



**Murder on the  
Limited**

## Murder on the Limited

by Howard Finney

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A long wail from the engine’s whistle rose above the vibrations of the pullmans as the Mississippi Limited peeled away the miles of western Ohio. It was the only reminder Stanley, the pullman conductor, had that there was anyone else awake on the Limited other than himself.

He glanced through the window of the men’s smoking compartment and saw the lights of Bellefontaine rush up on their left and then drop behind. He set his watch back an hour to Central Standard time. Bellefontaine was the last point on Eastern time. What a break if he could do that with his own life—set it back and gain a handicap, as the Limited did.

Above the hum of steel on steel and the song of the wheels he heard the ring of the porter’s buzzer at the other end of the car. Queer that—at this hour in the morning.

A moment later steps sounded in the vestibule and Jeb, the porter, pushed his head through the curtain. His black face, extra dark against the spotless white of his jacket, was set in a frown halfway between worry and fear.

“Boss, lady wants to see you. Lower Three—”

A woman pushed by him hastily, pulling a thin kimono about her nightgown. She was middle-aged and plump. Stanley recognized her. She and her husband had made the run from New York. Her white face and haggard eyes brought him to his feet.

“My husband’s vanished—disappeared right before my eyes,” she blurted huskily.

“Vanished?”

“Yes. He went to get me a drink of water and he hasn’t come back.” The frown left Stanley’s face for a moment.

“But my dear madam, why alarm yourself so quickly? Maybe he stepped out on a platform for a smoke. Take a look, Jeb.”

As the porter went out, she pulled back a loose strand of hair from her gray face, and shook her head.

“No, no. You’re wasting precious time,” she half-whispered in a low, urgent tone.

“He doesn’t smoke. And the only place he would stop would be here. Something’s happened to him, something strange. He vanished before my very eyes.”

She shivered and clutched her kimono more tightly about her. It was chilly in the car this time of night. But Stanley saw in her face that it was more than the temperature that made her shiver and turn her stricken eyes toward the slightly swaying curtain to the corridor. He nodded for her to go on.

“He was coming down the aisle with a cup of water when he disappeared. It was so strange and sudden I thought I was dreaming at first.

“A few minutes after he had gone for the water, I looked through the curtain and saw him coming down the aisle with the cup in his hand. I pulled myself up in bed to take the water. A moment later, when I thought it strange he hadn’t reached the berth, I looked out again. The aisle was empty. He’d vanished. It was just as though I’d never seen him there a minute before.

“The paper cup was lying in the middle of the car. I waited a few moments, thinking perhaps he’d spilled the water and gone back for more. But he didn’t come and when I looked out again, the paper cup was gone too.”

She glanced around the room and for an instant at the curtain, her features drawn and haunted.

The sinister import of her words stirred Stanley uneasily. Thirty years on the railroad had taught him to evaluate the excited demands of passengers for their true worth. But this woman’s story was a new one, fantastic, and yet touched with truth.

The door of the vestibule slammed and he heard the voices of Kelley, the

railroad conductor, and Hunt, the brakeman.

“Stay here and keep calm, Mrs. Saunders,” he said evenly. “We’ll look for him.”

As he pushed through the curtains, he saw her fingers wandering instinctively over the tightly constricted cords of her neck, trying to shake back her steadily rising hysteria.

“This fellow Saunders has pulled a Houdini,” he muttered to the two trainmen. “Vanished like a puff of smoke. It’s a queer story.”

Kelley nodded at the porter.

“He told us.”

Stanley glanced toward the room.

“She’s scared stiff. Got something on her mind she hasn’t spilled yet. See what you can find out.”

“O.K.,” Kelley assented and slipped through the door.

Hunt peered into Stanley’s face. “I don’t like it,” he ground out tensely.

Stanley turned away.

“We’ll take a look in this car.”

The light from the end of the Pullman shone dimly down the aisle, revealing the neat series of polished shoes. The snores of several of the sleeping passengers droned from behind the heavy green curtains and mingled with the steady clacking of the wheels on the rail joints.

Stanley walked down the aisle slowly, pausing before each berth, listening intently. He reached Number Three, the Saunders’ berth and his knee rubbed against something.

The inert, bare foot of a man was protruding into the aisle. A low whine of terror escaped the porter. Stanley gripped his arm in a warning for silence and pushed the curtains aside.

A man in pajamas was lying diagonally across the bed, face down. The small light above the pillow illuminated the shock of iron-gray hair lying against the white sheet and his tightly clenched hands. His body was inert, lifeless as a wax figure.

The section of his white pajamas from just below the shoulder blades to the small of the back was a dark, moist red that glistened like jelly in the yellow ray of the light. His head was half turned toward them, revealing the wild agony in his eye and the lips drawn back for the scream that had never passed them.

Stanley's unsteady fingers pulled at the pajamas. The shirt came away from the skin with a slight, sucking sound and revealed the wound.

"Stabbed," Hunt gasped.

Stanley pushed the door of the vacant drawing room closed and stared at Hunt's gray, shocked face. Murder on the Limited! Momentarily stunned as he was, he composed himself and answered the question on the brakeman's mute lips.

"Go forward and tell Schwartz to open up the throttle right into Muncie so no one can jump off. Drop a wire for the operator at Schyler Junction to the police at Muncie. Tell them to have men on both sides of the track when we run in."

Hunt stumbled out of the door.

"On your way," Stanley added, "send Kelley back. Don't let on to the woman."

A moment later Kelley's big frame pushed through the door. His rough-hewn features were like chalk as he wiped his brow on his blue sleeve.

"Well?" he breathed.

Stanley spoke mechanically.

"Saunders was stabbed from behind and throttled as he came down the aisle with the water. That's the way he vanished."

He opened the door and peered down the dark pullman.

"And the murderer is lying behind those curtains. Probably watching us now," he

added softly. “Waiting for the next move.”

He thought of a deadly snake, coiled in the darkness, ready to strike if stumbled upon.

Kelley licked his lips. “Dumped Saunders back in his own berth while the woman was out giving the alarm. Playing safe.”

“What did you get out of the woman?” Stanley asked out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes still searching the aisle speculatively, trying to penetrate the secret behind those gently swaying curtains.

“Saunders life had been threatened before they left New York. It seems he was an eye-witness to a gang shooting in St. Louis a few months ago. There were some other witnesses but they won’t talk, scared to death. Saunders was a pretty high-class man—refused to be intimidated. He was the state’s star witness and on his way back for the trial.

“Before they left New York yesterday he got a couple of telephone calls, warnings to lay off. He laughed ‘em off. He got a telegram on the train at Rochester. Just two words—\_Coffin Car\_—”

Stanley’s thin, resolute face hardened and his lips set in a grim line. It would have been better for Saunders if he had listened to the warning. It would be better for himself if he heeded the threat embodied in Saunders’ lifeless, staring face. He felt that warning now as his eyes roved down the aisle, felt himself being watched, and the menace of invisible eyes.

“We’ll take a look in these berths,” he rasped. Kelley’s glance shifted uneasily. “Suppose this guy is wise. If he lays low in his berth and doesn’t get cold feet we haven’t got a clue. Might be any one of the passengers in the car.”

“Maybe,” Stanley said softly. “But it’s ten to one he’s dressed. You can’t make a getaway all of a sudden-like in your pajamas.”

Kelley’s eyes flickered and then steadied before the level gaze of the older man.

“O.K.,” he muttered.

Stanley opened the curtains of the berths with deft, cautious fingers and played

the light over the interiors. He was wary, alert. Some stirred and muttered vaguely but he quickly flashed off the light and passed on. He eliminated the women from consideration.

Lower Ten was a man, sunk deep in the covers, snoring fitfully. Only the top of his black hair showed. They were all like that, asleep, apparently innocent.

At the other end of the car Kelley cursed softly.

“How can a dirty killer lie there and look so peaceful?”

“Of course one of them might have clothes on beneath those covers,” Stanley frowned. “But I can’t go down the line and yank everything off them to find out.” Jeb moved closer and nudged him.

“They’s a funny thing about one of them passengers.”

“Yes.”

“Well, now, you know all them passengers always leave their shoes beneath the berths so’s I can shine ‘em. Well, I done finished shinin’ all the shoes tonight and I don’t find none beneath Lower Ten. Dey ain’t no one in the upper but that don’t explain what the gentleman in the lower done with his’n less they’s right on his feet.”

Stanley gave Jeb one long silent look—but there were unspoken words in that look. He turned and his eyes fell on the shadowed curtains of Lower Ten, bored through it, and seemed to meet the sinister, watching eyes that he had been steadily conscious of.

He and Kelley and Jeb moved silently down the aisle and closed in on the berth. His sharp ears detected a rustle and then silence.

He spread the curtains and turned on the flashlight. The passenger was in the same position as when they had first gone through the car. Stanley watched him, could hardly detect his breathing. He got the impression of a coiled spring, held by a hair trigger. His free hand stole down, grasped the rim of the bedclothes, pulled them down gently.

He had a flash of the dark blue suit the man was wearing, saw an arm swing



back. The flashlight was dashed from his hand, the berth plunged in darkness. As he tried to draw away, a stunning blow crashed down on his head and he stumbled back against Kelley.

The muzzle of a black, snub-nosed automatic thrust through the split in the curtains and fanned them menacingly.

The other two froze and raised their hands. He sucked in his breath from pain and pushed his up slowly.

“Turn around.”

The voice behind the curtain was muffled but peremptory, and they obeyed, facing the opposite berths.

“The first one of you that makes a break gets what Saunders got,” the voice whispered.

They heard him getting out of the berth.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll lay low until I get off this train.”

There was the shuffle of a foot on the carpet—then silence. A moment later the vestibule door clicked.

Stanley swung around and ran for the vestibule. Kelley called to him. “Stop. He’ll drill you.”

Stanley kept running—saw no one on the platform—and ran into the next car. The aisle was empty. Kelley caught up with him, seized his arm.

“Were almost into Muncie,” pleaded Kelley.

“If he doesn’t make a break for it, the cops can help us take him.” Stanley cursed harshly.

“Did you see his face?”

Kelley shook his head in the negative.

They went back and searched the berth. There was nothing, no clues—only

blood-stained sheets where Saunders' body had lain.

"We're running into Muncie in a few minutes," Kelley blurted. "We'll get him there. At least we uncovered him."

Stanley's lips curled grimly.

They sped into the outskirts of Muncie, flashed by streets and factories. The long *whaaa, whaaa* of Schwartz's whistle screamed twice, flinging a warning ahead.

Stanley saw policemen and plainclothes dicks every few car lengths as they rushed down the platform. A great shudder ran through the train, a grinding, tearing jar, and the scream of protesting wheels under the squeeze of the brakes. The Limited came to a stop.

He swung off and in his momentum almost bowled over a tall, stout figure in blue and two plainclothes men.

"You the pullman conductor?" the stout officer shouted. "I'm Braden, chief of police here. We've got your train covered. What's the story?"

Stanley gave it to him tersely.

"Any passengers getting off here?" Braden barked.

"No. Only three or four pickups for St. Louis."

The station was deserted except for the police and men loading mail. The last of the pickups for St. Louis was climbing the steps of the car reserved for Muncie space, a plump traveling salesman with a loud, green suit. Stanley felt tense, strained.

He said slowly. "We'll have to go in and take him. Give us the two plainclothes men."

Braden nodded silently and the two dicks walked down and got on the observation car with him and Kelley. Stanley explained to them tersely with set jaw.

"We'll work right through from here forward. I'm checking every passengers

ticket. He can't show the stub for Lower Ten without giving himself away. And if he can't show a ticket that puts the finger on him."

The two dicks kept their hands in their pockets, ready for trouble. Most of the passengers were still asleep. Stanley woke them and made them show their stubs. Some wanted to start an argument but he moved on, left them spluttering.

There was only one car further ahead when he took the ticket of the last Muncie passenger, a heavily built, ill-tempered fellow.

"What's the big delay?" he growled, drawing his watch and waving it before Stanley's eyes, "We've been sitting in this station almost a half hour now. Am I on the Mississippi Limited or a milk train?"

"Sorry," Stanley apologized.

"Sorry, sorry," the passenger exclaimed. "That won't get me into St. Louis on time."

The pullman conductor's eyes flashed but he handed back the stub in silence.

He glanced in the lavatory on the way out. It was empty, as he had expected. He was getting into that frame of mind. There was only one more car ahead. He wondered how the killer had tricked him. He had vanished into thin air more completely than the hazy, blue pall of cigarette smoke that hung in the stuffy lavatory. Everything was in order in the last car.

"Come back to that drawing room in the next car," he said, still frowning.

Stanley knocked on the door again and pushed it open immediately. The man from Muncie was standing in the middle of the floor. "Now what?" Stanley smiled apologetically.

"Sorry to disturb you again. Was there anyone in this drawing room when you came on board?"

The man raised dark, heavy eyebrows curiously. "Why, no. I don't get you."

Stanley opened the lavatory door again. The air inside was still thick with cigarette smoke and stale. Four or five butts were mashed on the floor. The

drawing room was supposed to have been unoccupied until the man from Muncie boarded the train.

Stanley regarded the passenger with shrewd, appraising eyes. They rested on his smooth black hair. His glance turned toward the upper berth.

“Open that up,” he said to the porter standing in the doorway. The passenger started and leaned forward.

“What’s this all about?” he rasped.

The porter’s key rattled in the lock. As the shelf swung down, a hoarse cry burst from the negro and he sprang back. A man’s head and shoulders rolled over the side, and dragged by their weight, the whole body crashed to the floor. The fellow was bound and gagged with strips torn from the sheets. His plump figure and loud green suit betrayed him as one of the passengers Stanley had seen getting on at Muncie.

The black eyes of the other passenger flamed and his hand stole toward his coat.

“Hold that pose,” cried one of the dicks, flashing his service pistol. Stanley knelt and examined the man on the floor.

“He’s alive. Got a good crack in the head, though.”

He glanced up at the crouched, tense figure in front of him. “A clever trick,” he said harshly. “You almost got away with it.”

“What’s it all about?” the other spat.

“After you murdered Saunders and got away from us you hid in here in the lavatory. When this man got on at Muncie and the porter left, you cracked him down, took his tickets and hid him up there. Passed yourself off as getting on at Muncie. Very clever—except for one thing you forgot.”

The fellow’s dark face worked with fury.

“You meddling old fool,” he hissed.

He struck with his foot—quicker than Stanley could dodge. When he came to he

was lying on the side cushion of the drawing room. Jeb and Kelley were the only ones in the room. Jeb was leaning over him, dabbling his head with a wet towel, muttering unintelligibly, while Kelley looked on. Beneath him came the hum of the wheels.

“We’re moving,” he exclaimed, sitting up.

“Sure,” grinned Kelley.

“Where are the others?”

“Done take the one to jail and t’other to the hospital,” Jeb drawled.

Stanley lay back with a great sigh of relief.

“There’s one thing those dicks couldn’t understand,” Kelley grinned.

“How’d you spot that guy?”

“Remember when we came through the first time and I took his Muncie ticket? He was so damned ornery and kept waving his watch in front of my face?”

“Yeah”

“And complainin’ about the delay?”

“Yeah?”

“His watch was on Eastern Standard time. Muncie’s on Central Standard time. I thought it was phony his watch should be on Eastern time, him supposed to be getting on at Muncie.”

Stanley shook his finger at Jeb with a quizzical smile.

“Can’t fool a couple of old railroad men, eh, Jeb?”