

# THE LETTER IN THE VASE

By DON MARK LEMON

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If any one had told me such a thing, I wouldn't have believed them. Of course I wouldn't have let on that they were uttering a real falsehood, but I'd have had my own opinion about it. But when a thing happens to yourself, you can't have any doubts whatever. There's no use arguing the matter. It happened, and—well, you know it. Of course some folks can say you dreamt it, or perhaps they will listen nicely till you are through, and then go away and not believe a word of it. I have my opinion of such folks.

I had bought out furnished houses before. Indeed, I have laid up a little money in the bank from buying the furniture in houses and then tidying things up and getting all the rooms rented, and afterwards selling out. Some people envy you and say you ought to be very thankful that you can do business without having to pay any office rent, but you have to have your office in your head, just the same, and unless you are very careful you are apt to lose your money, sometimes in the strangest way. But I don't think anybody ever lost money in such a strange way as I did.

I lost nearly \$700, or I've as well as lost it, for I still have the furniture on my hands, and I am sure next to hearing how other people make money folks like to hear how other people have lost money. That is, people not in your own family.

There were seven rooms in the house, besides the kitchen, and as there was running water in all the rooms, they all could be entered right from the hallway, and good, big closets, and nice open plumbing, I felt I wouldn't be taking any risks in buying the furniture and reselling.

I saw the landlord, and he was agreeable to let any one take the place at the same rent, and there was a little French-looking woman who walked right under my nose, as I went back to examine the furniture the second time, and tried to buy the carpets from under my very feet, which made me real angry and stubborn. Land sakes! but some women have no more manners than cows, when there's a house to be sold out. They'll buy the prettiest dish in a set, and carry it off right then and there.

The carpets and furniture were elegant, and everything seemed as good as new. Indeed, things hadn't hardly been used. The lawyer told me all about it. The lady who had owned them had just died. She had lived there, shut up all alone, for two years, and when I questioned him right sharp like to learn if she had died of any contagious sickness, he said: No, she had died of a broken heart.

It was shocking to hear him say that, and I felt real sorry for the poor creature, but the furniture would not be any worse for her having died that way, so at last I said I would take it. I paid down \$50 as a deposit, and I tell you it did my pride good to see that little French polly-woo have to go away without pulling up the carpets from under my feet.

The next day I paid the lawyer the balance—\$700 in all, for it was elegant furniture, with one fine, big piano—and then I advertised it. Counting all expenses, like advertising, and a month's rent, and other things, I felt confident I could clear at least \$200.

The advertisement would not appear until Sunday, and so I planned to spend Saturday making everything look spick and span. Never shall I forget that Saturday! Never, though I should live to be a hundred years old! It was a bright, clear day, and I felt certain it would not rain Sunday and keep anyone away, and I went about my work singing to myself.

There was a fine, large vase on the parlor mantel, which had pleased me more than I had let on, and when I took it down and held it in my hand, I grew real covetous. I thought I would try to reserve it, or, better still, hide it away, for it doesn't do to let buyers see things around that you are going to reserve for yourself. It makes them act mean sometimes, as though one hadn't a right to reserve their own property.

The neck was narrow, but I could see there was a letter in the vase, so I turned it upside down and managed to half shake and half pull the letter out. Of course I didn't want any old letters lying around. People might think they belonged to me, as I was selling the things, and then, too, perhaps I was the least bit curious.

Maybe the letter had been written to the poor creature who had died of a broken heart, and I wondered what kind of letters such a person might receive. It wasn't exactly a letter, for there was no stamp on the envelope; but just a private note. It was written in a man's hand, and as the person was dead, I thought it would do no harm to glance at it. Perhaps you would like to see it for yourself. Well, it's here in the back of this drawer, and if it weren't, I am sure I could tell you just what it is, for every word was impressed on my mind forever. Listen!

"As you seem perfect but yet are false, so every object in this house, where I shall compel you to live for two years, though seemingly perfect, is secretly flawed. This shall be your punishment—to live day to day amidst things which are types of your character. Farewell."

Mercy! When I had finished reading it I was real nervous. It was like a strange man's face staring at you from a cupboard. "Poor thing!" I exclaimed, and then I wanted some one to put a chair under me quick. That awful letter couldn't mean that what I had paid \$700 for was as good as worthless. I snatched up the vase and examined it closely. Goodness! there was a great crack running its whole length, but so carefully mended and gum-glued together you wouldn't hardly have believed it.

I tell you I was scared and angry and indignant all at once, and I began examining things. The truth was more dreadful than the scare. I beat my heart to keep it down. There wasn't a solitary single thing in all that house but what had been broken or cut straight through, and then mended. Mended so carefully it would have deceived a saint.

The madman who had written this letter had deliberately gone about and had everything, everything, even the piano, in the whole house broken or sawed in two, and afterwards mended, and then had shut the poor lady up there till her heart had broken, and nobody could mend that!

No wonder the poor thing's heart broke, to know that all of that beautiful furniture was a delusion and a snare. It would have broken any woman's heart.

I went straight down to the lawyer with the letter, but he had gone away on his vacation, and the next week he was shot by a friend for a deer, and died, and I dread selling that furniture like I would a dagger that had stabbed some poor, innocent woman to death. Besides, if I should sell out without saying anything about its true condition, the buyer could come back on me for his money. What am I to do?