
Opening Extract from...

Girl Waits with Gun

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GIRL WAITS WITH GUN

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To John Birgel and Dennis O'Dell

"I got a revolver to protect us," said Miss Constance, "and I soon had use for it."

—*New York Times,* June 3, 1915

1

Our troubles began in the summer of 1914, the year I turned thirty-five. The Archduke of Austria had just been assassinated, the Mexicans were revolting, and absolutely nothing was happening at our house, which explains why all three of us were riding to Paterson on the most trivial of errands. Never had a larger committee been convened to make a decision about the purchase of mustard powder and the replacement of a claw hammer whose handle had split from age and misuse.

Against my better judgment I allowed Fleurette to drive. Norma was reading to us from the newspaper as she always did.

"'Man's Trousers Cause Death,'" Norma called out.

"It doesn't say that." Fleurette snorted and turned around to get a look at the paper. The reins slid out of her hands.

"It does," Norma said. "It says that a Teamster was in the habit of hanging his trousers over the gas jet at night but, being under the influence of liquor, didn't notice that the trousers smothered the flame."

"Then he died of gas poisoning, not of trousers."

"Well, the trousers—"

The low, goosey cry of a horn interrupted Norma. I turned just in time to see a black motor car barreling toward us, tearing down Hamilton and picking up speed as it crossed the intersection. Fleurette jumped up on the footboard to wave the driver off.

"Get down!" I shouted, but it was too late.

The automobile hit us broadside, its brakes shrieking. The sound of our buggy shattering was like a firecracker going off in our ears. We tumbled over in a mess of splintered wood and bent metal. Our harness mare, Dolley, faltered and went down with us. She let out a high scream, the likes of which I had never heard from a horse.

Something heavy pinned my shoulder. I reached around and found it was Norma's foot. "You're standing on me!"

"I am not. I can't even see you," Norma said.

Our wagon rocked back and forth as the motor car reversed its engine and broke free of the wreckage. I was trapped under the overturned rear seat. It was as dark as a coffin, but there was a dim shape below me that I believed to be Fleurette's arm. I didn't dare move for fear of crushing her.

From the clamor around us, I gathered that someone was trying to rock the wagon and get it upright. "Don't!" I yelled. "My sister's under the wheel." If the wheel started to turn, she'd be caught up in it.

A pair of arms the size of tree branches reached into the rubble and got hold of Norma. "Take your hands off me!" she shouted.

"He's trying to get you out," I called. With a grunt, she accepted the man's help. Norma hated to be manhandled.

Once she was free, I climbed out behind her. The man at-

tached to the enormous arms wore an apron covered in blood. For one terrible second, I thought it was ours, then I realized he was a butcher at the meat counter across the street.

He wasn't the only one who had come running out when the automobile hit us. We were surrounded by store clerks, locksmiths, grocers, delivery boys, shoppers—in fact, most of the stores on Market Street had emptied, their occupants drawn to the spectacle we were now providing. Most of them watched from the sidewalk, but a sizable contingent surrounded the motor car, preventing its escape.

The butcher and a couple of men from the print shop, their hands black with ink, helped us raise the wagon just enough to allow Fleurette to slide clear of the wheel. As we lifted the broken panels off her, Fleurette stared up at us with wild dark eyes. She wore a dress sheathed in pink taffeta. Against the dusty road she looked like a trampled bed of roses.

"Don't move," I whispered, bending over her, but she got her arms underneath herself and sat up.

"No, no, no," said one of the printers. "We'll call for a doctor."

I looked up at the men standing in a circle around us. "She'll be fine," I said, sliding a hand over her ankle. "Go on." Some of those men looked a little too eager to help with the examination of Fleurette's legs.

They shuffled off to help two livery drivers, who had disembarked from their own wagons to tend to our mare. They freed her from the harness and she struggled to stand. The poor creature groaned and tossed her head and blew steam from her nostrils. The drivers fed her something from their pockets and that seemed to settle her.

I gave Fleurette's calf a squeeze. She howled and jerked away from me.

"Is it broken?" she asked.

I couldn't say. "Try to move it."

She screwed her face into a knot, held her breath, and gingerly bent one leg and then the other. When she was finished she let her breath go all at once and looked up at me, panting.

"That's good," I said. "Now move your ankles and your toes."

We both looked down at her feet. She was wearing the most ridiculous white calfskin boots with pink ribbons for laces.

"Are they all right?" she asked.

I put my hand on her back to steady her. "Just try to move them. First your ankle."

"I meant the boots."

That's when I knew Fleurette would survive. I unlaced the boots and promised to look after them. A much larger crowd had gathered, and Fleurette wiggled her pale-stockinged toes for her new audience.

"You'll have quite a bruise tomorrow, miss," said a lady behind us.

The seat that had trapped me a few moments ago was resting on the ground. I helped Fleurette into it and took another look at her legs. Her stockings were torn and she was scratched and bruised, but not broken to bits as I'd feared. I offered my handkerchief to press against one long and shallow cut along her ankle, but she'd already lost interest in her own injuries.

"Look at Norma," she whispered with a wicked little smile. My sister had planted herself directly in the path of the motor car to prevent the men from driving away. She did make a

comical sight, a small but stocky figure in her split riding skirt of drab cotton. Norma had the broad Slavic face and thick nose of our father and our mother's sour disposition. Her mouth was set in a permanent frown and she looked on everyone with suspicion. She stared down the driver of the motor car with the kind of flat-footed resolve that came naturally to her in times of calamity.

The automobilist was a short but solidly built young man who had an overfed look about him, hinting at a privileged life. He would have been handsome if not for an indolent and spoiled aspect about his eyes and the tough set of his mouth, which suggested he was accustomed to getting his way. His face was puffy and red from the heat, but also, I suspected, from a habit of putting away a quart of beer at breakfast and a bottle of wine at night. He was dressed exceedingly well, in striped linen trousers, a silk waistcoat with polished brass buttons, and a tie as red as the blood seeping through Fleurette's stockings.

His companions tumbled out of the car and gathered around him as if standing guard. They wore the plain broadcloth suits of working men and carried themselves like rats who weren't accustomed to being spotted in the daylight. Each of them was unkempt and unshaven, and a few kept their hands in their pockets in a manner that suggested they might be reaching for their knives. I couldn't imagine where this gang of ruffians had been off to in such a hurry, but I was already beginning to regret that we had been the ones to get in their way.

The driver waved his arms and shouted for the crowd to clear the road. The other men took up his command and started yelling at the onlookers and pushing at them like drunks in a barroom brawl—all but one of them, who backed

away and tried to run. He stumbled and the men in the crowd easily took hold of him. With twenty or so people blocking the way, the motor car's engine sputtered and died, but the shouting and shoving went on.

I couldn't catch Norma's eye. She was taking them in, too, the outrage draining from her face as she realized that this gang was trouble.

The shopkeepers, clerks, and drivers of other automobiles now stalled along the curb were all barking orders and pointing fingers at once.

"You're going to pay these ladies for what you did!" one yelled.

"Their horse spooked!" the driver shouted back. "They ran right in front of us!"

A ripple of dissent rose up. Everyone knew that the horse was never to blame in these collisions. A horse could watch where it was going, but an automobile with an inattentive driver could not. These boys had obviously had something on their minds besides the traffic when they roared into town.

I couldn't leave Norma to face them by herself. I gave Fleurette a firm pat to keep her planted on the buggy seat and ran around to stand next to Norma. All eyes traveled over to me. As the tallest and the oldest, I must have looked like the responsible party.

There was no one to introduce us, but it was the only way I knew to begin.

"I am Constance Kopp," I said, "and these are my sisters."

I addressed the men with all the dignity I could muster, considering that I'd just been upside down in an overturned buggy. The driver of the motor car looked pointedly away as

if he couldn't be bothered to listen to me, and in fact made a great show of behaving as if I weren't standing right in front of him. I took a breath and spoke louder. "As soon as we settle on the damages, you may be on your way."

The one who had tried to run away—a tall, thin man with droopy eyes and a prominent front tooth—leaned over and whispered something to the rest of them. They appeared to be making some kind of plan. As he hobbled around to discuss the situation, I saw that his limp was caused by a wooden leg.

The driver of the automobile nodded at his friends and reached for the door handle. He was going to push through the crowd and drive off without a word! Norma started to say something but I held her back.

He pried the door open. Seeing no alternative, I ran over and slammed it shut.

This elicited a satisfied little gasp from the bystanders, who were clearly enjoying themselves. I saw no choice but to press my advantage. I stepped up and stood as tall as I possibly could, which meant that I towered above him considerably. He was about to address my collarbone, but thought better of it and lifted his chin to stare me in the face. His mouth hung open slightly, and as I watched, perfectly round beads of sweat bloomed in even rows above his lip.

"I suppose we may require a new buggy, as you seem to have smashed this one beyond repair," I said. A pin sprung loose from my hat at that moment and rang like a tiny bell as it hit the gravel. I had to force myself not to look down at it and hoped there were no other pins or fasteners working their way loose, as they could in moments of great agitation like these.

"Get offa my car, lady," he said between clenched teeth.

I glared down at him. Neither of us moved. "If you refuse to pay, then I must see your license plate," I declared.

He lifted one brow as if issuing a challenge. At that I marched around to write the plate number in a little notebook I carried in my handbag.

"Don't bother with this," Norma said from just behind me. "I don't like them looking at us."

"I don't either, but we need his name," I said in a low hiss.

"I don't care to know his name."

"But I do."

People were starting to crane their necks to hear us argue. I walked back around to the man and said, "Perhaps you'll save me the trouble of asking the state of New Jersey for your name and address."

He looked around at the crowd and, seeing no alternative, leaned toward me. He smelled of hair tonic and (as I'd suspected) liquor and the hard, metallic stench that leaked out of all the factories in town. He spat the particulars at me, releasing a wave of abdominal breath that forced me to take a step back as I wrote them down: Henry Kaufman of Kaufman Silk Dyeing Company on Putnam.

"That will do, Mr. Kaufman," I said, in a voice loud enough for the others to hear. "You'll have our invoice in a few days."

He made no answer but swung back into the driver's seat. One of his friends gave the engine a hard crank and the motor roared to life. They all climbed aboard and the car lurched ahead, clearing a path through the mob of shoppers. Men held their horses back and mothers pulled their children to the sidewalks as the motor car careened away.

Norma and I watched the dust rise up behind Henry Kaufman's tires and settle back down again.

"You let them go?" Fleurette said from her perch on our buggy's broken seat. She had assumed the pose of an audience member at a play and seemed very disappointed in our performance.

"I didn't want to spend another minute with them," Norma said. "They're the worst people I've ever seen. And look what they've done to your leg."

"Is it broken?" asked Fleurette, who knew it wasn't but loved to elicit from Norma one of her gloomy predictions.

"Oh, probably, but we can set the bone ourselves if we have to."

"I suppose my dancing career is at an end."

"Yes, I believe it is."

The livery drivers led a shaky but intact Dolley back to us. What remained of our buggy had been moved to the sidewalk, where it lay in a dozen or so pieces.

"I'm not sure it can be repaired," one of the liverymen said, "but I could send my stable boy around to the carriage shops to inquire."

"Oh, there's no need for that," Norma said. "Our brother will come and fetch it. He drives a wagon for work."

"But let's not involve Francis!" Fleurette protested. "He'll blame it on my driving."

I stepped between them, not wanting the liveryman to withdraw his offer of help while we squabbled. "Sir, if you could send your boy to my brother's place of business, I'd be very grateful." I wrote down the address of the basket importer where Francis worked.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "But how are you girls getting home?"

"Constance and I can walk," Norma said quickly, "and our little sister will ride."

I wasn't sure I could walk. I was already stiff and sore from the crash and it would be past dark by the time we got home. But I was in no mood to debate Norma, so I accepted the man's offer of a saddle for Dolley. We lifted Fleurette into place and wrapped her injured foot in a flour sack before sliding it into the stirrup. Norma took hold of Dolley's reins and we shuffled down Market, looking more like refugees from a war than three sisters out shopping for an afternoon.

Ordinarily, I would have considered getting run down by an automobile to be the worst sort of catastrophe that could befall the three of us. But this was not to be an ordinary year.