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THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER III.

"Yes!" Micky did not look at her. Somehow he could not trust himself.

"I don't in the least know why I want to tell you," she said again nervously. "But—you've been so kind to me. . . ."

"Yes!" said Micky gently, as she paused. "Yes, what is it?"

She was twisting her teaspoon, and she kept her eyes lowered.

"Last night, when I met you—I was unhappy. . . . There didn't seem anything to live for in the world. . . . I don't know if you've ever felt like that, or if you have ever cared for any one—really cared, I mean—but if you have . . ." She stopped again.

"I think I understand," Micky said, with an effort. "You mean that there's some one, some man . . ."

She raised her grey eyes to his face.

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Some man you care for—care for very much," Micky went on slowly. "Perhaps some one you have quarrelled with—who hadn't been quite as . . . kind as he might have been——"

The soft colour flooded her face.

"Did you guess—last night?" she asked shyly.

Micky smiled.

"Did I ? I am not sure; perhaps." He drew a long breath that was half a sigh. "Well?" he queried.

"I don't know why I am telling you this——" she said again, with a sort of distress. "It cannot interest you, but, somehow, I think I should like you to know."

"It interests me very much—I am honoured that you should tell me." Micky looked again at the ring she wore; quite a cheap little ring, with a couple of inferior diamonds. "You mean that you are engaged to be married?"

"Yes; at least——" The words were only a whisper.

Micky sat very still.

"Well, I suppose you will have me for a friend all the same, won't you?" he asked with an effort.

She looked at him in faint amazement.

"I thought if I told you that perhaps you'd rather not . . ." She stopped in confusion.

Micky leaned a little closer over the table.

"You said last night that you didn't believe in a man's friendship for a woman," he said. "Well, I am going to make you believe in it. I'm going to be your friend. The fact that you are engaged makes no difference to me, if it doesn't to you."

She looked at him earnestly.

"If you mean that," she said, "I think I'm very glad."

"Thank you. I suppose I mustn't ask who the—the lucky man is?"

She shook her head.

"I can't tell you. And he's away now—out of England."

Her voice changed a little, her eyes looked past Micky as if for the moment she had forgotten him.

Micky watched her jealously.

"And so whatever was wrong last night is all right to-day, is that it?" he asked with an effort.

"Yes . . . somehow I never thought it would be, but this morning——"

"This morning?" he echoed as she stopped.

"I had a letter this morning," she told him, and her voice had softened so wonderfully that Micky caught his breath. "Oh, I wonder if you have ever been as unhappy as I was last night, and then had a letter, a wonderful letted like I had this morning? There was something in it that seemed to put everything right straight away; something that I've always wanted before and never had. I can't explain it any better than that, but perhaps you understand. I'm just telling you because I feel so happy I must tell somebody, and because I didn't want you to misjudge him as I did yesterday. I thought he didn't really care, and I wanted to die, but to-day, when his letter came——" She broke off into a little happy laugh.

Micky had rammed his clenched hands into his pockets; the blood was hammering in his temples; his brain felt in a whirl; somehow in all his wildest imaginings he had never dreamed of this.

It was his letter that had brought that new look of happiness to her eyes! His letter which perhaps even than lay against her heart; the first love-letter he had ever written to any woman, and she believed it to have been written by Raymond Ashton!

He did not realise how long he sat there without speaking till Esther spoke to him again. There was a little anxious note in her voice.

"I'm afraid I've bored you horribly with all this. I know it's no interest to you, but I felt that I must tell somebody."

Micky roused himself with an effort.

"It's of great interest to me," he said. "And you mustn't ever say a thing like that again. We're going to be friends, and real friends are always interested in everything that concerns the other. I'm more glad than I can say that you're happy. I only hope it's going to last for ever."

Perhaps there was a dubious note in his voice, for an anxious gleam crept into the girl's eyes.

"You sound as if you don't think that it will," she said quickly.

Micky made a hurried disclaimer.

"I do think so, of course I do! You deserve all the happiness you can get, and whoever the man is, if he doesn't make you happy——"

He stopped, with frowning memory of Ashton and their parting only last night.

He hoped in his heart that they would never meet again; if they did, he realised that there would be quite a few nasty things he would feel called upon to say to him.

The waitress brought the bill at that moment and put an end to further conversation, for which he was thankful. He realised that he was getting rather out of his depth. He breathed more freely when they were safely out in the street.

"And where is the new boarding-house?" he asked presently. He wanted to change the subject; every moment he was afraid that he would say something to give himself away. He supposed he had behaved like an impetuous fool. He ought never to have posted that letter—ought never to have opened Ashton's; and yet—if he had not done so. . . . He looked down at the girl beside him, and wondered grimly how she would have felt if he had allowed that callous farewell to reach her.

"It's quite close to where we are now," she told him. "It's rather more expensive than the last one, but it's well worth the extra money, and"—she glanced up at him smilingly—"I'm better off to-day than I was yesterday," she explained. "And when I go back to work again——"

"Are you going back, then?" he asked quickly.

"Of course I am. I must do something, and they will take me back at Eldred's, I know——"

"Eldred's!" Micky frowned. "That's the petticoat shop, isn't it?"

She laughed.

"Yes; how did you know?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've seen the place lots of times. A girl I know buys all her——". He stopped. "Do you want to go back there?" he asked.

"Not particularly, but it's easier than looking for a fresh place, and I know they will take me. I'm in the work-room, and it's not really such a hard life."

Micky did some rapid thinking; it was surprising how easily his brain had taken to hard work during the last twenty-four hours.

"Why don't you get a job as a companion to a nice old lady or somebody?" he suggested vaguely.

She laughed again.

"It doesn't sound a bit attractive," she said frankly. "I think you need an awful lot of patience. It's very kind of you to be interested, but I think I shall go back to Eldred's, for a time, at least."

Micky did not like the idea at all, but he let the subject drop.

"Are you going back to the Brixton Road?" he asked after a moment.

"Oh no; I paid them before I left this afternoon, so I shall go straight to the new place."

"I should like to walk there with you, if I may," said Micky.

"Of course you may."

"And when shall I see you again?" he asked. "You're not going to vanish for days, are you? I've got no end of time to kill, and——"

"But I haven't," she reminded him. "At least, I shan't have when I start work. But I should like to see you again," she added kindly.

"Thank you," said Micky with faint sarcasm.

He felt vaguely disappointed with the whole afternoon. She was holding him so decidedly at arm's length. He supposed it was that infernal fellow Ashton that stood between them. There was a sort of irony, too, in the fact that he himself had by his own action established him more firmly than ever in this girl's affections.

And the fellow was not worth a thought! That was the rotten part of it. As he looked at her he felt strongly tempted to blurt out the truth; to tell her that it was he who wrote that letter—to undeceive her once and for all.

But the thing was manifestly impossible. She would probably think it an abominable thing to have opened Ashton's letter; she would probably be furious if he let her know that the money she had received had come from him. Whichever way he turned he seemed to be in a corner.

They had reached the new boarding-house now, and Micky was relieved to see that it was a decided improvement on the one in the Brixton Road.

The windows were not boxed up, and the steps and the bell were clean. It was on the sunny side of the road, too, and had an air of cheerfulness about it.

"It's much better than the other one, isn't it?" Esther asked.

"Streets better," he assured her. "I shouldn't mind living here myself. . . ." He waited, but she made no comment, and he felt rather snubbed.

There was a little silence.

"Don't you like the place where you are living now?" she asked after a moment. "Don't they make you comfortable there?"

"Oh, it's comfortable enough," said Micky. He wondered if he looked as guilty as he felt. "But I don't believe in sticking on anywhere too long. A change is good for every one. I shall be shifting out some day soon, I expect."

There was a little silence.

"I shall see you again soon," he said. "And if there is anything I can do for you——"

"Thank you, but there isn't." She spoke quite kindly, but Micky had the uncomfortable sort of feeling that her thoughts were elsewhere. He waited a moment, then held out his hand.

"Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, and thank you for my tea."

She nodded and smiled and turned away from him.

There was nothing else for Micky to do but to go; he raised his hat and walked off disconsolately.

CHAPTER IV.

When Esther went upstairs to her room in No. 11 E'phinstone Road, she found the door standing open, and she could hear some one talking inside.

She stood still for a moment in amazement; she thought perhaps she had made a mistake and come to the wrong room, but a glance reassured her; the number of her room was 23, and this one was 23; she pushed the door wider and went in.

Her boxes were there, standing one upon the other, so as to make more space in the small room, and on the rather shabby rug by the fireplace, a woman was kneeling with her back to the door.

She did not hear Esther enter, and for a moment the girl stood staring at her in blank amazement. She could not see her face, but she could see that the woman was small and slightly built, with a wealth of jet black hair coiled in becoming carelessness with a couple of yellow pins to fasten it.

She wore a yellow blouse, which Esther would have thought hideous on any one else, but somehow against that dark coil of hair it looked decidedly picturesque.

Esther moved a little, deliberately knocking against a chair to attract attention, and the girl on the hearthrug looked round with a startled exclamation; then scrambled to her feet.

"I heard there was a cat," she explained. "Lydia told me that he was shut up here alone, so I just had to come in and see him. I hope you don't mind. I brought him some milk."

(To be continued.)

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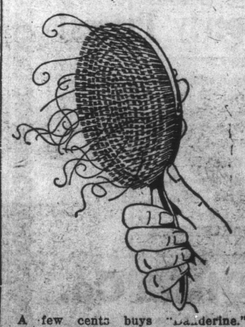

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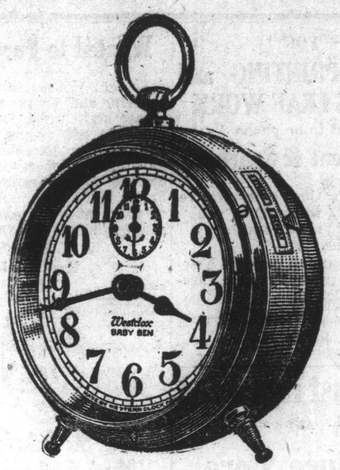

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SPRING.

Now comes the end, my fellowmen, of winter, stern and bitter; the spring is coming once again, and merry birds will twitter, and joy will permeate each hen and cow and human critter. The winter has been mild and kind, no tempests raged severely, the elements all seemed inclined to treat us fair, or nearly; the frost king and his frigid kind were kept in limits, clearly. And so we have no kick to make about the season going, but oh, our buzzums fairly ache to see the green things growing, to skirmish with a spade or rake, or do some fancy hoing! The winter makes us feel our years, and fills our hearts with sorrow, and, though a balmy day appears, small comfort can we borrow, for we are always filled with fears of what may come to-morrow. "The northern sky grows grim and gray," we sigh, with grim foreboding, "and though the sun's on deck to-day, we have a fear corroding that Boreas will come our way, his tinhorn goods unloading." To all such fears spring gives release, the fears that used to bore us; we do not summon the police when clouds assemble o'er us; spring fills our jaded souls with peace, and places hope before us.

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Some bodices are long and snug.

The wrapped frock gains in favor.

Quilted motifs are shown on capes.

Pendant hatpins of jade are popular.

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Pleated side panels are still featured.

Circular flounces have made an appearance.

High collars are predicted for spring wear.

Patent leather slippers are piped in white kid.

Jersey will be used for simple sports frocks.

The coat-frock rivals the suit for general wear.

The soft white collar for street wear is noted.

The uneven hem line is having a decided vogue.

Inch-wide hemstitching is a popular trimming.

Black and beige are smartest for afternoon wear.

Wraps have edges bound with grosgrain ribbon.

The waistcoat is very smart and much in evidence.

Bell-shaped sleeves appear on tailored garments.

Clusters of plaits mark the front and back of skirts.

Organdie tiger lilies trim a tangerine organdie hat.

Smocks are trimmed with bands of bright embroidery.

Large bunches of fruit will be used on summer hats.

The latest pocketbook is fashioned of rich brocade.