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PREVIEW: THE IMAGINARY INVALID

By

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Cast of Characters

EDMUND
ROSIE
ANGELA
CAMILLA
CHRISTOPHER
DR. GORSKI
THOMAS
WALTER

Synopsis

Hypochondriac Edmund wants his daughter to marry a doctor so he can save on his medical bills, but she's in love with someone else. Soon the whole household joins in a madcap scheme to save true love and give Edmund a taste of his own medicine.

ACT I

The living room of Edmund’s house. EDMUND is seated alone in his dressing gown and nightcap and is surrounded by pillows and cushions. He is busy calculating his medical bills.

EDMUND

Aaah! Bills, bills, bills! Like leaves in autumn, and just as difficult to get rid of. On the twenty-fourth, a mixture for my blood; on the twenty-fifth, for my heart; the twenty-sixth, for my nerves. Ridiculous!

(He picks up another pile of bills.)

Aah! Now, let’s see. This month I had eight different medicines and twelve treatments. Last month I had twelve different medicines and fifteen treatments. No wonder I’m not so well now as I have been.

(He picks up a very small handbell and rings it. The bell makes a ridiculously small tinkle.)

Silly little bell, doesn’t make a sound.

(He shakes the bell again, more violently, but it only tinkles.)

They only give it to me so they can’t hear it.

(He shakes more violently without effect.)

Not that they’d come if they did.

(Now each time he rings, it is more and more violently, until it is to the limit of his strength.)

I might be dying for all they know.

(Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.)

I could easily die of rage!

(He suddenly gives an ear-splitting yell of uncontrollable anger, hurls the little bell away from him, and collapses, panting, into the depths of his chair. His panting dies into silence, and for a moment he lies there quite still, then he

begins to stir into life again. He struggles into a half-sitting position and looks around. The offending little bell is hopelessly out of reach, so he calls out, but very, very feebly.)

Hullo.

(He struggles up a bit more, and calls a bit louder.)

Hullo!

(He suddenly sits bolt upright and lets out a stentorian bellow.)

HULLO!

(In the distance, but so it can be clearly heard, a female voice answers.)

ROSIE

(offstage, calling)

Hullo?

EDMUND

(shouting) Come quick. I’m dying!

ROSIE

(still offstage)

Dying?

EDMUND

(shouting)

Stop talking like an echo, and come here.

(He pauses.)

Can you hear me?

ROSIE

(still offstage)

No!

EDMUND

Aaah! Come here, come here, come here. Drop whatever you're doing and come here.

(There is a most terrific crash, followed by a scream. ROSIE, Edmund's nurse and his wife's maid, enters and stands in the doorway. She is a very amusing, wide-awake young woman. At the moment she is dishevelled, and holds a large empty tray.)

ROSIE

Now look what you made me do.

EDMUND

What?

ROSIE

I’ve fallen down the stairs and dropped your breakfast tray.

EDMUND

(grasping his cane.)

You clumsy wretch! Come here!

ROSIE

I can’t. I’ve broken my ankle.

(She flops into chair, at a safe distance from him and his stick.)

EDMUND

Broken your ankle. How can you look after me with a broken ankle?

ROSIE

I can’t.

EDMUND

Oh, you wicked girl! But if I can’t reach you with my stick, I can give you the rough edge of my tongue! Now, listen...

(Upon which ROSIE takes hold of her ankle and starts howling.)

EDMUND

(yelling)

Will you be quiet?

(ROSIE goes on howling.)

Stop it! Will you stop it! I can’t hear myself speak.

(EDMUND stops speaking and immediately ROSIE stops howling, so there is a sudden silence.)

I think you’ve given me laryngitis.

ROSIE

You’ve got laryngitis, I’ve broken my ankle. If that isn’t fair, what is?

EDMUND

Don’t argue, it makes my head ache. Clear these things away.

(He indicates the bills. ROSIE rises and crosses to the table.)

I thought you’d broken your ankle.

ROSIE

I’ve mended it.

EDMUND

You couldn’t.

ROSIE

Oh, yes, I could. It’s cured - like your laryngitis.

(She sees the litter on the table.)

Ooh, what a mess! What is it?

EDMUND

Mind your own business!

(ROSIE picks up a bill.)

EDMUND

DON’T TOUCH ‘EM!

(ROSIE throws the bill down, as if it had stung her.)

ROSIE

How can I clear ‘em up without touching ‘em?

EDMUND

Um? Put the table over there as it is, I’ll go on with ‘em tomorrow.

(ROSIE carries the table across the room. As she does so, she observes what is on it.)

ROSIE

Oh! All of ‘em from your doctor, I see.

EDMUND

Don’t show your ignorance, girl. My doctor is the best around, a man of the greatest skill and learning - what he doesn’t know about illnesses...

ROSIE

I agree with you there. He smells ‘em out, where nobody else would think of ‘em.

EDMUND

(pleased)

That’s true, that’s very true.

ROSIE

Why, if it wasn’t for him, you wouldn’t know you were ill.

EDMUND

That’s true, that’s... What are you talking about? With all I have to suffer, I think this lack of sympathy is the hardest to bear.

(He sinks his head in his hands.)

(Edmund’s daughter, ANGELA, enters the room.)

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ACT 2

The same. A little later.

EDMUND is in his chair, alone in the room. He is taking his temperature.

EDMUND

Normal! Ridiculous! Not to be trusted.

(he throws the thermometer across the room)

(CAMILLA enters.)

CAMILLA

Husband, there’s something going on, here, in this house, that’s very wrong.

EDMUND

I know! That stupid thermometer isn’t working again!

CAMILLA

No, dear. Not the thermometer. Just now, upstairs, walking along the passage, I passed your daughter’s door. I stood there - thunderstruck. What do you think I heard?

EDMUND

How should I know?

CAMILLA

Voices!

EDMUND

Well, what’s wrong with that? What did you expect to hear?

CAMILLA

Not a man’s voice.

EDMUND

Merciful heaven! What was he saying?

CAMILLA

I couldn’t hear. So I opened the door, and I went in - and what do you think I saw?

EDMUND

I wish you’d tell me, dear one, and not keep asking me questions.

CAMILLA

Kneeling before your daughter, was a young man. Her hands in his, and he was kissing them.

EDMUND

Disgusting! Who was he?

CAMILLA

I don’t know. I didn’t get a good look at him. I stood there by the open door; Angela looked up and saw me. The young man turned, leapt from his knees, pushed past me, bounded down the stairs- and has just left the house.

EDMUND

What did Angela say?

CAMILLA

I didn’t wait to ask. I’ve come straight to you. She’s your daughter - you must deal with her.

(ROSIE enters.)

ROSIE

Your brother to see you, sir.

(WALTER, Edmund’s brother, follows ROSIE into the room. He is a man of immense exuberance, and comes bursting in, like a great gust of wind.)

WALTER

Ah! My dear brother!

(He goes to him, seizes him by both hands and holds him at arm's length.)

Now, let's have a look at you. Oh, but you look splendid.

EDMUND

You must be blind, brother. I am very ill.

WALTER

Ill?

CAMILLA

(jumping in)

Yes, Edmund is far too weak to answer any questions. Much too exhausted to talk, aren't you sweetheart?

WALTER

That's a pity! Well, I can talk for the both of us.

EDMUND

(in a croak)

I'm also very hard of hearing - and I've lost my voice.

WALTER

I've come to talk to you about Angela. I've met the man she loves and I've come to recommend him.

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(EDMUND turns towards WALTER, which enables ROSIE to dart back out of sight, but onstage. At once, she begins talking as the doctor, putting disguise back on.)

ROSIE

(as the doctor, shouting)

Hi, girl! Don’t run away! Where are you off to? Here, come here. I want your help. I’m going to give your master his first dose now. I’ll leave the other six doses here with you - but I want you to watch me mix it. So hold the glass for me - very steady - that’s right. This needs careful measuring. One drop too little, or a drop too much - a matter of life and death.

EDMUND

Extraordinary! I never could have believed if I hadn’t seen them together.

(ROSIE appears to EDMUND carrying the dose of medicine.)

ROSIE

(as the doctor, giving the medicine to EDMUND)

Drink this. And I make only one stipulation. During this next week, you must rest. And rest completely. No outside activities or distractions of any sort. None whatsoever. Neither for business or pleasure, social or family reasons.

EDMUND

Yes, of course.

(drinks the medicine)

ROSIE

It’s possibly a little late to restore your youth, but follow my instructions, and I can promise you a vigorous middle-age! Goodbye.

WALTER

Thank you so much, doctor.

ROSIE

One more question - who’s your doctor?

EDMUND

Dr. Gorski.

ROSIE

Gorski! He’s the worst doctor around. And he’s a murderer. And his son’s a half-wit. My last word to you is a solemn warning. Have nothing to do with them! Either as doctors or people. They’d be a menace to your health and happiness.

(ROSIE sweeps out the door.)

WALTER

There’s a doctor for you!

EDMUND

You disapprove of doctors.

WALTER

This one was different.

(ROSIE enters as herself)

ROSIE

What did the good doctor have to say?

WALTER

He said Edmund should stay in his room, absolutely quiet, for at least a week.

EDMUND

But what about the marriage?

WALTER

After what you heard about old Gorski and his half-wit son, I presume that’s off.

EDMUND

Yes, yes, I suppose it is.

(with decision)

She’ll have to be a nun.

WALTER

(surprised)

A what?

EDMUND

A nun.

WALTER

A nun?

EDMUND

My wife has wished it. Now she shall have her way.

WALTER

(with growing indignation)

Your wife has wished it. For God’s sake, why?

EDMUND

That’s no concern of yours. My wife has expressed a wish, and since my own plan has failed, that’s good enough for me.

WALTER

(now really angry)

Really, this is too much! I must speak my mind. If there’s one thing that enrages me more than your infatuation for your doctors, it’s your utter blindness about your wife.

EDMUND

What’s that?

WALTER

(still white-hot)

I’ve always meant to say it. Now it’s been said. The way you fall headlong into any trap that woman sets for you.

ROSIE

(unexpectedly putting on another act)

Oh, no, Walter. How can you say so? Madam would never set a trap for him. She loves him. She adores him. If you could see them together - like two sweethearts.

EDMUND

Well said, Rosie. I didn’t expect if of you. You’re a good girl. Now, brother! If you won’t believe it from me, perhaps you will from her.

WALTER

Indeed I’ll not. Neither from her, nor anyone.

ROSIE

But, sir, I can prove it.

EDMUND

Prove it? How?

ROSIE

Sir, lie right back in your chair and pretend you’re dead. Then we shall all of us see how much she cares for you.

EDMUND

Pretend I’m dead? I don’t like the idea at all.

ROSIE

I hear her coming. Lie down.

(to WALTER)

And you, hide yourself.

EDMUND

Only a few moments. We musn’t keep her in suspense. The shock might kill her.

ROSIE

Yes, yes, yes - only a few moments. But lie down - she’s coming.

(ROSIE pushes him down.)

(A few moments later, CAMILLA enters. ROSIE sets up a great wailing.)

CAMILLA

Rosie!

(ROSIE wails louder)

Rosie!

(ROSIE makes it possible for CAMILLA to be heard)

Whatever is it? Why this caterwauling?

ROSIE

Oh, madam. A dreadful thing has happened.

CAMILLA

Dreadful? What?

ROSIE

The master! Oh, the poor master!

CAMILLA

What about him?

ROSIE

I can’t bear to tell you.

CAMILLA

Tell me.

ROSIE

He’s dead!

CAMILLA

Dead? My husband *dead*?

ROSIE

Oh, quite! Dead as a door-nail! I came in here just now, and there he was, stretched out, just as you see him. Cold. And lifeless. His poor heart stopped.

(For a long moment, CAMILLA remains standing where she is in the doorway, then comes slowly into the room. She seems dazed, as if she had not taken in what she had heard. ROSIE begins to wail again.)

CAMILLA

Really, Rosie! I don’t know what you’ve got to make such a fuss about.

ROSIE

Madam, I can’t help crying.

CAMILLA

Oh, don’t be ridiculous! Now that the old fool can’t hear us, at least we can be honest. It’s a good riddance! What earthly use was he to anyone? His endless illnesses. The ceaseless “treatments”. Revolting, most of them. There were times I didn’t know how to bear it. Now it’s over. Well, thank heaven for that!

(Very suddenly EDMUND sits bolt upright. CAMILLA screams. WALTER comes out of hiding. After the scream, there is a moment’s utter silence.)

ROSIE

Would you believe it - the deceased not dead.

(CAMILLA, with a great cry, rises and rushes out. It is then EDMUND who sets up a howling.)

EDMUND

Oh, brother, brother, brother! Now I really do wish that I were dead. The one person in the world I was quite sure loved me. Did you hear?

WALTER

Indeed, I did!

EDMUND

Now I’ve got nobody.

WALTER

That’s absurd - you’ve got a brother.

EDMUND

And you hate me.

WALTER

Indeed I don’t.

EDMUND

You think I’m an old fool.

WALTER

That’s a very different thing.

EDMUND

But I don’t want to be thought a fool.

WALTER

Then you shouldn’t behave like one. And you have your daughter.

EDMUND

And she hates me.

ROSIE

Oh, no, dear sir, my dear mistress loves you with all her heart.

EDMUND

You’re only trying to comfort me.

ROSIE

Quickly! Lie down again! Angela’s coming! You may hear something else that’ll surprise you.

(EDMUND flops back down. WALTER hides. ROSIE sets up another bout of wailing.)

(ANGELA enters.)

ANGELA

Rosie! Whatever is it?

ROSIE

Oh, my dear mistress - such a disaster.

ANGELA

Disaster?

ROSIE

Oh, your poor father - your poor dear loving father.

ANGELA

My what?

ROSIE

Your poor dear loving father. That’s what I said. And well you know it’s true.

(Motions to tell that he is not actually dead.)

ANGELA

Well - what’s the matter with him?

ROSIE

He’s dead!

ANGELA

Dead?

ROSIE

I came in here, just now, and there he was - stretched out - just

as you see him now; cold and lifeless - his poor heart stopped.

(By this time, as she speaks, she is making the most violent signs to ANGELA, shaking her head and pointing to EDMUND, to make ANGELA understand it is not so. After a few moments of bewilderment, ANGELA gets it.)

ANGELA

(as if utterly heartbroken)

My father dead! Oh, no. It’s more than I can bear.

(Through the open door, she beckons for someone to enter)

And to think, Rosie, that he has gone from us, when he was angry with me.

(CHRISTOPHER appears in the doorway.)

ROSIE

(loudly, for EDMUND’s benefit) Why, here’s Mr. Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

Angela!

ANGELA

Don’t speak to me!

CHRISTOPHER

But, my beloved...

ANGELA

I’m not your beloved. Nor can I ever be.

CHRISTOPHER

For heaven’s sake - what’s happened?

ANGELA

My father...

CHRISTOPHER

I’ve come to see him.

ANGELA

Well - there he is. Look at him! Look! He’s dead.

CHRISTOPHER

Dead?

ROSIE

Dead as mutton.

(During this, signs have passed between them, to show that CHRISTOPHER realizes the situation.)

CHRISTOPHER

(now starting on his act)

What a catastrophe! What utter catastrophe! Just when I'd come to ask him for your hand in marriage.

ANGELA

No! I could never marry without my father's consent. And that he can never give. But he would have done. He could be strict, but he was just; and human; and so kind. Oh, my beloved father, if I could only bring you back to life, what happiness for us all.

(Upon which, EDMUND suddenly sits bolt upright, and both ANGELA and CHRISTOPHER make the same appropriate reactions)

ROSIE

Oh, mistress Angela! You must be some kind of saint - you've worked a miracle.

EDMUND

Don't talk such drivel. You know as well as I do, it was a trick.

ANGELA

A trick! Oh, father, how could you? What have I said? What have you heard me say?

EDMUND

Well, it was a surprise, I don’t mind telling you.

WALTER

But after hearing your wife, you’ll hardly wish to follow her instructions; and after hearing your daughter, I can’t believe you’ll deny her anything.

CHRISTOPHER

Sir, I ask your daughter’s hand.

ROSIE

Oh, sir, you can’t say no.

EDMUND

Can’t I? You don’t know what I can say. I’ve been dead twice within the last few minutes, and had the two biggest shocks of all my life. I hardly know what I’m saying myself.

(to CHRISTOPHER)

So you want to marry my daughter.

CHRISTOPHER

Yes, yes I do.

EDMUND

But she can’t marry a music master.

CHRISTOPHER

I’m not a music master.

EDMUND

But you said you were.

CHRISTOPHER

Oh - yes - so I did.

EDMUND

But why?

CHRISTOPHER

It was a trick.

EDMUND

Outrageous! If there’s anything I disapprove of - it’s a trick.

ROSIE

(together with WALTER, in loud protest)

Oh, sir!

WALTER

(together with ROSIE, in loud protest)

Really brother!

EDMUND

(cutting them short)

All right, all right - enough of that!

(turning to CHRISTOPHER)

You’re not a doctor by any chance?

CHRISTOPHER

No.

EDMUND

Well... that’s probably for the best, isn’t it?

ANGELA

Oh, it is father, it is. *(comes together with CHRISTOPHER)*

EDMUND

Very well then. All of you get out of here and leave me to rest. I feel something coming on.

(starts coughing)

My new doctor told me I needed to rest.

(Everyone else leaves in excitement and exits while he continues to cough.)

Curtain.



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