RHEUMATISM

THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XVII.

Esther had spent a week indoors with a cold, and it was the longest she could ever remember. June was kindmade much of her, but the days drag-

There was only one thing to live for-the post! And though the rat-tat to neglect us so!" times a day, there was never anything himself; "I expected to hear you had; pealed to; he was stolidly stirring his for Esther.

Her own letter to Paris remained ther. unanswered. The telegram for which she longed never came.

June watched her with a mixture of sympathy and impatience. What was the good of putting all one's eggs in the same basket? she hot water. asked herself crossly. What was the good of falling in love if nothing bet-

ther one afternoon when they were good time?" sitting together in the firelight. "Write and tell Mrs. Ashton you can't come ealy. "Paris is not what it used to be, at all. I do wish you would."

Esther shook her head. "I promised to go, and I must do Monday, Mrs. Ashton has waited long danced up to her. enough as it is."

She looked pale and ill, June thought angrily, and put it all down to "that

"Has Mr. Mellowes come back from. Paris yet?" Esther asked suddenly. June was faintly amazed; Esther never spoke of Micky. She answered rather dubiously that she did not

"I expect he's having such a good time that he'll stay for weeks," she heart was thumping; that letter ought added. "I wish he would come back, to have been delivered yesterday, he I want him to get on with my busi- knew; it was cursed bad luck that it go without that sample, Micky-it

Mr. Mellowes . . ." Livdia at the door scream of delight.

"Micky! you villain! we were just falking about you. When did you come

fore? What have you been doing?"

She dragged him over to the fire; she fussed over him and told him he was just in time for tea.

"Esther's been indoors a week with having some one to share this root cold," she explained. "No, don't you with me that I'm not looking forward get up, Esther. Micky won't mind. to my own eternal company." She pushed Esther back amongst the nofa pillows. "Poor darling! She's really been quite ill," she said suddenly. There was a note of

nervousness in her voice. She coloursorry that she was not well, but that ed, meeting June's amazed eyes. Micky said formally that he was the weather was enough to kill anyness itself, and fussed and petted and body; he added that he had been in down in a heap on the hearthrug startown since Sunday, but . . .

ing at Esther. "I never knew such a see me!" said June. "What a shame, girl," she complained. "Micky, I ap-"Four days, and you've not been to "I've been busy," Micky defended

gone to Mrs. Ashton's," he said to Es-

She raised her eyes. "No-I am going on Monday."

"Oh," said Micky blankly. June had opened the door and was calling over the balusters to Lydia for

"And bring lots of it," she said. "We're thirsty. . . . She came back ter than unhappiness ever came of it? into the room. 'The postman's just She began to hate the phantom lover, come," she said with a nod and a as she called him, with increased smile to Esther. "Lydia will bring our letters up if there are any." She turn-"I don't think you're strong enough | ed again to Micky. "Well, truant! And to go yet, you know," she said to Es- what have you been doing? Having a "No, I have not," Micky said decid-

for another week, or that you can't go or I am not!" He laughed. "How's the swindle?" June began to answer, but stopped as Lydia came into the room. She

something. I shall be all right by brought a jug of hot water. June "No letters? I thought I heard the postman.' "One for Miss Shepstone," Lydia

> Micky looked across at Esther-her whole face was transformed as she turned eagerly with outstretched hand. There was a moment of silence, then she gave a little sigh of utter contentment. June sniffed inelegantly-Micky looked hard into the fire; his

said smilingly.

should arrive while he was here. She darted off to her room to fetch it, There was a little silence in the room while Esther opened it. She seemed to have forgotten that she was not alone. Her pale cheeks were flush-

June was bustling about, making back? Why haven't you been here be- great clatter with the teacups. Micky got up and began to prowl round the

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She looked up startled. ed and her whole face tremulous. Micky's eyes flamed. "That being so, of course, it is use ess for me to ask if you have chang-

ed your mind yet?" he said again. Esther gave a stifled cry. "Are you trying to insult me?" sh

asked under her breath. He half smiled. "I am, if it's an insult to ask you to

marry me." There was no time for more. Jun came back then with her hands full of smaples, which she proceeded to stuff into Micky's poeket.

om; his nerves felt jumpy. Because he knew so well who had written that

etter he was sure every one else mus know it too. Presently June nudge him as she passed. When he looked at her she made a little grimace. "Isn't it awful?" she said in a stage

"Can't I help get the tea?" he askd. "Toast some buns or something?" "There aren't any to toast," she told him, "Sit down and make yourself at home. Esther!"-she raised her voice elaborately-"are you going to have

Esther had come to the ond of her etter; she folded it hurriedly and put t away; she cast a quick look at Micky, but he did not see it. June was

"So Esther is going on Monday," she informed Micky, "and I shall be

left once more to my lonesome. I'm

not at all sure that I shall stay on

myself,' she added. "It's been so jolly

"I may not go after all," Esther

"Not go! Well, I never!" She sa

But Micky was not going to be ap-

"I suppose I can change my mind if

like?" Esther said. "Oh, it isn't you

who have changed your mind," June

cut in ironically. "It's something that

phantom lover of yours has said in

"Well, and if it is?" Esther demur-

red. "I suppose he has a right to say

what he likes, hasn't he?" But she was

laughing as the spoke; she felt won-

derfully happy and light-hearted. "I

believe you're jealous," she declared

"Jealous, indeed!" said June in-

dignantly. Then suddenly she sighed.

Well, perhaps I am; who knows?

Micky had stopped stirring his tea;

here was a sort of intentness about

Esther looked at him, and suddenly

"Never mind what he says," she an-

"Oh, all right-sorry if I was in

quistive." She deliberately turned and

began talking to Micky; Esther was

left to herself, but she did not mind,

she had enough now to think about.

The longed-for letter had come a

She woke from her reverie with

start when Micky rose and said he

"And don't you be so long before

you come and see me again," June

said in her downright way. "And don't

and Micky moved a step nearer to Es-

"You have had good news?" he said.

What does he sa ?? or mayn't we ask?"

his letter. Own up, now."

his big figure.

he stiffened.

must be going.

swered defensively.

June laughed.

There was a little silence.

any tea, my child?"

chattering away.

He submitted laughingly. "Supposing I get run over!" he said resignedly. "People will think I've been robbing a beauty shop."

"It will be a fine advertisement for me, anyway," June declared. "Can't you see all the halfpenny papers coming out with great headlines? Tragic Death of a Young Millionaire! Pockets Stuffed with June Mason's Skin-Food!" She laughed merrily. "That would be worth something, eh. Micky?"

"Heartless woman!" he answered. He turned to Esther. "Good-bye, Miss Shepstone."

Esther was glad that he did not offer to shake hands with her; she was all." glad that June went to see him off. As soon as the door had closed on them she took her letter out again; she pressed the paper to her lips.

It was worth waiting for, worth I love him, you see," she added shythe heartache and disappointment; she closed her eyes for a moment and thought of Raymond Ashton. How she must have misjudged him in the past! It did not seem true now that they had ever quarrelled, or parted in anger; that she had ever been so unhappy that she did not want to

live. . . . June came running up the stairs; she was singing cheerily; Esther smiled as she listened . . . it must be vonderful to be always as happy and light-hearted as June.

"Well, dreamer?" said June. She shut the door with a little slam and aine over to where her friend sat. "A penry for your thoughts."

She looked at Esther's finshed face n the firelight. "And so everything is all right after il. eh?" she asked.

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"And I'm not really going to Mrs. ful to the woman who loves him." Ashton's after all," she said with a sort of shamefaced delight. "Only I tartly. "And then she thinks he's all didn't want to say so in front of Mr. sorts of an idiot, and tells him so." she asked anxiously.

"My dear, of course I am!" said "You've never been in love," she ing. June heartily, "But for the life of me said, "or you wouldn't talk like that." I can't understand how it is that this man of yours has got such an in- thank you," said Jane. "If you and fluence over you. He's only got to Micky are samples of objects who are hold up his little finger and you're in love . . ." She made a little grimon your knees. I'm beginning to think ace, screwing up her nose in disgust. he must be a kind of wonder after

Esther did not answer for a mo-

"No," she said. "He isn't at all won derful, really, except to me, and-and ly. "I suppose every man is wonder

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her brows. "I've tried to guess, but it's no good. There was a Miss Deland he used to go about with at one time but I know that's all off." "Was he engaged to her?"

"No-not really! But her peopl wanted it, and Micky didn't mind; he'd have drifted into it sure enough if something very tremendous hadn't happened to make him change his mind. I know Micky-he'd have slip-

turned him away from it." She glanc-"Until she's his wife," said June ed down at the letter in Esther's lap. she said shyly, The blood surged into "Tell me what he says," she coaxed. "Take pity on a poor creature who Mellowes. . . . Oh, aren't you glad?" But Esther was too happy to take hasn't a phantom lover of her own, or

Esther drew the letter from its en-

SPEAKING FROM

EXPERIENCE

her seriously. "I'm never quite sure whether you're "And I never wish to be in love, aughing at me or not," she said nerv-

June laid her hand on Esther's lap. very soon now . . . "I laugh at every one and every-Esther coloured. "Micky!" she said, surprised into way, and doesn't mean anything. Per- live happily ever after. . . ." using his Christian name. "Is he in ove? How do you know he is?" haps I'm a bit jealous—because you "I'm not a bat, and I haven't known love this phantom lover so much bet-Micky years for nothing. He hasn't ter than you love me," she added.

it, though I haven't said a word. He's in love right enough, there can't be any other explanation, seeing that he's too rich to ever be in debt, and they are the only two things that ever make a man miserable," sho added. Esther wondered if June was trying to sound her

been himself for a long time. I've seen

"I don't know who the wretched female is," June went on, puckering

STEEDMAN'S ped into matrimony as easily as he gets into a taxi, unless some one had

"I'll read you just a few little bits," "And, do you know, it's awfully her pretty face.

closed her eyes. She held a cigarette a real one either," she added laugh- between her lips and puffed at it lazily. There was a little silence; then Esther said suddenly

"I can't. It makes me feel too selfconscious. But he just says that he ously. "I know you don't mean to, doesn't want me to go into any berth just yet. He says that he may be home

"Oh!" said June chagrined. "And thing," she said. "But it's only my then, of course, you'll be married and "Yes." said Esther. "I hope so.

June opened her eyes. Charlie, curled up on his cushion, started to purr lazily. Presently June flopped down on her knees beside him and began stroking his head. "You'll let me have Charlie when

you're married, won't you?" she said suddenly. "I am sure the phanton lover won't want him." Esther did not answer; she hated herself for remembering that Raymond had once said he loathed cats. "I told you how Micky went into a pond after a drowning kitten, didn't 1?" June asked reminiscently. "I

should have loved him for that alone if for nothing else. . . . Esther made no comment. She mo ed a little, and the letter slipped f her lap to the floor.

June picked it up. 'Or is it sacrilege to touch it?" sh asked teasingly. She laid it on Esther's lap.

"Well, I couldn't help seeing the vriting," she said, after a m

Micky's! If I hadn't known it wast his I should have declared that June leaned back in a corner and was," she said rather disconnected! Esther grabbed the letter up. "Well, it isn't his, anyway," said sharply.

> June laughed. (To be continued)

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