

The Great Impersonation

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Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	10
Chapter 3	18
Chapter 4	23
Chapter 5	31
Chapter 6	38
Chapter 7	48
Chapter 8	58
Chapter 9	64
Chapter 10	70
Chapter 11	78
Chapter 12	84
Chapter 13	89
Chapter 14	96
Chapter 15	102
Chapter 16	110
Chapter 17	117
Chapter 18	124
Chapter 19	130
Chapter 20	137
Chapter 21	143
Chapter 22	148
Chapter 23	155
Chapter 24	164
Chapter 25	169
Chapter 26	174
Chapter 27	182
Chapter 28	186
Chapter 29	194

Chapter 1

The trouble from which great events were to come began when Everard Dominey, who had been fighting his way through the scrub for the last three quarters of an hour towards those thin, spiral wisps of smoke, urged his pony to a last despairing effort and came crashing through the great oleander shrub to pitch forward on his head in the little clearing. It developed the next morning, when he found himself for the first time for many months on the truckle bed, between linen sheets, with a cool, bamboo-twisted roof between him and the relentless sun. He raised himself a little in the bed.

"Where the mischief am I?" he demanded.

A black boy, seated cross-legged in the entrance of the banda, rose to his feet, mumbled something and disappeared. In a few moments the tall, slim figure of a European, in spotless white riding clothes, stooped down and came over to Dominey's side.

"You are better?" he enquired politely.

"Yes, I am," was the somewhat brusque rejoinder. "Where the mischief am I, and who are you?"

The newcomer's manner stiffened. He was a person of dignified carriage, and his tone conveyed some measure of rebuke.

"You are within half a mile of the Iriwarri River, if you know where that is," he replied,-- "about seventy-two miles southeast of the Darawaga Settlement."

"The devil! Then I am in German East Africa?"

"Without a doubt."

"And you are German?"

"I have that honour."

Dominey whistled softly.

"Awfully sorry to have intruded," he said. "I left Marlinstein two and a half months ago, with twenty boys and plenty of stores. We were doing a big trek after lions. I took some new Askaris in and they made trouble,--looted the stores one night and there was the devil to pay. I was obliged to shoot one or two, and the rest deserted. They took my compass, damn them, and I'm nearly a hundred miles out of my bearings. You couldn't give me a drink, could you?"

"With pleasure, if the doctor approves," was the courteous answer. "Here, Jan!"

The boy sprang up, listened to a word or two of brief command in his own language, and disappeared through the hanging grass which led into another hut. The two men exchanged glances of rather more than ordinary interest. Then Dominey laughed.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "It gave me quite a start when you came in. We're devilishly alike, aren't we?"

"There is a very strong likeness between us," the other admitted.

Dominey leaned his head upon his hand and studied his host. The likeness was clear enough, although the advantage was all in favour of the man who stood by the side of the camp bedstead with folded arms. Everard Dominey, for the first twenty-six years of his life, had lived as an ordinary young Englishman of his position,--Eton, Oxford, a few years in the Army, a few years about town, during which he had succeeded in making a still more hopeless muddle of his already encumbered estates: a few months of tragedy, and then a blank. Afterwards ten years--at first in the cities, then in the dark places of Africa--years of which no man knew anything. The Everard Dominey of ten years ago had been, without a doubt, good-looking. The finely shaped features remained, but the eyes had lost their lustre, his figure its elasticity, his mouth its firmness. He had the look of a man run prematurely to seed, wasted by fevers and dissipation. Not so his present companion. His features were as finely shaped, cast in an even stronger though similar mould. His eyes were bright and full of fire, his mouth and chin firm, bespeaking a man of deeds, his tall figure lithe and supple. He had the air of being in perfect health, in perfect mental and physical condition, a man who lived with dignity and some measure of content, notwithstanding the slight gravity of his expression.

"Yes," the Englishman muttered, "there's no doubt about the likeness, though I suppose I should look more like you than I do if I'd taken care of myself. But I haven't. That's the devil of it. I've gone the other way; tried to chuck my life away and pretty nearly succeeded, too."

The dried grasses were thrust on one side, and the doctor entered,--a little round man, also clad in immaculate white, with yellow-gold hair and thick spectacles. His countryman pointed towards the bed.

"Will you examine our patient, Herr Doctor, and prescribe for him what is necessary? He has asked for drink. Let him have wine, or whatever is good for him. If he is well enough, he will join our evening meal. I present my excuses. I have a despatch to write."

The man on the couch turned his head and watched the departing figure with a shade of envy in his eyes.

"What is my preserver's name?" he asked the doctor.

The latter looked as though the questions were irreverent.

"It is His Excellency the Major-General Baron Leopold Von Ragastein."

"All that!" Dominey muttered. "Is he the Governor, or something of that sort?"

"He is Military Commandant of the Colony," the doctor replied. "He has also a special mission here."

"Damned fine-looking fellow for a German," Dominey remarked, with unthinking insolence.

The doctor was unmoved. He was feeling his patient's pulse. He concluded his examination a few minutes later.

"You have drunk much whisky lately, so?" he asked.

"I don't know what the devil it's got to do with you," was the curt reply, "but I drink whisky whenever I can get it. Who wouldn't in this pestilential climate!"

The doctor shook his head.

"The climate is good as he is treated," he declared. "His Excellency drinks nothing but light wine and seltzer water. He has been here for five years, not only here but in the swamps, and he has not been ill one day."

"Well, I have been at death's door a dozen times," the Englishman rejoined a little recklessly, "and I don't much mind when I hand in my checks, but until that time comes I shall drink whisky whenever I can get it."

"The cook is preparing you some luncheon," the doctor announced, "and it will do you good to eat. I cannot give you whisky at this moment, but you can have some hock and seltzer with bay leaves."

"Send it along," was the enthusiastic reply. "What a constitution I must have, doctor! The smell of that cooking outside is making me ravenous."

"Your constitution is still sound if you would only respect it," was the comforting assurance.

"Anything been heard of the rest of my party?" Dominey enquired.

"Some bodies of Askaris have been washed up from the river," the doctor informed him, "and two of your ponies have been eaten by lions. You will excuse. I have the wounds of a native to dress, who was bitten last night by a jaguar."

The traveller, left alone, lay still in the hut, and his thoughts wandered backwards. He looked out over the bare, scrubby stretch of land which had been cleared for this encampment to the mass of bush and flowering shrubs beyond, mysterious and impenetrable save for that rough elephant track along which he had travelled; to the broad-bosomed river, blue as the sky above, and to the mountains fading into mist beyond. The face of his host had carried him back into the past. Puzzled reminiscence tugged at the strings of memory. It came to him later on at dinner time, when they three, the Commandant, the doctor and himself, sat at a little table arranged just outside the hut, that they might catch the faint breeze from the mountains, herald of the swift-falling darkness. Native servants beat the air around them with bamboo fans to keep off the insects, and the air was faint almost to noxiousness with the perfume of some sickly, exotic shrub.

"Why, you're Devinter!" he exclaimed suddenly,--"Sigismund Devinter! You were at Eton with me--Horrock's House--semi-final in the racquets."

"And Magdalen afterwards, number five in the boat."

"And why the devil did the doctor here tell me that your name was Von Ragastein?"

"Because it happens to be the truth," was the somewhat measured reply. "Devinter is my family name, and the one by which I was known when in England. When I succeeded to the barony and estates at my uncle's death, however, I was compelled to also take the title."

"Well, it's a small world!" Dominey exclaimed. "What brought you out here really--lions or elephants?"

"Neither."

"You mean to say that you've taken up this sort of political business just for its own sake, not for sport?"

"Entirely so. I do not use a sporting rifle once a month, except for necessity. I came to Africa for different reasons."

Dominey drank deep of his hock and seltzer and leaned back, watching the fireflies rise above the tall-bladed grass, above the stumpy clumps of shrub, and hang like miniature stars in the clear, violet air.

"What a world!" he soliloquised. "Siggy Devinter, Baron Von Ragastein, out here, slaving for God knows what, drilling niggers to fight God knows whom, a political machine, I suppose, future Governor-General of German Africa, eh? You were always proud of your country, Devinter."

"My country is a country to be proud of," was the solemn reply.

"Well, you're in earnest, anyhow," Dominey continued, "in earnest about something. And I--well, it's finished with me. It would have been finished last night if I hadn't seen the smoke from your fires, and I don't much care--that's the trouble. I go blundering on. I suppose the end will come somehow, sometime-- Can I have some rum or whisky, Devinter--I mean Von Ragastein-- Your Excellency--or whatever I ought to say? You see those wreaths of mist down by the river? They'll mean malaria for me unless I have spirits."

"I have something better than either," Von Ragastein replied. "You shall give me your opinion of this."

The orderly who stood behind his master's chair, received a whispered order, disappeared into the commissariat hut and came back presently with a bottle at the sight of which the Englishman gasped.

"Napoleon!" he exclaimed.

"Just a few bottles I had sent to me," his host explained. "I am delighted to offer it to some one who will appreciate it."

"By Jove, there's no mistake about that!" Dominey declared, rolling it around in his glass. "What a world! I hadn't eaten for thirty hours when I rolled up here last night, and drunk nothing but filthy water for days. To-night, fricassee of chicken, white bread, cabinet hock and Napoleon brandy. And to-morrow again--well, who knows? When do you move on, Von Ragastein?"

"Not for several days."

"What the mischief do you find to do so far from headquarters, if you don't shoot lions or elephants?" his guest asked curiously.

"If you really wish to know," Von Ragastein replied, "I am annoying your political agents immensely by moving from place to place, collecting natives for drill."

"But what do you want to drill them for?" Dominey persisted. "I heard some time ago that you have four times as many natives under arms as we have. You don't want an army here. You're not likely to quarrel with us or the Portuguese."

"It is our custom," Von Ragastein declared a little didactically, "in Germany and wherever we Germans go, to be prepared not only for what is likely to happen but for what might possibly happen."

"A war in my younger days, when I was in the Army," Dominey mused, "might have made a man of me."

"Surely you had your chance out here?"

Dominey shook his head.

"My battalion never left the country," he said. "We were shut up in Ireland all the time. That was the reason I chucked the army when I was really only a boy."

Later on they dragged their chairs a little farther out into the darkness, smoking cigars and drinking some rather wonderful coffee. The doctor had gone off to see a patient, and Von Ragastein was thoughtful. Their guest, on the other hand, continued to be reminiscently discursive.

"Our meeting," he observed, lazily stretching out his hand for his glass, "should be full of interest to the psychologist. Here we are, brought together by some miraculous chance to spend one night of our lives in an African jungle, two human beings of the same age, brought up together thousands of miles away, jogging on towards the eternal blackness along lines as far apart as the mind can conceive."

"Your eyes are fixed," Von Ragastein murmured, "upon that very blackness behind which the sun will rise at dawn. You will see it come up from behind the mountains in that precise spot, like a new and blazing world."

"Don't put me off with allegories," his companion objected petulantly. "The eternal blackness exists surely enough, even if my metaphor is faulty. I am disposed to be philosophical. Let me ramble on. Here am I, an idler in my boyhood, a harmless pleasure-seeker in my youth till I ran up against tragedy, and since then a drifter, a drifter with a slowly growing vice, lolling through life with no definite purpose, with no definite hope or wish, except," he went on a little drowsily, "that I think I'd like to be buried somewhere near the base of those mountains, on the other side of the river, from behind which you say the sun comes up every morning like a world on fire."

"You talk foolishly," Von Ragastein protested. "If there has been tragedy in your life, you have time to get over it. You are not yet forty years old."

"Then I turn and consider you," Dominey continued, ignoring altogether his friend's remark. "You are only my age, and you look ten years younger. Your muscles are hard, your eyes are as bright as they were in your school days. You carry yourself like a man with a purpose. You rise at five every morning, the doctor tells me, and you return here, worn out, at dusk. You spend every moment of your time drilling those filthy blacks. When you are not doing that, you are prospecting, supervising reports home, trying to make the best of your few millions of acres of fever swamps. The doctor worships you but who else knows? What do you do it for, my friend?"

"Because it is my duty," was the calm reply.

"Duty! But why can't you do your duty in your own country, and live a man's life, and hold the hands of white men, and look into the eyes of white women?"

"I go where I am needed most," Von Ragastein answered. "I do not enjoy drilling natives, I do not enjoy passing the years as an outcast from the ordinary joys of human life. But I follow my star."

"And I my will-o'-the-wisp," Dominey laughed mockingly. "The whole thing's as plain as a pikestaff. You may be a dull dog--you always were on the serious side--but you're a man of principle. I'm a slacker."

"The difference between us," Von Ragastein pronounced, "is something which is inculcated into the youth of our country and which is not inculcated into yours. In England, with a little money, a little birth, your young men expect to find the world a playground for sport, a garden for loves. The mightiest German noble who ever lived has his work to do. It is work which makes fibre, which gives balance to life."

Dominey sighed. His cigar, dearly prized though it had been, was cold between his fingers. In that perfumed darkness, illuminated only by the faint gleam of the shaded lamp behind, his face seemed suddenly white and old. His host leaned towards him and spoke for the first time in the kindlier tones of their youth.

"You hinted at tragedy, my friend. You are not alone. Tragedy also has entered my life. Perhaps if things had been otherwise, I should have found work in more joyous places, but sorrow came to me, and I am here."

A quick flash of sympathy lit up Dominey's face.

"We met trouble in a different fashion," he groaned.

Chapter 2

Dominey slept till late the following morning, and when he woke at last from a long, dreamless slumber, he was conscious of a curious quietness in the camp. The doctor, who came in to see him, explained it immediately after his morning greeting.

"His Excellency," he announced, "has received important despatches from home. He has gone to meet an envoy from Dar-es-Salaam. He will be away for three days. He desired that you would remain his guest until his return."

"Very good of him," Dominey murmured. "Is there any European news?"

"I do not know," was the stolid reply. "His Excellency desired me to inform you that if you cared for a short trip along the banks of the river, southward, there are a dozen boys left and some ponies. There are plenty of lion, and rhino may be met with at one or two places which the natives know of."

Dominey bathed and dressed, sipped his excellent coffee, and lounged about the place in uncertain mood. He unburdened himself to the doctor as they drank tea together late in the afternoon.

"I am not in the least keen on hunting," he confessed, "and I feel like a horrible sponge, but all the same I have a queer sort of feeling that I'd like to see Von Ragastein again. Your silent chief rather fascinates me, Herr Doctor. He is a man. He has something which I have lost."

"He is a great man," the doctor declared enthusiastically. "What he sets his mind to do, he does."

"I suppose I might have been like that," Dominey sighed, "if I had had an incentive. Have you noticed the likeness between us, Herr Doctor?"

The latter nodded.

"I noticed it from the first moment of your arrival," he assented. "You are very much alike yet very different. The resemblance must have been still more remarkable in your youth. Time has dealt with your features according to your deserts."

"Well, you needn't rub it in," Dominey protested irritably.

"I am rubbing nothing in," the doctor replied with unruffled calm. "I speak the truth. If you had been possessed of the same moral stamina as His Excellency, you might have preserved your health and the things that count. You might have been as useful to your country as he is to his."

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