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Mysterious Lady

Was she flesh-and-blood, or fantasy?

By JAMES MCNITT



YAWNING, Philip Arnold closed his book and leaned back against the soft cushions. To the music of the clicking rails, his curly head nodded and Morpheus drew near him. Outside, the storm sometimes languished, sometimes increased in fury. Crashes of lightning alternated with the twinkling of lights in towns and cities as they flashed by. The coach contained possibly a score of passengers, most of them reading or dozing. From the coach ahead, a young lady entered and took the vacant seat in back of Phillip. She moved with a grace like that of the leopard. Lithe and dainty in form, her very gliding walk diffused a charm which forced from even the most casual observer a second glance. Set in a perfect ivory and rose face, were dark eyes of unfathomable depth, morbid, penetrating, filled with an entrancing personality which seemed to attract and repel at the same time. Over her there hung a heavy cloud of mystery.

She was looking at Philip with an intent gaze, seemingly fascinated. He was worth a careful scrutiny. The red plush cushions set off his wavy hair by contrast, and his dark, handsome face bore the innocence of sleep. Developed by four years of college football, his physique was splendid.

Up in the cab of the engine, the engineer gazed intently into the darkness. Occasionally he spoke to the fireman at his side. "I'm kinda glad this is my last run, Joe. The eyes aren't what they used to be. Forty-three years with the N. W. and H. is long enough. I can live comfortably on my pension. After we cross the river, it's only eight miles to town."

Joe peered into the murky gloom. "Must be pretty near the river."

"Any time now." The engineer kept his eyes glued to the track ahead. Suddenly he jumped for the throttle, but it was too late. Even then the nose of the engine was plunging down into the abyss drawing the coaches after it.

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When Philip returned to consciousness, he was aware of being dragged from the wreckage of the train. Looking up, he found himself gazing into a pair of very dark eyes. Although he was not sure of the fact, they belonged to the young lady who had been sitting in back of him. He began to struggle to clear away the debris around him. Finally he released himself and scrambled to his feet. Then for the first time he spoke to his neighbor. "What happened?"

"The bridge was washed out and the train wrecked." She spoke in a pleasantly modulated tone, with a faint touch of foreign articulation.

"Oh." He was rather stunned. Looking about, he saw the few survivors hunting for bodies of friends. Even while he watched, they dragged from the pile of scrap-iron which had formerly been the engine, the mangled body of the engineer, who only a few short minutes before had said that this was his last trip. How true! Along the banks of the muddy stream lay the still canvas-covered forms, mute testimony to the tragedy. It seemed to him that the lovely lady was rather unconcerned about the death around them.

Suddenly she turned toward him. "Look at me," she commanded. He did so. As his gaze met hers, he was conscious of being drawn irresistibly toward her. He struggled, but to no avail. Impulsively he seized her in his arms and their lips met. For a moment, she lay there inert, her eyes penetrating into his brain and searing their impression of

beauty upon it. Then she regained her composure, and with a gentle, "Thank you," she walked rapidly into the gray dawn and disappeared.

When Philip returned to the city the next day, the memory of the ebony eyes would not leave him. They haunted him in his work, at sleep, at recreation.

Then one day he met her again as she was hurrying along the street. On recognizing him, she stopped, with what seemed like fear in her eyes, and begged him not to go on. He was curious and not a little piqued, but she held him in conversation for several minutes. At length a loud detonation was heard. They both hurried to the spot where the explosion had occurred. Arriving there, they found the front of a cleaner's establishment blown away. It was evident that the members of a big racketeering gang were at work again. Throughout the ruins were scattered bodies, horribly torn and mangled. Phil's companion turned to him and said, "Shall we go on?"

Her sang-froid annoyed him. "But Great Heavens, these bodies!" he expostulated.

She shrugged. "Those men are beyond human aid. However, suit yourself."

He entered a nearby drug store and sent in an emergency call for the ambulances. By this time, quite a crowd had assembled. Even during the excitement and confusion of the bombing, it seemed that people were looking rather queerly at him while he was talking with the young lady. After the ambulances had carried away the bodies and Philip had given his name as a witness, she turned to go away. "When may I see you again?" he asked.

"You may see me—sometime in the near future," she replied vaguely. Then she disappeared.

"Come here a minute," called another voice. Phil looked. A rather tall gentleman stepped to his side. Then Phil uttered a cry. "Say, what's the big idea. Take these handcuffs off my hands."

"Sorry, big boy. There's a man down town that wants to see you."

And so Phil was arrested. He was forced into a long and arduous trial for insanity. Then the prosecuting attorney gave up. "There's no use trying to convict a guy like that who's got money. When a guy's got money, he isn't insane; he's eccentric. He must have given those alienists plenty to make them call him sane." The case was, unfortunately, given much publicity, and the general impression coincided with that of the attorney. Wherever he went, Phil felt that people were pointing at him, distrustful, suspicious. He was disgusted with life.

Then the lady again appeared. She came so swiftly and so silently that he forgot to be surprised. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that she should be there beside him in the garden, seated on the cold, marble bench.

He continued to gaze into the darkness for several minutes, then turned to her. "Who are you anyway? The Angel of Death?"

She made a deprecating gesture with her hands. "Let us not call it that. Say rather that I *am* death. Death incarnate! Death, the ruler of the world! Yet, to think that I, who hold the fate of the universe in my palm should descend to such an earthly passion as love."

"Whom do you love?" His mind was far away. He had suspected the truth of her identity for some time; now that it was ascertained, he was in no wise frightened by it. Death had seemed a terrible thing, but when represented by such a glorious personification as she, it seemed a wonderful way of leaving the world of alienists, attorneys and scoffers.

She answered in a weary voice, "Oh, don't be foolish. It is you, of course." He shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant manner. Coolly he began to speak. "Well now that it is settled, the question before us is of the proper place. How about a passport to heaven? Surely, love has its place there."

She nodded assent. Bending slightly over, she looked into his eyes and stroked his forehead. He was conscious that his soul was oozing from him by inches. Slowly darkness settled down on his brain. Just before unconsciousness over-

took him, he was vaguely aware of a rustling sound and heard Lady Death make her departure.

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"There, now, just lie quietly." An official-looking man was at the side of the linen-covered bed. "Hello, doc," said Phil rather irrelevantly. "How did I get here?"

"Your mother found you but in the garden suffering from heart disease."

Phil recovered, much against his will. At the present time, he sits in the garden, moping and staring. Someday his body will be found there, lifeless and cold. Death will have come to claim her own. Some old and doddering coroner will call it heart failure, and a skeptical public will place at naught Phil's statements about the personification of Death, remembering his trial for sanity.

DREARY DAYS

What is more dismal than a rainy day in autumn? From a leaden, sodden sky, the rain drizzled continuously, veiling the world with a silvery gray film. At intervals, the wind, like some angry, blustering monster, sent it dashing against the window panes in gusty torrents. Trees, with bare, bleak, wind-tossed branches, mourned the loss of their vivid turbans, and their leaves, no longer like fairy barks drifting "in idle, golden freighting," were being beaten and drenched and driven by the turbulent waters. Muddy rivulets coursed sluggishly in the gutters. Oh, how a drab, dripping world reminds one of life's failures and disappointments.

—Valerie Pattee.

A man recently bought a typewriter from Danny Rose, who claimed that he had used the machine only a month, but the purchaser found that he had been swindled for the "I" was entirely worn out.

A Student's Lesson Charm

Before opening a book, mix a dose of concentrated concentration with a little more than half a wit of alertness, an ounce of common sense and a pinch of sand or a little determination; the latter being preferable in serious cases. Boil this up until a little enthusiasm begins to bubble. Then add enough of any sticky substance available, stick-to-itiveness preferred to last throughout the entire dose. The dose, saturated with study should be placed on one's weakest spot until a little learning sinks in. To increase the educational effect, a little more work should be added.

As pictures teach the coloring, so sculpture teaches the anatomy of form. When I have seen fine statues, and afterwards enter a public assembly, I understand well what he meant who said, "When I have been reading Homer all men look like giants." I, too, see that painting and sculpture are gymnastics of the eye, its training to the niceties and curiosities of its function. There is no sculpture like this living man, with his infinite advantage over all ideal sculpture, of perpetual variety. What a gallery of art have I here! No mannerist made these varied groups and diverse original single figures. Here is the artist himself improvising, grim and glad, at his block. Now one thought strikes him, now another; and with each moment he alters the whole air, attitude, and expression of his clay. Away with your nonsense of oil and easels, of marble and chisels: except to open your eyes to the witchcraft of eternal art, they are hypocritical rubbish.

—Emerson, on Art.

Miss Linsley: Arthur, will you read this for the benefit of the people who were too lazy to bring their books to class?

Arthur Weiner: I left my book in my locker.