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THE Phantom Lover.

(By the Author of "A Bachelor Husband")

CHAPTER XXXV.

The hot blood died down, leaving him cool and alert. He pushed the door wide open and walked into the room. The group of men by the fireplace scattered; some one coughed deprecatingly; some one else seized upon a siphon and began filling an already full glass recklessly.

Nobody spoke.

Micky kicked the door to behind him, shutting it with a slam.

His eyes went straight to Ashton—a male Ashton, trying to smile unconcernedly and brazen the situation out.

"I'll give you two minutes in which to apologise," Micky said in a voice of steel. "Two minutes in which to retract the damned line you coughed deprecatingly in this room—or I'll thrash you within an inch of your life."

In the silence following one could have heard a pin drop. Every one looked at Ashton. Micky took out his watch. It seemed an eternity before Ashton spoke.

"If you've been listening—" he began blustering.

He moistened his dry lips.

"What I said is the truth," he broke out spluttering. "You were in Paris with—" But the name was never spoken—Micky's clenched fist shot out and struck him right in the mouth.

In a moment the room was in an uproar; half a dozen men rushed at Micky and pinned his arms.

"Mellows—for God's sake—if Hooper comes in..."

Ashton had staggered back against the wall; his mouth was cut and bleeding; he was swearing horribly.

Micky was crimson in the face; the veins stood out like cords on his forehead; he was straining every nerve to free himself from his captors.

"Apologise!" he gasped. "Apologise, you damned cad!"

Ashton laughed savagely.

"Apologise! What for? It's the truth, and you know it. Apologise! I'll repeat it. . . . I say that you were in Paris three weeks ago with Esther Shepstone, one of the girls from Eldred's."

Micky suddenly stopped struggling, but his breath came in deep rasps as he spoke. He looked round at the faces of the other men.

"I know most of you—here," he said in a laboured voice. "And most of you know me—and you know that I'm not a damned liar like Ashton; and I know that you'll believe me—believe me—when I tell you that the lady who was with me in—Paris—three weeks ago—is my wife. . . . we've been married some time—and it is solely by her wish that it has been kept a secret."

If Micky had dropped a bomb in the room it could hardly have created more consternation. The incredulity on the faces of the men around him would have been amusing to an on-looker, but to Micky the whole thing was tragedy.

He had brought Esther to this with his blundering outburst; he was nearly beside himself with remorse.

If he had been free he would have half-killed Ashton. His hands sobbed to get at him; to take him by his throat and choke the breath from his body.

He looked at the men around him with supplicating eyes.

"I've never given any of you cause to doubt my word yet," he said hoarsely. "And I'm sure you'll agree with me that this man should be made to retract what he said and apologise."

"Certainly—he ought to apologise. It's disgraceful—internally disgraceful," said a man who had been listening to Ashton's story eagerly enough a moment ago.

"What do you say, gentlemen?"

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There was chorus of assent. The man who had been holding Micky's arms let him go.

Ashton backed a step away. His face was livid, his eyes furious, but he knew that there was no other course open to him; nobody in the room had any sympathy with him now.

"I apologise," he said savagely. "I didn't know that—the lady—Mellows—had married—the lady."

His tone added that even now he did not believe it; he edged away to the door and disappeared.

Micky dropped into a chair; he looked thoroughly done up. Some one pushed a glass of whisky across to him. There was an uncomfortable silence. Perhaps they were all feeling guilty; perhaps they all remembered what what relish they had listened to this spicy bit of scandal.

"Never could stand Ashton," some one said presently, in gruff abatement. "Worm—the man let—perfect outsider!"

There were several grunts of assent; the sympathy was decidedly with Micky.

After a moment he rose to his feet. "I suppose an apology is due from me too," he said; he spoke with difficulty. "But I think any of you—in the same circumstances—"

He waited a moment.

"Quite right—certainly. . . . Should have done the same myself."

Micky smiled faintly.

"And I am sure you won't let this go any further—for my wife's sake," he added.

They pressed round him, shaking him by the hand and reassuring him. Micky took it for what it was worth. He knew that those of them who were married men would go straight home and tell their wives of the scene at Hooper's; and he knew how speedily the story would spread.

He got away as soon as he could and left the house.

He never gave Marie another thought, till he found himself out in the street and walking away through the fresh spring night.

He took off his hat and let the air blow on his hot forehead; his hand still trembled with excitement.

He tried to think, but his thoughts would not come clearly. When he got back to his room he asked Driver for a stiff brandy. The man looked at his master diffidently, and asked if anything were the matter.

Micky laughed.

"Why? Do I look as if there is?" He glanced at himself in the mirror. His face was very white.

"No, there's nothing the matter. I'm tired, that's all."

Driver turned to the door, but Micky called him back.

"You've been with me a good many years, Driver," he said.

"And you've been a faithful servant."

"Thank you, sir."

The man's stolidness did not change a fraction.

Micky took a gulp at the brandy.

"If you were to hear that I'm married, you wouldn't be surprised, would you?" he asked with a rush.

Driver stood immovable.

"Not in the least, sir."

"You would even say that you knew that I've been married some weeks, wouldn't you?"

"I should, sir."

"Good—you may go."

"Thank you, sir, and good-night."

"Good-night," said Micky.

And now, what was to be done now?

When he left this room three hours ago it had been with the determination to put the past behind him for ever, and what had he done? Only walked more deeply into his quixotism and seriously compromised the woman he loved.

He had said that she was his wife. It gave him a little firm to remember that a dozen of his acquaintances had heard him say it; and were probably

even now spreading the story of his marriage far and wide.

He paced up and down the room. He had failed all round; even love and desperate desire had not been able to help him.

He thought suddenly of June; June who, with all her bluntness, had a great heart and a deep understanding. She would not want explanations; she would know why he had done it, and sympathise.

But June was obviously not the one concerned. It was not to June that he must confess.

The clock in his room struck twelve; too late to do anything to-night. The memory of Marie returned—Marie as she had looked when he found her in the drawing-room that night; as she had looked when he had left her in the little anteroom at the Hoopers' and gone out with murder in his heart to find Ashton.

He stopped dead in his paces.

"Oh, you cad—you cad!" he said with a groan.

Life was an intolerable, purposeless thing. He sat down at his desk and leaned his head in his hands. His whole life seemed to spell failure. With sudden impulse he seized a pen and began to write.

For the first few moments he hardly knew what he wrote. It was only when he reached the end of the first page that he realised that he had done it. He looked back at the written lines with something of a shock. There was no beginning to the letter, no date or address; it simply started off as if the pen had been guided by some influence outside himself, some desperate need.

"I don't know what you will think when you get this letter. I am writing it because to-night I think I am half mad. I love you so much; there seems nothing in the whole world that counts any more now that I am beginning to understand that I can never have you. Esther, I ask you on my knees to listen to what I have to say. I've tried to keep away from you, to forget you; I've tried to put you out of my heart and persuade myself that I do not care—but it's no use. I love you; I know you care nothing for me, but I shall love you always. To-night I have done an unpardonable thing for your sake. I explain things so badly. I can only hope that you will understand and try and make some excuse for me. Some one knows we were together in Paris—I need not tell you who. To-night, at a house where I was, he had told several people that you and I had been to Paris together. . . ."

Micky had gone on writing rapidly—he seemed to have lost himself in a sea of eloquence; his heart was pleading with the woman he loved through the poor medium of a sheet of unaddressed paper.

"It nearly drove me mad to hear you spoken of by him. There was a scene, and I knocked him down. . . . you will hate me for this, but I would have killed him if he had let me. I told them afterwards that you were my wife—and understand how I have suffered of all these weeks—I told them that we had been married some time, and that it had been kept secret by your own wish. It's only now, when I am more alone and can think clearly, that I see what I have done. You don't care for me, and I have compromised you even more than that man did by his lying insinuations. Tell me what I am to do—anything, anything in the world. My whole life is yours to do with as you will. Be my wife, dear, be my wife."

For a moment the pen faltered, but Micky went on again with an effort.

"I will stay in London twenty-four hours for your answer, and then, if I don't hear . . ."

The pen faltered again, and this time finally stopped.

(To be continued)

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