



**Arthur Conan Doyle**

*The Land of Mist*



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I  
IN WHICH OUR SPECIAL COMMISSIONERS  
MAKE A START

**T**he great Professor Challenger has been—very improperly and imperfectly—used in fiction. A daring author placed him in impossible and romantic situations in order to see how he would react to them. He reacted to the extent of a libel action, an abortive appeal for suppression, a riot in Sloane Street, two personal assaults, and the loss of his position as lecturer upon Physiology at the London School of Sub-Tropical Hygiene. Otherwise, the matter passed more peaceably than might have been expected.

However, he was losing something of his fire. Those huge shoulders were a little bowed. The spade-shaped Assyrian beard showed tangles of grey amid the black, his eyes were a trifle less aggressive, his smile less self-complacent, his voice as monstrous as ever but less ready to roar down all opposition. Yet he was dangerous, as all around him were painfully aware. The volcano was not extinct, and constant rumblings threatened some new explosion. Life had much yet to teach him, but he was a little less intolerant in learning.

There was a definite date for the change, which had been wrought in him. It was the death of his wife. That little bird of a woman had made her nest in the big man's heart. He had

all the tenderness and chivalry, which the strong can have for the weak. By yielding everything, she had won everything, as a sweet-natured, tactful woman can. In addition, when she died suddenly from virulent pneumonia following influenza, the man staggered and went down. He came up again, smiling ruefully like the stricken boxer, and ready to carry on for many a round with Fate. However, he was not the same man, and if it had not been for the help and comradeship of his daughter Enid, he might have never rallied from the blow. She it was who, with clever craft, lured him into every subject, which would excite his combative nature and infuriate his mind, until he lived once more in the present and not the past. It was only when she saw him turbulent in controversy, violent to pressmen, and generally offensive to those around him, that she felt he was really in a fair way to recovery.

Enid Challenger was a remarkable girl and should have a paragraph to herself. With the raven-black hair of her father, and the blue eyes and fresh colour of her mother, she was striking, if not beautiful, in appearance. She was quiet, but she was very strong. From her infancy, she had either to take her own part against her father, or else to consent to be crushed and to become a mere automaton worked by his strong fingers. She was strong enough to hold her own in a gentle, elastic fashion, which bent to his moods and reasserted itself when they were past. Lately she had felt the constant pressure too oppressive and she had relieved it by feeling out for a career of her own. She did occasional odd jobs for the London press, and did them in such fashion that her name was beginning to be known in Fleet Street. In finding this opening she had been greatly helped by an old friend of her

father—and possibly of the reader—Mr. Edward Malone of the *Daily Gazette*.

Malone was still the same athletic Irishman who had once won his international cap at Rugby, but life had toned him down also, and made him a more subdued and thoughtful man. He had put away a good deal when last his football-boots had been packed away for good. His muscles may have wilted and his joints stiffened, but his mind was deeper and more active. The boy was dead and the man was born. In person, he had altered little, but his moustache was heavier, his back a little rounded, and some lines of thought were tracing themselves upon his brow. Post-war conditions and new world problems had left their mark. For the rest he had made his name in journalism and even to a small degree in literature. He was still a bachelor, though there were some who thought that his hold on that condition was precarious and that Miss Enid Challenger's little white fingers could disengage it. Certainly they were very good chums.

It was a Sunday evening in October, and the lights were just beginning to twinkle out through the fog, which had shrouded London from early morning. Professor Challenger's flat at Victoria West Gardens was upon the third floor, and the mist lay thick upon the windows, while the low hum of the attenuated Sunday traffic rose up from an invisible highway beneath, which was outlined only by scattered patches of dull radiance. Professor Challenger sat with his thick, bandy legs outstretched to the fire, and his hands thrust deeply into trouser pockets. His dress had a little of the eccentricity of genius, for he wore a loose-collared shirt, a large knotted maroon-coloured silk tie, and a black velvet smoking-jacket,

which, with his flowing beard, gave him the appearance of an elderly and Bohemian artist. On one side of him ready for an excursion, with bowl hat, short-skirted dress of black, and all the other fashionable devices, with which women contrive to deform the beauties of nature, there sat his daughter, while Malone, hat in hand, waited by the window.

“I think we should get off, Enid. It is nearly seven,” said he.

They were writing joint articles upon the religious denominations of London, and on each Sunday evening they sallied out together to sample some new one and get copy for the next week’s issue of the *Gazette*.

“It’s not till eight, Ted. We have lots of time.”

“Sit down, sir! Sit down!” boomed Challenger, tugging at his beard as was his habit if his temper was rising, “there is nothing annoys me more than having anyone standing behind me. A relic of atavism and the fear of a dagger, but still persistent. That’s right. For heaven’s sake put your hat down! You have a perpetual air of catching a train.”

“That’s the journalistic life,” said Malone. “If we don’t catch the perpetual train we get left. Even Enid is beginning to understand that. But still, as you say, there is time enough.”

“How far have you got?” asked Challenger.

Enid consulted a business-like little reporter’s notebook. “We have done seven. There was Westminster Abbey for the Church in its most picturesque form, and Saint Agatha for the High Church, and Tudor Place for the Low. Then there was the Westminster Cathedral for Catholics, Endell Street for Presbyterians and Gloucester Square for Unitarians. However, tonight we are trying to introduce some variety. We are doing the Spiritualists.”

Challenger snorted like an angry buffalo.

“Next week the lunatic asylums, I presume,” said he. “You don’t mean to tell me, Malone, that these ghost people have got churches of their own.”

“I’ve been looking into that,” said Malone. “I always look up cold facts and figures before I tackle a job. They have over four hundred registered churches in Great Britain.”

Challenger’s snorts now sounded like a whole herd of buffaloes.

“There seems to me to be absolutely no limit to the inanity and credulity of the human race. *Homo Sapiens! Homo idioticus!* Who do they pray to—the ghosts?”

“Well, that’s what we want to find out. We should get some copy out of them. I need not say that I share your view entirely, but I’ve seen something of Atkinson of St. Mary’s Hospital lately. He is a rising surgeon, you know.”

“I’ve heard of him—cerebro-spinal.”

“That’s the man. He is level-headed and is looked on as an authority on psychic research, as they call the new science, which deals with these matters.”

“Science, indeed!”

“Well, that is what they call it. He seems to take these people seriously. I consult him when I want a reference, for he has the literature at his fingers’ end. ‘Pioneers of the Human Race’—that was his description.”

“Pioneering them to Bedlam,” growled Challenger. “And literature! What literature have they?”

“Well, that was another surprise. Atkinson has five hundred volumes, but complains that his psychic library is very imperfect. You see, there is French, German, Italian, as well as our own.”

“Well, thank God all the folly is not confined to poor old England. Pestilential nonsense!”

“Have you read it up at all, Father?” asked Enid.

“Read it up! I, with all my interests and no time for one-half of them! Enid, you are too absurd.”

“Sorry, Father. You spoke with such assurance; I thought you knew something about it.”

Challenger’s huge head swung round and his lion’s glare rested upon his daughter.

“Do you conceive that a logical brain, a brain of the first order, needs to read and to study before it can detect a manifest absurdity? Am I to study mathematics in order to confute the man who tells me that two and two are five? Must I study physics once more and take down my Principia because some rogue or fool insists that a table can rise in the air against the law of gravity? Does it take five hundred volume to inform us of a thing, which is proved in every police court when an impostor is exposed? Enid, I am ashamed of you!”

His daughter laughed merrily.

“Well, Dad, you need not roar at me anymore. I give in. In fact, I have the same feeling that you have.”

“Nonetheless,” said Malone, “some good men support them. I don’t see that you can laugh at Lodge and Crookes and the others.”

“Don’t be absurd, Malone. Every great mind has its weaker side. It is a sort of reaction against all the good sense. You come suddenly upon a vein of positive nonsense. That is what is the matter with these fellows. No, Enid, I haven’t read their reasons, and I don’t mean to, either; some things are beyond the pale. If we re-open all the old questions, how can

we ever get ahead with the new ones? This matter is settled by common sense, the law of England, and by the universal assent of every sane European.”

“So that’s that!” said Enid.

“However,” he continued, “I can admit that there are occasional excuses for misunderstandings upon the point.” He sank his voice, and his great grey eyes looked sadly up into vacancy. “I have known cases where the coldest intellect—even my own intellect—might, for a moment have been shaken.”

Malone scented copy.

“Yes, sir?”

Challenger hesitated. He seemed to be struggling with himself. He wished to speak, and yet speech was painful. Then, with an abrupt, impatient gesture, he plunged into his story:

“I never told you, Enid. It was too—too intimate. Perhaps too absurd. I was ashamed to have been so shaken. But it shows how even the best balanced may be caught unawares.”

“Yes, sir?”

“It was after my wife’s death. You knew her, Malone. You can guess what it meant to me. It was the night after the cremation—horrible, Malone, horrible! I saw the dear little body slide down, down... and then the glare of flame and the door clanged to.” His great body shook and he passed his big, hairy hand over his eyes.

“I don’t know why I tell you this; the talk seemed to lead up to it. It may be a warning to you. That night—the night after the cremation—I sat up in the hall. She was there,” he nodded at Enid. “She had fallen asleep in a chair, poor girl. You know the house at Rotherfield, Malone. It was in the big hall. I sat by the fireplace, the room all draped in shadow, and



## CONTENTS

I. IN WHICH OUR SPECIAL COMMISSIONERS MAKE A START .....	3
II. WHICH DESCRIBES AN EVENING IN STRANGE COMPANY .....	12
III. IN WHICH PROFESSOR CHALLENGER GIVES HIS OPINION .....	32
IV. WHICH DESCRIBES SOME STRANGE DOINGS IN HAMMERSMITH .....	38
V. WHERE OUR COMMISSIONERS HAVE A REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE .....	70
VI. IN WHICH THE READER IS SHOWN THE HABITS OF A NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL .....	91
VII. IN WHICH THE NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL GETS WHAT THE BRITISH LAW CONSIDERS TO BE HIS DESERTS. ....	109
VIII. IN WHICH THREE INVESTIGATORS COME UPON A DARK SOUL .....	124
IX. WHICH INTRODUCES SOME VERY PHYSICAL PHENOMENA .....	148
X. DE PROFUNDIS .....	160
XI. WHERE SILAS LINDEN COMES INTO HIS OWN .....	178

XII. THERE ARE HEIGHTS AND THERE ARE DEPTHS .....	192
XIII. IN WHICH PROFESSOR CHALLENGER GOES FORTH TO BATTLE .....	206
XIV. IN WHICH CHALLENGER MEETS A STRANGE COLLEAGUE .....	224
XV. IN WHICH TRAPS ARE LAID FOR A GREAT QUARRY .....	237
XVI. IN WHICH CHALLENGER HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF HIS LIFETIME .....	251
XVII. WHERE THE MISTS CLEAR AWAY .....	269
APPENDICES .....	275