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THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XII.

She linked her arm in Esther's, and they went downstairs together. Esther did not want to come, but it seemed easier to give way than to make excuses. She took the chair which Micky brought forward; she felt a little nervous and ill at ease. Once, when their eyes met, she found herself colouring sensitively.

Micky let her alone in a marked fashion and talked to June. He had found the man he had been looking for for months, he declared, a good business man, honest—
"Really honest, Micky?" June asked, laughing.
"Really honest," Micky maintained. "Do you think I'd put you on to him else? I've told him all about you. I went out to lunch with him yesterday and we talked face creams and vanities till my head reeled. He's full of ideas, bursting with fresh notions for advertising. He didn't say so in actual words, but he thinks you'll be a little gold mine if you'll put yourself in his hands."

June's eyes sparkled; she jumped up from her chair, put her arms round Micky's neck, and gave him a sounding kiss.
"You're a dear," she said, "and I just love you!"
Esther glanced up quickly. June need not have done that, she thought with a touch of irritation, but Micky only laughed.

"Come here and you shall have that back with compound interest," he said, but June shook her head.
"That's enough for to-day, and Esther's looking shocked to death."
"I'm not—I never thought about it," Esther protested indignantly. June laughed.

"Well, you looked angry anyway," she declared. "Didn't she, Micky?"
"I'm afraid I didn't notice," he answered coolly, but he had, and for a moment his pulses had leapt at sight of the anger in Esther's eyes; she could not surely hate him as much as she pretended if it annoyed her that June should kiss him.

But she was indifferent enough now at all events; she was leaning back listlessly, her eyes fixed on the flames, her face sad and thoughtful.
"She was thinking about Ashton, Micky told himself savagely, wishing he were here, no doubt—Ashton, who even at that moment was probably running round Paris with Tubby Clare's little widow."

June was packing the tea things on to the tray and humming a snatch of song. Esther rose.

"Let me do that—you cleared away yesterday."
She took the tray.
June asked Micky for a cigarette.

"I've got heaps somewhere," she said vaguely. "But I never know where they are." She looked over to Esther. "Don't bother to put the cups away now," she said. "Come back and be cosy."

She was rather surprised that Esther obeyed; she had quite expected her to go off and not return.
Fond as she was of Esther, she could not quite make her out; she was full of surprises. It was getting dusk, and the room was full of shadows.

"Shall I light up?" Micky asked. "Go do we like the frelight?"
"We like the frelight," June said promptly; she nestled down amongst her mauve cushions.
Micky was sitting straddle-ways across a chair between the two girls, and Esther had drawn back a little so that her face was in the shadow. Micky glanced at her once, but could only see the glint of frelight on her hair and her hands clasped listlessly in the lap of her frock. He glanced at them; she still wore Ashton's ring, with its three inferior stones; he wondered how long the face was going to be kept up and what would happen to bring it to an end.

"If some one doesn't talk," June said drowsily, "I shall go to sleep."
There was a quiet peacefulness in the cosy little room. Micky crossed his arms on the chair back and leaned his chin on them, staring into the fire, and Esther, from her place in the shadows, looked at him unobserved.

Not in the least good-looking, she told herself again, and yet in common fairness she had to admit to herself that there was something about Micky Mellows that was undeniably attractive.

She liked the obtuseness of his chin—she liked the way his hair grew, and the shape of his hands—strong, manly hands they were, in spite of the fact that they had probably never done a day's useful work in their lives. Of course he was too well dressed. To begin with, there was no need to wear grey spats over his shoes, or to have his trousers so immaculately creased. She forgot that she had liked Ashton to indulge in both these weaknesses.

Micky was whistling a snatch of a love-song under his breath. Esther did not know what it was; she had never heard the melody before, but something in the softly sentimental notes brought the tears to her eyes; before she was aware of it they were tumbling down fast.

June sprang suddenly to her feet. "Why are we all mooning like this?" Micky, gave me a match. She almost snatched the box from him and lit the gas; the yellow flare flooded the room. Micky, glancing at Esther, saw the tears on her cheeks and the way she averted her head.

He scowled and rose to his feet, standing so that his tall figure shielded her.
"Well, I must be getting a-jong," he said. He pulled out his watch and looked at it, but he never noticed what the time was.

He was thinking of Esther and the tears he had surprised.
"And when are you going to introduce me to this man who is to make my fortune?" June demanded crisply. She was standing on a footstool, trying to see herself in a glass above the mantelshelf.

"Esther, you might have told me what a sight I look! My hair is all over the place."
"I thought it looked nice," Esther said hurriedly. She knew Micky had seen her tears, and was silently hating him for it.
Micky answered hesitatingly. "I'll let you know—I'll fix it up and let you know. There's no hurry, is there? I don't want him to think we are too keen."

"But I am keen," June insisted. "Wouldn't you be keen if some one had told you you would be a gold mine, properly handled?" she laughed. "Oh, I forgot! money is no object to you. Well, bide your own time, my dear, but don't let it be too long. . . . Must you really go?"
"I'm afraid so; and, June—"
"Um!" said June, silent on another cigarette.

Micky fidgeted. He looked down at the carpet.
"If you don't hear anything of me for a few days you'll know I'm out of London. . . ." He looked at Esther, but she was kneeling down by the fire stroking Charlie.

"Out of London?" June said in surprise. "Where are you going?"
Micky cleared his throat.
"I thought of running over to Paris for a day or two," he said.
"Paris!" They were both looking at him now. Micky was painfully aware of the eagerness in Esther's face.
"Yes; I haven't been since September. Anything I can do for you while I'm there?"

June raised her brows comically.
"Not for me, but perhaps Esther—"
"Esther has a great friend over there, haven't you, my child?"
Esther turned crimson from chin to brow.

"Mr. Mellows is not at all likely to meet any friend of mine," she said stiffly.
Micky felt horribly sorry for her. "Don't be too sure, Miss Shepstone," he said lightly. "It's a small world you know, and it's the most unexpected things that happen."
But Esther seemed not to have heard.

CHAPTER XIII.

Micky went to Paris. "No, I shan't want you, Driver," he told his man awkwardly. "I'm only going for a day or two. I—I shan't want you," he said again lamely.

He looked at the man guiltily, but Driver was as impassive as ever. "Very good, sir," he said. He could not understand what had happened to Micky; as a rule, he refused even to take his own railway ticket or speak to a porter. This new independence worried him.

But Micky went off cheerfully enough. He rang June up at her club the morning he started and told her he was really going. He heard her cheery laugh across the telephone. "Micky, you're not up to any mischief!"
"As if I should be!" he answered with dignity.

"I wouldn't trust you," she said promptly. "However, have a good time, and if you see the phantom lover, you might push him into the Seine for me."
"I'll remember," Micky said grimly. He hesitated. "Everything all right?" he asked.

She echoed his words, not understanding. "Everything all right? Do you mean the swindle? Oh yes, it's going fine, thank you. I had another order from those American export people this morning."



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"Good. . . . And—Miss Shepstone gone?"
"No, she's going on Saturday. Sickening, isn't it?"
"I don't think she'll stay long."
Micky said soothingly. "It won't do her any harm to see how she likes it. Well, good-bye."

He stood for a moment after he had hung up the receiver, staring at it. He wished he had not arranged to go to Paris. Supposing Ashton took it into his head to come back while he was away? Supposing he went home and found Esther there?

He tried to believe that it was not at all likely, but at the last moment, as he got into the train and received his ticket from the solemn Driver, Micky said—
"You know where to find me if anything happens—if anything should be the matter?"

"Yes, sir," Driver raised wooden eyes to his master's face. "Was you expecting anything to happen, sir?" he asked stolidly.
Micky got red. "No, you fool!"
"Very good, sir," Driver retorted unmoved.

And so Micky went to Paris. It was dark when he got there, and he drove at once to a small and unpretentious hotel in a narrow side street, where he had never been before, but of which he had heard from Phillips.

After all, it was only for a few nights. He did not want to stay in Paris long—Paris always bored him, but he made a little grimace as he looked up at the windows of the hotel. It certainly was a rotten-looking little show, he thought as he followed the concierge into the hall. This, too, was small and unpretentious, with a polished floor and wicker chairs scattered about. There was a kind of winter garden leading from the lounge, where a few neglected palms and ferns were struggling for an existence, and the whole place was silent, almost deserted.

Micky was too late for dinner, but a smiling host, with a short dark beard, assured him that he could have a most excellent supper in less time than it would consume of what that supper would consist. Micky said he didn't care what it was. He followed his suit-case up the wide, shallow stairs to a quaint little room with a low ceiling and polished floor.

He was beginning to feel more at home after all; one could be quiet here and not be eternally running up against people whom one knew; he felt more cheerful when he went down to his supper.

He asked the waiter if there were many people staying there. His tone of voice sounded as if he sincerely hoped there was not, and the waiter tacitly submitted that the place was almost empty.
Micky proceeded with his supper.

It was nearly ten o'clock, but he went out into the lounge when he had finished and sat down at a table in one of the most secluded corners.
There were pen and ink and a supply of hotel notepaper, which Micky looked at with great satisfaction, before he took up a pen, carefully examined the nib, squared his elbows and began to write.

"My darling—"
Micky wrote the words hurriedly and covered them over with a sheet of blotting paper as if they made him feel guilty.

(To be continued.)
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order to see if a strike might be called. George told the to-day in answer concerning the coal. Minister declared the importance of

within twenty-four hours would have to discuss the question of the only information the early session

day, although a strike had been night pointed to the coal miners' drifting in the die serious industries years. These are

Government has been military steps, which further emergency issued in accordance Council giving various departments must

to take possession of buildings, works water supplies, first age, and to requis transport, including light railways, to clo

prices of coal and gas. The Government has been the serious condition which may develop up the Government as

substante in the House tomorrow and Wednesday days, deciding w sections of the British railwaymen, and tra will strike in support

BRITAIN ER LON

The coal strike situ the "foremost" topic throughout a section

tain to-day sit late and if more deep the serious condition community has been shut down, the coal one is waiting the stat

George in the House which is expected to be influence. The best ne collieries was that the was being saved, the with the help of volun

the pumps, as other mi were gradually gain management of the e manufacture activity, the complete closing of plants, some during

U.S. TITTY WASHINGTON

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