



By Thomas Swift,
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A PHANTOM

CHAPTER I.

IT was purely from a business standpoint that I first contemplated love and matrimony. As a proof of this, the two ideas were, initially, quite separable. Indeed, the suggestion came from my friends of both sexes, who, for various reasons, urged the measure upon me. It is doubtful, however, if I should have yielded to their solicitations, had I not met Elsie Tasker. It was at a bicycle meet. After following a tress of golden hair streaming in the wind for a good twenty miles, I felt that it would be bliss to ride by her side for the rest of life's journey. Yes, it was love at first sight, you miserable sceptic,—and she didn't wear bloomers. I have seen many ladies on bicycles, but never one that in grace or power and control over the machine could match with Elsie Tasker.

I had just left a patient who resided in the west end of the great city, or, to be more accurate, lay at death's door; and my eyes longed for the sight of one dear face, and my heart for the touch of a firm, soft hand. It was not much out of my way, and my noiseless steed, impelled by love, had carried me there whilst yet debating the propriety of a call. But that is one of the many advantages of a bicycle,—it allows one little time for reflection and quickens the will to resolution.

Tall and stately, my love rose to receive me, and I, hardly yet free of the picture of death in life so recently under my notice, could not but marvel at the splendid symmetry of figure and generous grace of limb displayed by her who glided to my side. But Elsie was not herself. I could see that in the droop of her dark-blue eyes, feel it in the tones of her voice; though her manner towards me was tenderness itself.

I took up the magazine she had been reading when I entered. I glanced at the heading of the open page, and read aloud, "The New Woman athletically considered."

"I am coming to think that that is all wrong—the athletic woman, I mean," Elsie remarked. I looked up astonished. This from Elsie Tasker, the best all-round girl athlete in the Wellesey Gymnasium! I gazed at her inquiringly.

"We go there," said Elsie, pointing to the picture of a gymnasium, "and imitate our brothers in acts which we, unlike them, may not do in public. Then we don an attire in which we are ashamed to let our fathers and brothers see us. They can go anywhere, dress as they choose, and do anything inside the law, but, if we do anything the least out of the way, the world is down on us in a trice."

"Let me feel your pulse, dearest," I said lightly, placing my fingers on her firm, dainty wrist. "Nothing wrong there," I remarked; "pulse strong and regular. What have you been doing with yourself to-day?"

Elsie, laughing at my banter, replied:

"I spent an hour at the gymnasium, and went for a long bicycle ride with Jack."

No; I wasn't jealous. Jack was her only brother, a clerk in a big city bank.

Our conversation then drifted into other and more tender channels, and our whisperings were music only appreciated by ourselves. When I rose to depart, Elsie accompanied me to the door, and—"kissed you," do I hear you say, you cynical old scoffer? Well,—yes, she *did* kiss me, and put her two arms around my neck to do it. There! Make what you like of that.

My good wheel sped me to my rooms without hap or mishap. I went to bed, and was aroused from a delightful dream by my night-alarum. The fingers of my time-piece indicated one o'clock. I was urgently summoned to the bedside of an old friend, Harry Lester, who was suffering from a serious nervous disorder, caused by a sudden shock. In a short time I was at 301 Dallas Street.

My friend's boarding-house stood close to the street. As I leaned my wheel against the wall, I heard a strange, weird sound. It seemed to come from the opposite side of the street, along which ran a blank wall about seven feet high, topped at intervals by trees. After glancing around I ascended to the sick chamber.

Harry Lester lay panting and trembling, his bright eyes anxious for my coming.

"Glad to see you, Harold" he said. "Thought I was a goner that time, sure."

"Not a bit of it, old man. We'll pull you through yet," I replied, preparing a dose for his relief. "But you must fight these spasms off and cling to life like a cat."

"I am sorry to have brought you out at this unconscionable hour; but, really, I feel better the moment I see you," Harry said after swallowing the dose.

"That will soon fix you; and we must have you out in the open air. You haven't seen much of him lately, have you?" I inquired, with the least suspicion of banter.

"Don't chaff, Harold," said Harry, turning restlessly towards me. "It's no

joke. He came again to-night, and disappeared through the window."

I smiled and shook my head. "What was it like, this time?" I questioned.

"Like?" said Harry. "Like the Devil. I can't describe it. It was horrible."

I went to the window. The lower sash was up, in accordance with my directions for the free admission of the cool, night air. A fine maple tree stood opposite, whose branches touched the wall of the house.

"Couldn't I have that window down or the shutters fastened?"

"Nonsense!" I returned. "This cool, wholesome air is just what you want."

"But, you see, it—it went through the window like a flash. Close the shutters for once, old fellow. Do," he pleaded.

I humoured him. I closed and fastened the shutters and bade him "good-night."

Now, I had been with Harry Lester probably half an hour, and my bicycle had disappeared. I ascended to Harry's room again.

"What's up now, Harold?" came from the bed as I entered.

"I'm in it this time," I replied. "Somebody has walked off, or, more likely, ridden off, with my bicycle. If it should turn up again, you will know whose it is. The fellow may not mean to keep it."

I trudged down again and out, and, to my pleasant amazement, there stood my bicycle

where I had left it. Thankful, I started for home. Putting on a spurt, I fairly flew along Eerie Street. Under the shade trees, half way between two electric arcs, my eye suddenly caught sight of two objects—one lying in the roadway; the other, on the sidewalk. I wheeled round and returned to the spot. The object in the roadway was a bicycle; that on the sidewalk the figure of a female, evidently the rider, and in bloomers of a most pronounced and novel pattern, as was evidenced by one daintily-hosed limb,—the other being drawn up under the prostrate woman. She was lying face downwards, her head buried in her arms. I was startled, but not greatly; for the attitude of the recumbent form did not suggest death or grave injury, but rather terror. I ventured to place my hand on her shoulder for the purpose of investigating. The shoulder shook and the form squirmed and wriggled, but the face remained hidden.

"Ugh! Go away—go away—leave me alone," came in muffled tones suggestive of tears, fright and anger combined. I started back as if I had been struck. My eyes rested on a coil of golden hair gleaming beneath a cap; whilst the tones of the voice made my heart leap to my mouth.

"Elsie!" I exclaimed. "What, in God's name, has befallen you?"

"Go away. I'm not Elsie. I'm—a—Ugh!" she groaned, and writhed at my touch.

"It is I,—Harold," I said; for the poor girl was overpowered by some strange terror.

She peered up at me as I bent over her, and in a moment was sobbing hysterically on my breast. I stood in silence and bewilderment.

Presently, without raising her head, Elsie inquired in a low, tense whisper:

"Is it—is it—gone?"

"Is what gone?" I gently asked.

Elsie shuddered as she clung to me. "It—the thing—on the bicycle," she replied.

"Yes," I answered assuringly. "I guess it has gone. I don't see anything—on a bicycle."

"Oh, it was horrible," she said, at length raising her tearful eyes, which I dried and kissed.

"It frightened me so. I thought I should have died."

I deemed it wise to humour her, and asked: "What was it like, Elsie?"

"It was simply a horror. I can't describe it," she replied. "I thought it was"—in a low whisper—"the Devil. It *was* the Devil, I'm sure. Don't laugh, Harold. Oh, I can't say anything more now. I'll explain everything to you another time; but at present don't question me further, please."

So we mounted and I rode home with Elsie.

"My poor darling!" I said, clasping her in my arms for a moment at parting, and then she disappeared through a side-door that gave entrance to the garden and the back of the house.

I reached my rooms in a thoughtful mood. Elsie lying, at two o'clock in the morning, on a sidewalk, paralysed with fright and clad in bloomers only reaching to the knee,—I knew not what to think of the mad escape of the girl whom I knew to be so gentle by nature.

(To be continued.)



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"CAUGHT SIGHT OF TWO OBJECTS, ONE LYING IN THE ROADWAY, THE OTHER ON THE SIDEWALK."