



THIN ICE

By Isabel E. MacKay

CHAPTER I.

A BAD NIGHT.

PETER RUTHERFORD, one arm in the sleeve of his overcoat, paused irresolute.

"It's a bad night," said Leversage from his comfortable seat before the fire.

Mrs. Leversage looked up from a book.

"Better not go, Peter," she advised mildly.

Rutherford slipped the other arm into its sleeve and turned up the high collar. A little opposition is a good tonic.

"Oh, I don't know," he said briskly. "I think I'll risk it. I am rather anxious to hear from Graham and I have some letters to post—one very important letter." He smiled a little. "If anything happens to me my relatives can sue the town for not providing a postal delivery."

"It would be necessary to prove loss," said Leversage gravely. "I, for one, would not care to take the case."

"Do you know how to open the box, Peter?" asked Mrs. Leversage hastily.

"I am thankful to say that I have had no experience, but I presume it opens with a latch-key."

"Oh, no, we are not quite as ancient as that. All the private boxes have combination locks. Ours is number 127, the combination is S.C. and you set it by moving the pointer to C and shifting S to the indicator at the top."

"Otherwise," interposed Leversage, "you break the glass and pay damages."

"Let's see," repeated Rutherford choosing a fur cap from the rack, "Box 127 S.C., put the pointer to C and shift S to the top. I feel as if I were going to rob a safe—So long."

He tried to open the outer door gently but the angry wind shook it from his grasp and threw it backward with a bang; a whirlwind of fine snow burst like a giant puff-ball in his face and fell in powdered showers upon his overcoat; the drift, which had piled itself against the door, swept into the hallway on invisible wings.

"Better not go!" called Leversage from the drawing-room, but Peter, gasping a little, had already gone. Once out in the storm and battling in a hand to hand conflict with the fury of the elements the wildness of the night was not without its charm. It was not cold, at least it did not seem cold; one would have to be lost or exhausted before realising how low the temperature really was. The fierce wind buffeted and veered and seemed to drive the blinding snow from every point at once. Rutherford was glad of the heavy drifts through which he waded because they helped him to keep his feet.

A bad night indeed, a gloriously bad night! Every foot of headway had to be fought for and Rutherford liked fighting. Head down he pushed his slow way forward, breathless, choking and thoroughly enjoying himself. Indeed, so occupied was he with going the wind one better that it was some time before he realised that he had lost all sense of direction and could not tell where he was or where he was going. In the whirling snow he could distinguish nothing save the blur, here and there, of electric light; he could hear nothing save the shrieking of the wind. By rights, he knew that the last turn should have brought him out upon the main street but apparently the main street had moved. Peter stiffened himself against the tree-trunk and reflected. A snow-covered figure came noiselessly up behind him and passed noiselessly. Rutherford, always quick to decide, left the friendly tree and grabbed the figure's overcoat.

"Post-office!" shouted Rutherford.

The figure turned and seemed to listen.

"Post-office!" bawled Peter again at the place where the figure's ear should have been.

A voice, very faint and muffled answered, "Come on—going there!"

They started on again, the figure leading, and after some more blind stumbling Peter perceived by the better walking and the more frequent blurs of light that the main street had found itself and presently the haven of the post-office loomed delightfully ahead.

Peter stumbled up the steps and through the door-way, dizzy and gasping—he had had enough. The still, warm air of the vestibule came to his storm-bewildered senses with something of a shock. He shook off the snow and breathed long.

"Bad night," volunteered the figure he had followed and who, divested of his snowy covering, turned out to be a mere man like himself with a voice like a fog horn.

"Blizzard!" said Peter, still gasping. "Do you have them often?"

"About one a year," replied the stranger cheerfully.

Peter, who had regained his breath, felt cheerful, too.

"I am glad I struck it," he answered, "it is quite an experience," and stamping the pyramids of packed ice from his heels he pushed open the swing door and entered the post-office proper.

Facing him at right angles were rows and tiers of boxes—all vacantly staring. For a moment he returned the stare and then, the last vestige of the storm-confusion having passed, he remembered what he had come for. One of those boxes belonged to Leversage—but which? Slowly his memory rallied; it was box 127 and the combination—what in thunder was the combination?

The other man had taken his mail and gone and the office was quite empty. Peter found box 127 and looked in. There were two letters, lying decorously on their faces. One was from Graham, he knew Graham's envelope, and the other probably something for Mrs. Leversage.

But what was that combination? Rutherford thought hard. Box 127—combination—combination—hum! He had repeated it glibly enough at the house. Box 127—combination—oh, yes, combination S.C. With a complacent sigh at this justification of an excellent memory he turned the pointer round to S and—stopped. How had Mrs. Leversage explained the thing? He twirled it again to C and pulled tentatively. The door would not move. He reversed the combination and pulled again, energetically, with the same result. The thing had sounded quite simple, it must be simple, he was bound to get it soon. There had been something said about an indicator at the top. He found the indicator, shifted C into place and tried again. It was certainly maddening! Try as he would he could not remember just exactly what Aunt Jane Leversage had said. There was an alternative though, Leversage had suggested an alternative. After a few more useless attempts and an equally useless shaking of the obstinate door he felt that it would be a positive pleasure to break the glass, a delight to make Leversage pay damages.

He rose from his stooping position and looked around for a weapon, to encounter, with dismay and discomfiture, the amused gaze of a much interested spectator. The spectator was tall, young, feminine and, from what was visible of her face, distinctly interesting. Rutherford had a girlish trick of blushing, of which he was much ashamed and, as he straightened up under the fire of those laughing eyes, he knew that he was blushing his very worst. The lady's cheeks had been blown so rosy by the wind that it was impossible to tell whether she blushed or not, but she had stopped smiling. For a moment their mutual embarrassment kept them dumb, then, in a polite but uninterested tone, the lady spoke.

"Can I be of any assistance? These locks are troublesome to strangers."

Rutherford smiled and recovered his composure. "Troublesome," he said, "is not the word I should have used. The thing simply won't work. I was told it was S.C. and I tried S.C. and every arrangement of S.C. that I can think of. I was just preparing to smash the glass."

"S.C.," repeated the girl thoughtfully, "that will mean the pointer to C, and S to the indicator at the top."

"I don't see any reason why it should," said Peter hopelessly.

"This way," said the girl, stooping.

A few turns of her deft fingers and the door swung open easily. Peter noticed that her hand

was white and prettily fashioned and that she wore no rings.

"Thanks, so much," said Peter as the girl rose. He would have liked to say more but she had already turned away and was walking briskly towards the door. Could it be possible that she intended to go out into the storm alone—What were her people thinking of? Peter felt very much vexed with her people for not taking better care of her. Why, the wind alone!—impulsively he left the open box with the letters in it and strode to the door. The snow and wind were there but the lady had vanished. To Peter it seemed that the snowy night had swallowed her up. He turned back slowly. On second thoughts his impulse appeared to have been a very foolish one—Perhaps she had not been alone after all!

The box stood invitingly open and he took out the letters carelessly. One was for Mrs. Leversage, the other, as he had supposed, the expected word from Graham. Under the gas jet in the corner he paused, fingering the envelope. Now that it had come he hesitated to open it. It's news would mean so much that he trifled with uncertainty a little longer.

"Here goes!" he said finally and tore open the flap.

"Dear Peter (the note ran)

"We are going to come a cropper or I miss my guess.

"Yours in affliction,
O. Graham."

Men said of Rutherford he was a good loser and his face as he unfastened his ulster to place the note in an inner pocket was quite impassive. It would have been hard to guess that he had received news which might mean large, even serious, financial loss. He rebutted his coat calmly and stood for a moment under the gas jet thinking. Then, taking from his pocket the letters which he had braved the storm to post, he crossed to the letter box—and hesitated.

What made him hesitate he was never able to satisfactorily explain. He had certainly intended to post those letters, he had come out for no other purpose—one, as he had told Mrs. Leversage, was most important. This one he separated from the others and looked at with a curious expression, smiling a little as he thought of what Aunt Jane would have said had she seen the address and known that its importance consisted in the fact that it contained a proposal of marriage.

Rutherford picked the envelope idly, thinking hard. Had his news from Graham affected his nerve, he wondered? Why did he not slip the letter into the box and have done with it? Finally, with a quick movement and a half guilty smile, he dropped the letter back into his coat pocket. His other letters he slipped into the place provided, and walked meditatively away. Fate had taken Mr. Peter Rutherford in hand.

CHAPTER II.

THE FATES AMUSE THEMSELVES.

Quite unconscious of the determining hand of fate, Peter Rutherford left the post-office and stood on the steps to get his bearings.

"One corner down," he muttered, "two corners to the left and three straight ahead, third house from the corner. I must not get lost this time."

Taking a long breath he stepped out briskly into the wind and snow, forcing his way steadily ahead and realising in his own proper person the probable private emotions of a snow-plough. The drifts had deepened and the street was almost deserted. He had gone far before a fiercely whirling gust tore the fur cap from his head and left him dizzy and gasping. Pursuit was useless as the cap was already invisible, so accepting the situation with philosophy he flattened himself against the nearest building and with much effort succeeded in passing a handkerchief over his head and tying the ends beneath his chin.

At the first corner down he turned into a side-street, leaving the more travelled thoroughfare behind and striking out into a wilderness of white