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**THE Phantom Lover.**

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

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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He looked at her and quickly away again.

"Forget him, Esther, for God's sake. He never cared for you; he isn't worth a thought."

She rose to her feet, pushing the hair back from her face as if she were distraught.

"How dare you say such things to me?" she said in an odd, choked voice. "You always hated him, you and June. Do you think I'm going to believe you? Do you think I could believe you for a moment when I have his letters—when he has shown me in so many ways how he cares? . . . I don't care what you say—I don't care if the whole world were to tell me it was true—I'll never believe it till he tells me himself. . . ." Her breath came gaspingly; she looked at Micky's white face with passionate hatred in her eyes.

"How do I know it isn't all a made-up story?" she asked him hoarsely.

She hardly knew what she was saying; she leaned her arms on the mantel-shelf and hid her face in them.

Micky let her alone; he got up and began pacing up and down the room.

He deserved everything she had said; it was all his fault that she had got this to bear. With the best intentions in the world he had proved himself a blundering fool.

Esther raised her head; she had not shed a tear, but her face was white and desolate.

She walked past him to the door.

"I'm going on to Paris to-night," she said. "Nothing you can say will stop me—nothing."

"Very well, then I will come with you."

She did not answer; she fumbled helplessly with the door handle. Micky came forward to open it for her, and their hands touched. A little beam of red rushed to "his face; he put his shoulders to the door.

"You can't go like this," he said, stammering. "How can I let you go like this? Whatever I've done, I haven't deserved that you should think as badly of me as you do. It was because I cared for you so much—I tried to save you pain . . . perhaps it isn't any excuse, but it's the truth . . . I'd give my very soul if I could undo what's gone, if I could save you from this."

She was not looking at him, but the cold contempt in her face stung him.

"You may despise me," he broke out again jaggedly. "But it's the truth I've told you . . . Ashton never cared for you; that night at my rooms . . ." He stopped, he did not want to tell her, but somehow there was a compelling force within him that drove the words to his lips.

"He told me he'd had to break with you—that he was going away from London because of you. He said he must marry a woman with money—it's the truth, if I never speak again. He never cared for you, Esther—he was never fit to kiss the ground you walk on. He wanted to be rid of you—he . . ."

Micky stopped; Esther had given a little strangled cry, half-sob, half-moan, like some animal in mortal pain; for the moment she saw the world red; hardly knowing what she did, she lifted her hand and struck Micky across his white face.

"Oh, you liar—you liar," she said. The words were a hoarse whisper, but her voice was almost gone.

She fell away from him, shaking in every limb; she dropped into a chair, hiding her face.

Micky stood like a man turned to stone. She had not hurt him physically, though there was a red blush where she had struck him, but he felt as if the blow had fallen on his aching heart and his love for her.

It seemed a long time before either of them moved or spoke, then Esther dragged herself to her feet.

"Please let me pass," she said in a whisper, and Micky stood aside without a word.

He followed her out and inquired for a train; there was a slow one at ten-fifty they told him. He put Esther into a carriage and got a rug for her and a cushion. He knew she had had nothing to eat, and he ordered a basket to be made up at the refreshment-room. When he came back she was sitting in a corner with her eyes closed.

He had taken off her hat, and her golden hair was tumbled about her face. She took no notice when he put the rug over her; she did not even open her eyes when the train started.

Micky sat down in the opposite corner. He felt more tired than he had ever done in all his life, and yet he knew that he could not sleep; his brain seemed as if it would never rest again.

He sat with face averted from the girl in the corner, looking out into the darkness.

It seemed strange to realise that he had made this same journey dozens of times before. He felt that it was all strange and distasteful to him. The chattering voices of the French porters and the whistle of the engines sounded new and quaint as if he had never heard them before. It seemed an eternity before the train started slowly away.

He leaned back and closed his eyes; his head was splitting, and he was cold and hungry.

He must have dozed for a few minutes, for he was roused by a little choking sound of sobbing. He opened his eyes—he was awake at once—he looked across at Esther. She was lying huddled up, with her face turned against the dirty cushions of the carriage, sobbing her heart out.

Micky looked at her in miserable indecision. Then he got up impulsively, and sat down opposite to where Esther was huddled.

He stretched out his hand and took hers.

"Don't cry—don't; I can't bear it," he said hoarsely. He raised her hand to his lips. She had taken off her gloves and her fingers felt like ice.

He chafed them gently between his own. She still wore the cheap little ring which Ashton had given her months ago.

She let her hand lie passively in his. Perhaps she was too miserable to remember that it was Micky, and only realised that there was something kind and comforting in his touch. Presently her sobs quieted. She wiped the tears from her face and brushed back her disordered hair.

Micky got up and took down the supper basket he had managed to get at the station. There was a small thermos of hot coffee. He poured some out and made her drink it. If he had expected her to refuse he was agreeably disappointed. She obeyed apathetically; she even ate some sandwiches.

Micky was ravenous himself, but he would not touch a thing till she had finished.

"You'd be much more comfortable if you put your feet up on the seat and tried to sleep," he said presently. "You can have my coat as well as the rug. Your hands are like ice."

He took off his coat as he spoke and laid it over her.

"I'm afraid we've got a long journey yet," he said ruefully. "If you could get some sleep."

She turned her head and closed her eyes.

She looked very young and appealing in the depressing light of the carriage.

Micky sat looking at her in silence. She cared so little for him that she had even forgotten her anger against him; nothing he could do or say really mattered to her, she was not sufficiently interested in him to even trouble to hate him for long.

He wondered what June was thinking, and Miss Deartling! He wished from the depths of his soul that he had remembered to send those wires. There was his car, too—he had left that in the yard at Charing Cross—what the dickens would become of it?—not that it mattered much, he was too miserable to be seriously concerned about anything.

Some minutes passed, but Esther did not move. Micky spoke her name once softly.

"Esther . . ." But she did not answer; he leaned over and touched her hand, but she did not stir; in spite of what she had said she was asleep.

Micky gave a sigh of relief. He drew his coat and the rug more closely around her; he was very cold himself, but that did not trouble him; he finished the contents of the supper basket before he went back to his own corner.

The train rumbled on through the night; it dragged into many little stations and stopped jerkily, but Esther did not wake.

Once when she moved and the rug slipped, Micky rose and quietly replaced it. He was very tired himself, but his brain would not allow him to sleep; he felt as if he were living through years during these long hours.

He sat looking at Esther with wistful eyes. Why was it that people never fell in love with the right people? he asked himself vaguely. He could have made her so happy.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then dragged them open again. He must not go to sleep, whatever happened. He sat up stiffly.

Presently he lifted a corner of the blind. The sky looked a little lighter, as if dawn were not far away. He looked at his watch. Nearly two!

A sudden impulse came to him to wake Esther and make her listen now to what he had to say. The time was getting short, and there was so much to tell her and explain.

He rose and bent over her, but she did not move, and he went back again to his corner.

He let the window down a little way, hoping the cold night air would help to keep him awake. The minutes seemed to drag, though in reality only a quarter of an hour had passed when Esther woke with a little smothered cry.

Micky was on his feet in an instant. "It's all right—there's nothing to be afraid of—you've been asleep."

She rubbed her eyes childishly with her knuckles; she stared at him for a moment unrecognisingly, then, as memory returned, she shriek back to her corner.

Micky picked up the rug and coat that had slithered to the floor; he waited a few moments till he saw that she was quite awake before he spoke, then he said gently—

"I hope you feel better. We shall soon be in now. Are you warm enough?"

"Yes, thank you."

"We shall be into Paris very soon," he said again; "and there is a great deal I want to say to you first. Will you listen to me if I try to explain?"

She met his eyes unflinchingly.

"There is only one man who can possibly explain anything to me," she said then, "and he is not you."

Micky lost his temper; he was cold and tired and hungry, and at that moment she seemed the most unreasonable of mortals.

"I shall not allow you to see Ashton, if you mean Ashton," he said roughly. "The man isn't fit for you to think about. He's married, you know that . . . Esther, for your own sake . . ."

She had turned her face away and was looking out into the darkness; she seemed not to be listening.

Micky went on urgently.

"I blame myself. I always meant to tell you before things had gone as far as this. I shall never forgive myself for not having done so. I've behaved like a cad, but my only excuse is that I loved you; I wanted to spare you unnecessary pain . . . He was no longer stammering and self-conscious, his voice was firm and steady."

(To be continued)

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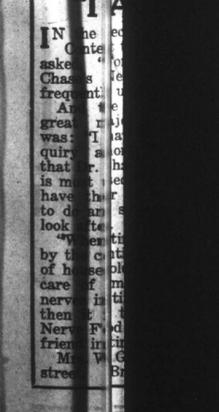
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