



## The Fortune

*by Constance McCutcheon*

A brown-haired young man led his girlfriend rapidly through the streets of New York City, although he was lost, too. The streets were even shabbier now than those that surrounded his Lower East Side apartment. Here and there huts had been heaved up out of the debris, pastiches of tar scraps, cardboard, and squashed tin cans that had been pressed together somehow to form the homes for those who hulked outside buried in bulky coats and beards, their still eyes sunk into the life passing by.

The young lovers hurried past, hand in hand, on their way to a restaurant Jay now felt they would never find. A mood of foreboding crept over Dorie.

“Where is this place, Jay?” she asked, but received no answer. Shrewdly she squinted through her eyelashes. “Watch yourself sometime, my man. How you take care of business! Rushing without knowing where the hell you’re going.”

“Took care of your business last night all right, didn’t I?” he retorted, leading her as quickly as before. He turned smiling to her. “And this morning, and—”

“Don’t be ridiculous in public!” she screeched, but her tone meant that she had withdrawn from the battle. She gave herself up to be led along as before.

“There it is. I can’t believe I found it again.”

“What did you find?” Dorie’s green eyes shifted nervously back and forth as she tried with slackening spirit to make something out on the abandoned street corner Jay pointed to. There was nothing there but a rusted pipe fence standing crooked against a gray mosaic of curb, sidewalk, and the occasional black rift in what had once been the street.

“Yeah, I can tell by the poles. This be the place, ma’am.”

“But Jay ...”

A set of broken steps led down under the sidewalk and into blackness.

“Jay, I’m not going down there.”

When Jay turned to answer, his trousers legs were immersed in the dank, acrid-smelling shadows of the third step. A sneer momentarily flattened his broad lips. “You know the city better than that, my love. This is a subway station! The restaurant is down here. It’s stuck into the wall. You’re not going to believe it! Whoo!”

Dorie stood frozen. He was gone and she was alone. Was going back by herself worse, with all the bums and distraught bag ladies along the way, than being down there with Jay? Her painful meditation was interrupted by the hollow sound of voices coming up through the black hole, then the tap, tap, tapping of footsteps

ascending the steps. She stood back. With nothing to stand beside or behind she felt as naked as an animal without its fur. Three husky men in business suits rose up onto the sidewalk arguing. One man with long, reddish-blond hair and a feathery mustache was whining and wiping his tie. Within moments, they were out of earshot, hurrying back to the office.

In their wake, a calm settled in. Dorie's panic was gone. The sunlight was peaceful and the dust on the ground soft, cold, eternal. The afternoon was back in focus. Jay was simply chasing another wild idea; he was not hauling her on a death ride. She approached the fence and stepped gingerly down into the throat of the cavity. It breathed up to her its vapors of urine and the grease of machinery. Softly, continuously calling out Jay's name, she descended. He was there to help her down the last step, nodding in a knowing way.

In the dark, they passed a griping, wheezing fat woman who sat in a huge elevator built to lift thirty lazy passengers up to the street. It stood empty except for the woman sitting on a stool by the controls. She stared at her fingers which grasped a large wooden lever. A desiccated, white-haired man sat in a glass booth by the turnstiles, ready to sell tokens, but with no customers. He stared unmoving at the seams of his daily domicile.

"Watch!" Jay made a flourish with his hand. Dorie grimaced when she saw the single token clasped in his fingers. "Just do what I say. Stand here in front ... like so." He positioned Dorie snugly within the bars of the turnstile and then, his arm straining forward, dropped the token into the slot as he pushed from behind, wheeling them both through the cold stems at once. "Owww!" Dorie complained, but she was inside the network of dark passageways now, hurrying behind Jay through ghostly concourses, slipping down staircases, finally touching down onto the welcome stability of the platform by the tracks. But Jay hurried on, past the platform, past the sign forbidding entrance and onto a narrow, lightless ledge that led into the tunnel where the train tracks disappeared. He paid no attention to

Dorie's protests and she could only lunge after him, fasten her hands onto his belt, hunch over as if against the wind, and follow.

A short flight of stairs caught them by surprise, leading them down to a graveled surface flush with the metal runners of the tracks. A sense of relief scoured their spirits as they crept back up another flight, regaining their slight elevation above the tracks. A strong wind came, whipping up the smell of grease. The sound of rumbling grew louder. "Oh, Jay!" Dorie whispered. Jay stopped, his heart pounding, and they waited. The noise was terrifying. Everything seemed to have gotten slick: the clammy wall, the single pale railing by their side, the cement underfoot. It would be very easy to lose one's footing. The terrifying noise crescendoed, a train roared by, deafening them, and whipping their breath away. In its wake, Jay muttered, "We have two minutes. We'll be inside in two minutes." But immediately another rush of wind came. They moaned involuntarily, crouched, and waited. The roar increased and the next train tore by. It was cold and damp in the tunnel and they were both badly shaken.

Pressing their hands against the bare cement wall, they groped their way along as quickly as they could. Presently, they made out the weak glow of fuchsia and blue neon lights tacked onto the cement around a low entranceway that led right into the wall, just as Jay had said. Bowing their heads and shoulders, they moved into wherever it might lead, anxious to get away from the next train.

When they straightened up, they found themselves in nothing more than a cement niche where a couple sat on rickety folding chairs at a card table. The unhappy pair were wielding their forks and knives, not to eat the meal set in front of them, but rather to point out the oddities of their unpleasant surroundings. From the shadow produced by the flickering of the single candle in the room came the unpleasant feeling that something was moving somewhere along the walls. Jay and Dorie's sudden entrance made the couple all the more uncomfortable; the room was too small for two couples who had

not been introduced. But Jay seemed to be unaware that he had intruded and showed no inclination of backing out to grant privacy.

“Thanks a lot, Jay,” Dorie whispered and turned to go, but he held her fast by her skirt.

Jay directed his gaze purposefully to the man at the table and asked how long he thought it was going to take them to finish their meal. The man stared at him with soft, round brown eyes, tousled his hair, and smiled but couldn’t hide a sense of disorientation. The woman sitting across from him, a dignified, good-looking woman, waited curiously, watching her companion. “You want it?” the man asked, and he began to get up. The woman put a restraining hand on his wrist. “Ralph, the fortunes,” she said very low. Ralph repossessed his chair and shrugged. “Look, man, you just hang on. It’s not good food and if you’re hungry, then you better go somewhere else.”

“How about,” Jay fumbled in his pocket for money. “Just let me buy your fortunes from you and—”

“Hey, who are you?” the woman fired out. “Wait ‘til we’re done. We’re trying to enjoy our—”

“I just want the fortunes,” Jay smiled ingratiatingly, but the woman exploded.

“And you think we came for the food? Look, pal, you eat your lunch, you earn your fortune. Okay? Go away.”

The lunch was bad, the service was bad, but at the end of it, Jay and Dorie were presented with their fortunes. “Look at this!” Dorie whispered in awe. She had the strip of paper between her fingers and was holding it near the candlelight. “I think it’s handwritten, and the paper is ... is ... is it rice paper? I don’t know what rice paper—”

“What does it say?” Jay asked, setting his aside.

“You say these are supposed to be true?” Dorie teased him. “I’ll never show it to anyone!” and she folded it into a tiny square, tucked it under her fingernail, and waved her finger at

him. “I’ll neeee-verrrr-owwww!” He had reached out and slapped her hand hard. The square dropped onto the table. He slipped it towards himself and unfolded it.

“Hey,” he began, but he stopped as suddenly as he had started, and regarded Dorie surreptitiously. As he lowered his eyes, his gaze darkened.

Having backed into a corner for a better view, Jay studied the tiny room to see how the proprietor came and went, but he saw only walls. There was no way out other than through the low, crude passageway through which he and Dorie had come in. When the wall next to him began to shimmy and the modest proprietor appeared, standing perfectly still and staring gravely up at him, Jay lost his breath, as if another train had just roared by, and his heart pounded half a beat too fast.

The wall through which the Chinaman had emerged still swayed slightly, revealing it to be a curtain of beads the same color as the wall; the candlelight gave the tiny balls only the slightest luster. Unaware of them, they readily took on the solidity and dullness of the cement.

“Yes? I can help you?” the Chinaman asked at long last. He smelled strongly of smoke.

What a little man he was, Jay thought, quieting his heart. He wanted to draw him aside, gently, behind the curtain, and give him some friendly advice about restaurants and the devastating business whirl of New York City about which Jay knew so much, but the brown face kept staring at him, impolitely, with an unsettling intensity.

“Yes?” the Chinaman repeated. “I can help you?”

“Yeah.” Jay bowed himself down slightly toward him. He would be generous but firm, very oriental in his own way with this little man. “I mean, the food’s bad enough,” he was saying low. “The least you could do is give me and my girlfriend different fortunes.” He spread the two slips of knobbed paper out on his palm. “How about a couple more?”

The man frowned and kept silent a long time. His face seemed to grow even darker, more severe; it was careworn, leathery, emaciated, and it shocked Jay as he regarded it furtively, ashamed of his fascination but unable to look away. He had never seen such a face before. His heartbeats were coming a little too fast again, but he stood his ground, his back arched and his toes curled tightly in his shoes. After waiting what he considered to be a pause equal to the pause the oriental man had used on him, he held his hand out, and receiving no answering gesture, tilted it, dropping the fortunes onto the uneven cement floor. He was ashamed to see how quickly the man squatted down to scoop them up, as if something precious had been dropped, water in a desert, the loosened leaves of a holy book. “Ahhhhh, now,” Jay began to apologize, but the proprietor had already risen, the fortunes in his palm, and was saying:

“You don’t like what I write.”

“No, hey, don’t get me wrong. It’s a great gimmick. I wish I had thought of it. That’s what it’s all about around here. Gimmicks sell and—”

“I cannot change the fortunes.”

Jay was offended. “You! man! gave me and my girlfriend the same ones!” He sneered slightly. “We ordered your slop because we heard you gave out some wild fortunes, you know, hand done and true and all that. I’m saying we didn’t get our money’s worth and I’m not even complaining about the damn food that isn’t Chinese or Taiwanese, or Cantonese, or whatever the hell it’s supposed to be! You’re probably cooking with sewer water down here, but I’m not complaining about the food. I just want a couple of extra fortunes! Hey, is there a fire back there?” he asked, no longer able to ignore the smell of burning and the now evident wisps of smoke that came from the gap between the floor and the bottom of the bead curtain.

“We have no problems,” the man answered, and then: “I cannot change the fortunes.” He regarded the tiny room sadly where Dorie sat absently wagging her crossed legs to make the silvery buckles on her shoes glint in the weak light.

“I said ...!” Jay widened his eyes and loomed a little closer to regain the man’s attention. His gaze expressed ignorance and openness and a willingness to fight.

The Chinaman resettled his eyes on Jay. “You express your desire for more fortunes. I cannot give you more. I am sorry.” The man hesitated and there was a shadow of fear in his eyes. “Perhaps you want your money back?”

Jay noticed the shadow. “Yeah! Yeah, I want my money back.”

“That is no problem. You did not pay. No charge. OK. Please leave now. This is very bad. You make problems. We want quiet here. Please.” He turned away.

“Hey!” Jay stopped him. “How about giving me those fortunes back? I mean they are ours, aren’t they? We labored over our ration for them, didn’t we?” he asked sarcastically.

“You not satisfied,” the man replied, his eyes once again as smooth as pond water. “Be satisfied with that.”

Jay turned on his heel and strutted out, Dorie in tow. Out in the eerie air so close to the tracks he clicked his fingers. “Forgot something. Just a minute.” He groped his way back towards the neon ribbons on the wall. With incredulity, he saw that another customer already occupied the room. “Sorry, forgot to pay,” he explained to the policeman who seemed to have grown up at the card table from out of the shadows. Jay slipped a folded bill between the tines of an unused fork, and set the fork so that the bill was neatly presented to whoever would clear the table. “That’s for that Chinaman!” Jay said to the policeman, as if warning him not to steal it. But the time it took him to make the statement had given him just enough time to see the Chinaman emerge through the dull beads, heading toward the table with a concerned look. Jay left hurriedly. The greenback would cover food and table setting and perhaps a lesson for the cook.

Both Jay and Dorie were glad to get to street level again. Jay’s single pointed comment on their swift walk back through the blocks of rubble was, “So, you’ve started working for the asshole, your cousin, again, I take it.”



“Just a little—” she stopped short. “I didn’t mention it to you.”

“Because it’s not important,” he sneered softly.

“Because it’s *not* important,” she affirmed.

The End