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## THE Phantom Lover.

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

### CHAPTER IV.

For a moment Esther was too taken back to answer. She looked from the little woman in the yellow blouse to Charlie, sprawled on the rug and purring lustily, and then back again to the little woman.

She was very attractive looking, that was Esther's first thought, and her next that she had never seen any one with such a beautiful complexion.

"You're Miss Shepstone, aren't you?" her visitor queried in the friendliest of tones. "You see, I know quite a lot about you already. Lydia told me—Lydia's the housemaid—you'll like her; she's a really nice girl. My name is June Mason—I live here, too, and I hope we shall be great friends."

"There was something so breezily disarming about her that Esther held out her hand.

"You're very kind. I hardly know what to say."

"Don't say anything," Miss Mason answered airily. "I'm going to like you; I know I should somehow when I first heard your name. I believe in that sort of thing—I don't know if you do, but as soon as Lydia told me who it was that had taken this room I knew I should like you, I think your name is sweet—Esther! So quaint and old-world. Have you had your tea?—yes, oh, what a shame! I've got some ready for you in my room. Oh, I hope you don't think it's awful cheek," she broke out with a sort of embarrassment. "I've got a sitting-room here as well as a bedroom, and I always make my own tea, it's better than you can get down-stairs. I've got a fire there, too, and if you're ever cold I hope you'll come and sit with me. I've got a good deal but you can always see my room when I'm not here, if you care to. Take off your hat and come and see it now, or are you too tired? I don't want to worry you."

"I'm not a bit tired," Esther said, laughing; she felt a little bewildered by this sudden offer of friendship, but June Mason interested her, and after a moment she took off her hat obediently.

"We'll bring the cat too," Miss Mason said; she swooped down with a quick movement and caught the cat up in her arms. "I love cats," she said. "What's his name?"

"Charlie," said Esther shyly. "He's very thin, but they weren't kind to him where he belonged before."

"What a shame! I simply loathe people who are not kind to animals. Never mind, he'll soon get all right. Now come along—I'll help you unpack your boxes presently."

She led the way downstairs, and Esther followed.

She had been feeling a little scared of this new boarding-house. She felt grateful for this girl's unaffected overture.

"Mine's the best room in the house," Miss Mason informed her. She pushed open the door of a room immediately below Esther's. "Sit down and make yourself at home. I'll get the tea in half a minute. I know you'll have another cup. I shall, anyway. Do you smoke?"

"No," said Esther.

## WOMEN OF MIDDLE AGE

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"Well! I do. I hope you're not shocked. I find it so soothing when you've got nerves; and I'm a frightfully nervous person. I am hardly ever still; I'm always on the go."

Esther could well believe it. She looked on with a slightly dazed feeling while June Mason lit a cigarette and bustled about the room.

It was a very comfortable room, with plenty of easy-chairs and lots of cushions all in the same pale shade of mauve.

"I don't think there would be any rooms as comfortable as this in the house," Esther said. "I suppose you pay a great deal for it, though."

"I don't know about that. Most of the furniture is mine and all the cushions. Do you like my cushions?"

She put down the teapot, which she had been about to fill, and caught up one of the cushions, plumping its softness together with her white hands.

"Mauve is my lucky colour," she rattled on. "Everything I do in mauve turns out well. But perhaps you don't believe in a superstition like that?"

"I'm not sure. I never thought about it," she said hesitatingly. "But it's a very pretty colour."

Miss Mason dropped the cushion to the floor, and stooping picked Charlie up and deposited him on it.

"Doesn't he look sweet?" she demanded. "And a black cat is lucky too, you know, so that's a comfort."

She went back to the teapot, made the tea, and poured out a cup for Esther.

"Is that chair comfy?—yes, lean back! What are you looking at? Oh, my photograph! Yes, I have got a lot, haven't I? Lydia dusts them for me! Lydia's a treasure! You'll love her. When I get married she's going to leave here and come with me—"

Esther looked interested.

"Are you going to be married?" she asked.

Miss Mason laughed.

"Am I? No, I'm not. I'm too fond of my independence. Not that I don't like men. I do like them, and I've got some awfully good pals amongst them, too. Look!"

She turned with one of her rapid movements, caught up a photograph from the shelf and handed it to Esther.

"There! that's one of the nicest men I ever met in my life," she said enthusiastically. "Don't you think he's got a ripping face?"

Esther took the portrait laughing. "I thought June Mason one of the most amusing people she had ever met—then she caught her breath on a little smothered exclamation as she found herself looking straight into the pictured eyes of Micky Meadows."

June Mason was too occupied with a fresh cigarette to notice the blank look that filled Esther's eyes.

She sat there in the big chair, staring at Micky's portrait with a sense of foreboding. Surely it was something bigger than just chance that had introduced him into her life for the second time.

"He's one of the best," June Mason went on. She dragged forward another chair and plumped down into it comfortably.

"Don't you admire him?" she opened her eyes wide, looking across at Esther.

"Yes, oh yes! I think he's quite nice," Esther said stiltedly. "But not a bit good-looking, do you think?" she asked, with a sort of hesitation.

another girl on the tapis now. I don't know if it will come to anything, though. Anyway, she's not good enough for him."

"You seem very fond of him," Esther said.

"I am. He's a dear! I should love to see him happily married to a girl with a heart of gold like his own. I think I know him better than most people, and his little corner of the world would be amused if they knew the amount of good Micky manages to do."

She had finished up with her own enthusiasm. Her curious eyes (Esther could not decide if they were grey, blue, or green, or a mixture of all three) were very bright and expressive.

"I've heard lots of rotten things said about him," she went on. "And I know that some of them are really deserved—at least most of them are not. He isn't a saint—but what man is I should like to know? But Micky's the sort who would give his life for a friend or any one little and weak. Do you know?"

she flung away the half-smoked cigarette and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees—"last winter, down in the country, I saw Micky go into a dirty pond to evening dress to rescue a drowning cat. What do you think of that?"

"A—cat!" said Esther faintly. She looked at Charlie, and remembered how Micky had paid for milk for him the night of their strange meeting.

"A miserable drowning cat!" Miss Mason went on with tragic emphasis. "He heard it mewling from the road, and he went in after it without stopping to think. Now, I call a man a hero who will do a thing like that when he is on his way to a dance he is very keen about, don't you?"

"Yes," said Esther. Her heart warmed towards Mellowes. Kind as he had been to her, she had not been quite sure of him; it made her feel happier to hear him so warmly championed.

"You'll be sick to death of my chatter," June Mason broke out with sudden change of voice. She helped herself to a third cigarette. "I hope you don't mind smoke," she apologized. "I'm always at it; I think I smoke dozens a day—"

"Or throw them away half smoked," Esther thought amusedly. "I don't mind at all," she answered.

"You haven't told me a thing about yourself," Miss Mason reminded her reproachfully. "And it's not fair that I should do all the talking. I know your name, and that's about all. Have you got any people? Where do you come from?"

Esther flushed a little.

"There isn't much to tell you. I haven't any people. I was born in India, and my mother died there. I don't know anything about my father. I was sent home to an aunt, and she looked after me till about three years ago, when she died. I came to London then, and they took me on at Eldred's—do you know Eldred's?"

"Do I not?" said Miss Mason fervently. "Scrumptious things they make; but what prices! I can't afford them very often, but I go in there a good deal. I know the manager, and he's good to do some business for me—at least I hope he is. If I can get my stuff into his place it will be a splendid thing. All London shops there, you know; all London with any money, that is!"

Esther looked mystified.

"Your stuff!" she echoed. "What do you mean?"

June Mason laughed merrily. She had a very infectious laugh and a trick of covering her face with her hands while she was laughing.

"I forgot that you didn't know!" she said. "I seem to know you so well. I can't remember that we never saw one another before to-day. My dear, I make face cream. Wait a moment!"

She sprang up and disappeared behind a mauve curtain into an adjoining room. Esther heard her moving about, opening and shutting boxes and plunging down on her knees beside Esther's chair.

"There you are!" she said lightly, though there was an odd dash of pride in her voice. "Face cream, night and day cream, eyelash tonic, and all the rest of it! Of course, I'm only just starting—I'm not like those people who advertise in all the papers and charge about a guinea for a shilling jar; but my stuff is as good as theirs any day, and better, because it's pure. Look!" She took a lid off a little white pot with a mauve label and held it to Esther.

"Isn't that a glorious perfume?" she demanded. She sniffed it herself with relish. "And it's all my invention, and I'm as proud of it as a cat would be of nine tails. When I've got things a little more ship-shape, Micky's going to put it on the market for me. It wants a man behind all these sort of things you know. I can do all the donkey work, but I've got no head for business. I never know the difference between a loss and a profit. It was partly over this that I quarrelled with my people—they said it was low-down to make face cream and sell it—they're awful snobs! So I just cleared off and changed my surname and came here. I'm quite happy, and if I haven't got so much money as I had, I don't mind—I've got my liberty, and that's worth every thing."

(To be continued.)

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My neighbor  
Blitzen took  
some hops and  
herbs and roots  
and barks, and  
brewed a pall of  
sparkling slops,  
to banish care  
that carks; and  
then he sipped  
some forty drops,  
with eloquent re-  
marks. "There is  
no reason why  
a-blick should  
suffer and be dry; this brew of mine  
is pretty slick. It beats the stuff you  
buy; it has the pep, it has the kick,  
the potency of rye." He took an-  
other forty drops, directly from the  
pail, then uttered sundry warlike  
yaws that made me shrink and  
quail, and tried to whip the village  
cops, who bore him off to jail. The  
home brew artists have no luck, this  
mad and merry year; through straws  
or garden hose they suck their net-  
tars, amber clear, and then they're  
loaded on a truck and jalled for half  
a year. They never seem to put  
across the graft they've framed so  
well; a bowl or two they blithely  
toss, and arch their necks and yell,  
and then they're seen, a total loss, in  
some punk prison cell. And, having  
seen what fills befall the home brew  
sports this year, I do not fill my flag-  
ons tall with stuff that looks like  
beer, but to the hydrant by the wall  
my steps I sanely steer.

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