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## THE Phantom Lover.

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

### CHAPTER VIII.

June laughed.  
"My dear boy, you're too late! She doesn't want your help now, or mine either, for that matter," she added ruefully. "She's a lady of means—that wonderful man of hers who's tucked up in Paris having the time of his life is going to allow her three pounds a week."

She paused and looked across at him expectantly.  
"Well, why don't you look surprised?" she asked.

Micky swallowed hard.  
"I am surprised!" he said. "Too jolly surprised for anything. It's good news, eh? I suppose she was pleased."

"Of course she was! She's staying on now, and is going to share my room. She had a quail just for a moment, as to whether she ought to take the money, but I soon put her mind at ease. 'Take all you can get, my dear,' I said. After all, I dare say if the man's giving her three pounds he could afford to give her about double that amount; men are not particularly generous from what I know of them—except you, Micky."

"But three pounds a week is enough to live on! Don't you think it is?" he asked, with a touch of anxiety in his voice.

"It's enough to live here on," June admitted. "But it's not great wealth. Still, she's going to get a berth as well, so perhaps, after all, the one you've heard of will suit her. What is it?"

Micky was stooping, patting Charles's head.

"It's in an office," he said, after a moment; his voice sounded a little uncertain. "I don't think it would really suit her, though—now I've seen

her," he hastened to add. "It would be too hard work—late hours and all the rest of it, I don't know."

June looked at his bent head shrewdly.

"Humph!" she said. "Perhaps it's just as well this phantom lover of Esther's has turned up trumps, if that's all you'd got to offer her."

"Phantom lover!" said Micky, his voice sounded as if he were annoyed. "Whom are you talking about?"

"Esther's beloved," June said airily. "She won't tell me his name, so I call him the phantom lover, because I've got an eerie sort of feeling in my mind about him that he doesn't really exist. What do you think, Micky?"

"My dear girl, how can I possibly know?"

June produced some cigarettes.

"If he were all that she'd like to believe he is," she said, shrewdly. "She'd tell me more about him. She certainly got a bit more confidential to-day, and said that he had a cat for a mother and a few things like that. She had another letter from him this morning; he's in Paris on business, so he tells her."

She laughed, turning her face for a moment against the mauve cushion. Suddenly she sat up right again. "Micky, I should hate that man if I knew him!"

Micky smiled.

"Another of your 'instinctive hates'?" he asked whimsically. She nodded.

"I know you don't believe in them, but—"

"Don't!" said Micky thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure." He looked at his watch. "Well, I must be trotting. There's nothing else I can do for you, I suppose? No more wails what you want, Micky?"

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm not—I never laugh at you." He laid his hand on her shoulder for a moment. "Don't bother to get up; you look so comfortable."

"Good-bye—"

"Good-bye—and, Micky, don't make up your mind not to like Esther just because of this afternoon."

"My dear, I never thought of such a thing," he protested lamely.

June smuggled more coals into the cushions.

"Ah, but I know what you are," she said, for once hopelessly on the wrong track.

Micky laughed to himself as he went out, hoping to catch a glimpse of Esther, but the house seemed deserted, quite different from what he had pictured it to be. He had always thought that a London boarding-house must be noisy and crowded and perpetually smelling of soap and cabbage water; he was relieved to find that this was fairly comfortable and quiet.

He picked up a taxicab at the corner of the road and was driven back to his flat. He felt very depressed. Everything seemed to have interests in life except himself. He wished he had got married years ago and settled down. He thought of Marie Deland with remorseful affection. Here was another woman who must be thinking him a possible outsider. How in the world

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did a man put an end to a flirtation that was growing rapidly into some thing else without hurting a woman's feelings, he wondered.

Ashton had accomplished it quite successfully several times. Micky sighed, and let himself into his flat.

There were several letters lying on the table; he picked them through disinterestedly; then he stopped—the last one was from Ashton.

Micky stood for quite a minute staring down at the hand-writing, which he had been at such pains to copy. Then he ripped open the envelope.

Ashton wrote from Paris:—

"Dear Micky—Just a line to send you my address, as promised. Hope things are going well with you. I am staying on here for the present, as I have run up against Malsie Clave's widow. My son, she's got pots of money, and at the present moment things are looking promising! The matter would be pleased if I could manage to pull it off. By the way, I dare say Driver told you I met him the other day—he was very mysterious and hadn't a word to say! Surely he wasn't joy-riding over here by himself? Remember me to every one—Yours, R. F. ASHTON."

And not one word about Esther! Not a single mention of the girl who was thinking of him night and day, and only living to see him again.

Micky crushed the letter and tossed it into the fire. That settled it, he told himself; he no longer had the slightest compunction in cutting Ashton out; the fellow was not worth a moment's consideration.

CHAPTER IX.

Esther trudged to and fro from the agency where the stiff and stately lady presided so many times during the next few days that she began to hate the sight of the tall building and the dark stairs covered with worn linoleum.

Every day the waiting-room seemed crowded with girls, many of whom were a great deal more shabby and hopeless looking than she was, and they all sat patiently on the wooden chairs and eyed one another with a sort of jealous suspicion till their turn came to pass within the magic portal which guarded the stiff and stately lady from the vulgar gaze.

"I told you an agency wouldn't be any good," June Mason said when Esther came home after another fruitless journey. "They take your money and forget you till you turn up to remind them that you're still in existence. Give it up, my dear, and come into partnership with me. I should love to take you round to all the big stores and tell them that you owe your milk and rose complexion to my famous cream." She burst out laughing. "Can't you imagine it! Esther, you and I ought to tour the country in a caravan or something. Call ourselves the new Sequahs." She rolled over in the big chair and hid her face in the cushions.

Esther laughed; she felt quite at home now in June's room. There were a few of her own possessions lying about, and she had bought Charles a new cushion of his own. It gave her a sense of independence to know that she was paying her share of everything.

"I shall get something if I wait long enough," Esther said presently. "Do you know, I rather think I should like to be a companion, after all. I told Mr.——" She stopped; she had been about to add that she had once told Micky how she would hate it.

"It might not be so bad," June admitted; "but you want some one with pots of money and a good temper."

She looked at Esther considerably.

"There wouldn't have to be any eligible sons either," she said bluntly. "You're much too pretty—"

Esther laughed.

"What nonsense!"

June dragged Esther to her feet and made her look in the glass.

"Now dare to call it nonsense—look at yourself!" she commanded.

But Esther only looked at June.

"Next to you," she began, but June cut her short.

"If you're going to try blatant flattery," she said.

They both laughed at that.

Some one tapped at the door; Lydia, the smiling house-maid, appeared; she looked at the two girls with a sort of parental expression; she was very fond of them both, and never minded how late or how hard she worked to do little extra jobs for either of them. It was her greatest pride to stay in when her "evening out" came and help June label the little mauve pots;

she recommended the famous cream to all her friends; she was as proud of it as if it were her own invention.

She carried a note on a tray now, which she handed to Esther.

"I found it on the hall table, Miss," she said. "It must have been left by a messenger."

She waited a moment to make up the fire and tidy the hearth; she was always glad of an excuse to stay in the room; she was never tired of telling her friends what a pretty room it was—the mauve cushions and the many photographs.

She went away with a reluctant backward look. June yawned.

"Another love-letter?" she asked, chaffingly. She looked across at Esther, and was surprised to see the embarrassment in the girl's face.

"It's from Mr. Harley," she said, in distress. "Oh, I'm sure I've never let him think I—"

She handed the letter to June. "He wants me to go to the theatre with him," she added in confusion.

"Well, I should go," said June promptly. "You don't get much fun, and the man knows you're engaged, and if he likes to chance it—"

"But how does he know I'm engaged? I've never told him."

"I did," June said calmly. "I saw the way the wind was blowing and told him to save complications." She made a little grimace at Esther. "After this note are you still going to declare that he isn't more than ordinarily interested? Esther, you're the most unsuspicious baby—Say you'll go, of course. There's no harm in it."

"I certainly shall not go," Esther said; "I don't want to, for one thing, and, for another, it would not be fair."

"You mean to Mr. Harley?" June asked.

"Yes, and to—"

"To the phantom lover! Oh, I see!" said June drily.

Esther coloured.

"I don't know what you mean," she said with a touch of dignity.

"Oh yes, you do," June declared. "Don't look so angry! What am I to call him, pray? You haven't told me his name."

"She waited, but Esther did not speak. "Of course, if you'd rather not," she added, rather stiffly.

Esther got up and came over to sit on the arm of her chair.

"It isn't that I don't want you to know, but—well, I promised him not to tell any one; you see, his people would be furious if they knew. After all, I suppose I'm not anybody, and—"

June pushed her away.

"Oh, you make me tired!" she said, crossly. "Why will you insist on being so mysterious? Who on earth is this wonderful man that he sets himself up for such a model of superiority? He can't be anybody if he's ashamed of you. You don't like Micky, I know, but with all his money and position, if he loved you he'd be only too proud to shout it from the housetops, and not care a hang what the world thought. There's no rotten pride about Micky—if he loved a beggar girl he'd be proud of it. . . . No, don't say any more, it makes me boil!"

She lit another cigarette and puffed at it furiously.

"Do you—do you think I should go with Mr. Harley, then?" Esther asked presently. Her pretty face was flushed and troubled.

"No, I don't," said June emphatically. "I think you ought to please yourself. I don't want to advise you, but it does seem to me that you're throwing away any chance of real happiness for a—what do they call it?—something beginning with 'c'."

"Children," said Esther, and sat with downcast eyes for a moment, then suddenly she began to cry. Perhaps in her heart she felt in some mysterious way that June was right, that this girl, with her odd instinct, had put her hand right on the heart of things, and that her happiness did not really lie with Raymond Ashton. And yet she loved him. Night and day he was never out of her thoughts. She slept with his letters under her pillow. Since he went away she had done much to blot out all that had gone before. And yet sometimes the memory of that past unhappiness, of its disagreements and quarrels and petty unkindnesses would raise its ugly head and look at her with a sort of leer as if daring her to forget entirely.

June was all remorse in a moment.

"I'm a pig!" she said disgustedly. "I ought to be kicked. Why do you let me talk so much? It's awful cheek of me to dare to criticize you. I'll never do it again. He may be an angel for all I know. Esther, if you don't stop crying, too, and then there'll be a nice sort of noise."

Esther dried her eyes and laughed shakily.

"I'm silly! I don't know why I cried. There's nothing to cry for," she protested.

"That's why women always cry," said June hardily.

(To be continued)

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# STEER BROS.

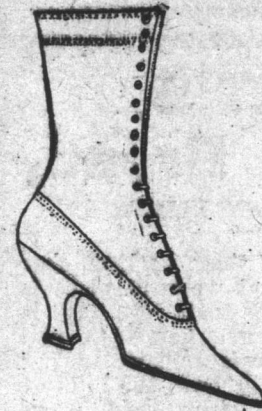
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# STEER BROS.

## Fashions and Fads.

Silk hats have feather brims. Suit skirts are slightly wider. Dance frocks have narrow ribbon sashes. Draped skirts are slightly tilted in front. Sleeves sometimes have full lace undersleeves. Deep square collars fall below the waist line. Dresses of every type have short capes to match. The majority of sleeves stop above the elbow. The sleeveless sports coat is extremely attractive. Colored veils will continue to be worn this spring. A frock of navy blue pique is cross-stitched in red. Embroidered net is used on a skirt of white chiffon. Silk crepe is used for the tailored blouse with high collar. Large, shaggy taffeta flowers are used on evening gowns. Quite a few of the new blouses are made of printed silk. There is a decided vogue for gray in frocks, furs and wraps. Side draperies have a way of hanging in uneven points. Corsetage of wadded flowers are worn with the lace dresses. The hand-knit scarf is very fashionable at Palm Beach. White organdies are embroidered attractively in black chenille. A pale apple green and a canary yellow are fashion's favorites.

Artificial grapes make a popular decoration for the dance frock.

For evening wear jeweled bands are worn low over the forehead. Afternoon blouses of chiffon are trimmed in tinsel and beadwork. The fine hand-embroidered Philippine blouse continues to be in favor. A black taffeta frock is trimmed with rows of white wool drawwork. A morning gown of rose piquelette has edgings of rick-rack braid. In Paris hats are worn again with the semi-formal evening dress.

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