

The Great Impersonation

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(Continued from last week.)
The Right Honourable, Gerald Watson stood upon the steps talking to the wife of the Italian Ambassador. She left him presently, and he came striding down the lawn with his hands behind his back and his eyes seeming to see out past the golf links.

"There goes a man," Terloff murmured, "whom lately I have found despatched. When I first came here he met quite openly. I believe, even now, he is sincerely desirous of peace and amicable relations between us. I cannot tell what it is. I cannot tell even of what nature it is, but I have an instinct for people's attitude towards me, and the English are the worst race in the world at hiding their feelings. Has Mr. Watson, I wonder, come under the spell of your connection, the Duke of Worcester? He seemed so friendly with both of us down in Norfolk."

Their womenfolk left them at that moment to talk to some acquaintances seated a short distance away. Mr. Watson, passing within a few yards of them, was brought to a standstill by Dominey's greeting. They talked for a moment or two upon idle subjects.

"Your news, I trust, continues favourable?"

"Our Ambassador remarked, observing the etiquette which required him to be the first to leave the realm of ordinary conversation. 'It is a little negative, in quality,' the other answered, 'after a moment's meditation. I am summoned to Downing Street again at six o'clock.'"

"I have already confided the result of my morning despatches to the Prime Minister," Terloff observed. "I went through them before I came down here. It was the somewhat doubtful reply."

"You will have appreciated, I hope their genuine pacific tone?" Terloff asked anxiously. His interlocutor bowed and then drew him up. It was obvious that the strain of the last few days was telling upon him. There were lines about his mouth, and his eyes spoke of sleepless nights.

"Words are idle things to deal with at a time like this," he said. "One thing, however, I will venture to say to you, Prince, here and under these circumstances. There will be no war unless it be the will of your country."

recorded history. He rose to his feet and raised his hat. "There will be no war," he said solemnly. The Cabinet Minister passed on with a lighter step. Dominey, more clearly than ever before, understood the subtle policy which had chosen for his great position a man as chivalrous and faithful and yet as shrewd as Terloff. He looked after the retreating figure of the Cabinet Minister with a slight smile at the corner of his lips.

"In a time like this," he remarked significantly, "one begins to understand why one of our great writers—was it Bernard Shaw?—has written that no island could ever breed a race of diplomats."

"The sea which engirdles this island," the Ambassador said thoughtfully, "have brought to England great wealth, as they may bring to her much woe. The too-nimble brain of the diplomat has its parallel of insincerity in the people whose interest he seems to guard. I believe in the honesty of the English politicians. I have placed that belief on record in the small volume of memories which I shall presently entrust to you. But we talk too seriously for a summer afternoon. Let us illustrate to the world our opinion of the political situation and play another nine holes at golf!"

Dominey rose willingly to his feet, and the two men strolled away towards the first tee. "By the by," Terloff asked, "what of our cheerful little friend Seaman? He ought to be busy just now."

"I am seriously enough, he is returning from Germany to-night," Dominey announced. "I expect him at Berkeley Square. He is coming direct to me."

CHAPTER XXVI

These were days, to all dwellers in



The Great Beef Economy.

CUBES

London, of vivid impressions, reasserting themselves afterwards with a curious sense of unreality, as though belonging to another set of days and another world. Dominey remembered his dinner that evening in the sombre, handsomely furnished dining-room of his town house in Berkeley Square. Although it lacked the splendid proportions of the banquet hall at Dominey, it was still a fine apartment, furnished in the Georgian period, with some notable pictures upon the walls, and with a wonderful ceiling and fireplace. Dominey and Rosamund dined alone, and though the table had been reduced to its smallest proportions, the place between them was yet considerable. As soon as Parkins had gravely put the port upon the table, Rosamund rose to her feet and, instead of leaving the room, pointed for the servant to place a chair for her by Dominey's side.

"I shall be like your men friends, Everard," she declared, "when the ladies have left, and draw up to your side. Now what do we do? Tell stories? I promise you that I will be a wonderful listener."

"First of all you drink half a glass of this port," he declared, filling her glass, "then you peel me one of those peaches, and we divide it. After which we listen for a ring at the bell. To-night I expect a visitor."

"A visitor?" "Not a social one," he assured her. "A matter of business which I fear will take me from you for the rest of the evening. So let us make the most of the time until he comes."

"I am so happy in London here with you, and I feel all the time so strong and well. I can read and understand the books which were a maze of puzzle to me before. I can see the things in the pictures, and feel the thrill of the music, which seemed to come to me, somehow, before, all distorted and discordant. You understand, dear?"

"I have spoken to Doctor Harrison about it," she went on, her voice scarcely audible. "He said that you probably loved more than you dared to show, because some day the real Everard might come back."

"That is quite true," he reminded her softly. "You may come back at any moment."

"She gripped his hand, her voice shook with passion. She leaned towards him, her other arm stole around his neck. "But I don't want him to come back!" she cried. "I want you!"

Dominey sat for a moment motionless, like a figure of stone. Through the wide-flung, blind-shielded windows came the raucous cry of a newsboy, breaking the stillness of the summer evening. And then another and sharper interruption—the stopping of a taxicab outside, the firm, insistent ringing of the front doorbell. Recollections came to Dominey, and a great strength, the fire which had leaped up within him was thrust back. His response to her wave of passion was infinitely tender.

"Dear Rosamund," he said, "that front doorbell summons me to rather an important interview. Will you please trust in me any way you can, and I will be back in half an hour. I am not indifferent. There is something with which I never reckoned, something which is beginning to weigh upon me night and day. Trust me, Rosamund, and wait!"

She sank back into her chair with a piquant and yet pathetic little grimace. "You tell me always to wait," she complained. "I will be patient, but you shall tell me when you are so kind to me. You make or mar my life. You must care a little? Please?"

He was standing up now. He kissed her hands fondly. His voice had all the old ring in it. "More than for any woman on earth, dear Rosamund!"

Seaman, in a light grey suit, a Panama, and a white bow-tied tie, had lost something of the placid urbanity of a few months ago. He was hot and tired with travel. There were new lines in his face and a queer expression about his eyes, at the corners of which little wrinkles had begun to appear. He responded to Dominey's welcome with a fervour which was almost feverish, scrutinized him closely, as though expecting to find some change, and finally sank into an easy-chair with him. "I have been in a great deal of trouble, but I have managed to get it all behind me," he said. "You have news?" Dominey asked. "Yes," was the momentous reply. "I have news."

Dominey rang the bell. He had already surmised, from the dressing case and coat in the hall that his servant was waiting. "What will you have?" he enquired. "A bottle of hock with seltzer water, and ice if you have it," Seaman replied. "Also a plate of cold meat, but it must be served here. And afterwards the biggest cigar you have. I have indeed news, news, disturbing, news magnificent, news astounding."

Dominey gave some orders to the servant who answered his summons.

"Of course," he answered gravely, "I do not wonder," she went on, "that Doctor Harrison is proud of me for a patient, but there are many times when I feel a dull pain in my heart, because I know that, whatever he or anybody else might say, I am not quite cured."

"Rosamund, dear," he protested. "Ah, but do not interrupt," she insisted, depositing his share of the peach upon his plate. "How can I be cured when all the time there is the problem of you, the problem which I am just as far off solving as ever I was? Often I find myself comparing you with the Everard whom I married."

"Do I fail so often to come up to his standard?" "You never fail," she answered, looking at him with brimming eyes. "Of course, he was very much more affectionate," she went on after a moment's pause. "His kisses were not like yours. And he was far fonder of having me with him. Then, when he was not there, he did wild things; he seemed to forget me altogether. It was that," she went on, "that was so terrible. It was that which made me so nervous. I think that I should even have been able to stand those awful moments when he came back to me, covered with blood and reeling, if it had not been that I was already almost a wreck. You know, he killed Roger Unthank that night. That is why he was never able to come back."

"Why do you talk of these things to-night, Rosamund?" Dominey begged. "I must, dear," she insisted, laying her fingers upon his hand and looking at him curiously. "I must, even though I see how they distress you. It is wonderful that you should mind so much, Everard, but you do, and I love you for it."

"Mind?" he groaned. "Mind?" "You are so like him and yet so different," she went on meditatively. "You drink so little wine, you are always so self-controlled, so serious. You live as though you had a life around of which others knew nothing. The Everard I remember would never have cared about being a magistrate or going into Parliament. He would never have had ambassadors for his friends. He would have spent his time racing or yachting or hunting or shooting, as the fancy took him. And yet—"

"And yet what?" Dominey asked, a little harshly. "I think I loved me better than you," she said very sadly. "Why?" he demanded. "I cannot tell you," she answered, with her hand resting on his plate, "but I think that he did."

Dominey walked suddenly to the window and leaned out. There were drops of moisture upon his forehead he felt the force of his air. When he came back she was still sitting there, still looking down.

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For a few moments they spoke trivialities of the journey. When everything was served, however, and the door closed, Seaman could wait no longer. His appetite, his thirst, his speech, seemed all stimulated to swift action.

"We are of the same temperament," he said. "That I know. We will speak first of what is more than disturbing—a little terrifying. The mystery of Johann Wolff has been solved."

"The man who came to us with messages from Schmidt in South Africa?" Dominey asked. "I had almost forgotten about him."

"The same. What was at the back of his visit to us that night, I cannot even now imagine. Neither is it clear why he held aloof from me, who am his superior in practically the same service. There we are, from the commencement, confronted with a very singular happening, but scarcely so singular as the denouement. Wolff vanished from your house that night into an English fortress."

"It seems incredible," Dominey declared bluntly. "It is nevertheless true," Seaman insisted. "No member of our service is allowed to remain more than one month without communicating his existence and whereabouts to the headquarters. No word has been received from Wolff since that night in January. On the other hand, indirect information has reached us that he is in France here."

"But such a thing is against the law, unheard of," Dominey protested. "No country can keep the citizen of another country in prison without formulating a definite charge or bringing him up for trial."

Seaman smiled grimly. "That's all very well in any ordinary case," he said. "Wolff has been marked man for years, though. Wilhelmstrasse would soon make fuss enough."

"If it were of any use, but it would not be. There are one or two Englishmen in German prisons at the present moment, concerning whose welfare the English Foreign Office has not even thought it worth while to enquire. What troubles me more than the actual fact of Wolff's disappearance is the mystery of his visit to you and his apprehension practically on the spot."

"They must have tracked him down there," Dominey remarked. "Yes, but they couldn't thrust a pair of tongs into your butter's sitting-room, extract Johann Wolff, and set him down inside Norwich Castle or whatever prison he may be in," Seaman objected. "However, the most disquieting feature about Wolff is that it introduces something we don't understand. For the rest, we have many men as good, and better, and the time for their utility is not far off. You are our great hope now, Dominey."

"It is to be, then?" "Seaman took a long and ecstatic draught of his hock and seltzer. "It is to be," he declared solemnly. "There was never any doubt about it. If Russia ceases to mobilize tomorrow, if every statesman in Serbia crawls to Vienna with a rope around his neck, the result would still be the same. The word has gone out. The whole of Germany is like a vast military camp. It comes exactly twelve months before the final day fixed by our great authorities, but the opportunity is too great, too wonderful for

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"You bring news indeed!" Dominey murmured, standing for a moment by the opened window.

"I have been received with favour in the very loftiest circles," Seaman continued. "You and I both stand high in the list of those to whom great rewards shall come. His Majesty approves altogether of your reluctance to avail yourself of your permission to wed the Princess Eiderston. Von Rugastien has decided well," he declared. "These are not the days for making or giving in marriage, these, the most momentous days of the world have ever known, the days when an empire shall spring into being, the nightfall since the Continents fell into shape and the stars looked down upon this present world. Those are the words of the All Highest. In his eyes the greatest of all attributes is the splendour of purpose. You followed your own purpose, contrary to my advice, contrary to Terloff's. You will gain by it."

Seaman finished his meal in due course, and the tray was removed. Seaman puffing out dense volumes of smoke, gripping his cigar between his teeth, brandishing it sometimes in his hand to give effect to his words. A little of his marvellous caution seemed to have deserted him. "For the first time he spoke directly to his companion."

(To be continued next week)

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