The Great Impersonation

A stirring story of love and adventure. By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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(continued from last week)

"The cruel part of it was," Dominey went on, standing before the window, his hands clasped behind his back, "that my wife from that moment developed a homicidal mania against me—I, who fought in the most absolute self-defence. That was what drove me out of this country, Mangan—not the fear of being arrested for having caused the death of Roger Unthank. I'd have stood my trial for that at any moment. It was the other thing that broke me up."

"Quite so," Mangan murmured sympathetically. "As a matter of fact, you were perfectly safe from arrest, as it happened. The body of Roger Unthank has never been found from that day to this."

"It is hidden," Dominey said.

"You must have been charged with either murder or manslaughter."

Dominey abandoned his post at the window and raised his glass of sherry to his lips. The cruelest side of those misadventures seemed, perhaps, as he was compelled to have recourse to it, "I suppose," he remarked, "it was the disappearance of the body which has given rise to all this talk as to his spirit still inhabiting the Black Wood."

"Without a doubt," the lawyer acquiesced. "The place had a bad name already, as you know. As it is, I don't suppose there's a villager here would cross the park in that direction after dark."

Dominey glanced at his watch and led the way from the room.

"After dinner," he promised, "I'll tell you a few West African superstitions which will make our local ones seem anaemic."

CHAPTER IX

"I certainly offer you my heartiest congratulations upon your cellars, Sir Everard," his guest said, as he sipped his third glass of port that evening. "This is the finest glass of sherry I've drunk for a long time, and this new fellow I've sent you down—Parkins—tells me there's any quantity of it."

"It has had a pretty long rest," Dominey observed.

"I was looking through the cellar book before dinner," the lawyer went on, "and I see that you still have forty-seven and forty-eight, and a quantity of two older vintages. Something ought to be done about those."

"We will try one of them to-morrow night," Dominey suggested. "We might spend half an hour or so in the cellars; if we have any time to spare."

"And another half an hour," Mr. Mangan said gravely, "I should like to spend in interviewing Mrs. Unthank. Apart from any other question, I do not for one moment believe that she is the proper person to be entrusted with the care of Lady Dominey. I made up my mind to speak to you on this subject, Sir Everard, as soon as we had arrived here."

"Mrs. Unthank was old Mr. Felbrigg's housekeeper and my wife's nurse when she was a child," Dominey reminded his companion. "Whatever her faults may be, I believe she is devoted to Lady Dommey."

"She may be devoted to your wife," the lawyer admitted, "but I am convinced that she is your enemy. The situation doesn't seem to me to be consistent. Mrs. Unthank is firmly convinced that, whether in fair fight or not, you killed her son. Lady Dominey believes that, too, and it was the sight of you after the fight that sent her insane. I cannot but believe that it would be far better for Lady Dominey to have some one with her unconnected with this unfortunate chapter of your past."

"We will consult Doctor Harrison to-morrow," Dominey said. "I am very glad you came down with me, Mangan," he went on, after a minute's hesitation.

"I find it very difficult to get back into the atmosphere of those days. I even find it hard sometimes," he added, with a curious little glance across the table, "to believe that I am the same man."

"Not so hard as I have done more than once," Mr. Mangan confessed.

"Tell me exactly in what respects you consider me changed?" Dominey insisted.

The lawyer hesitated.

"You seem to have lost a certain pliability, or perhaps I ought to call it lowering of suggestion," he admitted. "There are many things connected with the past which I find it almost impossible to associate with you. For a striking instance," he went on, with a slight smile, inclining his head towards his host's untasted glass, "you don't drink port like any Dominey I ever knew."

"I'm afraid that I never acquired the taste for port," Dominey observed.

The lawyer gazed at him with raised eyebrows.

"Not acquired the taste for port?" he repeated blankly.

"I should have said resquinol," Dominey explained to explain. "You see in this bush we drank a simply frightful amount of spirits, and that vitiates the taste for all wine."

The lawyer glanced enviously at his host's fine bronzed complexion and clear eyes.

"You haven't the appearance of ever having drunk anything, Sir Everard," he observed frankly. "One finds it hard to believe the stories that were going about ten or fifteen years ago."

"The Dominey constitution, I suppose!"

The new butler entered the room noiselessly and came to his master's chair.

"I have served coffee in the library, sir," he announced. "Mr. Middleton, the gamekeeper, has just called, and asks if he could have a word with you before he goes to bed to-night, sir. He seems in a very nervous and uneasy state."

"He can come to the library at once," Dominey directed; "that is, if you are ready for your coffee, Mangan."

"Indeed I am," the lawyer assented, rising. "A great treat, that wine. One thing the London restaurants can't give us. Port should never be drunk away from the place where it was laid down."

The two men made their way across the very fine hall, the walls of which had suffered a little through lack of heating, into the library, and seated themselves in easy-chairs before the blazing log fire. Parkins silently served them with coffee and brandy. He had scarcely left the room before there was a timid knock and Middleton made his somewhat hesitating entrance.

"Come in and close the door," Dominey directed. "What is it, Middleton? Parkins says you wish to speak to me."

The man came hesitatingly forward. He was obviously distressed and uneasy, and found speech difficult. His face glistened with the rain which had found its way, too, in long streaks down his velveteen coat. His white hair was wind-tossed and disarranged.

"Bad night," Dominey remarked.

"It's to save its being a worse one that I'm here, Squire," the old man replied hoarsely. "I've come to ask you a favour and to beg you to grant it for your own sake. You'll not sleep in the oak room to-night?"

"And why not?" Dominey asked.

"It's next her ladyship's."

"Well?"

The old man was obviously perturbed, but his master, as though of a purpose, refused to help himself.

"Say exactly what you wish to, Middleton," Dominey invited. "Mr. Mangan and his father and grandfather have been solicitors to the estate for a great many years. They know all our family history."

"I can't get rightly into touch with you, Squire, and that's a fact," Middleton went on despairingly. "The shape of you seem larger and your voice harder. I don't seem to be so near to you as I'd wished, to say what's in my heart."

"I have had a rough time, Middleton," Dominey reminded him. "No wonder I have changed! Never mind speak to me just as man to man."

"It was I who first met you, Squire," the old man went on, "when you tottered home that night across the park, with your arm hanging helplessly by your side, and the blood streaming down your face and clothes, and the red light in your eyes—murderous fire, they called it. I heard her ladyship go into hysterics. I saw her laugh and sob like a maniac, and, God help us! that's what she's been ever since."

The two men were silent. Middleton had raised his voice, speaking with fierce excitement. It was obvious that he had only paused for breath. He had more to say.

"I was by your side, Squire," he went on, "when her ladyship caught up the knife and ran at you, and, as you yourself, it was I, seizing her by the body, who saved you a terrible thrust. I was there and I saw it who went for the doctor the next morning, when she'd stolen into your room in the night and listened at your throat to hear if you breathed. It was I, a hard man, heard the threat. It was a mad woman's threat, Squire, but her ladyship is a malwoman at this moment, and with a knife in her hand you'll never be safe in this house."

"We must see," Dominey said quietly, "that she is not allowed to get possession of any weapon."

"Aye! Make sure of that," Middleton scoffed, "with Mother Unthank by her side! Her ladyship's mad because of the horror of that night, but Mother Unthank is mad with hate, and there isn't a week passes," the old man went on, his voice dropping lower and his eyes burning, "that Roger Unthank's spirit doesn't come and howl for your blood beneath their window. If you stay here this night, Squire, come over and sleep in the little room they've got ready for you on the other side of the house."

Mr. Mngan had lost his smooth, after-dinner appearance. His face was distinctly pale, his smoothly brushed hair was rumpled, and his coffee was growing cold. This was a very different thing thing from the vague letters and rumors which had reached him from time to time and which he had put out his mind with all the contempt of the materialist.

"It is very good of you to warn me, Middleton," Dominey said, "but I can lock my door, can I not?"

"Lock the door of the oak room!" was the scornful reply. "And what good would that do? You know well enough that the wall's double on three sides, and there are more secret entrances than even I know of. The oak room's not for you this night, Squire. It's hoping to get you there that's keeping them quiet."

"Tell us what you meant, Middleton,' the lawyer asked, with ill-assumed indifference, "when you spoke of the howling of Roger Unthank's spirit?"

The old man turned patiently around.

"Just that, sir," he replied. "It's round the house most weeks. Except for me odd nights, and Mrs. Unthank, there's been scarcely a servant would sleep in the Hall for years. Some of the maids they do come up from the village, but back they go before nightfall ,and until morning there isn't a living soul would cross the park—no, not for hunudred pounds."

"A howl, you call it?" Mr. Mangan observed.

(continued next week)

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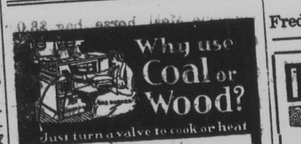

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