.

Too late! Food smell told him the next car must be the diner ... It was, and he saw the girl seating herself. The steward held her chair for her, snapped a menu down before her, a pencil, an order pad. The steward swung and saw Fleshman, held aloft a finger, shot his eyebrows up questioningly.

Fleshman—he had the shocking feeling that the girl had also looked squarely at him—shook his head and turned back.

Shaken, he retraced his steps through two coaches and took a position in another dark, noisy vestibule. He stood hard on his heels, feeling the frenzied hammering of wheels on rails. Snow particles needled his soft face; the steel plates where the cars joined gnashed against each other. Presently he cursed bitterly, first at the steward for having noticed him, then at the girl for possibly having seen him. He snapped a timetable out of his coat pocket and consulted it. The schedule indicated no stop for more than twenty minutes ...

He would wait.

Turning to the grimy window, he peered out. He could see nothing until he cupped hands against his face, and then saw little more—racing ghost light from the train, and snow-glazed earth undulating as it whistled past. When his breathing steamed the glass, he drew back. He watched the cold fade the breath fog until it became nothing. His breathing deepened and became strained.

He began, presently, to twist the heavy ring on the middle finger of his left hand; later he fell staring fixedly at the floor. He was waiting patiently now.

THREE

HER NAME WAS JULIE EDWARDS.

Her hand clutched her water glass as the dining car lurched. Silverware jangled on the table, the car bucked on its trucks, the water in the glass flung itself about and sloshed over the rim, wetting her fingers coldly.

After the car became steady she blotted her hand dry with the napkin. She threw a disapproving glance at the snow-streaked night spinning past the windowpane. For a moment she was frightened.

An alert, tall girl, she had a face somewhat longer than oval, a restrained manner. She looked twenty or twenty-two—she was twenty-six—and the youthful appearance was a source of satisfaction. Never, to anyone, would she have confessed that she sometimes found it disquieting to be twenty-six and unmarried, but it would be worse to look twenty-six. Her height, Walheim's statement that she was average-sized to the contrary, was above average for her weight: five feet seven and a hundred and twelve. She had an expressive face, especially around eyes and mouth, but this mobility was apt to go unnoticed, unless one looked for it. Otherwise her features, her carriage also, gave the impression of great reserve, almost tension.

"Yes ma'am!" The waiter, teeth shining, whisked away the damp napkin, snapped another into its place. He radiated warm efficiency. "The broiled trout is sho fine, miss!"

"Thank you."

The waiter saw her order was not yet written. He bustled away, active, sure-footed, the giddy lunging of the diner not bothering him at all.

She had practically decided on the Special Dinner. Her tentative choice was the soup du jour, the roast duck, french fries, asparagus tips, parfait, coffee. She picked up the pencil and drew the order on the pad to hand. Then, noticing the price of the Special Dinner for the first time, she was shocked. She began frowningly to study the *à la carte*, weighing prices and probable values for her money.

Pooh! This was her vacation! The Special Dinner it would be! Decisively she wrote down the different items, beginning with script, but when the demented movement of the diner made the words illegible she scratched out the script and printed carefully in large letters. She examined what she had put down, thoughtfully ... She drew a line through roast duck, substituted broiled trout.

Frowning, pencil poised, she contemplated the substitution of trout for duck. She was disturbed, feeling the change might imply a weakness, a knuckling under to the waiter's hawking of the broiled trout. She definitely preferred duck.

"Yes ma'am!" A hand swooped, carried away the pad.

"Wait! I believe I shall have the roast duck instead."

"Broiled trout's sho good, miss!"

“The duck!” she said firmly.

“Yes ma’am!” The waiter’s hand planted the menu in the holder between the windows, spiked the pencil into the place that was there for it. “Rost duck’s sho fine, too!” The great white teeth glistened agreeably.

“Do you have drinks?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“I think I’ll have a cocktail, if you please.”

“A nice scotch and soda?”

“A cocktail. Martini, a very dry one.”

“Yes ma’am! A martini comin’ up!”

There! She leaned back, conscious of quite a feeling of having won a victory. She felt warm about it, as if a necessary act had been accomplished. Her gaze settled intently on the window, the storming night being sucked past it, and—inwardly, firmly—she declared: I am going to fight against being dominated by anyone! I am going to use my own ideas, be an individual!

I’ll fight! ... If nature does succeed in making an introvert of me, nature is going to know it has been in a battle!

She bowed her head, studied her clasped hands. Twenty-six was rather old to begin to remark on oneself. But she had determined, irrevocably, to do that.

She hated a fight. She liked to keep warily at a distance from action, to think things out, to deal only in her mind with doubts, uncertainties, fears; she preferred to strike no actual blows; the thought of fray, thrust and counterthrust, filled her with trepidation. This, she had realized vaguely for a long time, was no way to live a balanced life. And lately she had seen that normalcy, sanity even demanded that she fight her way to a better adjustment.

She was a small-town family doctor’s office assistant. Her job, for twenty-two dollars a week was making blood counts, urinalyses, filing prescriptions, developing X-ray films, soothing crying babies while old Dr. Cooper treated the mothers. She helped on OB cases. Dr. Cooper’s patients were predominantly farmers, whose women birthed their babies at home. She fixed beds, got the mother ready for delivery, dressed the babies. It was not work for a reserved, oversensitive person. She faced each day as a nightmare.

A family would have been an aid to adjustment. She had none now. Her father, particularly, could have given comfort. She remembered him as a kindly, tall, reserved man, direct in thought and action. He had taught American literature at the State Teachers College. Her mother, a small, active woman she recalled as an outward personality, well adjusted to marriage. They had both been killed—an automobile accident—when she was sixteen, and she did not think they had left her any heritage of timidity, unsureness, indecision. Nor had her grandparents, as far as she knew. Grandmother Gates had died at a robust, corncob-pipe-smoking age of a hundred and one, and Grandfather Edwards still

distinctly remembered, at eighty-seven, as a loud, risqué old rogue.

Yet her life had tended to arrange itself into a distressing pattern. She saw clearly that she was withdrawing from everything. She had few friendships, only one—Martha Baxter—that was very close. She saw too, darkly, that she preferred to be alone and was a better lone worker than a team worker. She was very much at ease with ordinary people, but not at all at ease with superiors. Worst of all, while she knew all this clearly, her objections were no more than violently verbal, were not reflected in her behavior—she did nothing about it.

Well! She was fighting now!

I am cornered, she thought. I am at any age, twenty-six, when there is little time for remaking myself. I shall have to smash clear of the rut now or surrender and resign myself to crawl forever in it.

She threw out a hand, steadying herself against a riotous lunge the diner gave—suddenly it occurred to her that her own mood was akin to the wild one of the coaches. She, like the train, was going somewhere in a headlong way. Impulsively, swiftly, desperately, she and the train together.

Wouldn't Martha be surprised? She smiled slightly, imagining Martha's amazement.

Julie! My God, it can't be! Julie darling! Have you actually left Kirksville? I couldn't believe your telegram! You've left Kirksville—isn't that your secret?

Of course she had telegraphed Martha that she was coming:

HAVE RECEPTION COMMITTEE GRAND CENTRAL 2 AM TRAIN FRIDAY BRINGING
SECRET FOR YOU LOVE

JULIE

The secret? She was going to leave the small town, leave Kirksville. If she could, she would get a job in the city. Secret? Martha would love that. Martha—adventurous Martha—adored the unexpected. But probably she would guess it from the wire message, because she had urged Julie, often, to climb out of the rut.

“Dry martini!” The cocktail was whisked before her. “Yes ma'am!”

She touched the thin-stemmed glass, explored its inviting coolness with her finger tips. She took it up.

To Martha! The pale amber liquor in the glass caught and reflected twinkling lights. Martha was the very closest friend she had ever had. To Martha!

It was amazing, incredible, that someone should approach her the next moment and say: “Hello there ... Aren't you Martha's friend Julie Edwards?”

He did not do it quite that abruptly. But almost.

She was struck with, arrested by, an awareness of him as soon as he entered the diner. He came forward firmly, almost violently, using a breadth of shoulder to throw the door back out of his way.

He was a tall man with a bony but presentable face, and large hands, a man with a great deal of quiet force and a directness in using it. His gaze brushed the diner in a heads-up fashion, small light sprang from his shining blond hair; his eyes met hers and held them, then his up-thrown hand beckoned the steward.

The steward hurried to him, bent a head deferentially; they conferred, the steward with his head tilted in attention. Then the steward wheeled, came toward Julie's table.

With a precise bow that bent him exactly at the waist the dining-car steward addressed her: "I beg your pardon, miss. Do you mind if I seat another at your table?"

Well! Her composure tottered.

"But I ..." She felt embarrassment stain her cheeks. "Of course." Taking up the cocktail quickly she touched the glass to her lips and drank.

"Thank you!"

And I wasn't going to let anyone impose on me! she thought.

The steward snapped out the chair across the table, held it ready; his eyes signaled the man. The man came forward. He walked firmly, mastering the instability of the on-flying diner, with an air of competence and sureness.

"Thank you, sir!" The steward had received a dollar.

Upset, Julie gave the window close attention. Outside the night ribboned past, colored bone-gray by the snow. A handful of colored lights spun by; the faint bong-bong of a crossing bell leaped out of the darkness and was instantly gone, taking with it the crossing and a truck that stood there, radiated and enveloped in steam.

His voice, deep and of good timbre, laid a firm hold on her attention.

"Aren't you Julie?"

She gave him her startled gaze.

"Hello ... Hello there. Aren't you Martha's friend Julie Edwards?"

She half rose, her lips parted. She could do nothing at all but look at him blankly for a moment.

"Why, yes ... But who—Martha—yes, I'm Martha's friend."

"I was sure you must be."

"I don't believe I know you."

"Of course not. I'm Molloy—Chance Molloy. I know Martha, too."

He did not present her with the necessity of shaking hands, and she liked that. In a moment seeking composure, she lowered her eyes, carrying an impression, distinctly, of strong character, restrained force, a capacity for doing things or getting them done. She remembered particularly the wide and rather serious mouth, the pleasant brown eyes, marked faintly by fatigue. Looking up at him again, she noted the businesslike neatness with which he wore his clothes, the careful barbering, the rugged sweep of jaw and shoulders, neatly manicured nails. Thirty-five, or a bit over, she decided;

man who mixed thinking with action.

“I ... This must be some sort of a coincidence.”

“It is indeed.”

“How did you ... ?”

“Know you? I recognized you from a picture Martha keeps on her table.”

“Oh!”

“Did I startle you?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I was startled myself. My seat is three cars forward. I saw you pass, and something clicked, but I did not place you at once. Then I suddenly realized you must be Martha’s friend.”

“I’m surprised you recognized me.”

“I was lucky.”

“It’s hard to know people when you’ve only seen their picture.”

“It is a good likeness.”

“Yes, I remember the photograph.”

He’s Martha’s type, she thought. Her conclusion, quickly reached, was that he combined the best qualities, mental depth and straight-line methods, for example, and probably other things, that Martha liked. Not the man Martha would fall in love with necessarily—women didn’t always fall for their own qualities in a man—but he was definitely the sort Martha admired. He would, she surmised, turn out to be self-made and successful; he would be modest, but in an unhumble manner, the way a mountain is modest. He would—she felt certain she could safely translate him in terms of Martha—like adventure; he would prefer adventure movies, adventure stories; he would be an adept planner and schemer along with it, but his conniving would always have a very direct purpose.

“I hope you don’t mind my speaking to you.”

“Not at all.”

“Are you going to New York?”

“Yes.”

“You must look up Martha. You plan to, don’t you?”

“I’m going to visit Martha.”

“Swell!”

“Yes suh!” The waiter was there with his flashing teeth, menu-snapping and napkin-flourishing. “The broiled trout is sho nice!”

“A T-bone steak, french fries, a crisp salad, blue cheese, coffee, a brandy with the coffee if you want to have a good one.” Chance Molloy had not glanced at the bill of fare.

“Ain’t no steak on the menu.”

Molloy matched the waiter’s shining smile with one of his own. “Trot out that special big one

Charlie. Medium rare, and tell the cook to throw on plenty of mushrooms.”

“Yes suh!” said the big waiter delightedly. “Yes suh, indeed! Steak comin’ up!” He lunged away

Julie was surprised. “Do they really have steaks when they’re not on the menu?”

“Usually. Want one?”

“No, thank you. I have ordered ... Mr. Molloy ... ?”

“Yes?”

“I wonder—do you know—is Martha in the city?”

“I imagine so.”

“Would you—could you tell me when you saw her last?”

“Yesterday.”

“Martha didn’t say anything about going out of town?”

“No.”

She gave him an embarrassed smile. “You see, I decided suddenly, without advance planning, to make this trip. I wasn’t sure that Martha would be there.”

“She probably will be.”

“Thank you, Mr. Molloy. You’ve certainly relieved my mind.”

“So Martha doesn’t know you’re coming?”

“Oh yes! Yes, she does, if she got my telegram. I sent her one.”

“When?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

He nodded amiably. “Then she surely received it.” He took out a silver case, offered her a cigarette, which she accepted; flame jumped to the wick of a gold lighter in his hand; leaning forward to touch the tip of her cigarette to the flame, she noticed that his hand was tanned, finegrained, the fingers long, with blunt, capable tips.

He has not, she thought, been forward at all. She felt at ease with him; she liked him. He had a quiet, direct strength that reached her warmly, reassuring her so that she was not plagued by the curse which, as an inward person, she bore, the curse of being utterly ill at ease when she met a striking man. He had lighted his own cigarette, and he placed case and lighter on the table to his left; he then moved his water glass slightly so that, should a lurch of the on-flying diner throw water over the rim, the case and lighter would not get water-splashed. He was, Julie decided, foresighted about small things.

“I hope Martha got my telegram.”

“She was in New York yesterday, so the chances are that she did.”

“Well, I certainly hope so. I was afraid I might be on a wild goose chase. I don’t ordinarily throw my plans into the winds, but Dr. Cooper—I work for the doctor—decided suddenly to close his office for three weeks and go elk hunting in Wyoming. He decided yesterday. I’ve wanted to visit Martha for a long time. So I rushed down and bought a ticket, and discovered the only reservation

could get was for that afternoon or for five days later. I couldn't wait. You see, I wanted to use my three weeks to find a job in New York."

"A job?"

She nodded. "I don't like what a small town is doing to me."

"That might be imagination."

She frowned, shook her head gravely. "No, it isn't imagination."

His eyes touched her pleasantly; if she said so, his gaze explained, it was probably true.

"So there wasn't time to get an answer to your telegram to Martha?"

"No time, that's it."

"Did you mention the train you would be on?"

"Why, no—yes. That is, I said the two o'clock morning train, Friday ... Oh! Martha could have wired me on the train, then, couldn't she? She hasn't! Do you suppose that means she didn't receive my message?"

"No need to be alarmed. She probably got it."

"I wish I knew though. It would be so silly if she wasn't in the city. I would feel such a fool ... I did try to telephone her, but her apartment didn't answer, and I supposed she was at the office. Anyway, the New York operator said there was no answer."

"Did you think of trying her office?"

"Her employer, Mr. Copeland? ... Yes, I did, but there must have been a mix-up, because the New York operator professed to be unable to find a phone listed for a Transfa Air Industries."

"You asked for Transfa?"

"Yes."

"That explains it then. Transfa Air Industries no longer has a New York office—everything, at the closing out of the concern's assets, is being handled from the West Coast ... If you had thought to ask for Mr. Paul Roger Copeland, no doubt you would have had better luck, although I am not sure that Mr. Copeland maintains a Manhattan office any longer."

"It's no wonder the telephone operator didn't find Martha, then."

"No ... Martha, I understand, does her work at Copeland's place on Long Island. Huntington."

"Do you know Mr. Copeland?"

"Martha's employer? Not well—I have met him."

"He is in ill-health, I understand."

"Yes, so I have heard."

"Martha seems to love working for him."

"That is understandable. Mr. Copeland is a charming, efficient gentleman who managed to take many millions of dollars from the aircraft industry during the war."

"By any chance, are you in the aircraft business too?"

His gaze lowered to his cigarette, became contemplative, and he carefully removed ash from the cigarette tip by touching it to the tray. "In a slightly different branch of it," he said.

Startled, Julie shifted her own attention to the window. Why, he's pumping me, she thought! He has drawn a great deal from me, and done it directly and capably and without devious device! He has drawn information from me, turning me on like a faucet, for a flow of words.

This man was enormously adept! ... Or what was her imagination doing to her?

For the space of a minute the cars seemed to hang suspended and headlong, as if there was no longer force coming from the locomotive. This, it suddenly proved, was the pause between cutting the throttle and applying the brakes. In a moment air hose swelled rigidly, air hissed from leaky couplings, brake shoes slapped themselves against wheel rims, the whole train groaned, labored, and decelerated.

"Do you really know Martha?" Julie asked dubiously.

"Know her?"

"Very well, I mean."

"Fairly well." His voice was quiet, modulation unchanged, but suddenly somehow she felt tension in him. "Care to see Martha's latest picture?"

"Picture?"

"I have it here."

The wallet that came from his inner coat pocket was of ostrich with neat pockets for currency, and he pulled out a photograph. He spread it open, pushed it toward her, presenting the photograph for her attention. Her eyes lowered, touched the picture, and became rigidly fixed on it.

My God! she thought in shocked wonder.

The train jerked, groaned, wrenched convulsively. Ice had narrowed and made irregular the frame of the window glass; in the outer world the lights of a large town reeled past, precise processions of street lamps, the yellow glowing freckles of lighted windows, all followed each other at decreasing speed.

Chance Molloy—he had not given the window any attention—spoke dryly. "Rochester, imagine," he said.

Julie said nothing, did not move, did not take her eyes off the photograph.

There was more wrenching and groaning; the train had slowed greatly, and now the brake shoes locked, skidding the cars the last few inches to a stop. The result, a sudden descent of silence, was somewhat uncanny. All activity in the diner stopped, jaws became still, hands poised holding forks and this arrested animation held until there exploded a raucous shout of: "Telegrams! Take your telegrams!" A uniformed messenger sprang into the diner. "Send your telegrams! Telegrams!" he howled.

Molloy bent toward Julie. The general expression of his face had become quite wooden.

“Has Martha changed much?” He touched the photograph.

“This—is not Martha!”

“Oh, but it is.”

“It isn’t Martha—I’m positive,” Julie said tensely.

The drawn, fibrous cast remained on Molloy’s face as, catching the uniformed telegraph messenger’s roving eye, he lifted a hand, beckoned. The boy gave him a pad of telegram blanks and a pencil. A grim humor, a thing far from amusement, flickered darkly around his thinly compressed lips as he wrote out a telegram, the pad resting on his knees, away from Julie’s eyes.

A. C. KIGGINS

HOTEL REGIS NYC

GIRL NAMED JULIE EDWARDS IS MARTHA’S FRIEND BUT DOES

NOT RECOGNIZE MARTHA’S PICTURE HER CONNECTION WITH MATTER IS PUZZLE

ADVISE YOU USE GREAT CAUTION

M

Molloy took two one-dollar bills from the wallet and handed those with the telegram to the messenger. He said, “No change.” The boy counted the words. His, “Say, mister, thanks!” was pleased.

The messenger went away with the telegram. Molloy picked up his cigarette from the tray rim; it was now burned short, and he stubbed it out firmly, took any other from the silver case, and lit it. The dark humor, by now a fierce excitement, was more mobile about his mouth, and he fell to watching Julie’s face. Faintly, from the next car rearward, came the messenger’s boisterous yells of “Telegrams! Send your telegrams!”

“So you think that isn’t Martha?”

“It isn’t!”

“It must be. I took it myself. It is a very good likeness.”

Julie leaned forward to look closely at the photograph. She was upset. She was a naturally high-strung person, her emotions wild, intense things which needed continual restraining and were always seeking an excuse to get out of hand. The shock of being shown this picture—not Martha’s picture—the way it had been shown her had given her a banging around.

She shook her head decisively. “It is not, absolutely is not, Martha Baxter.”

“Do you know this girl?”

“No.”

“Ever see her before?”

“No.”

Gently and with an air of great power, as if it had regenerated and renewed its strength for

further attack on darkness and distance, the train went into motion. The drab vista of station, a flow of gray concrete platform and narrow-roofed shed, was chopped off; the Streamliner moved through crowded yards, sidings ribboning past; boxcars were lonely and ghostlike; they passed a yard engine that was bundled completely in the cotton of its own steam. All this time the train gathered pace, and presently it regained in full frenzy its headlong tide of speed.

Julie Edwards gathered purse and gloves, opened the purse, put fifty cents—forty for the martini and ten cents tip—on the table, then looked squarely at Molloy.

“I don’t know what you’re pulling,” she said. “But I don’t like it.”

“No?”

“Unless you have an explanation—I’m not going to stay!”

Regret slightly touched his face, but made, apparently, no impression on the straightforward part of his purpose.

“No explanation,” he said.

She stood up and left the table, eyes straight ahead. The door of the diner surged open at her shove; she was in the dark, boisterous vestibule, skirts wind-whipped. She shivered, but more from the stinging cold than panic. She was not particularly frightened. She was upset, though, which was to be expected, for her emotions were sensitive, and their behavior familiar processes; she knew the signs well, the nerve tingling at finger ends, the flutterings at her diaphragm. They were old and despised acquaintances.

More than anything, she was angry because this man, this Chance Molloy, had had his way with her. That was exactly what he’d done—had his way. She was puzzled, too, to know why he had shown her a girl’s picture and said it was Martha. It wasn’t Martha at all!

The vestibule, with its clanging steel, was quickly left. She moved into a compartment car; here was cozy warmth, and she moved calmly, fending with her shoulders against the corridor wall whenever a skittish motion of the car set her off balance ... Ahead of her, as she remembered, were five cars she must travel before reaching her seat. She stepped out firmly, convinced that the pleasant drowsy sleepers and coaches, even the murky, storm-battered vestibules, would hold nothing unpleasant for her ...

FOUR

FLESHMAN USED HIS FIST first, just his fist, enclosed in a tight black glove of hard shining leather, and he struck after his eyes whipped ahead, back, making certain the coast was clear.

Julie had hold of the handle of the door of the next coach when his fist came against the side of her head. He went up on the balls of his feet with the effort.

Behind the blow, in addition to astonishing strength for so chubby a man, was expert knowledge. He struck high, in her hair. She was made instantly unconscious. She gave out one small sound; it was like the noise of a cupful of water plunging down a sink drain.

Her purse fell to the steel floor plates, lay there in the thin powdering of snow.

Fleshman's left arm went around her waist like a snake. He stepped swiftly, with her body, into the vestibule niche by the outward door. His right fist, which had struck her, was now entangled in her hair; hair strands, tossed flying by the blow impact, clung to his fingers; individual fine hairs lay wetly on the snow-moist glove. Calmly he freed the hand.

His pouch-cheeked face was gray from his feelings; his breathing, whenever it was not entirely suspended, came and went in sobbing rushes, and his pale skin exuded a mist of sweat. The train and its passing time had been ripping at his nerves, and the noise and headlong velocity of the train now took to him at his composure.

Probably the girl had not noticed him at all. She had come into the vestibule in a head-down, preoccupied way. Not that it mattered much to her—now.

Hooking a toe around her purse, he skidded it to him. He searched the purse swiftly and skillfully, even tore the lining out to see if anything was inside. He kept the money. All this time his left arm held the girl to him, and he noted irrelevantly that she had a thin, firm-fleshed body. Her head was drooping, brown hair spilling over her face.

The outer door was in two sections, upper and lower, which opened separately. He seized the handle of the top half, twisted, and the door sprang violently toward him. Howling wind and shotlike snow, driving against the half door from the blizzard-ridden outer night, actually caused the door to strike him such a hard blow that he gasped in pain. He flung the purse out. The darkness took it, the wind spun it, and it vanished.

The door banged shut. Suction as from the lung of a monster had seized it; the door closed with a ringing crash.

He laid hold of the door to open it again. He tugged and wrenched. His soft endomorphic face began to bulge with horror. The door wouldn't open! It was stuck! Fast!

The door was stuck shut!

He fell to making, suddenly, low mewings of rage and desperation, choking animal-like sounds

his throat. The girl was as limp as a strip of unfried bacon in his arms. Couplings knocked together underfoot, the train seemed to run free and wild; and the door would not open. It would not budge. And then, abruptly, there was a change in the air; a softening of the uproar as part of the clamor escaped, through an opened door, into a coach. Someone was coming into the vestibule ...

“What’s the matter there?”

The conductor!

“What’s going on?” demanded the conductor. Surprise had straightened him; all his brass buttons were shining, his loose jowls trembled in sympathy with the tremors from the fast-moving coach.

Fleshman’s neck bowed tightly. Neck and backbone and legs all became one rigid bending arch, hard-sprung as if his entrails had become a drawn bowspring.

“What ails this girl?” The conductor was erect and alert except for his drooping bag of a stomach.

“She fainted.”

“What?”

“Passed out.”

“Fainted!” The conductor seemed indignant about this. “What the hell made her do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You her husband?”

“Oh no!” said Fleshman hastily. “I—I found her lying here.”

“Where?”

“On the floor ... I was going to open the door and give her air.”

“I’ll be damned—on the floor!” the conductor said. He was quite put out. An old man, long in service with the company, he resented jarring breaks in the regular routine of train business. He added explosively, “Air! There’s too much air in here now! ... You say you just found”—his eyes distended—his voice rang with alarm—“her on the floor! By God! She’s not—dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we’d better find out!” the conductor bellowed. “Take her to the ladies’ room! Here—I’ll help you!” He was shocked and resentful and somewhat frightened.

“These women passengers pick the damndest things to do!” he complained.

FIVE

CHANCE MOLLOY HATED INDIRECTION. It was likely this had its bud in early youth; one time when he saw his father being abused by his employer, the stupid, brutish operator of a coalyard. The disagreement arose out of a misunderstanding about unloading a carload of coal into a wrong bin, but the genesis was unimportant; what was vital, what had ripped the boy's soul bare, was that his father later, in the pitiful safety of his poverty-stricken home, said things he should have said to the brute during the incident. The suffering of his sensitive, kind, timid father frightened young Molloy. Reaction-determination never to permit such agony to himself—had made a fighter out of Molloy. It convinced him, and he still held the conviction, that a prompt fight was always better than a degrading surrender. He preferred action, direct blows, supreme effort, a quick decision, victory or defeat.

Yet much of his adult life had been spent in artifice, either using it himself or guarding warily against the cunning of others. This did not mean he had surrendered principles. He had, necessarily, struck a compromise, adopting methods that were practical without sacrificing a basic idealism substantially like his father's—kind, gentle, considerate. He kept his ideals clean, intact, but he could box them up and stow them below decks in clearing for action when, and only when—which was an accomplishment—his antagonist wasn't cluttered up with ideals himself. Chance Molloy had become, at thirty-nine, rich and powerful. He had, of necessity, fought many times, using the weapons at hand, ugly ones on occasion, if they happened to be the kind the foe was employing. The turn of a devious intrigue no longer was a novelty, but Molloy still took a sour view of cunning, in himself as well as in others.

He consumed his steak heartily, however. He had learned not to let tension interfere with an essential like eating.

He noticed, by way of channeling his attention elsewhere, the unnerving headlong temper of the train. The irascible, fractious lunging of the diner, the composure-trying squeaking of the window against his elbow, annoyed him, but the irritation was buried pleasantly in the knowledge that more and more people would eventually learn you could avoid such things by traveling via air liner. Molloy owned an air line, so this was a satisfying thought.

The check was two seventy-five. He added a dollar tip, and the thought, unspoken, that air liners served free meals.

Compartment seven, car 10, was his. He passed it by.

He walked on through the train, the noise between cars hardly intruding on his attention; his father was arranged in flat, somber planes, for he had again taken up dark thoughts and bitter problems.

George had section 4 in car 9. The section was not made up for sleeping, and George was seated there.

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