

One of the Garrison;

Or, A Mysterious Affair.

CHAPTER XII.—(Cont'd.)

"If you have determined to honor our neighborhood by a short stay," said I, "you will offend my father very much if you do not put up with him. He represents the laird here, and it is his privilege, according to our Scottish custom, to entertain all strangers of repute who visit his parish." My sense of hospitality prompted me to deliver this invitation, though I could feel the mate twitching at my sleeve as if to warn me that the offer was, for some reason, an objectionable one. His fears were, however, unnecessary, for the stranger signified by a shake of the head that it was impossible for him to accept it.

"My friends and I are very much obliged to you," he said, "but we have our own reasons for remaining where we are. The hut which we occupy is desirable and partly ruined but we Easterners have trained ourselves to do without most of those things which are looked upon as necessities in Europe, believing firmly in that wise axiom that a man is rich, not in proportion to what he has, but in proportion to what he can dispense with.

A good fisherman's supply with bread and with herbs, we have clean dry straw for our couches, what could man wish for more?"

"But you must feel the cold at night, coming straight from the tropics," remarked the captain.

"Perhaps our bodies are cold sometimes. We have not noticed it. We have all three spent many years in the Upper Himalayas on the border of the region of eternal snow, so we are not very sensitive to inconveniences of the sort."

"At least," said I, "you must allow me to send you over some fish and some meat from our larder?"

"We are not Christians," he answered, "but Buddhists of the higher school. We do not recognize that man has a moral right to slay an ox or a fish for the gross use of his body. He has not put life into them, and has assuredly no mandate from the Almighty to take life from them save under most pressing need. We could not, therefore, use your gift if you were to send it."

"But, sir," I remonstrated, "if in this changeable and inhospitable climate you refuse all nourishing food your vitality will fall—you will die."

"We shall die then," he answered with a bright smile. "And now, Captain Meadows, I must bid you adieu, thanking you for your kindness during the voyage, and you, too, good-bye—you will command a ship of your own before the year is out. I trust, Mr. West, that I may see you again before I leave this part of the country. Excuse me." He raised his red face, inclined his noble head with the stately grace which characterized all his actions, and stole away in the direction from which he had come.

"Let me congratulate you, Mr. Hawkins," said the captain to the mate as we walked homeward. "You are to command your own ship within the year."

"No such luck!" the mate answered, with a pleased smile upon his mahogany face; "still there's no saying how things may come out. What d'ye think of him, Mr. West?"

"Why," said I, "I am very much interested in him. What a magnificent head and bearing he has for a young man. I suppose he cannot be more than thirty."

"Forty," said the mate.

"Sixty, if he is a day," remarked Captain Meadows. "Why, I have heard him talk quite familiarly of the first Afghan war. He was a man then, and that is close on forty years ago."

"Wonderful!" I ejaculated. "His skin is as smooth and his eyes are as clear as mine are. He is the superior priest of the three no doubt."

"The inferior," said the captain confidently. "That is why he does all the talking for them. Their minds are too elevated to descend to mere worldly chatter."

"They are the strangest pieces of flotsam and jetsam that ever were thrown upon this coast," I remarked. "My father will be mightily interested in them."

"Indeed, I think the less you have to do with them the better for you," said the mate. "If I do command my own ship I'll promise you that I never carry live stock of that sort on board of her. But here we are at the anchor and the anchor tripped, so we must bid you good-bye."

"The wagonette had just finished loading up when we arrived, and the chief places, on either side of the driver, had been reserved for my two companions, who speedily sprang into them. With a chorus of cheers the good fellows whirled away down the road, while my father, Esther, and I stood upon the lawn and waved our hands to them until they disappeared behind the Cloombur woods, en route for the Wigtown railway station. Bark and crew had both vanished now from our little world, the only relics either being the heaps of debris upon the beach, which were to be there until the arrival of an agent from Lloyd's."

CHAPTER XIII.

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. Esth'er and I were relieved and glad when we at last were allowed to return to our room, for the exciting events of the last twenty-four hours had been too much for his weak frame and delicate nerves.

I was sitting 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 Cloombur? Haven'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 day of October to-morrow 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 who were hanging over these strange men wish to stay upon the coast?"

"What, the Buddhists?" I said lightly. "Oh, these fellows have continued 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?"

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, 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 devils 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 little 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 tenants of Cloombur. 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 learned 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 fir trees had 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 fencible, which presented as unbroken and formidable an obstacle as ever to the would-be intruder.

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 erected with each rail overlapping the last, so as to secure absolute privacy for those inside. 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 a 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 what ever 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 fencible 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 an air of a man who is bracing himself for an effort, but the other caught him by the wrist and endeavored 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 toward 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 query any time but I am none the less very glad to see you."

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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 to-morrow—we will be different men to-morrow, 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 its 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 your hearing the signal guns. She came ashore in the bay the night before last—a great bark 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 look 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. "They will be done!" he cried in a cracking voice. "They 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 just when I have got a snug billet."

"My lad," the general said, rising and squaring his shoulders like a man who braces himself for an effort. "Be it what it may, well 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 jangle-jangle," said the corporal. "Well, we'll all go together—that's some consolation."

"Good-bye, West," said the general. "Be a good husband to Gabriel, and give my humble friend here and I have placed you trouble you long. Good-by! 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 for? If you have 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. 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 unflinching 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-by!" 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 corporal.

I walked back to Brankesome 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 Cloombur. It was difficult for me to associate the cool-headed 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 I should least care to face 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 was a positive physical one, why should he not consent to my proposal to have the three men placed under my 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 Brankesome 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 John 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 will 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."

(To be Continued.)

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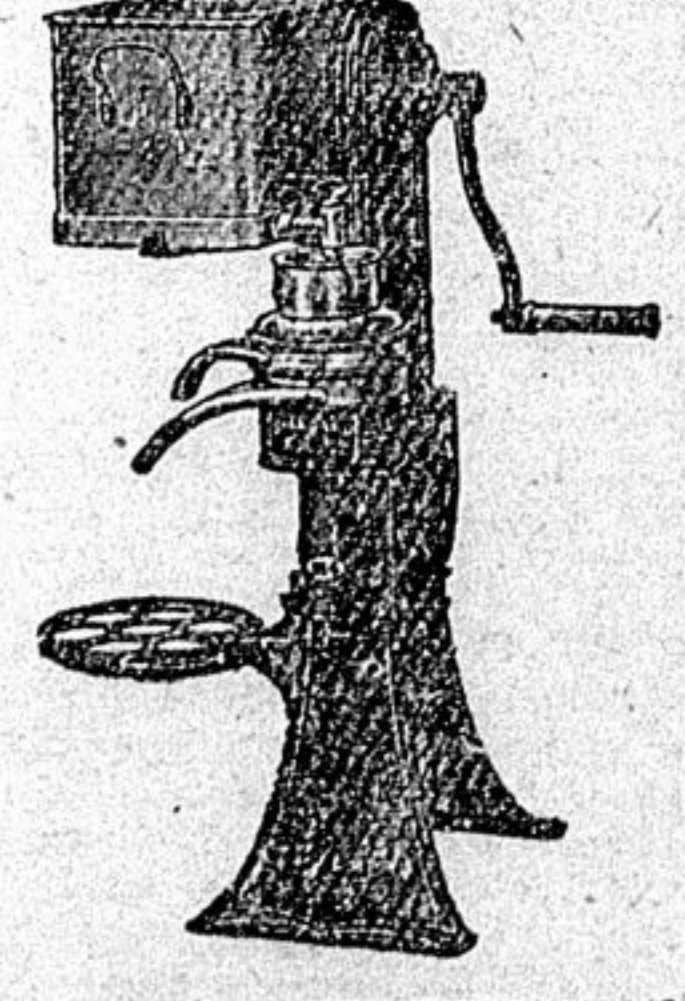
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