

The Girl in the Fur Coat

A SHORT STORY

By PERCY JAMES BREBNER

In Palm Tree Court there is no palm tree, as everyone acquainted with the Temple knows. Personally I doubt if there ever was a palm tree there, although Sir John Saunders, the oldest inhabitant of the Court, declares it stood on the spot where the stone flags incline to a small drain which carries off the rain water. To hear him talk you would think he had seen the tree, which is ridiculous, and I only mention this opinion because the drain happens to be opposite the door of No. 5, and on the third floor of that building I happen to live. This may appear a round about way of introducing myself, possibly you will find the method characteristic of men. Barristers, waiting for briefs and recognition, often take to the pen to keep themselves going, but I never had any inclination this way, let alone the ability, so now that it has fallen to my lot down these chronicles they suffer naturally at the hands of a novice. At any rate you have gathered that I am a barrister and briefless.

It is a fortuitous wind which drifts most of us into our particular rut in life, and I think I must have been blown into the wrong rut. My father's idea that because there were many solicitors in the family a barrister ought to have an excellent opportunity. Several of my legal relations died about the time I was called, and the others preferred to take their business to someone who had no connection with the family. I do not blame them; I would sooner deal with strangers myself. Their neglect did not trouble me greatly. I had enough to make two ends meet, and to be candid, my youth longed for more strenuous adventure than I was likely to find in the law courts. I lacked the energy to get out of my groove and seek adventure, but I was quite ready to welcome it if it came to me. And it did. It came knocking at my door in the most unexpected and startling manner.

I am metaphorical when I say adventure knocked at my door; as a fact, it began at my window, half an hour after breakfast—not a very early meal on this particular morning, by the way. It was late March, the first touch of Spring was in the air, and having lighted a cigarette, I threw open my window and looked out. Palm Tree Court is not a beauty spot. The buildings are too high to admit much sunlight. Entrance at one end is through a short tunnel; at the other there are three arches, which we call the colonnade. It requires a little imagination if you have ever seen a real colonnade. This morning there was as much sunlight as ever got into the court, but it was the girl going toward the colonnade which lent it especial grace and beauty. She wore a long brown fur coat and a toque to match, not a particularly distinguishing costume because a lot of girls were wearing these coats just then, but there was something which differentiated her from others. There was an elasticity in her step, a swing to her body which attracted me; it was not merely the fact that she was the only girl in the world visible at the moment. The opening of my window had made a noise, I suppose, and she glanced up. Of course, I was looking at her from an angle, and from the height of a third floor, but I got the impression that she was pretty. As she entered the colonnade she looked up again, smiled and gave a little wave of her hand in which she carried her glove.

I can almost hear the thought passing through the minds of some people. Not a nice type of girl they argue, but remember it was the first touch of Spring. It was in my blood, I jumped to the conclusion it was also in hers, and thought no harm. I had to change my coat and put on my shoes, but only a few moments elapsed before I was rushing down the stairs. On the bottom flight I met an elderly gentleman coming up—it would perhaps be more correct to say I just missed him in my hasty descent.

"Is there a Mr. Anderson in this building?" he asked as I went past him.

"Second floor, but he hasn't been here for months," I called back over my shoulder.

I ran as far as the Temple Church, then halted, wondering whether the girl had gone up to Fleet Street or down toward Paper Buildings and King's Bench Walk. I suppose I had an idea that, having waved, she would linger and give me a chance of catching her, and I was disappointed. I hurried into Fleet Street, glanced westwards and citywards, and it seemed as if fur coats and toques were no longer being worn. There was not a girl in sight who was so dressed.

Then walking quickly along Fleet Street as far as Miter Court, I went through to King's Bench Walk, and was rewarded. She must have waited somewhere after all, and was now going in the direction of the gateway which leads into Tudor Street. There is little of the bold Lothario about me, and it never occurred to me that she would resent my having followed her. That wave of her hand had been an invitation to do so; the spring in the March morning was an excuse for unconventionality. Hearing me close behind her she stopped and turned.

"Are you following me?" she asked.

"No, that is—I beg your pardon."

I am not sure whether she smiled, but if she did there was no invitation to continue the adventure. She was handsome rather than pretty and on closer inspection she appeared to lack something which she seemed to possess when viewed from my third floor window. Only distance and the angle had lent her piquancy. She did not look like a girl in whose blood there was a tingling for adventure. After looking at me steadily for a moment she went toward Tudor Street, and I took out a cigarette and tried not to look like the fool I felt. Two or three men were crossing King's Bench Walk, but I came to the conclusion that none of them had taken any notice of the encounter.

I walked slowly back into Fleet Street, remembering, now it was too late, how much more effectively I might have answered her question. Why had she waved to me? Had I been a little bolder the encounter might have ended differently, yet somehow I was not altogether sorry it had not done so. I had been attracted by the girl I thought she was not by the girl herself, and it was the girl of my fancy which kept the spirit of adventure alive in me, making a return to the seclusion of my chambers impossible at present.

I lunched up west, at a little Bohemian place in Soho, and drank half a bottle of wine to try and convince myself that I was grasping enjoyment. I do not suppose any girl in a brown fur coat escaped my scrutiny, for a kind of obsession possessed me, that the girl I had fancied must materialize. I was out for adventure, was prepared for it, and not a ghost of one came over my horizon to disturb the commonplace. About 4 o'clock I went to Palm Tree Court in a state of dejection.

I entered the Court through the tunnel, almost running into a loiterer there as I did so. I saw two men at open windows, and a horrible suspicion came to me that the girl of the morning had been waving to someone else, and that the Court gossip had already proclaimed that I had made an ass of myself. Old Sir John Saunders was on his doorstep, and to avoid being drawn into conversation by him I pretended I was in a hurry.

I entered my rooms, pushed the door to behind me, and then stood staring into a corner. The carpet had been turned back, and a bit of the flooring was missing. Someone had been there during my absence and—What the devil had been doing? I went and looked into the hole. It was some sort of secret hiding place, made for the purpose, and was empty save for a few scraps of paper, a piece of cloth, and a small strip of leather.

"By Jove! Here is adventure after all," I said aloud.

"Mr. Burford Yates, I think."

I swung round, suddenly conscious of danger. A man was standing by the door into my bedroom, and I recognized something familiar about him. An instant later I knew he was the man I had met on the stairs that morning.

"Yes, my name is Yates, but who the devil are you?"

"Screed—Jeremy Screed," was the answer.

"And what the deuce have you been doing here?" I asked, pointing to the hole.

"My name is not familiar to you?" he asked. "Astounding! The ignorance gives you away. You must be a barrister with nothing to do. Idle hands and the devil—you know the proverb. That hole? Like that when I came in. Wanted to see what you thought of it, so stayed. Rather wondered whether you would come back at all, you were in such a hurry this morning."

He jerked out his sentences in a disconnected fashion suggestive of cheap clockwork which was running down.

"You do not tell me who you are," I said.

"And you don't explain why you were in such a hurry this morning."

"Expect you'll have to. First of all I must ask you to come down and see Mr. Anderson. He is—is waiting for you to see him."

"I don't know him."

"Not by sight?"

"I have met him on the stairs once or twice, but he hasn't been here for months."

"He has come back. I expect he will explain why I am here."

Screed closed the door of my chambers as we went out and spoke of the weather as we went down the stairs. I wanted to resent his manner, but he was too interested in him, and the adventure, to do so. He was a personality who instinctively wanted to study. He might be a burglar, trusting to bluff, and although I went with him meekly enough I was prepared to put up a fight if necessary.

He knocked at Anderson's door, which was opened immediately. Although it was still daylight, heavy curtains drawn across the windows shut it out, and the electric light was switched on.

"We've come to see Mr. Anderson," said Screed to the man who opened the door. "Ever been in these chambers before, Mr. Yates?"

"Never."

"No one been here for months, the porter says, and he ought to know. There Mr. Yates?"

He had shepherd me across the room, and as he spoke he whisked a sheet from a chest of drawers which was pushed back against the wall. I stopped with a half-strangled cry in my throat. Lying there was a man—dead, murdered. He had been stabbed in the neck.

"Does Mr. Anderson explain why I am here?" Screed asked after a pause I did not answer immediately. I looked at him, then at the dead man again, and unpleasant ideas rushed into my brain. Here was an adventure I could easily have done without.

"A detective," I said slowly. I began to have a vague impression that I had heard the name of Screed before, had seen it in a newspaper perhaps.

"That's the position," he answered. "I bent down to look at the dead man, to look closely into his face."

"That is not Anderson," I said.

"Look at him again. Violent death altered the aspect of a man."

"That is not Anderson," I repeated.

"Very curious," said Screed, taking a case from his pocket. "That is a photograph of Anderson—authentic. Seems to me it is the picture of the man lying there."

"Yes, but it is not Anderson," I answered.

"An interesting point," he said replacing the sheet and the case. "We must argue it out. Shall it be here or upstairs?"

"In my chambers," I said.

He said something which I could not catch, to the man as he opened the door for us, and we went upstairs in silence. Screed took my most comfortable chair without invitation.

"First suggestion," he said. "Draw the curtains and switch on the light. Prevents people in the opposite houses getting too interested."

I complied.

"Second suggestion. Don't tell me anything you don't want me to repeat. Talking to me is sometimes like talking into a gramophone."

"Look here, Mr. Screed, are you thinking that I killed the man down stairs?"

"Suggestion three. Should advise you to tell me everything you know."

"You do not answer my question," I returned.

"Suggestion four. Don't expect it. I hardly ever do answer questions. Spend most of my time asking them. If you haven't smoked all your cigarettes I'll have one."

I passed him my case.

"Egyptians, and you usually smoke Virginians by the ends on the hearth. Dined out last night, and ran short. That is rather interesting to me, Mr. Yates."

"I fail to understand why."

"Perhaps naturally, perhaps not. My profession is full of uncertainties only to be met by careful method. My method is always the same. I always fix on one person and radiate from him until I hit the truth. In this case I have fixed on you. See?"

I laughed but felt uncomfortable. I defy anyone not to feel a shiver down his spine when Screed shot out suggestions of this kind.

"You see the idea, Mr. Yates. The first questions which came into my mind are: 'What did you do last night, and why were you in such a hurry this morning?'"

"That hole might be the answer to both questions."

"It isn't," I said. "I will tell you why I was in a hurry this morning."

"No. I may help things a bit if I tell you," Screed returned. "You were smoking at your window when a girl in a fur coat passed through the Court and waved to you. A signal, eh, Mr. Yates?"

"A signal!"

"May I ask if you have had a pleasant day?"

"No."

"Then my third suggestion. Tell me all you know."

"I told him exactly as I have set it down here. Further I explained that I had dined alone last night, had gone to the theater, and, meeting an acquaintance, had gone back to his

rooms in Bury Street to play cards for an hour or so.

"Do you often do that kind of thing?"

"I am out a great deal."

"Constantly home late, eh?"

"Yes. I am often at my club until late, the Oriental."

"So that if anyone wanted to come and look at that hole during the evening, he might fairly calculate on your not being in?"

"I do not live by rule, and anyone would run considerable risk by entering my chambers uninvited."

"He might knock first," said Screed. "He might be someone you knew, Mr. Anderson, for instance, and therefore not make you suspicious if you happened to be in."

"The dead man is not Mr. Anderson," I said.

"Well, you might have a visit from the gentleman you know as Mr. Anderson. It would interest me to hear about him."

"I do not know him. I have met him on the stairs once or twice, and seen him unlock his door. He was only about for two or three weeks. The porter could tell you more about him than I can."

"How long is it since you have seen him?" Screed asked.

"Seven or eight months."

Screed was thoughtful for a few minutes.

"Now about this girl. What kind of a girl was she? Something very special surely to make you tumble down the stairs in such a hurry?"

"She was disappointing on closer inspection and not at all pleased to find I was following her."

"Then why did she invite you by waving?"

"I didn't discuss the matter with her. I just accepted the position, and put my tail between my legs."

"Are you sure she waved?"

"Quite. She was carrying her glove in her hand. Of course, it is possible she was waving to someone else."

"Oh, no, it was to you all right."

"How do you know?"

"From information received," and he laughed. "Would you know the girl again?"

"Do you mean close to or from any window?"

"Close to."

"Yes."

"You have more confidence in yourself than I have in Jeremy Screed, which is saying a lot. She did no glove waving when you spoke to her?"

"No. She kept her hands in her muff."

"You are observant, Mr. Yates. You will have to come and help me when I get into difficulties, that is if I can get you off this time. Were they brown gloves?"

"I couldn't swear to that."

"But the coat and muff were brown?"

"Yes."

"That color?" and Screed suddenly held out a tuft of brown fur to me.

"Something of that color, but I am not going to swear to that, either."

"This tuft was found in the hand of the dead man," Screed went on, "presumably pulled from the muff or cloak in a death struggle. You did not happen to notice whether there was a piece missing when you stood close to the girl?"

"I did not."

"Well, Mr. Yates, that is all for the present," said Screed, rising. "You will be asked a lot more questions at the police court tomorrow, no doubt. There is no harm in your putting on a thick coat, although I do not think you will find your cell particularly cold tonight."

"Cell?"

"Sorry, but you are under arrest. I have two men on the landing and a revolver in my hip pocket. Take my advice and be philosophical."

As a man I found Screed rather amusing, as a detective he was evidently a dismal failure. He had not only got hold of the wrong dead man, but the wrong living one as well. I was not much interested in the dead man, but my own position was startling and unpleasant. My mind was suddenly full of all the cases of mistaken justice I had ever heard of.

At the hearing next day I was bound to admit that Screed had got some excuse for his mistake. The porter of Palm Tree Court, who had received more tips from me than I could afford, did not say very much, but he left the impression that I was a man of irregular habits. The way he put it almost convinced me that I was. Until that moment I had never seen myself as others saw me. The porter also swore to the dead man being Anderson, and when I asked what other person had a key to Mr. Anderson's rooms, he declared that I could not possibly have seen anyone entering them. I imagine that everyone present, from the magistrate downwards, assumed I had looked upon the wine when it was red.

But there was more evidence against me. A man, quite a young fellow, up from the country, stated that he had come to find a Mr. Wicklow at No. 14 Palm Court. He had evidently been given the wrong court for the name was not known there. He was coming down the stairs of No. 14, and was on the first landing, when, looking from the window, he saw a girl in a brown fur coat come out of the house opposite. At the time he did not notice it was No. 5. She went to the colonnade end and made a signal to a man who had opened an upper window. He recognized me as the man. The girl passed through the colonnade. He watched for a moment from the landing window, rather amused by the little romance, then came down the stairs. As he came

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chambers and was present in court seemed surprised, and when the porter was brought in between two constables he became suddenly excited. I suppose he thought the porter had betrayed him, and before anyone could interfere, he had whipped out a revolver and fired, wounding the porter in the arm. He was seized and overpowered before he could fire a second time, which he evidently intended to do.

"Take a good look at him, Mr. Yates," said Screed. "We shall have a talk about him in a day or two when we have got a little more out of the porter."

It was in a retired teaship in a turning off Chancery Lane that this conversation took place.

"Regular haunt of mine," Screed explained. "Know me here and ask no questions whatever I do. Make use of them at times, too. Often get information. It is run by a lady, Betty Cameron. Introduce you to her before we leave. Charming. You'll like her. Now for tea and business."

It was a long story, made longer by Jeremy Screed's desire to impress his personality upon me. I will be more concise. It was impossible to say how many people were concerned in the gang of thieves, but Anderson was one, the porter another, and also the young man who was a Frenchman, born in England. His real name was probably Le Maitre, but he had a dozen others. For months Anderson had been on the continent, his address and appearance being a great asset to the gang. His chambers in Palm Tree Court, always under the eye of the porter, were the London center of the gang, and a safe depository for stolen property. Who would suspect a barrister's chambers? It was one of the gang I had seen there and imagined it was Anderson, who had evidently never been there in my time.

In case of danger there was another way over the roof. For some unknown reason Anderson appeared to have made up his mind to turn traitor, possibly believing that justice was on the heels of the gang and anxious to save his own skin. He wrote to the authorities, making the appointment which Screed kept. His purpose, however, was discovered by some of his companions, and Le Maitre came to England to silence him. With the porter's connivance he crept himself in Anderson's chambers the night before and awaited his arrival.

"The murder was committed in the morning, probably while you were at breakfast," Screed went on, "and now comes in that curious air of coincidence which so often plays an important part in life. The murderer was ready to escape when, watching for the opportune moment from Anderson's window, he saw the girl in the fur coat go through the Court and wave to an upper window. His story was very accurate, remember. The girl gave him an idea for covering his own trail—he could throw suspicion on her and, as he afterwards discovered, on you. His story was a little too accurate, because after investigation of No. 14 I found he could not have seen all he said he did from there. At the last moment he had to alter his plans, because he saw me come into the Court and walk toward No. 5. Guessing who I was and what my business was, he knew he must be trapped unless he got away quickly, so he ran upstairs before you had started your pursuit, and escaped by the roof. Had you been a few moments earlier you would have had the surprise of your life."

"Why?"

"You will understand directly. Our friends didn't give up his plan altogether. He realized that justice was closer at his heels than he had imagined, and he was very loath to lose the chance of laying a false scent. He may have waited to see you rush from your chambers, seeing you from the recess as we saw him the other night, and knowing something of the character of Mr. Burford Yates from the porter probably, he hurried round to King's Bench Walk to make use of you if he could. He was not disappointed. He found you had gone in pursuit."

"He saw me?"

"He spoke to you."

"You are wrong. No one—"

"In life it is dangerous to be too certain of anything. There were five women in fur coats that morning. He was the second one. It was as a woman he had waited for Anderson; it was as a woman he had become notorious in the gang. The porter has confessed it. I suspected something of the kind when you told me your tale. Your observation of the glove in the hand, and later of the hands kept in the muff, was very useful. You will have to help me again, Mr. Yates."

"Then you arrested me merely as a blind?"

"I don't admit that, of course, but you can draw your own conclusions. In my profession one has to think ahead. That is why I said nothing in my evidence about the hole in the floor."

"Tell me about that," I said.

"It has probably been there since Palm Tree Court was built, but was forgotten until the porter discovered it before you took the chambers. Schemers invariably get periods of

nervousness, often that is why they are caught, and these men, for some reason or other, became nervous of keeping all their eggs in one basket. Some of the spoils were removed from Anderson's chambers to yours. It was possible for the porter to come to your chambers at any time. If you happened to be in he could easily give some excuse for coming. I did not suspect him at first, and while I was telephoning for the police I sent him for a doctor. He slipped round and over the roof. Jewels were in that hole, and he wanted to save something out of the wreck. I banked on the idea that Le Maitre would try that same stunt. Your arrest made him feel safe. When he found the jewels gone he naturally concluded that the porter had stolen a march on him, hence the shooting. Desperate fellow, that Frenchman. He very nearly fixed you with the crime. Lucky for you that the case was in my hands."

Only a Nickle

The things a nickle used to buy!
They make me pause and say "Oh my!"
As I compare that coin so gay
With one of a departed day!

We used to pass it out with pride,
For quite a lengthy trolley ride;
And sugar—such a lot it claimed,
The package made you feel ashamed.

A loaf of bread, a chunk of cake,
And taffy till your teeth would ache;
Ice cream and pop and lemonade—
You showed a nickle—the deal was made.

But in this era, swift and strange,
You keep on digging for more change,
And think with a regretful sigh
Of what a nickle used to buy!

"Luck affects everything; let your hook always be cast in the stream where you least expect it, there will be a fish."—(Ovid).

Last year, there were 364,498 sheep in Alberta, which produced 2,115,000 pounds of wool valued at \$1,125,000.

In two months, this year, Greece exported more than 16,000,000 pounds of currants, nearly 2,000,000 pounds more than was exported during all of 1919.

About 100 families have been leaving Winnipeg, Man., for the country each week since the first of May, due to the house shortage.

Run the berries for jams through the food chopper. The cooking process will be quicker and the product smoother.

The lighting equipment in the new municipal building in New York City requires more than 15,000 electric lamps.

The announcement of the invention of the carbon filament electric lamp was first made to the public in December, 1879.

The name geyhound appears to have no reference to the color, but is derived from the Iceland "grey," meaning a dog.

Neckties came into prominence in the eleventh century, when the Croats, from which the name "cravat" comes, entered the French service.