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VELVET FEMALE IMPERSONATOR.

"Howard, powder my back."
 Howard—a long, shabby man, with a black beard—turned from the fluffy skirts that he had been patting in vague approval as they lay on the trunk, and took a large blue-ribboned puff from the powder box. His master sat before the looking glass in a pink silk undervest, his neck and shoulders bare, his ringed hands folded in his lap.

Howard flattered and flattered the soft puff over his back, until the sensitive skin rippled into little shivering dimples at the downy caress.

"Leave off, Howard, you make me nervous," said Velvet, and then trilled off into a high running arpeggio. His voice had the limpid, treble purity of a clarinet.

There was a knock at the dressing room door.

"Are you ready?" asked the stage manager, putting in his head.

"No, he ain't," said Howard.

"They're waiting," said the stage manager.

"Well, they'll have to," said Howard, and shut the door.

The singer was still trilling softly to himself, and, drawing, with a blackened hare's foot, a faint shadow down the middle of his chest. His heavy lashes, thick with kohl, dropped prettily over his powdered cheek.

Another knock at the door and a woman's voice asked: "May I come in?"

Howard, with his master's rose-satin corsets in his hand, went to the door.

"Nobody can see him until he's done his turn," he said, holding the door slightly ajar. There was a flutter of silk dresses and feminine protestations outside. Then, one fair head, with a diminutive bonnet perched gayly at the back of it, was thrust in over Howard's shoulder.

"Velvet! Do let us in! I have brought the Baroness d'Este. You know you said she was pretty. Do let us in!"

"Yes, do!" said a full, foreign voice behind her. "I will put on your corsets for you that you will have a bust like Venus Anadyomene and a waist like mine!"

"Howard, don't let them tease me!" said Velvet, without turning round, as he put a dab of carmine into each delicate nostril.

"Now, ladies, please don't tease him!" said Howard.

"But did you get my letter, Velvet?" asked the fair one.

"He never gets his letters before he has done his turn," said Howard. "They make him nervous."

"Give him these flowers," said the Baroness d'Este, taking a large bunch of double violets from her breast.

"He never accepts flowers," said Howard. "Now, ladies, I am very sorry"—and he shut the door.

"Sale bete!" said the Baroness d'Este as she rustled away.

He was ready. He stood in the wings waiting for his opening bars, curled and perfumed, in his short satin skirts and his young, bare shoulders. Such young shoulders, with the pearl straps falling off them, and the puffed sleeves half way down his arm. He was made up without any rouge, and his thin face was quite colorless, except for the scarlet mouth and the deep shadow in his eyes. One heavy, black curl fell over his low, white forehead; the rest of his hair was pinned up at the back of his head with a scarlet rose. Howard stood near him, holding his fan and lace handkerchief.

As the orchestra struck up one of Ardit's waltzes, Howard slipped the fan over his master's waist and put the tiny

over-scented handkerchief into his impatient, ring-laden fingers. Then Velvet—beginning as softly as a far-away violin with a sordina—struck a trill in high G—a long, acute trill, with a gradual, astonishing crescendo which carried him out on the stage, filling and piercing the hall with the wild and wonderful agony of the note.

Howard walked wearily back to the dressing room and sat down on the trunk in the midst of the tossed skirts and tumbled satin shoes and trailing ribbons and artificial flowers. The air was stifling with perfume—Marechal Neil and Velontine—and the faint, insipid odor of grease paints and cold creams, of silken clothes and Russian cigarettes.

The door opened and a handsome man of about forty lounged into the room.

"Hullo," he said, nodding his curly, gray head in a friendly way to Howard.

"Hullo," said Howard.

The handsome man went over to the glass and gave a little upward twist to his heavy mustache. Then he sat down near Howard on the trunk.

"What are the invitations for to-night?" he asked, gazing pensively at a satin petticoat—a little green satia petticoat, trimmed with bunches of artificial violets, that lay on the chair beside him.

"Oh, the usual thing," said Howard. "Three newspaper men, half a dozen countesses, fifty actors, 100 actresses, a 'society leader' incog., a couple of clubs and a party of girls."

The other laughed. "Well, which is he going to accept?"

Howard shrugged his dingy shoulders. "You never knows," he said.

The handsome man lit a cigar and got up. "Well, if he should want me, I'm down stairs in the cafe," he said, and went out.

"Mr. Tom has been here," said Howard, bending his bald head over Velvet's shoes and unfastening their tiny pearl buttons. "He's down stairs in the cafe."

"Yes?" said Velvet.

"You've got that girls' supper on to-night," continued Howard, "and the newspapers. And Mrs. X—, incog., Madison avenue, you know."

"Yes," drawled Velvet.

"Then there are them actors," continued Howard, folding up a white satin corsage and bending his shabby back over the trunk as he put it away.

Velvet yawned.

"And the literary Countess affair," Howard went on.

"Howard," said Velvet, spraying the front of his coat with Marechal Neil, "I wish you were dead."

II.

Among the many women who adored him, two loved him.

One was a little English girl, with straight and tidy hair and a straight and tidy soul. Her small face was sensible and freckled, and her name was Sue.

She loved Velvet in the daytime. She had only seen him once at night, and was thoroughly disgusted. She tried to make a nice, English fellow out of him; she wanted him to wear cricketing flannels and be engaged to her. She sent him presents of cigar cases and match boxes, and a large knife with eight blades that belonged to her brother. She had no parents to look after her, and her brother was a newspaper man, away all night and slept all day. So Sue took things in her own way. And Velvet was one of them.

The other woman, whose slender soul ached for Velvet's boyish beauty, was Lalia Dore, the neurotic Parisienne who drooped her violet eyes and raised

her scarlet mouth to the undoing of so many.

"Velvet! Velvet! Velvet!" she would call, with thin, outstretched arms and pleasure-pale lips, alone in her dim, warm rooms, or with no matter whom raving at her feet. "Velvet! Velvet! Velvet!" And she would lean over the parapet of her crowded box, every night, and gaze with insolent hunger at the painted boy with the frail shoulders and the high, white voice.

Her perverse effrontery pleased him; and, singing, he would turn toward her—not often; once, perhaps, during the evening—and with a long, level look, drive her blood with a shock of pleasure to her heart.

He took her presents, too, as he took Sue's—small, blow-away handkerchiefs with dreamy laces; blue satin underwear studded with pearls; and black crepe gowns opening down the side a la Mme. Angot, and fastened on the shoulders with topazes.

One evening he went to have supper at her house after the performance. She had invited him twenty times before, but it was contrary to his system to accept readily.

He went, in his correctest evening dress, with the most candid of shirt fronts, the lowest of waistcoats, the pearllest of kid gloves, the dullest of black hats.

When he rang at the door a black servant in white velvet livery opened to him.

"Mademoiselle Dore," said Velvet, entering the amber-lit hall with tranquil assurance.

"Not at home," said the man, holding the door open.

"You are mistaken," said Velvet. "Take in my card."

The negro shook a large, obstinate head.

"But she is expecting me," said Velvet, flushing wrathfully.

"I have my orders," said the negro, with dignified black lids cast over his large eyes. "No gentlemen, sir. Mademoiselle is expecting a lady." The black lids were raised one moment, and the large eyes took in the whole of Velvet's trim, slim figure. Then the lashes dropped again, like covers over boxes.

"Oh!" said Velvet, thoughtfully. "Oh!" and went out.

He drove up again three-quarters of an hour later, and the negro in white velvet let him in. A maid, in cap and apron, escorted him to a dressing room, took his white satin opera cloak from him, held his Louis XIV fan and his tiny amethyst smelling-bottle, while he puffed up his short sleeves and smoothed his curls before the mirror; then she preceded him through the still, heavily-perfumed rooms to her mistress's boudoir in time.

She knocked at the plush-paneled door, drew aside the curtain and, as he passed into the room, retired.

"Ah, ma chatte!" cried Lalia, from the sofa. "Te voila a la fin! Ce que ai souffert!"

He ate the wonderful and abominable supper, and drank the astonishing and improbable beverages that Lalia tendered him with her own pale, ringless hands; but he made her drink more than half his share. He inhaled ether and nitrite of amyl until he was faint and she was fainter.

Then he pushed her languid face away, and rose.

"I must go," he said, kissing her lightly on the cheek. "Good night."

Lalia sat up with dazed eyes.

"Go?" she said, vaguely. "Where to?"

"Home," said Velvet, picking up his fan and gloves, and going past her into the dressing room for his cloak.