

Another Man's Wife

By
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SYNOPSIS

Rex Chandos, ace racer, meets and falls madly in love with Della Seaton, the most beautiful girl he ever has seen. Della, self-centered and of a naturally cold temperament, is the adored wife of Jim Seaton, world-famous cricketer, captain of the England team. She receives a large allowance from her wealthy father, Achilles Taylor. Della falls under the spell of the masterful Rex Chandos. There begins for her a double life. Her husband, in Australia, receives an injury which necessitates the amputation of a leg. Her father, facing disgrace, commits suicide, leaving nothing but debts. Jim Seaton returns to London, a broken creature, on Della's hands. Chandos, in order to get money for Della, accepts dishonest work. He gets a country home with rent free for Della and Jim, with a secret cottage near by for himself and Della, when he is able to visit her. Dr. Wentworth, from the village, becomes interested in Della, with whom he sympathizes and believes to be a faithful wife. His wife, Juliet, is a chronic invalid. She inherited a fortune and the beautiful home in which they live. His mother and his cousin, Jane Galt, live next door, where the doctor has his office. Della gives Jim an overdose of a sleeping drug which Dr. Wentworth had left with her.

INSTALMENT X.

DELLA sank down into the easy chair where Jim had always sat when in this room.

Dr. Wentworth took her hand as he said gravely: "I'm obliged to ask you a few questions, but I beg you not to feel frightened, and, above all, don't reproach yourself."

Della squeezed his hand gratefully. But, to her disappointment, instead of returning that pressure, he withdrew his hand and with it brought—what was it?—out of his pocket.

When she saw that it was the small bottle of the new French narcotic, a fearful inward commotion shook her.

"I suppose you left this bottle inadvertently last night in your husband's room. I take it that he was so sleepless and restless that you felt justified in disobeying me and that you gave him six drops of this new stuff?"

"Yes," she said falteringly, "that was what happened exactly."

"Now, I want that fact to remain an absolute secret between us. If your husband made up his mind to take his life, it is important that no one should suspect it. He certainly hoped it would appear an accident."

She looked at him, her eyes full of questioning. What exactly did he mean?

"If I can count on your keeping what I have just said absolutely to yourself forever, there will be no necessity for any sort of inquiry into the poor chap's death. I am prepared to sign a death certificate to the effect that he died from heart failure. A coroner's inquest generally arouses no more than a moment of passing interest, but it would be different in this case, for your husband was a famous young man."

"Also, you would have to give evidence if an inquest were held, and the truth would have to come out."

"The truth?" she echoed.

"Yes, Mrs. Seaton. You would be on oath to say exactly what happened last night, and you might even have to admit that I had told you how dangerous was this new form of narcotic, and further that you inadvertently left the bottle in his room."

"I know it was very, very wrong of me to do that," she murmured, and moved a little nearer to him.

He said at once: "It was not wrong of you, for you were worn out and hardly knew what you were doing."

All at once—Harry Wentworth could not have told you how it had come to pass—his arms closed around her and their lips met in a caress which to the man was full of unimagined ecstasy. Yet it was he who at last drew back with the muttered words: "Will you ever forgive me? I shall never, never forgive myself."

Again she swayed toward him, and this time it was as if neither knew what force was driving them anew into each other's arms. And while he murmured passionate terms of endearment between their kisses, she responded with an ardor she had never shown with either of the men who had loved her.

ONCE more it was the man who came to his senses.

"All this has been my fault. I loved you from the moment we met my pure angel. I couldn't help it, though I've never forgotten for one single moment that you were another man's wife. And yet—"

And then he stopped, overwhelmed with an agony of shame—of shame, and, yes, of exultation.

Wisely she remained silent—and only looked at him, her face full of wistful submission. She believed he was all hers now.

"I must go now," he said quietly. "Of course you can leave all arrangements to me and to my cousin. By the way, is there anyone, any relative, you would like sent for?"

She shook her head and turned away. Again the tears had come into her eyes. His heart swelled with tenderness.

Then he went into the room next door and replaced the small bottle with the others that were there. After doing that he went back to the lounge.

"I think you had better take those bottles that are by the bed in the next room and put them in a safe place before Mrs. Clay comes back," he said. "They may, after all, have to be produced."

After Della heard the gate shut behind Harry Wentworth she stood in the lounge for quite a long time, bewildered and shaken.

She shrank with a kind of almost animal terror from seeing Jim's dead face. Yet, making a great effort, she went into her husband's bedroom. But she was spared the ordeal she so dreaded, for the sheet had been drawn up and covered the whole of the upper part of his body. Even so, she averted

ed her eyes from that still form, and with shaking fingers took up the four bottles, two in each hand, and pushed her way through the door.

She threw a furtive glance toward the glazed door giving onto the veranda. It would be dreadful if Mrs. Clay came in and found her doing this strange thing. Yet the doctor had been insistent that those bottles should be put away by her.

She lay down on her bed at last, feeling spent with fatigue and emotion. After a while she began to feel rested. It was as her new life had actually begun, and when Mrs. Clay came in and walked past her door she called out that she was going to try to get a little sleep.

But before she could settle down the woman came with an envelope. "It's a letter from the Old Manor, ma'am. And an answer is wanted, or I wouldn't have disturbed you."

Della read the letter eagerly. Her luck had turned, not a doubt of it!

Hastily she scribbled a note and handed it to Mrs. Clay.

The telephone bell rang. "Will you answer it?" said Della wearily, and Mrs. Clay did answer it.

"It's a gentleman, ma'am. He says he must talk to you, as he's just come from abroad. He says he's a great friend of yours and of Mr. Seaton. I didn't tell him nothing. He's holding the line."

Della went into the passage. It must be, it could only be, Rex Chandos. She hadn't thought he would be back for at least a month, and there came over her a new feeling of fear. He knew her so well—in a sense she felt he knew her through and through—it would be terrible, terrible, were Rex ever to suspect the truth.

She took up the receiver. "Is that you?" she asked.

"Of course it is. I rang up early and some damned woman answered me who refused to get you. Is anything the matter? I have a thousand things to tell you."

There was a pause. "How's Jim?"

To that she made no answer, so he went on, "I'm thinking of coming down tomorrow morning at eleven."

According to their code this meant he would be in the cottage from eleven to twelve that night and that she must meet him there. She plucked up courage. "I am in great trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"I can't tell you now."

"You can tell me when we meet—"

There was a pause, then, "I'm in trouble, too," he said.

"How do you mean?"

"Things aren't going as I want them to do."

"Can't you tell me a little more?"

"Not over the telephone. Good luck to Jim."

He always said that when ending a talk on the telephone, and today it frightened her.

She hung up the receiver with a sinking of the heart. Yet in a way she was glad he was back, for the whole of her future life was bound up in his, and she longed to be free of this place and its associations.

At seven o'clock Della suddenly made up her mind that she could not meet Rex Chandos that night. For one thing, even she realized the danger she might be running if she were caught by someone in the company of a man in the middle of the night just after her husband's sudden death.

With a shaking hand she wrote the following message:

"I can't come this evening, for I am in great trouble. Jim was found dead this morning. His heart stopped beating. At least, the doctor says it was that. But if you will telephone tomorrow morning we can make some plan about meeting in a few days."

FOR the moment the thought of the future had vanished. She was oppressed with fears which she told herself in vain were unsubstantial. Yet everything, thanks to Harry Wentworth, was now all right. Poor Jim's body had been taken away to the mortuary.

She waited till eight o'clock. Then she ran to the cottage, let herself in through the window, and put the piece of paper on the round table.

As the evening wore itself away she began to feel as if she could not go to bed. She felt, indeed, so wide awake that she decided the only thing to do was to sit up all night and read in the lounge.

But she found she could not read. Though she made a really desperate effort to expel the image of Jim from her mind, he remained insistently

there. She even became afraid to look around, lest she should see his wraith near the fire, where he had sat hour after hour.

A little after eleven she heard sounds which proved that there was someone in the garden. She got up and stood petrified with fear.

For one awful moment it was as though she heard her husband's crutches, as she had heard them often, tapping on the path that led to the little flower garden beyond which lay the cottage, coming nearer and nearer to the veranda. Then, with measurable relief, the sounds became ordinary heavy foot-steps on the wooden treads leading to the door.

Why, of course it was Rex Chandos! She had been a fool not to know that he would come to the house as soon as he knew she would not go to the cottage.

"My poor girl, you must have had

"You thought what?"

"How about after we've been a little time in Germany? With those people, I mean."

In a moody tone he exclaimed, "That's all off."

"All off?"

She stared at him dismayed. So dismayed that for the moment she forgot Jim and all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. "D'you mean they've chucked you?"

"I found a cable when I got back last night," he muttered. "The idiot speculated, and now he's lost everything. Don't let's think about him!"



Their lips met in a caress... of ecstasy.

an awful day," he said, and kissed her as a brother might have done.

There was a pause. "Is he here?" he asked.

"No, they took him to the mortuary this afternoon. The doctor arranged everything. He's been most awfully kind."

He sat down, and she saw he looked tired—tired and haggard.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "what amazing things happen! I thought Jim would live forever."

"So did I," she whispered.

He looked at her somewhat shamefacedly.

"How soon can we be married?"

She would have been hurt had he not said that at once, yet she answered, "I don't know."

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be married next week."

"O, Rex, I couldn't do that!"

"Then when do you think we can be married? You don't want me to wait a year, do you?"

"I thought—"

And then Rex Chandos asked what Della felt to be a painful, unnecessary question, though it was one which she knew could not but be asked. It had been in the mind of Mrs. Clay and in the mind of Mrs. Roby. She had seen it in their faces, though they had not dared to say anything to her.

"D'you think he did it himself?"

"O, Rex, please don't say that!" she cried hysterically.

"That means he did, I suppose. Well, he acted as I should have acted if I'd been in his shoes. But I'd have done it long ago."

"He seemed so happy last night." The words escaped her.

"Happy? Why happy? What d'you mean?"

"I went in to say good-night to him, and he seemed much happier than usual."

HE was looking at her now. Looking at her hard.

She turned away. "I don't think you ought to stay here any longer. Someone might come in."

"Who could come in?"

"That tiresome woman who lives opposite might."

"How about money?" he said suddenly. "I've brought you fifty pounds." He took an envelope out of his coat pocket and handed it to her, and then he got up.

"I've got to go over to France for a few days. I wish you were going with me."

"I wish I were," she murmured.

Della knew that the big automobile firm that at one time had given him quite a lot of work in France was at a standstill, and seeing a look of surprise as well as relief flash over her face, he exclaimed, "I'm going over to collect money that has been owing to me for ever so long."

He waited a moment. "I hate your being alone here, my sweet."

She said quickly, "The people who live in the Old Manor, one of the big houses on the common, have asked me to stay with them for a bit."

"What's their name?"

"Wentworth."

"D'you mean Jim's doctor chap?"

"I mean his wife."

"There'd be no objection to my coming to see you there, I suppose?"

"O, yes, indeed, there would!"

"Those people couldn't possibly mind your seeing a friend now and again."

Then, because she was "on edge," she did what she was sorry for almost at once.

"You're the one person I know in the world who mustn't come to the Old Manor."

"Why is that?"

"I've always told you," she began inconsequently, "that you ought to be nicer in your manner to people. Sometimes you're so rude, Rex."

"What's that got to do with Dr. Wentworth? Have I ever been rude to him?"

He knew instinctively that it was the man, not the woman, in the Old Manor who was his enemy.

"I don't think you've ever met him. But still—well, he doesn't like the little he knows of you."

"Look here? This is serious. What d'you mean? You've got to tell me."

HER eyes fell before his. What a fool she had been to say what she had said! But there was a thinly malicious strain in Della Seaton's nature, and Rex Chandos had irritated her.

Haltingly, making as little of it as she could, she told him what Harry Wentworth had said.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "this is a bit thick."

She saw a look of rage flash into his eyes, and with that rage was coupled fear.

He looked down on her gloweringly. "Sure you've told me everything? Honest?"

"Honest!" she cried. And then, "I couldn't help thinking—"

"What did you think?"

"That perhaps in your gay young days you'd carried on with some woman Dr. Wentworth knows. That's the only thing I could think of."

He looked greatly relieved, and his quick mind began darting this way and that. Had any of his lighter loves, women he had treated with careless cruelty before he had met this woman, lived in or near Meltham? He couldn't remember.

"I suppose I may write to you?" He asked the question in a sarcastic tone, but she took it quite seriously.

"I suppose you can. The Old Manor, Meltham Common—that's the address."

"You'll be there by the time I'm back from Paris." He took out a pocket diary. "Let me see. Today's Monday; can you be here Friday evening, say about six? I shall have some money for you then."

He threw in those last words as an afterthought, but he knew they were what would bring her.

"I think I could manage that."

"We might then decide about the date of our wedding. After all, Jim—"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Please don't mention Jim. If you knew how I hated it you wouldn't do it. Besides, when I think of him I know it's beastly of me to think of being married as quickly as you want me to. In fact, I can't do it, Rex. It's no good to ask me."

"Very well," he said moodily.

"Have you anything in prospect?" she asked, and he detected the anxiety in her voice.

At once he replied: "Of course I have. A dozen irons in the fire."

And then at last came the moment he had been waiting for, hungering for.

She threw herself on his breast.

"I've been so awfully miserable, Rex, so utterly, utterly wretched. Don't think I don't want to be with you always, for I do."

Della's words melted him. "I don't want to hurry you, my darling. I love you too much to want you to do anything you would rather not do."

She went with him to the door and for a long time stood staring into the darkness.

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