

# The Infernal Feminine

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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YOUNG STAFFORD DEVOTED A FULL hour to the note, and even then was unable to satisfy himself. It was the ninth draft that he finally decided to send, and he folded it and sealed the envelope with the air of a philosopher who realizes how far short of the perfect are our most earnest endeavors. The note read as follows:

Dear Miss Blair:

I have been in New York two months; just long enough to form a decision that it is for the most part an exceedingly over-praised institution. Then, last night, a friend took me to see Winning Winona, and the moment you appeared on the stage that decision was reversed.

I shall not apologize for the informality of this; if you are inclined to be offended it would be useless. I shall only say that I wish very much to have the pleasure of meeting you, and that, having studied you for two hours, I

know you will at least be kind enough to accept my best and most tender regards and wishes.

Yours sincerely,  
Arnold Stafford.

Now, despite this evidence to the contrary submitted in black and white, Arnold Stafford was a sensible youth. There comes a time in the life of every man when he feels an overwhelming impulse to send a note to a musical comedy soubrette; and it is no credit to him if he is too cowardly or too cautious to yield to it. And when the soubrette happens to be Betty Blair—well, have you ever seen her?

As for the merit of the note itself, it must be admitted that it was a rather curious performance. It had a curtness and brevity that was almost legal—which perhaps was an effect intended deliberately. Anyway, it must be remembered that Stafford was wholly without experience in the matter.

The important thing is, it produced results. It was the third morning after sending his note that Stafford found in his mail a gray, severe envelope. Tearing it open, he read as follows:

Dear Mr. Stafford—You may meet me—if you will—at the stage door after the performance on Friday evening.

Sincerely,  
Betty Blair.

If Stafford had been a member of that gilded brotherhood which impedes the traffic of Broadway without any apparent purpose other than to prove that an animal with two legs is not necessarily a man, this seeming compliance on the part of Miss Blair would have filled him with suspicion. But as he was merely a promising young lawyer, with more or less of an excuse for existence, he was only pleased and a little surprised. As he attempted to convey to his tailor some idea of the importance of the occasion for which certain repairs were necessary, he realized that he was getting considerably more than he had dared to expect.

On Tuesday evening he went again to see *Winning Winona*, also, on Wednesday and Thursday. He was forced to miss the Wednesday matinée only by a business engagement, which it was impossible to postpone, and yet the dawning of Friday saw, if anything, an increase of his impatience and eagerness. That is what raised Stafford's whim to the dignity of passion. An infatuation that can withstand four performances of a popular Broadway show is not a thing to be regarded lightly, as an invitation to supper or a wedding engagement. It approaches the divine.

As is entirely proper in such cases, Stafford harbored no serious intentions. He was not entirely unsophisticated, and he knew very well that one goes to supper with an actress just as he goes to dinner with an appetite, or to church with a Bible. It is true that he was finding it difficult to reconcile this approved viewpoint with his own tumultuous feelings and eager expectation, but he accounted for the difference on the charge of novelty, and gave his undivided attention to the arrangement of his toilet and the choice of a restaurant.

Friday's performance of Broadway's newest hit, though in reality sadly similar to all the others, seemed to Stafford to be invested with a particular charm and

freshness. That was due to the fact that he took no notice of it whatever; his mind was entirely occupied with wild admiration of Betty Blair when she was on the stage, and restless impatience when she wasn't. He felt a sort of pity mingled with superiority, for the rest of the audience, who had to be content with their seats in the fifth row—or the fifteenth, which was worse—and share the glances of the divine Betty with anyone who had two dollars and a distaste for music. Then, reflecting that such a sentiment hardly suited a blase man of the world—which role he had definitely decided to assume—he spent the entire third act in the lobby, smoking cigarettes and looking as tired as possible.

He carefully avoided all appearance of haste. As the audience emerged from the theater he leaned against a nearby pillar and surveyed them, individually and collectively, with a cold and cheerless eye. Then he sauntered leisurely around to the stage door—and noted with alarm that members of the company were already leaving. He approached the guardian of the door and addressed him in a voice of anxiety.

„Has Miss Blair come out yet?“

The man in uniform eyed him a moment impassively, then his face brightened up. „Miss Blair? What is your name, please.“

Stafford handed him a card, and he disappeared in the narrow hall. A minute passed—two—then out into the white blaze of the arc over the entrance came Miss Betty Blair, with a dainty step and an entrancing swish. As Stafford advanced to meet her, hat in hand, she looked up inquiringly, smiled sweetly and said, in a silvery April-shower voice:

„Mr. Stafford? I'm so pleased to meet you.“

Those persons who are inclined to regard Stafford unfavorably, from whatever viewpoint, would do well to remember that the lure of the actress has been felt by more than one man worthy of the name, from Louis the Fourteenth down—or up—to Richard Le Gallienne. Her only business is to be charming, her only care is to entertain, her only desire is to please; for the public, of course. And thrice happy is the man who is able, even for one brief hour, to monopolize those melting glances, those musical tones and those pretty gestures! Studied or ingenuous, it matters not; they are there, and they are irresistible. Besides, do we not hear the man at the next table tell his companion that „that is Betty Blair?“

Such was the delightful tenor of Stafford's reflections as he led the way to a table in the tastefully subdued supper room at the Vanderbilt. It was, as he had hoped it would be, crowded. The soft carpets caressed his feet; a Viennese waltz sounded in his ears; the second glances at Betty Blair filled his heart with pride and his chest with wind. He motioned the waiter aside and himself adjusted her chair and arranged her cape. Then, after giving their order, he sat and regarded her expectantly, still scenting vaguely the delicious perfume that had arisen from her crown of golden brown hair.

„I'm not going to ask why you're so kind to me,“ he said. Betty Blair sat silent, pulling off her gloves.

„What do reasons amount to at a time like this?“ continued Stafford. „It's enough to know that we are here. Outside is the world, with its sorrows and its pain, its cold logic and its stubborn facts. No one knows better than I how full it is

of shams and lies and hypocrisy. It is only when his heart speaks that a man tells the truth.“

„And you?“

„Mine is speaking now. It has been—ever since I first saw you. If I could only tell you all that I have felt—all that these few days have meant to me! I have thought of nothing else, I have cared for nothing else, but this.“ His tone was full of earnestness, his eyes looked into hers with a sincere and real appeal.

„But you don't expect me to believe you?“

„Try me,“ Stafford leaned forward and spoke eagerly. „I know what you would say: that I do not know you. Ah! Do I not? Who could look into your eyes without seeing the kindness of your heart? Nothing could make me happier than that you should ask me for proof. Anything—I would do anything.“

A smile, charming and earnest, appeared on the face of Betty Blair. She stretched a hand across the table toward Stafford. Her eyes looked into his with confidence and satisfaction.

„I believe you,“ she said, „because I want to. But I'm going to demand your proof.“

„I would do anything, go anywhere for you,“ repeated Stafford, as gravely as his intoxication would permit. „A demand from you is a favor. Try me.“

Betty Blair opened a large silk bag which she had carried on her arm, and from it took a long slip of paper, a leather bound tablet and a fountain pen. She turned a cool, calculating eye on Stafford, unsheathed the fountain pen, and cleared her throat in a businesslike manner.

„Your address is 25 Broad Street?“

Stafford, guessing wildly as to the meaning of these deliberate preparations, nodded.

Betty Blair turned to a page in the leather bound book and wrote on it. Then:

„You are a Republican, I believe?“

„Unless you're a Democrat.“

„Mr. Stafford, this is no joke. You are a Republican?“

„I am,“ seriously. „Is it a crime?“

For reply Betty Blair pushed the slip of paper across the table and handed him the fountain pen. „Sign on the twenty-fourth line, please,“ she said.

As Stafford caught up the paper and read the printed paragraph at the top his jaw became firmly set and his hand trembled. Then he looked across at Betty Blair with a cold and cheerless eye.

„Miss Blair,“ he said, „I congratulate you. But you've missed your mark. I refuse to keep a promise obtained by fraud and misrepresentation.“

„Mr. Stafford!“

„O piffle!“ said the exasperated Stafford inelegantly. „You've deceived me. You've destroyed my illusions. But you're up against the wrong man. Take it from me, the best thing you can do is to put a marble bust of Sappho on your mantelpiece, read carefully the life of Peg Woffington and hang Susan B. Anthony on a sour apple tree. If you've finished supper I'm ready to go.“

„Mr. Stafford,“ Betty Blair's voice was cold and stern, „this is no time for personalities. Can you deny that *Votes for Women* is the universal password in the intellectual world of today? I'm not surprised that you wouldn't sign that pledge,

even after you'd promised. It's just like a man. But I warn you—" she choked with indignation—"I warn you—"

„You have already," Stafford rose and laid a bill on his plate. Then, as he turned to go, „Never again for me," he said bitterly. „An hour ago I was thanking God I'd found you. Now I'm thankful I found you out—before it was too late. Oh, I know what a real woman is—or ought to be. I read about one once in a novel. I had no idea they'd gone so far as to demoralize the stage."

That was all. An hour later Stafford was uneventfully and comfortably lying lonesome but safe in his bachelor bed. The only really important thing about the story is its application. As Stafford himself expressed it a day or two later, it's a waste of time to search for live specimens of an extinct species.

