

# The Master Man

By Ruby M. Ayres

## Chapter VI

Patricia stifled a scream, starting away from Michael in fear, then all at once she recognized him; she gave a little sobbing laugh and swayed towards him, catching his arm in a convulsive grip.

"Oh, is it you! Oh, I am so glad—I was so frightened. Oh, you won't leave me, will you? Oh, I am so glad it's you!"

Her voice was shaking and hysterical; she seemed hardly to know what she was saying she kept looking away from him down the road along which she had come; in the light of a street lamp over their heads Michael could see how white she was.

He drew her hand through his arm, pressing it reassuringly.

"Of course, I won't leave you—I've been hunting for you all day. Where have you been? What on earth possessed you to run away like that—Patricia, what is the matter?"

For she had broken down and was crying like a child.

Michael was horribly distressed. He looked up and down the deserted road for inspiration. If only one could get a taxi! The rain was falling more heavily now, and Patricia had only a thin coat.

"Look here," he said cheerfully. "Don't cry, there's a dear! We're getting wet enough with the rain. My rooms are quite close—if you don't mind coming in for a minute I can get you something hot, some coffee or something, and send for a taxi."

Patricia shook her head, trying in vain to check her sobbing. "I'm alright—I was frightened—I think I lost my way—and there was a horrid man following me. . . If you can get me a cab, I'll go home."

"Home!" said Michael grimly. "And where is home, may I ask?"

His very pity for her made him irritable. It hurt him to see this spoilt beauty as he had first known her alone at this time of night, and frightened and in tears.

She answered him falteringly. "I'm staying in rooms—just for the present—just till I get something to do."

He frowned down at her through the rain which was unkindly adding to the general discomfort of the situation by settling into a steady downpour.

"It's utter madness—this independence of yours!" he began shortly. "Why on earth you won't listen to reason. . . thank the Lord, there's a taxi."

Michael dashed out into the road, and Patricia heard him arguing with the man. After a moment he came back to her.

"It's all right. Being a philanthropist he'll take us for three times the usual fare." He took her arm and helped her into the cab. He stood with one foot on the step waiting for her to tell him the address.

Patricia tried to dismiss him. "There is no need for you to come, Mr. Rolf—I can go alone quite well now I have got a cab."

"I mean to come," Michael answered hardily.

"And if you argue the man will only think unpleasant things about us both, and turn us out in the road again. Now then—where are these rooms?"

She told him, and Michael repeated the address to the driver before he clambered in beside her and slammed the door.

"I suppose you know your own business best," he said, as they drove off through the wet streets. "But, surely to heaven there were other and more pleasant neighbourhoods in which you might have got rooms? Why didn't you go to a hotel?"

"Because I can't afford it. I've got to earn my own living, so I may as well get used to things right away."

Michael stifled an imprecation under his breath. He felt as if all this were his fault.

"I went down to Clayton this morning," he said, after a moment. "And, apparently, just missed you. Why didn't you leave a message to say where you were going?"

"I didn't want you to know." He laughed mirthlessly.

"You seem to take a positive delight in harrassing me and worrying me to death," he said.

"There is no need for you to worry about me. I am quite capable of looking after my-

self," she retorted.

"It looks like it," he answered. "What would you have done to-night, for instance, if you hadn't met me? You were frightened to death."

"Because I had been followed—the man frightened me."

"I'd have frightened him if I'd have seen him," said Michael, grimly. "What made him follow you? Where had you been?"

"I had been to a theatre. It was so lonely in the rooms." A little shiver passed through her. "I thought the evening would never pass. I couldn't have stayed there alone."

"It was better than going to a theatre alone," he answered. "Other women go alone," she defended herself.

"Not women like you," he maintained. "I don't suppose you've ever moved a yard alone in London until today—have you?"

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," she answered coldly.

"It's got every thing to do with it," said Michael. He jerked up the window through which the rain was splashing. "And next time you go, if you must go—take a cab home instead of trying to walk."

"I couldn't get one—all the men were pushing for them outside the theatre."

Michael laughed ruefully. "The the moral evidently is, take a man with you as well," he said.

After all, she was young and a girl. If she had been his own sister he could not have been more worried. He hated the thought of her being alone in London.

He ate a hasty meal and started out again on a fresh search. Not that he actually had any hope of success, but it was something to do, and it was often the unexpected that happened. One frequently read in books and newspapers of extraordinary meetings, and strange coincidences.

But at eleven o'clock he was back in his rooms, tired and irritable.

When he found Patricia he would tell her exactly what he thought of her behaviour. She was utterly selfish and indifferent to the anxiety of other people. He hoped something would happen to pay her out for all the worry she had caused him.

He opened the door of his sitting room, the nstood still with a smothered exclamation as Bernard Chesney rose from a chair and came forward.

"You!" said Michael, blankly. "Good heavens! Why, I thought you'd gone to the States!"

Chesney flushed uncomfortably. "I changed my mind." He paused. "I've been waiting for you since eight," he added with a touch of irritation.

Michael laughed, he knew by instinct Chesney had not left England, and why he was here now.

"Well, I don't know where she is," he said.

The two men looked hard at one another.

"I don't know where she is," Michael said again. "If you've come to ask me about Patricia—and I suppose you have!"

"Yes," Chesney fidgeted with his cigarette case. "I've come to the conclusion that I behaved badly to her," he said after a moment, with disarming frankness. "After all, well, dash it, it was your fault, you know."

"You mean that if I hadn't interfered you would have married her?"

"Yes."

"Humph! Well, then, I'm glad I did interfere. You'd never have made her happy—you're not suited to her. . ."

"A week ago your argument was that she would never make me happy, and she wasn't suited to me!" Chesney said indignantly.

Michael made an impatient gesture.

"Well, it's all the same, isn't it?" he asked.

Chesney was not so sure; he looked at his friend with a faint suspicion.

"What do you mean? That you don't know where she is?" he asked. "She's down at Clayton. I suppose—isn't she?"

"She was—yesterday morning. I saw her there—but she left to-day, and nobody seems to know where she's gone."

Chesney was flushed and agitated; he had had a miserable time since he had sent that letter to Patricia. He loved her sincerely, and a thousand times he had cursed himself for having ever listened to Michael. What did it matter if she married him only for his money so long as she did marry him? In his infatuation he believed that he could be happy with Patricia in any circumstances.

"If you're trying to bluff me," he broke out angrily.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "My dear chap, I'm not. Patricia has gone away somewhere! And I'm trying to find out where. It's no use looking so furious. After all, I'm not her keeper."

"You thought you were through—a week ago," Chesney answered with a sneer.

Michael laughed. "I thought I could manage her. Apparently I cannot; however when I find her—"

"When you find her! Supposing you never do! I call it scandalous. She hasn't a friend in the world now she's lost her money. If anything has happened to her it will be your fault."

"What the deuce do you mean?" Michael looked at his friend with furious eyes.

"I've done my best for her—Philips will tell you. I offered her money—I offered her the Dover House, or any other place she might prefer."

"You might have known she'd never take it. She always was proud."

"Proud! Well—perhaps. . . where are you going?"

But Chesney had gone, with a slam of the door.

"It sounds as if she is coming downstairs now," said Michael grimly.

There was a heavy tread on the stairs and in the narrow passage outside.

Michael went to the door of the sitting-room and opened it.

A short stout woman with round scared eyes stood there. She carried a candle in one plump hand and a poker in the other. She gave a loud scream when she saw Michael.

Patricia came hastily forward. "It's alright, Mrs. Flannagan. I lost my way to this gentleman—this gentleman. . ."

she floundered helplessly, realizing the very lameness of her inability to explain Michael away.

Michael rose to the occasion desperately. "My name is Michael Rolf," he said. "I have been to the theatre with this lady. As a matter of fact, we are engaged to be married."

He heard the stifled exclamation which Patricia gave, and he smiled grimly. That was a distinct score for him anyway, and he went on calmly:

"I dare say I shall often call while Miss Rolf is here. I am glad she has found such comfortable rooms."

His reassuring smile and half a sovereign completed the victory, and Mrs. Flannagan called down the blessings of her patron saint upon his head and retired.

She hoped she knew a gentleman when she saw one, she said. Her poor husband—rest his soul!—had been valet to a gentleman for twenty years, shure and he had!

She creaked away up the stairs again, and Michael looked at Patricia.

"How dared you tell her such a lie?" she asked under her breath.

Her eyes flashed at him furiously.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "It was for your sake. It was the only thing I could think of. What would you have preferred me to say? That I had never seen you before in my life?"

She flushed crimson.

"I'll say good-night now, anyway," Michael went on. "Or I suppose it should be good-morning."

Patricia did not answer.

"And I shall come and fetch you away from this place tomorrow," Michael said again.

She turned on him like a whirlwind.

"You will not—I shall not be here."

"You will—if I have to walk up and down the path outside all night and see that you don't run away again," he answered calmly, though his eyes were not calm. "It may be fun to you—

this absurd hide and seek business but I hate it—I've got some thing else to do besides chase about after you."

"Why don't you do it, then?" she retorted.

"Because for the present it suits me not to," he answered. "Aren't you going to say good-night to me?" he submitted with a twinkle. "Seeing that we are engaged?"

For a moment she did not answer, then she said:

"I will say good-night to you if you will promise not to stay outside all night."

"And I will promise not to stay outside all night if you will promise not to rush off again in the morning," he retorted.

Her eyes met his, and the anger in them died miserably away.

"Very well," she said listlessly. "That is a bargain!" Michael asked.

"I have said so."

Michael held out his hand. "Thank you for that, anyway," he said with sudden softening. "And—may I come and take you out to lunch to-morrow?"

She hesitated. Her lips were tremulous; she was worn out and overwrought.

"It won't be any use trying to persuade me to leave here," she said with a ghost of her old defiance.

Michael laughed. He felt almost cheerful.

"I'm not going to try. After all, you might be in a worse place! I dare say the old lady will do her best to make you comfortable. One o'clock to-morrow then—will that do?"

Patricia nodded, and Michael turned away trying not to see the tears that were trickling down her cheeks.

He went back home feeling very bad-tempered. He found a bright fire burning, and the comfort and luxury of his rooms struck him as a painful contrast to the surroundings in which he had left Patricia.

He stood for a moment in "Then the moral evidently is, take a man with you as well," he said. "Me, for instance."

"No, thank you."

He shrugged his shoulders. The car was slowly down—it had turned into narrow, dark street. Presently the driver turned in his seat and shouted back something.

Michael let the window down with a run and leaned out.

Patricia heard the driver ask which side of the road it was, and she called out nervously:—"I don't know—it's 53."

Michael got out.

"I'll find it," he said. He walked along the roadway, the cab following at a crawl.

Presently he stopped.

"Here it is," he said. There was dissatisfaction in his voice, and he looked up with a frown at the dark face of the house.

"Shall I wait, sir?" the driver inquired.

"No," said Michael.

He paid the man and dismissed him; he followed Patricia to the door of the house.

"Is anyone waiting up for you?" he asked.

Patricia laughed hysterically. "No, I should think not"—a half sob caught her breath. "The landlady gave me a latch-key—here it is."

She put it into Michael's hand and after striking a couple of matches he found the key-hole and opened the door.

An atmosphere of damp linoleum and paraffin rushed at them, and involuntarily he gave a little shiver of distaste.

Patricia looked at him.

"I will say good-night," she said unsteadily.

Michael passed her and went into the hall.

"You will not, till I have seen the sort of place this is," he said determinedly.

He struck another match and lit a gas-jet which he discovered above his head, and by its yellow flare he looked quickly around.

The house seemed quite clean and tidy, but exceedingly poor; the walls needed repapering, and the linoleum was patched and shabby.

There was a silence, broken only by the steady downpour of rain outside. Then Michael said, with a touch of hoarseness in his voice:

"And you prefer this to me—and what I have offered you?"

Patricia was very white, and there was a sort of crushed look about her. Something in the expression of her eyes at that moment reminded Michael forcibly of a woman whom he had once known out in the back of beyond—a lady who had married a drunken rancher, who had beaten her and humiliated her and brought her down to his own bestial level.

She had looked at him with just such proud abasement in her eyes the first time he had seen her, and now—as then—he broke out:

"Why did you do it? Why, in God's name?"

A streak of red flushed Patricia's face.

"What else could I do? I have to live somewhere—and this is the only sort of place I can afford."

Her eyes swept round the room, with its cheap Tottenham Court Road furniture and hideous pictures.

"It's clean, anyway," she said, and a faintly mocking smile lit her sombre eyes as she raised them to his.

Michael set his teeth.

"Oh, I should like to shake you!" he said.

"You've said that before," Patricia reminded him.

"I shall say it again," he answered. "And next time I shall do it—you know what people say about the third time."

The cheap clock on the shelf began to strike twelve; its gong was wheezy and discordant, and some loose piece of mechanism somewhere in the works jarred in metallic fashion with every stroke.

"What sort of a woman keeps this place?" Michael asked as the last sound died away.

"She seems kind," Patricia answered reluctantly. "I think she was rather afraid of me—she told me she was Irish—her name is Irish anyway—Mrs. Flannagan."

the doorway looking around him with disgust. The two saddle-bagged armchairs drawn up so invitingly to the fire looked positively bad taste, he thought, as he took off his coat and flung it down. There had been no arm-chair in Patricia's room—no fire!

Michael remembered how depressing the steady downpour of rain had sounded as he and she stood and looked at one another in the uncertain gaslight—he could still hear the rain now pattering against the windows, and splashing on the stone sills, but it only seemed by contrast to add to the comfort and luxury of his rooms. He went over to the fire and sat down, on the arm of one of the big chairs.

It was nearly one o'clock, but he had never felt more wide awake in his life—what was the good of going to bed if sleep was an impossibility? He wondered if Patricia was asleep, and he thought again of her tears, which he had tried not to see, and he swore under his breath as he felt for his cigarette case. After all, it was her own fault—she might have had five hundred or a thousand a year, and her own house at Clayton, had she only chosen to be reasonable; it was by her own choice that she had gone to live at Mrs. Flannagan's—perhaps the experience would do her good.

For ten minutes he smoked hard, and tried equally hard to persuade himself that it would undoubtedly do her good—but at the end of those ten minutes he flung the stump of his cigarette firewards and was up on his feet, restlessly pacing the room.

It was intensely aggravating that Patricia should weigh on his mind in this fashion—he wished once again that he had let Chesney marry her and ended his own responsibility. And yet he knew that even now he had no intention of letting Chesney know where he could find Patricia—Chesney was not the man to make Patricia happy—he was too slavish, too ready to lie down and allow her to walk over him.

In the rooms below his own, in spite of the lateness of the hour, some youthful spirit had started a gramophone going, and the strains of a ragtime coon song floated up to Michael Rolf with irritating clearness as he paced restlessly up and down—

"When she said she lubb'd me, she didn't speak true. So I'm off wid de ole lub, an' on wid de new."

Michael listened to the silly words with a feeling of familiarity—where had he heard them before? And then all at once he remembered—a gramophone had been grinding out the same record that day at the Chesney's bungalow on the river when the news came of Peter Rolf's death. A lifetime ago it seemed; and he thought with chagrin of Patricia as she had been then and as she had been when he left her an hour ago at Mrs. Flannagan's.

And he knew that it was a sheer impossibility to leave her in those miserable surroundings.

That she would never accept help from him he was sure. In spite of her tears and distress that evening her pride was not broken—very far from it!

Michael sat up till it was almost light, turning over possible and impossible schemes, and at last he fell asleep in the big chair by the dying fire and only awoke in broad daylight when his man came in to pull up the blinds.

He stared incredulously at his master's slumbering face, then he shrugged his shoulders and, stooping, shook him not very gently. Michael was on his feet in an instant. He laughed self-consciously, meeting the man's reproachful gaze. "I was late home," he explained. "I suppose I fell asleep by the fire. Get me a hot bath and breakfast."

He hurried through both, and was round at Mr. Philips' office before Mr. Philips himself had arrived.

"Not here!" he said disgustfully. "Why, what on earth time does he come then?"

The office boy pointed out rather resentfully that it was not yet nine o'clock and that Mr. Rolf was an early visitor.

(Continued Next Week)

## Mussolini Buying The Press.

V. B. in the New Statesman, (London).

There are now only three important Liberal papers left in Italy—the Corriere della Sera of Milan, the Stampa of Turin, and the Mondo of Rome—for Fascist money has now bought the Secolo of Milan in order to give Mussolini one more weapon against the Corriere and its proprietor Senator Albertini.

The disappearance of the freedom of the press is all the more amazing when one remembers that even the Corriere della Sera is not an opponent but merely a critic, of the present government.

Nobody desires the downfall of Mussolini, for chaos would then be almost inevitable. Mussolini has initiated his experiment, and every lover of Italy must hope that he will be able to carry it through, however many enemies he makes in the process. The necessity for drastic measures at the end of last year was terribly evident. That Mussolini's measures are drastic is certain. But his real test has yet to come.

If Mussolini's is to make Italy the country he desires to make her—a Prussian paradise with orange groves—he will have to realize that Senator Albertini is not necessarily a traitor because he believes in democracy, and that no country, even as tired of weak governments as was Italy, will put up with tyranny indefinitely.

The great hope for Italy lies in the fact that Mussolini may still realize that the iron fist does not necessarily mean strength. Otherwise his enemies will soon outnumber his supporters and the country will again be plunged into chaos.

## ARBITRATION TREATIES

From the Indianapolis News.

Probably those who seem to be determined to have a war with Japan will not be reassured by the renewal recently of the arbitration treaty with that power, and yet the policy of the two nations in this particular is one of substituting law for war. The treaty was first entered into in 1908, its duration being limited to five years. It was renewed in 1913, 1918 and now it is again renewed. It is, to be sure, rather limited in scope, covering only differences of a legal nature, or relating to the interpretation of treaties existing between the two contracting parties, and excluding questions affecting "the vital interests, the independence or the honor of the two contracting states," and involving "the interests of third parties." But, nevertheless, the treaty is valuable. More important—almost—than the agreement is the peaceful spirit of the two nations as evidenced by their entering into it, and their renewal of it.

But there have been other substitutions for war in our relations with Japan. The naval limitation treaty and the Pacific pact, together with this arbitration treaty, make strongly for peace. The motive back of all of them, a motive inspiring both nations, was an earnest desire to avert the horrors of war. The enlightened policy adopted by the two governments undoubtedly reflects the will of the people for whom they acted. It is suggested that henceforth there be in both lands less talk about war and a great deal more about these treaties, and the peaceful spirit of which they are the fruit. Nations have been talked into war, and it is possible that they may be again. It is good time to talk peace and think peace.

Small arbitration treaties with Great Britain and France were renewed a short time ago with a modification—which is hoped to get into the Japanese treaty—that disputes shall, with the consent of the senate, go to the permanent court of international justice rather than to The Hague tribunal.