



"I think I like you better as **BOVRIL**"

THE Phantom Lover.

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

CHAPTER XII.
"You needn't put any more labels on," she said shortly. "I can do the rest myself."

She took the tray away from Esther and carried it into her bedroom; when she came back there was a suspicion of tears in her eyes. Esther looked displeased. She felt that she was behaving meanly, and yet she meant to go to Mrs. Ashton's.

"Micky Mellows is coming directly," June said tartly. "If you don't want to see him you'd better go. I know you hate him."

Esther turned scarlet. She took off the apron she had borrowed from June and turned to the door.

Before she reached it June followed. "I'm a pig. I apologise humbly! please stay. Why don't you box my ears when I speak to you like this?" She dragged Esther back to the fire. "I'm wild because you've made up your mind to leave me. Our friendship doesn't mean anything to you. . . . There's Micky—he'll want to know why I've been crying. Amuse him for five minutes, there's an angel, and I'll come back."

She was gone in a flash. A smiling Lydia showed Micky into the room. Lydia liked Micky; he was always courteous, and he had been generous with his tips on each occasion that he had visited the house.

Micky looked a little embarrassed when he saw Esther. He glanced quickly round the room. "June . . ."

"She's coming in a moment," Esther explained. "Won't you sit down?"

Micky sat on the arm of the big chair; he was cold; he leaned forward, rubbing his hands vigorously; Esther watched him critically.

She had told June that she did not consider him in the least good-looking, but now the thought crossed her



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mind that this had not been quite a fair thing.

He was tall and well made, and he had brown hair that grew well about his temples, and waved slightly where it parted.

His nose was nothing particular and slightly crooked, and his eyes were no kind; Esther remembered it was the first thing she had noticed about him the night they met.

He looked up. "Well," he said, "have you found another berth yet?"

"I'm going to Mrs. Ashton's," Esther said.

She was amazed at the sudden change in his face; a look of furious anger flashed into his eyes; he rose to his feet.

"You're not serious?" he said quietly.

Esther laughed; she felt painfully nervous without knowing why.

"Serious? Indeed I am!" she answered. "Mr. Mellows, what are you doing?"

Micky had caught her hands. Jealousy was driving him with whips of fire—jealousy of this phantom lover, whom he himself had created.

"I—I can't bear to think of you having to work for your living. There's no need—it's all nonsense. You'd hate being at the Ashtons. . . . Esther—"

She wrenched herself free; she was white to the lips.

"How dare you speak like this? What is it to you what I do? How dare you try to interfere? What business is it of yours?"

Micky laughed shakily; he had recovered himself a little now.

"It's everything to me," he said rather hoarsely. "You must know that it is. Esther, will you marry me?"

If only premeditated proposals were made, there would be few marriages in the world. Ten minutes ago, when Micky Mellows walked into the room, he had no intention of asking Esther to marry him, but now it seemed as if he had come for that express purpose as he stood there, grimly obstinate.

"There was a moment of silence; then Esther drew herself up.

"I think you must be mad," she said. "I've only seen you once or twice in my life. I have told you that I am already engaged."

"I know, but it makes no difference," said Micky. "I ask you to marry me—will you marry me?"

She drew back from him.

"You must be mad."

Micky laughed. "You've said that two or three times already, but I assure you that I'm quite sane. I loved you the first moment I ever saw you, but, of course, you won't believe it. However, that doesn't matter—you haven't answered my question. Will you marry me?"

"You know I am engaged—how dare you?" She backed away from him till she was close to the door. Micky laughed savagely.

"You needn't be afraid—I'm not going to hurt you—I'm not going to move from this hearthrug, but I should like you to answer my question. Once again, will you marry me?"

"No."

He forgot his promise and took a step towards her.

"I can make you happier than any other man possibly could. I've never cared for a woman in my life till I met you."

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the only man in the world—I don't even like you. . . ." Her voice shook with anger now. "My answer is no—no! I shall never change my mind if I live to be a hundred. . . ."

she added vehemently. The words seemed forced from her by something in his eyes.

"You will," said Micky calmly, though he felt anything but calm.

"Women always do; but if you don't feel like changing it just at this moment, will you please tell June I am here? I came to see her, and I'm tired of waiting. . . ." He turned away and went back to his seat on the arm of the big chair as if nothing had happened, but his hand shook when he tried to light a cigarette.

When June came back he was absently turning the pages of a magazine; she looked at him for a moment, then began to laugh.

"Micky! What in the world has hap-

pened to you lately? Do you always read a paper upside down?"

Micky started, looked down at the magazine, and said a bad word; then he laughed too, and flinging the magazine across the room got to his feet, stretching his long arms.

"Where's Esther?" June demanded. "I asked her to stay and amuse you till I came back. . . ."

"She did her best," said Micky drily. "But I am afraid I bored her."

June looked annoyed.

"I do think you two might try and like one another, if only for my sake," she said. "It's so perfectly obvious that you hate one another, and I cannot see why for the life of me."

"One of your instinctive hates, perhaps," Micky submitted, with a touch of irony. He went back to the chair.

"Miss Shepstone tells me she has found a berth," he said, after a moment. June nodded.

"Yes. Did she tell you with whom?"

"Yes, Mrs. Ashton."

Something in the tone of his voice made June look up quickly.

"Well?" she said.

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing—I dared to suggest that perhaps she would not like the place, and she flew at me."

June laughed.

"That's just like Esther; she asks for your advice, and then—"

"She didn't ask for mine," Micky cut in. "I very kindly volunteered the information."

"Oh!" June was on her knees now toasting buns.

"They're stale," she informed Micky candidly. "But you won't know it when they're toasted."

Micky watched in silence. He was wondering if June had heard anything of his conversation with Esther; they had both spoken rather loudly. He was also wondering whether he should tell June the whole story.

"You must make allowances for her," June said briskly, as he was still hesitating. "I know she's worried about this man. I discovered another thing this morning, Micky—she turned up with a sudden jerk to look at him, and the bun fell off the fork into the fire."

Micky laughed.

"Well, what have you discovered now?" he inquired.

"Why, that she can't write to him—she doesn't give her an address—or, if he does, he takes good care to move on before she has time to answer his letters. It looks to me, Micky, as if that young man is shirking his responsibilities. If you ask my candid opinion, Esther won't ever see him again."

Micky said "Rot!" rather uncomfortably. "If the fellow is travelling—moving about. . . ."

"He could give her an address and have the letters sent on, couldn't he?" June demanded.

Micky rubbed his chin.

"What's she want to write to him for?" he asked presently.

June swung round, and a second bun almost shared the fate of the first, but she grabbed it back in time.

"What does she want to write to him for?" she echoed with scorn. "My poor child, what does any one want to write to any one for? She's in love with the man, and when you're in love you simply have to write it down—at least, that's what I understand from people with wide experience. Esther's but a young girl, and she'll believe it. How much she loves him and what a wonderful man he is; as a matter of fact she does write to him, and tears the letters up again, and that's no satisfaction. I wish to goodness he'd get run over and done with," she added exasperatedly.

"I don't suppose she wishes it," said Micky.

"That's because she doesn't know what's good for her; he was probably the first man who had ever paid her any attention, and from what she says he's a bit of a swell, and I suppose she was flattered. . . ."

"Rot!" said Micky violently; it made him hot to hear June say things like this. Ashton superior to Esther? It was like the man's confounded impudence to even think such a thing.

"Not such rot," June said wisely. "And that's what all the trouble is about, or my name's not what it is. He has a stuck-up old cat of a mother who won't condescend to know Esther. . . . What did you say?"

"Nothing," said Micky. He got up and began strolling about the room with his hands in his pockets, and June finished toasting her buns and made the tea.

"I'll just go up and tell Esther," she said. She went out of the room and upstairs.

"Esther," she announced cheerfully, knocking at Esther's door; she turned the handle and went in. Esther was standing by the window looking out into the neglected garden at the back of the house; she turned.

"I'm not really hungry, and if you'd like to have Mr. Mellows to yourself," she began.

June stared at her.

"My dear," she said then drily, "if I'd wanted to have Mr. Mellows to myself I should have married him long ago; so don't pretend you're not dying for one of the stale, but toasted buns."

(To be continued.)

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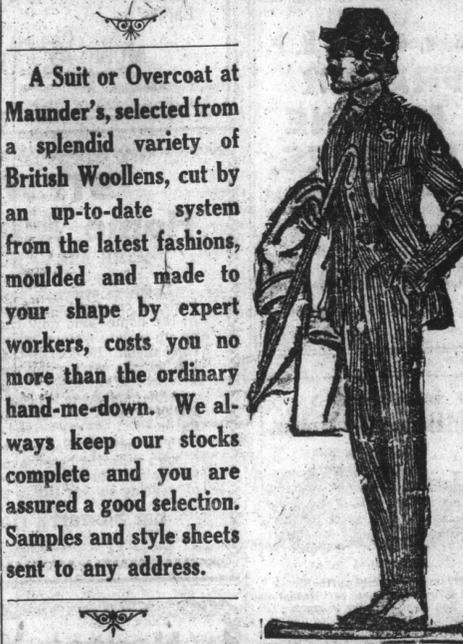
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