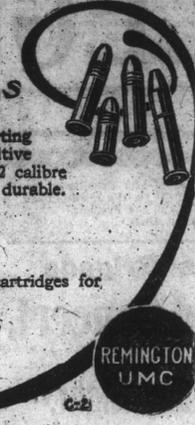


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THE Phantom Lover.

(By the Author of "A Bachelor Husband")

CHAPTER VII.

He gave a dissatisfied growl as he finished reading it. Not a very eloquent epistle. There was so much more which he wanted to say, but did not dare to. He folded it again and thrust it into an envelope; then he addressed it and laid it beside that other on his desk, comparing the two handwritings with complacency.

Not in the least alike! Nobody would ever suspect that they had been written by the same person.

He rang for driver and gave him the unstamped envelope. "This is what I want you to post in Paris. Mind you put enough stamps on. You'd better have it weighed."

"Yes, sir," Driver looked at the other letter. "And—is that for the post, sir?"

Micky put his hand behind him with a guilty gesture.

"No, I'll post that myself," he said, and he went out then and there into the cold night and did so.

As it dropped into the letter-box Micky looked up at the stars and sighed.

What the dickens could he have done to make her so distant? At any rate he would let her see that he was not to be so easily snubbed. If she didn't answer his letter he would go boldly round to Elphinstone Road, and stay there till he saw her.

He was half way to bed before he remembered that he had promised to go to the Delands that evening. He stopped short with his necktie half undone and swore.

What the deuce would they think of me?

Well, he would have to plead that headache still, that was all, and if Marie chose to cut up rough. . . . Micky felt mean because he rather hoped that she would. He knew that he wanted their friendship to cease, but, man like, he did not altogether like having to take the initiative. Marie was a nice little girl, and if it hadn't been for that relative of hers dying on New Year's Eve—well, he would probably have been engaged to her by this time.

He went to bed feeling miserable.

Driver, had just left the house to catch the boat train the following morning when June Mason rang Micky up.

"Any news for me?" she demanded.

"I hate worrying you so soon, but Esther's given notice. She's told Mrs. Elders that she can't afford to stay on. I nearly shook her this morning. I asked her to let me help her for the time being. I even said that I would take five per cent. interest on the hateful money if she was so abominably proud, and she laughed! She cried the next minute and said I was much too kind to her, but she wouldn't listen. What have you done?"

"Everything," said Micky promptly.

"In a couple of days—"

"My good man, that's much too long to wait."

"It's the best I can do," said Micky rather shortly. "And you'll find it's a good best if you'll be patient."

He heard the sigh she gave.

"Honest! Injun!" he said seriously.

"Oh, very well. If you let me down, Micky—"

"You won't be let down," Micky said.

June went back to Elphinstone Road with a heavy heart.

She was very thorough in her friendships, and it really seemed a terrible thing to her that Esther would not accept help.

She felt so genuinely fond of affection and confidence not being reciprocated; she went up to her room and tucked herself into the big armchair amongst the mauve cushions and smoked innumerable cigarettes. Charlie was asleep by the fire; he found his way upstairs now without invitation; he was beginning to get quite respectable-looking; he had lost his wild, scared look, and even his purr had taken on a sleeker, smoother sound.

June stared at him for some time, then suddenly she got up and went downstairs.

She knocked at Esther's door, but there was no answer, and she went back to her own room dejectedly.

If only Esther were not so proud they might have such good times together! If only Esther had a little money and could go shares with this room; but what was the good of wishing? She hurried one of the mauve cushions across the room, and after that she felt better.

She went down to lunch because she hoped Esther would be there, but she was not. The long room was rather empty, and June ate her cold meat and pudding hurriedly and went back upstairs.

It was getting dusk when she heard Esther come in; she waited eagerly, but the footsteps did not come on to her door. June threw another cushion across the room to keep the other company; it was her chief vent for anger or irritation.

"Confounded pride," she said under her breath. She paced up and down for some minutes, then she caught Charlie up from his cushion and went downstairs to Esther's room with him in her arms.

Her knock was answered immediately and Esther stood there in the doorway.

June spoke without looking at her. "I've brought Charlie down—I thought if he stayed up in my room any longer you'd be wanting to pay me for his board and lodging."

She thrust the cat into Esther's arms and turned away.

She was feeling very sore; hers was such a generous nature that she could not understand why Esther could not see how glad she would have been to help her; she went back to her own room and slammed the door.

A moment later she was sorry for what she had done; twice she went half way down the stairs to apologise, then came back again.

"Do her good," she told herself snappishly. "I've no patience with such silly pride, and as for you, my boy," she stopped and shook her fist at Micky's photograph. "If you don't buck up and find her something . . ."

The two days dragged away. June purposely avoided Esther; she never went into the dining-room to meals, and Esther never came upstairs to June's room; there was a kind of armed neutrality between them.

Charlie, too, seemed to have been told to keep away, and June missed his lusty purr in the silent room.

She shed a few tears into the mauve cushions; she thought Esther was willfully misunderstanding her; she wrote to Micky on the second day with a great deal of emphasis.

"Are you dead or asleep? Here am I, just living to hear from you, and you leave me without a word! Esther and I haven't spoken for two days, not

that you care, of course. You don't believe in my friendships. I know, but it's a very serious thing for me. I'm more fond of that girl than I've ever been of anybody, and now she'll walk out of this house and my life, and it will be your fault . . ."

She knew this was unfair to Micky, but she knew that Micky would understand—Micky always understood.

But Micky frowned over the letter. Did she imagine he enjoyed sitting down here doing nothing? What pleasure did she suppose he was getting out of the whole thing?

He threw the letter into the fire. Something ought to happen to-morrow, anyway. The last two days had seemed like months.

To kill time he went round to the Delands. He felt a little nervous as he reached the house. It seemed an unconscionable time since he was last here. When the butler opened the door he felt an insane desire to say, "Good evening, Jessop! You're still here, then." Such a decade ago it seemed since Jessop had been wont to admit him without question and take his hat and coat.

But Jessop did not smile to-night, and did not move back an inch when he saw who was the caller.

Micky was nonplussed.

"Mr.—anybody in?" he asked awkwardly.

"No, sir; the mistress and the young ladies are all out, sir . . ."

"Oh! There was a little silence; then Micky turned on his heel. "Well, good-night!" he said jerkily.

He walked away, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. A few yards down the road he almost cannoned into a man he knew.

"Hallo, Phillips! Where are you off to?"

Phillips stopped.

"Hallo, Micky! Not coming my way? I'm going to the Delands. What's up with you? Haven't seen you for a week or more."

"I've been seedy," Micky said harshly. "And the Delands are out. I've just called there myself."

"Eh? Phillips tried hard to see his face through the darkness. "Rot," he said at last. "They've got a musical evening on—I had a special invite."

Micky said nothing. This was a nasty blow; apparently the Delands were only "not at home" to him. Joy! He must have behaved caddishly. He walked on feeling very subdued. Had he quite lost his wits, he wondered, that for the sake of a girl who would offend all his old friends? He tried to look at his behaviour from Marie Deland's point of view. Yes, it must look pretty rotten, he was forced to admit. He thought about it all the time he walked home. He asked himself honestly if this new game was worth the candle.

Esther loved another man.

Already she had shown him that she cared nothing for him or his friendship, and yet—yet—Micky set his teeth. He had never wanted anything really badly in all his life before, but now he wanted this girl.

"I'm not done yet, anyway," he told himself. "After all—let the best man win."

He felt that he had decided a question of great importance as he went back to his room. It was a pleasant surprise to find Driver there; Micky beamed.

"You've got back, then?"

"Yes, sir."

The man took Micky's hat and coat, and turned to go.

"Everything all right?" he asked, with a touch of anxiety.

"Yes, sir."

"You posted the letter?"

"Yes, sir, and had it weighed. . . ."

There was a little pause.

"Is that all?" Micky asked. "Nothing else happened?"

The man raised his expressionless eyes.

"I should have got in this morning, sir, but we had a rough crossing, and I was ill—"

Micky smiled.

"Poor old Driver!—anything else?"

"Yes, sir—I met Mr. Ashton in Paris. He seemed very surprised to

see me there without you, sir."

Micky's face changed; he had not counted on this.

"Good Lord!" he said. "You didn't tell him you—"

Driver raised his eyes.

"I never tell anybody anything, sir," he said woodenly.

Micky breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good man. . . . He was alone, of course?"

"Alone at the hotel, but I saw him out driving twice with the same lady, sir."

"You saw him out twice—driving with the same lady?" Micky echoed the man's words vaguely. "All right—you can go."

"Thank you, sir," Driver departed, closing the door noiselessly.

Ashton had soon found consolation. Micky thought savagely. He wondered what Esther would say if she could know. What was Driver thinking about it all? Driver was safe as the Bank of England; but, all the same, it was not altogether pleasant to feel that he had had to give himself away to his valet.

He looked up at the clock. Past nine! So there would not be another post in to-night.

Esther had not answered his note, and two whole days had elapsed.

Micky began pacing the room. Why had she so suddenly thrown him over, he wondered miserably.

He could not imagine what he had done to offend her.

He hardly knew how the days had passed since New Year's Eve. He had not visited any of his old haunts or seen any of his friends. It almost seemed as if he had opened the book of a new life and forgotten about the old.

She might have answered his letter. Dash it all! he wasn't just a bounder, who had spoken to her for his own amusement. He kicked a hassock out of his way and went to bed.

If he didn't hear in the morning, he would risk it and go round to see her. At the worst she could only have the door shut in his face.

"And even then—," he told his reflection in the mirror fiercely, as he struggled with a stud. "Even then I'm not done—and I'll show her that I'm not . . ."

(To be continued)

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