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REMINGTON ARMS COMPANY, INC.
 233 Broadway, New York.

THE Phantom Lover.

By the Author of "A Bachelor Husband."

CHAPTER XXXV.

It was late that night when Micky turned up at the Delands. He had taken extravagant pains with his toilet, lingering over it as long as possible. Ever since the arrival of that parcel from Esther, he had been trying to make up his mind to take the train to the city, and ask Marie Deland to be his wife. He was miserably sure that she would accept him, miserably sure that he was already forgiven for the past.

He kept on persuading himself that it was the one and only thing left to him to do. He tried to believe that once the affair was settled, he would find some sort of happiness. After all, what did it matter whom he married if it could not be Esther?

He looked pale but determined when he walked into the Delands' drawing-room and found Marie there alone. She turned to greet him with a little start, movement that was somehow comforting.

"Here, at any rate, was some one who really cared for him and was glad to see him. He took the hand she held out, bending, kissed it.

"She caught her breath on a little sound that was almost a sob, but she checked it instantly and tried to laugh.

"This is almost like old times," she said. "Quite like old times," Micky answered recklessly. "We've just turned the pages back again and gone on where we left off, that's all."

He looked at her and tried to forget everything else. She was pretty and dainty enough to satisfy the most exacting man, and she loved him! To a man who is disappointed and unhappy there is great consolation in the knowledge that to one person at least he counts before anything else in the world.

She looked up at him, and impulsively he took a step towards her; another moment and Micky would have sealed his fate, had not Mrs. Deland pushed open the door and walked into the room.

"It had not been an effort for her to forgive Micky for his cavalier treatment of her daughter. For the last week she had been busy telling every one that Marie and Micky had made up their quarrel—entirely, Marie's fault it was, you know," and so on.

"You are going to give me half your dances at least," Micky said, when they reached the Hoopers'. He took the card from Marie's hand and filled in his own initials recklessly against the numbers.

She laughed tremulously; she was too happy to think of anything but the present, she had got Micky again, and that was all she cared about.

"Good-evening!" said a voice at her side, and, turning, she found Raymond Ashton at her elbow.

Marie did not care particularly for

Ashton. She greeted him rather coldly. "So you're back in town," she said. "And your wife?"

"Not here to-night," he answered. "She has a bad cold, so I persuaded her to stay at home. May I have a dance?"

She gave him her card reluctantly. She would have liked to have refused, but she thought Micky would be annoyed; she did not know that he and this man were friends no longer.

She saw him glance at Micky's many initials on her card, saw the half-ironical smile he gave as he looked at her. "Mallowes is back, then?" he said.

"Yes—he came with us to-night." "Really! I thought—" he paused eloquently.

Marie flushed, she knew quite well what he meant; that he must have known how Micky had once deserted her.

"I understood that Mallowes was in Paris." "At least I was told so by an acquaintance of mine—who was staying here with him."

Marie's eyes dilated. "Father and I crossed by the same boat as he did," she said with an effort. "He was alone then."

Ashton laughed delectably. "Ah, but not afterwards," he said—then checked himself. "But I forget, I must not tell tales out of school, only as every one seems to have heard of his penchant for the little lady from Eldred's"—he laughed lightly.

Marie stood staring down the long ballroom. The colour slowly faded from her cheeks, leaving her as white as her frock. She looked at Ashton, intent on a crease in his gloves, and she broke out stammering:

"How dare you say such a thing! I don't believe you—in Paris—Micky!"

He raised his brows with assumed surprise. "I'm sorry—perhaps I should not have spoken—but I thought every one knew."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Of course it may be a mistake, but I happen to know the lady in question slightly—through Mallowes—and it was she who told me. . . . I am sorry if my carelessness has pained you—excuse me, I am engaged for this dance."

He bowed and left her standing there, white and dazed. "I don't believe it! I don't," she told herself despairingly, and yet in her heart something told her that, for once at least, Ashton had spoken the truth.

"Our dance, I think," said Micky beside her. She laid her hand on his arm mechanically; they went the round of the room once, then Micky, glancing down, saw how white she was and how her head drooped towards his shoulder.

He lightened his arm a little—he swept her seductively out of the crowd and into a small ante-room; he put her into a chair and bent over her in concern.

"You are not well—what can I do? Can I get you anything?" "For a moment she did not speak.

Then all at once she rose to her feet; she clutched Micky by both arms; he could feel how hands shook; there was heartbroken tragedy in her brown eyes as she looked into his face. For once she had forgotten her pride and the indifference into which she had been drilled for twenty years; she was no longer Marie Deland, a sought-after and courted beauty; she was just an unhappy, jealous woman.

"It isn't true, Micky, is it?" she entreated him; her voice was only a broken whisper. "Tell me—oh, please, please, tell me. You don't care for her, do you?—it isn't true, is it?"

She forgot that he did not know of what she was speaking; it seemed as if everybody in the world must know of this tragedy that had desolated her life.

"I can't hear it any longer—it's no use. . . . I've borne all I can. . . . O Micky, Micky!"

He forced her hands from his arms; he put her back into the chair and set beside her; he hated to see the white despair of her face.

"You're ill—upset. . . . It's all right—everything is all right. You're not to worry any more. . . . Everything is all right."

"At that moment he would have given his soul could he have truthfully said that he wanted her for his wife. He cursed himself for a cur and a coward, but somehow he could not force the words to his lips.

She lay back against the cushions, hiding her face. There was a tragic moment of silence. Out in the ballroom a noisy on-step was in bolterous progress; there was a great deal of laughter and chattering; the little ante-room seemed as if it must be in another world.

Micky got up. He walked across the room and shut the door. There was a hard look about his mouth. For an instant he stood staring down at the floor irresolutely, then he came back to Marie. He bent over her, but he did not touch her.

He spoke her name gently. "Marie." She did not raise her head. "I want to speak to you," he said huskily.

She looked up then. Her face was flushed and quivering, and the brown eyes that for a moment met his own were full of an unutterable grief and shame.

"Oh," she said in a broken whisper. "If you'd just go away—and leave me to myself."

Micky did not answer. The impossibility of ever going back now struck him to the soul. This was the end, the very end—he had burned his boats and bidden good-bye to the woman he loved for ever.

"Then all his natural chivalry rose in his heart. Hitherto it had been only of himself that he had thought, but now . . . his eyes softened as they rested on the girl's bowed head; he stooped and took her hand, held it fast in his steady grip.

"Will you marry me?" he said very gently. And, oh, the long time before she answered! It seemed to Micky that he lived through years as he stood there with the rattling tune of the on-step in his ears and Marie's tragic figure before his eyes. Was she never going to speak?

Then she sat up very stiff and straight—there were tears scorching her flushed cheeks, and her eyes seemed to burn.

"Will I—will I—marry you?" she echoed, as if not understanding. Her voice rose a little.

"Then it isn't true. . . . It can't be true—what he said?" "What did he say? Who are you talking about? What do you mean?"

She began to sob; quiet, tearless sobs that seemed to bring no relief with them.

"Raymond Ashton—he told me—here!—just now—that you . . ." She stopped, catching her breath at the change in Micky's face; it no longer looked tender—his eyes were fierce.

"Ashton! What has he said?" His voice was roughly insistent. "He told me that you—were in Paris—a week or two ago—with a girl from Eldred's."

"It's a lie!" The words escaped Micky before he could check them; his

first thought was to defend Esther. "It's an infernal lie!" he said again violently.

It turned him cold to think of all that the brute must have implied. The tears were frozen on Marie's cheeks—her hands were clasped together in her lap.

When at last she found her voice it was strained and cracked. " . . . that she told him you were there with her. . . . Her brown eyes searched his face as if they were trying to read his very soul. "It's a lie," she said shrilly. "It's she who is lying—she told Raymond Ashton that she was there with you."

"She told him. . . ." For a moment Micky stood like a man turned to stone. Was this the truth?—that Esther had told Ashton.

He looked again at Marie. "When did Ashton tell you this?" "To-night—not a moment ago—he told me."

"Here!" Then to how many more people had he told the same distorted story? The blood beat into Micky's face; it seemed to hammer maddeningly against his temples. Nothing counted but the fact that Esther's name was being bandied about on the lips of the creature. To stop him—to stop his living tongue was the one thought in Micky's mind; he saw the whole world red as he tore open the door of the silent room and strode out into the corridor.

The noisy rattles had ceased, but a storm of deafening applause and cries of "Encore!" filled the ballroom. An elderly man cannoned into Micky, and stopped short with a laughing apology.

"Hullo, Mallowes—not dancing—what the deuce is the matter?" he asked with sudden change of voice. Micky passed a shaking hand across his mouth.

"Nothing. . . . where's Ashton—have you seen Ashton?" "I've just left him; he isn't dancing either. Can't think what's happened to you youngsters to-day. When I was your age. . . . I've borne all I can. . . . O Micky, Micky!"

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"You're ill—upset. . . . It's all right—everything is all right. You're not to worry any more. . . . Everything is all right."

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