# Best-Dressed Woman

BY HELEN WELSHIMER

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CHAPTER I

Outside a storm was raging. Even in the velvet recesses of her dressing room at the most exclusive counter-fer's in New York, Judith Irving felt the tempestuous chilling, the daring, the genuineness of it. Now the slim white kidlings that barricaded the bodice were sleeked with silk, and the tie of the Empire State building caught fascinated and flung it like a silver tassel hanger of fire.

Green fire . . . Judith looked down at the dinner jacket she wore, a jacket whose cloud green was a bright foil against the storm-black of the heavy crepe dress. There was a gaudiness . . .

From the stricken choral mirrors in the dressing room, she watched her striking, slender, black-haired selves with hope and faith. Tomorrow the newspapers would announce that she, Mrs. Philip Godfrey Irving, had paid $900 for that jacket, that she had purchased five other jackets as exotic—one in silver, one in Coronation pink, one in royal gold, a blue that was slippery and a white that was dull and powdery. Best dressed woman in America! Best dressed woman in the world, some artists and stylists said.

Suddenly, with the swift, lithe grace that distinguished her, she seated herself before the mirrors, studied her effect. There was a light knock on the door. She turned casually. It would be only Annette, with the pale blue evening dress adorned with scarves of long flame crepe which she would wear to dinner and the theatre tonight.

"Come in," she said quietly, no hint of disturbance in her voice.

It wasn't Annette. It was the woman about whom she had been thinking when she sat down to study herself before the mirrors.

"Darling, I'm stealing your husband for an hour or two," the newcomer said gaily but her eyes weren't laughing. "You don't mind, do you?"

Judith wanted to say: "Do I mind? I mind so much that I have to clench my hands to keep from telling you what I think of you! I mind so much that I can't see why Phil wants to be bored for one half second—" But she didn't. Instead, she answered easily and nonchalantly: "He told me. He said he was having tea with a beautiful woman who wanted help about investments, and I guessed you. Have a good time and rescue him from the cinnamon buns. He's the handsomest man I know but the waistline may creep out on him."

She saw Marta Rogers' blue eyes widen in surprise, and applauded herself, even while she hated herself, for using the possessive marital touch to show the other woman that it was she who bore Phil's name and kept his home.

* * *

When Mrs. Rogers had gone, and Judith was dressed in her brown wool ensemble whose jacket of hyacinth blue had butterflies done in warmer colors, she seated herself once more at her mirror. Intently she looked into her own cloudy gray eyes.

Phil—Phil . . . He was hers. That is, as much as one human being could belong to another. It had been that way for six years now. They didn't just love each other—they liked each other, which was even more important.

Phil . . . He wasn't handsome. Rugged was a better word. Tall, broad shouldered, slim waisted, with rough-edged blond hair and blue eyes that some seafaring relative had given him. He had worked his way through college where he had been an All-American football star. A wealthy grandfather, who had disinherited Phil's father, had taken an interest in him after that, helped him through law school and had left him his money. Now, at 34, Phil was not only rich, but a brilliant and successful young corporation lawyer.

Sitting before the mirror, with the storm beating against the windows, Judith relived a scene of the night before. The telephone had rang and she had answered the extension in her dressing room. Already there were pulses on the line. Phil's and a woman's.

"Of course, darling. Same time and place," she heard Phil say.

"I sha all my day around that house," the velvet voice came back.

* * *

Very quietly she replaced the telephone and when she went into the living room where Phil was waiting in his homecoming dinner clothes she was as cool and composed as the silver metallic sheath that wrapped her slim body.

"You're gorgeous," he said. "A movie version of Joan of Arc done in excellent taste."

She could have screamed. "Dressed to please my husband." Instead she put the words away. It was he who had noticed the discussion things, and remembered a game. If she had not known that he loved her she would have seen a little malice of the situation he seemed to read for her choice. She had told herself now and then that she was whom with whom she danced or played the piano and would have resented lack of attention. "Why shouldn't he be proud of her ability to wear clothes?"

Now she smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. Phil knew it. She sensed it in the tightening of the muscles at his mouth. Suddenly he felt the need of explanation—and they never explained to each other. It wasn't necessary.

"Marta Rogers called. I'm helping her with some investments. I'm having tea with her tomorrow."

Maybe that really was the gist of it all. Marta . . . that her natural manner, some asserted itself. Any man met a romantic throwback in the enchanting limelight of a pretty woman's smile—and Marta Rogers, with her blue-gold hair and blue-violet eyes, was as pretty as sin. Although she was a green-eyed . . . she should be covered in any rain street, suddenly she became gay.

Phil was glad and devoted during the evening but she thought his spirit wandered sometimes and then he would quickly force back to her. He seated in the darkened playhouse—she could see it coming, tripping over itself to get back before it was missed.

* * *

Now, in the dressing room, she stood up. Her car was waiting. She would stop at Anne's tea only a minute—it would be the usual gossip, somebody playing a cello and violin, not because anyone wanted music but because it was a softened soundboard for voices that were getting too shrill.

Best dressed woman. . . She laughed quietly as the limousine sped up Park avenue.

Anne, whom she had known for years, was a large woman, familiar enough with Judith's moods to find and ignore the trouble in her eyes. "Come in, darling. I have a surprise. Bruce Knight is here."

"Did you plan it?" Judith forgot Phil for a moment.

"No, Millicent Hayne brought him. She carries somebody's umbrella or something across the stage in his play."

"Anne, be a dear and don't tell him who I am—who I used to be, I mean."

But when she met the actor, tall and fair-haired, in perfect tweeds, his keen eyes scanned her face.

"Don't we know each other?" he asked. "I've seen you—"

"In the rotogravures," Millicent supplied. "Judy's America's best dressed woman and any actress would envy the publicity she gets."

"Mrs. Philip Godfrey Irving." He repeated the name slowly. "No, it wasn't the clothes I've seen. I think it was you."

"We will compare itineraries," Judy said laughingly, but suddenly she wasn't the poised woman of the world whose husband was taking an inconsequential woman to tea. She was Judith Bole, old man Bole's youngest, whose legs were too long and whose hair was fly-away stuff—Judy Bole who lived on a river boat anchored in the flats of Pittsburgh's rivers. She was 17, a high school junior.

Because she had worked happily in the chemistry laboratory with a boy named Bruce Knight they had become friends. Once the class had made an expedition to a mining district and he had taken her in his roadster. They had been late in returning because they had discovered a long way back. The girls, whose clothes were good and whose houses opened on streets, had spurned her because she had taken Bruce, a popular senior idol, from them that day. And she had vowed in a frightened, little girl heart that some day she would do something to show them she mattered—write a book, be an actress. Of course she couldn't, though.

* * *

Thirteen years ago that had been—and here they were, important names both of them; a Broadway favorite an a woman who knew style.

"Yes, we'll repeat our travels and find a mutual crossroads," the man was saying "How about lunch, tomorrow?"

She shook her head. Tomorrow she was going to suggest lunch to Phil. Suddenly, the fear of the night before came back. She was the frightened, shabby little Judy Bole, wanting somebody to be kind to her.

"Thursday?" the man was saying. "The Union Club—Ladies' room?"

Her eyes flashed with brief amusement. It was the most eminently respectable dining room in New York—one where men entertained family guests and never held a rendezvous.

"At one?" she asked simply.

"Telephone for you, darling," Anne interrupted. "In my sitting room." She lowered her voice as she walked away with Judith. "Judy, that Rogers' woman who divorced her husband in Paris last year and came from goodness knows where before New York took 'em up, is casting purple eyes at Phil and he's too sweet to know it. Better get out your bow and arrow and scare the girl out of the woods."

Judith laughed but her hand was shaking when she picked up the receiver.

"Judy dear?" The voice that could make her heart turn over like a top came cheerfully into the room. "I'm being detained—but I'll join the party later. We're dining with the Colys, aren't we? Will you make my apologies?"

CHAPTER II

Promising Phil that she would make his apologies, Judith held the receiver of the telephone in a frightened hand. She knew that he had no conference, no client, no business. He was taking Marta Rogers to dinner. She knew it, and yet she wanted to keep that telephone connection which bound her to her husband. When it broke, he would go back to the other woman.

Phil didn't play casually with women. His devotion and fidelity were the talk of their circle. Maybe that very thing left him open to a scheming woman of Marta Rogers' type. She made a hasty decision.

"I'm tired, Phil. I'm skipping the party, too."

His voice was surprised when he answered. Worried, too, but she could not tell if it was for her or because he felt compunction now about carrying out his own plans. "You're not ill? Judy, I'll skip the whole business and come home as soon as I can. That's what you want, isn't it dear?"

"Don't come until you're ready," she answered. "I'll be lazy and read."

Phil preferring somebody else—it was preposterous! Of course it would be over in a week, a month. Or—would it? For six years he had preferred her. . . .

"Judith Irving, you are acting like a fishwife," she upbraided that still white face in the mirror over the telephone table. Oh, every place she looked today there were mirrors! "No, go walk home. Get so tired that nothing will look as good as a hot bath and a deep chair and a pot of tea. Hurry!"

As she started up the avenue, a pleasant voice spoke at her shoulder. "Maybe we met on a walk somewhere!" She turned to see Bruce Knight. She felt oddly pleased. "I hate teas," he said, smiling disarmingly.

"So do I," she answered. "But I go to hundreds of them."

"Why do we do it?"

She answered, explaining it more to herself than to him.

"My husband likes them . . . the geniality after the day's work. I like people but not in crowds. I feel that my thoughts are being stepped on."

"Have you seen my play yet?" he asked presently.

She shook her head, dark and shining under the simple blue sailor that matched the hyacinth jacket. "It's a sellout. We have to wait until we can get seats."

"I'll send you tickets.

A boy and girl from Pittsburgh, waking together again. She thanked him as she turned off at the street which led over to the East river and her apartment. He would send two seats, of course. She had a premonition that she would be seeing the play alone.

But she didn't call off her engagement. Instead she left a note for Phil and went. He came when the play that followed the dinner was half over.

There were photographers in the lobby during the intermission and Judith smiled and posed while her frock was being photographed. Best dressed woman—Phil stood near, smiling at her. Suddenly she became aware that the old warmth was missing. He was giving her a courteous gesture. He looked amused, a little critical.

That was the reason for the perplexity in her face in the pictures the next day. The dress had photographed perfectly. It was white silk crepe with bands of gold and silver embroidery that edged the cape and the panels and made the belt. She had arisen early to have breakfast with Phil and she smiled as she showed him the paper. He looked at the pictured face, and when his eyes searched her own face they were troubled.

"Are you ill, Judy?"

"No, Phil, dear. Why?"

"Would a trip help you? Paris perhaps?"

"I don't think so." Oh, if you would only tell me about Marta, if there is anything to tell; if you would put the cards on the table and let me help you face it. Please, Phil! Outwardly her face was quiet. "Honey, let's lunch together. I'll pick you up down on Wall Street—"

He looked at her a little sadly. As though there was something she couldn't understand; as though there were something he wished to tell her and couldn't. He was hunting a path to reach her. Impulsively she spoke:

"What is it, Phil?"

He started. "What? Oh—oh nothing, nothing at all. I'm ending up a business deal at lunch today. How about tomorrow?"

Tomorrow didn't matter. Not even if she had not made the date with Bruce Knight. She told him about that now and his interest quickened.

When her telephone rang an hour later and she heard Bruce's voice she was glad. Here was someone who wanted to see her; someone without romantic implications; that was over. "Was it today or tomorrow, or both, we're lunching?" he asked. "I honestly forgot."

"It was tomorrow but it can be today," she answered, glad to be taken away from herself.

Seated with Bruce in the comfortable, chintz-draped dining room of the Union club, busy with iced grapefruit, Judith suddenly put down her spoon. Two familiar figures were approaching. One was a small woman in a leaf green frock with a saucy hint of a hat on yellow curls. The other was a broad-shouldered man, tall and lithe, and he smiled down at the woman as he talked to her.

But Phil smiled at everyone that way! After all, a man couldn't have a set of special gestures for his wife. Judith looked up as Phil looked down. Her gray eyes steady and dark now, were serious but her lips curved humorously.

There were introductions and no one but the woman who loved him knew that Phil was disturbed. Then he and Marta found a corner table, the grapefruit was replaced by creamed mushrooms, and the conversation went back and forth like a well-trained bouncing ball.

Strange how life changes one. Judith was thinking. Ten years ago she would have gone home to cry. Not now, though. At least, she had a background of experience against which to make comparisons. Foundation of courage. The luncheon was over. Bruce with a smile, gay and [illegible] the two who loitered [illegible] to laugh because they had such a discreet room for rendezvous. Life was [illegible] terribly funny.

Bruce suggested the [illegible] his play when they [illegible] street and she accepted [illegible] want to go home alone.

So it happened that [illegible] the afternoon watching [illegible] who had taken her home [illegible] night, long ago, bring [illegible] faith and sacrifice to a [illegible] was a great actor. She [illegible] now. She wouldn't [illegible] she was. She wouldn't [illegible] again. She must just [illegible] and say goodby. Then [illegible] dressing room shut her [illegible] when the attendant had [illegible] entrance permission.

"I don't want to love you. I honestly don't. But I [illegible] it!" That was Millicent [illegible] with the utter candor [illegible] younger generation.

"You don't—you [illegible] cent, it's madness. I'm [illegible] 19 . . . You'll get over [illegible] It's nothing, nothing—"

Two years older than [illegible] years ago, thought Judith [illegible] would ask the girl to [illegible] afternoon. Maybe she [illegible] her. Suddenly she wanted [illegible] her terribly, intensely. [illegible] being hurt, too. Were all [illegible] hurt? Hurt but walked on [illegible] there was no place [illegible] Millicent had been a protégée [illegible] tante last year, feted at [illegible] Harvard, Yale. She had a [illegible] of football stars. Yet [illegible] Bruce.

That night Phil [illegible] "It's still unfinished business," he said. "We didn't get the [illegible] chosen."

"Phil," Judith said after [illegible] silence.

"Yes, darling?" His voice [illegible] comfortable and relaxed.

"I want to talk. Let's [illegible] to the civilized world [illegible] and go out to the lodge [illegible] this week-end. We're too [illegible] surrounded by people. [illegible] guests all the time. Maybe [illegible] thought clearly—" She [illegible] She had almost voiced [illegible] —something quite [illegible]

"Go on Judy," Phil said [illegible]

(To Be Continued)

Illustrations by Virginia Krausmann

"Darling, I'm stealing your husband for an hour or two," the newcomer said gaily, but her eyes weren't laughing. "You don't mind, do you?"

Judith went to the terrace to greet her husband and the two aire-dales followed her. "Hello, Judy dear," same Marta's fluted tones.

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