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THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XV.

He wrote a note in reply to once and said he would call the following afternoon; he could just look in early for half an hour and go on afterwards to meet Marie; it was strange how he dreaded both these appointments.

He felt ridiculously nervous when he reached Mrs. Ashton's house. For the first time it occurred to him that possibly Esther would be here too. He was kept waiting some minutes in the drawing-room—minutes during which he wandered restlessly about staring at the pictures and the photographs.

There were many portraits of Raymond—Raymond at all stages of his chequered career, smiling and handsome. Micky turned his back on them with a feeling of disgust.

The door opened behind him, and, turning sharply, he found himself face to face with Mrs. Ashton.

She came forward with outstretched hand.

"This is kind of you, Mr. Mellows. I did not know you had been away until I got your note this morning. I was wondering why I had had no reply to mine."

Micky blurted out that he had been in Paris—that he only came back yesterday evening.

Mrs. Ashton's face changed a little. "Paris! Have you been with that set of mine?" she asked sharply.

Micky coloured. "I met him—quite by chance, though. We were not together more than a few minutes."

She smiled rather ironically.

"Have you got tired of him at last, then?" she asked. She moved over to the fire. She looked back at Micky quizzically. "I have often wondered how you put up with his friendship so long."

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long, Mr. Mellows," she added rather sadly. Micky felt embarrassed. He had always liked Mrs. Ashton. He stammered out that he and Raymond had always been very good friends.

She drew her chair a little closer to the fire.

"Very well—then, perhaps, you will be kind enough to answer a question I am going to ask you. Mr. Mellows, what was the name of that girl at Eldred's whom Raymond was always about with before Christmas?"

The question was so unexpected that Micky was utterly taken aback. Before he was aware of it he had told a lie.

"I don't know—at least, he always spoke of her as 'Lallic.' I never once saw him with her. Mrs. Ashton—she never introduced me to her."

She looked rather incredulous.

"And yet you were such friends," she said.

Micky coloured.

"Our tastes were not always identical," he said rather stiffly. "I am not very interested in women, and he—"

"And he is," she finished for him.

"There is no need to tell me that—I know my son. So you cannot tell me the name of this girl? I had hoped that you would be able to do so."

Micky met her eyes unflinchingly.

"I dare say I could find out," he said. "If she is still at Eldred's."

"She is not there." Mrs. Ashton looked at Micky with an anxious line between her handsome eyes. "Mr. Mellows, I have always prided myself on my sense of justice, and somehow lately I have got an uncomfortable feeling that when I forbade Raymond to have anything more to do with that girl it would have been better if I had advised her to have nothing more to do with him. He is my son, and perhaps it seems strange for me to speak about him like that, but you cannot have been friends with him all these months without finding him out, so I need not apologise. Raymond is just his father over again."

She paused, and a painful little smile curved her lips.

She looked at Micky rather pathetically. "There is no need for me to say any more, is there?" she asked.

Micky did not answer. He had heard many stories about Raymond's father, all more or less savoury, and he knew that from all accounts Mrs. Ashton had been greatly to be pitted during his lifetime.

"So if you can't help me in this," she went on presently, "I am afraid I have brought you here for nothing. I want to find out who this girl is, and see her for myself." She paused, but Micky's face was inscrutable.

In his heart he was convinced that she did not believe him, but he had no intention of telling her Esther's name; he longed to know if Esther was in the house, but, of course, it was impossible to ask.

It almost seemed as if Mrs. Ashton could read his thoughts, for she said suddenly—

"Do you know, Mr. Mellows, that I am going to have a companion?"

Micky echoed her last word vacantly.

"Companion?—I—er . . ."

"Yes, a girl," Mrs. Ashton went on; "I have always envied people with daughters; a daughter is so much more to a mother than a son; but as I was not fortunate enough to have one of my own I am going to try having a companion. Raymond will be annoyed, I dare say—he has always pook-pooked the idea when I have mentioned it to him, but now—"

she shrugged her shoulders and sighed impatiently.

"Well, he can no longer object, I think, seeing that he is to be married himself."

Micky made a little quick movement, almost knocking over a vase of flowers standing at his elbow; he recovered himself with an effort.

"Married?" he said. "Why, I thought—"

he broke off. "He did not say anything about it to me when I met him in Paris," he said lamely.

"No?" Her handsome eyes searched his agitated face critically. "Well, he is to be married all the same," she said. "I heard from him only this morning. He is engaged to Tom Clare's widow—Tubby Clare, I believe he was always called."

CHAPTER XVI.

When Micky left Mrs. Ashton he raced off to meet Marie.

She was looking quite her prettiest, in dark furs with a bunch of violets in the breast of her coat, but Micky would not have noticed if she had been shabby, his thoughts were elsewhere. He did not even see that she wore the bracelet he had given her for a Christmas present, or remember that he had once told her violets were his favourite flowers.

He apologised breathlessly for being late.

"I had an appointment," he explained. "Raymond's mother; she wrote and asked me to call this afternoon."

He hesitated, then added, "Did you know that Raymond is going to be married? Oh, but, of course, you cannot know, as Mrs. Ashton only knew this morning."

Marie's dark eyes opened; like most women, she loved to hear of an engagement or marriage.

"Really?" she said. "At last!—but to—surely not to that little girl at Eldred's?"

Micky flushed angrily. Did every one know about Esther? he asked himself savagely. He answered shortly that it was Mrs. Clare, Tubby Clare's little widow.

Marie looked amazed.

"But we all thought—"

she said, then stopped, remembering that Micky and Raymond had been great friends.

"I hope he'll be happy," she said lamely.

Micky laughed shortly.

"I don't," he said. "He doesn't deserve to be."

She made no comment.

There was an excited flush in her cheeks, and a nervous note in her voice when she spoke; it was like old times to be here with him again, until she met his eyes across the little table, and then it seemed as if she was looking into the face of a stranger, a man who was like Micky—enough like him to hurt, and yet not Micky at all.

She aroused herself to amuse him. Micky had always told her she cheered him up in the old days, but this afternoon he answered her in monosyllables, and she saw with bitter mortification how often he looked at the clock. At last she was driven to remark on it.

"Micky, are you in a hurry to get away?"

She asked the question lightly, but there was a strained note in her voice.

Micky did not look at her.

"No—no, not at all," he said hurriedly. "But I suppose we ought to be moving soon. . . . There was a little pause. "It's been nice seeing you again," he added with an effort.

She sat staring down at her plate. Her pretty colour had faded; she was very pale, and she bit her lip hard to hide its trembling.

Suddenly she looked up at him.

"Micky—may I ask you a question?"

"A hundred if you like."

She picked up a teaspoon and twisted it nervously. Micky watched her with apprehension; he knew what was coming, and his heart sank.

It only she would be contented to leave things as they were; if only she would accept the friendship he was willing to give and close the book of the past for ever.

He did not understand that it was because she cared for him so much that at the risk of losing her self-respect and pride she must ask him for the truth, must know . . .

"He heard her catch her breath, then suddenly she spoke: "Micky . . . why was it? What have I done?"

There was a quiver in her voice that set him on edge; he could not stand the sound of unhappiness in any woman's voice, and he had once thought he loved Marie.

He answered without looking at her, realising that it was kinder to tell her the truth straight out and have done with it.

"I meant to have written to you—I hope some day you will try and forgive me, but . . . but . . ." He could not go on for the life of him, but he had said enough, and he knew that she understood.

"You mean . . . you mean that there is some one else?" she asked with stiff lips.

"Yes." He looked at her white, stricken face, and felt himself a brute.

It seemed an eternity before she could steady her voice enough to speak.

"Is it—Is it some one I know?"

"No, dear," said Micky very gently. "It isn't any one you have ever seen."

She picked up her big muff suddenly and held it so that her face was hidden; the little word of endearment that had escaped Micky's lips had almost broken her down. This was the end of all she had ever hoped for, and for the moment she could not choke the anguish in her heart.

The following silence seemed unending; then she looked round for her gloves, and put them on, buttoning them with shaking fingers.

"I am ready if you are," she said. She did not look at him, but it felt like dying to walk beside him out of the shop and into the cold air and know that perhaps this was the last time they would ever be alone, he and she. Once her steps faltered a little, and Micky put out his hand to steady her, but she drew away from him.

"Please don't," she said in a whisper.

There was a taxi waiting at the roadside, and Micky called to the man. There was a slight cold drizzle of rain falling as he held open the door. He would have followed but she stopped him. "I should like to go alone, if you don't mind."

He looked up, and for a moment he saw her face in the light of the taxi lamp; such a white, quivering face it was.

"Marie! . . ." said Micky in a choked voice, but she waved him away.

He stood there on the kerb till the taxi had whirled out of sight, and once again he asked himself desperately if it were all worth while, if he were not throwing away the real thing for a chimera.

There was probably a no more unhappy man in London at that moment than Micky Mellows.

(To be continued)

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The round and square neck, with the long, loose sleeve, is most popular.

Narrow, tinted valenciennes lace is profusely used on afternoon frocks.

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