



CH II ~ OF THE STRANGE MANNER IN WHICH
A TENANT CAME TO CLOOMBER

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Branksome might have appeared a poor dwelling-place when compared with 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 dwelling 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 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 tower of Cloomber Hall shot up, like a 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 many years, and stood with weather-blotched walls and vacant, staring windows looking blankly out over the hill side.

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 its 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 skyline and the eager air. Here at least there was no neighbour to pry and chatter.

The laird had left his phaeton 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 fall to an agent, or "factor" as it was there called, 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 flushed cloud 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 stared 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 van-

ished, 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 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 storey 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 hasna 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 wunna gang within a Scotch mile o’t.”

“Well, Seth, there is someone 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 backwards and forward 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 tile building.

“Let ilka man blaw his ain parritch,” said Seth Jamieson doggedly, coming to a dead stop. “What is it tae us if a wraith or a bogle minds tae tak’ a fancy tae Cloomber? It’s no canny tae 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, Master 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 tae Maister McNeil, the factor body frae Wigtown—him wha 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.

“What is this, McNeil?” I heard him say, in a gasping, choking voice. “Is this your promise? What is the meaning of it?”

“Don’t be alarmed, General! Don’t be alarmed!” said the little fat factor in a soothing fashion, as one might speak to a frightened child. “This is young Mr. Fothergill West, of Branksome, though what brings him up here tonight is more than I can understand. However, as you are to be neighbours, I can’t do better than take the opportunity to introduce you to each other. Mr. West, this is General Heatherstone, who is about to take a lease of Cloomber Hall.”

I held out my hand to the tall man, who look it in a hesitating, half-reluctant fashion.

“I came up,” I explained, “because I saw your lights in the windows, and I bought that something might be wrong. I am very glad I did so, since it has given me the chance of making the general’s acquaintance.”

Whilst I was talking, I was conscious that the new tenant of Cloomber Hall was peering at me very closely through the darkness. As I concluded, he stretched out a long, tremulous arm, and turned the gig-lamp in such a way as to throw a flood of light upon my face.

“Good Heavens, McNeil!” he cried, in the same quivering voice as before, “the fellow’s as brown as chocolate. He’s not an Englishman. You’re not an Englishman—you, sir?”

“I’m a Scotchman, born and bred,” said I, with an inclination to laugh, which was only checked by my new acquaintance’s obvious terror.

“A Scotchman, eh?” said he, with a sigh of relief. “It’s all one nowadays. You must excuse me, Mr.—Mr. West. I’m nervous, infernally nervous. Come along, McNeil, we must be back in Wig-town in less than an hour. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night!”

The two clambered into their places; the factor cracked his whip, and the high dog-cart clattered away through the darkness, casting a brilliant tunnel of yellow light on either side of it, until the rumble of its wheels died away in the distance.

“What do you think of our new neighbour, Jamieson?” I asked, after a long silence.

“Deed, Mr. West, he seems, as he says himsel’, to be vera nervous. Maybe his conscience is oot o’ order.”

“His liver, more likely,” said I. “He looks as if he had tried his constitution a bit. But it’s blowing chill, Seth, my lad, and it’s time both of us were indoors.”

I bade my companion good-night, and struck off across the moors for the cheery, ruddy light which marked the parlour windows of Branksome.