

THE PHANTOM FISHERMAN.

By ALICK MUNRO,*

Author of "A Woman of Wiles."



IX very nice trout They are. I wouldn't grumble if I were you. Oh, yes, it's a good fishing day, I know, and you've been on a grand bit of water. You *might* have done better, I won't deny; but it isn't a blank day, boy, when you creel half a dozen. I

remember once— Hum! what fly did you kill them with? Blue dun? A good fly, too, at this time of year; but give me a March-brown, the best fly that's made, for the early months.

I remember one day when I couldn't kill with it, though. It was a grand day that, too—4th of May, in the year that your father was married; you'll see presently how I come to remember the date so well. I had taken three dozen out of the same water the day before, though there were big, white clouds about, and a keen nor-easter blowing. It was a kind bit o' water that, I tell you, the best in Perthshire. When I showed my basket to Forsyth (you'll have heard your mother speak of Colin Forsyth, of Glen-mosset; he was your father's best man), he just laughed and said they'd come in very handy for to-morrow, as he was going to Edinburgh and would be bringing his lawyer back to dinner.

"We'll have them for breakfast," said I. "A trout shouldn't be kept, and I'll promise you more in time for dinner."

"You won't rise a fish to-morrow," he answered, "nor see one."

"Don't malign your own bonnie river!" I said. "I'll rise, and land, a basketful."

You'll see how I kept my promise.

I was up next morning early. Never make half a day do for fishing, boy, if you can get the whole day. I looked at the weather and laughed, because Colin had said

I shouldn't rise a fish on a day like this. There was a soft, warm wind blowing, just enough to ripple the long, quiet pools and make an up-stream cast fall like a gossamer. The water in the shallows had the clear amber of pale sherry, shading off in the deeper parts through brown October to bottled stout in the holes. There was peat-water in it, you see; and black peat-water is the next most beautiful thing in Nature after the flashing crystal of a chalk-stream. You couldn't see much of the river at a time, because of the sharp turns it took, and the alder-trees that lined one bank; and when I made my first cast, I didn't see any trout moving near me. But they were moving, because I heard them. In the pool above me I could hear them rising—four or five splashes in the time it took me to put my rod together; and by the sound, they weren't four-inch fingerlings either.

I thought it queer, mind you, that nothing was moving where I could see it; and when I had fished that pool and the next, and the next after that, and hadn't seen a fish, I thought it queerer still, because all the time I could hear them every now and then falling back into the water with a plop—the kind of dull plop a fish makes when he meets the water with his mouth open, after missing his fly. But the splashes were always out of sight, round a rock, or a tree, or a bunch of alder-coppice, and I never saw a scale of the fish that made them. And there was another queer thing; the rising fish were all above me, in the direction in which I was fishing. Beside me and behind me, I don't think a fin moved all day. I fished up four miles of water, and tried every likely fly in my book, and some unlikely ones; and the same thing went on for every reach and eddy of the four miles. I even hunted under stones for worms, and tried them up-stream, though I knew Forsyth didn't like that.

The four-mile post was the march of his water, and when I reached it, I sat down and had my lunch and a pipe, and got my temper back.

Now, I knew well enough that there's no accounting for the ways of a trout. He's

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"Again the line whistled, almost at my ear, but I couldn't see it."

the "unexpectedest" fish that swims. One day he'll be pig-headed and sulky, and the next he'll almost court you. Bless you, he's just like a woman! If it wasn't for his tantrums, he wouldn't be half so fascinating as he is. Besides, I've fished years enough to learn philosophy. So I threw away my temper with the sandwich-papers and started to try the water over again, down-stream.

No use. Fish rising out of sight below me now, but never a one near me or behind me. I began to think the devil was in it, and I wondered how Forsyth came to know beforehand what it would be like. Then suddenly I stopped and listened, for I heard the scream of a reel as the line ran out. There was somebody fishing in front of me,

and his reel sang of better luck than I was having; for it meant that he was fast in a fish.

"Confound him!" I said. "I wonder what flies he has on? I'll go and ask him!"

I stuck the butt-spike of my rod in the earth and started to clamber over a bit of rough ground which lay between me and the pool from which the sound of the reel came; but when I got to the top of a knoll and looked down on the pool, there was no one there. The water had the same dead look that had struck me all day, the look of being utterly uninhabited. But the other fellow had found fish in it, if the whirr of a reel went for anything.

But he wasn't here now. He seemed to

be fishing quicker even than I was, so I went back to my rod and took it to pieces. I meant to walk on till I overtook him, and if he would give me one of the flies he was killing with, I would put my rod together again; if he wouldn't, or if I had already tried the fly, I would go home and tell Forsyth that I'd rather go out on a day when he hadn't asked a wizard to fish his water.

In about ten minutes I heard his reel again—the whirr as the line ran out, the silence as he humoured his fish, and the *err-err-err-err-errk!* as he reeled him in. I pushed my way through a clump of brambles and came upon the water.

It was a long, straight reach, shallow on the side on which I was standing, and shelving down to black water under the opposite bank. The wind made a ripple over the deeper water, but for half-a-dozen yards on my side the surface was dead smooth. There was no one in sight. And yet I didn't see how a man could have creeled his fish and gone away in the time it took me to push through the brambles.

Then I heard the whistle of a line through the air, quite close to me, and I think I shivered. The sun was glinting bright from the water, but a cloud moved over the young bracken on the hillside before me, and the air had taken a sudden chill. I have fished for grayling in Yorkshire when the snow was on the ground and the shallow waters near the edge were frozen hard enough to stand on. It was not the cold which made me tremble now and feel afraid. In the bright sunshine of that May afternoon I shivered heavily, and needles of sweat pricked me under my clothes.

Again the line whistled, almost at my ear, but I couldn't see it.

A fish rose in the shade of the other bank—the first I had seen that day. I saw the yellow gleam of his belly as he turned, and again I heard the whirr of the line from the reel. The fish came my way, into the shallows, and a long V spread across the still water in his wake, as though a tight casting-line were cutting it. I even fancied I saw drops from the wet line fall into the fork of the V. The trout came close to my bank, and the *err-err-errk!* of the reel spoke again. I waited to see no more.

I turned and ran, and did not stop until I had run half a mile and had twice more heard the scream of that phantom reel behind me.

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Forsyth chaffed me a little at dinner that

night and said he didn't think a ghost in the sunlight would have made me run; but later, over our last pipe in the gunroom, when the lawyer from Edinburgh had gone to bed, he told me the story.

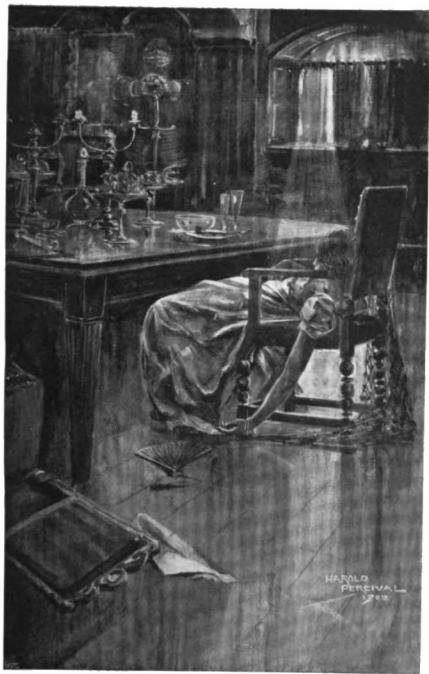
His great uncle, Sir Hector Forsyth, was one of Wellington's captains, and many a tale I heard afterwards of his deeds of valour. He was a tall, fair man, with a Viking's face and the strength of a bull; and there is one story about him, how at the storming of Ciudad Rodrigo—but I'll tell you that some other night. In the spring of the year after Waterloo he brought his bride home to Glenmosset. She was a Spanish woman, with great, black eyes, and hair that rippled like water over stones; and the story was that Sir Hector had carried her off from Badajoz on the day of that great assault and had fought a duel for her possession. Men said that he loved her as a dog loves its mistress, and that in return she treated him, the big Viking-man, as few women would treat a dog. She hated him. For she had left her lover behind her in Spain.

On the 4th of May, nine days after he had brought her to his Highland home, she struck at him with a dagger when he kissed her for "Good morning." The dagger grazed his rib, for she had aimed at his heart. The wound was a slight one, and he laughed, they say, and kissed her again and again as payment for the blow. He was a man that a woman should love, I think; but she had tried to murder him.

Maybe she had done that before, and he had come to regard it as a thing not to be bothered about overmuch. I don't say that that was his thought, and I think his heart was sorer than his rib when he took his rod down and went down to fish; for tigress as she was, he loved her.

In the evening he returned, with his basket loaded with trout, and his big heart hungering for the gentleness of love. He was told that a stranger—a foreign gentleman—had come soon after he went out to fish, and that his wife had spent the day in the stranger's company. He went in and welcomed the man.

Dinner was served for three that night—for Sir Hector and his wife, and for the lover from Spain; for that was what the stranger was. It must have been a queer dinner-party that, but the tale goes that it was a merry one. If these three had a tragedy to play, they did not play it before the servants. You will hear hard things said of Spaniards, and many of them will be true. It is true, for



"A dagger was in her heart."

instance, that a Spaniard is always cruel, and often even treacherous in his cruelty; but when it comes to dying—why, *then*, he is the gentleman of the world. Two of these three were Spaniards, and it was with a look of pride that Colin Forsyth told me that his great-uncle made a worthy third. For Sir Hector's jest was the freshest, and his laugh the loudest and the gayest of the three.

"Man," I remember Colin saying, as he flung open the door between the gunroom where we were sitting and the dining-room where those three had sat, "I would have liked to be there to see! Can't you picture them round that table? And can't you realise the life, the joy, the red blood of the drama they were playing? Pride of race! pride of personal valour! and, for one of them, pride of sex! Two men and a woman standing over their own graves and laughing, because if they kept silence the servants might say afterwards they were afraid! See! that was where he sat, and she opposite him, and the stranger at her left hand! Man, I think I can see them now!"

We stood in that room for a minute, and Forsyth seemed to forget there was more to tell. His glance went round the table, halting at the head and the foot and one side in turns, as though he really saw them sitting there—the strong man who loved, the tiger woman who hated, and the stranger from Spain. And as I watched him, and saw that his eye turned oftenest to the place where Sir Hector had sat, it seemed to me that he was

a true scion of Sir Hector's stock: for pride of race was strong in him, too.

Presently, with a laugh, he gripped my arm and bade me come out and hear the wind. The weather had changed, and a warm western gale was raging. We stood with bare heads at the open door, and heard the rough and moan of it tearing up the glen. Then it seemed to me that somewhere about a mile away two pistol shots snapped out, and the wind that brought the sound to my ears turned for an instant cold. And I shivered, as I had shivered in the afternoon by that sunlit pool.

Colin turned to me with a laugh.

"Did you hear it?" he asked. "Maybe it was only a branch of the big fir at the foot of the glen, snapped by the wind. We'll see in the morning. But at twelve o'clock on that night I've told you of, the two men went out, and they took their pistols with them. There is a round, green bog near the fir-tree, soft and bottomless. Next morning the marks of footsteps were found approaching it from opposite sides, and entering it; and two black holes in the greenness showed where it had swallowed two heavy masses that might have been men. It was said that Sir Hector and the Spaniard fought out their duel to the death there, and that the bog swallowed them where they fell.

"The woman was found in the chair where she had dined. A dagger was in her heart—the dagger she had struck with in the morning. But no witness lived to say which of the three had put it there."