



CH XIV ~ OF THE VISITOR WHO RAN DOWN
THE ROAD IN THE NIGHT-TIME

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

It was a quarter past ten o'clock by the parlour timepiece when my father went off to his room, and left Esther and myself together. We heard his slow steps dying away up the creaking staircase, until the distant slamming of a door announced that he had reached his sanctum.

The simple oil lamp upon the table threw a weird, uncertain light over the old room, flickering upon the carved oak paneling, and casting strange, fantastic shadows from the high-elbowed, straight-backed furniture. My sister's white, anxious face stood out in the obscurity with a startling exactness of profile like one of Rembrandt's portraits.

We sat opposite to each other on either side of the table with no sound breaking the silence save the measured ticking of the clock and the intermittent chirping of a cricket beneath the grate.

There was something awe-inspiring in the absolute stillness. The whistling of a belated peasant upon the high road was a relief to us, and we strained our ears to catch the last of his notes as he plodded steadily homewards.

At first we had made some pretence—she of knitting and I of reading— but we soon abandoned the useless deception, and sat uneasily waiting, starting and glancing at each other with questioning eyes whenever the faggot crackled in the fire or a rat scampered behind the wainscot. There was a heavy electrical feeling in the air, which weighed us down with a foreboding of disaster.

I rose and flung the hall door open to admit the fresh breeze of the night. Ragged clouds swept across the sky, and the moon peeped out at times between their hurrying fringes, bathing the whole countryside in its cold, white radiance. From where I stood in the doorway I could see the edge of the Cloomber wood, though the house itself was only visible from the rising ground some little distance off. At my sister's suggestion we walked together, she with her shawl over her head, as far as the summit of this elevation, and looked out in the direction of the Hall.

There was no illumination of the windows tonight. From roof to basement not a light twinkled in any part of the great building. Its huge mass loomed up dark and sullen amid the trees which surrounded it, looking more like some giant sarcophagus than a human habitation.

To our overwrought nerves there was something of terror in its mere bulk and its silence. We stood for some little time peering at it through the darkness, and then we made our way back to the parlour again, where we sat waiting—waiting, we knew not for what, and yet with absolute conviction that some terrible experience was in store for us.

It was twelve o'clock or thereabout when my sister suddenly sprang to her feet and held up her fingers to bespeak attention.

“Do you hear nothing?” she asked.

I strained my ears, but without success.

“Come to the door,” she cried, with a trembling voice. “Now can you hear anything?”

In the deep silence of the night I distinctly heard a dull, murmuring, clattering sound, continuous apparently, but very faint and low.

“What is it?” I asked, in a subdued voice.

“It’s the sound of a man running towards us,” she answered, and then, suddenly dropping the last semblance of self-command, she fell upon her knees beside the table and began praying aloud with that frenzied earnestness which intense, overpowering fear can produce, breaking off now and again into half-hysterical whimperings.

I could distinguish the sound clearly enough now to know that her quick, feminine perception had not deceived her, and that it was indeed caused by a running man.

On he came, and on down the high road, his footfalls ringing out clearer and sharper every moment. An urgent messenger he must be, for he neither paused nor slackened his pace.

The quick, crisp rattle was changed suddenly to a dull, muffled murmur. He had reached the point where sand had been recently laid down for a hundred yards or so. In a few moments, however, he was back on hard ground again and his flying feet came nearer and ever nearer.

He must, I reflected, be abreast of the head of the lane now. Would he hold on? Or would he turn down to Branksome?

The thought had hardly crossed my mind when I heard by the difference of the sound that the runner had turned the corner, and that his goal was beyond all question the laird's house.

Rushing down to the gate of the lawn, I reached it just as our visitor dashed it open and fell into my arms. I could see in the moonlight that it was none other than Mordaunt Heatherstone.

"What has happened?" I cried. "What is amiss, Mordaunt?"

"My father!" he gasped—"my father!"

His hat was gone, his eyes dilated with terror, and his face as bloodless as that of a corpse. I could feel that the hands which clasped my arms were quivering and shaking with emotion.

"You are exhausted," I said, leading him into the parlour. "Give yourself a moment's rest before you speak to us. Be calm, man, you are with your best friends."

I laid him on the old horsehair sofa, while Esther, whose fears had all flown to the winds now that something practical was to be done, dashed some brandy into a tumbler and brought it to him. The stimulant had a marvelous effect upon him, for the colour began to come back into his pale cheeks and the light of recognition in his eyes,

He sat up and took Esther's hand in both of his, like a man who is waking out of some bad dream and wishes to assure himself that he is really in safety.

"Your father?" I asked. "What of him?"

"He is gone."

“Gone!”

“Yes; he is gone; and so is Corporal Rufus Smith. We shall never set eyes upon them again.”

“But where have they gone?” I cried. “This is unworthy of you, Mordaunt. What right have we to sit here, allowing our private feelings to overcome us, while there is a possibility of succouring your father? Up, man! Let us follow him. Tell me only what direction he took.”

“It’s no use,” young Heatherstone answered, burying his face in his hands. “Don’t reproach me, West, for you don’t know all the circumstances. What can we do to reverse the tremendous and unknown laws which are acting against us? The blow has long been hanging over us, and now it has fallen. God help us!”

“In Heaven’s name tell me what has happened!” said I excitedly. “We must not yield to despair.”

“We can do nothing until daybreak,” he answered. “We shall then endeavour to obtain some trace of them. It is hopeless at present.”

“And how about Gabriel and Mrs. Heatherstone?” I asked. “Can we not bring them down from the Hall at once? Your poor sister must be distracted with terror.”

“She knows nothing of it,” Mordaunt answered. “She sleeps at the other side of the house, and has not heard or seen anything. As to my poor mother, she has expected some such event for so long a time that it has not come upon her as a surprise. She is, of course, overwhelmed with grief, but would, I think, prefer to be left to herself for the present. Her firmness and composure should be a lesson to me, but I am constitutionally excitable, and this catastrophe coming after our long period of suspense deprived me of my very reason for a time.”

“If we can do nothing until the morning,” I said, “you have time to tell us all that has occurred.”

“I will do so,” he answered, rising and holding his shaking hands to the fire. “You know already that we have had reason for some time—for many years in fact—to fear that a terrible retribution was hanging over my father’s head for a certain action of his early life. In this action he was associated with the man known as Corporal Rufus Smith, so that the fact of the latter finding his way to my father was a warning to us that the time had come, and that this 5th of October—the anniversary

of the misdeed—would be the day of its atonement. I told you of our fears in my letter, and, if I am not mistaken, my father also had some conversation with you, John, upon the subject. When I saw yesterday morning that he had hunted out the old uniform which he had always retained since he wore it in the Afghan war, I was sure that the end was at hand, and that our forebodings would be realized.

“He appeared to be more composed in the afternoon than I have seen him for years, and spoke freely of his life in India and of the incidents of his youth. About nine o’clock he requested us to go up to our own rooms, and locked us in there—a precaution which he frequently took when the dark fit way upon him. It was always his endeavour, poor soul, to keep us clear of the curse which had fallen upon his own unfortunate head. Before parting from us he tenderly embraced my mother and Gabriel, and he afterwards followed me to my room, where he clasped my hand affectionately and gave into my charge a small packet addressed to yourself.”

“To me?” I interrupted.

“To you. I shall fulfill my commission when I have told you my story. I conjured him to allow me to sit up with him and share any danger which might arise, but he implored me with irresistible earnestness not to add to his troubles by thwarting his arrangements. Seeing that I was really distressing him by my pertinacity, I at last allowed him to close the door and to turn the key upon the outside. I shall always reproach myself for my want of firmness. But what can you do when your own father refuses your assistance or co-operation? You cannot force yourself upon him.”

“I am sure that you did all you could do,” my sister said.

“I meant to, dear Esther, but, God help me, it was hard to tell what was right. He left me, and I heard his footsteps die away down the long corridor. It was then about ten o’clock, or a little after. For a time I paced up and down the room, and then, carrying the lamp to the head of my bed, I lay down without undressing, reading St. Thomas a Kempis, and praying from my heart that the night might pass safely over us.

“I had at last fallen into a troubled sleep when I was suddenly aroused by a loud, sonorous sound ringing in my ears. I sat up bewildered, but all was silent again. The lamp was burning low, and my watch showed me that it was going on to midnight. I blundered to my feet, and was striking a match with the intention of lighting the candles, when the sharp, vehement cry broke out again so

loud and so clear that it might have been in the very room with me. My chamber is in the front of the house, while those of my mother and sister are at the back, so that I am the only one who commands a view of the avenue.

“Rushing to the window I drew the blind aside and looked out. You know that the gravel-drive opens up so as to form a broad stretch immediately in front of the house. Just in the centre of this clear space there stood three men looking up at the house.

“The moon shone full upon them, glistening on their upturned eyeballs, and by its light I could see that they were swarthy-faced and black-haired, of a type that I was familiar with among the Sikhs and Afridis. Two of them were thin, with eager, aesthetic countenances, while the third was kinglike and majestic, with a noble figure and flowing beard.”

“Ram Singh!” I ejaculated.

“What, you know of them?” exclaimed Mordaunt in great surprise. “You have met them?”

“I know of them. They are Buddhist priests,” I answered, “but go on.”

“They stood in a line,” he continued, “sweeping their arms upwards and downwards, while their lips moved as if repeating some prayer or incantation. Suddenly they ceased to gesticulate, and broke out for the third time into the wild, weird, piercing cry which had roused me from my slumber. Never shall I forget that shrill, dreadful summons swelling and reverberating through the silent night with an intensity of sound which is still ringing in my ears.

“As it died slowly away, there was a rasping and creaking as of keys and bolts, followed by the clang of an opening door and the clatter of hurrying feet. From my window I saw my father and Corporal Rufus Smith rush frantically out of the house hatless and unkempt, like men who are obeying a sudden and overpowering impulse. The three strangers laid no hands on them, but all five swept swiftly away down the avenue and vanished among the trees. I am positive that no force was used, or constraint of any visible kind, and yet I am as sure that my poor father and his companion were helpless prisoners as it I had seen them dragged away in manacles.

“All this took little time in the acting. From the first summons which disturbed my sleep to the last shadowy glimpse which I had of them between the tree trunks could hardly have occupied more

Ch XIV ~ Of the Visitor Who Ran Down. . .

than five minutes of actual time. So sudden was it, and so strange, that when the drama was over and they were gone I could have believed that it was all some terrible nightmare, some delusion, had I not felt that the impression was too real, too vivid, to be imputed to fancy.

“I threw my whole weight against my bedroom door in the hope of forcing the lock. It stood firm for a while, but I flung myself upon it again and again, until something snapped and I found myself in the passage.

“My first thought was for my mother, I rushed to her room and turned the key in her door. The moment that I did so she stepped out into the corridor in her dressing-gown, and held up a warning finger.

“‘No noise, she said,’ Gabriel is asleep. They have been called away?’

“‘They have,’ I answered.

“‘God’s will be done!’ she cried. ‘Your poor father will be happier in the next world than he has ever been in this. Thank Heaven that Gabriel is asleep. I gave her chloral in her cocoa.’

“‘What am I to do?’ I said distractedly.

“‘Where have they gone? How can I help him? We cannot let him go from us like this, or leave these men to do what they will with him. Shall I ride into Wigtown and arouse the police?’

“‘Anything rather than that’, my mother said earnestly. ‘He has begged me again and again to avoid it. My son, we shall never set eyes upon your father again. You may marvel at my dry eyes, but it you knew as I know the peace which death would bring him, you could not find it in your heart to mourn for him. All pursuit is, I feel, vain, and yet some pursuit there must be. Let it be as private as possible. We cannot serve him better than by consulting his wishes.’

“‘But every minute is precious,’ I cried. ‘Even now he may be calling upon us to rescue him from the clutches of those dark-skinned fiends.’

“The thought so maddened me that I rushed out of the house and down to the high road, but once there I had no indication in which direction to turn. The whole wide moor lay before me, without

a sign of movement upon its broad expanse. I listened, but not a sound broke the perfect stillness of the night.

“It was then, my dear friends, as I stood, not knowing in which direction to turn, that the horror and responsibility broke full upon me. I felt that I was combating against forces of which I knew nothing. All was strange and dark and terrible.

“The thought of you, and of the help which I might look for from your advice and assistance, was a beacon of hope to me. At Branksome, at least, I should receive sympathy, and, above all, directions as to what I should do, for my mind is in such a whirl that I cannot trust my own judgment. My mother was content to be alone, my sister asleep, and no prospect of being able to do anything until daybreak. Under those circumstances what more natural than that I should fly to you as fast as my feet would carry me? You have a clear head, Jack; speak out, man, and tell me what I should do. Esther, what should I do?”

He turned from one to the other of us with outstretched hands and eager, questioning eyes.

“You can do nothing while the darkness lasts,” I answered. “We must report the matter to the Wigtown police, but we need not send our message to them until we are actually starting upon the search, so as to comply with the law and yet have a private investigation, as your mother wishes. John Fullarton, over the hill, has a lurcher dog which is as good as a bloodhound. If we set him on the general’s trail he will run him down if he had to follow him to John o’ Groat’s.”

“It is terrible to wait calmly here while he may need our assistance.”

“I fear our assistance could under any circumstances do him little good. There are forces at work here which are beyond human intervention. Besides, there is no alternative. We have, apparently, no possible clue as to the direction which they have taken, and for us to wander aimlessly over the moor in the darkness would be to waste the strength which may be more profitably used in the morning. It will be daylight by five o’clock. In an hour or so we can walk over the hill together and get Fullarton’s dog.”

“Another hour!” Mordaunt groaned, “every minute seems an age.”

“Lie down on the sofa and rest yourself,” said I. “You cannot serve your father better than by laying up all the strength you can, for we may have a weary trudge before us. But you mentioned a packet which the general had intended for me.”

“It is here,” he answered, drawing a small, flat parcel from his pocket and handing it over to me, “you will find, no doubt, that it will explain all which has been so mysterious.”

The packet was sealed at each end with black wax, bearing the impress of the flying griffin, which I knew to be the general’s crest. It was further secured by a band of broad tape, which I cut with my pocket-knife. Across the outside was written in bold handwriting: “J. Fothergill West, Esq.,” and underneath: “To be handed to that gentleman in the event of the disappearance or decease of Major-General J. B. Heatherstone, V.C., C.B., late of the Indian Army.”

So at last I was to know the dark secret which had cast a shadow over our lives. Here in my hands I held the solution of it.

With eager fingers I broke the seals and undid the wrapper. A note and a small bundle of discoloured paper lay within. I drew the lamp over to me and opened the former. It was dated the preceding afternoon, and ran in this way:

MY DEAR WEST,—

I should have satisfied your very natural curiosity on the subject which we have had occasion to talk of more than once, but I refrained for your own sake. I knew by sad experience how unsettling and unnerving it is to be for ever waiting for a catastrophe which you are convinced must befall, and which you can neither avert nor accelerate.

Though it affects me specially, as being the person most concerned, I am still conscious that the natural sympathy which I have observed in you, and your regard for Gabriel’s father, would both combine to render you unhappy if you knew the hopelessness and yet the vagueness of the fate which threatens me. I feared to disturb your mind, and I was therefore silent, though at some cost to myself, for my isolation has not been the least of the troubles which have weighed me down.

Many signs, however, and chief among them the presence of the Buddhists upon the coast as described by you this morning, have convinced me that the weary waiting is at last over and that the

hour of retribution is at hand. Why I should have been allowed to live nearly forty years after my offence is more than I can understand, but it is possible that those who had command over my fate know that such a life is the greatest of all penalties to me.

Never for an hour, night or day, have they suffered me to forget that they have marked me down as their victim. Their accursed astral bell has been ringing my knell for two-score years, reminding me ever that there is no spot upon earth where I can hope to be in safety. Oh, the peace, the blessed peace of dissolution! Come what may on the other side of the tomb, I shall at least be quit of that thrice terrible sound.

There is no need for me to enter into the wretched business again, or to detail at any length the events of October 5th, 1841, and the various circumstances which led up to the death of Ghoolab Shah, the arch adept.

I have torn a sheaf of leaves from my old journal, in which you will find a bald account of the matter, and an independent narrative was furnished by Sir Edward Elliott, of the Artillery, to the Star of India some years ago—in which, however, the names were suppressed.

I have reason to believe that many people, even among those who knew India well, thought that Sir Edward was romancing, and that he had evolved his incidents from his imagination. The few faded sheets which I send you will show you that this is not the case, and that our men of science must recognise powers and laws which can and have been used by man, but which are unknown to European civilization.

I do not wish to whine or to whimper, but I cannot help feeling that I have had hard measure dealt me in this world. I would not, God knows, take the life of any man, far less an aged one, in cold blood. My temper and nature, however, were always fiery and headstrong, and in action when my blood is up, I have no knowledge of what I am about. Neither the corporal nor I would have laid a finger upon Ghoolab Shah had we not seen that the tribesmen were rallying behind him. Well, well, it is an old story now, and there is no profit in discussing it. May no other poor fellow ever have the same evil fortune!

I have written a short supplement to the statements contained in my journal for your information and that of any one else who may chance to be interested in the matter.

And now, adieu! Be a good husband to Gabriel, and, if your sister be brave enough to marry into such a devil-ridden family as ours, by all means let her do so. I have left enough to keep my poor wife in comfort.

When she rejoins me I should wish it to be equally divided between the children. If you hear that I am gone, do not pity, but congratulate

Your unfortunate friend,

JOHN BERTHIER HEATHERSTONE.

I threw aside the letter and picked up the roll of blue foolscap which contained the solution of the mystery. It was all ragged and frayed at the inner edge, with traces of gum and thread still adhering to it, to show that it had been torn out of a strongly bound volume. The ink with which it had been written was faded somewhat, but across the head of the first page was inscribed in bold, clear characters, evidently of later date than the rest: "Journal of Lieutenant J. B. Heatherstone in the Thull Valley during the autumn of 1841," and then underneath:

This extract contains some account of the events of the first week of October of that year, including the skirmish of the Terada ravine and the death of the man Ghoolab Shah.

I have the narrative lying before me now, and I copy it verbatim. If it contains some matter which has no direct bearing upon the question at issue, I can only say that I thought it better to publish what is irrelevant than by cutting and clipping to lay the whole statement open to the charge of having been tampered with.