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THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XIII.

"I thought I should have been leaving Paris before now, but have been delayed. I shall be staying here till the end of the week and am writing this so that you can let me have a letter before I leave. I hope you have received both my other letters safely, and are quite well and as happy as possible, seeing that we cannot be together."

He sat back for a moment and looked at this frowningly, then he wrote on hurriedly.

"I want you to miss me, you see—I want you to feel as I do, that there is only one thing to look forward to and that is when we shall be together again. Darest, it seems now that I have never really told you how well I love you. Some day, if all that I wish for comes true, I will tell you the many things you would not let me say when we were last together."

He sat back for a moment and looked at this frowningly, then he wrote on hurriedly.

"Write to me as soon as you get this, so that I may have a letter to take with me when I leave. I shall watch for every post and count the minutes till it comes. I have arranged with my bankers to send the money you every week. Darest, if this is not enough, please let me know, and I will send some more."

Micky scratched out the last five words, finally rewriting the whole page to add "... let me know and we must see what can be done. I cannot bear to think that you are wanting anything which it is in my power to give you. Tell me all about yourself; if you are well and happy—and how often you think of me. I shall write again soon, perhaps to-morrow ... and till then, and for ever, I am all ways yours, Micky."

He added his own signature without noticing it, then realized what he had done and rewrite the last page in a panic.

Supposing he had sent it—it made



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FOR DAINTY FABRICS

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Micky knew Mrs. Clare slightly; he rose and went towards them. "I heard you were in Paris," he said. He shook hands with Mrs. Clare; she was rather a pretty little woman, small and plump, with round, meaningful eyes and a friendly smile. "We're going to the opera," Ashton said. "Mrs. Clare is not staying here, but she very kindly consented to come and dine with me. Are you staying here, Micky? When did you come over?"

"Last night; and I'm not staying here. Just dropped in for some grub." "You'd better dine with us," Ashton said, but he did not sound very enthusiastic.

Micky laughed. "Thanks, but I have dined. I was just leaving when you came in." He thought of Esther, and his face hardened. This was the man of whom she was thinking all day and every day; this man who was so obviously going to try and marry Tubby Clare's little widow.

He stood talking to them for a few moments, then excused himself. "You haven't told me where you are staying," Ashton said.

"No—and I'm going away to-morrow anyway. . . . When are you coming back to town?"

Ashton looked quickly at his companion. "Oh, not yet awhile," he said. "I see," Micky met his eyes steadily.

"By the way, I got your letter," he said after a moment. "You didn't ask about that letter you gave me. I posted it."

Raymond turned crimson. "The letter—oh, yes, thanks—thanks, very much. You didn't take it then?"

"Er—thanks awfully!" Ashton said again. He twisted his moustache nervously. "I'll see you some other time," he said with a rush. "I'll drop you a line."

"Right oh!" said Micky laconically. "I hope I shall see you again too, Mr. Mellows," Mrs. Clare said. She thought she was saying the right thing. She thought these two men were friends, and she was sufficiently in love with Raymond to wish to be liked by his friends.

"Thank you, Mrs. Clare," Micky said stolidly. "But I am going back to London to-morrow; I am afraid I shall have very little time, though I should be delighted, of course—"

He felt rather sorry for this woman. After all, she was harmless and good natured, she deserved a better fate than to be snapped up by a good-looking fortune-hunter.

He was getting into his coat in the lounge when Ashton came after him. He looked worried and abashed; he asked a hurried question.

"Everything's all right, eh, Micky?" "Lallic," Micky—I thought from the way you looked just now—she's all right—eh?"

"My dear chap—how should I know? She never answered my letter, though I sent the money, as you wished. I thought you would have heard."

"I told you I didn't mean to write—I said that I wanted the whole affair cut out," Ashton said irritably. Micky made no response.

"She's sure to be all right anyway," Ashton said after a moment. "If she hadn't I should have heard—eh?"

Micky looked at him coolly. "You rather sound as if you were expecting to hear she'd done something foolish—jumped off Waterloo Bridge or something—"

he said drily. Ashton laughed. "Well, you never know," he said heartily. "Women are such queer creatures—and Lallie was so excited; she said more than once that she'd go away with herself—it's all rot, of course, but . . . what did you say?"

"Nothing," said Micky curtly. "Good-night." He turned on his heel and went out.

CHAPTER XIV.

Micky stayed in Paris four days; the longest four days of his life.

He wandered about killing time and wishing everything and every one at the bottom of the sea.

It seemed impossible that he had ever managed to have a good time over here—the noise and bustle of the streets got on his nerves; the things that had always amused him before bored him and left him cold; he thought of London with a deadly sort of home-sickness.

Esther did not mean to write to him, he was sure, and in some ways he hoped she would not; he realized that he was playing a mean trick on her, cheating her out of fond words and a love-letter to which he had not the smallest claim.

He tried to solve his conscience by making up his mind to leave on the Monday morning whatever happened; if there was not a letter by that time there would never be one. Esther would have gone to Mrs. Ashton's. It was surprising how much he hated the thought of her being with Raymond's mother. During the interminable hours when he walked about Paris trying to kill time he thought out all manner of possibilities that might result from his unforeseen contingency. Mrs. Ashton might get fond of Esther—and if she got fond of Esther, well—who knew what might happen in the future in spite of Tubby Clare's little widow? He had not run across Ashton again, and he sincerely hoped that he would not.

When Monday morning came he packed his portmanteau before he left his room—there would be no letter for him, so he might as well clear out



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and go home without making a further fool of himself. There was not the least hope in his heart when he went to the bureau and asked for letters; the reply came as it had done each morning: "Nothing for Monsieur . . ."

Micky turned away. He was half way to the dining-room before it suddenly dawned upon him that he did not know he was expecting letters in the name of Ashton—that he had forgotten to tell them. He went back hurriedly to the bureau.

"Any letters for Ashton?—I am expecting one for a friend of mine of that name . . ."

He waited breathlessly while the girl sorted through the pigeon-holes on the wall; he felt as if he could hardly breathe when she came back with "Mais oui," she said smilingly. "I did not know it was for Monsieur . . ."

Micky almost snatched it from her; he had not even glanced at the writing, but he knew it must be from Esther. He sat down at the breakfast table with his thoughts in a whirl; he was sure that the waiter must know how excited he felt. He ordered coffee and rolls before he opened the envelope; he laid it down on the cloth beside him and stared at it very much as a sentimental girl might stare at her first love-letter, hesitating to open it, wishing to prolong the ultimate delight.

Finally he cut it open carefully and drew out the contents. His pulses were racing, he did not know if shame or delight were the greatest emotion in his heart; he glanced at the first two words and the blood rushed to his face.

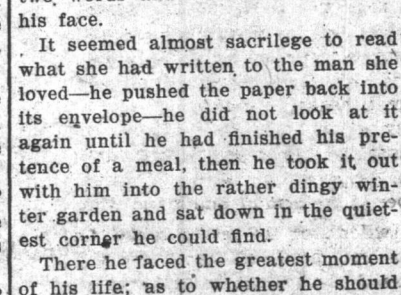
It seemed almost sacrilege to read what she had written; the man she loved—he pushed the paper back into its envelope—he did not look at it again until he had finished his presence of a meal, then he took it out with him into the rather dingy winter garden and sat down in the quietest corner he could find.

There he faced the greatest moment of his life; as to whether he should go on with this thing or wipe it out of his life once and for all.

Ashton had done with Esther; he was as sure of that as he was sure that Ashton meant to marry Mrs. Clare. This being so, was it wrong of him to try and give Esther some happiness in place of what she had lost? She had refused to marry him—she had said that she could never care for him; could he hope to make her change her mind? In his heart he was sure that he could; he wanted her so badly that it seemed to him as if the very force of his desire must compel some return from her.

He sat staring down the dismal garden with moody eyes. He knew it was a big risk; he thought of her as he had first seen her and as he had last seen her.

(To be continued)



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seed oil to the consistency of a thin paste. Use a soft cloth and rub the damaged surface with this.

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