

The Not So Lost Purse

After reading the wire delivered to my office, attached to my efficiency on the third floor of the James Hotel, I ran down the three flights to the lobby clutching the pocketbook, rather than hear Nelson brag about his grandchildren as he lowered the lift. There was a line at the telegraph office behind the front desk.

Last in line, hoping up on my toes, I waved the wire yelling “emergency, emergency.”

Grumbling, the front of the line people let me pass.

My wire, a response to what I had clipped from the newspaper, read “I have it. Stop. Alex Murray. James Hotel. NYC. STOP” I gave the operator a silver dollar.

The operator said, assuming the ship’s wireless operator was at the set, my mysterious woman should wire back in short order. If he was done for the day, she wouldn’t read my wire until the morning. I went out to the lobby and sank into an overstuffed Chesterfield chair and read again the local notes section I had clipped from the evening newspaper “Urgent. This morning a leather pocketbook was lost in the vicinity of the cab stand in front of the James Hotel. Wire Wanda Levenson Steamship Success.”

What the hell was going on? Yes, I found the pocketbook, but it hadn’t been lost. It was mixed in with the bills and detective magazines in my mailbox. So, why did this Miss Levenson put a purse in my box and then advertise that it was lost?

Ten minutes later a bellboy brought me her reply to my wire. “My purse, a Morocco card, \$110 US and a passport. Stop. Need passport. Stop. If this is right. Private boat Essex leaving at 5 a.m. tomorrow from Penn’s Landing. Stop. Board with my purse. Stop. Handsome reward. Stop.”

Wanda Levenson.

She had me at handsome. A woman who has the means to hire a boat to catch a steamship deserved my attention. I scheduled a wake up call for 4 a.m., but two thugs in flat caps and long black coats broke down my door at 3. Before I could get out of bed, I had a revolver in my face.

“Okay, where’s the doll’s pocketbook,” said one of the thugs

“Doll? Pocketbook?”

“Don’t play dumb, it ain’t becoming.”

How the hell did they know? Had to be the telegraph operator. They must have given him two.

The pocketbook was in the the slide out hidden compartment in the false bottom of my radio. I told them I gave it to the police. To Detective David Beatty.

“The cops? What the bejesus ya do that for?”

“I didn’t know what the hell to do with it.”

He waved the gun in my face. His partner stuck the earpiece of my telephone upside my head.

“Get it back. Make up a story. You made a damn mistake. You gave him the wrong envelope.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that. He’s on his way with a couple friends to take me downtown for a little talk.”

They bought the lie and I figured they’d just beat it, but thug one grabbed me, twisted my arm behind my back and rushed me down the stairs. Thug two followed, still waving the damn gun.

When we got to the sidewalk there was Beatty with two patrolmen coming toward us.

What the hell? Did I suddenly get physic power and summon Beatty with my made up story?

The patrolmen saw thug one’s gun and took off after him. Beatty ran after the other one, who split in the opposite direction. I went back to my apartment, grabbed my jacket, hat, the

telegrams and the purse. I half slid back down the stairs and ran down the sidewalk toward the subway stair. Far behind me I heard Beatty yell, "Goddamit, Alex, stop."

I made it to the Landing, dropped my name and boarded the runabout waiting for me. The pilot gunned the twin Evinrudes. I looked back and could make out a cop car through the spray.

In 30 minutes we caught the steamship Success and pulled alongside a cargo deck. It was open.

Two men tied the Essex up so I could climb into the opening. I turned and yelled to the pilot.

"Hang on, this shouldn't take long."

"Sorry pal this ain't a return trip." He gunned the engines and turned away, soaking me in his wake.

A steward appeared at my side.

"This way," he said.

We took a lift up to the luxury cabin deck. With a slight bow and an open palm he singled me to step out. He pointed down the hallway and said, "Three-fourteen" and closed the lift door.

What could I do but find suite 314 and knock on the door? The woman who opened it buckled my knees. I put my hand on my heart and looked away. She was straight out of Hollywood. Long blonde victory curls, big baby blues and a pencil skirt showing off killer gams.

"You're wet. Towels are in there," she said pointing to a door.

When I came out she said, "Bourbon?" And before I could answer I had a glass in my hand.

I tried to sip, but gulped. I swirled my glass and hit it again.

"What am I doing here," she said. "That's what you are wondering. And why was a lost purse in my mailbox?"

She sipped her drink, said, "I'm aware of your reputation."

“Reputa...”

“Don’t play dumb,” she said and laughed.

Why does everybody think I’m playing dumb?

“I know Missy Reeves very well,” she said.

Ah, Missy. I’d done a few favors for her.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who?”

“Ship’s police. We are sorry to bother you, but we must insist you open the door. If not, we have a key.”

She let them in. “I am Detective Wells,” said the taller man in a suit, vest and derby. “And this is Officer Wylie.” He nodded toward the man in uniform.

They looked around and Wells said, “We must insist to see your clutch.”

“He has it,” she said, pointing at me.

I pulled the purse from my pocket and put it in his outstretched hand.

He emptied the contents on her table and found, as she had described in her telegram, a Morocco card, \$110 US and a passport, oh, and a lipstick.

Wells stroked his beard and bade Wylie to pull out his knife and slit the lining. Wells put his fingers into the slit and pulled out a silk handkerchief tied like a pouch. Wells extracted a slip of paper from the lining as well. He untied the handkerchief and there were a dozen or so sparkling gems. Then it hit me who Miss Wanda Levenson was. The world infamous jewel thief the press had dubbed Miss Heist.

The detective read the slip of paper and said, "I'm afraid we're going to have to confine you, and your friend, to your quarters, Miss Levenson, until we reach Liverpool where you will be handed over to the police. Two stewards will be stationed outside your door and they will bring your meals."

They went out and closed the door. I looked at Levenson and opened my mouth, but no words came out.

"Why do you suppose he stationed stewards, not a couple of his cops, in the hall?"

I shrugged.

"Because he doesn't have any. It's just the two of them and they are going to be busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"Wells will be studying the gems and sending wires to the New York police bragging about finding the stolen Countess Madeleine Gems and Wylie will be checking the safes against their contents lists on the ship's manifests."

"Why check the safes?"

"Because the note in the purse lining is an accurate list of the safes' combinations."

"So you lost the gems and you're not going to rob the safes. I don't get it. What are you going to do? And what am I doing here?"

"The gems are the highest quality fakes," she said pacing about the suite." She paused. Pacing again she said, "How many workers on the ship's staff?"

"I don't know, a thousand?"

"Eleven hundred thirty-seven."

"What about it," I asked hoping she'd get around to explaining why she picked on me.

“Twenty minutes after we dock in Liverpool, the Success Line paymaster with a briefcase full of cash and an armed guard will walk up the employees’ ramp on their way to the payout in the grand ballroom. ”

She raised a finger, went into the bedroom, came out with a red leather briefcase, laid it on the table and opened it. In it were what looked like bound stacks of pounds.

I picked one up, riffed it with my thumb and saw the pound on top was real, while the rest of the stack was blank papers.

“So,” I said, “were going to rob the payroll.”

"No." she said, “we’re going to steal the payroll.”

"Ok, rob...steal, how are we going to do that?"

“As they come up the ramp, we, with my arm in yours, and you carrying the brief, come walking down.”

“Wait. Walking down the ramp? Remember, we’re prisoners here.”

“A friend is aboard in the next door cabin.”

I looked at the wall. No pass door.

She pointed to the balcony.

“Oh no, I’m not doing that.”

But two days later, as the crew moored the ship to its berth, I found myself walking, well crawling, the plank. The plank being the sideboards of Levenson’s bed laid across the balcony walls to connect the suites.

The ship rocked. Forty feet below the water churned with icy peaks, while a stiff wind buffeted me. As I reached for the rail on the adjacent balcony wall a pair of strongman hands gripped my wrists and pulled me onto the balcony. The bed boards fell into the drink.

From the floor I looked up at a red bearded man mountain, Levenson's friend, Finn. He pulled me up by my offered hand and said, "Let's do it."

We put on crew uniforms. He shoved me into the wall, stomped his boots and growled and while I yelled, "stop, don't, you're killing me" and toppled over a table with a crash.

The stewards guarding Levenson's door banged on Finn's door and it swung open. With a giant hand on each of their necks he overpowered both men. We gagged and bound their legs and their hands to each other, as Levenson calmly walked out into the hallway with the brief. As I fell in beside her, she handed it to me. Finn followed. We got onto an elevator and got off at the crew level. Flanking Levenson, we walked maybe 20 yards to the crew ramp door. A few crewmen looked at us with raised eyebrows. Finn muttered "emergency" and we walked down the ramp.

Two bobbies came up toward us flanking a man with a briefcase.

They stepped aside for the elegant Miss Levenson to pass. She slipped, fell and tumbled into their legs. The paymaster fell over her, letting go of the brief to break his fall and forming a bridge over her. As the bobbies and Finn scrambled to untangle her and the paymaster, I switched the briefs.

Once they were back on their feet, profuse apologies and insistent assurances she wasn't injured were made and we all went on our ways.

A cab was waiting for us at the pier. As he took us to central station, Finn pulled off his fake beard and we pulled off our crew uniforms and stashed them under our seat. Levenson donned a

hat and glasses. We boarded a train for London, where mystery writer Mary Whitson, AKA Wanda Levinson, her scribe and personal assistant had hotel reservations.

The next morning Finn read from the Times as we sipped coffee at the Mersey Cafe.

“Police are looking for two men and a woman who they believed switched the briefs on the ship’s ramp.”

“Miss Levenson,” I said, or should say Whitson, I must ask why the devil did you put the purse in my box and why were you so insistent that I bring it to the ship?”

“The New York and Liverpool police were tipped off that I was carrying the gems. So was Bart Branson. I hope you didn’t meet his thugs, but I had to keep up the ruse.”

“That was a clever heist you pulled off, but, from what I’ve heard of you, it doesn’t seem like you to rob the working class of their pay. You about killed your Robin Hood reputation.”

“Don’t fret,” she said, “Think of it as robbing Lloyd’s.”

