



CH XIII ~ IN WHICH I SEE THAT WHICH HAS BEEN SEEN BY FEW

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

At dinner that evening I mentioned to my father the episode of the three Buddhist priests, and found, as I had expected, that he was very much interested by my account of them.

When, however, he heard of the high manner in which Ram Singh had spoken of him, and the distinguished position which he had assigned him among philologists, he became so excited that it was all we could do to prevent him from setting off then and there to make his acquaintance.

Esther and I were relieved and glad when we at last succeeded in abstracting his boots and maneuvering him to his bedroom, for the exciting events of the last twenty-four hours had been too much for his weak frame and delicate nerves.

I was silting at the open porch in the gloaming, turning over in my mind the unexpected events which had occurred so rapidly—the gale, the wreck, the rescue, and the strange character of the castaways—when my sister came quietly over to me and put her hand in mine.

“Don’t you think, Jack.” she said, in her low, sweet voice, “that we are forgetting our friends over at Cloomber? Hasn’t all this excitement driven their fears and their danger out of our heads?”

“Out of our heads, but never out of our hearts,” said I, laughing. “However, you are right, little one, for our attention has certainly been distracted from them. I shall walk up in the morning and see if I can see anything of them. By the way, to-morrow is the fateful 5th of October—one more day, and all will be well with us.”

“Or ill,” said my sister gloomily.

“Why, what a little croaker you are, to be sure!” I cried. “What in the world is coming over you?”

“I feel nervous and low-spirited,” she answered, drawing closer to my side and shivering. “I feel as if some great peril were hanging over the heads of those we love. Why should these strange men wish to stay upon the coast?”

“What, the Buddhists?” I said lightly. “Oh, these fellows have continual feast-days and religious rites of all sorts. They have some very good reason for staying, you may be sure.”

“Don’t you think,” said Esther, in an awe-struck whisper, “that it is very strange that these priests should arrive here all the way from India just at the present moment? Have you not gathered from all you have heard that the general’s fears are in some way connected with India and the Indians?”

The remark made me thoughtful.

“Why, now that you mention it,” I answered, “I have some vague impression that the mystery is connected with some incident which occurred in that country. I am sure, however, that your fears would vanish if you saw Ram Singh. He is the very personification of wisdom and benevolence. He was shocked at the idea of our killing a sheep, or even a fish for his benefit—said he would rather die than have a hand in taking the life of an animal.”

“It is very foolish of me to be so nervous,” said my sister bravely. “But you must promise me one thing, Jack. You will go up to Cloomber in the morning, and if you can see any of them you must tell them of these strange neighbours of ours. They are better able to judge than we are whether their presence has any significance or not.”

“All right, little one,” I answered, as we went indoors. “You have been over-excited by all these wild doings, and you need a sound night’s rest to compose you. I’ll do what you suggest, however, and our friends shall judge for themselves whether these poor fellows should be sent about their business or not.”

I made the promise to allay my sister’s apprehensions, but in the bright sunlight of morning it appeared less than absurd to imagine that our poor vegetarian castaways could have any sinister intentions, or that their advent could have any effect upon the tenant of Cloomber.

I was anxious, myself, however, to see whether I could see anything of the Heatherstones, so after breakfast I walked up to the Hall. In their seclusion it was impossible for them to have learnt anything of the recent events. I felt, therefore, that even if I should meet the general he could hardly regard me as an intruder while I had so much news to communicate.

The place had the same dreary and melancholy appearance which always characterized it. Looking through between the thick iron bars of the main gateway there was nothing to be seen of any of the occupants. One of the great Scotch firs had been blown down in the gale, and its long, ruddy trunk lay right across the grass-grown avenue; but no attempt had been made to remove it.

Everything about the property had the same air of desolation and neglect, with the solitary exception of the massive and impenetrable fencing, which presented as unbroken and formidable an obstacle as ever to the would-be trespasser.

I walked round this barrier as far as our old trysting-place without finding any flaw through which I could get a glimpse of the house, for the fence had been repaired with each rail overlapping the last, so as to secure absolute privacy for those inside, and to block those peep-holes which I had formerly used.

At the old spot, however, where I had had the memorable interview with the general on the occasion when he surprised me with his daughter, I found that the two loose rails had been refixed in such a manner that there was a gap of two inches or more between them.

Through this I had a view of the house and of part of the lawn in front of it, and, though I could see no signs of life outside or at any of the windows, I settled down with the intention of sticking to my post until I had a chance of speaking to one or other of the inmates. Indeed, the cold, dead aspect of the house had struck such a chill into my heart that I determined to scale the fence at whatever risk of incurring the general's displeasure rather than return without news of the Heatherstones.

Happily there was no need of this extreme expedient, for I had not been there half-an-hour before I heard the harsh sound of an opening lock, and the general himself emerged from the main door.

To my surprise he was dressed in a military uniform, and that not the uniform in ordinary use in the British Army. The red coat was strangely cut and stained with the weather. The trousers had originally been white, but had now faded to a dirty yellow. With a red sash across his chest and a straight

sword hanging from his side, he stood the living example of a bygone type—the John Company's officer of forty years ago.

He was followed by the ex-tramp, Corporal Rufus Smith, now well-clad and prosperous, who limped along beside his master, the two pacing up and down the lawn absorbed in conversation. I observed that from time to time one or other of them would pause and glance furtively all about them, as though guarding keenly against a surprise. I should have preferred communicating with the general alone, but since there was no dissociating him from his companion, I beat loudly on the fencing with my stick to attract their attention. They both faced round in a moment, and I could see from their gestures that they were disturbed and alarmed.

I then elevated my stick above the barrier to show them where the sound proceeded from. At this the general began to walk in my direction with the air of a man who is bracing himself up for an effort, but the other caught him by the wrist and endeavoured to dissuade him.

It was only when I shouted out my name and assured them that I was alone that I could prevail upon them to approach. Once assured of my identity the general ran eagerly towards me and greeted me with the utmost cordiality.

“This is truly kind of you, West,” he said. “It is only at such times as these that one can judge who is a friend and who not. It would not be fair to you to ask you to come inside or to stay any time, but I am none the less very glad to see you.”

“I have been anxious about you all,” I said, “for it is some little time since I have seen or heard from any of you. How have you all been keeping?”

“Why, as well as could be expected. But we will be better tomorrow—we will be different men tomorrow, eh, Corporal?”

“Yes, sir,” said the corporal, raising his hand to his forehead in a military salute. “We'll be right as the bank to-morrow.”

“The corporal and I are a little disturbed in our minds just now,” the general explained, “but I have no doubt that all will come right. After all, there is nothing higher than Providence, and we are all in His hands. And how have you been, eh?”

“We have been very busy for one thing,” said I. “I suppose you have heard nothing of the great shipwreck?”

“Not a word,” the general answered listlessly.

“I thought the noise of the wind would prevent you hearing the signal guns. She came ashore in the bay the night before last—a great barque from India.”

“From India!” ejaculated the general.

“Yes. Her crew were saved, fortunately, and have all been sent on to Glasgow.”

“All sent on!” cried the general, with a face as bloodless as a corpse.

“All except three rather strange characters who claim to be Buddhist priests. They have decided to remain for a few days upon the coast.”

The words were hardly out of my mouth when the general dropped upon his knees with his long, thin arms extended to Heaven.

“Thy will be done!” he cried in a cracking voice. “Thy blessed will be done!”

I could see through the crack that Corporal Rufus Smith’s face had turned to a sickly yellow shade, and that he was wiping the perspiration from his brow.

“It’s like my luck!” he said. “After all these years, to come when I have got a snug billet.”

“Never mind, my lad,” the general said, rising, and squaring his shoulders like a man who braces himself up for an effort. “Be it what it may we’ll face it as British soldiers should. D’ye remember at Chillianwallah, when you had to run from your guns to our square, and the Sikh horse came thundering down on our bayonets? We didn’t flinch then, and we won’t flinch now. It seems to me that I feel better than I have done for years. It was the uncertainty that was killing me.”

“And the infernal jingle-jangle,” said the corporal. “Well, we all go together—that’s some consolation.”

“Good-bye, West,” said the general. “Be a good husband to Gabriel, and give my poor wife a home. I don’t think she will trouble you long. Good-bye! God bless you!”

“Look here, General,” I said, peremptorily breaking off a piece of wood to make communication more easy, “this sort of thing has been going on too long. What are these hints and allusions and innuendoes? It is time we had a little plain speaking. What is it you fear? Out with it! Are you in dread of these Hindoos? If you are, I am able, on my father’s authority, to have them arrested as rogues and vagabonds.”

“No, no, that would never do,” he answered, shaking his head. “You will learn about the wretched business soon enough. Mordaunt knows where to lay his hand upon the papers bearing on the matter. You can consult him about it to-morrow.”

“But surely,” I cried, “if the peril is so imminent something may be done to avert it. If you would but tell me what you fear I should know how to act.”

“My dear friend,” he said, “there is nothing to be done, so calm yourself, and let things take their course. It has been folly on my part to shelter myself behind mere barriers of wood and stone. The fact is, that inaction was terrible to me, and I felt that to do anything, however futile, in the nature of a precaution, was better than passive resignation. My humble friend here and I have placed ourselves in a position in which, I trust, no poor fellow will ever find himself again. We can only recommend ourselves to the unfailing goodness of the Almighty, and trust that what we have endured in this world may lessen our atonement in the world to come. I must leave you now, for I have many papers to destroy and much to arrange. Good-bye!”

He pushed his hand through the hole which I had made, and grasped mine in a solemn farewell, after which he walked back to the Hall with a firm and decided step, still followed by the crippled and sinister corporal.

I walked back to Branksome much disturbed by this interview, and extremely puzzled as to what course I should pursue.

It was evident now that my sister's suspicions were correct, and that there was some very intimate connection between the presence of the three Orientals and the mysterious peril which hung over the towers of Cloomber.

It was difficult for me to associate the noble-faced Ram Singh's gentle, refined manner and words of wisdom with any deed of violence, yet now that I thought of it I could see that a terrible capacity for wrath lay behind his shaggy brows and dark, piercing eyes.

I felt that of all men whom I had ever met he was the one whose displeasure I should least care to face. But how could two men so widely dissociated as the foul-mouthed old corporal of artillery and the distinguished Anglo-Indian general have each earned the ill-will of these strange castaways? And if the danger were a positive physical one, why should he not consent to my proposal to have the three men placed under custody—though I confess it would have gone much against my grain to act in so inhospitable a manner upon such vague and shadowy grounds.

These questions were absolutely unanswerable, and yet the solemn words and the terrible gravity which I had seen in the faces of both the old soldiers forbade me from thinking that their fears were entirely unfounded.

It was all a puzzle—an absolutely insoluble puzzle.

One thing at least was clear to me—and that was that in the present state of my knowledge, and after the general's distinct prohibition, it was impossible for me to interfere in any way. I could only wait and pray that, whatever the danger might be, it might pass over, or at least that my dear Gabriel and her brother might be protected against it.

I was walking down the lane lost in thought, and had got as far as the wicket gate which opens upon the Branksome lawn, when I was surprised to hear my father's voice raised in most animated and excited converse.

The old man had been of late so abstracted from the daily affairs of the world, and so absorbed in his own special studies, that it was difficult to engage his attention upon any ordinary, mundane topic. Curious to know what it was that had drawn him so far out of himself, I opened the gate softly, and walking quietly round the laurel bushes, found him sitting, to my astonishment, with none other than the very man who was occupying my thoughts, Ram Singh, the Buddhist.

The two were sitting upon a garden bench, and the Oriental appeared to be laying down some weighty proposition, checking every point upon his long, quivering, brown fingers, while my father, with his hands thrown abroad and his face awry, was loud in protestation and in argument.

So absorbed were they in their controversy, that I stood within a hand-touch of them for a minute or more before they became conscious of my presence.

On observing me the priest sprang to his feet and greeted me with the same lofty courtesy and dignified grace which had so impressed me the day before.

“I promised myself yesterday,” he said, “the pleasure of calling upon your father. You see I have kept my word. I have even been daring enough to question his views upon some points in connection with the Sanscrit and Hindoo tongues, with the result that we have been arguing for an hour or more without either of us convincing the other. Without pretending to as deep a theoretical knowledge as that which has made the name of James Hunter West a household word among Oriental scholars, I happen to have given considerable attention to this one point, and indeed I am in a position to say that I know his views to be unsound. I assure you, sir, that up to the year 700, or even later, Sanscrit was the ordinary language of the great bulk of the inhabitants of India.”

“And I assure you, sir,” said my father warmly, “that it was dead and forgotten at that date, save by the learned, who used it as a vehicle for scientific and religious works—just as Latin was used in the Middle Ages long after it had ceased to be spoken by any European nation.”

“If you consult the puranas you will find,” said Ram Singh, “that this theory, though commonly received, is entirely untenable.”

“And if you will consult the Ramayana, and more particularly the canonical books on Buddhist discipline,” cried my father, “you will find that the theory is unassailable.”

“But look at the Kullavagga,” said our visitor earnestly.

“And look at King Asoka,” shouted my father triumphantly. “When, in the year 300 before the Christian era—before, mind you—he ordered the laws of Buddha to be engraved upon the rocks, what language did he employ, eh? Was it Sanscrit?—no! And why was it not Sanscrit? Because the



lower orders of his subjects would not have been able to understand a word of it. Ha, ha! That was the reason. How are you going to get round King Asoka's edicts, eh?"

"He carved them in the various dialects," Ram Singh answered. "But energy is too precious a thing to be wasted in mere wind in this style. The sun has passed its meridian, and I must return to my companions."

"I am sorry that you have not brought them to see us," said my father courteously. He was, I could see, uneasy lest in the eagerness of debate he had overstepped the bounds of hospitality.

"They do not mix with the world," Ram Singh answered, rising to his feet. "They are of a higher grade than I, and more sensitive to contaminating influences. They are immersed in a six months' meditation upon the mystery of the third incarnation, which has lasted with few intermissions from the time that we left the Himalayas. I shall not see you again, Mr. Hunter West, and I therefore bid you farewell. Your old age will be a happy one, as it deserves to be, and your Eastern studies will have a lasting effect upon the knowledge and literature of your own country. Farewell!"

"And am I also to see no more of you?" I asked.

"Unless you will walk with me along the sea-shore," he answered. "But you have already been out this morning, and may be tired. I ask too much of you."

"Nay, I should be delighted to come," I responded from my heart, and we set off together, accompanied for some little distance by my father, who would gladly, I could see, have reopened the Sanscrit controversy, had not his stock of breath been too limited to allow of his talking and walking at the same time.

"He is a learned man," Ram Singh remarked, after we had left him behind, "but, like many another, he is intolerant towards opinions which differ from his own. He will know better some day."

I made no answer to this observation, and we trudged along for a time in silence, keeping well down to the water's edge, where the sands afforded a good foothold.

The sand dunes which lined the coast formed a continuous ridge upon our left, cutting us off entirely from all human observation, while on the right the broad Channel stretched away with hardly a sail to break its silvery uniformity. The Buddhist priest and I were absolutely alone with Nature.

I could not help reflecting that if he were really the dangerous man that the mate affected to consider him, or that might be inferred from the words of General Heatherstone, I had placed myself completely in his power.

Yet such was the majestic benignity of the man's aspect, and the unruffled serenity of his deep, dark eyes, that I could afford in his presence to let fear and suspicion blow past me as lightly as the breeze which whistled round us. His face might be stern, and even terrible, but I felt that he could never be unjust.

As I glanced from time to time at his noble profile and the sweep of his jet-black beard, his rough-spun tweed traveling suit struck me with an almost painful sense of incongruity, and I re-clothed him in my imagination with the grand, sweeping Oriental costume which is the fitting and proper frame for such a picture—the only garb which does not detract from the dignity and grace of the wearer.

The place to which he led me was a small fisher cottage which had been deserted some years before by its tenant, but still stood gaunt and bare, with the thatch partly blown away and the windows and doors in sad disrepair. This dwelling, which the poorest Scotch beggar would have shrunk from, was the one which these singular men had preferred to the proffered hospitality of the laird's house. A small garden, now a mass of tangled brambles, stood round it, and through this my acquaintance picked his way to the ruined door. He glanced into the house and then waved his hand for me to follow him.

“You have now an opportunity,” he said, in a subdued, reverential voice, “of seeing a spectacle which few Europeans have had the privilege of beholding. Inside that cottage you will find two Yogis—men who are only one remove from the highest plane of adeptship. They are both wrapped in an ecstatic trance, otherwise I should not venture to obtrude your presence upon them. Their astral bodies have departed from them, to be present at the feast of lamps in the holy Lamasery of Rudok in Tibet. Tread lightly lest by stimulating their corporeal functions you recall them before their devotions are completed.”

Walking slowly and on tiptoe, I picked my way through the weed-grown garden, and peered through the open doorway.

There was no furniture in the dreary interior, nor anything to cover the uneven floor save a litter of fresh straw in a corner.

Among this straw two men were crouching, the one small and wizened, the other large-boned and gaunt, with their legs crossed in Oriental fashion and their heads sunk upon their breasts. Neither of them looked up, or took the smallest notice of our presence.

They were so still and silent that they might have been two bronze statues but for the slow and measured rhythm of their breathing. Their faces, however, had a peculiar, ashen-grey colour, very different from the healthy brown of my companion's, and I observed, on, stooping my head, that only the whites of their eyes were visible, the balls being turned upwards beneath the lids.

In front of them upon a small mat lay an earthenware pitcher of water and half-a-loaf of bread, together with a sheet of paper inscribed with certain cabalistic characters. Ram Singh glanced at these, and then, motioning to me to withdraw, followed me out into the garden.

“I am not to disturb them until ten o'clock,” he said. “You have now seen in operation one of the grandest results of our occult philosophy, the dissociation of spirit from body. Not only are the spirits of these holy men standing at the present moment by the banks of the Ganges, but those spirits are clothed in a material covering so identical with their real bodies that none of the faithful will ever doubt that Lal Hoomi and Mowdar Khan are actually among them. This is accomplished by our power of resolving an object into its ‘chemical atoms’, of conveying these atoms with a speed which exceeds that of lightning to any given spot, and of there re-precipitating them and compelling them to retake their original form. Of old, in the days of our ignorance, it was necessary to convey the whole body in this way, but we have since found that it was as easy and more convenient to transmit material enough merely to build up an outside shell or semblance. This we have termed the astral body”

“But if you can transmit your spirits so readily,” I observed, “why should they be accompanied by any body at all?”

“In communicating with brother initiates we are able to employ our spirits only, but when we wish to come in contact with ordinary mankind it is essential that we should appear in some form which they can see and comprehend.”

“You have interested me deeply in all that you have told me,” I said, grasping the hand which Ram Singh had held out to me as a sign that our interview was at an end. “I shall often think of our short acquaintance.”

“You will derive much benefit from it,” he said slowly, still holding my hand and looking gravely and sadly into my eyes. “You must remember that what will happen in the future is not necessarily bad because it does not fall in with your preconceived ideas of right. Be not hasty in your judgments. There are certain great rules which must be carried out, at whatever cost to individuals. Their operation may appear to you to be harsh and cruel, but that is as nothing compared with the dangerous precedent which would be established by not enforcing them. The ox and the sheep are safe from us, but the man with the blood of the highest upon his hands should not and shall not live.”

He threw up his arms at the last words with a fierce, threatening gesture, and, turning away from me, strode back to the ruined hut.

I stood gazing after him until he disappeared through the doorway, and then started off for home, revolving in my mind all that I had heard, and more particularly this last outburst of the occult philosopher.

Far on the right I could see the tall, white tower of Cloomber standing out clear-cut and sharp against a dark cloud-bank which rose behind it. I thought how any traveler who chanced to pass that way would envy in his heart the tenant of that magnificent building, and how little they would guess the strange terrors, the nameless dangers, which were gathering about his head. The black cloud-wrack was but the image, I reflected, of the darker, more sombre storm which was about to burst.

“Whatever it all means, and however it happens,” I ejaculated, “God grant that the innocent be not confounded with the guilty.”

My father, when I reached home, was still in a ferment over his learned disputation with the stranger.

*Ch XIII – In Which I See That Which Has Been Seen by Few*

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“I trust, Jack,” he said, “that I did not handle him too roughly. I should remember that I am in *loco magistri*, and be less prone to argue with my guests. Yet, when he took up this most untenable position, I could not refrain from attacking him and hurling him out of it, which indeed I did, though you, who are ignorant of the niceties of the question, may have failed to perceive it. You observed, however, that my reference to King Asoka’s edicts was so conclusive that he at once rose and took his leave.”

“You held your own bravely,” I answered, “but what is your impression of the man now that you have seen him?”

“Why,” said my father, “he is one of those holy men who, under the various names of Sannasis, Yogis, Sevras, Qualanders, Hakims, and Cufis have devoted their lives to the study of the mysteries of the Buddhist faith. He is, I take it, a theosophist, or worshipper of the God of knowledge, the highest grade of which is the adept. This man and his companions have not attained this high position or they could not have crossed the sea without contamination. It is probable that they are all advanced chelas who hope in time to attain to the supreme honour of adeptship.”

“But, father,” interrupted my sister, “this does not explain why men of such sanctity and attainments should choose to take up their quarters on the shores of a desolate Scotch bay.”

“Ah, there you get beyond me,” my father answered. “I may suggest, however, that it is nobody’s business but their own, so long as they keep the peace and are amenable to the law of the land.”

“Have you ever heard,” I asked, “that these higher priests of whom you speak have powers which are unknown to us?”

“Why, Eastern literature is full of it. The Bible is an Eastern book, and is it not full of the record of such powers from cover to cover? It is unquestionable that they have in the past known many of Nature’s secrets which are lost to us. I cannot say, however, from my own knowledge that the modern theosophists really possess the powers that they claim.”

“Are they a vindictive class of people?” I asked. “Is there any offence among them which can only be expiated by death?”

“Not that I know of,” my father answered, raising his white eyebrows in surprise. “You appear to be in an inquisitive humour this afternoon—what is the object of all these questions? Have our Eastern neighbours aroused your curiosity or suspicion in any way?”

I parried the question as best I might, for I was unwilling to let the old man know what was in my mind. No good purpose could come from his enlightenment; his age and his health demanded rest rather than anxiety; and indeed, with the best will in the world I should have found it difficult to explain to another what was so very obscure to myself. For every reason I felt that it was best that he should be kept in the dark.

Never in all my experience had I known a day pass so slowly as did that eventful 5th of October. In every possible manner I endeavoured to while away the tedious hours, and yet it seemed as if darkness would never arrive.

I tried to read, I tried to write, I paced about the lawn, I walked to the end of the lane, I put new flies upon my fishing-hooks, I began to index my father’s library—in a dozen ways I endeavoured to relieve the suspense which was becoming intolerable. My sister, I could see, was suffering from the same feverish restlessness.

Again and again our good father remonstrated with us in his mild way for our erratic behaviour and the continual interruption of his work which arose from it.

At last, however, the tea was brought, and the tea was taken, the curtains were drawn, the lamps lit, and after another interminable interval the prayers were read and the servants dismissed to their rooms. My father compounded and swallowed his nightly jorum of toddy, and then shuffled off to his room, leaving the two of us in the parlour with our nerves in a tingle and our minds full of the most vague and yet terrible apprehensions.