

THE MYSTERY OF CLOOMBER.

(By A. CONAN DOYLE, in the *Pail Mail Budget*.)

"There is a scientific incredulity which surpasses in imbecility the obtuseness of the cloé-hopper."—BARON HELLENBACH.

CHAPTER I.

THE HESIRA OF THE WESTS FROM EDINBURGH.

I, JAMES FOTHERGILL WEST, student of law in the university of St. Andrews, have endeavoured in the ensuing pages to lay my statement before the public in a concise and business-like fashion. It is not my wish to achieve literary success; nor have I any desire by the graces of my style, or by the artistic ordering of my incidents, to throw a deeper shadow over the strange passages of which I shall have to speak. My highest ambition is that those who know something of the matter should, after reading my account, be able to conscientiously endorse it without finding a single paragraph in which I have either added to or detracted from the truth. Should I attain this result, I shall rest amply satisfied with the outcome of my first, and probably my last, venture in literature.

My father, John Hunter West, was a well-known Oriental and Sanskrit scholar, and his name is still of weight with those who are interested in such matters. He it was who first after Sir William Jones called attention to the great value of early Persian literature, and his translations both from Hafiz and from Ferideddin Atar have earned the warmest commendations from the Baron von Hammer-Purgstall, of Vienna, and other distinguished Continental critics. In the issue of the "Orientalisches Sciensz-blatt" for January, 1861, he is described as "*Der berühmte und sehr gelehrte Hunter West von Edinburgh*."—a passage which I well remember that he cut out and stowed away, with a pardonable vanity, among the most revered family archives.

He had been brought up to be a solicitor, or Writer to the Signet, as it is termed in Scotland, but his learned hobby absorbed so much of his time that he had little to devote to the pursuit of his profession. When his clients were seeking him at his chambers in George street he was buried in the recesses of the Advocates' Library, or poring over some mouldy manuscript at the Philosophical Institution, with his brain more exercised over the code which Menu propounded six hundred years before the birth of Christ than over the knotty problems of Scottish law in the nineteenth century. Hence it can hardly be wondered at that as his learning accumulated his practice dissolved until at the very moment when he had attained the zenith of his celebrity he had also reached the nadir of his fortunes. There being no chair of Sanskrit in any of his native universities, and no demand anywhere for the only mental wares which he had to dispose of, we should have been forced to retire into genteel poverty, consoling ourselves with the aphorisms and precepts of Firdousi, Omar Chiam, and other of his Eastern favourites, had it not been for the unexpected kindness and liberality of his half-brother, William Farintosh, the Laird of Branksome, in Wigtownshire.

This William Farintosh was the proprietor of a lauded estate, the acreage of which bore, unfortunately, a most disproportional relation to its value, for it formed the bleakest and most barren tract of land in the whole of a bleak and barren shire. As a bachelor, however, his expenses had been small, and he had contrived from the rents of his scattered cottages, and the sale of the Galloway nags which he bred upon the moors, not only to live as a laird should, but to put by a considerable sum in the bank. We had heard little from our kinsman during the days of our comparative prosperity; but just as we were at our wits' end, there came a letter like a moistering angel, giving us assurance of sympathy and succour. In it the Laird of Branksome told us that one of his lungs had been growing weaker for some time, and that Dr. Easterling, of Stranraer, had strongly advised him to spend the few years which were left to him in some more genial climate. He had determined, therefore, to set out for the south of Italy, and he begged that we should take up our residence at Branksome in his absence, and that my father should act as his land steward and agent at a salary which placed us above all fear of want. Our mother had been dead for some years, so that there were only myself, my father, and my sister Esther to consult; and it may readily be imagined that it did not take us long to decide upon the acceptance of the Laird's generous offer. My father started for Wigtown that very night, while Esther and I followed a few days afterwards, bearing with us two potato-sacks full of learned books, and such other of our household effects as were worth the trouble and expense of transport.

CHAPTER II.

OF THE STRANGE MANNER IN WHICH A TENANT CAME TO CLOOMBER.

Branksome might have appeared a poor dwelling-place when compared to the house of an English squire; but to us, after our long residence in stuffy apartments, it was of regal magnificence. The building was broad-spread and low, with red-tiled roof, diamond-paned windows, and a profusion of dining-rooms with smoke-blackened ceilings and oaken wainscots. In front was a small lawn, girt round with a thin fringe of haggard and ill-grown beeches, all gnarled and withered from the blighting effects of the sea spray. Behind lay the scattered hamlet of Branksome-Bere—a dozen cottages at most—inhabited by rude fisher-folk who looked upon the Laird as their natural protector. To the west was the broad yellow beach and the Irish Sea; while in all other directions the desolate moors, greyish green in the foreground and purple in the distance, stretched away in long low curves to the horizon.

Very bleak and lonely it was upon this Wigtown coast. A man might walk many a weary mile and never see a living thing except the white heavy-flapping kittiwakes, which screamed and cried to each other with their shrill sad voices. Very lonely and very bleak! Once out of sight of Branksome and there was no sign, of the works of man, save only where the high white towers of Cloomber Hall shot, like the headstone of some giant grave, from amid the firs and

larches which girt it round. This great house, a mile or more from our dwelling, had been built by a wealthy Glasgow merchant of strange tastes and lonely habits; but at the time of our arrival it had been untenanted for years, and stood with weather-blotched walls and vacant staring windows looking blankly out over the billside. Empty and mildewed, it served only as a landmark to the fishermen, for they had found by experience that by keeping the Laird's chimney and the white tower of Cloomber in a line they could steer their way through the ugly reef which raises its jagged back, like that of some sleeping monster, above the troubled waters of the wind-swept bay.

To this wild spot it was that fate had brought my father, my sister, and myself. For us the loneliness had no terrors. After the hubbub and bustle of a great city, and the weary task of upholding appearances upon a slender income, there was a grand, soul-soothing serenity in the long sky-line and the eager air. Here at least there was no neighbour to pry and chatter. The Laird had left his prison and two ponies behind him, with the aid of which my father and I would go the round of the estate doing such light duties as fell to an agent; while our gentle Esther looked to our household needs, and brightened the dark old building. Such was our simple, uneventful existence until the summer night when an unlooked-for incident occurred which proved to be the herald of those strange doings which I have taken up my pen to describe.

It had been my habit to pull out of an evening in the Laird's skiff and to catch a few whiting which might serve for our supper. On this well-remembered occasion my sister came with me, sitting with her book in the stern-sheets of the boat, while I hung my lines over the bows. The sun had sunk down behind the rugged Irish coast, but a long bank of flush clouds still marked the spot, and cast a glory upon the waters. The whole broad ocean was seamed and scarred with crimson streaks. I had risen in the boat, and was gazing round in delight at the broad panorama of shore and sea and sky, when my sister plucked at my sleeve with a little sharp cry of surprise.

"See, John," she cried; "there is a light in Cloomber Tower."

I turned my head and started back at the tall white turret which peeped out above the belt of trees. As I gazed I distinctly saw at one of the windows the glint of a light, which suddenly vanished, and then shone out once more from another higher up. There it flickered for some time, and finally flashed past two successive windows underneath before the trees obscured our view of it. It was clear that some one bearing a lamp or a candle had climbed up the tower stairs and had then returned into the body of the the house.

"Who in the world can it be?" I exclaimed, speaking rather to myself than to Esther, for I could see by the surprise upon her face that she had no solution to offer. "Maybe some of the folk from Branksome-Bere have wanted to look over the place."

My sister shook her head. "There is not one of them would dare to set foot within the avenue gates," she said. "Besides, John, the keys are kept by the house-agent at Wigtown. Were they ever so curious, none of our people could find their way in."

When I reflected upon the massive door and ponderous shutters which guarded the lower story of Cloomber I could not but admit the force of my sister's objection. The untimely visitor must either have used considerable violence in order to force his way in, or he must have obtained possession of the keys. Piqued by the little mystery, I pulled for the beach, with the determination to see for myself who the intruder might be, and what were his intentions. Leaving my sister at Branksome, and summoning Seth Jamieson, an old man-o'-war's-man, and one of the stoutest of the fishermen, I set off across the moor with him through the gathering darkness.

"It has na go' a guid name after dark, yon hoose," remarked my companion, slackening his pace perceptibly as I explained to him the nature of our errand. "It's no for naething that him wha owns it wanna gaug within a Scotch mile o'."

"Well, Seth, there is some one who has no fears about going into it," said I, pointing to the great white building which flickered up in front of us through the gloom. The light which I had observed from the sea was moving backward as I forwards past the lower floor windows, the shutters of which had been removed. I could now see that a second fainter light followed a few paces behind the other. Evidently two individuals, the one with a lamp and the other with a candle or rushlight, were making a careful examination of the building.

"Let ilka man blaw his ain parritch," said Seth Jamieson, doggedly, coming to a dead stop. "What is it tas us if a wraith or a bogle chooses tas tak' a fancy tas Cloomber? It's no canny tas meddle wi' such things."

"Why, man," I cried, "you don't suppose a wraith came here in a gig! What are those lights away yonder by the avenue gates?" "The lamps o' a gig sure enough!" exclaimed my companion in a less lugubrious voice. "Let's steer for it, Maister West, and speer where she hails frae."

By this time night had closed in save for a single long, narrow slit in the westward. Stumbling across the moor together, we made our way into the Wigtown road, at the point where the high stone pillars mark the entrance to the Cloomber avenue. A tall dog-cart stood in front of the gateway, the horse browsing upon the thin border of grass which skirted the road.

"It's a' richt!" said Jamieson, taking a close look at the deserted vehicle. "I ken it weel. It belongs tas Maister McNeil, the factor body frae Wigtown—him who keeps the keys."

"Then we may as well have speech with him now that we are here," I answered. "They are coming down, if I am not mistaken." As I spoke, we heard the slam of the heavy door, and within a few minutes two figures, the one tall and angular, the other short and thick, came towards us through the darkness. They were talking so earnestly that they did not observe us until they had passed through the avenue gate.

"Good evening, Mr. McNeil," said I, stepping forward and addressing the Wigtown factor, with whom I had some slight acquaintance. The smaller of the two turned his face towards me as I spoke, and showed me that I was not mistaken in his identity, but his taller companion sprang back and showed every sign of violent agitation;