

THE
MALE
IMPERSONATOR

By
E.F. BENSON

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by
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Five hundred and thirty
numbered copies of this story
have been set in Monotype
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "E. F. Benson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

E. F. Benson

Miss Elizabeth Mapp was sitting, on this warm September morning, in the little public garden at Tilling, busy as a bee with her water-colour sketch. She had taken immense pains with the drawing of the dykes that intersected the marsh, of the tidal river which ran across it from the coast, and of the shipyard in the foreground: indeed she had procured a photograph of this particular view and, by the judicious use of tracing-paper, had succeeded in seeing the difficult panorama precisely as the camera saw it: now the rewarding moment was come to use her paint-box. She was intending to be very bold over this, following the method which Mr. Sargent practised with such satisfactory results, namely of painting not what she knew was there but what her eye beheld, and there was no doubt whatever that the broad waters of the high tide, though actually grey and muddy, appeared to be as blue as the sky which they reflected. So, with a fierce glow of courage she filled her broad brush with the same strong solution of cobalt as she had used for the sky, and unhesitatingly applied it.

“There!” she said to herself. “That’s what he would have done. And now I must wait till it dries.”

The anxiety of waiting to see the effect of so reckless a proceeding by no means paralysed the natural activity of Miss Mapp’s mind, and there was plenty to occupy it. She had returned only yesterday afternoon from a month’s holiday in Switzerland, and there was much to plan and look forward to. Already she had made a minute inspection of her house and garden, satisfying herself that the rooms had been kept well-aired, that no dusters or dish-cloths were missing, that there was a good crop of winter lettuces, and that all her gardener’s implements were there except one trowel, which she might possibly have overlooked: she did not therefore at present entertain any dark suspicions on the subject. She had also done her marketing in the High Street, where she had met several friends, of whom Godiva Plaistow was coming to tea to give her all the news, and thus, while the cobalt dried, she could project her mind into the future. The little circle of friends, who made life so pleasant and busy (and sometimes so agitating) an affair in Tilling would all have returned now for the winter, and the days would scurry by in a round of housekeeping, bridge, weekly visits to the workhouse, and intense curiosity as to anything of domestic interest which took place in the strenuous world of this little country town.

The thought of bridge caused a slight frown to gather on her forehead. Bridge was the chief intellectual pursuit of her circle, and, shortly before she went away, that circle had been convulsed by the most acute divergences of opinion with regard to majority-calling. Miss Mapp had originally been strongly against it.

“I’m sure I don’t know by what right the Portland Club tells us how to play bridge,” she witheringly remarked. “Tilling might just as well tell the Portland Club to eat salt with gooseberry tart, and for my part I shall continue to play the game I prefer.”

But then one evening Miss Mapp held no less than nine clubs in her hand and this profusion caused her to see certain advantages in majority-calling to which she had hitherto been blind, and she warmly espoused it. Unfortunately, of the eight players who spent so many exciting evenings together, there were thus left five who rejected majority (which was a very inconvenient number since one must always be sitting out) and three who preferred it. This was even more inconvenient, for they could not play bridge at all.

“We really must make a compromise,” thought Miss Mapp, meaning that everybody must come round to her way of thinking, “or our dear little cosy bridge evenings won’t be possible.”

The warm sun had now dried her solution of cobalt, and, holding her sketch at arm's length, she was astonished to observe how blue she had made the river, and wondered if she had seen it quite as brilliant as that. But the cowardly notion of toning it down a little was put out of her head by the sound of the church clock striking one, and it was time to go home to lunch.

The garden where she had been sketching was on the southward slope of the hill below the Church square, and having packed her artistic implements she climbed the steep little rise. As she skirted along one side of this square, which led into Curfew Street, she saw a large pantehnicon van lumbering along its cobbled way. It instantly occurred to her that the house at the far end of the street, which had stood empty so long, had been taken at last, and since this was one of the best residences in Tilling, it was naturally a matter of urgent importance to ascertain if this surmise was true. Sure enough the van stopped at the door, and Miss Mapp noticed that the bills in the windows of "Suntrap" which announced that it was for sale, had been taken down. That was extremely interesting, and she wondered why Diva Plaistow, who, in the brief interview they had held in the High Street this morning, had been in spate with a torrent of miscellaneous gossip, had not mentioned a fact of such primary importance. Could it be that dear Diva was unaware of it? It was pleasant to think that after a few hours in Tilling she knew more local news than poor Diva who had been here all August.

She retraced her steps and hurried home. Just as she opened the door she heard the telephone bell ringing, and was met by the exciting intelligence that this was a trunk call. Trunk calls were always thrilling; no one trunked over trivialities. She applied ear and mouth to the proper places.

"Tilling 76?" asked a distant insect-like voice.

Now, Miss Mapp's real number was Tilling 67, but she had a marvellous memory, and it instantly flashed through her mind that the number of Suntrap was 76. The next process was merely automatic, and she said, "Yes." If a trunk call was coming for Suntrap and a pantehnicon van had arrived at Suntrap, there was no question of choice: the necessity of hearing what was destined for Suntrap knew no law.

"Her ladyship will come down by motor this afternoon," said the insect, "and she——"

"Who will come down?" asked Miss Mapp, with her mouth watering.

"Lady Deal, I tell you. Has the first van arrived?"

"Yes," said Miss Mapp.

"Very well. Fix up a room for her ladyship. She'll get her food at some hotel, but she'll stop for a night or two settling in. How are you getting on, Susie?"

Miss Mapp did not feel equal to saying how Susie was getting on, and she slid the receiver quietly into its place.

She sat for a moment considering the immensity of her trove, feeling perfectly certain that Diva knew nothing about it all, or the fact that Lady Deal had taken Suntrap must have been her very first item of news. Then she reflected that a trunk call had been expended on Susie, and that she could do no less than pass the message on. A less scrupulous woman might have let Susie languish in ignorance, but her fine nature dictated the more honourable course. So she rang up Tilling 76, and in a hollow voice passed on the news. Susie asked if it was Jane speaking, and Miss Mapp again felt she did not know enough about Jane to continue the conversation.

"It's only at Tilling that such interesting things happen," she thought as she munched her winter lettuce. . . . She had enjoyed her holiday at the Riffel Alp, and had had long talks to a

Bishop about the revised prayer book, and to a Russian exile about Bolshevism and to a member of the Alpine Club about Mount Everest, but these remote cosmic subjects really mattered far less than the tenant of Suntrap, for the new prayer book was only optional, and Russia and Mount Everest were very far away and had no bearing on daily life, as she had not the smallest intention of exploring either of them. But she had a consuming desire to know who Susie was, and since it would be a pleasant little stroll after lunch to go down Curfew Street, and admire the wide view at the end of it, she soon set out again. The pantechnicon van was in process of unloading, and as she lingered a big bustling woman came to the door of Suntrap, and told the men where to put the piano. It was a slight disappointment to see that it was only an upright: Miss Mapp would have preferred a concert-grand for so territorially sounding a mistress. When the piano had bumped its way into the rather narrow entrance, she put on her most winning smile, and stepped up to Susie with a calling-card in her hand, of which she had turned down the right-hand corner to show by this mystic convention that she had delivered it in person.

“Has her ladyship arrived yet?” she asked. “No? Then would you kindly give her my card when she gets here? *Thank you!*”

Miss Mapp had a passion for indirect procedure: it was so much more amusing, when in pursuit of any object, however trivial and innocent, to advance with stealth under cover rather than march up to it in the open and grab it, and impersonating Susie and Jane, though only for a moment at the end of a wire, supplied that particular sauce which rendered her life at Tilling so justly palatable. But she concealed her stalkings under the brushwood, so to speak, of a frank and open demeanour, and though she was sure she had a noble quarry within shot, did not propose to disclose herself just yet. Probably Lady Deal would return her card next day, and in the interval she would be able to look her up in the Peerage, of which she knew she had somewhere an antique and venerable copy, and she would thus be in a position to deluge Diva with a flood of information: she might even have ascertained Lady Deal’s views on majority-calling at bridge. She made search for this volume, but without success, in the bookshelves of her big garden-room, which had been the scene of so much of Tilling’s social life, and of which the bow-window, looking both towards the church and down the cobbled way which ran down to the High Street, was so admirable a post for observing the activities of the town. But she knew this book was somewhere in the house, and she could find it at leisure when she had finished picking Diva’s brains of all the little trifles and shreds of news which had happened in Tilling during her holiday.

Though it was still only four o’clock, Miss Mapp gazing attentively out of her window suddenly observed Diva’s round squat little figure trundling down the street from the church in the direction of her house, with those short twinkling steps of hers which so much resembled those of a thrush scudding over the lawn in search of worms. She hopped briskly into Miss Mapp’s door, and presently scuttled into the garden-room, and began to speak before the door was more than ajar.

“I know I’m very early, Elizabeth,” she said, “but I felt I must tell you what has happened without losing a moment. I was going up Curfew Street just now, and what do you think! Guess!”

Elizabeth gave a half-yawn and dexterously transformed it into an indulgent little laugh.

“I suppose you mean that the new tenant is settling into Suntrap,” she said.

Diva’s face fell: all the joy of the herald of great news died out of it.

“What? You know?” she said.

“Oh, dear me, yes,” replied Elizabeth. “But thank you, Diva, for coming to tell me. That was a kind intention.”

This was rather irritating: it savoured of condescension.

“Perhaps you know who the tenant is,” said Diva with an unmistakable ring of sarcasm in her voice.

Miss Mapp gave up the idea of any further secrecy, for she could never find a better opportunity for making Diva’s sarcasm look silly.

“Oh yes, it’s Lady Deal,” she said. “She is coming down—let me see, Thursday isn’t it?—she is coming down to-day.”

“But how did you know?” asked Diva.

Miss Mapp put a meditative finger to her forehead. She did not mean to lie, but she certainly did not mean to tell the truth.

“Now, who was it who told me?” she said. “Was it someone at the Riffel Alp? No, I don’t think so. Someone in London, perhaps: yes, I feel sure that was it. But that doesn’t matter: it’s Lady Deal anyhow who has taken the house. In fact, I was just glancing round to see if I could find a Peerage: it might be useful just to ascertain who she was. But here’s tea. Now it’s your turn, dear: you shall tell me all the news of Tilling, and then we’ll see about Lady Deal.”

After this great piece of intelligence, all that poor Diva had to impart of course fell very flat: the forthcoming harvest festival, the mistake (if it was a mistake) that Mrs. Poppit had made in travelling first-class with a third-class ticket, the double revoke made by Miss Terling at bridge, were all very small beer compared to this noble vintage, and presently the two ladies were engaged in a systematic search for the Peerage. It was found eventually in a cupboard in the spare bedroom, and Miss Mapp eagerly turned up “Deal.”

“Viscount,” she said. “Born, succeeded and so on. Ah, married——”

She gave a cry of dismay and disgust.

“Oh, how shocking!” she said. “Lady Deal was Helena Herman. I remember seeing her at a music hall.”

“No!” said Diva.

“Yes,” said Miss Mapp firmly. “And she was a male impersonator. That’s the end of her; naturally we can have nothing to do with her, and I think everybody ought to know at once. To think that a male impersonator should come to Tilling and take one of the best houses in the place! Why, it might as well have remained empty.”

“Awful!” said Diva. “But what an escape I’ve had, Elizabeth. I very nearly left my card at Suntrap, and then I should have had this dreadful woman calling on me. What a mercy I didn’t.”

Miss Mapp found bitter food for thought in this, but that had to be consumed in private, for it would be too humiliating to tell Diva that she had been caught in the trap which Diva had avoided. Diva must not know that, and when she had gone Miss Mapp would see about getting out.

At present Diva showed no sign of going.

“How odd that your informant in London didn’t tell you what sort of a woman Lady Deal was,” she said, “and how lucky we’ve found her out in time. I am going to the choir practice this evening, and I shall be able to tell several people. All the same, Elizabeth, it would be thrilling to know a male impersonator, and she may be a very decent woman.”

“Then you can go and leave your card, dear,” said Miss Mapp, “and I should think you would know her at once.”

“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t do,” said Diva regretfully. As Elizabeth had often observed with pain, she had a touch of Bohemianism about her.

Though Diva prattled endlessly on, it was never necessary to attend closely to what she was saying, and long before she left Miss Mapp had quite made up her mind as to what to do about that card. She only waited to see Diva twinkle safely down the street and then set off in the opposite direction for Suntrap. She explained to Susie with many apologies that she had left a card here by mistake, intending to bestow it next door, and thus triumphantly recovered it. That she had directed that the card should be given to Lady Deal was one of those trumpery little inconsistencies which never troubled her.

The news of the titled male-impersonator spread like influenza through Tilling, and though many ladies secretly thirsted to know her, public opinion felt that such moral proletarianism was impossible. Classes, it was true, in these democratic days were being sadly levelled, but there was a great gulf between male impersonators and select society which even viscountesses could not bridge. So the ladies of Tilling looked eagerly but furtively at any likely stranger they met in their shoppings, but their eyes assumed a glazed expression when they got close. Curfew Street, however, became a very favourite route for strolls before lunch when shopping was over, for the terrace at the end of it not only commanded a lovely view of the marsh but also of Suntrap. Miss Mapp, indeed, abandoned her Sargentesque sketch of the river, and began a new one here. But for a couple of days there were no great developments in the matter of the male impersonator.

Then one morning the wheels of fate began to whizz. Miss Mapp saw emerging from the door of Suntrap a bath-chair, and presently, heavily leaning on two sticks, there came out an elderly lady who got into it, and was propelled up Curfew Street by Miss Mapp’s part-time gardener. Curiosity was a quality she abhorred, and with a strong effort but a trembling hand she went on with her sketch without following the bath-chair, or even getting a decent view of its occupant. But in ten minutes she found it was quite hopeless to pursue her artistic efforts when so overwhelming a human interest beckoned, and, bundling her painting materials into her satchel, she hurried down towards the High Street, where the bath-chair had presumably gone. But before she reached it, she met Diva scudding up towards her house. As soon as they got within speaking distance they broke into telegraphic phrases, being both rather out of breath.

“Bath-chair came out of Suntrap,” began Miss Mapp.

“Thought so,” panted Diva. “Saw it through the open door yesterday.”

“Went down towards the High Street,” said Miss Mapp.

“I passed it twice,” said Diva proudly.

“What’s she like?” asked Miss Mapp. “Only got glimpse.”

“Quite old,” said Diva. “Should think between fifty and sixty. How long ago did you see her at the music hall?”

“Ten years. But she seemed quite young then. . . . Come into the garden-room, Diva. We shall see in both directions from there, and we can talk quietly.”

The two ladies hurried into the bow-window of the garden-room, and having now recovered their breath went on less spasmodically.

“That’s very puzzling you know,” said Miss Mapp. “I’m sure it wasn’t more than ten years ago, and, as I say, she seemed quite young. But of course make-up can do a great deal, and

also I should think impersonation was a very ageing life. Ten years of it might easily have made her an old woman.”

“But hardly as old as this,” said Diva. “And she’s quite lame: two sticks, and even then great difficulty in walking. Was she lame when you saw her on the stage?”

“I can’t remember that,” said Miss Mapp. “Indeed, she couldn’t have been lame, for she was Romeo, and swarmed up to a high balcony. What was her face like?”

“Kind and nice,” said Diva, “but much wrinkled and a good deal of moustache.”

Miss Mapp laughed in a rather unkind manner.

“That would make the male impersonation easier,” she said. “Go on, Diva, what else?”

“She stopped at the grocer’s, and Cannick came hurrying out in the most sycophantic manner. And she ordered something—I couldn’t hear what—to be sent up to Suntrap. Also she said some name, which I couldn’t hear, but I’m sure it wasn’t Lady Deal. That would have caught my ear at once.”

Miss Mapp suddenly pointed down the street.

“Look! there’s Cannick’s boy coming up now,” she said. “They have been quick. I suppose that’s because she’s a viscountess. I’m sure I wait hours sometimes for what I order. Such a snob! I’ve got an idea!”

She flew out into the street.

“Good morning, Thomas,” she said. “I was wanting to order—let me see now, what was it? What a heavy basket you’ve got. Put it down on my steps, while I recollect.”

The basket may have been heavy, but its contents were not, for it contained but two small parcels. The direction on them was clearly visible, and having ascertained that, Miss Mapp ordered a pound of apples and hurried back to the garden-room.

“To Miss Mackintosh, Suntrap,” she said. “What do you make of that, Diva?”

“Nothing,” said Diva.

“Then I’ll tell you. Lady Deal wants to live down her past, and she has changed her name. I call that very deceitful, and I think worse of her than ever. Lucky that I could see through it.”

“That’s far-fetched,” said Diva, “and it doesn’t explain the rest. She’s much older than she could possibly be if she was on the stage ten years ago, and she says she isn’t Lady Deal at all. She may be right, you know.”

Miss Mapp was justly exasperated, the more so because some faint doubt of the sort had come into her own mind, and it would be most humiliating if all her early and superior information proved false. But her vigorous nature rejected such an idea and she withered Diva.

“Considering I know that Lady Deal has taken Suntrap,” she said, “and that she was a male impersonator, and that she did come down here some few days ago, and that this woman and her bath-chair came out of Suntrap, I don’t think there can be much question about it. So that, Diva, is that.”

Diva got up in a huff.

“As you always know you’re right, dear,” she said, “I won’t stop to discuss it.”

“So wise, darling,” said Elizabeth.

Now Miss Mapp’s social dictatorship among the ladies of Tilling had long been paramount, but every now and then signs of rebellious upheavals showed themselves. By virtue of her commanding personality these had never assumed really serious proportions, for Diva, who was generally the leader in these uprisings, had not the same moral massiveness. But now when Elizabeth was so exceedingly superior, the fumes of Bolshevism mounted

swiftly to Diva's head. Moreover, the sight of this puzzling male impersonator, old, wrinkled, and moustached, had kindled to a greater heat her desire to know her and learn what it felt like to be Romeo on the music-hall stage and, after years of that delirious existence, to subside into a bath-chair and Suntrap and Tilling. What a wonderful life! . . . And behind all this there was a vague notion that Elizabeth had got her information in some clandestine manner and had muddled it. For all her clear-headedness and force Elizabeth did sometimes make a muddle and it would be sweeter than honey and the honeycomb to catch her out. So in a state of brooding resentment Diva went home to lunch and concentrated on how to get even with Elizabeth.

Now, it had struck her that Mrs. Bartlett, the wife of the vicar of Tilling, had not been so staggered when she was informed at the choir practice of the identity and of the lurid past of the new parishioner as might have been expected: indeed, Mrs. Bartlett had whispered, "Oh dear me, how exciting—I mean, how shocking," and Diva suspected that she did not mean "shocking." So that afternoon she dropped in at the Vicarage with a pair of socks which she had knitted for the Christmas tree at the workhouse, though that event was still more than three months away. After a cursory allusion to her charitable errand, she introduced the true topic.

"Poor woman!" she said. "She was being wheeled about the High Street this morning and looked so lonely. However many males she has impersonated, that's all over for her. She'll never be Romeo again."

"No indeed, poor thing!" said Mrs. Bartlett; "and, dear me, how she must miss the excitement of it. I wonder if she'll write her memoirs: most people do if they've had a past. Of course, if they haven't, there's nothing to write about. Shouldn't I like to read Lady Deal's memoirs! But how much more exciting to hear her talk about it all, if we only could!"

"I feel just the same," said Diva, "and, besides, the whole thing is mysterious. What if you and I went to call? Indeed, I think it's almost your duty to do so, as the clergyman's wife. Her settling in Tilling looks very like repentance, in which case you ought to set the example, Evie, of being friendly."

"But what would Elizabeth Mapp say?" asked Mrs. Bartlett. "She thought nobody ought to know her."

"Pooh," said Diva. "If you'll come and call, Evie, I'll come with you. And is it really quite certain that she is Lady Deal?"

"Oh, I hope so," said Evie.

"Yes, so do I, I'm sure, but all the authority we have for it at present is that Elizabeth said that Lady Deal had taken Suntrap. And who told Elizabeth that? There's too much Elizabeth in it. Let's go and call there, Evie: now, at once."

"Oh, but dare we?" said the timorous Evie. "Elizabeth will see us. She's sketching at the corner there."

"No, that's her morning sketch," said Diva. "Besides, who cares if she does?"

The socks for the Christmas tree were now quite forgotten and, with this parcel still unopened, the two ladies set forth, with Mrs. Bartlett giving fearful sidelong glances this way and that. But there were no signs of Elizabeth, and they arrived undetected at Suntrap, and enquired if Lady Deal was in.

"No, ma'am," said Susie, "Her ladyship was only here for two nights settling Miss Mackintosh in, but she may be down again to-morrow. Miss Mackintosh is in."

Susie led the way to the drawing-room, and there, apparently, was Miss Mackintosh.

“How good of you to come and call on me,” she said. “And will you excuse my getting up? I am so dreadfully lame. Tea, Susie, please!”

Of course it was a disappointment to know that the lady in the bath-chair was not the repentant male impersonator, but the chill of that was tempered by the knowledge that Elizabeth had been completely at sea, and how far from land, no one yet could conjecture. Their hostess seemed an extremely pleasant woman, and under the friendly stimulus of tea even brighter prospects disclosed themselves.

“I love Tilling already,” said Miss Mackintosh, “and Lady Deal adores it. It’s her house, not mine, you know—but I think I had better explain it all, and then I’ve got some questions to ask. You see, I’m Florence’s old governess, and Susie is her old nurse, and Florence wanted to make us comfortable, and at the same time to have some little house to pop down to herself when she was utterly tired out with her work.”

Diva’s head began to whirl. It sounded as if Florence was Lady Deal, but then, according to the Peerage, Lady Deal was Helena Herman. Perhaps she was Helena Florence Herman.

“It may get clearer soon,” she thought to herself, “and, anyhow, we’re coming to Lady Deal’s work.”

“Her work must be very tiring indeed,” said Evie.

“Yes, she’s very naughty about it,” said Miss Mackintosh. “Girl-guides, mothers’ meetings, Primrose League, and now she’s standing for Parliament. And it was so like her; she came down here last week, before I arrived, in order to pull furniture about and make the house comfortable for me when I got here. And she’s coming back to-morrow to spend a week here I hope. Won’t you both come in and see her? She longs to know Tilling. Do you play bridge by any chance? Florence adores bridge.”

“Yes, we play a great deal in Tilling,” said Diva. “We’re devoted to it too.”

“That’s capital. Now, I’m going to insist that you should both dine with us to-morrow, and we’ll have a rubber and a talk. I hope you both hate majority-calling as much as we do.”

“Loathe it,” said Diva.

“Splendid. You’ll come, then. And now I long to know something. Who was the mysterious lady who called here in the afternoon when Florence came down to move furniture, and returned an hour or two afterwards and asked for the card she had left with instructions that it should be given to Lady Deal? Florence is thrilled about her. Some short name, Tap or Rap. Susie couldn’t remember it.”

Evie suddenly gave vent to a shrill cascade of squeaky laughter.

“Oh dear me,” she said. “That would be Miss Mapp. Miss Mapp is a great figure in Tilling. And she called! Fancy!”

“But why did she come back and take her card away?” asked Miss Mackintosh. “I told Florence that Miss Mapp had heard something dreadful about her. And how did she know that Lady Deal was coming here at all? The house was taken in my name.”

“That’s just what we all long to find out,” said Diva eagerly. “She said that somebody in London told her.”

“But who?” asked Miss Mackintosh. “Florence only settled to come at lunch time that day, and she told her butler to ring up Susie and say she would be arriving.”

Diva’s eyes grew round and bright with inductive reasoning.

“I believe we’re on the right tack,” she said. “Could she have received Lady Deal’s butler’s message, do you think? What’s your number?”

“Tilling 76,” said Miss Mackintosh.

Evie gave three ecstatic little squeaks.

“Oh, that’s it, that’s it!” she said. “Elizabeth Mapp is Tilling 67. So careless of them, but all quite plain. And she did hear it from somebody in London. Quite true, and so dreadfully false and misleading, and *so* like her. Isn’t it, Diva? Well, it does serve her right to be found out.”

Miss Mackintosh was evidently a true Tillingite.

“How marvellous!” she said. “Tell me much more about Miss Mapp. But let’s go back. Why did she take that card away?”

Diva looked at Evie, and Evie looked at Diva.

“You tell her,” said Evie.

“Well, it was like this,” said Diva. “Let us suppose that she heard the butler say that Lady Deal was coming——”

“And passed it on,” interrupted Miss Mackintosh. “Because Susie got the message and said it was wonderfully clear for a trunk call. That explains it. Please go on.”

“And so Elizabeth Mapp called,” said Diva, “and left her card. I didn’t know that until you told me just now. And now I come in. I met her that very afternoon, and she told me that Lady Deal, so she had heard in London, had taken this house. So we looked up Lady Deal in a very old Peerage of hers——”

Miss Mackintosh waved her arms wildly.

“Oh, please stop, and let me guess,” she cried. “I shall go crazy with joy if I’m right. It was an old Peerage, and so she found that Lady Deal was Helena Herman——”

“Whom she had seen ten years ago at a music hall as a male impersonator,” cried Diva.

“And didn’t want to know her,” interrupted Miss Mackintosh.

“Yes, that’s it, but that is not all. I hope you won’t mind, but it’s too rich. She saw you this morning coming out of your house in your bath-chair, and was quite sure that you were *that* Lady Deal.”

The three ladies rocked with laughter. Sometimes one recovered, and sometimes two, but they were re-infected by the third, and so they went on, solo and chorus, and duet and chorus, till exhaustion set in.

“But there’s still a mystery,” said Diva at length, wiping her eyes. “Why did the Peerage say that Lady Deal was Helena Herman?”

“Oh, that’s the last Lady Deal,” said Miss Mackintosh. “Helena Herman’s Lord Deal died without children and Florence’s Lord Deal, my Lady Deal, succeeded. Cousins.”

“If that isn’t a lesson for Elizabeth Mapp,” said Diva. “Better go to the expense of a new Peerage than make such a muddle. But what a long call we’ve made. We must go.”

“Florence shall hear every word of it to-morrow night,” said Miss Mackintosh. “I promise not to tell her till then. We’ll all tell her.”

“Oh, that is kind of you,” said Diva.

“It’s only fair. And what about Miss Mapp being told?”

“She’ll find it out by degrees,” said the ruthless Diva. “It will hurt more in bits.”

“Oh, but she mustn’t be hurt,” said Miss Mackintosh. “She’s too precious, I adore her.”

“So do we,” said Diva. “But we like her to be found out occasionally. You will, too, when you know her.”