

# THE GREAT IMPERSONATION

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM.

Chapter I.

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 desperate effort and came crashing through the great, slender, shrub to the front of the next morning.

He found himself for the first time in a position on a level, and, between thin sheets of smoke, he saw the doctor, a man 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, stepped 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 Trivari River, if you know where that is," he replied, "about seventy-two miles southeast of the Darawa Settlement."

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

"Without a doubt."

"And you are German?"

"I have the honour."

Dominey smiled softly.

"Awfully sorry to have intruded," he said. "I left Marlinsburg two days and a half months ago, with twenty boys and plenty of stores. We were doing a big trek after lions. I took some deer Antelope, and they came, but the trouble—brought 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 and then, and then a hundred miles out of my bearings. You could not 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 to 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 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 life.

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 first sharp 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, and then a blank of dispassion. 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 like 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 pray, not 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 his preserver's name?" he asked the doctor.

The latter looked as though the question were irrelevant.

"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 whiskey lately, so?" he asked.

"I don't know what the devil it got to do with you," was the curt reply. "But I drink whiskey 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 salt-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. "I don't know how you did it, but until that time I don't drink whiskey whenever I can get it."

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

"Send it along," was the enthusiastic reply. "With a consultation, 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 party 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 east of the bush and flowering shrubs beyond, mysterious and invulnerable save for that rough elephant track along which he had travelled; to the broad, brown river, blue as the sky above, and to the mountains fading into mist beyond. The face of his out 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 doctor, the Englishman and himself, sat at a little table arranged just outside the hut, that they might catch the fast breeze from the mountains, herald of the swift-falling darkness. Native servants beat the floor with bamboos, and the air was faint almost to noxiousness with the perfume of some sickly, exotic shrub.

"Why, you're devils!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Sighmunt Devintar! You were at Eton with me—Horrocks' House—seminary 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.

"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 clumps of shrub, and hang like minute stars in the dark, violet air.

"What a world!" he soliloquized.

"Siggy Devintar, 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, Devintar?"

"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 fire 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 whiskey, Devintar?"

"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," 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 commiseration, 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," he had 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. Tonight, fricassee of chicken, white bread, cracked hock and Napoleon brandy. And tomorrow 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.

"You really wish to know," Von Ragastein replied. "I am an annoying political agent, immovably by moving from place to place, collecting natives for drill."

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

"It is our custom," Von Ragastein declared. "I drill didactically, in German and whenever 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. "I 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

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. "Who's that nobly looking fellow between his fingers. In that perturbed

be a different man. You must excuse, I have work."

Dominey spent three restless days. Even the sight of a herd of elephants in the river and that strange, fierce chorus of night sounds, as beasts of prey crept noiselessly around the camp, failed to move him. For the moment his love of sport, his last hold upon the world of real things seemed dead. What did it matter, the killing of an animal more or less? His mind was fixed unseeingly upon the past, searching always for something which

your life in Germany before you came out here?"

Von Ragastein made no immediate reply, and a curious silence ebbed and flowed between the two men. Every now and then a star shot across the sky. The red rim of the moon rose a little higher from behind the mountains. The bush stillness, always the most mysterious of silences, seemed gradually to become charged with unvoiced passion. Soon the animals began to call around them, one nearer and nearer to the fire which burned at the end of the open space.

"My friend," Von Ragastein said at last, speaking with the air of a man who has spent much time in deliberation, "you speak to me of Germany, of my homeland. Perhaps you have guessed that it is not duty alone which has brought me here to these wild places. I, too, left behind me a tragedy."

Dominey's quick impulse of sympathy was smothered by the stern, almost harsh repression of the other's incidence. You and I, schoolmates and college friends, though some of us in different countries, meet here in the wilderness, each with the iron in our souls. I shall tell you the thing which happened to me, and you shall speak to me of your own career."

"I cannot!" Dominey groaned.

"But you will," was the stern reply.

"Listen."

An hour passed, and the voices of the two men had ceased. The howling of the animals had lessened with the paling of the fires, and a slow, melancholy ripple of breeze was passing through the bush and laying the surface of the river. It was Von Ragastein who broke through what might almost have seemed a trance. He rose to his feet, vanished inside the banda, and reappeared a few minutes later with two tumblers. One he set down in the space provided for it in the arm of his guest's chair.

"Tonight I break what has become a rule with me," he announced. "I shall drink a whiskey and soda. I shall drink to the new things that may yet come to both of us."

"You are giving up your work here?" Dominey asked curiously.

"I am part of a great machine," was the somewhat evasive reply. "I have nothing to do but obey."

A flicker of passion distorted Dominey's face, flamed for a moment in his tone.

"Are you content to live and die like this?" he demanded. "Don't you want to get back to where a different sort of sun will warm your heart and fill your pulses? This primitive world is in its way colossal, but it isn't human. It isn't a life for humans. We want the life of the cities, of people and of the hum of human voices. Curse these animals! If I live in this country much longer, I shall go on all fours."

"You yield too much to environment," his companion observed. "In the life of the cities you would be a sentimentalist."

"No city nor any civilised country will ever claim me again," Dominey sighed. "I should never have the courage to face what might come."

Von Ragastein rose to his feet. The dim outline of his erect form was in a way majestic. He seemed to tower over the man who lounged in the chair below him.

"Fill your whiskey and soda to our next meeting, friend of my school days," he begged. "Tomorrow, before you awake, I shall be gone."

"By soon?"

Von Ragastein replied, "I must be on the other side of those mountains. This must be our farewell."

Dominey was querulous, almost pathetic. He had a sudden hatred of solitude.

"I must trek westward myself directly," he protested, "or eastward, or northward—it doesn't so much matter. Can't we travel together?"

Von Ragastein shook his head.

"I travel officially, and I must travel alone," he replied. "As for your journey, they will be breaking up here tomorrow, but they will send you an escort and put you in the direction you wish to take. This, alas, is as much as I can do for you. For us it must be farewell."

"Well, I can't force myself upon you," Dominey said a little wistfully. "It seems strange, though, to meet right out here, far away even from the rest of life, just to shake hands and pass on. I am sick to death of niggers and animals."

"It is fate," Von Ragastein decided. "Where I go, I must go alone. Farewell, dear friend! We will drink the toast we drank our last night in your rooms at Magdalen. That Sanscrit man translated it for us: 'May each find what he seeks!' We must follow our star."

Dominey laughed a little bitterly. He pointed to a light glowing fitfully in the bush.

"My 'will-the-wisp,' he muttered recklessly, 'leading where I shall follow—into the swamps!'"

A few minutes later Dominey threw himself upon his couch, curiously and unaccountably drowsy. Von Ragastein, who had come in to wish him good night, stood looking down at him for several moments with significant intensity. Then, satisfied that his guest really slept, he turned and passed through the hanging curtain of dried grasses into the next banda, where the doctor, still fully dressed, was awaiting him. They spoke together in German and with lowered voices. Von Ragastein had said something of his imperturbability.

"Everything progresses according to my orders," he demanded.

"Everything, Excellency! The boys are being loaded, and a runner has gone on to Wadhuan for ponies to be prepared."

"They know that I wish to start at dawn?"

"All will be prepared, Excellency," Von Ragastein laid his hand upon

the doctor's shoulder.

"Come outside, Schmidt," he said. "I have something to tell you of my plans."

The two men seated themselves in the long, wicker chairs, the doctor in an attitude of strict attention. Von Ragastein turned his head and listened. From Dominey's quarters quarters came the sound of deep and regular breathing.

"I have formed a great plan, Schmidt," Von Ragastein proceeded. "You know what news has come to me from Berlin?"

"Your Excellency has told me little," the doctor reminded him.

"The Day arrives," Von Ragastein announced, his voice shaking with deep emotion. He paused a moment in thought and continued, "the time, even the month, is fixed. I am recalled from here to take the place for which I was destined. You know what that place is? You know why I was sent to an English public school and college?"

"I can guess."

"I am to take up my residence in England. I am to have a special mission. I am to find a place for myself there as an Englishman. The means are left to my ingenuity. Listen, Schmidt. A great idea has come to me."

The doctor lit a cigar.

"I listen, Excellency."

Von Ragastein rose to his feet. Not content with the sound of that regular breathing, he made his way to the opening of the banda and gazed in at Dominey's slumbering form. Then he returned.

"It is something which you do not wish the Englishman to hear?" the doctor asked.

"It is."

"We speak in German."

"Languages," was the cautious reply, "happen to be that man's only accomplishment. He can speak German as fluently as you or I. That, however, is of no consequence. He sleeps and he will continue to sleep. I mixed him a sleeping draught with his whiskey and soda."

"Ah!" the doctor grunted.

"My principal need in England is an identity," Von Ragastein pointed out. "I have made up my mind. I shall take this Englishman's name. I shall return to England as Sir Everard Dominey."

"So?"

"There is a remarkable likeness between us, and Dominey has not seen an Englishman who knows him for eight or ten years. Any school or college friends whom I may encounter I shall be able to satisfy. I have stayed at Dominey's. I know Dominey's relatives. Tonight he has babbled for hours, telling me many things that it is well for me to know."

"What about his near relatives?"

"He has none nearer than cousins."

"No wife?"

Von Ragastein paused and turned his head. The deep breathing inside the banda had certainly ceased. He rose to his feet and stealing unobtrusively to the opening, gazed down upon his guest's outstretched form. To all appearance, Dominey still slept deeply. After a moment or two's watch, Von Ragastein returned to his place.

"Therein lies his tragedy," he confessed, dropping his voice a little lower. "She is insane—insane, it seems through a shock for which he is responsible. She might have been the only stumbling block, and she is as though she did not exist."

"It is a great scheme," the doctor murmured enthusiastically.

"It is a wonderful one! That great and unrevealed Power, Schmidt, which catches over our country and which will make her mistress of the world, must have guided this man to us. My position in England will be unique. As Sir Everard Dominey I shall be able to penetrate into the inner circles of Society—perhaps, even, of political life. I shall be able, if necessary, to remain in England even after the storm bursts."

"Supposing," the doctor suggested, "this man Dominey should return to England?"

Von Ragastein turned his head and looked towards his questioner.

"He must not," he pronounced.

"So?" the doctor murmured.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Dominey, with a couple of boys for escort and his rifle slung across his shoulder, rode into the bush along the way he had come. The little fat doctor stood and watched him, waving his hat until he was out of sight. Then he called to the orderly.

"Heinrich," he said, "you are sure that the Herr Englishman has the whiskey?"

"The water bottles are filled with nothing else, Herr Doctor," the man replied.

"There is no water or soda water in the pack?"

"Not one drop, Herr Doctor."

"How much food?"

"One day's rations."

"The beef is salt?"

"It is very salt, Herr Doctor."

"And the compass?"

"It is ten degrees wrong."

"The boys have their orders?"

"They understand perfectly, Herr Doctor. If the Englishman does not drink they will take him at midnight to where His Excellency will be encamped at the bend of the Blue River."

The doctor sighed. He was not at heart an unkindly man, but he was a man of his word. "I think," he murmured, "it will be better for the Englishman that he drinks."

CHAPTER III.

Mr. John Lambert Mangan of Lincoln's Inn gazed at the card which a junior clerk had just presented in blank astonishment, an astonishment which became speedily blended with dismay.

"Good God, do you see this, Harrison?" he exclaimed, passing it over to his manager, with whom he had been in consultation. "Dominey—Sir Everard Dominey—back here in England!"

The head clerk glanced at the narrow piece of pasteboard and sighed.

"I'm afraid you will find him rather a troublesome client, sir," he remarked.

(Continued on Monday.)



"Tonight," said Von Ragastein, "I drink to the things that may yet come to the both of us."