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THE

fort, "I'm a rotten hand at this sort

you any day.'

like to say so. Esther Shepstone and Ashton's girl from Eldred's were one and the same; that was all he could grasp, and it sounded absurd and impossible.

He had heard so much of this girl -Ashton had talked about her times without number-Lallie he had called her; now he came to think of it, Micky could not remember having ever heard her spoken of by any other name; and Lallie and Esther Shep-

stone were one and the same. Was this, then, why she had cried, because of Ashton . . .? I'd got it now!" Ashton called to him impatiently

"What the deuce are you doing? shall miss my train." Micky roused himself with a start, and, dropping the letter into his

(By the Author of "A Bachelor Hus-

band.")

CHAPTER II.

of action.

Micky stood staring at the envelope

pocket, went slowly out of the room; he felt as if he could not have hurried had his life depended upon it: there was an absurdly cold sort of feeling round his heart. It was ridiculous, of course: it was

he had dined an hour ago loved Ashton; he had never seen her before. That sounded an absurd truth, too; it seemed impossible that until this evening he and she had never met. "For heaven's sake, nurry up, man," said Ashton again sharply.

He was at the bottom of the stairs: the face he turned over his shoulder rather a forced laugh. "You've been to Micky looked pale and harassed. Micky quickened his steps and join-

ed his friend in the porch below; they stood together out on the path waiting for a taxicab. Micky glanced at Ashton with a

curious sense of unreality; he felt as if he had never seen him before; it seemed impossible that this Ashton could know Esther-and Charlie!

A taxicab drew up to the kerb; Ashton banged open the door and got in. Micky followed, and they drove some way in silence.

"I'll take thundering good care I don't stay away long," Ashton said suddenly, with a sort of growl. "And if the mater thinks it will make me "I thought her name was Esther."

said Micky quietly. He was looking out of the window into the starry

"So it is-but I always call her Lallie." He looked at his friend with a sort of vague suspicion. "How do you know what her name is?" he asked.

"If only-what?" Micky asked as he

except what the mater chooses to dole harmless chaff in consequence; he me know what she said and how she

out?"

They were nearing their destina- to the window.

got on ahs nerves; he rather wished he had not come to see him off.

"Oh, but you have-whether you like me to say so or not," the other man went on obstinately. "And-and there's one last thing I'm going to ask you before I go. . . ."

He waited, but Micky did not speak of the congested traffic.

"If you could give Lallie some money," Ashton went on with a rush. "I'd send her some, but I've only just got enough to get out of the way with. I'll pay you back as soon as the mater condescends to send me another che

Micky's face felt hot:

First Aid

"I think it would be better if you done with it," Micky said with an ef- man he really was until to-night?

be a sport and stick to your word." in his hand. He felt as if something had happened to paralyse all power

girl to-morrow if only-"

can I do without a bob to my name that he had had to stand a lot of where I'm staying, and you can let

Ashton gave a savage little laugh.

"It's all very fine for you to say that money isn't everything—that's only because you've got it, and are lowed by a porter with Ashton's bag- the station. never likely to be without it. You gage. Micky looked at it resentfully; don't know what it feels like to be Ashton was evidently prepared to enup to yours eyes in debt and not joy himself; this was no rush after knowing where to turn for a fiver, mere solitude and forgetfulness. nothing to him if the girl with whom Bah! what's the good of talking?" He He stood stiffly at the carriage door now, and yet so much had been crowdlet down the window with a run, while Ashton stowed his smaller ed into the past four hours. Since the

> wanted to say to Micky which so far you, old man?" There was a real anxi- world into a new. He wondered what you again for a bit," he said, with

a good pal to me, Micky-" Micky said "Rot!" rather shortly; he frowned in the darkness; Ashton

The taxi was turning into the station yard now, moving slowly because

"Hasn't she-hasn't she got any, then?" he asked with an effort. "No-at least I promised her some when I saw her this morning. Sheshe's left Eldred's. You see'-he drew

hard breath-'you see, I hoped we'd be able to get married, and so-well, here was no sense in her staying on here. She was worked to death, poor

He glanced at Micky, but could no ee his face.

"You understand, don't you?" said, encouraged by his silence. "She owes'them a bit at the boarding-house where she is living. I promised to wipe it off for her, but the mater cutting up rough altered everything, and so . . . if you could give her a little

"I'll see to it," said Micky. He opned the door of the taxi and got out before it was at a standstill. He took off his hat and let the cold air play on his hot forehead. He could hardly

trust himself to speak. He was thankful when Ashton wen off to see to his luggage. He walked nto the station and found himself aimlessly staring at a notice board. He could not remember when he had felt so furiously angry.

Had Ashton changed? he was ask-

ing himself in bewilderment. Or was posted it to her yourself and have it merely that he had never seen the He tried to remember what Ashto of thing. It can't do any good if I go had told him about Esther Shepstone in the past. That she had been "You said you would go-you might | Eldred's he knew, and that Eldred's was a place where women bought silk Ashton protested. "I'd do the same for petticoats and things he also knew. He had heard Marie Deland and her Micky rather doubted it, but did not friends talking about it lots of times. Marie had once invited him to accom-"If you knew how sick I am about pany her there when they had been the whole business," Ashton went on out together, but he had refused and jerkily. "You may not believe me, but had waited outside for her. Now he I tell you. Micky, that I'd marry that came to think of it, that was about all Ashton had ever told him of Esther

Shepstone. He knew that Ashton had been seen "Oh, you know! What the dickens about with her a great deal; knew out? I tell you," he went on with a himself had joked about Ashton's takes it. . . . Oh, confound it!" sort of snarl, "it'll be very different "latest" as they had all called her:

> Ashton rejoined him "Buck up! The train 's in."

They went along the platform, fol-

turning his face to the keen night air. traps on the rack. Presently he came tion, and there was still something he "You'll do the best you can, won'

he had been afraid to put into words. ety in his eyes, but Micky was not Esther Shepstone was doing in the "Well, I suppose I shan't be seeing looking at him; he answered stiffly- very horrid boarding-house of which "Yes. I'll do what I can." "She'll soon get another job," Ash-

ton went on, with forced confidence. "I'm sorry she left Eldred's, now it's for all response he got. "And when I come back-

come back things may be all right post it to her. again . . . tell her that, will you?" "I'll tell her," said Micky stolidly.

now, doors were being shut. Micky roused himself and looked

"Are you-er-are you going to write to her?" he asked constrained-

Ashton coloured. "No-it's better not-far better le the thing drop till I come back. I've explained it all in my letter-she'll understand. It's no use writing-don't

you think it's better not---' Micky hunched his shoulders. "It's your affair." he said laconical

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A porter had come along and slam-

when I get the money. Gad! if only it seemed a memory to be ashamed med the door; the train was slowly of, when he thought of the way he moving; Micky was vaguely glad that "Money isn't everything," said had heard her sobbing in the street there had been no time in which to Micky sententiously. "And if you like that night, of the distress in her eyes, shake hands. A moment, and he was the girl, why not marry her and face of the hopeless way in which she had | walking away alone down the plat-His hands were deep thrust in the

pockets of his coat; he took no notice of anything; he walked on and out of

Well, this had been an eventful New Year's Eve with a vengeance; he glanced up at the clock in the dome behind him-only a quarter to twelve moment when the Delands rang up to cancel his engagement to dine he seemed to have stepped out of the old she had told him-if she was thinking of Ashton

What a cad the man was, what t come to this, but how was I to know?" discovered it before—to clear off and he appealed to Micky, but he might leave a girl like this, without a word as well have appealed to a brick wall of farewell except the letter. He wondered if he meant to deliver it and admit that he knew Ashton, or if he said again. "Tell her that when I meant just to stick a stamp on and

He realised that there was nothing very much to be proud of in an ad-The guard was blowing his whistle mission that he knew Ashton, and yet they had been friends for years.

It was striking twelve when he got home; he stood for a moment on the doorstep, looking up at the starry sky. Several clocks were chiming midnight in the distance; he listened with a queer sense of fatalism.

This was the strangest New Year's Eve he had ever spent in his life, At this hour last year he had been dancing the old year out, and to-night, had things gone as he had thought, he would have been somewhere with Marie Deland-he might even have proposed to her by this time. He smiled faintly, remembering that the intention had really been somewhere in the background of his mind; but that, too, had faded out now to give place to other, more important, fac-

ors.
Nine, ten, eleven, twelve! He counted the strokes mechanically; there was a breathless pause, then the clash of bells.

Some irrepressibles in a block of flats near by raised a cheer; the front door of a house opposite was open, and Micky caught a glimpse of a crowded hall and black-coated and girls in pretty frocks.

He felt strangely removed from al the noise and laughter; after a moment he turned and went up to his

The fire had been carefully made up and his slippers and dressing-gown put to warm. Micky looked at them with a sort of disgust; it was sickening for a healthy grown man to be so pampered; he kicked the slippers into a corner and tossed the dressinggown on to the couch.

He wondered what sort of a room Esther Shepstone had in the very horrid boarding-house-what odd corner the thin black cat curled into to

He took Ashton's letter from his pocket and stuck it up against the lock on the mantelshelf. "Miss Esther Shepstone . . ." It was fate, that's what it was! He

wondered if she would ever have lived to get that letter had fate not thrown her across his path that night. that cad Ashton.



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