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THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XI.

"I should have been delighted if you could have come," he said. "But, of course, if your fiancé would not object about it—." He broke off as if there was nothing more to be said. Esther wondered if Raymond really would mind; at first he had been very jealous, and could not bear her to speak to another man, but latterly—she hated it, because she could not forget that once he had told her she could marry a man with money if she played her cards carefully—the man who had said that seemed a different personality altogether from the man whose letters she had only lived for during the last fortnight.

It was she mean and unfeeling that she continually found herself remembering the quarrels and scenes they had had? She wanted so earnestly to forget them; she went up to June's room with dragging steps. The door of the room opened before she reached the landing, and June came out. "I knew it was you," she said. "Poor soul! how tired you sound. Another day of miserable failure, I suppose. Never mind, come and sit down in the warm, and you'll soon forget it."

Esther laughed rather shamefacedly.

"It's been a day of success, strange to relate," she said. "But I'm tired, dead tired—I must have walked miles. She suddenly remembered Micky; she looked round with a quick suspicion. "Have you been alone all the afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes, quite alone," June laughed. "Who did you expect to find here, pray?" she demanded.

"Nobody—I only wondered if you had any visitors."

"I might have known it wasn't the truth that he was coming here," she told herself vexedly.

"Well, and what about the success?"

June asked; she was sitting on the hearthrug stroking Charlie. "You don't mean to say that the old dear at the agency really had something to offer you this time?"

Esther nodded.

"Yes, and she's desperately anxious for me to take it, too. It's quite a good offer, but it means leaving here and living in; and I don't believe I want to leave here," she added ruefully.

June looked dismayed.

"I shan't let you go," she said promptly. "Just as we are settling down so cozily." She put her white hands over her ears. "No, I don't want to hear another thing about it, if that's all, refuse it—write and refuse it at once."

Esther laughed; she pulled June's hands down and held them firmly.

"Tell me," she said. "Do you know any people named Ashton?"

She was longing to find out if June did know them; it seemed such a lifetime since she had seen Raymond or spoken to him, she was hungry to hear him spoken of, even if only by this woman who probably had merely known him as an ordinary acquaintance.

"Ashton!" June wrinkled up her nose. "I know some Ashtons who live in Braystone Square," she said at last. "A mother and son. A very handsome woman she is, with white hair; she has a sort of grande dame look about her—the sort of woman you can imagine in a powdered wig and a crinoline, curtsying to the queen."

She scrambled up, and, snatching a paper fan from the shelf, swept Esther a graceful curtsy to illustrate her meaning.

But Esther was too much in earnest to be amused.

"It must be the same Mrs. Ashton,"

she said eagerly. "This is her card—she gave it to me to-day—Mrs. Raymond Ashton."

June glanced at the card and nodded briskly.

"Yes, it's the same. I don't know her frightfully well; she's rather reserved, too; but I admire her immensely—well, go on."

"She wants me to go to her as a sort of companion—she has offered me fifty pounds a year."

June whistled.

"Not bad, is it? But you'll refuse, of course?"

"I asked her to let me think it over; I said I should like to talk it over with you first."

June clasped her hands round her knees and stared into the fire thoughtfully.

"She's a widow, isn't she?" Esther said hesitatingly. "At least—she didn't say anything about a husband."

"Yes, she's a widow right enough," June said. "And delighted to be, I should think," she added bluntly. "I never knew the departed spouse, but from all accounts he was a perfect terror."

Esther said nothing. Raymond had always spoken of his father as being a "rare old sport."

After a moment—

"There's a son too," June said. "A kind of Adonis to look at, beautiful eyes and all that sort of thing."

"Yes," said Esther. She tried hard to keep the eagerness from her voice. "Do you—do you know the son too?" she asked nervously.

June gave a queer little laugh.

"Oh, yes, I know him. That is to say, I say 'How d'ye do' to him when I have the misfortune to meet him, but—"

Esther's hands were clasped in her lap.

"Why—why—misfortune?" she asked.

June Mason shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know—it's hard to explain—his never done me any harm, but there are some people one hates by instinct, and Raymond Ashton is one of the people I hate." She smoothed a crease in the skirt of her frock. "He's such a—such an awful outsider; she added, unconsciously choosing the word Micky Mellowes had used a few hours before.

Esther sat very still. Twice she tried to speak, but no words would come. She knew that it was unfair to June to sit there and allow her to go on talking about Raymond, but something in her heart seemed to have set a seal on her lips.

"He's that insufferable kind of creature who thinks himself irresistible," June went on. "Micky has often told me the way he brags about his so-called 'conquests.' Conquests, indeed! What are they but a few poor ignorant girls hood-winked by his handsome face and smooth tongue? Dozens of girls he's had, my dear, literally dozens! Only the other day some one told me that Mrs. Ashton had to threaten to cut him off with a shilling if he didn't give up some little person he was supposed to be going to marry! I don't know how true it is, mind you, but that's the sort of man he is—I've no time for him at all," she finished vigorously.

She turned to look at Esther, and gave a little exclamation of alarm.

"How pale you are! Don't you feel well?"

"I'm quite all right—I'm just tired—I don't think I'll go down to supper to-night. I'll just stay here and be quiet. I wanted to hear what you had to say about my future employer."

"Future fiddleticks!" June retorted. "You're not going to her, my dear; I shan't let you. If Raymond came home while you were there, you'd never have any peace."

Esther was lying back now with closed eyes. Over and over again in her mind she was saying to herself—

"I don't believe it—I don't believe a word of it; it's all cruel lies—first Mr. Mellowes and now June. They both hate him, that's what it is; but I don't believe a word of what they say."

June was bustling about the room fetching cushions and a light rug, which she had laid over Esther.

"You have a little sleep, and you'll feel heaps better," she said.

She went away, shutting the door quietly; and Esther hid her face in her hands.

She hardly knew why she was crying, she only knew that she was utterly miserable.

She took Ashton's last letter from her dress and read it through again—that he loved her? How could any one, knowing his careful thought for her, believe that he was the detestable personality June and Micky had described?

She kissed the signature passionately; nobody in all the world counted but this one man.

She got up and went over to June's desk, which both girls used; she felt that she must write to him and tell him how much she wanted him.

When she had finished writing she looked to the head of the paper on which she had written for the address, and then she saw a postscript scribbled in a corner which she had not noticed before.

"Don't write to me here—I shall have left this hotel by the time you get my letter. I will write again as soon as possible."

It was like a door with iron bars being closed in her face; she could not write after all! She could have no relief for all her longing and unhappy-

ness; she must just wait and wait, eating her very soul out, till he wrote again.

She tore up what she had written and threw it into the fire.

"The phantom lover"—June's half playful, half mocking words came back to her with foreboding. Was he indeed only a phantom lover? Just a creation of her own brain and desire? She tried to thrust the thought from her; she was tired and fanciful; in the morning she would be all right; it was not fair to him, it was not fair to herself to be so doubting. She went back to June's couch and curled up amongst the mauve pillows; life was so hard, so disappointing; it gave so little of all that one desired; and her tears fell again, presently she cried herself to sleep.

JUNE came back on tiptoe; she stole across the room and looked at Esther, then she went back to the hearthrug to keep Charlie company.

The fire had died down and she replenished it as quietly as she could, putting a knob on at a time with her fingers.

As she leaned over to poke them softly together she caught sight of a scrap of paper lying in the grate. It looked like part of a torn letter, and without thinking June picked it up—the one word "dearest" stared up at her in Esther's writing.

June looked at it for a long moment, then she turned her head and glanced at Esther, still sleeping.

June frowned; she hunched her shoulders impatiently.

"More phantom lover, I suppose," she told herself crossly; she threw the little scrap of paper into the fire and watched it burn with a sort of vengeful delight.

CHAPTER XII.

"I've decided to accept Mrs. Ashton's offer," said Esther suddenly.

It was the following afternoon, and she had been helping June paste labels on to the little mauve pots. She looked up as she spoke, with the paste brush still in her hand and her fingers all sticky.

"Did you hear what I said?" she demanded guiltily.

"Yes, I heard," June said rather tartly. "And I think you're a mean pig. However, go on! Have your own way! Don't mind me."

"It isn't that at all," Esther declared. "But I must do something—I've



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been idle quite long enough. I shall be sorry to leave you, but I shall still pay for my half of the room."

"Thank you—thank you very much," said June dryly. Esther ushered in distress.

"Don't be so unkind! It's not that I want to leave you. I've been happier here with you than anywhere else, but I must work, I can't live on nothing."

"You could live on three pounds a week if you wish to. What do you suppose the phantom lover will say if he knows that his money hasn't helped you, and that you're going to make a drudge of yourself?"

"I shan't be a drudge—I—"

June broke in impatiently.

"Oh, very well—I don't want to argue, but I think it's mean of you. If you really liked me you'd stay. . . ."

"I shall come to see you whenever I get any time off."

"Yes, once a week for two hours, I suppose—and when I shall probably be out."

"I shall write first and let you know when I'm coming."

June took no notice; she screwed the lid on to a perfume bottle and wiped her fingers on the white over-all.

(To be continued)

Fashions and Fads.

A large poke hat of crepe de chine has applique of tinsel-spangled net.

Chiffons, taffetas and crepes in plain colors are worn for afternoon.

A gown of heavy wavy crepe is decorated with Turkestan patchwork.

Among the new evening gowns are self-tone brocades and beaded nets.

Evening dresses often have narrow trains hanging free from the waist.

Earrings are very elaborate in design and show green and blue stones.

Although the long chiffon blouses are still worn, the shorter ones are favored.

Evening wraps of lace, with soft serge collars, will be worn this summer.

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A three-piece cape costume of black serge is embroidered in white. The short cape, which is attached to the shoulders, is bound with scarlet.