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**THE  
Phantom Lover.**

By the Author of "A Bachelor Husband."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Micky had just reached the unpretentious inn in the village where he had taken a room, when he was hailed from across the road by June; a very cheerful-looking June, in a business-like coat and skirt of rough tweed, and carrying a walking-stick, which she proceeded to wave at him vigorously.

"Back so soon!" She came across to where he stood by the car, and looked at his despondent face. "Not another row?" she demanded tersely.

Micky frowned.

"No—merely a sort of frigid silence this time," he said savagely, then he laughed. "It's no use, June, I may as well throw up the sponge. I seem to put my foot in it whatever I do."

June drew a pattern in the mud at her feet.

"Well, what have you done?" she asked. "Esther was all right this morning, and quite pleased to be going with you. I certainly never expected to see either of you till this afternoon, when did you go?"

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, some little one-eyed place. We stopped at an inn and had some coffee, and that seemed to finish it."

"What, the coffee?" asked June with a twinkle.

Micky turned away.

"If you're going to make a joke of everything," he said with dignity. She laid her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, old boy. But you do explain things so badly, you know. You had coffee at the inn, yes—and then

"I went outside to start up the engine, and when I came back she seemed to have utterly changed. She even looked different and she hardly spoke all the way home."

"It must be your imagination," He shook his head.

"No, it isn't; and when we get home she went indoors without even saying good-bye—confound her!" he added in savage parenthesis.

"Oh, Micky!" said June reproachfully.

He coloured.

"I didn't mean that, but I'm so fed-up with everything—" He leaned his elbow on the side of the car and looked away from her down the road. "I think I'll get back to town this afternoon," he said after a moment. "I was a fool to come at all."

June looked at him silently.

"Well, what are you thinking?" he asked.

She roused herself and answered briskly.

"I think you want your lunch, that's what I think, and I'm going to take you back with me to have some. Aunt Mary is expecting you." Her queer eyes twinkled. "Micky, she's quite made up her mind that you've come down here after me."

Micky laughed ruefully.

"It would be a dashed sight better for me if I had," he said.

He moved to the door of the car.

"Jump in, and I'll drive you back. I'm not sure that I shall stay to lunch, though—" he added darkly.

"Oh, yes, you will," June said. "And when you see Esther you'll find that it was just imagination on your part—why, only coming down in the train the other morning she agreed with me that you were a perfect darling—she did, on my word of honour!"

When they reached the house Micky followed June into the hall.

"The table's laid," she informed him. "I'll just go and take off my hat and find Esther and Aunt Mary. Go in, Micky."

Micky took off his hat and coat and obeyed.

He looked several sizes too large for the little dining-room as he walked over to the fire and stood with his back to it; he looked round the room appreciatively.

This was a real home, he thought with sudden wistfulness in spite of its small rooms and general atmosphere of a bygone decade; a man could be very happy here with a woman he cared for.

"Micky—Micky—" called June urgently. She came clattering down the stairs anyhow—she burst into the room, she thrust a scrap of paper into his hand.

"She's gone—she's gone! Oh, what fools we were! I told you what it would be. I knew she'd find out sooner or later. Oh, why didn't you let me tell her?—I begged you to let me. It's not my fault. I warned you what it would be—oh dear! oh dear!" and June fell into a sobbing heap on the uncomfortable horsehair couch behind her.

Micky, about clutching the paper and

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staring at her; it was some minutes before he could find his voice, then he went over to where she lay, put his hand on her shoulders, and shook her almost roughly.

"What are you talking about, June? For heaven's sake sit up and behave like a rational woman. Who's gone? What do you mean?"

She raised her tear-stained face.

"Read it! read it! Oh, Micky, you have been a fool!" she said furiously. "It's all your fault. I knew what would happen."

"Oh, for heaven's sake shut up," said Micky.

He had unfolded the paper, and there was a moment's tragic silence as he read the three lines Esther had scribbled.

"I have gone to Paris; I can't live without him any longer. Please don't worry about me."

Twice his lips moved, but no words would come, then he broke out in a strangled voice.

"It's a joke—of course it is. She's done it to frighten you. Why, I—only left her here half-an-hour ago—it can't be more. It's a joke—of course it is."

"A queer sort of joke," said June sobbing. "Poor darling! and a nice sort of reception she'll get when she reaches Paris with that cad there..."

"She'll never find him, she doesn't know where he is," Micky said hoarsely. There was a stunned look in his eyes—he took a step toward the door and came back again as if he did not know what to do.

June was drying her eyes and shedding more tears and drying them again; she looked at Micky angrily.

"Of course she'll find him," she said tartly. "She knows his address; she wrote it to her dozens of times, and she's written to him as well..." Her eyes searched his face with a sort of contempt.

"Well, what are you going to do now you've made such a glorious hash of everything?" she demanded.

Micky passed a hand across his eyes.

"I don't know. I'm trying to think. She can't have been gone long. She may still be in the village." He dragged out his watch. "There may not have been a train up to London—"

"Yes, there was; the twelve-twenty—" The eyes of both of them turned to the clock, and Micky gave a smothered groan.

"She must have gone by that. I must follow her, of course."

June bounced up.

"I'll come with you; I'll put on my hat again—" She made a dive for the door, but Micky caught her arm and stopped her.

"You can't; I can't take you with me. Be sensible, June—I'll find her and bring her back—"

She looked up at him stormily.

"She's my friend, and it's all your fault she's got into this mess. I told you not to interfere, and you wouldn't listen—"

It was a woman all over to rave at him now, but Micky took it patiently.

"Very well, it's my fault, and as it's my fault it's up to me to try and put things right. Don't waste time arguing—I'm to match her before she leaves England..."

June burst into fresh tears and sobs.

"You won't be able to; she'll get over there and have to bear it all alone."

"Oh, Micky, I almost hate you when I think what we've done..."

Micky went out of the room; he went down to the road and mechanically started up the car; he was getting into his seat when June followed and called to him—

"You haven't got your coat or cap, Micky."

He came back; he hoisted himself into his coat, and turned away again; June caught his hand.

"I didn't mean to be a beast, Micky."

He gave her fingers a squeeze.

"I know; it's all right; but don't keep me, there's a dear."

But she still clung to him.

"You'll bring her back safely, Micky—promise."

Micky turned away without answering.

When he got to the station he found there was no train to town for a couple of hours; he asked a sleepy porter an agitated question.

"Did you see a young lady go by the twelve-twenty—one of the young ladies staying with Miss DeKring. Oh, for heaven's sake hurry up and answer, man!"

The man scratched an unshaven chin with irritating consideration.

"Yes, I seen her," he said at last. "She came in running—caught the train to London—she..."

But Micky had gone; he would have to drive to town, he decided. If Esther had got to know the truth, better hear it from him than from that brute.

He drove off at breakneck speed. It seemed miles and miles to London; no matter how much of the winding road he covered, it unfolded again before his eyes, and mercifully again.

He went straight to Charing Cross; he left the car in the ward and dashed in to inquire about trains; he searched a time-table; 12-53—3 o'clock—4.5...

He looked up at the clock—three minutes past four now. Micky dashed across the big hall to a gate where a signboard said "Dover Express"; he had no ticket; he pushed by the protesting inspector; the guard was waving his flag; some one grabbed at Micky and missed as he flung himself breathless and panting into the last coach of the moving train.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Micky sat for a few moments breathless and exhausted before he pulled himself together, and taking off his hat wiped his hot forehead.

The train was gathering speed; he let down the window with a run and looked out; the station was out of sight altogether; they were crossing the bridge under which the silent Thames flowed sluggishly.

A breath of cold air touched his hot face and he shivered suddenly and drew the window up once more.

Something had driven his thoughts back to his first meeting with Esther, to the cold silence of the night, and the hard desperation of her voice as she said—

"I didn't mean to go home any more—I shouldn't have ever gone home again if I hadn't met you..."

If it got to Paris before he saw her she would feel like this again. Micky groaned.

Fortunately he had the carriage to himself, but it was a third-class compartment, and not a corridor carriage.

He cursed his luck here; if there had been a corridor he could have gone the length of the train and see if Esther were on it. As it was, he would have to wait till they reached Dover, and even then perhaps he would never find her.

He tried to calm himself with the conviction that everything would be all right, but in his heart he was despairing; if he found Esther and brought her back she would hate him for the rest of his life.

What had happened to make her rush off like this? He could not say. She had seemed so happy only that morning. What could account for the tragedy that seemed to breathe in every word of that little note she had left for June?

He took it from his pocket and read it again. It gave no hint of what had prompted this sudden flight. He wrote out a couple of telegrams to dispatch from Dover—one for June, and another for Driver.

He wished he had got Driver with him. There was a sort of security in the man's stolidness.

He realised that he was without luggage, and that he had not much money. Supposing he had to go on to Paris, what the dickens was he going to do?

When the train ran into Dover he got to his feet with a sigh of relief. Quietly as he was out of the train a great many passengers had left it before him. He started at a run down the platform. He stared at every woman he met, hoping it would be Esther. The crowd was getting thick; he had to push his way unceremoniously past people; porters with luggage trucks jostled him; he began to lose his temper—he was just answering with great heart a man who had ironically asked "who he was shoving," when some one touched his arm.

"Micky..."

For a moment Micky's heart beat up in his throat; he turned quickly and found himself looking down into the brown eyes of Miss DeKring.

(To be continued.)

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**H. A. SAUNDERS,**  
Superintendent.

aprs.9.21

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Bumps and bruises well.

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Money on us  
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All her life  
That she never could  
Afford to have music  
Right at home  
So we're going to buy her  
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