Blackmask Online −− The Manuscript

Otto Larssen

Table of Contents

The Manuscript

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TWO gentlemen sat chatting together one evening.

Their daily business was to occupy themselves with literature. At the present moment they were engaged in drinking whisky,−−an occupation both agreeable and useful,−−and in chatting about books, the theater, women and many other things. Finally they came around to that inexhaustible subject for conversation, the mysterious life of the soul, the hidden things, the Unknown, that theme for which Shakespeare has given us an oft−quoted and oft− abused device, which one of the men, Mr. X., now used to point his remarks. Raising his glass, he looked at himself meditatively in a mirror opposite, and, in a good imitation of the manner of his favorite actor, he quoted: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in thy philosophy, Horatio."

Mr. Y. arranged a fresh glass for himself, and answered: "I believe it. I believe also that it is given but to a few chosen ones to see these things. It never fell to my lot, I know. Fortunately for me, perhaps. For,−−at least so it appears to me,−− these chosen ones appear on closer investigation to be individuals of an abnormal condition of brain. As far as I personally am concerned, I know of nothing more strange than the usual logical and natural sequence of events on our globe. I confess things do sometimes happen outside of this orderly sequence; but for the cold−blooded and thoughtful person the Strange, the apparently Inexplicable, usually turns out to be a sum of Chance, that Chance we will never be quite clever enough to fully take into our calculations.

"As an instance I would like to tell you the story of what happened several years back to a friend of mine, a young French writer. He had a good, sincere mind, but he had also a strong leaning toward mysticism,−−something which was just then in danger of becoming as much of a fashion in France as it is here now. The event of which I am about to tell you threw him into what was almost a delirium, which came near to robbing him of his normal intelligence, and therefore came near to robbing French readers of a few excellent books.

"This was the way it happened:

"It was about ten years back, and I was spending the spring and summer in Paris. I had a room with the family of a concierge on the left bank, rue de Vaugirard, near the Luxembourg Gardens.

"A few steps from my modest domicile lived my friend Lucien F. We had become acquainted through a chain of circumstances which do not belong to this story, but these circumstances had made firm friends of us, a friendship which was a source of great pleasure and also of assistance to me in my study of Paris conditions. This friendship also enabled me to enjoy better and cheaper whisky than one can usually meet with in the city by the Seine, a real good 'Jameson Highland.'

"Lucien F. had already published several books which had aroused attention through the oddity of their themes, and their gratifying success had made it possible for him to establish himself in a comfortably furnished bachelor apartment on the corner of the rue de Vaugirard and the rue de Conde.

"The apartment had a corridor and three rooms; a dining room, a bedroom, and a charming study with an

inclosed balcony, the three windows of which,−−a large one in the center and two smaller ones at the side,−−sent a flood of light in over the great writing table which filled nearly the entire balcony. Inside the room, near the balcony, stood a divan covered with a bearskin rug. Upon this divan I spent many of my hours in Paris, occupied in the smoking of my friend's excellent cigars, and the sampling of his superlatively good whisky. At the same time I could lie staring up at the tops of the trees in the Luxembourg Gardens, while Lucien worked at his desk. For, unlike most writers, he could work best when he was not alone.

"If I remained away several days, he would invariably ring my bell early some morning, and drag me out of bed with the remark: 'The whisky is ready. I can't write if you are not there.'

"During the particular days of which I shall tell you, he was engaged in the writing of a fantastic novelette, 'The Force of the Wind,' a work which interested him greatly and which he would interrupt unwillingly at intervals to furnish copy for the well−known newspaper that numbered him among the members of its staff. His books were printed by the same house that did the printing for the paper.

"Often, as I lay in my favorite position on the divan, the bell would ring and we would be honored by a visit from the printer's boy Adolphe, a little fellow in a blue blouse, the true type of Paris gamin. Adolphe rejoiced in a broken nose, a pair of crafty eyes, and had his fists always full of manuscripts which he treated with a carelessness that would have driven a literary novice to despair. The long rolls of yellow paper would hang out of his trousers pockets as if ready to fall apart at his next movement. And the disrespectful manner in which he crammed my friend Lucien's scarcely dried essay into the breast of his blouse would have certainly called forth remarks from a journalist of more self−conceit.

"But his eyes were so full of sly cunning, and there was such an atmosphere of Paris about the stocky little fourteen−year−old chap, that we would often keep him longer with us, and treat him to a glass of anisette to hear his opinion of the writers whose work he handled. He was an amusing cross between a tricky little Paris gamin and a real child, and he hit off the characteristics of the various writers with as keen a touch of actuality as he could put into his stories of how many centimes he had won that morning at 'craps' from his friend Pierre. Pierre was another employee of the printing house, Adolphe's comrade in his study of the mysteries of Paris streets, and now his rival. They were both in love with the same girl, the fifteen−year−old daughter of the keeper of 'La Prunelle' cafe, and her favor was often the prize of the morning's game.

"Now and then this rivalry between the two young Parisians would drop into a hand−to−hand fight. I myself was witness to such a skirmish one day, in front of 'La Prunelle.' The rivals pulled each other's hair mightily while the manuscripts flew about over the pavement, and Virginie, in her short skirts, stood at the door of the cafe and laughed until she seemed about to shake to pieces.

"Pierre was the strongest, and Adolphe came off with a bloody nose. He gathered up his manuscripts in grim Silence and left the battlefield and the still laughing Virginie with an expression of deep anger on his wounded face.

"The following day, when I teased him a little because of his defeat, he smiled a sly smile and remarked: "'Yes, but I won a franc from him, the big stupid animal. And so it was I, after all, who took Virginie out that evening. We went to the Cafe "Neant," where I let them put me in the coffin and pretend to be decaying, to amuse her. She thought it was lots of fun.'

"One morning Lucien had come for me as usual, put me on the divan, and seated himself at his writing table. He was just putting the last words to his novel, and the table was entirely covered with the scattered leaves, closely written. I could just see his neck as he sat there, a thin−sinewed, expressive neck. He bent over his work, blind and deaf for anything else. I lay there and gazed out over the tops of the trees in the park up into the blue summer sky. The window on the left side of the desk stood wide open, for it was a warm and sultry

day. I sipped my whisky slowly. The air was heavy, and thunder threatened in the distance. After a little while the clouds gathered together, heavy, low−hanging, copper−hued, real thunder clouds, and the trees in the park rustled softly. The air was stifling, and lay heavy as lead on my breast.

"'Lucien!'

"Lucien did not hear or see anything, his pen flew over the paper.

"I fell back lazily on my divan.

"Then, suddenly, there was a mighty tumult. A strong gust of wind swept through the street, bending the trees in the gardens quite out of my horizon. With a crash the right−hand window in the balcony flew wide open, and like a cyclone, the wind swept through, clearing the table in an instant of all the loose sheets of paper that had lain scattered about it.

"'The devil! Why don't you shut the window!' I cried, springing up from the sofa.

"'Spare your energy, it's too late,' said Lucien with a gentle mockery in his soft voice. 'Look there!'−−he pointed out into the street, where his sheets of paper went swirling about in the heavy air like white doves.

"A second later came the rain, a veritable cloud−burst. We shut the windows and gave ourselves up to melancholy thoughts about the lost manuscript, the recovery of which now seemed utterly hopeless.

"'That's one thousand francs, at least, that the wind has robbed me of,' sighed Lucien. 'Well, enfin, that doesn't matter so much. But do you know anything more tiresome than to work over the same subject a second time? I can't think of doing it. It would fairly make me sick to try it.'

"We were in a sad mood that morning. When we went out to breakfast at about two o'clock, we looked about for some traces of the lost manuscript.

"There was nothing to be seen. It had vanished completely, whirled off to all four corners of the earth probably, this manuscript from which Lucien had expected so much. Truly it was 'The Force of the Wind.'

"Now comes the strange part of the story. One morning, two weeks later, Lucien stood in the door of my little room, pale as a ghost. He had a bundle of printer's proofs in his hand, and held them out to me without a word.

"I looked at it and read:
"'"The Force of the Wind," by Lucien F.'

"It was a good bundle of proofs, the entire first proofs of Lucien's novel, that novel the manuscript of which we had seen blown out of the balcony window and whirled away by the winds.

"'My dear man,' I exclaimed, as I handed him back the proofs. 'You have been industrious indeed, to write your entire novel over again in so short a time−−and to have proofs already−−−−'

"Lucien did not answer. He stood silent, staring at me with a weird look in his otherwise so sensible eyes. After a moment he stammered:
"'I did not write the novel over again. I have not touched a pen since the day the manuscript blew out of the window.'

"'Are you a sleep−walker, Lucien?'

"'Why do you ask?'

"'Why, that would be the only natural explanation. They say we can do a great many things in sleep, of which we know nothing when we wake. I've heard queer stories of that. Men have committed murders in their sleep. It happens quite often that sleep−walkers write letters in a handwriting they do not recognize when awake.'

"'I have never been a sleep−walker,' answered Lucien.

"'Oh, you never can tell,' I remarked. 'Would you rather explain it as magic? Or as the work of fairies? Or do you believe in ghosts? Your muse has fascinated you, you mystic!' And I laughed and trilled a line from 'The Mascot,' which we had seen the evening before at the Lyric.

"But my merriment did not seem to strike an answering note in Lucien. He turned from me in silence, and with an offended expression took his hat and his proofs, and−−humorist and skeptic as he was ordinarily, he parted from me with the words, uttered in a theatrical tone:
"'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in thy philosophy.'

"He turned on his heel and left the room.

"To be candid, I was unpleasantly affected by the little scene. I could not for an instant doubt Lucien's honesty,−−he was so pale, so frightened almost−−so touching in the alarm and excitement of his soul. Of course the only explanation that I could see was that he had written his novel in a sleep−walking state.

"For certainly no printer could set up type from a manuscript that did not exist,−−to say nothing of printing it and sending out proofs.

"Several days passed, but Lucien did not come near me. I went to his place once or twice, but the door was locked. Had the devil carried him off bodily? Or had this strange and inexplicable occurrence robbed him of his sanity, and robbed me of his friendship and his excellent whisky?

"After three useless attempts to find him at home, and after writing him a letter which he did not answer, I gave up Lucien without any further attempt to understand his enigmatical behavior. A short time after, I left for my home without having seen or heard anything more of him.

"Months passed. I remained at home, and one evening when, during the course of a gay party, the conversation came around to the subject of mysticism and occult occurrences, I dished up my story of the enigmatical manuscript. The Unknown, the Occult, was the rage just then, and my story was received with great applause and called forth numerous quotations as to 'more things in heaven and earth.' I came to think so much of it myself that I wrote it out and sent it to Professor Flammarion, who was just then making a study of the Unknown, which he preserved in his later book 'L'Inconnu.'

"The occupying myself with the story brought my mind around again to memories of Lucien. One day, I saw a notice in _Le Figaro_ to the effect that his book, 'The Force of the Wind,' had appeared in a second large edition, and had aroused much attention, particularly in spiritualistic circles. I seemed to see him again before me, with his long nervous neck, which was so expressive. The vision of this neck rose up before me whenever I drank the same sort of whisky that I had drunk so often with him, and the longing to hear something more of my lost friend came over me. I sat down one evening when in a sentimental mood, and wrote to him, asking him to tell me something of himself and to send me his book.

"A week later I received the little book and the following letter which I have here in my pocket. It is somewhat crumpled, for I have read it several times. But no matter. I will read it to you now, if you will pardon my awkward translating of the French original.

"Here it is: "DEAR FRIEND:

"Many thanks for your letter. Here is the book. I have to thank you also that you did not lay my behavior of your last days in Paris up against me. It must have seemed strange to you. I will try to explain it.

"I have been nervous from childhood. The fact that most of my books have treated of fantastic subjects,−−somewhat in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe−−has made me more susceptible for all that world which lies beyond and about the world of every−day life. I have sought after,−−and yet feared−−the mystical; cool and lucid as I can be at times, I have always had an inclination for the enigmatical, the Unknown.

"But the first thing that ever happened in my life that I could not explain or understand was the affair of the manuscript. You remember the day I stood in your room? I must have looked the picture of misery. The affair had played more havoc with my nerves than you can very well understand. Your mockery hurt me, and yet under all I felt ashamed of my own thoughts concerning this foolish occurrence. I could not explain the phenomenon, and I shivered at the things that it suggested to me. In this condition, which lasted several weeks, I could not bear to see you or anyone else, and I was impolite enough even to leave your letter unanswered.

"The book appeared and made a hit, since that sort of thing was the center of interest just then. But almost a month passed before I could arouse myself from that condition of fear and−−I had almost said, softening of the brain −−which prevented my enjoyment of my success.

"Then the explanation came. Thanks to this occurrence I know now that I shall never again be in danger of being 'haunted.'

"And I know now that Chance can bring about stranger happenings than can any fancied visitations from the spirit world. Here you have the story of this 'mystic' occurrence, which came near endangering my sanity, and which turns out to be a chance combination of a gust of wind, a sudden downpour of rain, and the strange elements in the character of our little friend Adolphe the printer's boy.

"You remember that funny little chap with the crafty eye, his talent for gambling, and his admiration for the girl of 'La Prunelle'? A queer little mixture this child who has himself alone to look to for livelihood and care, the typical race of the Paris streets, the modified gamin from 'Les Miserables.'

"About a month after the appearance of my book I lay on the divan one day,−−your favorite place, you remember?−−and lost myself in idle reasonings on the same old subject that never left my mind day or night, when the bell rang and Adolphe appeared, to call for the essay on 'Le Boulevarde.' There was an unusually nervous gleam in his eyes that day. I gave him an anisette and tried to find out what his trouble was. I did find it out, and I found out a good deal more besides.

"Thanks to his good fortune as a gambler, Virginie came to look upon him with favor. Pierre was quite out of the race and Adolphe's affection was reciprocated as much as his heart could desire. But with his good fortune in love came all the suffering, all the torture, the suspicions that tear the hearts of us men when we set our hopes upon a woman's truth. Young as he was he went through them all, and now he was torturing himself with the thought that she did not really love him and was only pretending, while she gave her heart to another. Perhaps he was right−− why not?

"I talked to Adolphe as man to man, and managed to bring back a gleam of his usual jollity and sly humor. He took another glass of anisette, and said suddenly:
"'M. Lucien−−I did something−−−−'

"'Did what?' I asked.

"'Something I should have told you long ago−−it was wrong, and you've always been so nice to me −−−−'

"You remember the day, two months ago, when we had such a sudden wind and rain storm, a regular cloud−burst? I was down here in this neighborhood fetching manuscripts from M. Labouchere and M. Laroy. I was to have come up here for copy from you, too. But then−−you'll understand after all I've been telling you,−−I came around past 'La Prunelle' and Virginie stood in the doorway, and she'd promised to go out with me that evening. So I ran up to speak to her. And then when I went on again, I saw a sheet with your writing lying in the street. You know I know all the gentlemen's writing, whose copy I fetch. Then I was frightened. I thought to myself, 'The devil,' I thought, 'here I've lost M. Lucien's manuscript.' I couldn't remember calling for it, but I thought I must have done so before I got M. Laroy's. I can't remember much except Virginie these days. I took up the sheet and saw three others a little further on. And I saw a lot more shining just behind the railing of the Luxembourg Garden. You know how hard it rained. The water held the paper down, so the wind couldn't carry it any further. I ran into the Garden and picked up all the sheets, thirty−two of them. All of them, except the first four I found in the street, had blown in behind the railing. And I can tell you I was precious glad that I had them all together. I ran back to the office, told them I had dropped the manuscript in the street, but asked them not to say anything to you about it. But the sheets were all there,−−you always number them so clearly, and 'handsome August,' the compositor, promised he wouldn't tell on me. I knew if the foreman heard of it, he'd put me out, for he had a grudge against me. So nobody knew anything about it. But I thought I ought to tell you, 'cause you've been so nice to me. Maybe you'll understand how one gets queer at times, when a girl like Virginie tells you she likes you better than Pierre, and yet you think she might deceive you for his sake−−that big, stupid animal−− But now I'll be going. Much obliged for your kindness, M. Lucien, and for the anisette−−' And he left me.

"There you have the explanation, the very simple and natural explanation of the phenomenon that almost drove me crazy.

"The entire 'supernatural' occurrence was caused by a careless boy's love affairs, by a gust of southwest wind, by a sudden heavy rain, and by the chance that I had used English ink, the kind that water cannot blur. All these simple natural things made me act so foolishly toward a good friend, the sort of friend I have always known you to be. Let me hear from you, and tell me what you people up North think of my book. I give you my word that the 'Unknown Powers' shall never again make me foolish enough to risk losing your friendship!

"Yours

"LUCIEN."

"So this is my story. Yes, 'there are more things in heaven and earth−−' But the workings of Chance are the strangest of all. And this whisky is really very good. Here's to you."