Ch IX ~ Narrative Of John Easterling, F.R.C.P.Edin.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Having given the statement of Israel Stakes in extenso , I shall append a short memorandum from Dr. Easterling, now practicing at Stranraer. It is true that the doctor was only once within the walls of Cloomber during its tenancy by General Heatherstone, but there were some circumstances connected with this visit which made it valuable, especially when considered as a supplement to the experiences which I have just submitted to the reader.

The doctor has found time amid the calls of a busy country practice to jot down his recollections, and I feel that I cannot do better than subjoin them exactly as they stand.

I have very much pleasure in furnishing Mr. Fothergill West with an account of my solitary visit to Cloomber Hall, not only on account of the esteem which I have formed for that gentleman ever since his residence at Branksome, but also because it is my conviction that the facts in the case of General Heatherstone are of such a singular nature that it is of the highest importance that they should be placed before the public in a trustworthy manner.

It was about the beginning of September of last year that I received a note from Mrs. Heatherstone, of Cloomber Hall, desiring me to make a professional call upon her husband, whose health, she said, had been for some time in a very unsatisfactory state.

I had heard something of the Heatherstones and of the strange seclusion in which they lived, so that I was very much pleased at this opportunity of making their closer acquaintance, and lost no time in complying with her request.

I had known the Hall in the old days of Mr. McVittie, the original proprietor, and I was astonished on arriving at the avenue gate to observe the changes which had taken place.

The gate itself, which used to yawn so hospitably upon the road, was now barred and locked, and a high wooden fence, with nails upon the top, encircled the whole grounds. The drive itself was leaf-strewn and uncared-for, and the whole place had a depressing air of neglect and decay.

I had to knock twice before a servant-maid opened the door and showed me through a dingy hall into a small room, where sat an elderly, careworn lady, who introduced herself as Mrs. Heatherstone. With her pale face, her grey hair, her sad, colourless eyes, and her faded silk dress, she was in perfect keeping with her melancholy surroundings.

"You find us in much trouble, doctor," she said, in a quiet, refined voice. "My poor husband has had a great deal to worry him, and his nervous system for a long time has been in a very weak state. We came to this part of the country in the hope that the bracing air and the quiet would have a good effect upon him. Instead of improving, however, he has seemed to grow weaker, and this morning he is in a high fever and a little inclined to be delirious. The children and I were so frightened that we sent for you at once. If you will follow me I will take you to the general's bedroom."

She led the way down a series of corridors to the chamber of the sick man, which was situated in the extreme wing of the building.

It was a carpetless, bleak-looking room, scantily furnished with a small truckle bed, a campaigning chair, and a plain deal table, on which were scattered numerous papers and books. In the centre of this table there stood a large object of irregular outline, which was covered over with a sheet of linen.

All round the walls and in the corners were arranged a very choice and varied collection of arms, principally swords, some of which were of the straight pattern in common use in the British Army, while among the others were scimitars, tulwars, cuchurries, and a score of other specimens of Oriental workmanship. Many of these were richly mounted, with inlaid sheaths and hilts sparkling with precious stones, so that there was a piquant contrast between the simplicity of the apartment and the wealth which glittered on the walls.

I had little time, however, to observe the general's collection, since the general himself lay upon the couch and was evidently in sore need of my services.

He was lying with his head turned half away from us. Breathing heavily, and apparently unconscious of our presence. His bright, staring eyes and the deep, hectic flush upon his cheek showed that his fever was at its height.

I advanced to the bedside, and, stooping over him, I placed my fingers upon his pulse, when immediately he sprang up into the sitting position and struck at me frenziedly with his clenched hands. I have never seen such intensity of fear and horror stamped upon a human face as appeared upon that that which was now glaring up at me.

"Bloodhound!" he yelled; "let me go—let me go, I say! Keep your hands off me! Is it not enough that my life has been ruined? When is it all to end? How long am I to endure it?"

"Hush, dear, hush!" said his wife in a soothing voice, passing her cool hand over his heated forehead. "This is Doctor Easterling, from Stranraer. He has not come to harm you, but to do you good."

The general dropped wearily back upon his pillow, and I could see by the changed expression of his face that his delirium had left him, and that he understood what had been said.

I slipped my clinical thermometer into his armpit and counted his pulse rate. It amounted to 120 per minute, and his temperature proved to be 104 degrees. Clearly it was a case of remittent fever, such as occurs in men who have spent a great part of their lives in the tropics.

"There is no danger," I remarked. "With a little quinine and arsenic we shall very soon overcome the attack and restore his health."

"No danger, eh?" he said. "There never is any danger for me. I am as hard to kill as the Wandering Jew. I am quite clear in the head now, Mary; so you may leave me with the doctor."

Mrs. Heatherstone left the room-rather unwillingly, as I thought—and I sat down by the bedside to listen to anything which my patient might have to communicate.

"I want you to examine my liver," he said when the door was closed. "I used to have an abscess there, and Brodie, the staff-surgeon, said that it was ten to one that it would carry me off. I have

not felt much of it since I left the East. This is where it used to be, just under the angle of the ribs."

"I can find the place," said I, after making a careful examination; "but I am happy to tell you that the abscess has either been entirely absorbed, or has turned calcareous, as these solitary abscesses will. There is no fear of its doing you any harm now."

He seemed to be by no means overjoyed at the intelligence.

"Things always happen so with me," he said moodily. "Now, if another fellow was feverish and delirious he would surely be in some danger, and yet you will tell me that I am in none. Look at this, now." He bared his chest and showed me a puckered wound over the region of the heart. "That's where the jezail bullet of a Hillman went in. You would think that was in the right spot to settle a man, and yet what does it do but glance upon a rib, and go clean round and out at the back, without so much as penetrating what you medicos call the pleura. Did ever you hear of such a thing?"

"You were certainly born under a lucky star," I observed, with a smile.

"That's a matter of opinion," he answered, shaking his head. "Death has no terrors for me, if it will but come in some familiar form, but I confess that the anticipation of some strange, some preternatural form of death is very terrible and unnerving"

"You mean," said I, rather puzzled at his remark, "that you would prefer a natural death to a death by violence?"

"No, I don't mean that exactly," he answered. "I am too familiar with cold steel and lead to be afraid of either. Do you know anything about odyllic force, doctor?"

"No, I do not," I replied, glancing sharply at him to see if there were any signs of his delirium returning. His expression was intelligent, however, and the feverish flush had faded from his cheeks.

"Ah, you Western scientific men are very much behind the day in some things," he remarked. "In all that is material and conducive to the comfort of the body you are pre-eminent, but in what concerns the subtle forces of Nature and the latent powers of the human spirit your best men are centuries behind the humblest coolies of India. Countless generations of beef-eating, comfort loving ancestors have given our animal instincts the command over our spiritual ones. The body, which should have been a mere tool for the use of the soul, has now become a degrading prison in which it is confined. The Oriental soul and body are not so welded together as ours are, and there is far less wrench when they part in death"

"They do not appear to derive much benefit from this peculiarity in their organization," I remarked incredulously.

"Merely the benefit of superior knowledge," the general answered. "If you were to go to India, probably the very first thing you would see in the way of amusement would be a native doing what is called the mango trick. Of course you have heard or read of it. The fellow plants a mango seed, and makes passes over it until it sprouts and bears leaves and fruit—all in the space of half-an-hour. It is not really a trick— it is a power. These men know more than your Tyndalls or Huxleys do about Nature's processes, and they can accelerate or retard her workings by subtle means of which we have no conception. These low-caste conjurers—as they are called—are mere vulgar dabblers, but the men who have trod the higher path are as far superior to us in knowledge as we are to the Hottentots or Patagonians."

"You speak as if you were well acquainted with them," I remarked.

"To my cost, I am," he answered. "I have been brought in contact with them in a way in which I trust no other poor chap ever will be. But, really, as regards odyllic force, you ought to know something of it, for it has a great future before it in your profession. You should read Reichcnbach's 'Researches on Magnetism and Vital Force,' and Gregory's 'Letters on Animal Magnetism.' These, supplemented by the twenty-seven Aphorisms of Mesmer, and the works of Dr. Justinus Kerner, of Weinsberg, would enlarge your ideas."

I did not particularly relish having a course of reading prescribed for me on a subject connected with my own profession, so I made no comment, but rose to take my departure. Before doing

so I felt his pulse once more, and found that the fever had entirely left him in the sudden, unaccountable fashion which is peculiar to these malarious types of disease.

I turned my face towards him to congratulate him upon his improvement, and stretched out my hand at the same time to pick my gloves from the table, with the result that I raised not only my own property, but also the linen cloth which was arranged over some object in the centre.

I might not have noticed what I had done had I not seen an angry look upon the invalid's face and heard him utter an impatient exclamation. I at once turned, and replaced the cloth so promptly that I should have been unable to say what was underneath it, beyond having a general impression that it looked like a bride-cake.

"All right, doctor," the general said good-humouredly, perceiving how entirely accidental the incident was. "There is no reason why you should not see it," and stretching out his hand, he pulled away the linen covering for the second time.

I then perceived that what I had taken for a bride-cake was really an admirably executed model of a lofty range of mountains, whose snow-clad peaks were not unlike the familiar sugar pinnacles and minarets.

"These are the Himalayas, or at least the Surinam branch of them," he remarked, "showing the principal passes between India and Afghanistan. It is an excellent model. This ground has a special interest for me, because it is the scene of my first campaign. There is the pass opposite Kalabagh and the Thul valley, where I was engaged during the summer of 1841 in protecting the convoys and keeping the Afridis in order. It wasn't a sinecure, I promise you."

"And this," said I, indicating a blood-red spot which had been marked on one side of the pass which he had pointed out—"this is the scene of some fight in which you were engaged."

"Yes, we had a skirmish there," he answered, leaning forward and looking at the red mark. "We were attacked by—"

At this moment he fell back upon his pillow as if he had been shot, while the same look of horror came over his face which I had observed when I first entered the room. At the same instant

there came, apparently from the air immediately above his bed, a sharp, ringing, tinkling sound, which I can only compare with the noise made by a bicycle alarm, though it differed from this in having a distinctly throbbing character. I have never, before or since, heard any sound which could be confounded with it.

I stared round in astonishment, wondering where it could have come from, but without perceiving anything to which it could be ascribed.

"It's all right, doctor," the general said with a ghastly smile. "It's only my private gong. Perhaps you had better step downstairs and write my prescription in the dining-room."

He was evidently anxious to get rid of me, so I was forced to take my departure, though I would gladly have stayed a little longer, in the hope of learning something as to the origin of the mysterious sound.

I drove away from the house with the full determination of calling again upon my interesting patient, and endeavouring to elicit some further particulars as to his past life and his present circumstances. I was destined, however, to be disappointed, for I received that very evening a note from the general himself, enclosing a handsome fee for my single visit, and informing me that my treatment had done him so much good that he considered himself to be convalescent, and would not trouble me to see him again.

This was the last and only communication which I ever received from the tenant of Cloomber.

I have been asked frequently by neighbours and others who were interested in the matter whether he gave me the impression of insanity. To this I must unhesitatingly answer in the negative. On the contrary, his remarks gave me the idea of a man who had both read and thought deeply.

I observed, however, during our single interview, that his reflexes were feeble, his arcus senilis well marked, and his arteries atheromatous— all signs that his constitution was in an unsatisfactory condition, and that a sudden crisis might be apprehended.