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THE Phantom Lover.

(By the Author of "A Bachelor Husband.")

CHAPTER XX.

Looking back to that night at the theatre it always seemed to June Mason that she had been most extraordinarily blind in not seeing before that it was Esther for whom Mickey Melowes cared.

One glance at his face as he lifted the girl in his arms told her more than any words would have done; there was a sort of indescribable rage and pain in his eyes as he looked down at the white face lying against his shoulder.

People gathered about them, curious and sympathetic. June heard some one say that it had been so "diced hot in the theatre, no wonder people fainted," but she knew all the time that it was nothing to do with the heat; she stopped mechanically and picked up Esther's gloves which had fallen from her nerveless hand before she followed Mickey back into the foyer, where he had Esther down on one of the long velvet lounges.

Afterwards she realised that the sudden discovery that Mickey loved her friend had been something of a shock to her, that she had even been faintly jealous; she did not want to marry him herself, and yet they had been such good friends, it gave her an odd little pain to think that there was somebody else whom he placed a long way ahead of her in his heart.

Most of the people had gone, one of two of the theatre attendants lingered; it seemed a long time before Esther opened her eyes. She lay for a moment, looking vaguely about her, then her eyes came back to Mickey, who

was bending over her, his face scarcely less white than her own.

She made an effort to lift herself from his arms; then quite suddenly she burst into tears.

The little sound of sobbing broke the spell that seemed to have held June; she went down on her knees beside her both arms round the slender figure.

Micky had risen to his feet. June glanced up at him.

"Go and find the taxi and leave her to me," she said sharply. The look of suffering in his face hurt her. Mickey went out into the cold night bareheaded. He hardly knew what he was doing. He stood for some minutes on the path forgetting why he had come out at all, before some one, jostling against him, brought him back to a sense of time and place.

He went down the road to look for a taxi. When he came back Esther was sitting up, wrapped in her cloak. She was not crying now, but she looked like a child who wants to cry but is determined not to.

June was standing beside her.

"We're quite ready," she said. She kept an arm about Esther, and Mickey followed them silently.

He saw them into the cab, but did not follow. June asked a sharp question: "Aren't you coming?"

"No—at least, not if you can manage without me." His voice sounded unsteady; he looked away from June to where Esther was huddled into a corner beside her, and suddenly, as if urged by an impulse he could not control, he leaned forward, groped for her hand in the darkness, and, bending, kissed it passionately.

A moment later he had stepped back and shut the door.

He stood looking after the cab till it vanished round a corner, then he went back to the theatre for his hat and coat, and set off again down the road.

He was not conscious of any real emotion; but he walked swiftly as a man does who has a set purpose, and he did not stop till he found himself outside the Ashton's house.

It was not far off midnight, but lights burned in many of the windows, and after a swift glance at the face of the house he went up the steps and rang the bell.

It was some moments before the door was opened by a mildly amazed-looking servant; Micky asked for Mr. Ashton.

"Mr. name is Melowes," he said, as she obviously hesitated. "If you tell him my name he will see me. I know he is in, I saw him at the Comedy Theatre to-night."

He stepped past the girl into the hall, and after a slightly scared glance at him she shut the door and departed upstairs.

A moment later Micky heard Ashton's voice.

"You old night-bird! What an ungodly hour to call on any one! I was just going to bed; come in."

He spoke easily, but there was a slightly anxious look in his eyes; he led the way into the library.

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The fire was nearly out there and the room felt chilly; he shivered, and, stooping, tried to rake the cinders into a blaze.

Micky watched him silently; after a moment Ashton turned.

"Lord, man! What the matter? You look as cheerful as Doomsday!"

Micky was standing stiffly against the table.

"I saw you in the theatre to-night," he began without preamble. "I was with Miss Shepstone, and she saw you, too—at least she believes it was you, and I am going to tell her that she was mistaken. How soon can you get out of town and back to Paris?"

Ashton stared; the colour had rushed to his face; after a moment his eyes fell.

"I don't know what the devil you're driving at," he said irritably. "I suppose I can come to London without asking you first, can't I? And, as for Lallie"—he grinned nervously—"well, you know as well as I do that that's all been off for weeks."

Micky stood immovable.

"You haven't answered my question," he said flatly. "How soon can you get out of London?"

Ashton swore under his breath.

"I'm dashed if I know what you're driving at," he said sulkily. "If you like to take Lallie to theatres, that's your business; she's a nice little girl, I admit, but—"

Micky took a step forward.

"If you want to make me forget that this is your mother's house, you're going the right way to do it," he said between his teeth. "And I don't want any of your bluffs. Miss Shepstone thinks she saw you at the Comedy to-night; she'll probably write to you or try to see you in the morning, and you've got to be out of London by then—do you hear?"

Ashton laughed; he shrugged his shoulders.

"Must," he said nastily. "How long have you been Lallie's champion?"

"Oh, all right, all right," he broke off hurriedly, as he saw the ugly light in Micky's eyes. "But she's a bit thick, you know," he resumed injuredly. "I've done with her; you know that. You sent my letter on to her yourself. It's absurd if I can't come back home for a few days in case she should see me and get upset. I'm sorry if she's still fond of me, but dash it all—"

"You haven't answered my question," said Micky again.

He was controlling himself with a mighty effort, but the veins stood out like cords on his forehead and his hands were clenched.

The two men looked at one another, and it was Ashton's eyes that felt.

"If you're going to bullyrag me," he began blusteringly, "I may as well tell you that I'm not going back to Paris till I please, and—"

"Very well," said Micky. He turned on his heel.

Raymond watched him across the room anxiously. When he reached the door he called to him.

"Micky! What the devil are you going to do?"

And Micky answered, without turning—

"I'm going to tell Mrs. Clare the way you've treated Miss Shepstone, and if she's half the decent sort I think she is she'll throw you overboard as you've thrown scores of others."

Micky cut him short. "The first train leaves Victoria at 9:49; I'll be there to see you off."

Ashton scowled. "It's a nice way to treat a friend," he grumbled. "If there's really anything up with Lallie—"

Micky stood like a statue.

"It's decent of you to take her out," Ashton went on uneasily. "I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure. She's never had much of a time. If I'd had any money—"

Micky broke out then. "Oh, hold your infernal tongue," he said furiously.

He walked out of the room, shutting the door hard behind him. He passed the astonished maid in the hall and let himself out into the night. The blood was pounding in his veins, he felt in actual need of physical violence; he did not know how he had managed to keep his hands off Raymond. He walked on at a furious pace; presently he laughed with a sort of self-pity.

What was the good of what he had done after all? At best he had only succeeded in staying off the inevitable for a little while; Esther would have to know sooner or later.

Such wasted love it was! All for a man who was not worth one thought, or even a tear!

When he got back to his rooms he told Driver to call him early, as he was going to see somebody off by train. He was at Victoria long before Ashton; the greeting between the two men was constrained.

"I was going back to-day, anyway," Ashton said faintly. "I'm going to be married the day after to-morrow—"

He looked at Micky with triumphant eyes. "To Mrs. Clare," he added.

When Micky got back to his rooms, Driver met him; Driver with a spark of unwonted animation in his dull eyes, and who closed the sitting-room door mysteriously behind him as he came forward.

"If you please, sir—there is a lady to see you."

"A lady!" said Micky blankly; then he laughed. "Rubbish! You're dreaming man."

"No, sir," said Driver stolidly.

Micky stared at him for a moment, then he passed him, and threw open the door of the sitting-room.

It was Esther who rose from a chair by the fire as he entered.

For an instant Micky was unable to believe his own eyes, then he shut the door and took a step forward.

"You!" he said. "I never thought to see you."

She broke in agitatedly.

"Oh, I know; I suppose I shouldn't have come; I don't know what June would say if she knew; but—there wasn't anybody else I could come to, did you?"

"She flushed up nervously. "Oh, you did say you would be a friend to me, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Micky.

He might have reminded her that she had declined his friendship; he might have reminded her of all the not very kind things which she had said to him, but it was such happiness to see her here in his room that he was in no mood to be critical.

"Do sit down . . . there's no hurry, is there?" He wanted to put her at her ease; he did not like to see the nervous agitation in her face; but she shook her head.

"I'm not going to say, only . . . only I . . ." Her voice changed suddenly. "Oh, Mr. Melowes, will you tell me how I can get to Paris?"

"Paris!" Micky echoed the word helplessly. "Paris!" he said again. "For the moment he stared at her with blank eyes.

She rushed on impetuously.

"I have a friend there—some one I . . . some one I . . . Oh, it's the man I'm engaged to, and I want to see him—I must see him! I've got the money to get there. I hope you don't think I was going to ask you to lend me that . . ." she added in distress.

"Miss Shepstone . . . I—"

Micky was horribly upset. "I never thought anything of the sort. And—"

and even if you were going to ask me, you know quite well that anything I have, anything . . ."

She stopped him hurriedly.

"Oh, I know, it's very kind of you." Her blue eyes sought his face with a sort of abasement. "I don't think I've ever really realised how kind you've been to me," she said. "But . . . but I've been so worried and unhappy . . . I—I do hope you'll forgive me if I was rude or unkind."

Micky did not answer; so it had come at last, the explanations which he had always dreaded; he racked his brains in vain to think of a way out of it—to make out the best story he could.

She seemed to realise his perturbation, she came a step nearer to him.

"Mr. Melowes," she said earnestly, "will you tell me something?"

"Yes," said Micky inaudibly, but he did not look at her.

She looked up at him, trying to see his face before she asked her question.

"Do you—do you know who the man is that I am going to marry?"

In the silence that followed her timid question, Micky felt that he lived through years. Should he tell her the truth, or should he not? Ashton was out of London by this time; in another forty-eight hours he would be married to another woman; he raised his head with a sort of desperation.

"No," he said.

He tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that at least it was substantially the truth; she was not going to marry Ashton—she never could marry him now.

(To be continued)

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