



CH XII ~ OF THE THREE FOREIGN MEN UPON THE COAST

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

It must have been eleven or twelve o'clock before I awoke, and it seemed to me in the flood of golden light which streamed into my chamber that the wild, tumultuous episodes of the night before must have formed part of some fantastic dream.

It was hard to believe that the gentle breeze which whispered so softly among the ivy-leaves around my window was caused by the same element which had shaken the very house a few short hours before. It was as if Nature had repented of her momentary passion and was endeavouring to make amends to an injured world by its warmth and its sunshine. A chorus of birds in the garden below filled the whole air with their wonder and congratulations.

Down in the hall I found a number of the shipwrecked sailors, looking all the better for their night's repose, who set up a buzz of pleasure and gratitude upon seeing me.

Arrangements had been made to drive them to Wigtown, whence they were to proceed to Glasgow by the evening train, and my father had given orders that each should be served with a packet of sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs to sustain him on the way.

Captain Meadows thanked us warmly in the name of his employers for the manner in which we had treated them, and he called for three cheers from his crew, which were very heartily given. He and the mate walked down with us after we had broken our fast to have a last look at the scene of the disaster.

The great bosom of the bay was still heaving convulsively, and its waves were breaking into sobs against the rocks, but there was none of that wild turmoil which we had seen in the early morning. The long, emerald ridges, with their little, white crests of foam, rolled slowly and majestically in, to break with a regular rhythm—the panting of a tired monster.

A cable length from the shore we could see the mainmast of the barque floating upon the waves, disappearing at times in the trough of the sea, and then shooting up towards Heaven like a giant jav-

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*Ch XII - Of the Three Foreign Men Upon the Coast*

---

elin, shining and dripping as the rollers tossed it about. Other smaller pieces of wreckage dotted the waters, while innumerable spars and packages were littered over the sands. These were being drawn up and collected in a place of safety by gangs of peasants. I noticed that a couple of broad-winged gulls were hovering and skimming over the scene of the shipwreck, as though many strange things were visible to them beneath the waves. At times we could hear their raucous voices as they cried to one another of what they saw.

“She was a leaky old craft,” said the captain, looking sadly out to sea, “but there’s always a feeling of sorrow when we see the last of a ship we have sailed in. Well, well, she would have been broken up in any case, and sold for firewood.”

“It looks a peaceful scene,” I remarked. “Who would imagine that three men lost their lives last night in those very waters?”

“Poor fellows,” said the captain, with feeling, “Should they be cast up after our departure, I am sure, Mr. West, that you will have them decently interred.”

I was about to make some reply when the mate burst into a loud guffaw, slapping his thigh and choking with merriment.

“If you want to bury them,” he said, “you had best look sharp, or they may clear out of the country. You remember what I said last night? Just look at the top of that ‘ere hillock, and tell me whether I was in the right or not?”

There was a high sand dune some little distance along the coast, and upon the summit of this the figure was standing which had attracted the mate’s attention. The captain threw up his hands in astonishment as his eyes rested upon it.

“By the eternal,” he shouted, “it’s Ram Singh himself! Let us overhaul him!”

Taking to his heels in his excitement he raced along the beach, followed by the mate and myself, as well as by one or two of the fishermen who had observed the presence of the stranger.

*Ch XII - Of the Three Foreign Men Upon the Coast*

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The latter, perceiving our approach, came down from his post of observation and walked quietly in our direction, with his head sunk upon his breast, like one who is absorbed in thought.

I could not help contrasting our hurried and tumultuous advance with the gravity and dignity of this lonely Oriental, nor was the matter mended when he raised a pair of steady, thoughtful dark eyes and inclined his head in a graceful, sweeping salutation. It seemed to me that we were like a pack of schoolboys in the presence of a master.

The stranger's broad, unruffled brow, his clear, searching gaze, firm-set yet sensitive mouth, and clean-cut, resolute expression, all combined to form the most imposing and noble presence which I had ever known. I could not have imagined that such imperturbable calm and at the same time such a consciousness of latent strength could have been expressed by any human face.

He was dressed in a brown velveteen coat, loose, dark trousers, with a shirt that was cut low in the collar, so as to show the muscular, brown neck, and he still wore the red fez which I had noticed the night before.

I observed with a feeling of surprise, as we approached him, that none of these garments showed the slightest indication of the rough treatment and wetting which they must have received during their wearer's submersion and struggle to the shore.

"So you are none the worse for your ducking," he said in a pleasant, musical voice, looking from the captain to the mate. "I hope that your poor sailors have found pleasant quarters."

"We are all safe," the captain answered. "But we had given you up for lost—you and your two friends. Indeed, I was just making arrangements for your burial with Mr. West here."

The stranger looked at me and smiled.

"We won't give Mr. West that trouble for a little time yet," he remarked; "my friends and I came ashore all safe, and we have found shelter in a hut a mile or so along the coast. It is lonely down there, but we have everything which we can desire."

"We start for Glasgow this afternoon," said the captain; "I shall be very glad if you will come with us. If you have not been in England before you may find it awkward traveling alone."

*Ch XII - Of the Three Foreign Men Upon the Coast*

---

“We are very much indebted to you for your thoughtfulness,” Ram Singh answered; “but we will not take advantage of your kind offer. Since Nature has driven us here we intend to have a look about us before we leave.”

“As you like,” the captain said, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t think you are likely to find very much to interest you in this hole of a place.”

“Very possibly not,” Ram Singh answered with an amused smile. “You remember Milton’s lines:

‘The mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a hell of Heaven, a heaven of Hell.’

I dare say we can spend a few days here comfortably enough. Indeed, I think you must be wrong in considering this to be a barbarous locality. I am much mistaken if this young gentleman’s father is not Mr. James Hunter West, whose name is known and honoured by the pundits of India.”

“My father is, indeed, a well-known Sanscrit scholar,” I answered in astonishment.

“The presence of such a man,” observed the stranger slowly, “changes a wilderness into a city. One great mind is surely a higher indication of civilization than are incalculable leagues of bricks and mortar.

“Your father is hardly so profound as Sir William Jones, or so universal as the Baron Von Hammer-Purgstall, but he combines many of the virtues of each. You may tell him, however, from me that he is mistaken in the analogy which he has traced between the Samoyede and Tamulic word roots.”

“If you have determined to honour our neighbourhood by a short stay,” said I, “you will offend my father very much if you do not put up with him. He represents the laird here, and it is the laird’s privilege, according to our Scottish custom, to entertain all strangers of repute who visit this parish.”

My sense of hospitality prompted me to deliver this invitation, though I could feel the mate twitching at my sleeves as if to warn me that the offer was, for some reason, an objectionable one. His fears were, however, unnecessary, for the stranger signified by a shake of the head that it was impossible for him to accept it.

*Ch XII - Of the Three Foreign Men Upon the Coast*

---

“My friends and I are very much obliged to you,” he said, “but we have our own reasons for remaining where we are. The hut which we occupy is deserted and partly ruined, but we Easterns have trained ourselves to do without most of those things which are looked upon as necessities in Europe, believing firmly in that wise axiom that a man is rich, not in proportion to what he has, but in proportion to what he can dispense with. A good fisherman supplies us with bread and with herbs, we have clean, dry straw for our couches; what could man wish for more?”

“But you must feel the cold at night, coming straight from the tropics,” remarked the captain. “Perhaps our bodies are cold sometimes. We have not noticed it. We have all three spent many years in the Upper Himalayas on the border of the region of eternal snow, so we are not very sensitive to inconveniences of the sort.”

“At least,” said I, “you must allow me to send you over some fish and some meat from our larder.”

“We are not Christians,” he answered, “but Buddhists of the higher school. We do not recognize that man has a moral right to slay an ox or a fish for the gross use of his body. He has not put life into them, and has assuredly no mandate from the Almighty to take life from them save under most pressing need. We could not, therefore, use your gift if you were to send it.”

“But, sir,” I remonstrated, “if in this changeable and inhospitable climate you refuse all nourishing food your vitality will fail you—you will die.”

“We shall die then,” he answered, with an amused smile. “And now, Captain Meadows, I must bid you adieu, thanking you for your kindness during the voyage, and you, too, good-bye—you will command a ship of your own before the year is out. I trust, Mr. West, that I may see you again before I leave this part of the country. Farewell!”

He raised his red fez, inclined his noble head with the stately grace which characterized all his actions, and strode away in the direction from which he had come.

“Let me congratulate you, Mr. Hawkins,” said the captain to the mate as we walked homewards. “You are to command your own ship within the year.”

*Ch XII - Of the Three Foreign Men Upon the Coast*

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“No such luck!” the mate answered, with a pleased smile upon his mahogany face, “still, there’s no saying how things may come out. What d’ye think of him, Mr. West?”

“Why,” said I, “I am very much interested in him. What a magnificent head and bearing he has for a young man. I suppose he cannot be more than thirty.”

“Forty,” said the mate.

“Sixty, if he is a day,” remarked Captain Meadows. “Why, I have heard him talk quite familiarly of the first Afghan war. He was a man then, and that is close on forty years ago.”

“Wonderful!” I ejaculated. “His skin is as smooth and his eyes are as clear as mine are. He is the superior priest of the three, no doubt.”

“The inferior,” said the captain confidently. “That is why he does all the talking for them. Their minds are too elevated to descend to mere worldly chatter.”

“They are the strangest pieces of flotsam and jetsam that were ever thrown upon this coast,” I remarked. “My father will be mightily interested in them.”

“Indeed, I think the less you have to do with them the better for you,” said the mate. “If I do command my own ship I’ll promise you that I never carry live stock of that sort on board of her. But here we are all aboard and the anchor tripped, so we must bid you good-bye.”

The wagonette had just finished loading up when we arrived, and the chief places, on either side of the driver, had been reserved for my two companions, who speedily sprang into them. With a chorus of cheers the good fellows whirled away down the road, while my father, Esther, and I stood upon the lawn and waved our hands to them until they disappeared behind the Cloomber woods, en route for the Wigtown railway station. Barque and crew had both vanished now from our little world, the only relic of either being the heaps of debris upon the beach, which were to lie there until the arrival of an agent from Lloyd’s.