



CH III ~ OF OUR FURTHER ACQUAINTANCE WITH
MAJOR-GENERAL J. B. HEATHERSTONE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

There was, as may well be imagined, much stir amongst our small community at the news that the Hall was to be inhabited once more, and considerable speculation as to the new tenants, and their object in choosing this particular part of the country for their residence.

It speedily became apparent that, whatever their motives might be, they had definitely determined upon a lengthy stay, for relays of plumbers and of joiners came down from Wigtown, and there was hammering and repairing going on from morning till night.

It was surprising how quickly the signs of the wind and weather were effaced, until the great, square-set house was all as spick-and-span as though it had been erected yesterday. There were abundant signs that money was no consideration to General Heatherstone, and that it was not on the score of retrenchment that he had taken up his abode among us.

“It may be that he is devoted to study,” suggested my father, as we discussed the question round the breakfast table. “Perhaps he has chosen this secluded spot to finish some magnum opus upon which he is engaged. If that is the case I should be happy to let him have the run of my library.”

Esther and I laughed at the grandiloquent manner in which he spoke of the two potato-sacksful of books.

“It may be as you say,” said I, “but the general did not strike me during our short interview as being a man who was likely to have any very pronounced literary tastes. If I might hazard a guess, I should say that he is here upon medical advice, in the hope that the complete quiet and fresh air may restore his shattered nervous system. If you had seen how he glared at me, and the twitching of his fingers, you would have thought it needed some restoring.”

“I do wonder whether he has a wife and a family,” said my sister. “Poor souls, how lonely they will be! Why, excepting ourselves, there is not a family that they could speak to for seven miles and more.”

“General Heatherstone is a very distinguished soldier,” remarked my father.

“Why, papa, however came you to know anything about him?”

“Ah, my dears,” said my father, smiling at us over his coffee-cup, “you were laughing at my library just now, but you see it may be very useful at times.” As he spoke he took a red-covered volume from a shelf and turned over the pages. “This is an Indian Army List of three years back,” he explained, “and here is the very gentleman we want—‘Heatherstone, J. B., Commander of the Bath,’ my dears, and ‘V.C.’, think of that, ‘V.C.’—‘formerly colonel in the Indian Infantry, 41st Bengal Foot, but now retired with the rank of major-general.’ In this other column is a record of his services—‘capture of Ghuznee and defense of Jellalabad, Sobraon 1848, Indian Mutiny and reduction of Oudh. Five times mentioned in dispatches.’ I think, my dears, that we have cause to be proud of our new neighbour.”

“It doesn’t mention there whether he is married or not, I suppose?” asked Esther.

“No,” said my father, wagging his white head with a keen appreciation of his own humour. “It doesn’t include that under the heading of ‘daring actions’—though it very well might, my dear, it very well might.”

All our doubts, however, upon this head were very soon set at rest, for on the very day that the repairing and the furnishing had been completed I had occasion to ride into Wigtown, and I met upon the way a carriage which was bearing General Heatherstone and his family to their new home. An elderly lady, worn and sickly-looking, was by his side, and opposite him sat a young fellow about my own age and a girl who appeared to be a couple of years younger.

I raised my hat, and was about to pass them, when the general shouted to his coachman to pull up, and held out his hand to me. I could see now in the daylight that his face, although harsh and stern, was capable of assuming a not unkindly expression.

“How are you, Mr. Fothergill West?” he cried. “I must apologize to you if I was a little brusque the other night—you will excuse an old soldier who has spent the best part of his life in harness—All the same, you must confess that you are rather dark-skinned for a Scotchman.”

“We have a Spanish strain in our blood,” said I, wondering at his recurrence to the topic.

“That would, of course, account for it,” he remarked. “My dear,” to his wife, “allow me to introduce Mr. Fothergill West to you. This is my son and my daughter. We have come here in search of rest, Mr. West—complete rest.”

“And you could not possibly have come to a better place,” said I.

“Oh, you think so?” he answered. “I suppose it is very quiet indeed, and very lonely. You might walk through these country lanes at night, I dare say, and never meet a soul, eh?”

“Well, there are not many about after dark,” I said.

“And you are not much troubled with vagrants or wandering beggars, eh? Not many tinkers or tramps or rascally gipsies—no vermin of that sort about?”

“I find it rather cold,” said Mrs. Heatherstone, drawing her thick sealskin mantle tighter round her figure. “We are detaining Mr. West, too.”

“So we are, my dear, so we are. Drive on, coachman. Good-day, Mr. West.”

The carriage rattled away towards the Hall, and I trotted thoughtfully onwards to the little country metropolis.

As I passed up the High Street, Mr. McNeil ran out from his office and beckoned to me to stop.

“Our new tenants have gone out,” he said. “They drove over this morning.”

“I met them on the way,” I answered.

As I looked down at the little factor, I could see that his face was flushed and that he bore every appearance of having had an extra glass.

“Give me a real gentleman to do business with,” he said, with a burst of laughter. “They understand me and I understand them. ‘What shall I fill it up for?’ says the general, taking a blank cheque out o’ his pouch and laying it on the table. ‘Two hundred,’ says I, leaving a bit o’ a margin for my own time and trouble.”

“I thought that the landlord had paid you for that,” I remarked.

“Aye, aye, but it’s well to have a bit margin. He filled it up and threw it over to me as if it had been an auld postage stamp. That’s the way business should be done between honest men—though it wouldna do if one was inclined to take an advantage. Will ye not come in, Mr. West, and have a taste of my whisky?”

“No, thank you” said I, “I have business to do.”

“Well, well, business is the chief thing. It’s well not to drink in the morning, too. For my own part, except a drop before breakfast to give me an appetite, and maybe a glass, or even twa, afterwards to promote digestion, I never touch spirits before noon. What d’ye think o’ the general, Mr. West?”

“Why, I have hardly had an opportunity of judging,” I answered.

Mr. McNeil tapped his forehead with his forefinger.

“That’s what I think of him,” he said in a confidential whisper, shaking his head at me. “He’s gone, sir, gone, in my estimation. Now what would you take to be a proof of madness, Mr. West?”

“Why, offering a blank cheque to a Wigtown house-agent,” said I.

“Ah, you’re aye at your jokes. But between oorsel’s now, if a man asked ye how many miles it was frae a seaport, and whether ships come there from the East, and whether there were tramps on

the road, and whether it was against the lease for him to build a high wall round the grounds, what would ye make of it, eh?"

"I should certainly think him eccentric," said I.

"If every man had his due, our friend would find himself in a house with a high wall round the grounds, and that without costing him a farthing," said the agent.

"Where then?" I asked, humouring his joke.

"Why, in the Wigtown County Lunatic Asylum," cried the little man, with a bubble of laughter, in the midst of which I rode on my way, leaving him still chuckling over his own facetiousness.

The arrival of the new family at Cloomber Hall had no perceptible effect in relieving the monotony of our secluded district, for instead of entering into such simple pleasures as the country had to offer, or interesting themselves, as we had hoped, in our attempts to improve the lot of our poor crofters and fisherfolk, they seemed to shun all observation, and hardly ever to venture beyond the avenue gates.

We soon found, too, that the factor's words as to the inclosing of the grounds were founded upon fact, for gangs of workmen were kept hard at work from early in the morning until late at night in erecting a high, wooden fence round the whole estate.

When this was finished and topped with spikes, Cloomber Park became impregnable to any one but an exceptionally daring climber. It was as if the old soldier had been so imbued with military ideas that, like my Uncle Toby, he could not refrain even in times of peace from standing upon the defensive.

Stranger still, he had victualled the house as if for a siege, for Begbie, the chief grocer of Wigtown, told me himself in a rapture of delight and amazement that the general had sent him an order for hundreds of dozens of every imaginable potted meat and vegetable.

It may be imagined that all these unusual incidents were not allowed to pass without malicious comment. Over the whole countryside and as far away as the English border there was nothing

but gossip about the new tenants of Cloomber Hall and the reasons which had led them to come among us.

The only hypothesis, however, which the bucolic mind could evolve, was that which had already occurred to Mr. McNeil, the factor—namely, that the old general and his family were one and all afflicted with madness, or, as an alternative conclusion, that he had committed some heinous offence and was endeavouring to escape the consequences of his misdeeds.

These were both natural suppositions under the circumstances, but neither of them appeared to me to commend itself as a true explanation of the facts.

It is true that General Heatherstone's behaviour on the occasion of our first interview was such as to suggest some suspicion of mental disease, but no man could have been more reasonable or more courteous than he had afterwards shown himself to be.

Then, again, his wife and children led the same secluded life that he did himself, so that the reason could not be one peculiar to his own health.

As to the possibility of his being a fugitive from justice, that theory was even more untenable. Wigtonshire was bleak and lonely, but it was not such an obscure corner of the world that a well-known soldier could hope to conceal himself there, nor would a man who feared publicity set every one's tongue wagging as the general had done.

On the whole, I was inclined to believe that the true solution of the enigma lay in his own allusion to the love of quiet, and that they had taken shelter here with an almost morbid craving for solitude and repose. We very soon had an instance of the great lengths to which this desire for isolation would carry them.

My father had come down one morning with the weight of a great determination upon his brow.

“You must put on your pink frock today, Esther,” said he, “and you, John, you must make yourself smart, for I have determined that the three of us shall drive round this afternoon and pay our respects to Mrs. Heatherstone and the general.”

“A visit to Cloomber,” cried Esther, clapping her hands.

“I am here,” said my father, with dignity, “not only as the laird’s factor, but also as his kinsman. In that capacity I am convinced that he would wish me to call upon these newcomers and offer them any politeness which is in our power. At present they must feel lonely and friendless. What says the great Firdousi? ‘The choicest ornaments to a man’s house are his friends.’”

My sister and I knew by experience that when the old man began to justify his resolution by quotations from the Persian poets there was no chance of shaking it. Sure enough that afternoon saw the phaeton at the door, with my father perched upon the seat, with his second-best coat on and a pair of new driving-gloves.

“Jump in, my dears,” he cried, cracking his whip briskly, “we shall show the general that he has no cause to be ashamed of his neighbours.”

Alas! Pride always goes before a fall. Our well-fed ponies and shining harness were not destined that day to impress the tenants of Cloomber with a sense of our importance.

We had reached the avenue gate, and I was about to get out and open it, when our attention was arrested by a very large wooden placard, which was attached to one of the trees in such a manner that no one could possibly pass without seeing it. On the white surface of this board was printed in big, black letters the following hospitable inscription:

GENERAL AND MRS. HEATHERSTONE
HAVE NO WISH
TO INCREASE
THE CIRCLE OF THEIR ACQUAINTANCE.

We all sat gazing at this announcement for some moments in silent astonishment. Then Esther and I, tickled by the absurdity of the thing, burst out laughing, but my father pulled the ponies’ heads round, and drove home with compressed lips and the cloud of much wrath upon his brow. I have never seen the good man so thoroughly moved, and I am convinced that his anger did not arise from any petty feeling of injured vanity upon his own part, but from the thought that a slight had been offered to the Laird of Branksome, whose dignity he represented.