

The Disintegration Machine

Arthur Conan Doyle

Professor Challenger was in the worst possible humour. As I stood at the door of his study, my hand upon the handle and my foot upon the mat, I heard a monologue which ran like this, the words booming and reverberating through the house:

‘Yes, I say it is the second wrong call. The second in one morning. Do you imagine that a man of science is to be distracted from essential work by the constant interference of some idiot at the end of a wire? I will not have it. Send this instant for the manager. Oh! you are the manager. Well, why don’t you manage? Yes, you certainly manage to distract me from work the importance of which your mind is incapable of understanding. I want the superintendent. He is away? So I should imagine. I will carry you to the law courts if this occurs again. Crowing cocks have been adjudicated upon. I myself have obtained a judgement. If crowing cocks, why not jangling bells? The case is clear. A written apology. Very good. I will consider it. Good morning.’

It was at this point that I ventured to make my entrance. It was certainly an unfortunate moment. I confronted him as he turned from the telephone—a lion in its wrath. His huge black beard was bristling, his great chest was heaving with indignation, and his arrogant grey eyes swept me up and down as the backwash of his anger fell upon me.

‘Infernal, idle, overpaid rascals!’ he boomed. ‘I could hear them laughing while I was making my just complaint. There is a conspiracy to annoy me. And now, young Malone, you arrive to complete a disastrous morning. Are you here, may I ask, on your own account, or has your rag commissioned you to obtain an interview? As a friend you are privileged—as a journalist you are outside the pale.’

I was hunting in my pocket for McArdle’s letter when suddenly some new grievance came to his memory. His great hairy hands fumbled about among the papers upon his desk and finally extracted a press cutting.

‘You have been good enough to allude to me in one of your recent lucubrations,’ he said, shaking the paper at me. ‘It was in the course of your somewhat fatuous remarks concerning the recent Saurian remains discovered in the Solenhofen Slates. You began a paragraph with the words: “Professor G.E. Challenger, who is among our greatest living scientists—”’

‘Well, sir?’ I asked.

‘Why these invidious qualifications and limitations? Perhaps you can mention who these other

predominant scientific men may be to whom you impute equality, or possibly superiority to myself?’

‘It was badly worded. I should certainly have said: “Our greatest living scientist”,’ I admitted. It was after all my own honest belief. My words turned winter into summer.

‘My dear young friend, do not imagine that I am exacting, but surrounded as I am by pugnacious and unreasonable colleagues, one is forced to take one’s own part. Self-assertion is foreign to my nature, but I have to hold my ground against opposition. Come now! Sit here! What is the reason of your visit?’

I had to tread warily, for I knew how easy it was to set the lion roaring once again. I opened McArdle’s letter. ‘May I read you this, sir? It is from McArdle, my editor.’

‘I remember the man —not an unfavourable specimen of his class.’

‘He has, at least, a very high admiration for you. He has turned to you again and again when he needed the highest qualities in some investigation. That is the case now.’

‘What does he desire?’ Challenger plumed himself like some unwieldy bird under the influence of flattery. He sat down with his elbows upon the desk, his gorilla hands clasped together, his beard bristling forward, and his big grey eyes, half-covered by his drooping lids, fixed benignly upon me. He was huge in all that he did, and his benevolence was even more overpowering than his truculence.

‘I’ll read you his note to me. He says:

Please call upon our esteemed friend, Professor Challenger, and ask for his co-operation in the following circumstances. There is a Latvian gentleman named Theodore Nemor living at White Friars Mansions, Hampstead, who claims to have invented a machine of a most extraordinary character which is capable of disintegrating any object placed within its sphere of influence. Matter dissolves and returns to its molecular or atomic condition. By reversing the process it can be reassembled. The claim seems to be an extravagant one, and yet there is solid evidence that there is some basis for it and that the man has stumbled upon some remarkable discovery.

I need not enlarge upon the revolutionary character of such an invention, nor of its extreme importance as a potential weapon of war. A force which could disintegrate a battleship, or turn a battalion, if it were only for a time, into a collection of atoms, would dominate the world. For social and for political reasons not an instant is to be lost in

getting to the bottom of the affair. The man courts publicity as he is anxious to sell his invention, so that there is no difficulty in approaching him. The enclosed card will open his doors. What I desire is that you and Professor Challenger shall call upon him, inspect his invention, and write for the Gazette a considered report upon the value of the discovery. I expect to hear from you to-night.

R. McArdle.

‘There are my instructions, Professor,’ I added, as I refolded the letter. ‘I sincerely hope that you will come with me, for how can I, with my limited capacities, act alone in such a matter?’

‘True, Malone! True!’ purred the great man. ‘Though you are by no means destitute of natural intelligence, I agree with you that you would be somewhat overweighted in such a matter as you lay before me. These unutterable people upon the telephone have already ruined my morning’s work, so that a little more can hardly matter. I am engaged in answering that Italian buffoon, Mazotti, whose views upon the larval development of the tropical termites have excited my derision and contempt, but I can leave the complete exposure of the impostor until evening. Meanwhile, I am at your service.’

And thus it came about that on that October morning I found myself in the deep level tube with the Professor speeding to the North of London in what proved to be one of the most singular experiences of my remarkable life.

I had, before leaving Enmore Gardens, ascertained by the much-abused telephone that our man was at home, and had warned him of our coming. He lived in a comfortable flat in Hampstead, and he kept us waiting for quite half an hour in his ante-room whilst he carried on an animated conversation with a group of visitors, whose voices, as they finally bade farewell in the hall, showed that they were Russians. I caught a glimpse of them through the half-opened door, and had a passing impression of prosperous and intelligent men, with astrakhan collars to their coats, glistening top-hats, and every appearance of that bourgeois well-being which the successful Communist so readily assumes. The hall door closed behind them, and the next instant Theodore Nemor entered our apartment. I can see him now as he stood with the sunlight full upon him, rubbing his long, thin hands together and surveying us with his broad smile and his cunning yellow eyes.

He was a short, thick man, with some suggestion of deformity in his body, though it was difficult to say where that suggestion lay. One might say that he was a hunchback without the hump. His large, soft face was like an underdone dumpling, of the same colour and moist consistency, while the pimples and blotches which adorned it stood out the more

aggressively against the pallid background. His eyes were those of a cat, and catlike was the thin, long, bristling moustache above his loose, wet, slobbering mouth. It was all low and repulsive until one came to the sandy eyebrows. From these upwards there was a splendid cranial arch such as I have seldom seen. Even Challenger's hat might have fitted that magnificent head. One might read Theodore Nemor as a vile, crawling conspirator below, but above he might take rank with the great thinkers and philosophers of the world.

'Well, gentlemen,' said he, in a velvety voice with only the least trace of a foreign accent, 'you have come, as I understand from our short chat over the wires, in order to learn more of the Nemor Disintegrator. Is it so?'

'Exactly.'

'May I ask whether you represent the British Government?'

'Not at all. I am a correspondent of the Gazette, and this is Professor Challenger.'

'An honoured name —a European name.' His yellow fangs gleamed in obsequious amiability. 'I was about to say that the British Government has lost its chance. What else it has lost it may find out later. Possibly its Empire as well. I was prepared to sell to the first Government which gave me its price, and if it has now fallen into hands of which you may disapprove, you have only yourselves to blame.'

'Then you have sold your secret?'

'At my own price.'

'You think the purchaser will have a monopoly?'

'Undoubtedly he will.'

'But others know the secret as well as you.'

'No, sir.' He touched his great forehead.

'This is the safe in which the secret is securely locked —a better safe than any of steel, and secured by something better than a Yale key. Some may know one side of the matter: others may know another. No one in the world knows the whole matter save only I.'

'And these gentlemen to whom you have sold it.'

'No, sir; I am not so foolish as to hand over the knowledge until the price is paid. After that

it is I whom they buy, and they move this safe' he again tapped his brow 'with all its contents to whatever point they desire. My part of the bargain will then be done —faithfully, ruthlessly done. After that, history will be made.' He rubbed his hands together and the fixed smile upon his face twisted itself into something like a snarl.

'You will excuse me, sir,' boomed Challenger, who had sat in silence up to now, but whose expressive face registered most complete disapproval of Theodore Nemor, 'we should wish before we discuss the matter to convince ourselves that there is something to discuss. We have not forgotten a recent case where an Italian, who proposed to explode mines from a distance, proved upon investigation to be an arrant impostor. History may well repeat itself. You will understand, sir, that I have a reputation to sustain as a man of science —a reputation which you have been good enough to describe as European, though I have every reason to believe that it is not less conspicuous in America. Caution is a scientific attribute, and you must show us your proofs before we can seriously consider your claims.'

Nemor cast a particularly malignant glance from the yellow eyes at my companion, but the smile of affected geniality broadened his face.

'You live up to your reputation, Professor. I had always heard that you were the last man in the world who could be deceived. I am prepared to give you an actual demonstration which cannot fail to convince you, but before we proceed to that I must say a few words upon the general principle.

'You will realize that the experimental plant which I have erected here in my laboratory is a mere model, though within its limits it acts most admirably. There would be no possible difficulty, for example, in disintegrating you and reassembling you, but it is not for such a purpose as that that a great Government is prepared to pay a price which runs into millions. My model is a mere scientific toy. It is only when the same force is invoked upon a large scale that enormous practical effects could be achieved.'

'May we see this model?'

'You will not only see it, Professor Challenger, but you will have the most conclusive demonstration possible upon your own person, if you have the courage to submit to it.'

'If!' the lion began to roar. 'Your "if," sir, is in the highest degree offensive.'

'Well, well. I had no intention to dispute your courage. I will only say that I will give you an opportunity to demonstrate It. But I would first say a few words upon the underlying laws which govern the matter.

'When certain crystals, salt, for example, or sugar, are placed in water they dissolve and

disappear. You would not know that they have ever been there. Then by evaporation or otherwise you lessen the amount of water, and lo! there are your crystals again, visible once more and the same as before. Can you conceive a process by which you, an organic being, are in the same way dissolved into the cosmos, and then by a subtle reversal of the conditions reassembled once more?’

‘The analogy is a false one,’ cried Challenger. ‘Even if I make so monstrous an admission as that our molecules could be dispersed by some disrupting power, why should they reassemble in exactly the same order as before?’

‘The objection is an obvious one, and I can only answer that they do so reassemble down to the last atom of the structure. There is an invisible framework and every brick flies into its true place. You may smile, Professor, but your incredulity and your smile may soon be replaced by quite another emotion.’

Challenger shrugged his shoulders. ‘I am quite ready to submit it to the test.’

‘There is another case which I would impress upon you, gentlemen, and which may help you to grasp the idea. You have heard both in Oriental magic and in Western occultism of the phenomenon of the apport when some object is suddenly brought from a distance and appears in a new place. How can such a thing be done save by the loosening of the molecules, their conveyance upon an etheric wave, and their reassembling, each exactly in its own place, drawn together by some irresistible law? That seems a fair analogy to that which is done by my machine.’

‘You cannot explain one incredible thing by quoting another incredible thing,’ said Challenger. ‘I do not believe in your apports, Mr. Nemor, and I do not believe in your machine. My time is valuable, and if we are to have any sort of demonstration I would beg you to proceed with it without further ceremony.’

‘Then you will be pleased to follow me,’ said the inventor. He led us down the stair of the flat and across a small garden which lay behind. There was a considerable outhouse, which he unlocked and we entered.

Inside was a large whitewashed room with innumerable copper wires hanging in festoons from the ceiling, and a huge magnet balanced upon a pedestal. In front of this was what looked like a prism of glass, three feet in length and about a foot in diameter. To the right of it was a chair which rested upon a platform of zinc, and which had a burnished copper cap suspended above it. Both the cap and the chair had heavy wires attached to them, and at the side was a sort of ratchet with numbered slots and a handle covered with indiarubber which lay at present in the slot marked zero.

‘Nemor’s Disintegrator,’ said this strange man, waving his hand towards the machine.

‘This is the model which is destined to be famous, as altering the balance of power among the nations. Who holds this rules the world. Now, Professor Challenger, you have, if I may say so, treated me with some lack of courtesy and consideration in this matter. Will you dare to sit upon that chair and to allow me to demonstrate upon your own body the capabilities of the new force?’

Challenger had the courage of a lion, and anything in the nature of a defiance roused him in an instant to a frenzy. He rushed at the machine, but I seized his arm and held him back.

‘You shall not go,’ I said. ‘Your life is too valuable. It is monstrous. What possible guarantee of safety have you? The nearest approach to that apparatus which I have ever seen was the electrocution chair at Sing Sing.’

‘My guarantee of safety,’ said Challenger, ‘is that you are a witness and that this person would certainly be held for manslaughter at the least should anything befall me.’

‘That would be a poor consolation to the world of science, when you would leave work unfinished which none but you can do. Let me, at least, go first, and then, when the experience proves to be harmless, you can follow.’

Personal danger would never have moved Challenger, but the idea that his scientific work might remain unfinished hit him hard. He hesitated, and before he could make up his mind I had dashed forward and jumped into the chair. I saw the inventor put his hand to the handle. I was aware of a click. Then for a moment there was a sensation of confusion and a mist before my eyes. When they cleared, the inventor with his odious smile was standing before me, and Challenger, with his apple-red cheeks drained of blood and colour, was staring over his shoulder.

‘Well, get on with it!’ said I.

‘It is all over. You responded admirably,’ Nemor replied. ‘Step out, and Professor Challenger will now, no doubt, be ready to take his turn.’

I have never seen my old friend so utterly upset. His iron nerve had for a moment completely failed him. He grasped my arm with a shaking hand.

‘My God, Malone, it is true,’ said he. ‘You vanished. There is not a doubt of it. There was a mist for an instant and then vacancy.’

‘How long was I away?’

‘Two or three minutes. I was, I confess, horrified. I could not imagine that you would return. Then he clicked this lever, if it is a lever, into a new slot and there you were upon the chair, looking a little bewildered but otherwise the same as ever. I thanked God at the sight of you!’ He mopped his moist brow with his big red handkerchief.

‘Now, sir,’ said the inventor. ‘Or perhaps your nerve has failed you?’

Challenger visibly braced himself. Then, pushing my protesting hand to one side, he seated himself upon the chair. The handle clicked into number three. He was gone.

I should have been horrified but for the perfect coolness of the operator. ‘It is an interesting process, is it not?’ he remarked. ‘When one considers the tremendous individuality of the Professor it is strange to think that he is at present a molecular cloud suspended in some portion of this building. He is now, of course, entirely at my mercy. If I choose to leave him in suspension there is nothing on earth to prevent me.’

‘I would very soon find means to prevent you.’

The smile once again became a snarl. ‘You cannot imagine that such a thought ever entered my mind. Good heavens! Think of the permanent dissolution of the great Professor Challenger vanished into cosmic space and left no trace! Terrible! Terrible! At the same time he has not been as courteous as he might. Don’t you think some small lesson —?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Well, we will call it a curious demonstration. Something that would make an interesting paragraph in your paper. For example, I have discovered that the hair of the body being on an entirely different vibration to the living organic tissues can be included or excluded at will. It would interest me to see the bear without his bristles. Behold him!’

There was the click of the lever. An instant later Challenger was seated upon the chair once more. But what a Challenger! What a shorn lion! Furious as I was at the trick that had been played upon him I could hardly keep from roaring with laughter.

His huge head was as bald as a baby’s and his chin was as smooth as a girl’s. Bereft of his glorious mane the lower part of his face was heavily jowled and ham-shaped, while his whole appearance was that of an old fighting gladiator, battered and bulging, with the jaws of a bulldog over a massive chin.

It may have been some look upon our faces —I have no doubt that the evil grin of my companion had widened at the sight —but, however that may be, Challenger’s hand flew up

to his head and he became conscious of his condition. The next instant he had sprung out of his chair, seized the inventor by the throat, and had hurled him to the ground. Knowing Challenger's immense strength I was convinced that the man would be killed.

'For God's sake be careful. If you kill him we can never get matters right again!' I cried.

That argument prevailed. Even in his maddest moments Challenger was always open to reason. He sprang up from the floor, dragging the trembling inventor with him. 'I give you five minutes,' he panted in his fury. 'If in five minutes I am not as I was, I will choke the life out of your wretched little body.'

Challenger in a fury was not a safe person to argue with. The bravest man might shrink from him, and there were no signs that Mr. Nemor was a particularly brave man. On the contrary, those blotches and warts upon his face had suddenly become much more conspicuous as the face behind them changed from the colour of putty, which was normal, to that of a fish's belly. His limbs were shaking and he could hardly articulate.

'Really, Professor!' he babbled, with his hand to his throat, 'this violence is quite unnecessary. Surely a harmless joke may pass among friends. It was my wish to demonstrate the powers of the machine. I had imagined that you wanted a full demonstration. No offence, I assure you. Professor, none in the world!'

For answer Challenger climbed back into the chair.

'You will keep your eye upon him, Malone. Do not permit any liberties.'

'I'll see to it, sir.'

'Now then, set that matter right or take the consequences.'

The terrified inventor approached his machine. The reuniting power was turned on to the full, and in an instant, there was the old lion with his tangled mane once more. He stroked his beard affectionately with his hands and passed them over his cranium to be sure that the restoration was complete. Then he descended solemnly from his perch.

'You have taken a liberty, sir, which might have had very serious consequences to yourself. However, I am content to accept your explanation that you only did it for purposes of demonstration. Now, may I ask you a few direct questions upon this remarkable power which you claim to have discovered?'

'I am ready to answer anything save what the source of the power is. That is my secret.'

‘And do you seriously inform us that no one in the world knows this except yourself?’

‘No one has the least inkling.’

‘No assistants?’

‘No, sir. I work alone.’

‘Dear me! That is most interesting. You have satisfied me as to the reality of the power, but I do not yet perceive its practical bearings.’

‘I have explained, sir, that this is a model. But it would be quite easy to erect a plant upon a large scale. You understand that this acts vertically. Certain currents above you, and certain others below you, set up vibrations which either disintegrate or reunite. But the process could be lateral. If it were so conducted it would have the same effect, and cover a space in proportion to the strength of the current.’

‘Give an example.’

‘We will suppose that one pole was in one small vessel and one in another; a battleship between them would simply vanish into molecules. So also with a column of troops.’

‘And you have sold this secret as a monopoly to a single European Power?’

‘Yes, sir, I have. When the money is paid over they shall have such power as no nation ever had yet. You don’t even now see the full possibilities if placed in capable hands which did not fear to wield the weapon which they held. They are immeasurable.’ A gloating smile passed over the man’s evil face. ‘Conceive a quarter of London in which such machines have been erected. Imagine the effect of such a current upon the scale which could easily be adopted. Why,’ he burst into laughter, ‘I could imagine the whole Thames valley being swept clean, and not one man, woman, or child left of all these teeming millions!’

The words filled me with horror —and even more the air of exultation with which they were pronounced. They seemed, however, to produce quite a different effect upon my companion. To my surprise he broke into a genial smile and held out his hand to the inventor.

‘Well, Mr. Nemor, we have to congratulate you,’ said he. ‘There is no doubt that you have come upon a remarkable property of nature which you have succeeded in harnessing for the use of man. That this use should be destructive is no doubt very deplorable, but Science knows no distinctions of the sort, but follows knowledge wherever it may lead. Apart from the principle involved you have, I suppose, no objection to my examining the construction

of the machine?’

‘None in the least. The machine is merely the body. It is the soul of it, the animating principle, which you can never hope to capture.’

‘Exactly. But the mere mechanism seems to be a model of ingenuity.’ For some time he walked round it and fingered its several parts. Then he hoisted his unwieldy bulk into the insulated chair.

‘Would you like another excursion into the cosmos?’ asked the inventor.

‘Later, perhaps —later! But meanwhile there is, as no doubt you know, some leakage of electricity. I can distinctly feel a weak current passing through me.’

‘Impossible. It is quite insulated.’

‘But I assure you that I feel it.’ He levered himself down from his perch.

The inventor hastened to take his place.

‘I can feel nothing.’

‘Is there not a tingling down your spine?’

‘No, sir, I do not observe it.’

There was a sharp click and the man had disappeared. I looked with amazement at Challenger. ‘Good heavens! Did you touch the machine, Professor?’

He smiled at me benignly with an air of mild surprise.

‘Dear me! I may have inadvertently touched the handle,’ said he. ‘One is very liable to have awkward incidents with a rough model of this kind. This lever should certainly be guarded.’

‘It is in number three. That is the slot which causes disintegration.’

‘So I observed when you were operated upon.’

‘But I was so excited when he brought you back that I did not see which was the proper slot for the return. Did you notice it?’

‘I may have noticed it, young Malone, but I do not burden my mind with small details. There are many slots and we do not know their purpose. We may make the matter worse if we experiment with the unknown. Perhaps it is better to leave matters as they are.’

‘And you would —’

‘Exactly. It is better so. The interesting personality of Mr. Theodore Nemor has distributed itself throughout the cosmos, his machine is worthless, and a certain foreign Government has been deprived of knowledge by which much harm might have been wrought. Not a bad morning’s work, young Malone. Your rag will no doubt have an interesting column upon the inexplicable disappearance of a Latvian inventor shortly after the visit of its own special correspondent. I have enjoyed the experience. These are the lighter moments which come to brighten the dull routine of study. But life has its duties as well as its pleasures, and I now return to the Italian Mazotti and his preposterous views upon the larval development of the tropical termites.’

Looking back, it seemed to me that a slight oleaginous mist was still hovering round the chair. ‘But surely —’ I urged.

‘The first duty of the law-abiding citizen is to prevent murder,’ said Professor Challenger. ‘I have done so. Enough, Malone, enough! The theme will not bear discussion. It has already disengaged my thoughts too long from matters of more importance.’

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.