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Almost a quarter of a century ago, H. R. Wakefield's THEY RETURN AT EVENING (Appleton) revealed a new master of the English ghost story, a man who, in his development of a great formal tradition, stood in somewhat the same relation to the Old Master M. R. James as James to the still Older Master Sheridan LeFanu. Now James is long since dead and Wakefield is himself the respected Old Master; but many connoisseurs have felt that his later work, despite occasional startling flashes such as the incomparable The Frontier Guards, rarely sustained the level of that extraordinary first volume, which contained such stories as . . . And He Shall Sing and Professor Pownall's Oversight (the latter recently reprinted here, as you'll remember). Now however, thanks to August Derleth (perhaps the only man to whom we'll yield in our status as Wakefield-fanciers), we're able to present for the first time anywhere one of Wakefield's newest and finest stories, as subtle and complex as anything he's done, and a notable illustration of that little understood key truth of fantasy: What happens, no matter how strange and fascinating, is not the most significant part of your fiction; what makes it a story is: to whom it happens.

The Gorge of the Churels

by H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

"MR. SEN," said the Reverend Aloysius Prinkle, "I am going to take a holiday tomorrow. I'm feeling a bit jaded. I thought we'd have a picnic, if it's fine. You must come with us, of course."

"A pleasant idea, certainly," smiled Mr. Sen. He was a Bengali babu, aged about thirty, who acted as secretary and general factotum to the incumbents of the Mission Station. Mr. Prinkle had taken him over from his predecessor three months before. He was a slightly enigmatic young man, habitually smiling and obliging, but not quite as "open" as he might be, was Mr. Prinkle's verdict. His enemies called him a "Rice Christian," meaning he had found the Christian side of the bread the better buttered. His friends replied, "Very sensible of Mr. Sen, if he is right about the rice." His English was fluent and personally idiomatic, his intonation precise.

"Have you yet decided on a site for the occasion?" he added. "Possibly my advice may be welcome; possibly not."

"Well, Mrs. Prinkle and I passed what we considered an ideal spot the other day. It's a little gorge off the Kulan Valley. It's known, I understand, as 'The Gorge of the Churels.' You know where I mean?"

Mr. Sen didn't reply for a moment. He continued to wear that smile, but it contracted somewhat as though he were moved by some not entirely pleasant reflections. At length he remarked, "Yes, I am familiar with the locality you mention, but is it not rather a long way to go? Just a suggestion, of course."

"Not a bit of it!" laughed Mr. Prinkle; "just three-quarters of an hour in the car and a beautiful drive in the bargain."

"Did you consider taking the youngster with you?" asked Mr. Sen slowly.

"Why, naturally! He'll love it, and it'll give his Ayah the day off."

"It is not perhaps a very satisfactory place for young children," said Mr. Sen.

"Why ever not! Snakes?"

"No, I was not thinking so much of snakes," replied Mr. Sen aloofly; "those are, in a way, everywhere and easily avoided, terrified, or destroyed."

"Then what *are* you thinking about?" asked Mr. Prinkle. His voice was benignly patronising.

"There is a good deal of water there; a stream and a pool, and so on. All this may be dangerous for the tender-yearred, of course."

"Of course *not!*" laughed Mr. Prinkle. "We shall see Nikky doesn't come to a premature and watery end! It is not good, you know, Mr. Sen, to be too nervous about children. It makes *them* nervous, too. 'Fear and be slain!' There's a lot of truth in that, you know!"

"There is, also, of course," smiled Mr. Sen, "the Heavenly Father on guard."

Mr. Prinkle glanced at him sharply. Was he being a shade sarcastic? One could never be quite sure with Mr. Sen. A pity he couldn't be more *open!*

"Now, Mr. Sen," he said, "I don't think you're being quite candid with me. I don't think those are your real reasons. Now tell me quite frankly, please, why you dislike going to this place, for I can see you do."

"Oh, I don't mind really," said Mr. Sen with a quick little giggle. "I was perhaps reverting to type, if you know what I mean, just being foolish, a silly primitive Indian."

"I *suppose* I know what you're getting at," said Mr. Prinkle quizzingly. "The place has some sort of evil repute; is that what you mean?"

"Since you press me on the matter, that is so. Quite absurd, of course!"

Mr. Prinkle saw fit to issue a rather roguish reprimand.

"You mean, Mr. Sen, it is thought to be haunted by spirits of some kind?"

"That is what I may term the rough idea," replied Mr. Sen. "I do not

desire to discuss or argue the matter at further length, if you do not mind."

"But I *do mind*, Mr. Sen. I have instructed you that the only evil spirits are in the hearts of men. To suppose they can materialise themselves and infest certain localities is a childish superstition, primitive, as you say. Such ideas distract and confuse men's minds; they must be eradicated. I am rather surprised at you, Mr. Sen, after all you've been taught. It doesn't seem to have sunk in, for in spite of your protestations, I can see that you still in some ways share these barbarous notions. We *will* go to this gorge and enjoy ourselves thoroughly — *all* of us! Come now to my bungalow and give me my Urdu lesson, and let's have no more reversion to type!"

Mr. Sen smiled and did as he was told, but behind the mask he was charged with a great anger almost perfectly controlled. So during the next hour he delicately permitted Mr. Prinkle to realise he considered him a person of lethargic wits and quite devoid of linguistic ability; that instructing him was a considerable strain on the patience and by no means a labour of love. And later he quite refused to obey the pious injunction not to let the sun go down upon his wrath, for he lay long awake that night, his fury festering, because he had been ridiculed, humiliated, and reproved, and it was like a rodent ulcer in his spirit.

Mr. Prinkle was very young, earnest, pink-and-white and naïvely self-confident. Though he had landed at Bombay but fourteen weeks before, he felt he already knew India and the Indian mind pretty well, and the chapter headings of a book dealing with the Missionary problems of the sub-continent were already in his notebook. His wife, Nancy, was very young and earnest too, but much more pleasing to the eye and by no means so confident. In her heart she thought India a frightening place, and that she and her husband were really strangers in a very strange land, unwelcome strangers to ninety per cent of its inhabitants, at any rate those of the northern Punjab. She was an intelligent girl and her little boy Nicholas was an intelligent child. He was a charming, small, blond boy, much too young for the climate, pronounced the pundits. He was inclined to solemnity, too, and it seemed the genes of earnestness were already busy within him.

The next morning, September 13th, was spotlessly fine and not wickedly hot, for the scimitar edge of the summer sun was by now mercifully blunted.

Punctually at eleven the four of them packed into the V 8, and Mr. Prinkle facetiously exclaimed, "Chai! Chai!" as though urging on an elephant, for he was very proud of his few words of the lingo. So soon they were speeding through the tea-gardens and raising a dense, low-lying, light ochre dust.

At length they reached the chotal, or head of the little pass, and there below them was the Kulan Valley, the river like a sapphire necklace in an

emerald case, and above it the glossy, sparkling silver of the gods of the Hindu Kush stroked the sky. They paused a moment to revel in this view, though only Nancy really recognized how flabbergastingly well composed it was, and how brilliantly it just escaped the obvious. Then they began coasting down to the vale.

"What is the meaning of the word Churel, Mr. Sen?" asked Nancy turning round in the front seat to face that person.

Mr. Sen paused before replying. He was still angry and indignant, and this was a very dangerous question, of which he'd have preferred to have received notice. He decided it was a moment for the exercise of that gift for sarcasm on which he prided himself, and which was often a good defensive dialectical weapon. With him sarcasm and verbosity went arm in arm.

"The word Churel," he remarked in his most "sing-song" tone, "is a typical example of the poor superstitious Indians' ineradicable tendency to charge vague and fearful notions with materialist implications."

"Very likely," said Nancy, trying not to laugh, "but what does it mean?"

"The poor primitive Indians," replied Mr. Sen, "cherish fearful ideas about women who pass over in giving birth to their young. They fondly imagine that the spirits or ghosts of such unfortunate females continue to haunt the earth, with a view to seizing the soul of some living child and carrying it off to the void to comfort them. Then, if they are successful in this morbid ambition, they are content, and roam their favourite places no more. Such ghosts are called 'Churels', and this gorge we are visiting is one of such favoured places. It is all very absurd, of course."

"I think it's a strange and sad idea," said Nancy; "the child dies, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, naturally," smiled Mr. Sen; "its vital principle has been removed."

"You don't believe such stuff, I hope," said Mr. Prinkle insinuatingly.

Mr. Sen, who believed it with fearful intensity, replied, "Naturally, since my conversion to the True Faith and the instruction of two reverends, I regard the concept as wholly fatuous."

"It is queer," said Nancy frowning, "how such ideas ever get into people's heads. I mean someone must have *started* the Churel idea. Why? Does the word mean anything else, Mr. Sen? Has it any secondary meaning?"

"Oh, no, indeed. Just what I have informed you. Just a silly Indian notion, altogether."

"Then I can't quite understand it," said Nancy.

Mr. Prinkle decided it was time a superior intellect was brought to bear on the topic. Pulling out the Vox Parsonica stop, he proclaimed authoritatively, "My dear girl, it is one of a myriad such fantasies connected in some

way with procreation, which is always a kinetic mystery to the primitive mind. Once formed, the fantasy is *named*, inevitably. These encapsuled animistic relics in the human mind are very hard to eradicate, but I'm going to do my best to cleanse the midden; I regard it as an essential part of my mission to India."

Mr. Sen maintained his bland grin, but behind it a formidable seethe of emotions was writhing: contempt, rage, hate, a growing fear and a horrid hope. He glanced at little Nikky, who was regarding him in a steady, searching way. Mr. Sen wriggled uneasily; for some complex reason he was perturbed by that appraising stare.

"What are you talking about, Mummy?" asked the small one.

"Oh nothing," replied Nancy. "We shall soon be there."

The Gorge of the Churels ran up from the eastern flank of the valley. It was a re-entrant from the low, limestone cliff which lined the vale. It had been burrowed out during countless aeons by a hard-running little stream, which rose somewhere in the foothills and fed the Kulan half a mile away. The entrance to it was narrow and stark, but it widened out to a breadth of some five hundred yards and was a mile or so in depth. At its eastern ending the burn fell over a steep bank, died for a moment in a deep circular basin, and poured out again from its western rim. The gorge was full of deodars, peepuls and kikars, and a few great dominating teaks. The surface was thick grass interspersed with bamboo. It was a very shady, aloof place, death-quiet, save for the splash of the fall, the murmur of the burn, and the occasional cry of a bird.

They parked the car just inside it and then strolled about for a while.

"It is rather a sombre spot," said Nancy, "though," she added hurriedly, "quite lovely of course."

Mr. Sen grinned.

Mr. Prinkle said, "Now *you're* getting fanciful, my dear. I don't find it sombre in the least; quite charming. Remote, no doubt, and cut off from the busy world of men; but what a relief that is! If it were in England, it would be coated with orange peel and old newspapers, and cacophonous with gramophones and loud-speakers. Let's have lunch."

They spread out the cloth in the shade of a mighty deodar. Little Nikky was very quiet during the meal and not as hungry as usual. His eyes kept wandering in the direction of the pool.

"You'd like to fish in there, wouldn't you, darling?" said Nancy.

"Yes, Mummy," he replied listlessly.

"Before we come again we must get a little rod for you," said Nancy.

Nikky just smiled in a perfunctory way.

After the feast they smoked a cigarette, chatted for a while, and then

Mr. Prinkle yawned and said, "I feel like a nap. Most unusual for me, the reaction from a very hard week I suppose."

"I do, too," said Nancy. "Would you like forty winks, Nikky?"

"No, thank you, Mummy."

"Well, what would you like to do?"

"Just play about."

"Then don't go near the pond! What about you, Mr. Sen?"

"I do not wish to sleep, thank you," grinned that person. "I will watch over the young shaver, if that is what you imply."

"That's very kind of you. Just see he doesn't get into mischief. Now remember, darling, be good and *don't* go near the pond!"

"All right, Mummy."

Mr. and Mrs. Prinkle then stretched themselves under a long branch of the deodar, hung out like the groping arm of a blind man. They put handkerchiefs over their faces, wriggled into comfortable positions and soon slept.

Mr. Sen squatted down in the open whence he could keep Nikky in view, and began to think in his own tongue. He didn't like this place; it stirred ancestral forebodings. These callow, impercipient Europeans were fools to have come here — with a child. Because they were blind they thought there was nothing to see. Yes, he really hated them, despised them from the bottom of his heart. Let him be open with himself for once — wide open! Of course it paid him — not well, but enough — to pretend to like and respect them and their idiotic gods, but they were blind and insolent and conceited fools. If they were not, they would worship Brahma, the greatest of all god-ideas. Not, he thought to himself, that I am really greatly impressed even by Brahma, for what does he *do*? Now that I am being open, I will confess he seems to *do* nothing, and evil spirits freely defy him.

He would like to see these people punished for their vanity and stupidity. What would be the worst punishment they could suffer? The loss of the child, of course, and this was a fearful death-trap for children. No woman would bring her child near the gorge by night, and not even by day unless protected by some appropriately powerful charm. He ran his tongue across his lips. What was the little Nikky doing? He was kneeling down and staring across towards the pool, an oddly intent look on his face. Mr. Sen watched him for a few moments and then followed the direction of his gaze. He leaned forward, peered hard, and drew in his breath with a quick hiss. His face became set and rigid with terror. Just to the left of the basin was a circular grove of mulberry trees, and at the centre of this circle was something which had no business to be there; at least so it seemed to Mr. Sen. The sun's rays, coiling between the leaves, dappled and as it were camou-

flaged this intruder, so that it appeared just a thing of light and shade; like every other visible entity in the world, of course, yet somehow this was essentially incorporeal, not linked to earth, but painted thinly on the freckled air. It was this appearance which little Nikky seemed to be observing so intently, yet intermittently.

Sometimes he would look down and pretend to be playing with the grass and flowers, and then he would glance up swiftly and stealthily and become quite still and taut. He was, Mr. Sen decided, trying in an innocent way to deceive anyone who might be watching him. And Mr. Sen knew why he was doing this, and trembled. He pulled up the sleeve of his right arm where, round the biceps, was what resembled a large leather wrist-watch strap, but in the container was a piece of narrow scroll on which a very sacred text was inscribed. For this was a charm, idolatrously obtained by Mr. Sen from an extremely ancient and holy Sadhu, and, though not a protection against the full power of certain demons, a great shield for sure against most dangers and evils. He touched this charm and muttered to himself.

Presently little Nikky toddled slowly forward in the direction of the grove. Then he knelt again and nervously plucked up some blades of grass.

After a while the child glanced quickly up and moved forward again. He was now about fifteen yards from the grove. Mr. Sen began to tremble violently, not only with fear, but from some subtle emotion, atavistic and nameless. His teeth chattered and he clutched the charm. Again little Nikky glanced up from his feigned play and stared hard in front of him. Mr. Sen could see he was smiling in a vague, rapt way. It was very quiet, the light toss of the fall, the stir of the brook seemed but to join the stillness and intensify it. But Mr. Sen was aware of a horrid tension in the air.

Suddenly Nikky uttered a happy little cry and ran forward as fast as his chubby legs would carry him. As he reached the verge of the grove, it seemed to the entranced and quivering Mr. Sen as though the thing of light and shadow moved forward to meet and greet him. The little boy threw out his arms and in another moment the two would have mingled.

And then Mr. Sen, as the odd and pregnant saying has it, "came to himself." He leapt to his feet and ran headlong towards the grove, fiercely clutching the charm and uttering repeatedly, loudly, and hoarsely some words of warning or incantation. Little Nikky paused, glanced round and fell on his face, and the thing of light and shade seemed to lose its form and pass into the stippled air.

Mr. and Mrs. Prinkle came running out.

"What's the matter?" they cried in unison to Mr. Sen, who had taken Nikky in his arms.

"The little chap fell down," he said shrilly. "Perhaps a touch of the sun."

Nancy seized the child, who had fallen into a deep sleep.

"We'd better get him home," said Mr. Prinkle urgently. And soon they had packed up and were hurrying on their way.

Presently little Nikky stirred from his deep doze, opened his round blue eyes, smiled and said, "Pretty lady!" and went to sleep again.

"He's quite all right," laughed Nancy in relief.

"Just a little tired perhaps," said her husband resignedly. "Just a false alarm. Rather spoilt our day!"

"Why did you shout, Mr. Sen?" asked Nancy.

"Ah!" grinned that person. "I am ashamed to confess it, but *I* had a snooze too. Very negligent of me, but I was properly punished, for I had a very bad dream, I assure you!"

"What did you dream about?" asked Mr. Prinkle mockingly. "Those bereft and acquisitive Churels?"

"Ah, no," replied Mr. Sen with a protesting smile, and slipping his left arm up his right sleeve; "it is not fair of you, Mr. Prinkle, to pull my legs so, and remind me of the ridiculous superstitions of us poor, ignorant, primitive Indians!"
