The Phantom Lover

By Ruby Ayres

THIS STARTS THE STORY

Micky Mellowes, matrimonial catch, diverts the mind of a girl he finds crying on the street from the thoughts of suicide with which she had wrestled. Returning to his apartment, he finds his friend, Ashton, who says he is leaving town and his sweetheart at his mother's request and asks Mellowes to deliver a letter to the girl. Micky discovers the girl, Esther Shepstone, to be the one he had met crying on the street. Instead of delivering the letter Ashton gave him he writes another, a kindlier one, and signs Ashton's name to it. Esther tells Micky of her intention to accept a position as amanuensis to Mrs. Ashton, and Micky, jealous of the phantom lover he has created, is incredulous and says she must not go there. He proposes marriage to her and is rejected. She believes herself engaged to Ashton. Micky goes to Paris. He sees Ashton in company with Mrs. Clare and writes another letter to Esther above Ashton's signature. At the theatre with Micky and June, friend of Micky, Esther sees Ashton with his mother. Esther becomes hysterical and faints. Micky forces Ashton to leave England next day, and Micky sends Esther a fur coat and a collar for her cat in Ashton's name. When he gets home his man, Driver, hands him the evening paper and points out a notice of Ashton's marriage to Mrs. Clare. Micky arranges with June to take Esther to the country and to keep all newspapers from her, but she overhears two men commenting on the marriage and feels that their remarks are true. Esther goes to Paris to find out Ashton and Micky follows her. He comes across her at Calais and a scene ensues. She objects to being followed. Micky tells her that the letters, etc., supposed to have come to her from Ashton in reality did not come from him and admits to having written them himself. He is angered at her treatment of him and leaves her to find Ashton alone, which she does. Ashton confesses his marriage but asks that they continue friends. His marriage would make no difference, and he had plenty of money now. She roundly tells him how detestable he is and returns to the hotel, where she again finds Micky. They journey home in silence and for weeks do not meet again. She returns his presents. One night at a reception Micky overhears Ashton bragging to some friends of his acquaintance with Esther before she knew Micky. Micky demands an apology and none forthcoming fistful force is used, and Micky announces that Esther and he have been married many weeks but the event has been kept secret at the wish of the bride.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"I'VE NEVER given any of you cause to doubt my word yet," he said hoarsely. "And I'm sure you'll agree with me that this man should be made to retract what he said and apologize."

"Certainly—he ought to apologize. It's disgraceful—infernally disgraceful," said a man who had been listening to Ashton's story eagerly enough a moment ago.

"What do you say, gentlemen?"

There was a chorus of assent—the men who had been holding Micky's arms let him go.

Ashton backed a step away.

His face was livid, his eyes furious, but he knew that there was no other course open to him; nobody in the room had any sympathy with him now.

"I apologize," he said savagely. "I didn't know that—the—lady—Mellowes had married—the lady."

His tone added that even now he did not believe it; he edged away to the door and disappeared.

Micky dropped into a chair; he looked thoroughly done up. Some one pushed a glass of whisky across to him. There was an uncomfortable silence. Perhaps they were all feeling guilty; perhaps they all remembered with what relish they had listened to this spicy bit of scandal.

"Never could stand Ashton," some one said presently, in gruff abasement. "Worm—the man is!—perfect outsider!"

There were several grunts of assent; the sympathy was decidedly with Micky.

After a moment he rose to his feet.

"I suppose an apology is due from me, too," he said; he spoke with difficulty. "But I think any of you—in the same circumstances——"

He waited a moment.

"Quite right—certainly. • • • Should have done the same myself."

Micky smiled faintly.

"And I am sure you won't let this go any further—for—for my wife's sake," he added.

They pressed round him, shaking him by the hand and reassuring him. Micky took it for what it was worth; he knew that those of them who were married men would go straight home and tell their wives of the scene at Hoopers', and he knew how speedily the story would spread.

He got away as soon as he could and left the house.

Driver opened the door and Micky said:

"You've been with me a good many years, Driver."

"Yes, sir."

"And you've been a faithful servant."

"Thank you, sir."

The man's stolidness did not change a fraction.

Micky took a gulp at the brandy.

"If you were to hear that I'm married, you wouldn't be surprised, would you?" he asked with a rush.

Driver stood immovable.

"Not in the least, sir."

"You would even say that you knew that I've been married some weeks, wouldn't you?"

"I should, sir."

"Good—you may go."

"Thank you, sir, and good-night."

"Good-night," said Micky.

And now, what was to be done now? When he left this room three hours ago it had been with the determination to put the past behind him for ever, and what had he done? Only walked more deeply into his quixotism and seriously compromised the woman he loved.

He thought suddenly of June; June who, with all her bluntness, had a great heart and a deep understanding.

She would not want explanations; she would know why he had done it, and sympathize.

But June was obviously not the one concerned. It was not to June that he must confess.

The clock in his room struck twelve; too late to do anything tonight.

Life was an intolerable, purposeless thing. He sat down at his desk and leaned his head in his hands. His whole life seemed to spell failure. With sudden impulse he seized a pen and began to write.

For the first few moments he hardly knew what he wrote. It was only when he reached the end of the first page that he seemed to realize with a start what he had done. He looked back at the written lines with something of a shock. There was no beginning to the letter, no date or address; it simply started off as if the pen had been guided by some influence outside himself, some desperate need.

"I don't know what you will think when you get this letter. I am writing it because tonight I think I am half mad. I love you so much; there seems nothing in the whole world that counts any more now that I am beginning to understand that I can never have you, Esther, ask you on my knees to listen to what I have to say. I've tried to keep away from you, to forget you. I've tried to put you out of my heart and persuade myself that I do not care—but it's no use. I love you; I know you care nothing for me, but I shall love you always. Tonight I have done an unpardonable thing for your sake. I explain things badly. I only hope that you will understand and try to make some excuse for me. Some one knows we were together in Paris—I need not tell you who. Tonight, at a house where I was, he had told several people that you and I had been to Paris together. • • •"

Micky had gone on writing rapidly—he seemed to have lost himself in a sea of eloquence; his heart was pleading with the woman he loved through the poor medium of a sheet of unadressed paper.

"It nearly drove me mad to hear you spoken of by him. There was a scene, and I knocked him down • • • You will hate me for this, but I would have killed him had they let me. I told them afterward that you were my wife—try to understand how I have suffered all these weeks—I told them that we had been married some time, and that it had been kept secret by your own wish. It's only now, when I am more alone and can think clearly, that I see what I have done. You don't care for me, and I have compromised you even more than that man did by his lying insinuations. Tell me what I am to do—anything, anything in the world. My whole life is yours to do with as you will. Be my wife, dear, be my wife • • •"

For a moment the pen faltered, but Micky went on again with an effort.

"I will stay in London twenty-four hours for your answer, and then, if I don't hear • • •"

The pen faltered again and this time finally stopped.

CHAPTER XIX

June went downstairs singing; during the last few days she had, as she would have expressed it, begun to discover herself all over again; certainly the world had utterly changed, and was more like a fairy city than a place where it rained a great deal and where busses and taxicabs splashed pedestrians with mud.

Lydia met her at the foot of the stairs; she smiled at sight of a new hat.

"I was just coming up, Miss June," she said. "There's a letter for Miss Shepstone."

June held out her hand.

"I'll take it, and save you the trouble——"

A moment later June thrust the letter for Esther into her coat pocket and went out blissfully into the rain to meet George Rochester.

George was ardent; he forgot to eat his most excellent lunch, and hardly took his eyes off June.

"It's all so much waste of time this being engaged," he said with pretended annoyance. "Why don't we do the trick and get married? What are we waiting for? I'll take you to the States for a wedding trip."

June laughed, and protested blushingly that it was much too soon.

"I haven't thought about it," she declared, not quite truthfully. "There's tons of things to see to first. What about my business and Esther?

"Leave the one to look after the other," he said promptly.

She shook her head.

"I couldn't—I should hate to leave Esther alone; if only she could be married, too?"

"Well—find her a husband; what about Mellowes?" he suggested jokingly.

June's face sobered.

"Oh—Micky!" she said. She was not sure if she was justified in telling Rochester that Micky had once cared for Esther. "I thought he was practically engaged to Marie Deland," she said doubtfully.

Rochester gave an exclamation.

"That reminds me," he said. "There seems to have been a bit of a row at the Hoopers' dance last night. • • • I wasn't there, but I heard some fellows at the club talking it over just now—do you know a man named Ashton?"

June sniffed inelegantly.

"Do I not!"

"Well, if you don't like him, you'll be pleased to hear that Micky knocked him into the middle of next week," Rochester said calmly.

June's eyes gleamed.

"Never! Well, I'm delighted to hear it!

"What was it about?"

Rochester shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, they were gossiping about some woman, as far as I could make out—a woman Micky had been rather friendly with, from what I gathered—they didn't mention her name, but"—he hesitated. "They spoke of her as a girl from • • • I've forgotten the name, but I think it was a petticoat shop——"

"Eldred's?" said June sharply.

"Yes, that was it! What do you know about it?"

"Nothing—go on! What were they saying?"

"That she'd been to Paris with Mellowes, and Mellowes overheard it, and there was a bit of a fight, and Mellowes said that the girl was his wife. • • •"

June gasped.

"What!"

Rochester looked rather uncomfortable.

"It's only club talk," he said deprecatingly. "Dare say it's all lies."

June pushed back her chair; her brain was in a whirl; she stared at Rochester with dazed eyes.

"Of course you're mad, quite mad!" she said calmly. "Or I am! which is it? • • • My dear man, the girl Micky went to Paris with was Esther! My Esther Shepstone; and here you are trying to tell me that she and Micky are married!" she burst into hysterical laughter.

"I'm not trying to tell you," he protested injuredly. "It's only what I heard; and any way, if Mellowes went to Paris with Miss Shepstone——"

He broke off before the anger in June's eyes.

"If you speak about Esther in that tone of voice again I shall hate you forever," she said furiously. "If you must know the truth, I'll tell it to you, and another time just don't judge people till you've heard both sides of the question," and she promptly proceeded to tell him the whole story of her meeting with Esther, and all that had happened since.

CHAPTER XX

Esther woke from a troubled sleep that night to find June standing beside her. Pale moonlight shone into the room from half-drawn blinds, filling it with an eerie light, as Esther started up trembling and frightened.

"What is it? Is anything the matter? Oh, I thought you were a ghost!" She clutched at June with both hands. "Oh, is anything the matter?" she asked again.

June laughed nervously. She found matches and lit a candle, then she came back to Esther and thrust something into her hands.

"You'll never forgive me," she said. "But I've had it in my coat pocket for two days • • •" She pushed her dark hair back from her forehead tragically. "Lydia gave it to me for you the day I went out in my best hat to meet George, and I was such a selfish, conceited pig that he put everything else out of my head, and I forgot all about it till just now, when I was lying awake thinking • • • and then • • • oh, Esther, it's from Micky!"

Esther looked down at the crumpled envelope.

"From—Micky • • •" she said. She was only half awake; she made a very fair picture there with her long hair tumbling about her shoulders, and her face a little flushed and startled.

June turned to the door.

"I'll go away—you don't want me. • • • I'll go——," but Esther caught her hand.

"No—no, • • • Wait! Please wait!" wait!"

"Very well—but I'm half frozen. • • •" June looked plaintively at Esther, but Esther had forgotten her, and she dragged the quilt from the bed and wrapped it round her small figure till she looked like a mummy.

There was a long silence, then Esther raised her eyes to June's anxious face.

Her own was quite colorless, and her blue eyes looked dazed.

"Will you—will you—read it?" she said faintly. "Please—I want you to— • • • somehow I feel as if I'm dreaming."

But June at any rate was wide awake; it only took her two minutes to read it only took her two minutes to read Micky's passionate appeal; the next she was laughing and crying together, and hugging Esther boisterously.

"Oh, isn't he the most wonderful man? Don't you love him? Don't you just adore him? Oh, if you're going to break his heart after all this, I'll never forgive you! • • • Why, my George isn't in it with Micky, poor darling!"—she shook Esther in her excitement—"What are you made of, that you can't see what a king he is? I don't believe there's any blood in your veins at all," she declared indignantly. "You haven't got a heart. • • • Oh, Esther, darling! You haven't got a heart • • • Oh, Esther darling! I didn't mean it—I—oh; I'm such an idiot!

And the two girls clasped each other and cried together.

"And now if this ridiculous midnight scene is ended," June said presently, sniffing her tears away, "let's talk sense. I'll go and see Micky in the morning and explain everything. He knows what I am—he won't be at all surprised—oh, I'm so glad—so more than glad. • • • Oh, Esther, why do you hide your face?"

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

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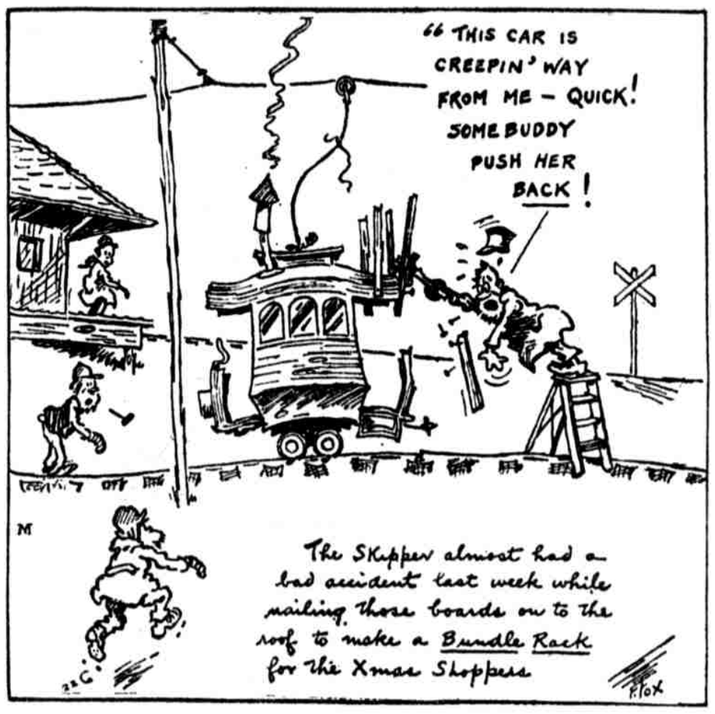

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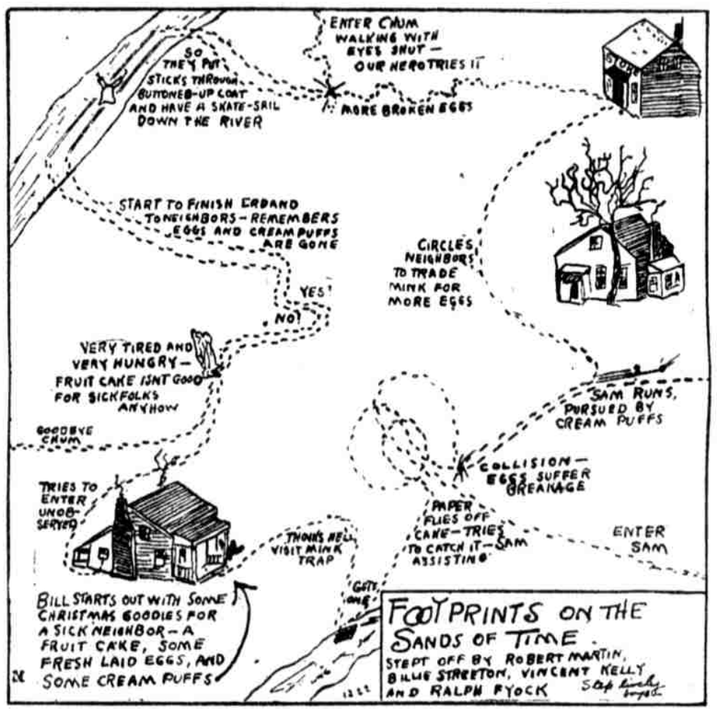

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