



CH VII ~ OF CORPORAL RUFUS SMITH
AND HIS COMING TO CLOOMBER

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

In making this statement I have purposely couched it in bald and simple language, for fear I should be accused of colouring my narrative for the sake of effect. If, however, I have told my story with any approach to realism, the reader will understand me when I say that by this time the succession of dramatic incidents which had occurred had arrested my attention and excited my imagination to the exclusion of all minor topics.

How could I plod through the dull routine of an agent's work, or interest myself in the thatch of this tenant's bothy or the sails of that one's boat, when my mind was taken up by the chain of events which I have described, and was still busy seeking an explanation for them.

Go where I would over the countryside, I could see the square, white tower shooting out from among the trees, and beneath that tower this ill-fated family were watching and waiting, waiting and watching—and for what? That was still the question which stood like an impassable barrier at the end of every train of thought.

Regarded merely as an abstract problem, this mystery of the Heatherstone family had a lurid fascination about it, but when the woman whom I loved a thousandfold better than I did myself proved to be so deeply interested in the solution, I felt that it was impossible to turn my thoughts to anything else until it had been finally cleared up.

My good father had received a letter from the laird, dated from Naples, which told us that he had derived much benefit from the change, and that he had no intention of returning to Scotland for some time. This was satisfactory to all of us, for my father had found Branksome such an excellent place for study that it would have been a sore trial to him to return to the noise and tumult of a city. As to my dear sister and myself, there were, as I have shown, stronger reasons still to make us love the Wigtownshire moors.

In spite of my interview with the general—or perhaps I might say on account of it—I took occasion at least twice a day to walk towards Cloomber and satisfy myself that all was well there. He

had begun by resenting my intrusion, but he had ended by taking me into a sort of half-confidence, and even by asking my assistance, so I felt that I stood upon a different footing with him than I had done formerly, and that he was less likely to be annoyed by my presence. Indeed, I met him pacing round the enclosure a few days afterwards, and his manner towards me was civil, though he made no allusion to our former conversation.

He appeared to be still in an extreme state of nervousness, starting from time to time, and gazing furtively about him, with little frightened, darting glances to the right and the left. I hoped that his daughter was right in naming the fifth of October as the turning point of his complaint, for it was evident to me as I looked at his gleaming eyes and quivering hands, that a man could not live long in such a state of nervous tension.

I found on examination that he had had the loose rails securely fastened so as to block up our former trysting-place, and though I prowled round the whole long line of fencing, I was unable to find any other place where an entrance could be effected.

Here and there between the few chinks left in the barrier I could catch glimpses of the Hall, and once I saw a rough-looking, middle-aged man standing at a window on the lower floor, whom I supposed to be Israel Stakes, the coachman. There was no sign, however, of Gabriel or of Mordaunt, and their absence alarmed me. I was convinced that, unless they were under some restraint, they would have managed to communicate with my sister or myself. My fears became more and more acute as day followed day without our seeing or hearing anything of them.

One morning—it was the second day of October—I was walking towards the Hall, hoping that I might be fortunate enough to learn some news of my darling, when I observed a man perched upon a stone at the side of the road.

As I came nearer to him I could see that he was a stranger, and from his dusty clothes and dilapidated appearance he seemed to have come from a distance. He had a great hunch of bread on his knee and a clasp-knife in his hand, but he had apparently just finished his breakfast, for he brushed the crumbs off his lap and rose to his feet when he perceived me.

Noticing the great height of the fellow and that he still held his weapon, I kept well to the other side of the road, for I knew that destitution makes men desperate and that the chain that glittered on my waistcoat might be too great a temptation to him upon this lonely highway. I was confirmed in my fears when I saw him step out into the centre of the road and bar my progress.

“Well, my lad,” I said, affecting an ease which I by no means felt, “what can I do for you this morning?”

The fellow’s face was the colour of mahogany with exposure to the weather, and he had a deep scar from the corner of his mouth to his ear, which by no means improved his appearance. His hair was grizzled, but his figure was stalwart, and his fur cap was cocked on one side so as to give him a rakish, semi-military appearance. Altogether he gave me the impression of being one of the most dangerous types of tramp that I had ever fallen in with.

Instead of replying to my question, he eyed me for some time in silence with sullen, yellow-shot eyes, and then closed his knife with a loud snick.

“You’re not a beak,” he said, “too young for that, I guess. They had me in chokey at Paisley and they had me in chokey at Wigtown, but by the living thunder if another of them lays a hand on me I’ll make him remember Corporal Rufus Smith! It’s a darned fine country this, where they won’t give a man work, and then lay him by the heels for having no visible means of subsistence.”

“I am sorry to see an old soldier so reduced,” said I. “What corps did you serve in?”

“H Battery, Royal Horse Artillery. Bad cess to the Service and every one in it! Here I am nigh sixty years of age, with a beggarly pension of thirty-eight pound ten—not enough to keep me in beer and baccy.”

“I should have thought thirty-eight pound ten a year would have been a nice help to you in your old age,” I remarked.

“Would you, though?” he answered with a sneer, pushing his weather-beaten face forward until it was within a foot of my own.

“How much d’ye think that slash with a tulwar is worth? And my foot with all the bones rattling about like a bagful of dice where the trail of the gun went across it. What’s that worth, eh? And a liver like a sponge, and ague whenever the wind comes round to the east—what’s the market value of that? Would you take the lot for a dirty forty pound a year—would you now?”

“We are poor folk in this part of the country,” I answered. “You would pass for a rich man down here.”

“They are fool folk and they have fool tastes,” said he, drawing a black pipe from his pocket and stuffing it with tobacco. “I know what good living is, and, by cripes! While I have a shilling in my pocket I like to spend it as a shilling should be spent. I’ve fought for my country and my country has done darned little for me. I’ll go to the Rooshians, so help me! I could show them how to cross the Himalayas so that it would puzzle either Afghans or British to stop ‘em. What’s that secret worth in St. Petersburg, eh, mister?”

“I am ashamed to hear an old soldier speak so, even in jest,” said I sternly.

“Jest, indeed!” He cried, with a great, roaring oath. “I’d have done it years ago if the Rooshians had been game to take it up. Skobeloff was the best of the bunch, but he’s been snuffed out. However, that’s neither here nor there. What I want to ask you is whether you’ve ever heard anything in this quarter of a man called Heatherstone, the same who used to be colonel of the 41st Bengalies? They told me at Wigtown that he lived somewhere down this way.”

“He lives in that large house over yonder,” said I, pointing to Cloomber Tower. “You’ll find the avenue gate a little way down the road, but the general isn’t over fond of visitors.”

The last part of my speech was lost upon Corporal Rufus Smith; for the instant that I pointed out the gate he set off hopping down the road.

His mode of progression was the most singular I have ever seen, for He would only put his right foot to the ground once in every half-dozen strides, while he worked so hard and attained such a momentum with the other limb that he got over the ground at an astonishing speed.

I was so surprised that I stood in the roadway gazing after this hulking figure until the thought suddenly struck me that some serious result might come from a meeting between a man of such blunt speech and the choleric, hot-headed general. I therefore followed him as he hopped along like some great, clumsy bird, and overtook him at the avenue gate, where he stood grasping the ironwork and peering through at the dark carriage-drive beyond.

“He’s a sly old jackal,” he said, looking round at me and nodding his head in the direction of the Hall. “He’s a deep old dog. And that’s his bungalow, is it, among the trees?”

“That is his house,” I answered; “but I should advise you to keep a more civil tongue in your head if you intend to speak with the general. He is not a man to stand any nonsense.”

“Right you are. He was always a hard nut to crack. But isn’t this him coming down the avenue?”

I looked through the gate and saw that it was indeed the general, who, having either seen us or been attracted by our voices, was hurrying down towards us. As he advanced he would stop from time to time and peer at us through the dark shadow thrown by the trees, as if he were irresolute whether to come on or no.

“He’s reconnoitering!” whispered my companion with a hoarse chuckle. “He’s afraid—and I know what he’s afraid of. He won’t be caught in a trap if he can help it, the old ‘un. He’s about as fly as they make ‘em, you bet!”

Then suddenly standing on his tip-toes and waving his hand through the bars of the gate, he shouted at the top of his voice:

“Come on, my gallant commandant! Come on! The coast’s clear, and no enemy in sight.”

This familiar address had the effect of reassuring the general, for he came right for us, though I could tell by his heightened colour that his temper was at boiling point.

“What, you here, Mr. West?” he said, as his eye fell upon me. “What is it you want, and why have you brought this fellow with you?”

“I have not brought him with me, sir,” I answered, feeling rather disgusted at being made responsible for the presence of the disreputable-looking vagabond beside me. “I found him on the road here, and he desired to be directed to you, so I showed him the way. I know nothing of him myself.”

“What do you want with me, then?” the general asked sternly, turning to my companion.

“If you please, sir,” said the ex-corporal, speaking in a whining voice, and touching his moleskin cap with a humility which contrasted strangely with the previous rough independence of his bearing, “I’m an old gunner in the Queen’s service, sir, and knowing your name by hearing it in India I thought that maybe you would take me as your groom or gardener, or give me any other place as happened to be vacant.”

“I am sorry that I cannot do anything for you, my man,” the old soldier answered impressively.

“Then you’ll give me a little just to help me on my way, sir,” said he cringing mendicant. “You won’t see an old comrade go to the bad for the sake of a few rupees? I was with Sale’s brigade in the Passes, sir, and I was at the second taking of Cabul.”

General Heatherstone looked keenly at the supplicant, but was silent to his appeal.

“I was in Ghuznee with you when the walls were all shook down by an earthquake, and when we found forty thousand Afghans within gunshot of us. You ask me about it, and you’ll see whether I’m lying or not. We went through all this when we were young, and now that we are old you are to live in a fine bungalow, and I am to starve by the roadside. It don’t seem to me to be fair.”

“You are an impertinent scoundrel,” said the general. “If you had been a good soldier you would never need to ask for help. I shall not give you a farthing.”

“One word more, sir,” cried the tramp, for the other was turning away, “I’ve been in the Tarada Pass.”

The old soldier sprang round as if the words had been a pistol-shot.

“What—what d’ye mean?” he stammered. “I’ve been in the Tarada Pass, sir, and I knew a man there called Ghoolab Shah.”

These last were hissed out in an undertone, and a malicious grin overspread the face of the speaker.

Their effect upon the general was extraordinary. He fairly staggered back from the gateway, and his yellow countenance blanched to a livid, mottled grey. For a moment he was too overcome to speak. At last he gasped out:

“Ghoolab Shah’ Who are you who know Ghoolab Shah?”

“Take another look,” said the tramp, “your sight is not as keen as it was forty years ago.”

The general took a long, earnest look at the unkempt wanderer in front of him, and as he gazed I saw the light of recognition spring up in his eyes.

“God bless my soul!” he cried. “Why, it’s Corporal Rufus Smith.”

“You’ve come on it at last,” said the other, chuckling to himself. “I was wondering how long it would be before you knew me. And, first of all, just unlock this gate, will you? It’s hard to talk through a grating. It’s too much like ten minutes with a visitor in the cells.”

The general, whose face still bore evidences of his agitation, undid the bolts with nervous, trembling fingers. The recognition of Corporal Rufus Smith had, I fancied, been a relief to him, and yet he plainly showed by his manner that he regarded his presence as by no means an unmixed blessing.

“Why, Corporal,” he said, as the gate swung open, “I have often wondered whether you were dead or alive, but I never expected to see you again. How have you been all these long years?”

“How have I been?” the corporal answered gruffly. “Why, I have been drunk for the most part. When I draw my money I lay it out in liquor, and as long as that lasts I get some peace in life.”

When I'm cleaned out I go upon tramp, partly in the hope of picking up the price of a dram, and partly in order to look for you."

"You'll excuse us talking about these private matters, West," the general said, looking round at me, for I was beginning to move away. "Don't leave us. You know something of this matter already, and may find yourself entirely in the swim with us some of these days."

Corporal Rufus Smith looked round at me in blank astonishment.

"In the swim with us?" he said. "However did he get there?"

"Voluntarily, voluntarily," the general explained, hurriedly sinking his voice. "He is a neighbour of mine, and he has volunteered his help in case I should ever need it."

This explanation seemed, if anything, to increase the big stranger's surprise.

"Well, if that don't lick cock-fighting!" he exclaimed, contemplating me with admiration. "I never heard tell of such a thing."

"And now you have found me, Corporal Smith," said the tenant of Cloomber, "what is it that you want of me?"

"Why, everything. I want a roof to cover me, and clothes to wear, and food to eat, and, above all, brandy to drink."

"Well, I'll take you in and do what I can for you," said the general slowly. "But look here, Smith, we must have discipline. I'm the general and you are the corporal; I am the master and you are the man. Now, don't let me have to remind you of that again."

The tramp drew himself up to his full height and raised his right hand with the palm forward in a military salute.

"I can take you on as gardener and get rid of the fellow I have got. As to brandy, you shall have an allowance and no more. We are not deep drinkers at the Hall."

“Don’t you take opium, or brandy, or nothing yourself, sir?” asked Corporal Rufus Smith.

“Nothing,” the general said firmly.

“Well, all I can say is, that you’ve got more nerve and pluck than I shall ever have. I don’t wonder now at your winning that Cross in the Mutiny. If I was to go on listening night after night to them things without ever taking a drop of something to cheer my heart—why, it would drive me silly.”

General Heatherstone put his hand up, as though afraid that his companion might say too much.

“I must thank you, Mr. West,” he said, “for having shown this man my door. I would not willingly allow an old comrade, however humble, to go to the bad, and if I did not acknowledge his claim more readily it was simply because I had my doubts as to whether he was really what he represented himself to be. Just walk up to the Hall, Corporal, and I shall follow you in a minute.”

“Poor fellow!” he continued, as he watched the newcomer hobbling up the avenue in the ungainly manner which I have described. “He got a gun over his foot, and it crushed the bones, but the obstinate fool would not let the doctors take it off. I remember him now as a smart young soldier in Afghanistan. He and I were associated in some queer adventures, which I may tell you of some day, and I naturally feel sympathy towards him, and would befriend him. Did he tell you anything about me before I came?”

“Not a word,” I replied.

“Oh,” said the general carelessly, but with an evident expression of relief, “I thought perhaps he might have said something of old times. Well, I must go and look after him, or the servants will be frightened, for he isn’t a beauty to look at. Good-bye!”

With a wave of the hand the old man turned away from me and hurried up the drive after this unexpected addition to his household, while I strolled on round the high, black paling, peering

through every chink between the planks, but without seeing a trace either of Mordaunt or of his sister.

I have now brought this statement down to the coming of Corporal Rufus Smith, which will prove to be the beginning of the end.

I have set down soberly and in order the events which brought us to Wigtownshire, the arrival of the Heatherstones at Cloomber, the many strange incidents which excited first our curiosity and finally our intense interest in that family, and I have briefly touched upon the circumstances which brought my sister and myself into a closer and more personal relationship with them. I think that there cannot be a better moment than this to hand the narrative over to those who had means of knowing something of what was going on inside Cloomber during the months that I was observing it from without.

Israel Stakes, the coachman, proved to be unable to read or write, but Mr. Mathew Clark, the Presbyterian Minister of Stoneykirk, has copied down his deposition, duly attested by the cross set opposite to his name. The good clergyman has, I fancy, put some slight polish upon the narrator's story, which I rather regret, as it might have been more interesting, if less intelligible, when reported verbatim. It still preserves, however, considerable traces of Israel's individuality, and may be regarded as an exact record of what he saw and did while in General Heatherstone's service.