

THE DEPOT VAMPIRE Oney Fred Sweet



But there was this distinction about her—she had eyes for the train crew alone.

"I Can't Help It Because I'm Different and Attractive Can I?" She Asked.

THOSE who pass the Pioneer house in Prairie Junction on a summer evening, pass as in review. For the coterie reclining on the hotel entrance steps or in the chairs that have been lugged from the uncomfortable temperature of the office, though apparently bored and languid, is very much at attention. The peculiar light after the sun has gone down and before the stars come out is a merciless limelight upon Main street pedestrians as they approach this reviewing stand.

A woman, direct from her edge of town environs of a story and a half house and vegetable garden, came down the new cement walk, feigning indifference to the bevy of spectators. Her skirt and waist seemed to have been hitched together by fingers that had had no spare instant for primping purposes. The waist hinted of having gone from the washtub to the back of its owner without having experienced a flatiron's redeeming touch. Both skirt and waist sagged here and tightened there, in defiance of current fashion's decree. As for the woman's face, it was permitted to appear as sallow as it chose, and the hatless hair above it rebelled in stray strands.

Behind her the woman dragged a go-cart, designed in the factory for a single occupant, but on this occasion pressed into carrying

two passengers, one seated so far along the handle as to impede anything like hasty locomotion. Acting as a rear guard, came three more youngsters.

"My laws, what's the matter with you kids back there?" complained the woman at the cart handle. "It's the last time I'm ever going to try to take you any place. Be still, now or I'll get the marshal after ya."

This last ultimatum was her best bet. The party continued its progress, for the austere marshal, blue-uniformed, was sitting in one of the hotel office chairs beside me.

"She's going to the movie, I suppose," the officer of the law remarked. "That bunch'll be quiet in there about two minutes. That's the first time I've seen Mrs. Mullen out anywhere in six months."

"What's on at the movie tonight?" asked one of the travelling men on the steps.

"One of them vampire films," replied the marshal. "It came in by express this afternoon."

For a few minutes the marshal sat in reverie. Finally he remarked as he turned toward me: "We used to have a sort of a vampire here in Prairie Junction. Her name was Etta Hurley. She was what you might call a depot vampire. You know, a mania for going down to the depot to watch the trains go through. Her idea of romance was waving at an engineer, or a conductor, or a fireman—fellows she didn't know or who didn't have any idea who she was. It was always a fleeting performance; trains never stopped here long."

"Of course," he continued, "most towns this size have got their depot hounds—folks

who can't resist the glamour of the cinder-bedded railroad tracks, the puff and clang of an engine, the click of the telegraph instrument, the exchange of stares with the strangers in the car windows, the gamble on who may be getting off the train. To this fraternity the hiss of steam as old No. 2 slows down is a sound far sweeter than the notes of a Galli-Curci, and a whiff of smoke fresh from the stack is more fragrant than the breath of springtime blossoms.

"I have rather a weakness for hankering to be on hand when the train pulls in myself," admitted the marshal, "but I insist that I am interested merely because it is within the line of my duty. And years of observation have taught me that a throng at the station does not indicate that the whole town is really going away."

"Etta Hurley was a feminine member in good standing of this fraternity. She never missed a session. But there was this distinction about her—she had eyes for the train crew alone. Her smiling and waving acquaintance was a thing in which she took great pride. This smiling and waving acquaintanceship set her apart, she felt, from the general run of residents belonging to the burg in which she dwelt through no wish of her own. When the train had pulled out her smiles died on her lips, her handkerchief was snapped back in her handbag. For local consumption she assumed a bored expression. As she minced away on her high heels toward downtown she felt that she could hardly be expected to register interest in the prosaic and everyday—she who held communion with momentarily glimpsed gentlemen in blue coats and brass buttons who were of all towns and no town in particular."

Preparatory to her great daily adventure Etta must have spent many moments looking back over her shoulder into the family mirror to make certain that things hung just right. She kept so far in advance of the styles that you never realized until a month or two later that what she had on wasn't really outlandish at all. She would have worn a cucumber on her hat if fashion had

called for it. If a girl was supposed to wear furs in summer and go bare-throated in winter, she knew all about it. When the train was real late she used to pass the time in manicuring her finger nails absent-mindedly, or, just as if nobody was around, studying her makeup in the handbag mirror. Everything local and stationary seemed to annoy her—flies buzzing on the window pane, the cry of a fussy baby really waiting with its mother to go some place, the repartees of fellow townspeople.

"One day, after the train had come and gone, and the rather one-sided smiling and waving session had ended, and she had started mincing back towards downtown, the busman, just before cracking his whip for his own getaway, sallied, 'Well, Etta, did you get to see him?'"

"She stopped short, every inch of her bristling dignity. She lifted her chin, her eyebrows lowered, her lip curled. 'O, you folks in this town make me tired,' she flared back. 'Just because a girl happens to know a bunch of fellows that don't live here, you think there's some mystery about her. I can't help it if I'm different, can I? Or because I'm attractive? If outsiders take to me, there's nothing to stop 'em, is there? You folks around here make me tired.'"

"And Etta continued as our depot vampire. She became a part of the setting, like the name of the town lettered on the sign at the edge of the low roof, like the baggageman with the metal plate across the front of his cap, like the weeds that crept between the platform planks, like the beer kegs waiting to be shipped back to wet territory, like the sidetracked box car that seemed to have forgotten where it was going, like the water tank beneath which the I. W. W.'s of the period held rendezvous.

"Etta was not a novel reading girl. Her own imagination pictured enough—fancies concocting the wonderful towns that the train left and the real burghs to which it was on its way. It gave Etta a satisfaction to feel that the town in which she was being held by circumstances of birth for a short time longer, perhaps, was but a snap of the fingers to the train and its crew. The railroad was the one thing connected with the town that was not of the town, and it was therefore a symbol for worship."

"A conductor swinging from the steps of a coach to help on passengers, an engineer leaning from a cab window, a fireman pausing at his task of shoveling coal, a brakeman signaling with his arms to 'go ahead,' a newsboy deigning to vend a paper from the coach platform—all these furnished thrills for Etta."

"There was a broad-brimmed hat that she used to wear that completely concealed the upper part of her face. Seated in one of the depot's worn benches, she was by means of the hat enabled to maintain seclusion and reserve, so far as mere natives were concerned. Natives saw but the cold, set expression of her lips. It was when some one acting as scout on the depot platform detected a moving speck on the horizon that Etta arose—as though a calm partner in some secret understanding with the unusual—and strode with studied poise to her point of vantage, near a certain telegraph pole. You could be sure that everything she wore hung just right and that the shine had been banished from her nose. Standing there, balanced on her high heels—"

The marshal was interrupted by the return of the go-cart doing double duty and the rear guard. All five were in rebellion and bursting with unrest.

"Be still, now, or the marshal will get ya," warned the woman, who had hold of the cart handle. And then, just as she passed: "My laws, do you suppose I had a chance to stay and see anything with this bunch on my hands? Haven't any idea how the thing finished. Only saw part of the first reel. Jenny kept kicking the seat in front of her, and Clara wanted a drink of water, and Horace was scared when they turned off the lights, and Benny squalled because Esther took his peanuts. No chance getting out with this bunch. Just let me get home with 'em again, that's all I ask. My laws!"

"Be quiet, now," her voice threatened just before the aggregation turned the corner. "Walk along here, now, all of you. My laws!"

"You were speaking of the depot vampire," I reminded the marshal.

"A thing of the past now," he replied. "The brakeman she married turned out to be a widower with five children. He was only working as an 'extra,' and he lost his job two weeks after the wedding. That was Etta just went by."