



FRANCES
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DEATH
AT
PULLMAN

An Emily Cabot Mystery



DEATH AT PULLMAN

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PROLOGUE

The mind tries to refuse such a sight, tries to deny it. A young man, tall and thin in frayed overalls and undershirt, shouldn't be so still, with his feet swaying an arm's length away and at the level of your face like that. I could see the worn soles and broken laces of his scuffed work boots, and above them, his bony hands with dirt ground into their creases and around his broken fingernails. Freckles stood out on his white face and his eyes were closed. One side of his head was encrusted with dried blood matted into his thick brown hair. Surely, he was too young to die—he was no older than me! Was this what we would all come to in such violent times? Was this how it ended—with the body of a poor young man swinging at the end of a rope?

ONE

I once heard a lecture given by a well-known naturalist at the University of Chicago. He described how a species of snake sheds its skin, slithering out and leaving behind a cracked and drying carcass of itself. How liberating it must feel to be free of that. I imagine the reptile emerges scratched and sore but is soon healed by the touch of the wet grass and mud. I think when we are young—as I was at the time of these events—the growth we experience is just this sort of harsh shedding. But, like the reptile, we are destined to repeat the experience—always thinking we have at last grown into our final transformation when, in fact, we are only beginning another cycle.

I came to Chicago from Boston in 1892, to be a graduate student in sociology—the year the University of Chicago opened its doors. I had exposed a murderer—albeit too late to save two victims. I had been expelled from the university, was exiled to a settlement house, and worked among the tenements of the city. There I learned the truth about my own father's death and some other truths about myself. I was at my mother's bedside when she died, and I had rejected both a fellowship and a marriage proposal. I was scheduled to return to the university in the fall, but on my own terms. Meanwhile, I had found a new home at Hull House, the famous settlement house on the west side of Chicago.

So it was on that fine spring morning in 1894 that I found myself in the town of Pullman, south of Chicago. There was the small matter of a disagreement between the owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company and the workers. The Civic Federation, a group of reformers who regularly supported progressive solutions to problems in the city, had decided to investigate the situation.

They invited my mentor, Jane Addams, to assist and she brought me along. It was exactly the type of action that made work at Hull House so much more satisfactory than the mere study of urban problems that was undertaken at the university. We did not plan to write a report. On the contrary, we wanted to recommend a fair and equitable solution. We wanted to reopen the doors of the factory and put the people back to work. But there was a rather good-looking young man who wanted to stop us. I didn't think much of his chances.

“Really, Miss Addams, I cannot consent to this deviation from the plan. A very fine luncheon has been prepared for the committee and it is waiting. Please, join us inside.” Mr. William Jennings, a representative of the Pullman Company, stood ramrod straight in his dark suit with an enamel American flag pinned to the lapel. He had already taken us on a thorough tour of the Pullman factory that morning. We saw shops where they built the cars, repaired any problems, and decorated the interiors, down to the curtains in the windows. Our guide explained that once a Pullman car was completed, it was delivered to one of the country's railroad lines, where it was hooked up to their existing stock. The palace cars were all passenger vehicles, and luxurious ones at that. They were owned and maintained by the Pullman Company and only leased to the various railroads.

Mr. Jennings was tall, with a military bearing, and I thought his height and broad shoulders must have given him an advantage over most adversaries. But the opponent he faced now was not impressed by his air of authority.

Jane Addams was petite beside him, looking up into his face. She was probably only a few years older than Mr. Jennings, but she was as immovable as a block of granite and as imperturbable as a brick wall. She had established her settlement house in the belief that “we can do no good cut off from the more than half of mankind that must struggle to survive” and I sometimes thought that Joan of Arc must have been very like her. She was

determined to follow her path no matter what obstacles the world put in her way. Poor Mr. Jennings was really no match for her, but he didn't know that yet.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Jennings, but Miss Cabot and I have an appointment with a Mr. MacGregor from the strike committee. We are very grateful for your information concerning the position of the company with regard to the strike. Now we would like to hear from the other side."

The man's face reddened perceptibly. "Miss Addams, I really cannot permit this. It is much too dangerous. I cannot ensure your safety in the circumstances and Mr. Pullman would never forgive me if you were to come to any harm. I really must insist."

It was a standoff. Jane Addams completely ignored the man's protests. She sailed through the low gate towards the street and I followed. The poor man appeared somewhat exasperated. After all, what could he do? Despite the fact that nearby there was a crowd of other men in suits, also wearing flags on their lapels, milling about, Mr. Jennings could hardly call on them to restrain us. He was at a distinct disadvantage. But, before the conflict came to a head, Mr. Louis Safer, a prominent banker who was also from the Civic Federation, followed us out through the fence and turned back to the Pullman assistant manager.

"If that is your concern, I will accompany the ladies and see that they come to no harm." He was a stout man in his sixties with a full white beard.

Jennings hesitated. I could see an angry red line on his neck above the stiff white collar but I doubted he would try to order the older man to stay. Instead, he tried to persuade him. "We have a very fine cook at the Florence, Mr. Safer. I'm sure you will regret missing her soup. You won't get anything nearly as good from them, you know."

The banker considered the young man from under bushy white eyebrows. "From what I hear, we will get very little, Mr. Jennings. The state of the food supply down here is one of the

situations we were sent to investigate. According to the papers, your people are near starvation. No, sir, I can afford to pass on your fine soup today.” He patted his bulging stomach. “Thank you kindly. We will rejoin you later. We know where the office is.” He turned to us. “Come, ladies, let us find our friends the workers.”

Mr. Jennings had no choice but to turn away smartly and lead the rest of the group up the stairs, across the wide veranda, and into the Florence Hotel, named for George Pullman’s favorite daughter. They followed him, a dozen or so other members of the Civic Federation, like sheep, I thought. But I got a whiff of roasted meat then and my empty stomach almost made me regret our parting.

When I volunteered to help Miss Addams with the investigation, I had never before visited the famous factory town. When George Pullman erected his factory to build and service his railway cars, he had also constructed a whole town where his workers could live away from the dirt and crime of the working neighborhoods of the city. During the World’s Columbian Exposition the previous year, visitors from all over the world had taken a day from their sightseeing to travel to the model town and admire the many improvements in living conditions it offered. As we walked through the well-tended lawns and neat brick buildings I couldn’t help but be impressed with how favorably it all compared to the rickety wooden tenements of Chicago’s West Side. How much better off the children of our neighborhood would have been in such a well-kept place, I thought. Pullman was such an improvement over the living conditions in the slums and tenements that its failure was unthinkable. Yet conditions had led the workers to strike. It was hard to imagine how such good intentions could culminate in such a catastrophe. I wanted to know why they had. I was sure there was a way to correct the situation. Walking through the model town only made me more determined, for I admired the idea behind it even more after seeing it.

The three of us turned back to the view of the carefully tended

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greens and gardens facing the hotel. To our north the massive buildings of the factory stood empty. While we had toured there in the morning, the works were shuttered by the workers' strike and management's immediate response in the form of a lockout. In front of the works we could see the small artificial Lake Vista surrounded by a park. Now we turned to the east to head into the town itself. When we reached the main street, we were met by a smallish middle-aged man who swept off a woolen cap to greet us solemnly.

"Miss Addams? I am Ian MacGregor and I chair the grievance committee for the local chapters of the American Railway Union. I am also president of Local 210. There are nineteen locals represented in Pullman. And on behalf of all of them I want to thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

I was very curious to meet this man since he was the first person from the railroad union who had ever contacted us. He was a very solid little man who seemed planted wherever he stood. Balding, with a lined face and dark, leathery skin, he had stringy muscles that stood out well defined in his neck and forearms. I knew he was a skilled metalworker responsible for a team of men who worked on building the structures of the Pullman cars. He spoke slowly with frequent halts, as if to meditate before committing his thoughts to complete sentences. A cautious and conscientious man, he was as far from the popular image of a fiery union agitator as could be imagined.

Miss Addams introduced me and Mr. Safer, then Mr. MacGregor gravely asked us to follow him to his home. He walked slowly, answering questions from Miss Addams about the town. Mr. Safer and I walked behind, as Mr. MacGregor explained that the larger houses facing the tree-lined street were rented to the company officers and that the very large building to our right, beyond a little park, was the Arcade containing shops, a bank, and the library. It was a very stratified society, with the managers in the north and the houses becoming smaller and meaner as you

travelled south. Still, the lawns and buildings were trim and well maintained. It reflected an ordered society where people could live in very pleasant surroundings even if only the wealthier members could afford the fees to use the library or attend the little theater. At least they would have something to aspire to. I admired the physical beauty of the place. How could people not do better than in the dirty city by living in this place? I could see how—with a little moderation and compromise—this could be the best place in the world. The very attractiveness of the town made me determined, right there and then, that the problem of this strike must be resolved quickly. I knew from experience that this was just the sort of thing that Hull House reformers could help to accomplish. And, with the hubris of the inexperienced, I convinced myself that our object would be easily accomplished. It seemed so obvious.

Mr. MacGregor was responding to our admiration of a fine big church constructed of a curious green stone as we turned a corner to head east. “Aye, it’s a fine building, but it went unused for some years as the rent was too high.”

“Good lord, Pullman charges high rents for the Lord’s house?” Mr. Safer was scandalized.

Mr. MacGregor stopped, as was his way, and considered the structure across the street as he prepared a further statement. “The Presbyterians eventually rented it. For I believe they bargained down the price. But it’s closed now for the time being.”

“Closed?” Jane Addams was surprised. “Surely in times of trouble the congregation seeks solace in prayer?”

Mr. MacGregor spent a further moment preparing his response. “The Reverend Oggel spoke against the strike from the pulpit. People were not favorably impressed. Soon after that, the Reverend left on vacation. There’s no news on when he plans to return.” We stopped for a moment, Miss Addams shaking her head and Mr. Safer raising a hairy eyebrow at this information. But MacGregor merely turned and led us on to the next corner. I knew

Miss Addams would be appalled by the clergyman's desertion of his flock in their time of need, so I expected her to comment on that, but she was the one who turned the conversation down an entirely different route with her next question.

"The company provides a hospital, doesn't it?"

This caused Mr. MacGregor to halt again to consider his response. Finally, it came. "Aye. But it's not easy to get to see the doctor. It's there for the company. So when a man is hurt he goes, and before the doctor will see him he must talk to the lawyer. The lawyer has a paper with a design of the human body and he notes on it where the man is injured and then the man must sign a paper, you see, before the doctor will see him. But it is closed now because of the lockout, you see. And we've no medical care for the moment."

I heard Miss Addams cluck with annoyance at that, but she walked along, listening as our guide led us down the street, pointing out the Market Hall where all of the meat and vegetables—raised on the Pullman Company farm three miles south—were sold. It was called "Sewage Farm" because waste collected from the homes was turned into fertilizer at a company plant and used to fertilize the fields. Mr. MacGregor reported that prices were higher than in the neighboring town of Kensington. But I was impressed that the market was such a very clean and attractive place. Modern dwellings with open arches over the sidewalks formed a circle around the hall. North, to our left, we could look up a tree-lined street to the main gate and clock tower of the factory. It was a great improvement over the views we had left behind in the neighborhood of Hull House. It made me wonder why in the world would workers lucky enough to live here ever want to strike. I kept my thoughts to myself, however. Presumably that was the question we were here to investigate.

After we all had admired the view, Mr. MacGregor led us south again, to an area where the housing was less impressive, but still well kept. They were small row houses in yellow brick.

Two blocks down, a quiet crowd of men stood in front of what turned out to be Mr. MacGregor's doorstep. They were quiet because they were being harangued by an Amazon of a woman with red hair, who was wearing a dress of midnight blue taffeta. Her back was to us.