



CH VI ~ HOW I CAME TO BE ENLISTED AS ONE
OF THE GARRISON OF CLOOMBER

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

“To your room, girl!” he cried in a hoarse, harsh voice, stepping in between us and pointing authoritatively towards the house.

He waited until Gabriel, with a last frightened glance at me, had passed through the gap, and then he turned upon me with an expression so murderous that I stepped back a pace or two, and tightened my grasp upon my oak stick.

“You-you—” he spluttered, with his hand twitching at his throat, as though his fury were choking him. “You have dared to intrude upon my privacy! Do you think I built this fence that all the vermin in the country might congregate round it? Oh, you have been very near your death, my fine fellow! You will never be nearer until your time comes. Look at this!” he pulled a squat, thick pistol out of his bosom. “If you had passed through that gap and set foot on my land I’d have let daylight into you. I’ll have no vagabonds here. I know how to treat gentry of that sort, whether their faces are black or white.”

“Sir,” said I, “I meant no harm by coming here, and I do not know how I have deserved this extraordinary outburst. Allow me to observe, however, that you are still covering me with your pistol, and that, as your hand is rather tremulous, it is more than possible that it may go off. If you don’t turn the muzzle down I shall be compelled in self-defense to strike you over the wrist with my stick.”

“What the deuce brought you here, then?” he asked, in a more composed voice, putting his weapon back into his bosom. “Can’t a gentleman live quietly without your coming to peep and pry? Have you no business of your own to look after, eh? And my daughter? How came you to know anything of her? And what have you been trying to squeeze out of her? It wasn’t chance that brought you here.”

“No,” said I boldly, “it was not chance which brought me here. I have had several opportunities of seeing your daughter and of appreciating her many noble qualities. We are engaged to be married to each other, and I came up with the express intention of seeing her.”

Instead of blazing into a fury, as I had expected, the general gave a long whistle of astonishment, and then leant up against the railings, laughing softly to himself.

“English terriers are fond of nosing worms,” he remarked at last. “When we brought them out to India they used to trot off into the jungle and begin sniffing at what, they imagined to be worms there. But the worm turned out to be a venomous snake, and so poor doggy played no more. I think you’ll find yourself in a somewhat analogous position if you don’t look out.”

“You surely don’t mean to cast an aspersion upon your own daughter?” I said, flushing with indignation.

“Oh, Gabriel is all right,” he answered carelessly. “Our family is not exactly one, however, which I should recommend a young fellow to marry into. And pray how is it that I was not informed of this snug little arrangement of yours?”

“We were afraid, sir, that you might separate us,” I replied, feeling that perfect candour was the best policy under the circumstances. “It is possible that we were mistaken. Before coming to any final decision, I implore you to remember that the happiness of both of us is at stake. It is in your power to divide our bodies, but our souls shall be for ever united.”

“My good fellow,” said the general, in a not unkindly tone, “you don’t know what you are asking for. There is a gulf between you and any one of the blood of Heatherstone which can never be bridged over.”

All trace of anger had vanished now from his manner, and given place to an air of somewhat contemptuous amusement.

My family pride took fire at his words. “The gulf may be less than you imagine,” I said coldly. “We are not clodhoppers because we live in this out-of-the-way place. I am of noble descent on

one side, and my mother was a Buchan of Buchan, I assure you that there is no such disparity between us as you seem to imagine.”

“You misunderstand me,” the general answered. “It is on our side that the disparity lies. There are reasons why my daughter Gabriel should live and die single. It would not be to your advantage to marry her.”

“But surely, sir,” I persisted, “I am the best judge of my own interests and advantages. Since you take this ground all becomes easy, for I do assure you that the one interest which overrides all others is that I should have the woman I love for my wife. If this is your only objection to our match you may surely give us your consent, for any danger or trial which I may incur in marrying Gabriel will not weigh with me one featherweight.”

“Here’s a young bantam!” exclaimed the old soldier, smiling at my warmth. “It’s easy to defy danger when you don’t know what the danger is.”

“What is it, then?” I asked, hotly. “There is no earthly peril which will drive me from Gabriel’s side. Let me know what it is and test me.”

“No, no. That would never do,” he answered with a sigh, and then, thoughtfully, as if speaking his mind aloud: “He has plenty of pluck and is a well-grown lad, too. We might do worse than make use of him.”

He went on mumbling to himself with a vacant stare in his eyes as if he had forgotten my presence.

“Look here, West,” he said presently. “You’ll excuse me if I spoke hastily a little time ago. It is the second time that I have had occasion to apologize to you for the same offence. It shan’t occur again. I am rather over-particular, no doubt, in my desire for complete isolation, but I have good reasons for insisting on the point. Rightly or wrongly, I have got it into my head that some day there might be an organized raid upon my grounds. If anything of the sort should occur I suppose I might reckon upon your assistance?”

“With all my heart.”

“So that if ever you got a message such as ‘Come up,’ or even ‘Cloomber,’ you would know that it was an appeal for help, and would hurry up immediately, even if it were in the dead of the night?”

“Most certainly I should,” I answered. “But might I ask you what the nature of the danger is which you apprehend?”

“There would be nothing gained by your knowing. Indeed, you would hardly understand it if I told you. I must bid you good day now, for I have stayed with you too long. Remember, I count upon you as one of the Cloomber garrison now.”

“One other thing, sir,” I said hurriedly, for he was turning away, “I hope that you will not be angry with your daughter for anything which I have told you. It was for my sake that she kept it all secret from you.”

“All right,” he said, with his cold, inscrutable smile. “I am not such an ogre in the bosom of my family as you seem to think. As to this marriage question, I should advise you as a friend to let it drop altogether, but if that is impossible I must insist that it stand over completely for the present. It is impossible to say what unexpected turn events may take. Good-bye.”

He plunged into the wood and was quickly out of sight among the dense plantation.

Thus ended this extraordinary interview, in which this strange man had begun by pointing a loaded pistol at my breast and had ended, by partially acknowledging the possibility of my becoming his future son-in-law. I hardly knew whether to be cast down or elated over it.

On the one hand he was likely, by keeping a closer watch over his daughter, to prevent us from communicating as freely as we had done hitherto. Against this there was the advantage of having obtained an implied consent to the renewal of my suit at some future date. On the whole, I came to the conclusion as I walked thoughtfully home that I had improved my position by the incident.

But this danger—this shadowy, unspeakable danger—which appeared to rise up at every turn, and to hang day and night over the towers of Cloomber! Rack my brain as I would, I could not conjure up any solution to the problem which was not puerile and inadequate.

One fact struck me as being significant. Both the father and the son had assured me, independently of each other, that if I were told what the peril was, I would hardly realize its significance. How strange and bizarre must the fear be which can scarcely be expressed in intelligible language!

I held up my hand in the darkness before I turned to sleep that night, and I swore that no power of man or devil should ever weaken my love for the woman whose pure heart I had had the good fortune to win.