Arthur Conan Doyle

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Аннотация

This novel is narrated by John Fothergill West, who tries to discover why the tenant of Cloomber Hall, General Heatherstone, is nervous to the point of being paranoid. Why are his fears becoming stronger every year at the fifth of October? And why doesn't he let his children leave home? This is a great mystery novel with a sharp twist at the end.

Содержание

The Mystery of Cloomber by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

I. The Hegira of the Wests from Edinburgh

I John 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.

It was my intention to write out the sequence of events in due order, depending on trustworthy hearsay when I was describing that which was beyond my own personal knowledge. I have now,

however, through the kind cooperation of friends, hit upon a plan which promises to be less onerous to me and more satisfactory to the reader. This is nothing less than to make use of the various manuscripts which I have by me bearing upon the subject, and to add to them the first-hand evidence contributed by those who had the best opportunities of knowing Major-General J. B. Heatherstone.

In pursuance of this design I shall lay before the public the testimony of Israel Stakes, formerly coachman at Cloomber Hall, and of John Easterling, F.R.C.P. Edin., now practising at Stranraer, in Wigtownshire. To these I shall add a verbatim account extracted from the journal of the late John Berthier Heatherstone, of the events which occurred in the Thul Valley in the autumn of '41 towards the end of the first Afghan War, with a description of the skirmish in the Terada defile, and of the death of the man Ghoolab Shah.

To myself I reserve the duty of filling up all the gaps and chinks which may be left in the narrative. By this arrangement I have sunk from the position of an author to that of a compiler, but on the other hand my work has ceased to be a story and has expanded into a series of affidavits.

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 from the 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 Scienz-blatt for January, 1861, he is described as "Der beruhmte und sehr gelhernte 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 Sanscrit 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 Khayyam, and others of his Eastern favourites, had it not been for the kindness and liberality of his half-brother William Farintosh, the Laird of Branksome, in Wigtownshire.

This William Farintosh was the proprietor of a landed estate, the acreage 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 wit's end, there came a letter like a ministering 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 be readily 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-sacksful of learned books, and such other of our household effects that were worth the trouble and expense of transport.

II. Of the strange manner in which a tenant came to Cloomber

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 sky-line 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 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 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 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 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 Wigtown 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.

III. Of our further acquaintance with major-general J. B. Heatherstone

There was, as may well be imagined, much stir amongst our small community at the news that the Hall was to be inhabited once more, and considerable speculation as to the new tenants, and their object in choosing this particular part of the country for their residence.

It speedily became apparent that, whatever their motives might be, they had definitely determined upon a lengthy stay, for relays of plumbers and of joiners came down from Wigtown, and there was hammering and repairing going on from morning till night.

It was surprising how quickly the signs of the wind and weather were effaced, until the great, square-set house was all as spick-and-span as though it had been erected yesterday. There were abundant signs that money was no consideration to General Heatherstone, and that it was not on the score of retrenchment that he had taken up his abode among us.

"It may be that he is devoted to study," suggested my father, as we discussed the question round the breakfast table. "Perhaps he has chosen this secluded spot to finish some magnum opus upon which he is engaged. If that is the case I should be happy to let him have the run of my library."

Esther and I laughed at the grandiloquent manner in which he spoke of the two potato-sacksful of books.

"It may be as you say," said I, "but the general did not strike me during our short interview as being a man who was likely to have any very pronounced literary tastes. If I might hazard a guess, I should say that he is here upon medical advice, in the hope that the complete quiet and fresh air may restore his shattered nervous system. If you had seen how he glared at me, and the twitching of his fingers, you would have thought it needed some restoring."

"I do wonder whether he has a wife and a family," said my sister. "Poor souls, how lonely they will be! Why, excepting ourselves, there is not a family that they could speak to for seven miles and more."

"General Heatherstone is a very distinguished soldier," remarked my father.

"Why, papa, however came you to know anything about him?"

"Ah, my dears," said my father, smiling at us over his coffee-cup, "you were laughing at my library just now, but you see it may be very useful at times." As he spoke he took a red-covered volume from a shelf and turned over the pages. "This is an Indian Army List of three years back," he explained, "and here is the very gentleman we want– 'Heatherstone, J. B., Commander of the Bath,' my dears, and 'V.C.', think of that, 'V.C.' – 'formerly colonel in the Indian Infantry, 41st Bengal Foot, but now retired with the rank of major-general.' In this other column is a record of his services – 'capture of Ghuznee and defence of Jellalabad,

Sobraon 1848, Indian Mutiny and reduction of Oudh. Five times mentioned in dispatches.' I think, my dears, that we have cause to be proud of our new neighbour."

"It doesn't mention there whether he is married or not, I suppose?" asked Esther.

"No," said my father, wagging his white head with a keen appreciation of his own humour. "It doesn't include that under the heading of 'daring actions' – though it very well might, my dear, it very well might."

All our doubts, however, upon this head were very soon set at rest, for on the very day that the repairing and the furnishing had been completed I had occasion to ride into Wigtown, and I met upon the way a carriage which was bearing General Heatherstone and his family to their new home. An elderly lady, worn and sickly-looking, was by his side, and opposite him sat a young fellow about my own age and a girl who appeared to be a couple of years younger.

I raised my hat, and was about to pass them, when the general shouted to his coachman to pull up, and held out his hand to me. I could see now in the daylight that his face, although harsh and stern, was capable of assuming a not unkindly expression.

"How are you, Mr. Fothergill West?" he cried. "I must apologise to you if I was a little brusque the other night – you will excuse an old soldier who has spent the best part of his life in harness – All the same, you must confess that you are rather dark-skinned for a Scotchman."

"We have a Spanish strain in our blood," said I, wondering at his recurrence to the topic.

"That would, of course, account for it," he remarked. "My dear," to his wife, "allow me to introduce Mr. Fothergill West to you. This is my son and my daughter. We have come here in search of rest, Mr. West – complete rest."

"And you could not possibly have come to a better place," said I.

"Oh, you think so?" he answered. "I suppose it is very quiet indeed, and very lonely. You might walk through these country lanes at night, I dare say, and never meet a soul, eh?"

"Well, there are not many about after dark," I said.

"And you are not much troubled with vagrants or wandering beggars, eh? Not many tinkers or tramps or rascally gipsies – no vermin of that sort about?"

"I find it rather cold," said Mrs. Heatherstone, drawing her thick sealskin mantle tighter round her figure. "We are detaining Mr. West, too."

"So we are, my dear, so we are. Drive on, coachman. Good-day, Mr. West."

The carriage rattled away towards the Hall, and I trotted thoughtfully onwards to the little country metropolis.

As I passed up the High Street, Mr. McNeil ran out from his office and beckoned to me to stop.

"Our new tenants have gone out," he said. "They drove over this morning."

"I met them on the way," I answered.

As I looked down at the little factor, I could see that his face was flushed and that he bore every appearance of having had an extra glass.

"Give me a real gentleman to do business with," he said, with a burst of laughter. "They understand me and I understand them. 'What shall I fill it up for?' says the general, taking a blank cheque out o' his pouch and laying it on the table. 'Two hundred,' says I, leaving a bit o' a margin for my own time and trouble."

"I thought that the landlord had paid you for that," I remarked.

"Aye, aye, but it's well to have a bit margin. He filled it up and threw it over to me as if it had been an auld postage stamp. That's the way business should be done between honest men – though it wouldna do if one was inclined to take an advantage. Will ye not come in, Mr. West, and have a taste of my whisky?"

"No, thank you" said I, "I have business to do."

"Well, well, business is the chief thing. It's well not to drink in the morning, too. For my own part, except a drop before breakfast to give me an appetite, and maybe a glass, or even twa, afterwards to promote digestion, I never touch spirits before noon. What d'ye think o' the general, Mr. West?"

"Why, I have hardly had an opportunity of judging," I answered.

Mr. McNeil tapped his forehead with his forefinger.

"That's what I think of him," he said in a confidential whisper, shaking his head at me. "He's gone, sir, gone, in my estimation.

Now what would you take to be a proof of madness, Mr. West?"

"Why, offering a blank cheque to a Wigtown house-agent," said I.

"Ah, you're aye at your jokes. But between oorsel's now, if a man asked ye how many miles it was frae a seaport, and whether ships come there from the East, and whether there were tramps on the road, and whether it was against the lease for him to build a high wall round the grounds, what would ye make of it, eh?"

"I should certainly think him eccentric," said I.

"If every man had his due, our friend would find himsel' in a house with a high wall round the grounds, and that without costing him a farthing," said the agent.

"Where then?" I asked, humouring his joke.

"Why, in the Wigtown County Lunatic Asylum," cried the little man, with a bubble of laughter, in the midst of which I rode on my way, leaving him still chuckling over his own facetiousness.

The arrival of the new family at Cloomber Hall had no perceptible effect in relieving the monotony of our secluded district, for instead of entering into such simple pleasures as the country had to offer, or interesting themselves, as we had hoped, in our attempts to improve the lot of our poor crofters and fisherfolk, they seemed to shun all observation, and hardly ever to venture beyond the avenue gates.

We soon found, too, that the factor's words as to the inclosing of the grounds were founded upon fact, for gangs of workmen

were kept hard at work from early in the morning until late at night in erecting a high, wooden fence round the whole estate.

When this was finished and topped with spikes, Cloomber Park became impregnable to any one but an exceptionally daring climber. It was as if the old soldier had been so imbued with military ideas that, like my Uncle Toby, he could not refrain even in times of peace from standing upon the defensive.

Stranger still, he had victualled the house as if for a siege, for Begbie, the chief grocer of Wigtown, told me himself in a rapture of delight and amazement that the general had sent him an order for hundreds of dozens of every imaginable potted meat and vegetable.

It may be imagined that all these unusual incidents were not allowed to pass without malicious comment. Over the whole countryside and as far away as the English border there was nothing but gossip about the new tenants of Cloomber Hall and the reasons which had led them to come among us.

The only hypothesis, however, which the bucolic mind could evolve, was that which had already occurred to Mr. McNeil, the factor – namely, that the old general and his family were one and all afflicted with madness, or, as an alternative conclusion, that he had committed some heinous offence and was endeavouring to escape the consequences of his misdeeds.

These were both natural suppositions under the circumstances, but neither of them appeared to me to commend itself as a true explanation of the facts.

It is true that General Heatherstone's behaviour on the occasion of our first interview was such as to suggest some suspicion of mental disease, but no man could have been more reasonable or more courteous than he had afterwards shown himself to be.

Then, again, his wife and children led the same secluded life that he did himself, so that the reason could not be one peculiar to his own health.

As to the possibility of his being a fugitive from justice, that theory was even more untenable. Wigtownshire was bleak and lonely, but it was not such an obscure corner of the world that a well-known soldier could hope to conceal himself there, nor would a man who feared publicity set every one's tongue wagging as the general had done.

On the whole, I was inclined to believe that the true solution of the enigma lay in his own allusion to the love of quiet, and that they had taken shelter here with an almost morbid craving for solitude and repose. We very soon had an instance of the great lengths to which this desire for isolation would carry them.

My father had come down one morning with the weight of a great determination upon his brow.

"You must put on your pink frock to-day, Esther," said he, "and you, John, you must make yourself smart, for I have determined that the three of us shall drive round this afternoon and pay our respects to Mrs. Heatherstone and the general."

"A visit to Cloomber," cried Esther, clapping her hands.

"I am here," said my father, with dignity, "not only as the laird's factor, but also as his kinsman. In that capacity I am convinced that he would wish me to call upon these newcomers and offer them any politeness which is in our power. At present they must feel lonely and friendless. What says the great Firdousi? 'The choicest ornaments to a man's house are his friends.'"

My sister and I knew by experience that when the old man began to justify his resolution by quotations from the Persian poets there was no chance of shaking it. Sure enough that afternoon saw the phaeton at the door, with my father perched upon the seat, with his second-best coat on and a pair of new driving-gloves.

"Jump in, my dears," he cried, cracking his whip briskly, "we shall show the general that he has no cause to be ashamed of his neighbours."

Alas! pride always goes before a fall. Our well-fed ponies and shining harness were not destined that day to impress the tenants of Cloomber with a sense of our importance.

We had reached the avenue gate, and I was about to get out and open it, when our attention was arrested by a very large wooden placard, which was attached to one of the trees in such a manner that no one could possibly pass without seeing it. On the white surface of this board was printed in big, black letters the following hospitable inscription:

GENERAL AND MRS. HEATHERSTONE

HAVE NO WISH
TO INCREASE
THE CIRCLE OF THEIR ACQUAINTANCE.

We all sat gazing at this announcement for some moments in silent astonishment. Then Esther and I, tickled by the absurdity of the thing, burst out laughing, but my father pulled the ponies' heads round, and drove home with compressed lips and the cloud of much wrath upon his brow. I have never seen the good man so thoroughly moved, and I am convinced that his anger did not arise from any petty feeling of injured vanity upon his own part, but from the thought that a slight had been offered to the Laird of Branksome, whose dignity he represented.

IV. Of a young man with a grey head

If I had any personal soreness on account of this family snub, it was a very passing emotion, and one which was soon effaced from my mind.

It chanced that on the very next day after the episode I had occasion to pass that way, and stopped to have another look at the obnoxious placard. I was standing staring at it and wondering what could have induced our neighbours to take such an outrageous step, when I became suddenly aware of a sweet, girlish face which peeped out at me from between the bars of the gate, and of a white hand which eagerly beckoned me to approach. As I advanced to her I saw that it was the same young lady whom I had seen in the carriage.

"Mr. West," she said, in a quick whisper, glancing from side to side as she spoke in a nervous, hasty manner, "I wish to apologise to you for the indignity to which you and your family were subjected yesterday. My brother was in the avenue and saw it all, but he is powerless to interfere. I assure you, Mr. West, that if that hateful thing," pointing up at the placard, "has given you any annoyance, it has given my brother and myself far more."

"Why, Miss Heatherstone," said I, putting the matter off with a laugh, "Britain is a free country, and if a man chooses to warn off visitors from his premises there is no reason why he should not."

"It is nothing less than brutal," she broke out, with a petulant stamp of the foot. "To think that your sister, too, should have such a unprovoked insult offered to her! I am ready to sink with shame at the very thought."

"Pray do not give yourself one moment's uneasiness upon the subject," said I earnestly, for I was grieved at her evident distress. "I am sure that your father has some reason unknown to us for taking this step."

"Heaven knows he has!" she answered, with ineffable sadness in her voice, "and yet I think it would be more manly to face a danger than to fly from it. However, he knows best, and it is impossible for us to judge. But who is this?" she exclaimed, anxiously, peering up the dark avenue. "Oh, it is my brother Mordaunt. Mordaunt," she said, as the young man approached us. "I have been apologising to Mr. West for what happened yesterday, in your name as well as my own."

"I am very, very glad to have the opportunity of doing it in person," said he courteously. "I only wish that I could see your sister and your father as well as yourself, to tell them how sorry I am. I think you had better run up to the house, little one, for it's getting near tiffin-time. No – don't you go Mr. West. I want to have a word with you."

Miss Heatherstone waved her hand to me with a bright smile, and tripped up the avenue, while her brother unbolted the gate, and, passing through, closed it again, locking it upon the outside.

"I'll have a stroll down the road with you, if you have no

objection. Have a manilla." He drew a couple of cheroots from his pocket and handed one to me. "You'll find they are not bad," he said. "I became a connoisseur in tobacco when I was in India. I hope I am not interfering with your business in coming along with you?"

"Not at all," I answered "I am very glad to have your company."

"I'll tell you a secret," said my companion. "This is the first time that I have been outside the grounds since we have been down here."

"And your sister?"

"She has never been out, either," he answered. "I have given the governor the slip to-day, but he wouldn't half like it if he knew. It's a whim of his that we should keep ourselves entirely to ourselves. At least, some people would call it a whim, for my own part I have reason to believe that he has solid grounds for all that he does – though perhaps in this matter he may be a little too exacting."

"You must surely find it very lonely," said I. "Couldn't you manage to slip down at times and have a smoke with me? That house over yonder is Branksome."

"Indeed, you are very kind," he answered, with sparkling eyes. "I should dearly like to run over now and again. With the exception of Israel Stakes, our old coachman and gardener, I have not a soul that I can speak to."

"And your sister – she must feel it even more," said I, thinking

in my heart that my new acquaintance made rather too much of his own troubles and too little of those of his companion.

"Yes; poor Gabriel feels it, no doubt," he answered carelessly, "but it's a more unnatural thing for a young man of my age to be cooped up in this way than for a woman. Look at me, now. I am three-and-twenty next March, and yet I have never been to a university, nor to a school for that matter. I am as complete an ignoramus as any of these clodhoppers. It seems strange to you, no doubt, and yet it is so. Now, don't you think I deserve a better fate?"

He stopped as he spoke, and faced round to me, throwing his palms forward in appeal.

As I looked at him, with the sun shining upon his face, he certainly did seem a strange bird to be cooped up in such a cage. Tall and muscular, with a keen, dark face, and sharp, finely cut features, he might have stepped out of a canvas of Murillo or Velasquez. There were latent energy and power in his firm-set mouth, his square eyebrows, and the whole pose of his elastic, well-knit figure.

"There is the learning to be got from books and the learning to be got from experience," said I sententiously. "If you have less of your share of the one, perhaps you have more of the other. I cannot believe you have spent all your life in mere idleness and pleasure."

"Pleasure!" he cried. "Pleasure! Look at this!" He pulled off his hat, and I saw that his black hair was all decked and

dashed with streaks of grey. "Do you imagine that this came from pleasure?" he asked, with a bitter laugh.

"You must have had some great shock," I said, astonished at the sight, "some terrible illness in your youth. Or perhaps it arises from a more chronic cause – a constant gnawing anxiety. I have known men as young as you whose hair was as grey."

"Poor brutes!" he muttered. "I pity them."

"If you can manage to slip down to Branksome at times," I said, "perhaps you could bring Miss Heatherstone with you. I know that my father and my sister would be delighted to see her, and a change, if only for an hour or two, might do her good."

"It would be rather hard for us both to get away together," he answered, "However, if I see a chance I shall bring her down. It might be managed some afternoon perhaps, for the old man indulges in a siesta occasionally."

We had reached the head of the winding lane which branches off from the high road and leads to the laird's house, so my companion pulled up.

"I must go back," he said abruptly, "or they will miss me. It's very kind of you, West, to take this interest in us. I am very grateful to you, and so will Gabriel be when she hears of your kind invitation. It's a real heaping of coals of fire after that infernal placard of my father's."

He shook my hand and set off down the road, but he came running after me presently, calling me to stop.

"I was just thinking," he said, "that you must consider us a

great mystery up there at Cloomber. I dare say you have come to look upon it as a private lunatic asylum, and I can't blame you. If you are interested in the matter, I feel it is unfriendly upon my part not to satisfy your curiosity, but I have promised my father to be silent about it. And indeed if I were to tell you all that I know you might not be very much the wiser after all. I would have you understand this, however – that my father is as sane as you or I, and that he has very good reasons for living the life which he does. I may add that his wish to remain secluded does not arise from any unworthy or dishonourable motives, but merely from the instinct of self-preservation."

"He is in danger, then?" I ejaculated.

"Yes; he is in constant danger."

"But why does he not apply to the magistrates for protection?" I asked. "If he is afraid of any one, he has only to name him and they will bind him over to keep the peace."

"My dear West," said young Heatherstone, "the danger with which my father is threatened is one that cannot be averted by any human intervention. It is none the less very real, and possibly very imminent."

"You don't mean to assert that it is supernatural," I said incredulously.

"Well, hardly that, either," he answered with hesitation. "There." he continued, "I have said rather more than I should, "but I know that you will not abuse my confidence. Good-bye!"

He look to his heels and was soon out of sight round a curve

in the country road.

A danger which was real and imminent, not to be averted by human means, and yet hardly supernatural – here was a conundrum indeed!

I had come to look upon the inhabitants of the Hall as mere eccentrics, but after what young Mordaunt Heatherstone had just told me, I could no longer doubt that some dark and sinister meaning underlay all their actions. The more I pondered over the problem, the more unanswerable did it appear, and yet I could not get the matter out of my thoughts.

The lonely, isolated Hall, and the strange, impending catastrophe which hung over its inmates, appealed forcibly to my imagination. All that evening, and late into the night, I sat moodily by the fire, pondering over what I had heard, and revolving in my mind the various incidents which might furnish me with some clue to the mystery.

V. How four of us came to be under the shadow of Cloomber

I trust that my readers will not set me down as an inquisitive busybody when I say that as the days and weeks went by I found my attention and my thoughts more and more attracted to General Heatherstone and the mystery which surrounded him.

It was in vain that I endeavoured by hard work and a strict attention to the laird's affairs to direct my mind into some more healthy channel. Do what I would, on land or on the water, I would still find myself puzzling over this one question, until it obtained such a hold upon me that I felt it was useless for me to attempt to apply myself to anything until I had come to some satisfactory solution of it.

I could never pass the dark line of five-foot fencing, and the great iron gate, with its massive lock, without pausing and racking my brain as to what the secret might be which was shut in by that inscrutable barrier. Yet, with all my conjectures and all my observations, I could never come to any conclusion which could for a moment be accepted as an explanation of the facts.

My sister had been out for a stroll one night, visiting a sick peasant or performing some other of the numerous acts of charity by which she had made herself beloved by the whole countryside.

"John," she said when she returned, "have you seen Cloomber Hall at night?"

"No," I answered, laying down the book which I was reading. "Not since that memorable evening when the general and Mr. McNeil came over to make an inspection."

"Well, John, will you put your hat on and come a little walk with me?"

I could see by her manner that something had agitated or frightened her.

"Why, bless the girl!" cried I boisterously, "what is the matter? The old Hall is not on fire, surely? You look as grave as if all Wigtown were in a blaze."

"Not quite so bad as that," she said, smiling. "But do come out, Jack. I should very much like you to see it."

I had always refrained from saying anything which might alarm my sister, so that she knew nothing of the interest which our neighbours' doings had for me. At her request I took my hat and followed her out into the darkness. She led the way along a little footpath over the moor, which brought us to some rising ground, from which we could look down upon the Hall without our view being obstructed by any of the fir-trees which had been planted round it.

"Look at that!" said my sister, pausing at the summit of this little eminence.

Cloomber lay beneath us in a blaze of light. In the lower floors the shutters obscured the illumination, but above, from the broad

windows of the second storey to the thin slits at the summit of the tower, there was not a chink or an aperture which did not send forth a stream of radiance. So dazzling was the effect that for a moment I was persuaded that the house was on fire, but the steadiness and clearness of the light soon freed me from that apprehension. It was clearly the result of many lamps placed systematically all over the building.

It added to the strange effect that all these brilliantly illuminated rooms were apparently untenanted, and some of them, so far as we could judge, were not even furnished. Through the whole great house there was no sign of movement or of life – nothing but the clear, unwinking flood of yellow light.

I was still lost in wonder at the sight when I heard a short, quick sob at my side.

"What is it, Esther, dear?" I asked, looking down at my companion.

"I feel so frightened. Oh, John, John, take me home, I feel so frightened!"

She clung to my arm, and pulled at my coat in a perfect frenzy of fear.

"It's all safe, darling," I said soothingly. "There is nothing to fear. What has upset you so?"

"I am afraid of them, John; I am afraid of the Heatherstones. Why is their house lit up like this every night? I have heard from others that it is always so. And why does the old man run like a frightened hare if any one comes upon him. There is something

wrong about it, John, and it frightens me."

I pacified her as well as I could, and led her home with me, where I took care that she should have some hot port negus before going to bed. I avoided the subject of the Heatherstones for fear of exciting her, and she did not recur to it of her own accord. I was convinced, however, from what I had heard from her, that she had for some time back been making her own observations upon our neighbours, and that in doing so she had put a considerable strain upon her nerves.

I could see that the mere fact of the Hall being illuminated at night was not enough to account for her extreme agitation, and that it must have derived its importance in her eyes from being one in a chain of incidents, all of which had left a weird or unpleasant impression upon her mind.

That was the conclusion which I came to at the time, and I have reason to know now that I was right, and that my sister had even more cause than I had myself for believing that there was something uncanny about the tenants of Cloomber.

Our interest in the matter may have arisen at first from nothing higher than curiosity, but events soon look a turn which associated us more closely with the fortunes of the Heatherstone family.

Mordaunt had taken advantage of my invitation to come down to the laird's house, and on several occasions he brought with him his beautiful sister. The four of us would wander over the moors together, or perhaps if the day were fine set sail upon our little

skiff and stand off into the Irish Sea.

On such excursions the brother and sister would be as merry and as happy as two children. It was a keen pleasure to them to escape from their dull fortress, and to see, if only for a few hours, friendly and sympathetic faces round them.

There could be but one result when four young people were brought together in sweet, forbidden intercourse. Acquaintance-ship warmed into friendship, and friendship flamed suddenly into love.

Gabriel sits beside me now as I write, and she agrees with me that, dear as is the subject to ourselves, the whole story of our mutual affection is of too personal a nature to be more than touched upon in this statement. Suffice it to say that, within a few weeks of our first meeting Mordaunt Heatherstone had won the heart of my clear sister, and Gabriel had given me that pledge which death itself will not be able to break.

I have alluded in this brief way to the double tie which sprang up between the two families, because I have no wish that this narrative should degenerate into anything approaching to romance, or that I should lose the thread of the facts which I have set myself to chronicle. These are connected with General Heatherstone, and only indirectly with my own personal history.

It is enough if I say that after our engagement the visits to Branksome became more frequent, and that our friends were able sometimes to spend a whole day with us when business had called the general to Wigtown, or when his gout confined him to his

room.

As to our good father, he was ever ready to greet us with many small jests and tags of Oriental poems appropriate to the occasion, for we had no secrets from him, and he already looked upon us all as his children.

There were times when on account of some peculiarly dark or restless fit of the general's it was impossible for weeks on end for either Gabriel or Mordaunt to get away from the grounds. The old man would even stand on guard, a gloomy and silent sentinel, at the avenue gate, or pace up and down the drive as though he suspected that attempts had been made to penetrate his seclusion.

Passing of an evening I have seen his dark, grim figure flitting about in the shadow of the trees, or caught a glimpse of his hard, angular, swarthy face peering out suspiciously at me from behind the bars.

My heart would often sadden for him as I noticed his uncouth, nervous movements, his furtive glances and twitching features. Who would have believed that this slinking, cowering creature had once been a dashing officer, who had fought the battles of his country and had won the palm of bravery among the host of brave men around him?

In spite of the old soldier's vigilance, we managed to hold communication with our friends.

Immediately behind the Hall there was a spot where the fencing had been so carelessly erected that two of the rails could be removed without difficulty, leaving a broad gap, which gave

us the opportunity for many a stolen interview, though they were necessarily short, for the general's movements were erratic, and no part of the grounds was secure from his visitations.

How vividly one of these hurried meetings rises before me! It stands out clear, peaceful, and distinct amid the wild, mysterious incidents which were destined to lead up to the terrible catastrophe which has cast a shade over our lives.

I can remember that as I walked through the fields the grass was damp with the rain of the morning, and the air was heavy with the smell of the fresh-turned earth. Gabriel was waiting for me under the hawthorn tree outside the gap, and we stood hand-in-hand looking down at the long sweep of moorland and at the broad blue channel which encircled it with its fringe of foam.

Far away in the north-west the sun glinted upon the high peak of Mount Throston. From where we stood we could see the smoke of the steamers as they ploughed along the busy water-way which leads to Belfast.

"Is it not magnificent?" Gabriel cried, clasping her hands round my arm. "Ah, John, why are we not free to sail away over these waves together, and leave all our troubles behind us on the shore?"

"And what are the troubles which you would leave behind you, dear one?" I asked. "May I not know them, and help you to bear them?"

"I have no secrets from you, John," she answered, "Our chief trouble is, as you may guess, our poor father's strange behaviour.

Is it not a sad thing for all of us that a man who has played such a distinguished part in the world should skulk from one obscure corner of the country to another, and should defend himself with locks and barriers as though he were a common thief flying from justice? This is a trouble, John, which it is out of your power to alleviate."

"But why does he do it, Gabriel?" I asked.

"I cannot tell," she answered frankly. "I only know that he imagines some deadly danger to be hanging over his head, and that this danger was incurred by him during his stay in India. What its nature may be I have no more idea than you have."

"Then your brother has," I remarked. "I am sure from the way in which he spoke to me about it one day that he knows what it is, and that he looks upon it as real."

"Yes, he knows, and so does my mother," she answered, "but they have always kept it secret from me. My poor father is very excited at present. Day and night he is in an agony of apprehension, but it will soon be the fifth of October, and after that he will be at peace."

"How do you know that?" I asked in surprise.

"By experience," she answered gravely. "On the fifth of October these fears of his come to a crisis. For years back he has been in the habit of locking Mordaunt and myself up in our rooms on that date, so that we have no idea what occurs, but we have always found that he has been much relieved afterwards, and has continued to be comparatively in peace until that day

begins to draw round again."

"Then you have only ten days or so to wait," I remarked, for September was drawing to a close. "By the way, dearest, why is it that you light up all your rooms at night?"

"You have noticed it, then?" she said. "It comes also from my father's fears. He does not like to have one dark corner in the whole house. He walks about a good deal at night, and inspects everything, from the attics right down to the cellars. He has large lamps in every room and corridor, even the empty ones, and he orders the servants to light them all at dusk."

"I am rather surprised that you manage to keep your servants," I said, laughing. "The maids in these parts are a superstitious class, and their imaginations are easily excited by anything which they don't understand."

"The cook and both housemaids are from London, and are used to our ways. We pay them on a very high scale to make up for any inconvenience to which they may be put. Israel Stakes, the coachman, is the only one who comes from this part of the country, and he seems to be a stolid, honest fellow, who is not easily scared."

"Poor little girl," I exclaimed, looking down at the slim, graceful figure by my side. "This is no atmosphere for you to live in. Why will you not let me rescue you from it? Why won't you allow me to go straight and ask the general for your hand? At the worst he could only refuse."

She turned quite haggard and pale at the very thought.

"For Heaven's sake, John," she cried earnestly, "do nothing of the kind. He would whip us all away in the dead of the night, and within a week we should be settling down again in some wilderness where we might never have a chance of seeing or hearing from you again. Besides, he never would forgive us for venturing out of the grounds."

"I don't think that he is a hard-hearted man," I remarked. "I have seen a kindly look in his eyes, for all his stern face."

"He can be the kindest of fathers," she answered. "But he is terrible when opposed or thwarted. You have never seen him so, and I trust you never will. It was that strength of will and impatience of opposition which made him such a splendid officer. I assure you that in India every one thought a great deal of him. The soldiers were afraid of him, but they would have followed him anywhere."

"And had he these nervous attacks then?"

"Occasionally, but not nearly so acutely. He seems to think that the danger – whatever it may be – becomes more imminent every year. Oh, John, it is terrible to be waiting like this with a sword over our heads – and all the more terrible to me since I have no idea where the blow is to come from."

"Dear Gabriel," I said, taking her hand and drawing her to my side, "look over all this pleasant countryside and the broad blue sea. Is it not all peaceful and beautiful? In these cottages, with their red-tiled roofs peeping out from the grey moor, there live none but simple, God-fearing men, who toil hard at their crafts

and bear enmity to no man. Within seven miles of us is a large town, with every civilised appliance for the preservation of order. Ten miles farther there is a garrison quartered, and a telegram would at any time bring down a company of soldiers. Now, I ask you, dear, in the name of common-sense, what conceivable danger could threaten you in this secluded neighbourhood, with the means of help so near? You assure me that the peril is not connected with your father's health?"

"No, I am sure of that. It is true that Dr. Easterling, of Stranraer has been over to see him once or twice, but that was merely for some small indisposition. I can assure you that the danger is not to be looked for in that direction."

"Then I can assure you," said I, laughing, "that there is no danger at all. It must be some strange monomania or hallucination. No other hypothesis will cover the facts."

"Would my father's monomania account for the fact of my brother's hair turning grey and my mother wasting away to a mere shadow?"

"Undoubtedly," I answered, "The long continued worry of the general's restlessness and irritability would produce those effects on sensitive natures."

"No, no!" said she, shaking her head sadly, "I have been exposed to his restlessness and irritability, but they have had no such effect upon me. The difference between us lies in the fact that they know this awful secret and I do not."

"My dear girl," said I, "the days of family apparitions and that

kind of thing are gone. Nobody is haunted nowadays, so we can put that supposition out of the question. Having done so, what remains? There is absolutely no other theory which could even be suggested. Believe me, the whole mystery is that the heat of India has been too much for your poor father's brain."

What she would have answered I cannot tell, for at that moment she gave a start as if some sound had fallen upon her ear. As she looked round apprehensively, I suddenly saw her features become rigid and her eyes fixed and dilated.

Following the direction of her gaze, I felt a sudden thrill of fear pass through me as I perceived a human face surveying us from behind one of the trees – a man's face, every feature of which was distorted by the most malignant hatred and anger. Finding himself observed, he stepped out and advanced towards us, when I saw that it was none other than the general himself. His beard was all a-bristle with fury, and his deepset eyes glowed from under their heavily veined lids with a most sinister and demoniacal brightness.

VI. How I came to be enlisted as one of the Garrison of Cloomber

"To your room, girl!" he cried in a hoarse, harsh voice, stepping in between us and pointing authoritatively towards the house.

He waited until Gabriel, with a last frightened glance at me, had passed through the gap, and then he turned upon me with an expression so murderous that I stepped back a pace or two, and tightened my grasp upon my oak stick.

"You-you – " he spluttered, with his hand twitching at his throat, as though his fury were choking him. "You have dared to intrude upon my privacy! Do you think I built this fence that all the vermin in the country might congregate round it? Oh, you have been very near your death, my fine fellow! You will never be nearer until your time comes. Look at this!" he pulled a squat, thick pistol out of his bosom. "If you had passed through that gap and set foot on my land I'd have let daylight into you. I'll have no vagabonds here. I know how to treat gentry of that sort, whether their faces are black or white."

"Sir," said I, "I meant no harm by coming here, and I do not know how I have deserved this extraordinary outburst. Allow me to observe, however, that you are still covering me with your pistol, and that, as your hand is rather tremulous, it is more than

possible that it may go off. If you don't turn the muzzle down I shall be compelled in self-defence to strike you over the wrist with my stick."

"What the deuce brought you here, then?" he asked, in a more composed voice, putting his weapon back into his bosom. "Can't a gentleman live quietly without your coming to peep and pry? Have you no business of your own to look after, eh? And my daughter? how came you to know anything of her? and what have you been trying to squeeze out of her? It wasn't chance that brought you here."

"No," said I boldly, "it was not chance which brought me here. I have had several opportunities of seeing your daughter and of appreciating her many noble qualities. We are engaged to be married to each other, and I came up with the express intention of seeing her."

Instead of blazing into a fury, as I had expected, the general gave a long whistle of astonishment, and then leant up against the railings, laughing softly to himself.

"English terriers are fond of nosing worms," he remarked at last. "When we brought them out to India they used to trot off into the jungle and begin sniffing at what, they imagined to be worms there. But the worm turned out to be a venomous snake, and so poor doggy played no more. I think you'll find yourself in a somewhat analogous position if you don't look out."

"You surely don't mean to cast an aspersion upon your own daughter?" I said, flushing with indignation.

"Oh, Gabriel is all right," he answered carelessly. "Our family is not exactly one, however, which I should recommend a young fellow to marry into. And pray how is it that I was not informed of this snug little arrangement of yours?"

"We were afraid, sir, that you might separate us," I replied, feeling that perfect candour was the best policy under the circumstances. "It is possible that we were mistaken. Before coming to any final decision, I implore you to remember that the happiness of both of us is at stake. It is in your power to divide our bodies, but our souls shall be for ever united."

"My good fellow," said the general, in a not unkindly tone, "you don't know what you are asking for. There is a gulf between you and any one of the blood of Heatherstone which can never be bridged over."

All trace of anger had vanished now from his manner, and given place to an air of somewhat contemptuous amusement.

My family pride took fire at his words. "The gulf may be less than you imagine," I said coldly. "We are not clodhoppers because we live in this out-of-the-way place. I am of noble descent on one side, and my mother was a Buchan of Buchan, I assure you that there is no such disparity between us as you seem to imagine."

"You misunderstand me," the general answered. "It is on our side that the disparity lies. There are reasons why my daughter Gabriel should live and die single. It would not be to your advantage to marry her."

"But surely, sir," I persisted, "I am the best judge of my own interests and advantages. Since you take this ground all becomes easy, for I do assure you that the one interest which overrides all others is that I should have the woman I love for my wife. If this is your only objection to our match you may surely give us your consent, for any danger or trial which I may incur in marrying Gabriel will not weigh with me one featherweight."

"Here's a young bantam!" exclaimed the old soldier, smiling at my warmth. "It's easy to defy danger when you don't know what the danger is."

"What is it, then?" I asked, hotly. "There is no earthly peril which will drive me from Gabriel's side. Let me know what it is and test me."

"No, no. That would never do," he answered with a sigh, and then, thoughtfully, as if speaking his mind aloud: "He has plenty of pluck and is a well-grown lad, too. We might do worse than make use of him."

He went on mumbling to himself with a vacant stare in his eyes as if he had forgotten my presence.

"Look here, West," he said presently. "You'll excuse me if I spoke hastily a little time ago. It is the second time that I have had occasion to apologise to you for the same offence. It shan't occur again. I am rather over-particular, no doubt, in my desire for complete isolation, but I have good reasons for insisting on the point. Rightly or wrongly, I have got it into my head that some day there might be an organised raid upon my grounds. If

anything of the sort should occur I suppose I might reckon upon your assistance?"

"With all my heart."

"So that if ever you got a message such as 'Come up,' or even 'Cloomber,' you would know that it was an appeal for help, and would hurry up immediately, even if it were in the dead of the night?"

"Most certainly I should," I answered. "But might I ask you what the nature of the danger is which you apprehend?"

"There would be nothing gained by your knowing. Indeed, you would hardly understand it if I told you. I must bid you good day now, for I have stayed with you too long. Remember, I count upon you as one of the Cloomber garrison now."

"One other thing, sir," I said hurriedly, for he was turning away," I hope that you will not be angry with your daughter for anything which I have told you. It was for my sake that she kept it all secret from you."

"All right," he said, with his cold, inscrutable smile. "I am not such an ogre in the bosom of my family as you seem to think. As to this marriage question, I should advise you as a friend to let it drop altogether, but if that is impossible I must insist that it stand over completely for the present. It is impossible to say what unexpected turn events may take. Good-bye."

He plunged into the wood and was quickly out of sight among the dense plantation.

Thus ended this extraordinary interview, in which this strange

man had begun by pointing a loaded pistol at my breast and had ended, by partially acknowledging the possibility of my becoming his future son– in-law. I hardly knew whether to be cast down or elated over it.

On the one hand he was likely, by keeping a closer watch over his daughter, to prevent us from communicating as freely as we had done hitherto. Against this there was the advantage of having obtained an implied consent to the renewal of my suit at some future date. On the whole, I came to the conclusion as I walked thoughtfully home that I had improved my position by the incident.

But this danger – this shadowy, unspeakable danger – which appeared to rise up at every turn, and to hang day and night over the towers of Cloomber! Rack my brain as I would, I could not conjure up any solution to the problem which was not puerile and inadequate.

One fact struck me as being significant. Both the father and the son had assured me, independently of each other, that if I were told what the peril was, I would hardly realise its significance. How strange and bizarre must the fear be which can scarcely be expressed in intelligible language!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.