

# The Great Impersonation

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM.

(Continued from yesterday.)

She leaned heavily on his arm and even tottered on the way, but her steps grew lighter as they approached her own apartment. Finally, as they reached the corridor, she broke away from him and tripped on with the gaily almost of a child to the door of her room. Then came a little cry of disappointment as she flung open the door. Several maids were there, busy with a refractory fire and removing the covers from the furniture, but the room was half full of smoke and entirely unprepared.

"Oh, how miserable!" she exclaimed. "Everard, what shall I do?"

He threw open the door of his own apartment. A bright fire was burning in the grate, the room was warm and comfortable. She threw herself with a little cry of delight on the edge of Chesterford drawn up to the hags of the hearth.

"I can stay here, Everard, can't I, until you come up to bed?" she pleaded. "And then you can sit and talk to me, and tell me all the news about the people. You have no idea how much better I am. All my music has come back to me, and they say that I play bridge ever so well. I shall love to help you entertain."

The maid was slowly unfastening her mistress's boots. Rosemund held up her foot for him to feel.

"See how cold I am!" she complained. "Please rub it. I am going to have some supper up here with carnie. Will one of you maids please go down and see about it? What a lot of nice new things you have, Everard!" she added, looking around. "And that picture of me from the drawing-room on the table!" she cried, her eyes suddenly soft with joy. "You dear thing! What made you bring that?"

"I wanted to have it here," he told her.

"I'm not so nice as that now," she smiled, a little wistfully.

"Do not believe it," he answered. "You have not changed in the least. You will be better looking still when you have been here for a few months."

She looked at him almost shyly—tenderly, yet still with that gleam of sadness in her eyes.

"I think," she murmured, "I shall be just what you want to be. I think you could make me just what you want. Be very kind to me, please," she begged, stretching her arms out to him. "I suppose it is because I have been ill so long, but I feel so helpless, and I love your strength and I want you to take care of me. Your own hands are quite cold," she added anxiously. "You look pale, too. You're not ill, Everard?"

"I am very well," he assured her, struggling to keep his voice steady. "Forgive me now, if I am a trifle weary away. There are guests here—rather important guests. Tomorrow you must come and see them all."

"And help you?"

"Dominey made his escape and went reeling down the corridor. At the top of the great quadrangular landing he stopped and stood with half-closed eyes for several moments. From downstairs he could hear the sound of pleasantly raised voices, the music of a piano in the distance, the click of billiard balls. He waited until he had regained his senses, then he stepped as he was on the point of descending, he saw Seaman mounting the stairs. At a gesture he waited for him, waited until he came, and took him by the arm, led him to a great settee in a dark corner. Seaman had lost his usual blitheness. The good-humored smile played no longer about his lips.

"Where is Lady Dominey?" he asked.

"In my room, waiting until her own tea is prepared."

Seaman's manner was unusually grave.

"My friend," he said, "you know very well that I would not work in the great trials of life I am unscrupulous. In those other hours, alas! I have a weakness—I love women."

"Well?" Dominey murmured.

"I will admit," the other continued, "that you are placed in a delicate and trying position. Lady Dominey seems disposed to offer to you the affection which, notwithstanding their troubles, I wish, she should reserve for her husband. I risk your anger, my friend, but I warn you to be very careful how you encourage her."

A light flashed in Dominey's eyes. For the moment angry words seemed to tremble upon his lips. Seaman's manner, however, was very gentle. He counted no offence.

"If you were to take advantage of your position with any other, I would string my shoulders and stand on one side, but this mad Englishman's wife, or rather his widow, has been mentally ill. She is still weak-minded, just as she is tender-hearted. I watched her as she passed through the hall with you just now. She turns to you for love as a flower to the sun after a long spell of cold, wet weather. Von Ragastern, you are a man of honor. You must find means to deal with this situation, however difficult it may become."

Dominey had recovered from his first wave of weakness. His companion's words excited no sentiment of remorse. He was conscious even of regarding him with a greater feeling of respect than he ever before.

"My friend," he said, "you have shown me that you are a man of honor, and which I must confess is exercising me to the utmost. Let me now advise you of another. The Princess Eiderman has brought me an autograph letter from the Kaiser, commanding me to marry her."

"The situation," Seaman declared grimly, "but for its serious side, would provide all the elements for a Palais Royal farce. For the present, however, you have duties below. I have said the words which were thumping against the walls of my heart."

Their descent was opportune. Some of the foot maids were preparing to make their departure, and Dominey was in time to receive their adieux. They all left messages for Lady Dominey, spoke of a speedy visit to her, expressed themselves as delighted to hear of her return and recovery. As the last car rolled away, Caroline took her host's arm and led him to a chimney sweep by the huge log fire in the inner hall.

"My dear Everard," she said, "you really are a very terrible person."

"Exactly why?" he demanded.

"Your devotion to my sex," she continued, "is flattering but far too catholic. Your return to England appears to have done what we undertook to do—impossible—restored your wife's reason. A fiery-headed Hungarian Princess has pursued you down here, and has now gone to her room in a tantrum because you left her side for a few minutes to welcome your wife. And there remains our own sentimental little flirtation, a broken and, alas, a discarded thing! There is no doubt whatever, Everard, that you are a very bad lot."

"You are distressing me terribly," Dominey confessed, "but all the same after a somewhat agitated evening I must admit that I find it pleasant to talk with some one who is not wailing the lightnings. May I have a whiskey and soda?"

"Bring me one, too, please," Caroline begged. "I fear that I will seriously impair the note which I had intended to strike in our conversation, but I am thirsty. And a handful of those Turkish cigarettes, too. You can devote yourself to me with a perfectly clear conscience. Your most distinguished guest has found a task after his own heart. He has got Henry in a corner on the billiard-room and is trying to convince him of what I am sure the dear man really believes himself—Germany's intentions towards England are of a particularly love-like nature. Your Right Honorable guest has gone to bed, and Eddy Felham is playing billiards with Mr. Manan. Every one is happy. You can devote yourself to soothing my wounded vanity, to say nothing of my broken heart."

"Always giving at me," Dominey murmured.

"Not always," she answered quietly, raising her eyes for a moment. "There was a time, Everard, before that terrible tragedy at Dunster—when I didn't gibe."

"When, on the contrary, you were sweetness itself," he reflected.

She sighed reminiscently.

"That was a wonderful month," she murmured. "I think it was then for the first time that I saw traces of something in you which you are not today."

"You think that I have changed, then?"

She looked him in the eyes.

"I sometimes find it difficult to believe," she admitted, "that you are the same man."

He turned away to reach for his whiskey and soda.

"As a matter of curiosity," he asked, "when?"

"To begin with, then," she continued, "you have become almost a precisian in your speech. You used to be rather slangy at times."

"That is true."

"You used always to clip your final 's'."

"Shocking habit," he murmured. "I cured myself of that by reading aloud in the bush—Go on, please."

"I have carried yourself so much more stiffly. Sometimes you have the air of being surprised that you are not in uniform."

"Trifles, all these things," he declared. "Now for something serious?"

"The serious things are pretty good," she admitted. "You used to drink whiskey and soda at all hours of the day, and quite as much wine. Now, although you are a wonderful host, you scarcely take anything but yourself."

"You should see me at the port," he told her, "when you ladies are well out of the way! Some more of the good, please?"

"All your best qualities seem to have come to the surface," she went on, "and I think that the way you have come back and faced it all is simply wonderful. Tell me, if that man's body should be discovered after all these years, would you be charged with manslaughter?"

He shook his head. "I do not think so, Caroline."

"Everard,"

"Did you kill Roger Unthank?"

A portion of the burning log fell on to the hearth. Then there was silence. They heard the click of the billiard balls in the adjoining room. Dominey leaned forward and with a pair of small tongs replaced the burning wood upon the fire. Suddenly he felt his hands clasped by his companion.

"Everard dear," she said, "I am so sorry. You came to me a little tired tonight, didn't you? I think that you needed sympathy, and here I am asking you once more that horrible question. Forget it, please. Talk to me like your old dear self. Tell me about Rosemund's return? Is she really recovered, do you think?"

"I see her only for a few minutes," Dominey replied, "but she seemed to me absolutely better. I must say that the weekly reports I have received from the nursing home quite prepared me for a great improvement. She is very frail, and her eyes still have that restless look, but she talks quite cheerfully."

"What about that horrible woman?"

"I have mentioned Mrs. Unthank. To my surprise I hear that she is still living in the village."

"And your ghost?"

"Not a single howl all the time that Rosemund has been away."

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