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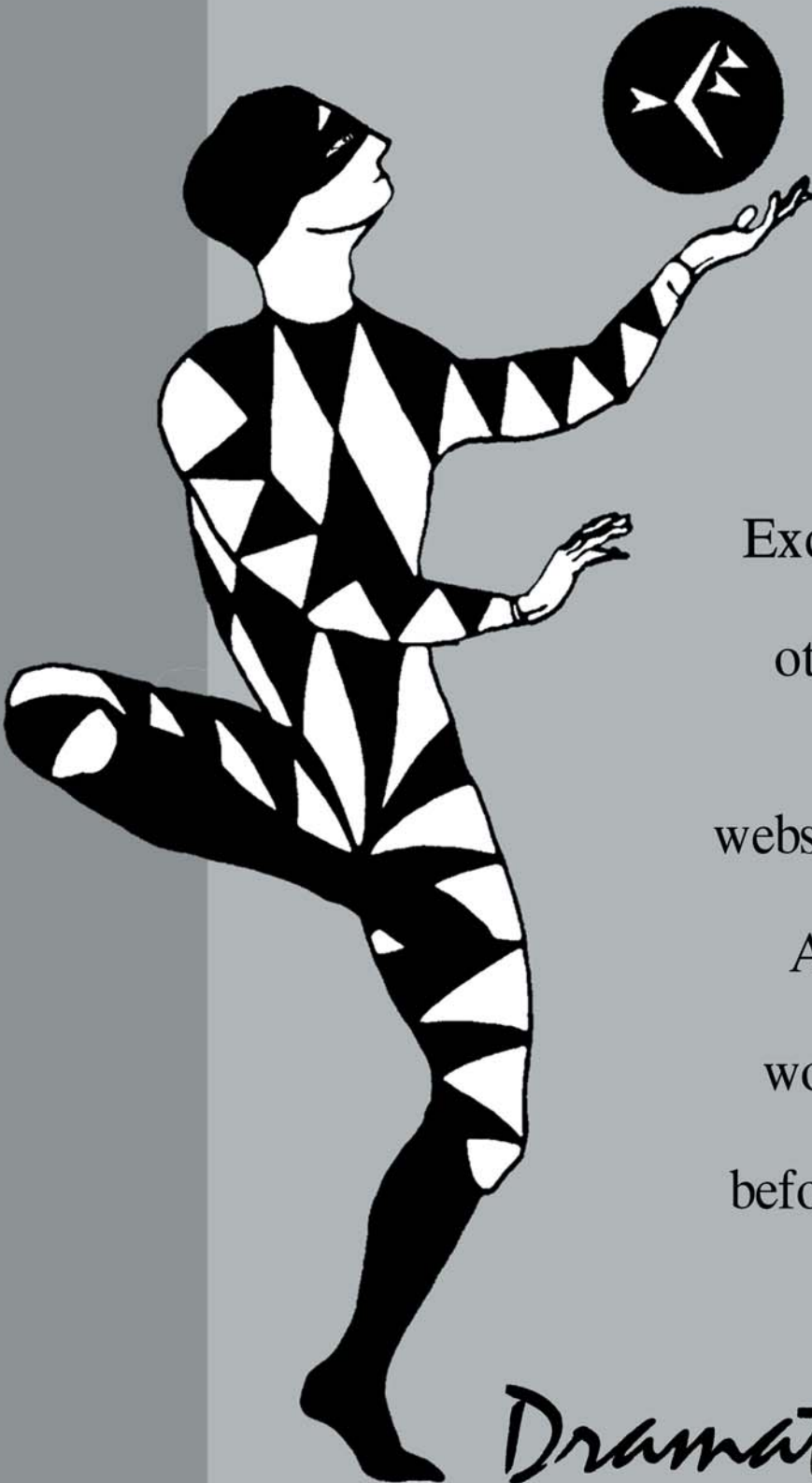
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Dramatic Publishing





The Lady Who Knew Something

A One-Act Play

By
PAT COOK



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(THE LADY WHO KNEW SOMETHING)

This play is dedicated to

ROBIN

THE LADY WHO KNEW SOMETHING

A Play In One Act

For Four Men and Two Women

CHARACTERS

CHARLEY. an easy-going man, about thirty-five

THE LADY a woman of ordinary features, in her forties

JEFFREY WEXLER PENDERGAST a loud, conniving
. man in his late forties

JESS. a rough, ranch-hand type in his fifties,
. but looks much older

HONDO Jess' simple-minded, overweight, sidekick

MILDRED a large woman, in her late thirties

TIME: The present

PLACE: An out-of-date cafe in Miller Falls, Texas

The setting for this drama is a semi-contemporary cafe in West Texas — a place called Miller Falls. The cafe is rather usual in its decor and around the room are several tables, complete with checkered tablecloths and chairs. There is one table, which belongs to Pendergast, located DC and another, which becomes the Lady's, located DL. There is also a bar with bar stools. On the bar sits a cash register, salt and pepper shakers, menus, etc. Around the room are various pictures and paraphernalia depicting the West Texas terrain and atmosphere.

THE LADY WHO KNEW SOMETHING

SCENE: The cafe.

AS LIGHTS COME UP: CHARLEY, the proprietor of the cafe, is seated on a bar stool at the bar. His face is hidden from the audience by a newspaper. Slowly he lowers the paper to “discover” the audience.

CHARLEY. Oh, excuse me. (He folds up the newspaper.) I didn't mean to take so long, but there was an article about Liz Green's girl getting married. Frankly, I didn't believe it. We didn't think Liz would *ever* get rid of that girl. I'm not telling tales out of school, but that kid has a face that could ruin a buzzard's appetite. Anyway — (He gets up and walks toward the audience.) — that's another story and not without its points of interest, I am sure. She sure must've known something bad about the groom, I give you that. He's a sailor and he better pray for long voyages, if you ask me. (He smiles.) Yeah, she must've known something, all right. I wonder if she'd talked to that stranger that was in here a coupla years ago. Oh, that's right, you don't know, do you? Listen, you got a minute? I'll try to set this thing up for you. You'll get a charge out of it. Let's see. It was just coming up on spring here. You know, windy and cool, like it always is. (He crosses behind the bar.) Out in the panhandle you can never tell what the weather's going to do. Anyway, I had only owned this restaurant for a couple of years then. When I bought it it was a restaurant but ever'body calls it a cafe, so what're you going to do. So, here I was working behind the bar like I always do — (He points to the

door.) – when in comes this lady.

(The LADY enters. She looks the place over for a minute.)

CHARLEY. She stood there, lookin' over the place, you know, and finally she comes up to me. (The LADY crosses to the bar and sits on a stool.)

LADY. Afternoon.

CHARLEY. Hi-dy.

LADY. Little windy, isn't it?

CHARLEY. Some, I guess. Not really, though. We ain't had any of the bad ones yet. We had one last year that carried off Efrem Brown's Buick and last we heard it was somewhere over Nebraska.

LADY. Just the same, it's a little much for this old Southern girl. Can I get a tall Cocacola? (CHARLEY takes out a bottle of Coke and pours it into a glass.)

CHARLEY. Ask and ye shall receive.

LADY (taking the glass). My mouth's a little dry. My pallet has the same texture as sandpaper – only not as soft.

CHARLEY. What brings you to Miller Falls? And if you say "a bus" I'm going to lose my high opinion of you.

LADY. Well, you might say I'm here on business.

CHARLEY. What kinda business you in?

LADY. Let's just say I deal in futures.

CHARLEY. You mean, like wheat futures?

LADY. I mean, like people futures.

CHARLEY. I don't believe I ever heard of that.

LADY. Not meaning to be presumptuous, but I didn't think you had.

CHARLEY. I know, I know. Next you're going to tell me that I'm too darn nosey and I ought to mind my own business. But you got to understand, this is a small town. And I don't know anything about farming or oil, sports or cattle, so about the only conversation I get is with the

customers and an old dog that hangs around down by the filling station.

LADY. I bet they think you're an eccentric, don't they?

CHARLEY. That's about the only word they *haven't* used, yeah.

LADY. This the only cafe in town?

CHARLEY (to the audience). See? What' I tell you. (Back to the LADY.) Well, ma'am, this is the only place you can sit down and eat, if that's what you mean. There's a Sneak-A-Snack down the street there and the filling station sells sandwiches, but they always smell like gasoline.

LADY. That's all I need to know.

CHARLEY (to the audience). Well, here she sat, just looking over the place. Brownsin', kinda. Anyway, it wasn't ten minutes when in walks Jeffrey Pendergast.

(PENDERGAST enters. He is carrying a newspaper and smoking a large, black cigar.)

CHARLEY. Jeffrey Wexler Pendergast. At that time he was Miller Falls' richest and most notorious citizen. He had unquestionable, if unexplainable, wealth. Nobody in town really knew much about him, except after talking to him for five minutes you got the creeping feeling that there were a few bodies that were *not* in the cemetery. (PENDERGAST sits at "his" table and reads his newspaper.)

LADY. Who's that gentleman yonder?

CHARLEY. Name's Pendergast. Jeffrey Wexler Pendergast. He is Miller Falls' richest and most notorious citizen. He has unquestionable, if unexplainable, wealth. Nobody in town . . .

LADY (interrupting him). He seems like a man of substance, all right. And yet I get the feeling that . . . Well, I'll be! That's him, all right.

CHARLEY. What do you mean, ma'am?

LADY. Yes, sir. That's the man I've been looking for.

CHARLEY. Well, you can have him. And no complaints from us.

LADY. He come in everyday about this time?

CHARLEY. Like clockwork. We run the trains by him.

LADY. And he always sits at that table?

CHARLEY. Yes'um. Got his name carved on one of the legs. He pays me five dollars a week to reserve it. 'Course ever'body knows it's his so they don't . . .

LADY (handing CHARLEY a five dollar bill). Well, in that case, I want that table over there. Behind him.

CHARLEY (taking the bill). Yes, ma'am!

(JESS and HONDO enter and sit at the table the LADY has just reserved and start reading the menus. CHARLEY crosses to them.)

CHARLEY. Jess, I hate to have to move you and Hondo here, but I just sold this choice spot. (PENDERGAST hears the commotion and looks over his shoulder.)

JESS. Sold it? How much?

CHARLEY. Five dollars, like it's any of your business.

JESS. Must be an out-of-towner.

HONDO. Yeah, an out-of-towner. (He giggles.)

JESS. Shut up, Hondo, and move to that other table.

HONDO (pointing to a table). That one?

JESS. Yeah, fine.

HONDO (pointing to another table). Or that one.

JESS. Sure, okay.

HONDO (pointing to the first table again). Or maybe that one.

JESS (shouting). Pick a table, Hondo! It'll be dark soon! (HONDO crosses to a table. JESS gets up.) And don't carve nothin' on it. (He looks at CHARLEY.) You have to be a member of the aristocracy around here to do that,

ain't that right, Charley?

CHARLEY. You pay me five dollars a week and I'll let you carve a letter to your mother on it.

JESS. Who're you over-charging for this one?

CHARLEY. The lady at the bar. (PENDERGAST turns and sees the LADY.)

JESS. Why's she want this table?

CHARLEY. That's her business.

JESS. You don't know either.

HONDO (at a table). Can I sit down now, Jess?

JESS (crossing to HONDO). Crymonently, of course, Hondo! You ain't got the brains God gave a coffee table, you know that? Sometimes I get the feeling you were born under a truck. (He sits with HONDO.)

CHARLEY (wiping off the table). Ma'am, it's ready for you now. (The LADY crosses to the table, passing behind PENDERGAST, who has taken a curious interest in her.)

LADY (as she passes PENDERGAST). Excuse me, Jeffrey. (She sits at the table. PENDERGAST looks at her even harder.)

CHARLEY. I trust this will suit your needs. (The LADY nods and continues looking at PENDERGAST, smiling.) Or your interests . . . whatever they are . . . if you'd care to tell me. (The LADY doesn't hear him. He looks at the audience.) She didn't care to tell me. I was just about to press the point when Pendergast . . .

PENDERGAST (interrupting him). Charley!

CHARLEY. . . . calls me over. (He crosses to PENDERGAST.) Yes, sir, Mr. Pendergast?

PENDERGAST (still looking at the LADY). Mighty strange weather we're havin', ain't it, Charley? I mean, I've been around here for a few years and the one thing I've never gotten used to is the weather. Mighty strange, ain't it?

CHARLEY (to the audience). Pendergast always had a hard time getting to a subject. He could beat around the bush

better than anybody I ever knew. It was like if he ever got to the point that he had wanted to speak to you about originally, he had stumbled on it by accident. (To PENDERGAST.) Yes, sir, it is strange.

PENDERGAST. Mighty strange, that's all I can say.

CHARLEY (after a pause). Well, if that's all you can say . . .
(He starts to leave.)

PENDERGAST. Charley, I'll tell you why I called you over here.

CHARLEY. Oh, there's no hurry. I'm still young.

PENDERGAST. I was just wondering who your new client is — there.

CHARLEY. You mean the lady?

PENDERGAST (nettled). 'Course I mean the lady. You think I'm interested in Hondo?

CHARLEY. Ain't nobody interested in Hondo unless they just wonder what that smell is.

PENDERGAST. S'what you get from hanging around cows.

CHARLEY. Yes, sir. About the lady . . .

PENDERGAST. Yeah, what's her business here?

CHARLEY (excited). Well, I'll tell you. (He pulls up a chair and leans in to PENDERGAST.) I don't know.

PENDERGAST. Aaah, you're no help. Out with it, man! What's her name? What's she here for? How'd she know my name?

CHARLEY (rising). I don't know, I don't know, and I don't know. She seems to know you, though, from the minute you walked in. Not some lady from your deep, dark past, I trust?

PENDERGAST. Don't start in on me, Charley. When I want your opinion I'll ask somebody else. (CHARLEY crosses to the bar.)

CHARLEY (to audience). You hear him just then? (He smiles broadly.) I got his goat. I love to do that to him. Getting Pendergast's goat was one of my favorite things

in the world. He had the patience of a land mine. (PENDERGAST goes back to reading his newspaper but finds his attention drawn to the LADY. He keeps looking over his shoulder at her and sees her smiling at him. Finally he speaks.)

PENDERGAST. Mighty strange weather, ain't it?

LADY. It has its points.

PENDERGAST. Don't it, though. (He laughs broadly. His laugh subsides and the lights fade on PENDERGAST and the LADY and come up on CHARLEY, who is at the bar lighting a cigar. JESS and HONDO exit.)

CHARLEY. Well, that's how it began. Pretty strange when you look at it. And that was just the first day. The next day was pretty much the same. Pendergast would come in and sit at his table and then the lady would come in and sit at hers. See, one thing she could depend on was Pendergast. He had the originality of an adding machine. (The lights come up on PENDERGAST and the LADY.) And after about four days of this it kinda began to wear on him.

PENDERGAST. Charley! (He motions CHARLEY over.)

CHARLEY (crossing to PENDERGAST). What is it? You want another piece of chocolate pie? It was all you could do to force down those last three.

PENDERGAST (angry). No, I don't want another piece of pie!

CHARLEY (smiling at audience). Got him again.

PENDERGAST. I want to lodge a complaint with you.

CHARLEY. What? You don't like the cuisine?

PENDERGAST. I never touched the cuisine. I just come in here to eat.

CHARLEY. Well, what is it, then?

PENDERGAST. I just think it's shameful the way you run this place. I mean, you let anybody come in here whether you know anything about them or not.

CHARLEY. I suppose you got *lots* of ways for me to remedy this, don't you?

PENDERGAST. Sure. Now listen to this. You ought to run this place like a country club.

CHARLEY. What do you want now? A golf course and a sauna?

PENDERGAST. No, I was just looking into the law and if you make out like this place is some kind of private club, then you could ask your customers a little about themselves. You know, some personal questions, add a little personal touch to this place. Make them feel special.

CHARLEY. What kind of questions?

PENDERGAST. Write these down, I don't want to have to go through them again. (CHARLEY takes out a note pad and starts writing.) Questions like "What's your business?" and "How'd you get to be so successful?" "What brought you here?" "What do you intend to accomplish here?" You know, like that.

CHARLEY. Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Pendergast, I think this is a wonderful idea.

PENDERGAST. You do? Good. Now – (He indicates the LADY.) – Get at it.

CHARLEY. Okay. (He reads.) Mr. Pendergast, what's your business? How'd you get to be so successful? What brought you here? What do you intend to accomplish here? (PENDERGAST glares at CHARLEY for a moment, then reaches over and tears up Charley's notes.)

(The lights fade on CHARLEY, PENDERGAST and the LADY and come up on JESS and HONDO, occupying two stools at the bar. HONDO is reading a comic book while JESS looks in the direction of the tables. PENDERGAST and the LADY exit.)

JESS. I bet you she's a show girl. She's got that kinda face, don't she? I mean, I bet she's a lot older than she looks

but just wears a lot of make-up to hide her age. And you only learn that kinda stuff in show business. And if she's got anything on Pendergast she's got to be older than she looks. I figure at least ten or fifteen years older, anyway. 'Cause God knows how old Pendergast is. They might be the same age, him and God. Only difference is neither one of them has heard of the other one. What do you think, Hondo?

HONDO. I try not to.

JESS. And you're doing a fine job, too. Yep, that's what she is, I bet. A show girl. I bet you anything that's it. A show girl. (Slight pause.) Or a nurse. (Lights fade on JESS and HONDO and they exit. Lights come up on CHARLEY, now at the bar.)

CHARLEY. That was just about the main topic of discussion in Miller Falls. Who was this lady with the dark past? And if it was a subject of conversation to us, it musta been a burning passion to Pendergast. One thing was for sure, though. She was a lady who knew something. On Pendergast, anyway. (The lights come up on the tables. They are empty.) This noontime cat and mouse game went on for another week before we had what I called "musical tables" day. Where Pendergast thought he'd turn the tables. Or, at least, change them.

(PENDERGAST enters and sits at the Lady's table. CHARLEY crosses to him.)

CHARLEY. What happened, the wind catch you? That's not your table.

PENDERGAST. Charley, I have decided the time has come to take action. Let's see how this mysterious interloper likes a dose of her own medicine.

CHARLEY. But you're sitting at her table.

PENDERGAST. That's right, Charley, boy, and I want you

to explain to the lady that she is cordially invited to sit at mine — an occasion that seldom happens to anyone in this town.

CHARLEY. Oh, I'm sure she'll be all over goose pimples when she hears.

(The LADY enters.)

PENDERGAST. Go on now. There she is.

CHARLEY. Uh, ma'am, we have something of a situation here. It seems that Mr. Pendergast has suddenly struck up an affair with your table and wants, most vehemently, for you to partake in his.

LADY (to PENDERGAST). Why, Jeffrey, that's most kind of you. Just like old times. (She sits at Pendergast's table and CHARLEY retreats to the bar. PENDERGAST mumbles to himself and tries to stare at the LADY. She sits for a moment, then reaches into her purse and takes out a small compact with a mirror. Then, pretending to examine her make-up, she watches PENDERGAST in the mirror. She smiles. PENDERGAST, realizing this, becomes more irritated than ever. First, he tries to duck her gaze. Giving up, he moves to another table. She still watches him in the mirror. He then moves to a third table and the LADY, putting away her compact, moves to her original table, where she can now see him without the mirror. Giving up, PENDERGAST starts toward his table.)

(At this moment, HONDO enters and sits at Pendergast's table, not seeing PENDERGAST.)

PENDERGAST. Just what do you think you're doing?

(HONDO knows he is in trouble, but is not sure why.)

HONDO. Uh . . . uh . . . is this a trick question?

PENDERGAST. No, you're at my table, you moron!