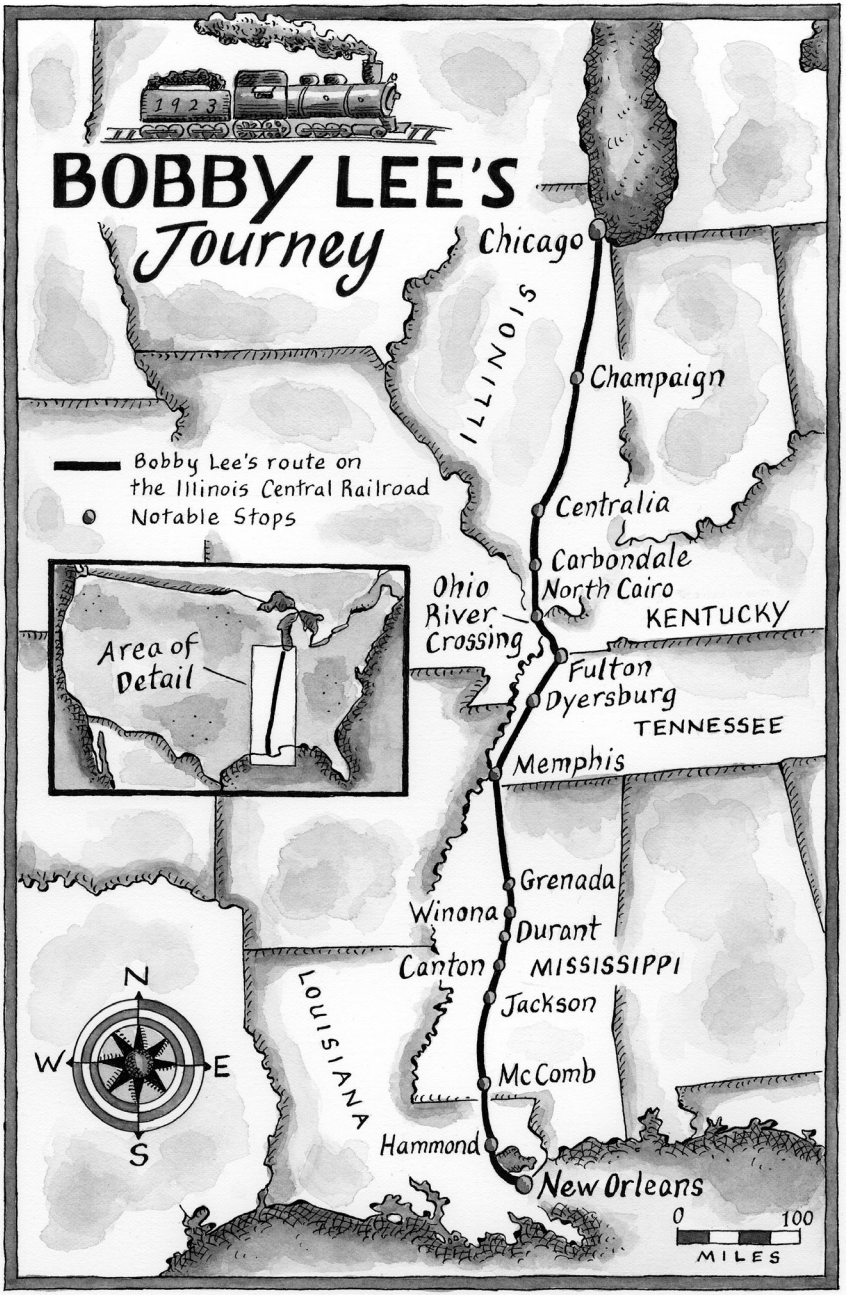
BOBBY LEE CLAREMONT AND THE CRIMINAL ELEMENT


1923
BOBBY LEE'S
Journey
Chicago
ILLINOIS
Champaign
Bobby Lee's route on
the Illinois Central Railroad
Notable Stops
Centralia
Carbondale
North Cairo
Ohio
River
Crossing
KENTUCKY
Area of
Detail
Fulton
Dyersburg
TENNESSEE
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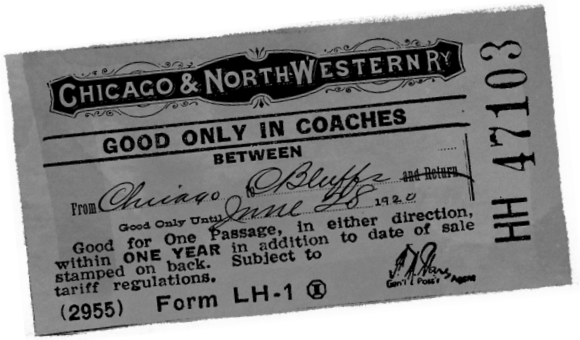
BOBBY LEE CLAREMONT AND THE CRIMINAL ELEMENT

Jeannie Mobley

Holiday House / New York



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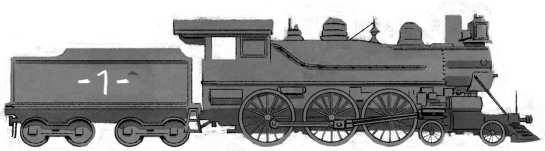
for Greg—my pride, my joy, my own little
criminal element all grown up.
I love you, man.



MAY 27, 1923
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
7:45 A.M.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and glanced at the huge clock on the wall. According to the timetable below it, the train to Chicago—and freedom—would pull out of the station in fifteen minutes, whether I was on it or not. But that didn't make one measly bit of difference to the lady ahead of me at the ticket counter, who was rooting around in the bottom of her pocketbook for the remainder of her fare. The minute hand on the clock eased forward a tick as she picked out one penny after another, like she had all the time in the world. All the time and none of the sense, far as I could tell.

Imagine losing track of money! I'd made plenty of mistakes in my life, but that sure wasn't one of them. I knew where every last cent of mine was: safe and sound inside my pocket. Excepting, of course, the two pennies I had placed on Maman's eyes when we laid her in the crypt. I could still see that bright copper against her alabaster face. It had been hard to give up two cents, but then again I figured I owed her that much, what with all I had cost her. Two pennies didn't make much difference to getting me out of New Orleans. And I *had* to get out of New Orleans.

That's why I'd turned to the poor box of the Sisters of Charitable Mercy. I knew it was a sin to steal—lord knows, Sister Mary Magdalene had drummed that into my head often enough—but the box had barely even been locked. And anyway, I reckoned it was a solid start on my new life of crime, which was about all I was good for. Thirteen years old, and I had already lied, cheated, and killed my mother, more or less. Stealing from a church was a nice addition to my résumé, seeing as how I was headed to Chicago to set myself up in a life of crime for good. Or at least I would be setting off, if the lady at the counter would get moving. If I could get my ticket and get on that train before either the Sisters or the police found the empty poor box and tracked me down.

At last, with a strange little "Ooh!" of satisfaction, the woman found her last penny, laid it on the counter, and scooted it under the barrier to the ticket master. He counted her money with painful deliberateness before sliding a ticket back to her. She snapped her pocketbook shut, straightened her hair and hat with one lace-gloved hand, picked up her ticket, picked up her carpetbag, double-checked the counter just in case she had forgotten any change, looked at the board to find her platform, and *finally* stepped out of the way.

I pressed forward to the counter and looked the ticket master square in the eyes, as if buying a train ticket to Chicago was old hat to me. Folks like me, aiming for a life of crime, know that confidence is the key to deception. Confidence, though, wasn't enough to hide the fact that I was only thirteen—and a small thirteen at that, since the Sisters of Charitable Mercy hadn't been nearly as charitable as I would have liked when it

came to their free lunches. The closest I'd ever been to satisfied was that narrow space between not quite hungry and not quite full. Now, as the ticket master looked down at me, his blue eyes in their own narrow space between bushy eyebrows and half-moon spectacles, he wasn't all that satisfied neither. He watched me unfold the scrap of newspaper from my pocket and remove from it miscellaneous coins until I had the exact fare laid out on the counter.

"You traveling to Chicago all by yourself?" he said doubtfully.

"Yes, sir. I got me a Yankee aunt up there," I lied. Another sin piled onto my morning's tally, but after a lifetime of sinning, topped off by robbing the poor box in a church, I figured God would hardly even notice. Plus, I needed the practice if I was going to be a criminal. I had to get to where my conscience hardly even noticed either, which wasn't going to be easy after all the hours I'd spent in the company of Sister Mary Magdalene and all her long-winded charitable mercy. I'd done plenty of lying, cheating, and stealing for as long as I could remember, but I'd done plenty of penance too.

"What about your momma and daddy?" asked the ticket master. "Ain't they here to see you off?"

"Yes, sir, that's my daddy over yonder," I said, pointing to a stranger standing by himself near the door. This time, it might not have been a lie. Maman had never told me who my daddy was; maybe she hadn't known herself. In my case, it seemed even being born had been a sin.

"He wants me to buy my own ticket, to prove I'm old enough to travel alone. My aunt will meet me at the station in Chicago."

I smiled and looked the ticket master in the eye again, willing him to hurry. Only six minutes until the train pulled out.

The ticket master scrutinized the stranger I'd pointed out, and his eyebrows gradually slid back down to where they belonged. He counted out the money I'd put on the counter with slow hands, moving like a winding-down clock. It was my time that was running out—in more ways than one. When I had pointed out my "daddy" to the ticket master, I had noticed new arrivals entering the station. Four policemen in uniform, and I recognized one of them. He had helped return runaway orphans to the Sisters of Charitable Mercy so often that Sister Mary Magdalene called him by his Christian name. They had found the empty poor box. I had to get on that train before it left, and before they spotted me.

I nudged my hat down a little lower over my face and turned back to the ticket counter. The ticket master had pulled the ticket and was saying something about baggage. I interrupted him.

"Which platform?"

"Two. That way. Better get on over there, it departs soon."

He didn't have to tell me twice, not with those cops starting to spread out through the station. I turned toward the entryways to the platforms and set off at a trot.

Other late passengers were hurrying toward their destinations as well, and I slipped into the thick, rushing crowd, trying to disappear. When I was at last in the shadowed archway I broke into a run, bursting out onto the platform. I crashed head-on into a group of burly workmen. One of them cursed and nearly dropped his end of their heavy load. I stumbled backward and fell, landing square on my backside.

I looked up. A shock ran through me when I saw what the workmen were carrying—a long pine box, like the one Maman had been closed in just a week ago. As I sat, stunned, the four men heaved the coffin up to the edge of an open baggage car on the train. *My* train—bound for Chicago.

The crowds of late folks kept surging past, cursing as they swerved or stumbled over me, but I couldn't move. I sat transfixed, watching the workmen slide that coffin into the car, seeing again my mother's coffin sliding into the dark maw of the Sisters' crypt for the poor. Sister Bernadette had offered me her hand then. Now, it was a kid about my own age who offered to help me up. The hand he extended was friendly enough, and I took hold of it, realizing as I did that it was rough and callused from hard work—and much darker than my own. I looked around, embarrassed to find myself in a crowd of colored folk, all hugging and saying goodbye to family as they boarded the car reserved for them, right behind the baggage car.

I looked again at the boy who'd helped me. He was looking at me, just as curious. He wore denim overalls, with no shirt underneath, and his dark arms and chest were moist with sweat. Judging from the two large suitcases on either side of him, he'd probably been loading the baggage car before I'd come crashing through, though he wasn't any older than me. As soon as I let go his hand, he tucked it, along with the other, into the bib of the overalls. A younger boy stood at his elbow, a skinny kid of about five or six, in a shirt and trousers several sizes too big for him. When I looked at him, he stuffed his hands into his pants pockets, and grinned. His teeth were crooked, and the front two were

missing, but he didn't seem to mind showing them off in a friendly smile.

"I don't think you're in the right place," said the younger boy, lisping a little through his missing front teeth.

"You can say that again," I said, glancing around at all the smiling faces. I didn't belong among so many people feeling happy and warm in the comfort of family, no matter what color my skin was. I glanced again at the baggage car, and the coffin, which I could still see through the open door.

"There's a dead man in that box," the younger boy said, following my gaze. "And we aim to find out who it is."

"Hush up, Terrance," the older boy said.

"It's true," said the younger boy. "And there's a lady in widow's weeds who got on the train. We reckon she's mournin' whoever's in that box—"

"Hush *up*," the older boy repeated before turning back to me. "Where you headed?"

"Chicago. To visit my aunt," I added quickly, before they could ask.

"You got a Yankee aunt?" Terrance asked in a surprised tone. I couldn't tell whether he was impressed or suspicious.

"Mind your own business, Terrance," the older boy said before turning back to me. "I meant, can I help you find your car?"

"Do you work here?" I asked.

The younger boy giggled, but the older one elbowed him.

"Why else would I be hauling these suitcases? I ain't stealing them, if that's what you think," he said, a little defensively.

"I didn't say you were," I said, thinking as I did it would be

a good scam, and one I might remember in case I needed a little cash once I got to Chicago.

"Let me see your ticket," he said.

I held it out to him and he pointed farther along the train, to where the cars looked newer and nicer. "Car number 4, right there. Best be getting aboard. She'll be pulling out directly."

"Maybe we'll see you on down the line," the younger boy called after me as I hurried to my coach. I didn't answer. I had recovered from the shock of seeing the coffin enough to remember the police, and I was eager to board and get out of sight before they found me.

Still, I couldn't quite shake the heebie-jeebies that had come over me. I reckoned that was another thing I'd have to get over in a life of crime, but I couldn't help feeling like it was all part of my punishment from God. Far as I could tell, me and God had never been on particularly good terms, but I figured he was spitting mad now, what with me robbing a church and all. Putting that coffin in my path had been his little way of reminding me that he'd be serving up some just desserts for my sins, and they wouldn't be pralines or bread pudding, neither.

I mounted the steps and entered the coach from the first door I came to at the front. It was the cheapest whites-only car on the train, not a Pullman sleeper where I could rest in comfort on the twenty-three-hour trip, but a coach car, where any sleeping to be done would be on the stiff wooden benches. I slipped into an empty seat near the back, swinging my small bag off my shoulder, and hunched down low so I couldn't be seen through the window. The last of the passengers scurried aboard and the doors closed. Bystanders on the

platform began waving hands and handkerchiefs as the brakes let out in a huge, steamy belch. The engine huffed and the train cars lurched and strained against the couplings before easing forward.

Out on the platform a policeman appeared, but if he was out to catch me he was too late. The platform was already sliding away behind us. I smiled to myself and sat up straight. I had escaped—escaped from the cops and the constant reminders of Maman's ruination and death in New Orleans.

I pulled the bit of newspaper, now empty of its coins, from my pocket and smoothed it across my knee. The headline blazed large and bold: MORE LIQUOR PRODUCED IN CHICAGO THAN BEFORE PROHIBITION. I read the next sentence too, about criminals making millions of dollars and dining with the mayor. That's the one I liked, the one that held all the promise. I figured a sweet-faced sinner like me could make a decent living in the town where men like Johnny Torrio and Al Capone ran the show. Sure, I'd have to spend a little time on the streets, maybe run a rigged shell game or two, maybe charm a few meals out of little old ladies who couldn't resist a motherless boy with such good manners. But I'd find a way to catch a bootlegger's eye somehow. That was the thing about scraping by—you learned to keep one eye always open for opportunity. And when it came knocking, I would throw the door wide open and let it sweep me away to easy street.

I folded the newspaper carefully and slipped it back into my pocket, glancing around at the other passengers, feeling smug in my recent escape and bright future. Other than the porter in his alcove near the door, the coach car was nearly empty. There

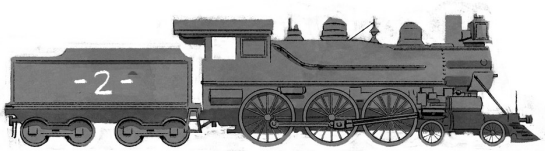
was only one small party of travelers at the rear of the car and a single man off to my right. I guess most folks paid the extra for a bed for the night in a Pullman sleeper.

The lone man to my right wore a rumpled brown suit and was reading a newspaper. The party at the other end consisted of three men and a lady. One man was slender, and pale, like he'd never been out in the sun. The other two were big and bigger, making the lady between them seem as tiny and frail as a sparrow. As for her, even though she was facing toward me, I could not see her face. She was dressed head to toe in widow's weeds—black hat, black veil, black dress. Against her shoulder, like an angelic cloud of innocence amid the trappings of her grief, slept a tiny baby, wrapped in a soft, white cotton blanket, its head tucked up all peaceful on her shoulder.

I thought again of the coffin in the baggage car, my heart sinking as I realized it held a husband and father. This was a woman and a baby cast adrift in the cruel world. Despite my vow to become a hardened criminal, I hated the sight of that fatherless child. It was as if I was seeing me and Maman, back in the beginning, back before she had worked herself to death for my sake. Maybe I'd once been innocent like that too, before life had gobbled us up and spit us out onto the streets, where swiping rolls from bakeries and loose change from pockets had been the best way to survive. Maybe Maman had once held me like that, long before holding on to me had killed her.

I blinked and forced my vision of the widow and baby to come back into focus. Innocence was for saps and patsies,

I told myself. I was headed to Chicago to make my mark on the underworld. Fame, fortune, and a life of leisure—that's what I was after, and none of those came with good, honest hard work. My dead, hardworking Maman was proof enough of that.



HAMMOND, LOUISIANA
9:45 A.M.

New Orleans disappeared behind us and the train picked up speed through the bayous, rocking into a steady rhythm, the rails clattering beneath us in a metallic beat. Inside the carriage, everything was quiet. The man in the brown suit read his paper. The rest of us just sat. I looked out the window, watched the trees and moss and mud, the green and wild world so different from the city streets that had raised me. A little thrill ran through me—I had truly left home now.

The train rolled on and the bayous flashed by for forty-five minutes. Then the conductor walked through the car to announce our first stop, at Hammond, Louisiana. As if the train had heard him, the rhythm shifted and the wheels began to slow. At last, with a shriek and huff of the brakes, we stopped amid a cluster of little houses. Only the presence of the ramshackle, single-room depot gave the place the nerve to call itself a town.

The only thing coming or going from Hammond, Louisiana, was the mail. Out my window, I caught sight of the colored boy in the overalls hauling the mail sacks to the baggage car and hoisting them up to a man inside. It struck me as strange. All the other workers I'd seen were grown men. Maybe this

boy had lied about his age to get a job, as I had once done at the docks of the United Fruit Company. That had been a good, honest job—except, of course, for the lying I'd had to do to get it. It hadn't paid much, barely enough to keep a roof over our heads when Maman had grown too sick to work. Then Sister Mary Magdalene had found out and gone to my bosses with the truth about my age. I was out of a job, and back in the convent's poorhouse, while Maman was sent to their hospital. I suppose for Sister Mary Magdalene that was a charitable mercy, but not for me.

While the boy loaded the mail, two little colored girls came onto the train with baskets full of homemade pralines, roasted peanuts, and warm corn pones for sale. My mouth watered as my fellow travelers made their purchases, but I only had two cents left after paying my fare to Chicago. It might buy an apple or a handful of peanuts somewhere along the way, but I figured it was safer to hold on to it, just in case.

I turned my thoughts back to my days on the docks, trying to ignore the hot, oily aroma of nuts and fresh-fried corn bread. The dock was where I had seen my first Yankee gangster, first realized how high on the hog a man could live with a good, dishonest job. Because while I had been sweating and straining to earn my pennies, I'd watched the fellow disembark from a gilded riverboat, as lazy and smug as a cat in the sun. A swaggering, pin-striped, polished peacock of a white man, his watch chain glinting in the sunlight across his well-fed belly. The beautiful blond woman on his arm was all but swallowed up by long strands of expensive pearls, bright rouge coloring her lily-white cheeks. And as they walked, she kept

glancing at him from under her lashes, like he was more than just the bees knees—he was the whole sweet hive, dripping with honey.

"Who's that?" I'd asked the fellow working next to me.

"That's trouble," the fellow said.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked, thinking that I sure wouldn't mind being in that kind of trouble.

"The kind from up north, kid. The kind that will cut off your nose just for staring at him. So forget about him and get back to work."

I got back to work, but I didn't forget about him. And the more I thought about him, the more sure I was that he was a gangster—maybe Johnny Torrio himself—living large and easy. All the money and food and comfort a body could ask for. Soft hands and clean fingernails and meat with every meal. No toiling like I'd been doing on the dock.

Or for that matter, I now thought as I looked out the train window, toiling like the older boy on the station platform. As I watched him hoisting the last of the canvas mailbags on board, I reached into my pocket and felt for the newspaper clipping.

"More liquor produced in Chicago than before Prohibition," I whispered. When I saw the headline only a day after Maman's funeral, I remembered the dapper Yankee from the docks. I took it for a sign that it was time to start a new life in Chicago.

The final mailbag disappeared into the baggage car and the boy jumped up after it. A moment later, the workmen on the platform slid the door of the compartment shut. This piqued

my curiosity. How would the boy get back out of the baggage car? Before I could contemplate the answer, a voice cut into my thoughts.

"Would you like a corn pone, son? Allow me."

I nearly jumped out of my skin. The man in the brown suit who had been reading the paper was now standing in the aisle beside me, grinning down at me. He waved over one of the girls and took five corn pones from her basket, piling them on a clean handkerchief in his hand. When he had all he wanted, he reached into his pocket, smearing its edge with grease, and pulled out a nickel for the girl. Then he shooed her away with a flick of his hand, as if she was no more than a pigeon in the street. She scuttled away, head down, trying to be invisible as she retreated from the train car. I frowned. Working the docks and the streets, I'd learned that the colored folks were just trying to get by like the rest of us. The way he got what he wanted and then scorned her told me all I needed to know about this man. But he dismissed my frown as well, and settled himself uninvited into the seat opposite me. He held out the pile of corn pones on the handkerchief.

"Eat 'em while they're warm. Go on, son."

"Thank you, sir," I said. I wanted to tell him I wasn't his son, but instead I just helped myself to the biggest corn pone and prepared for whatever was coming. I'd lived off charity often enough to know that people didn't buy you breakfast without expecting something in return. Sure enough, after I'd swallowed the last bite and licked the grease from my fingers he smiled at me, as if to say he had me in his debt and planned to make the most of it.

"What's your name, son?" he said in that easy, friendly voice untrustworthy folks use when they want you to trust them. I didn't, but since he still had a handful of golden corn bread, and I still had an empty stomach, I smiled back.

"Robert E. Lee Claremont, sir," I said, trying to give off a whiff of innocence.

He gave a whistle of appreciation. "That's a mighty fine name, son. A mighty fine name. Have another."

He held out the handkerchief again and I took another corn pone. This was exactly why Maman had given me the name, and why I had shared it with him. A boy needed every advantage he could get in this hard world, she always said. For a while I couldn't see how being named after the South's greatest failure was an advantage, but with uppity white men in New Orleans it often paid off.

"Thank you, sir," I said again. "And what's your name?"

He smiled as polite as could be. "I'm Sergeant Rufus T. Hayworth, and pleased to be makin' your acquaintance."

I froze, the corn bread halfway to my mouth. Sergeant? The train lurched and began moving again.

"Are you a soldier, sir?" I asked, hoping against hope.

He chuckled and pulled back his jacket to reveal the badge on his sweat-stained shirt. "I'm a member of the Louisiana State Police, son. And I was just wondering what a youngster your age was doing, traveling alone on such a long journey. You're headed to Chicago, I presume?"

"Call me Bobby Lee," I said. If he was fixin' to drag me back to the Sisters of Charitable Mercy, he might as well call me by my sinner's name. I was only Robert when Sister Mary

Magdalene was making me walk the straight and narrow. "I'm going to visit my aunt. She'll be meeting me at the station in Chicago."

"That so?" said the sergeant, his tone still friendly and conversational, though his eyes were telling me he didn't believe me. "What's this aunt's name?"

"Aunt Bertha, sir," I said quickly, knowing hesitation could give away a liar, then wondering if I'd given it away by being too quick. "She's got a fine, big car. She's meeting me at the station." I swallowed to make myself shush up before I got in any deeper.

Maybe I was too deep already. Sergeant Hayworth was looking at me in that long, hard, considering way, and I couldn't tell where he'd end up after all that considering.

"The thing is," he said after a spell, "I couldn't help noticing the way you hunkered down in your seat before we left New Orleans, like you didn't want to be seen through the windows. Like maybe someone might be looking for you."

He paused, waited for me to crack. I blinked and chewed, and waited right back, giving away nothing.

He frowned, flattening his eyebrows down tight so that his eyes went all hard. "The thing is," he said again, leaning in this time, like he was sharing a secret, "I have it on good authority that those folks behind me, at the rear of the car, they aren't respectable, if you take my meaning. Could be mighty dangerous for a boy on his own. Mighty dangerous."

I leaned to look around him at the woman and three men, who seemed to be minding their business. My heart gave a little flutter of hope. "You mean they're criminals?"

"They might be, son. They very well might be."

"What kind of criminals?" I asked, trying not to let my rising excitement show.

"Murderers," he whispered, in a way meant to scare me. "Cold-blooded killers, son."

I leaned out for another quick peek before bending closer and whispering, "Even the baby?"

"Of course not the baby! But the others, they could be unpredictable, and mighty dangerous. So maybe you might want to tell me your real story, son? Where you belong?"

I looked him square in the eye, steady as could be. "Yes, sir. I belong with my Aunt Bertha in Chicago. She'll be coming for me in her fine, big car, sir."

He leaned back then, disappointed that I hadn't spilled my guts. "'Course you do. But you be careful, you hear? You tell me if them folks try anything suspicious on this journey. I'm a police officer, and I'll protect you as best as I can."

So that was it. He wanted me to be a snitch and thought he'd buy my services with two corn pones and a little fear. I didn't say anything, just gave him a meaningless smile, formulating my own plan.

"Well," the sergeant said, getting to his feet and dusting the crumbs off his jacket. "I think I need a cup o' joe to wash down that corn bread. It's been a pleasure talking to you, Robert E. Lee Claremont."

He walked to the back of the carriage and opened the door. The clack of the wheels on the track filled the air for a brief moment before the door closed behind him. I continued to look straight ahead, with equal parts curiosity and trepidation. With

the policeman gone, I had an unencumbered view of the group at the far end of the carriage. Now that he mentioned it, I *could* see the rakish tilt of a hat and the pinstripes on a suit. And was that the glint of a solid gold watch chain?

Criminals! Exactly who I wanted to meet! Only problem was, the big man sitting beside the widow had been watching me the whole time I'd been conversing with Sergeant Hayworth. And he looked none too happy that I had been fraternizing with the enemy.