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**THE
Phantom Lover.**

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

CHAPTER XXXI.

No sooner had Esther got out of his sight at the station than he was beside himself with remorse for having allowed her to go; he had spent the whole morning wandering about looking for her. He had been to this hotel a dozen times; he had only just come again when she followed.

The relief of having her safely in his charge once more was almost more than he could bear. He walked over to the door, then stopped and looked back at her.

"You won't . . . you won't run away from me again will you?" he asked. For the first time there was real emotion in his voice.

Esther had been sitting looking into the fire; she raised her head now. "Don't go," she said tremulously. "Please don't go. I want to speak to you."

He flushed crimson, he tried to make some excuse.

"Another time. . . . You're tired. I'll come back presently. You ought to get some rest if we're to go back to-night."

"No," she said. "It must be now." He shut the door, but he kept as far away from her as possible, standing over by the window that looked into the dreary winter garden.

"There was something implacable about his tall figure.

"Oh, won't you come here?" she said.

He obeyed at once. He rested an elbow on the mantelshelf and kept his eyes fixed on the fire.

"There was a little silence, then Esther said, almost in a whisper: 'I want to beg your pardon. I hope you will—will try and forgive me.' Micky did not move.

She struggled on.

"I've seen . . . Mr. Ashton." Some-

how she could not bring herself to speak of him by his Christian name.

"And I know—I know—that I've been a fool."

Her voice broke. She gripped the arms of the chair hard to keep herself from breaking down.

Micky forced himself to speak. "I'm glad you've seen him—as you wished it," he said jerkily. "But as hoping I will forgive you, there's nothing to forgive—it's all the other way on. I behaved like—like a cad—it's for you to forgive me."

He smiled faintly.

"And now we've both said the right thing. I'll go and see about that train," he said.

But again she stopped him. "I don't want you to go—I want to talk to you. I want . . . oh, I don't know what I do want!" she finished, with a sob.

"You're tired out," Micky said calmly, though he looked anything but calm. "And I'm going to bully you and insist that you rest. I'll come back presently."

He went away quickly, as if he were afraid of being kept against his will, but outside the door he stood still for a moment with his hand over his eyes before he pulled himself together and went on.

Esther listened to his departing steps with a sinking at her heart.

What had she hoped for? She hardly knew, but she felt as if she had made an overture of friendship that had been kindly but decidedly refused.

Her cheeks burned. It was not what she had expected.

It seemed an eternity till Micky came back again.

"There's a train in half an hour," he told her. "We can get back to town very comfortably. I've wired to June to meet us. She probably came up from Enmore yesterday."

June! Esther had almost forgotten June.

"You ought to be getting ready if we are to catch that train," Micky said.

"Would you rather stay till to-morrow? I'm afraid the journey will tire you dreadfully."

She rose hurriedly.

"No, no—oh no, I'd much rather go!"

Micky reserved a carriage.

"I think I will go in a smoker," he said. "He put some magazines and a box of chocolates on the seat; he avoided looking at her. "It's a corridor train, so I'll come and see that you are all right occasionally—if I may."

She did not answer; she felt a little chill of disappointment. He had not asked a single question about Raymond, and now he was suggesting that they travelled the long journey separately.

He hesitated.

"Will you be all right?" he asked awkwardly.

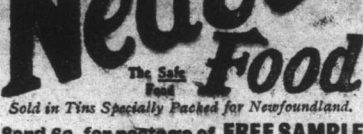
"Yes, thank you."

He went away, and presently the train started. Esther looked out of the

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window and watched the city as it was rapidly left behind.

"I never want to see it again," was the thought in her heart. "I wish I never had seen it."

She felt like a naughty child who has run away from home and is being ignominiously brought back.

Last night seemed like some fevered dream; Raymond Ashton some man of whom she had read in a book or seen in a play.

A phantom lover!—he had not even been that, and once she had wished to die because she had got to be separated from him.

Her eyes fell on her hand—she still wore his ring.

With sudden passion she dragged it from her finger; she let the window open with a rattle and flung the ring far out into the grey evening. It was the end of a dream; the final uprooting of an illusion.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Esther slept through the long journey fitfully—she was mentally and physically exhausted. She was only thoroughly aroused by people out in the corridor moving about collecting bags and baggage.

She opened her eyes with a confused feeling—the train was stacking speed, and Micky stood in the doorway.

"We are nearly in," he said.

Esther had covered her face with her hands.

"I'm not crying," she said in a stifled voice. "But I'm so ashamed. I don't know what you must think of me—it's so—so humiliating."

"It's nothing of the kind," June declared. "The only mistake you've made is to put your money on the wrong man, if you'll excuse the expression."

(To be continued.)

"Does she?" said Micky.

He was dead beat himself; he looked round vacantly.

"I wired Driver—I thought he'd be here."

"Here, sir," said a voice at his elbow, and there was Driver, stolid and impenetrable as ever.

Micky was unfeignedly glad to see the little man; for almost the first time in his life he realized that some-thing dullness and short-sightedness are a blessing in disguise. Apparently to Driver there was nothing odd in this mad rush over to Paris; his expressionless eyes saw the untidiness of his master's toilet without changing.

"I've brought the car, sir," he said.

"Good man; get me a taxi, then. You must take the car down to your rooms," Micky said to June. "No, don't argue; I insist."

He put the two girls into the car; he did not look at Esther, though he squeezed June's hand when he said good-bye.

"Let me know if you get back all right; I shall see you soon."

He raised his hat, stood aside, and the car started forward.

June looked at Esther with a sort of shyness. It seemed as if years must have passed since they were down at Enmore.

The car had rolled out of the station and into the heart of London before either of them spoke; then Esther said, stiltedly:

"It was kind of you to come."

June flushed.

"It wasn't kind at all," she said bluntly. "You're my friend, or, at least, you were, and, as for Micky—well, I love him."

There was a sort of defiance in her voice. She had seen the tired, strained look in Micky's face, and she was near being angry with Esther than she had ever been, but she turned and took her hand.

"Somehow I never thought I should see you again," she said, with real emotion. "I haven't slept a wink since you went away."

"You're much too good to me," Esther said. "Everyone is much too good to me."

"I think Micky is, certainly," June agreed exasperatedly. "The man's a perfect fool to run about like he does after a woman who doesn't care two hoots about him. . . . There! now I oughtn't to have said that. Esther, if you're crying. . . ."

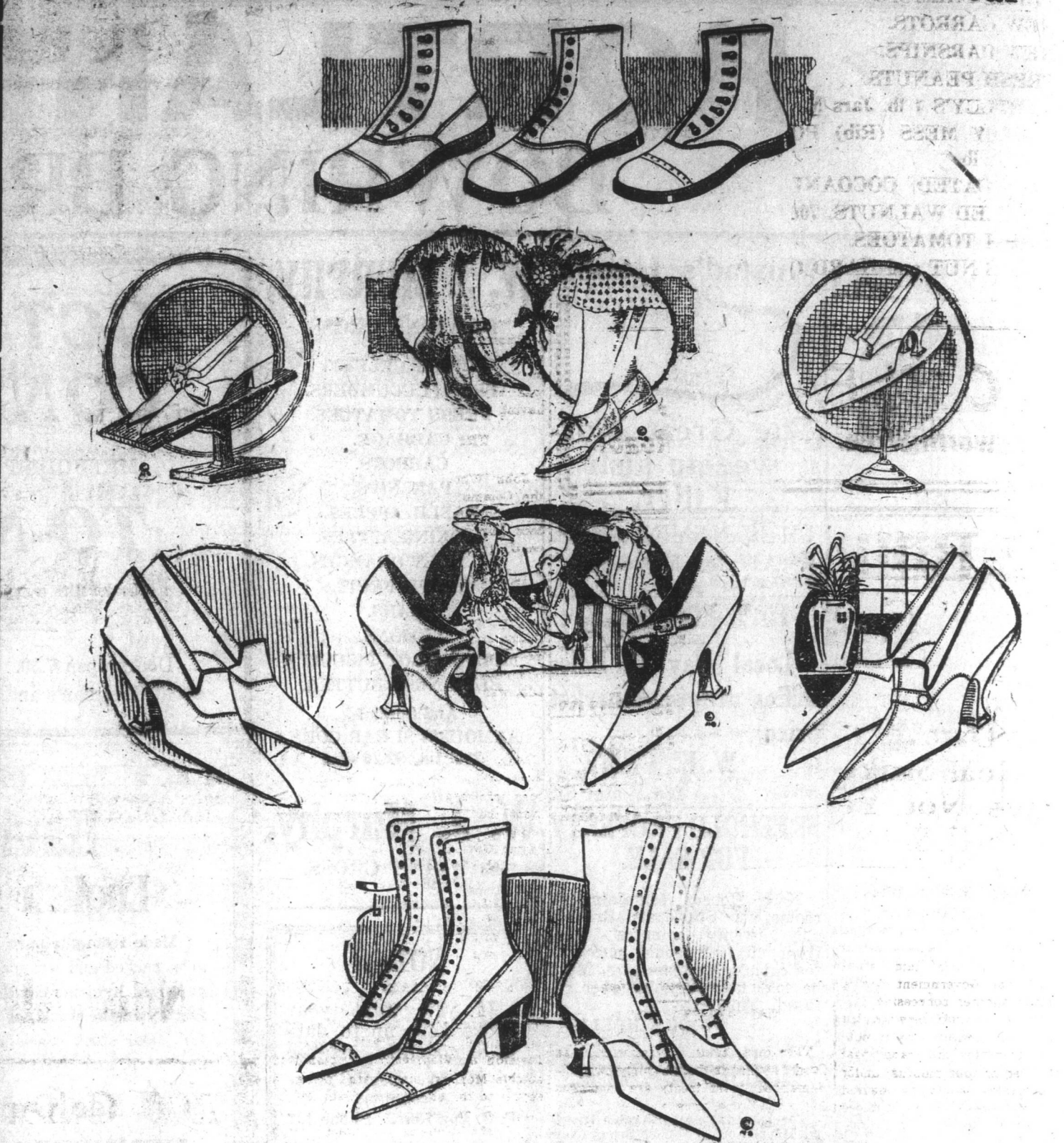
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(To be continued.)

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