

THE IMPOSTOR.

Herr Hartmann was an old friend of my father, and we were all very fond of him. When I came home from vacation, I spent a good deal of time in his house, but my visits had nothing to do with Julia, his daughter, all gossip to the contrary notwithstanding. To be sure, her presence added life to our little gatherings, for, indeed she was a vivacious, well educated girl, but my heart belonged to another representative of her sex. I was really interested in the old man. He talked entertainingly on almost any topic under the sun, and he had an easy going sort of humor which was irresistible.

That he had a son I learned from Julia, who was as communicative and gushing as she was gay.

"You know I have a brother somewhere," she once said to me. "First promise on your word of honor that you won't tell father I told you. But no, I won't tell you anything. You shouldn't have let me blab that much either."

"Look here, Fraulein Hartmann," I said, seriously, "if the matter is really a secret you had better think twice before you go on."

"That's all right. I am so full of it I must speak about it to somebody. All I want you to do is to pledge your word of a gentleman that it will go no farther."

I only shrugged my shoulders, but this must have been interpreted by Julia as a sacred oath of discretion, for she immediately proceeded to tell me the story.

"I never saw him," she began. "He was born six or seven years before I came into the world, when our parents lived in Cologne. When he was two years old, the landlady of the house in which they lived took a liking to him. 'A liking' is no word for it. She was all wrapped up in the boy. You see, she was childless and a cranky, nervous creature. Everybody called her a 'crazy loon,' and some people said she was actually out of her mind half the time. Her husband soon died and she sold all her property and went to America, where she had a sister and two brothers. At that time my father did not know she was going away. He found it out when it was too late. You see, she was so fond of my brother that my parents had to let her take him to her house sometimes. They hated to do it, and my mother had a foreboding that it would lead to trouble, but the widow would beg them so hard they could not refuse her. Well, the long and short of it is the crazy woman stole the boy, and before my parents knew where she was she had landed in America with him. She wrote us all about it as soon as she arrived at her sister's and begged us to let her keep the child, promising to bring him up well and to make him her sole heir. My father wrote to some friends in America, but nothing came of it. When she found out that he was bent on getting back the child, she stopped writing altogether and father's friends could not find her. Later on my parents heard from her in Australia. Again she assured them that Victor was well taken care of, but there was no address in her letter and that was the last they heard of him—the last until yesterday. By the way, Victor was his real name, but she changed it to hide his identity."

"Didn't your father try to get the child?" I asked.

"Of course he did," she answered testily. "But all this happened a few years before I came into the world, so how am I to know what he did and what he did not in those days? All I do know is that he did not leave a stone unturned, but that is not what I wish to tell you. You're inquisitive as a woman, and I am sorry I have told you so much."

I must confess my curiosity got the better of my sense of dignity, I begged her to go on.

"Well," she said, with a patronizing smile, "I am not going to torture you. My father received a letter from him yesterday. He would not tell me what Victor said nor where he was, except that he expected to be here in a month or two. When I begged father to let me see the letter, he said I talked too much and that he would wait until Victor actually arrived and he made sure it was not a dream."

It was no dream; at least at the time I was introduced to the man who said he was Victor we had not the slightest suspicion that he was somebody else and that the real Victor—but then I am afraid I have fallen into Julia's habit of "blabbing."

He was a well built fellow of twenty-nine, with reddish hair and regular features. He certainly bore some resemblance to Herr Hartmann, and my old friend was in the seventh heaven. He was both an Australian and an American, having spent his childhood in both countries by turns, but he spoke good German, and his present residence was in an English town in the West Indies, where he was established in business, as he said.

One afternoon, in the course of a walk I took with Herr Hartmann, my friend said to me:

"You must be curious to know the story of my son." And after going over the events with which I had been made familiar by Julia he went on: "The rest of it is very simple. That crazy woman told her relatives

a lie. She passed my son for her own. He grew up that way. Only recently—a year or two ago—he learned the truth by mere chance. He came across an old neighbor of ours who told him that the woman he thought his mother was childless and related the circumstances of her disappearance. He investigated the matter, and from a thousand details he came to the conclusion that it was all true. Then it was he wrote to me. It was all so strange, and I was as slow to believe that he was my boy as he was to believe that I was his father, but a correspondence, of which my daughter knows nothing, established the truth beyond a doubt. That's all there is to it."

As he spoke I noticed that his face was clouded and that the ring of good humor which usually accompanied his talk was absent from his voice. It seemed to me as though my friend were worried, as if instead of being overjoyed at the great event he looked pensive, wistful, heavy-hearted.

One evening Julia said to me:

"My brother must be in trouble. I know nothing about business matters, of course, but I feel that his affairs are out of shape and that he is a poor man. He is so bashful and reticent, you know, but I can see he is anxious to talk to papa about his affairs and has not the courage to do so. Poor fellow, it keeps him awake nights. I am so fond of him, you know. I wish I could help him. I am sure papa would, but I can't tell him about it. I have tried several times, but my heart begins to beat fast the moment I get near the subject. I can't account for it, but it's no use. I know I won't have the spunk to speak to papa."

"I wish I could help you," I said politely.

You could if you only would," she answered eagerly. "You are a man. You can talk business with papa. You could work the conversation round to my brother's affairs and ask him whether he was well off, for instance. I tried the trick but made a mess of it."

I had to promise her. When I made an attempt to redeem my pledge, I experienced the same sensation which Julia had described to me. There was something forbidding in Herr Hartmann's manner when the conversation turned on Victor. He became morose, and he smoked more than he talked.

Meanwhile the newcomer behaved toward Julia in a way which seemed to me rather singular. He was bashful in her presence and lavished attentions upon her which somehow did not impress me as the usual manifestations of an ordinary attachment between brother and sister. I confess it piqued my curiosity, and I watched the two with increasing interest. Julia received these attentions as a matter of course. With all her education and cleverness she was no philosopher of human relations. She was the most credulous girl you ever saw, and she asked no questions.

Finally my old friend lost all his patience. He was dying to relieve his heart of its burden.

"I must speak to you. You are the only man I can be frank with. I am unhappy. This man who calls himself my son is an impostor. I cannot prove it, but I am sure of it all the same. Something told me so from the beginning. At first I was too overcome to mind the inner voice, but the young man's demeanor makes my suspicion stronger every day. There is something in his manner, his voice, in everything he says or does, which keeps buzzing in my ear that I am being made a fool of."

"If he were my son, I would experience that instinctive feeling which every parent must feel for his child. My heart is cold. It never was otherwise. It was my brain which accepted the logic of all the evidence contained in that correspondence between him and me. My heart has all along refused to believe it. Why, man, can't you see he is after some of my money? It seems vulgar to speak of these things, but he never talks to me in a free and easy manner, and he always seems to be beating about the bush, as if he left a great deal unsaid or wanted to ask a favor and was too bashful to unbosom himself to me."

"But if he is an impostor it ought not to be so difficult to find him out," I remarked. "By a clever system of examination and cross examination it ought to be easy to trip him up."

"I have tried to draw him out. I have examined him as closely as possible on his antecedents, but he answers my questions in monosyllables, and he is so careful of every word he utters that my efforts are all of no avail—except, indeed, in so far as his replies to my queries intensify my conviction—my moral conviction, do you understand?—that the man is not my son. No, no, no! He is not my son!" My friend pounded the table with his fist, and, getting up from his seat, he fell to pacing the floor with great vehemence.

A few days later the young man called on me. It was his first visit at our house, and I could see by his manner that he came on a rather important business. When we found ourselves alone in my room he said without looking at me:

"I wish to come straight to the point. Have you time to listen?" I said, "Yes."

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and he went on. "I know you are a man of honor, I wish to confide in you a matter which has been weighing on my mind almost since I set foot on the soil of this town. Well, I wish to say that my name is not Victor Hartmann and that I am not your friend's son. Yes, I am an impostor, but if you think I am a knave you wrong me. I am an unfortunate fellow, weak and capable of crime perhaps, but I have a heart and a conscience and know how to hate myself for being bad. I am tired of this comedy. I have made up my mind to disappear from this town. Tell your friend his son is dead. I knew him. He looked somewhat like me. He died two years ago in Honduras. When I found myself stranded, the evil spirit came over me, I thought I would impersonate my chum (by that time I had learned who his father was) and get some money out of it."

"I was mistaken. I have made a botch of it. I have been wretched and awkward from the start. That gave it all away. Well—Julius is the cause of it. I would give twenty years of my life to undo it all, so as to be able to sue for her hand, but, of course, that's out of the question. I am going away. Tell Julia I am no knave—at heart, at least. And if I have acted like one, tell her my punishment is severe enough."

Before I could say a word he whispered:

"Remember, I have told you all this because I think you a gentleman. Goodby, and don't interfere with my going. Goodby, sir."

When my friend discovered the truth, he was angry with me for not having handed the wretch over to the police, but he was gone.—Adapted From the German For New York Commercial Advertiser.

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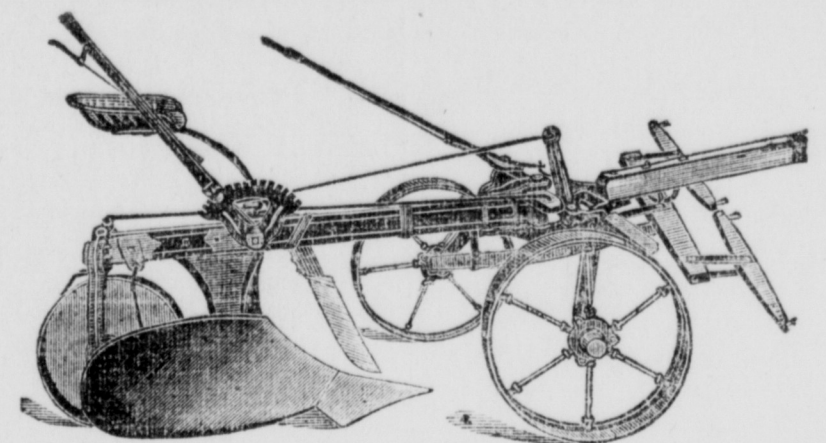
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