

# One of the Garrison;

Or, A Mysterious Affair.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

"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 Cloombier 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 orge 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 of events may take. Good-bye!" He plunged into the wood and was quickly out of sight among the dense plantation.

This 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.

CHAPTER VII.

In making this statement I have purposely couched it in bald and simple language, for fear I should be accused of coloring my narrative for the sake of effect. If, however, I have told my story with any approach to realism, the reader will understand me when I say that by this time the succession of dramatic incidents which had occurred had arrested my attention and excited my imagination to the exclusion of all minor topics. How could I plod through the dull routine of an agent's work, or interest myself in the thatch of this tenant's bothy or the sails of that one's boat, when my mind was taken up by the chain of events which I have described, and was still busy seeking an explanation for them? Go where I would over the countryside I could see the square white tower shooting out from among the trees, and beneath that tower this ill-fated family were watching and waiting, and watching—and for what? That was still the question which stood like an impassable barrier at the end of every train of thought. Regarded merely as an abstract problem, this mystery of the Heatherstone family had a lurid fascination about it, but when the woman whom I loved a thousandfold better than I did myself proved to be so deeply interested in the solution, I felt that it was impossible to turn my thoughts to anything else unless the matter had been finally cleared up.

My good father had received a letter from the laird, dated from Naples, which told us that he had derived much benefit from the change, and that he had no intention of returning to Scotland for some time. This was satisfactory to all of us, for my father had found Branksome such an excellent place for study that it would have been a sore trial to him to return to the noise and tumult of a city. As to my dear sister and myself, there were, as I have shown, stronger reasons still to make us love the Wigtownshire moors.

In spite of my interview with the general—or perhaps I might say on account of it—I took occasion at least twice to walk toward Cloombier and satisfy myself that all was well there. He had begun by resenting my intrusion, but he had ended by taking me into a sort of half confidence, and even by asking my assistance, so I felt that I stood upon a different footing with him than I had done formerly, and that he was less likely to be annoyed by my presence. Indeed, I met him pacing around the enclosure a few days afterward, and his manner toward me was civil, though he made no allusion to our former conversation. He appeared to be still in an extreme state of nervousness, starting from time to time, and gazing furtively about him. I hoped that his daughter was right in naming the 8th of October as the turning-point of his complaint, for it was evident to me, as I looked at his gleaming eyes and quivering hands, that a man could not live long in such a state of nervous tension.

I found on examination that he had the loose rails securely fastened so as to block up our former trying-place, and though I prowled round the whole long line of fencing, I was unable to find any other place where an entrance could be effected. Here and there between chinks of the barrier I could catch glimpses of the Hall, and once I saw a rough-looking, middle-aged man standing at a window at the lower floor, whom I supposed to be Israel Stakes, the coachman. There was no sign, however, of Gabriel or of Mordaunt, and their absence alarmed me. I was convinced that, unless they were under some restraint, they would have managed to communicate with my sister or myself. My fears became more and more acute as day followed day without our seeing or hearing anything of them.

One morning—it was the second day of

October—I was walking toward the hall, hoping that I might be fortunate enough to learn some news of my darling, when I observed a man perched upon a stone at the side of the road. As I came nearer to him I could see that he was a stranger, and from his dusty clothes and dilapidated appearance he seemed to have come from a distance. He had a great hunch of bread on his knee and a clasp knife in his hand, but he had apparently just finished his breakfast, for he brushed the crumbs off his lap and rose to his feet when he perceived me. Noticing the great height of the fellow, and that he still held his weapon, I kept well to the other side of the road, for I knew that destitution makes men desperate and that the chain that glittered on my waistcoat might be too great a temptation to him upon this lonely highway. I was confirmed in my fears when I saw him step out into the center of the road and bar my progress.

"Well, my lad," I said, affecting an ease which I by no means felt, "what can I do for you this morning?" The fellow's face was the color of mahogany with exposure to the weather, and he had a deep scar from the corner of his mouth to his ear, which by no means improved his appearance. His hair was grizzled, but his figure was stalwart, and his fur cap was cocked on one side so as to give him a rakish, semi-military appearance. Altogether he gave me the impression of being one of the most dangerous types of tramp that I had ever fallen in with.

Instead of replying to my question he eyed me for some time in silence with sudden yellow-shot eyes, and then closed his knife with a loud click. "You're not a beak," he said; "too young for that, I guess. They had me in choker at Paisley and they had me in choker at Wigtown, but by the living thunder if another of them lays a hand on me I'll make him remember Corporal Rufus Smith! It's a damned fine country this, where they won't give a man work, and then lay him by the heels for having no visible means of subsistence. I'm an old soldier, sir, and I was at the second taking of Cabul."

General Heatherstone looked keenly at the supplicant, but was silent to his appeal.

"I was in Ghuznee with you when the walls were all shook down by an earthquake, and when we found forty thousand Afghans within gunshot of us. You ask me about it, and you'll see whether I'm lying or not. We went through all this when we were young, and now that we are old you are to live in a fine bungalow, and I am to starve by the roadside. It don't seem to me to be fair."

"You are an impertinent scoundrel!" said the general, "if you had been a good soldier you would never need to ask for help. I shall not give you a farthing."

"One word more, sir," cried the tramp, for the other was turning away: "I've been in the Terada Pass."

The old soldier sprang round as if the words had been a pistol-shot. "What-what d'ye mean?" he stammered.

"I've been in the Terada Pass, sir, and I know a man there called Ghoolab Shah."

These last words were hissed out in an undertone, and a malicious grin overspread the face of the speaker. Their effect upon the general was extraordinary. He fairly staggered back from the gateway, and his yellow countenance blanched to a livid mortid gray. For a moment he was too overcome to speak. At last he gasped out, "Ghoolab Shah!—who are you who know Ghoolab Shah?"

"Take another look," said the tramp; "your sight is not as keen as it was forty years ago."

The general took a long, earnest look at the unkempt wanderer in front of him, and as he gazed I saw the light of recognition spring up in his eyes. "God bless my soul!" he cried. "Why it's Corporal Rufus Smith!"

"You've come on it at last," said the other, chuckling to himself. "I was wondering how long it would be before you knew me. And first of all just unlock this gate, wailing. It's too much like ten minutes with a visitor in the cells."

The general, whose face still bore evidences of his agitation, undid the bolts with nervous, trembling fingers. The recognition of Corporal Rufus Smith had, indeed, been a relief to him, and yet he regarded his presence as by no means an unbidden blessing.

"Why, corporal," he said, as the gate swung open, "I have often wondered whether you were dead or alive, but I never expected to see you again. How have you been all these long years?"

"How have I been?" the corporal answered gruffly. "Why I have been drunk evered for the most part. When I draw my money I lay it out in liquor, and as long

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ing his moleskin cap with a humility which contrasted strangely with the previous rough independence of his bearing. "I'm an old gunner in the queen's service, sir, and knowing your name by hearing it in India I thought that maybe you would take me as your groom or gardener, or give me any other place as happened to be vacant."

"I am sorry that I cannot do anything for a money man," the old soldier answered, impassively.

"Then you'll give me a little just to help me on my way, sir," said the ering mendicant. "You won't see an old comrade go to the bad for the sake of a few rupees? I was with Sale's brigade in the Passes, sir, and I was at the second taking of Cabul."

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as that lasts I get some peace in life. When I'm cleaned out I go upon tramp, partly in the hope of picking up the price of a dram, and partly in order to look for you."

"You'll excuse us talking about these private matters, West," the general said, looking round at me, for I was beginning to move away. "Don't leave us. You know something of this matter already, and may find yourself entirely in the swim for us some of these days."

Corporal Rufus Smith looked round at me in blank astonishment. "In the swim with us!" he said. "However did he get there?"

"Voluntarily, voluntarily," the general explained, hurriedly sinking his voice. "He is a neighbor of mine, and he has volunteered his help in case I should ever need it."

This explanation seemed, if anything, to increase the big stranger's surprise. "Well, if that don't lick cock-fighting!" he exclaimed, contemplating me with admiration. "I never heard tell of such a thing."

"And now that you have found me, Corporal Smith," said the tenant of Cloombier, "what is it that you want of me?"

"Why, everything: I want a roof to cover me, and clothes to wear, and food to eat, and above all brandy to drink."

"Well, I'll take you in and do what I can for you," said the general slowly. "But look here, Smith, we must have discipline. I'm the general and you are the corporal; I am the master and you are the man. Now, don't let me have to remind you of that again."

The tramp drew himself up to his full height and raised his right hand with the palm forward in a military salute. "I can take you on as gardener and get rid of the fellow I have got. As to brandy, you shall have an allowance and no more. We are not deep drinkers at the Hall."

"Don't you take opium, or brandy, or nothing yourself, sir?" asked Corporal Rufus Smith.

"Nothing," the general said, firmly. "Well, all I can say is, that you've got more nerve and pluck than I shall ever

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have. I don't wonder now at your winning that cross in the mutiny. If I was to go on listening night after night to them things without ever taking a drop of something to cheer my heart—why, it would about drive me silly."

(To be continued.)

"What is your name, little boy?" "Willoughby Walton Waggle, ma'am." "Some day you'll have a lovely monogram on your stationery."

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