One of the Garrison;

Or, A Mysterious Affair.

CHAPTER XVI.—(Cont'd).

By ten o'clock we had walked close upon twelve miles, and were compelled to call a halt for a few minutes to recover our breath, for the last mile or two we had been breasting the long, wearying slope of the Wigtown hills. From the summit of this range, which is nowhere more than a thousand feet in height, we could see, looking northward, such a scene of bleakness and desolation as can hardly be matched in any country. Right away to the horizon stretched the broad expanse of mud and of water, mingled and mixed together in the wildest chaos, like a portion of some world in the process of formation. Here and there on the dun-colored surface of this great marsh there had burst out patches of sickly yellow reeds and of livid greenish scum, which only served to heighten and intensify the gloomy effect of the dull, melancholy expanse. On the side nearest to us some abandoned peat cuttings showed that ubiquitous man had been at work there, but beyond these few petty scars there was no sign anywhere of human life. Not even a crow or a seagull flapped their way over that hideous desert.

This is the great bog of Cree, which may be seen in the maps to extend over a considerable surface of the shire of Wigtown. It is a salt-water marsh formed by an inroad of the sea, and so intersected is it with dangerous swamps and treacherous pitfalls of liquid mud, that no man would venture through it unless he had the guidance of one of the few peasants who retain the secret of its paths. As we approached the fringe of rushes which marked its border, a foul, dank smell rose up from the stagnant wilderness, as from impure water and decaying vegetation—an earthly, noisome smell which poisoned the fresh upland air. So forbidding and gloomy was the aspect of the place that our stout crofter hesitated, and it was all that we could do to persuade him to proceed. Our lurcher, however, not being subjected to the delicate impressions of our higher organizations, still ran yelping along with its nose on the ground and every fibre of its body quivering with excitement and eagerness.

There was no difficulty about picking our way through the morass, for wherever the five could go we three could follow. If we could have had any doubts as to our dog's guidance they would all have been removed now, for in the soft, black oozing soil we could distinctly trace the tracks of the whole party. From these we could see that they had walked abreast, and, furthermore, that each was about equidistant from the other. Clearly, then, no physical force had been used in taking the general and his companion along. The compulsion had been psychical and not material.

Once within the swamp we had to be careful not to deviate from the narrow track, which offered a firm foothold. On each side lay shallow sheets of stagnant water overlying a treacherous bottom of semifluid mud, which rose above the surface here and there in moist, sweltering banks, mottled over with occasional patches of unhealthy vegetation. Great purple and yellow fungi had broken out in a dense eruption, as though Nature were afflicted with a foul disease, which manifested itself by this crop of plague spots. Here and there dark, crab-like creatures scuttled across our path and hideous flesh-colored worms wriggled and writhed amid the sickly reeds. Swarms of buzzing piping insects rose up at every step and formed a dense cloud around our heads, settling on our hands and faces and inoculating us with their filthy venom. Never had I ventured into so pestilent and forbidding a place. Morraunt Heatherstone strode on, however, with a set purpose upon his swarthy brow, and we could but follow him, determined to stand by him to the end of the adventure.

As we advanced the path grew narrower and narrower until, as we saw by the tracks, our predecessors had been compelled to walk in single file. Fullarton was leading us with the dog, Mordaunt behind him, while I brought up the rear. The peasant had been sulky and surly for a little time back, hardly answering when spoken to, but he now stopped short and positively refused to go a step farther.

"It's no canny," he said; "besides, I ken where it will lead us tae!"

"Where, then?" I asked.

"Tae the Hole o' Cree," he answered. "It's no far frae here I'm thinking."

"The Hole of Cree! What is that, then?"

"It's a great muckle hole in the ground that gangs awa' doun so deep that naebody could ever reach the bottom. Indeed there are folk wha say that it's just a door leadin' intae the bottomless pit itsel'."

"You have been there then?" I asked.

"Been there!" he cried. "What would I be doin' at the Hole o' Cree? No, I've never been there, nor any other man in his senses."

"How do you know about it, then?"

"My great grandfeyther had been there, and that's how I ken." Fullarton answered. "He was fou' one Saturday night and he went for a bet. He didna like tae talk aboot it afterward, and he wouldna' tell a' what befell him, but he was aye feared o' the very name. He's the first Fullarton that's been at the Hole o' Cree, and he'll be the last for me. If ye'll tak' my advice ye'll just gie the matter up and gang hame again, for there's no guid tae be got oot o' this place."

"We shall go on with you or without you," Mordaunt answered. "Let us have your dog and we can pick you up on our way back."

"Na, na," he cried; "I'll no hae my dog scared wi' bogles and running down Aul Nick as if he were a hare. The dog shall bide wi' me."

"The dog shall go with us," said my companion, with his eyes blazing. "We have no time to argue with you. Here's a five-pound note. Let us have the dog, or, by heaven, I shall take it by force and throw you in the bog if you hinder us." I could realize the Heatherstone of forty years ago when I saw the fierce and sudden wrath which lit up the features of his son.

Either the bribe or the threat had the desired effect; for the fellow grabbed at the money with one hand while with the other he surrendered the leash which held the lurcher. Leaving him to retrace his steps, we continued to make our way into the utmost recesses of the great swamp. The tortuous path grew less and less defined as we proceeded, and was even covered in places with water; but the increasing excitement of the hound and the sight of the deep footmarks in the mud, stimulated us to push on. At last, after struggling through a grove of high bulrushes, we came on a spot the gloomy horror of which might have furnished Dante with a fresh terror for his Inferno.

The whole bog in this part appeared to have sunk in, forming a great funnel-shaped depression, which terminated in the center in a circular rift or opening about forty paces in diameter. It was a whirlpool—a perfect maelstrom of mud, sloping down on every side to this silent and awful chasm. Clearly this was the spot which, under the name of the Hole of Cree, bore such a sinister reputation among the rustics. I could not wonder at its impressing their imagination, for a more weird or gloomy scene, or one more worthy of the avenue which led to it, could not be conceived. The steps passed down the declivity which surrounded the abyss, and we followed them with a sinking feeling in our hearts, as we realized that this was the end of our search. A little way from the downward path was the return trail made by the feet of those who had come back from the chasm's edge. Our eyes fell upon these tracks at the same moment, and we each gave a cry of horror, and stood gazing speechlessly at them. For there, in those blurred footmarks, the whole drama was revealed. Five had gone down, but only three had returned.

None shall ever know the details of that strange tragedy. There was no marks of struggle or sign of an attempt at escape. We knelt at the edge of the Hole and endeavored to pierce the unfathomable gloom which shrouded it. A faint, sickly exhalation seemed to rise from its depths, and there was a distant hurrying, clattering sound as of waters in the bowels of the earth. A great stone lay embedded in the mud, and this I hurled over, but we never heard thud or splash to show that it had reached the bottom. As we hung over the noisome chasm a sound did at last rise to our ears out of its murky depths. High, clear, and throbbing, it tinkled for an instant out of the abyss, to be succeeded by the same deadly stillness which had preceded it. I do not wish to appear to be superstitious, or to put down to extraordinary causes that which may have a natural explanation. That one keen note may have been some strange water sound produced far down in the bowels of the earth. It may have been that or it may have been that sinister bell of which I had heard so much. Be this as it may, it was the only sign that rose to us from the last terrible resting-place of the two who had paid the debt which had so long been owing.

We joined our voices in a call with the unreasoning obstinacy with which men will cling to hope, but no answer came back to us save a thousand hollow reverberations from the depths beneath. Footsore and heartsick, we retraced our steps and climbed the slimy slope once more.

"What shall we do, Mordaunt?" I asked, in a subdued voice. "We can but pray that their souls may rest in peace."

Young Heatherstone looked at me with flashing eyes. "This may be all according to occult laws," he cried, "but we shall see what the laws of England have to say upon it. I suppose a chela may be hanged as well as any other man. It may not be too late yet to run them down. Here, good dog, good dog—here!" He pulled the hound over and set it on the track of the three men. The creature sniffed at it once or twice, and then, falling upon his stomach, with bristling hair and protruding tongue, it lay shivering and trembling, a very embodiment of canine terror.

"You see," I said, "it is no use contending against those who have powers at their command which we cannot even give a name to. There is nothing for it but to accept the inevitable, and to hope that these poor men may meet with some compensation in another world for all that they have suffered in this."

"And be free from all devilish religions and their murderous worshippers!" Mordaunt cried furiously.

Justice compelled me to acknowledge in my own heart that the murderous spirit had been set on foot by the Christian before it was taken up by the Buddhists, but I forebore to remark upon it for fear of irritating my companion. For a long time I could not draw him away from the scene of his father's death, but at last, by repeated arguments and reasonings, I succeeded in making him realize how useless and unprofitable any further efforts on our part must necessarily prove, and in inducing him to return with me to Cloomber. Oh! the wearisome, tedious journey! It had seemed long enough when we had some slight flicker of hope, or at least of expectation, before us, but now that our worst fears were fulfilled it appeared interminable. We picked up our peasant guide at the outskirts of the marsh, and having restored his dog we let him find his own way home, without telling him anything of the results of our expedition. We ourselves plodded all day over the moors with heavy feet and heavier hearts until we saw the ill-omened tower of Cloomber, and at last, as the sun was setting, found ourselves once more beneath its roof.

There is no need for me to enter into further details, or to describe the grief which our tidings conveyed to mother and to daughter. Their long expectation of some calamity was not sufficient to prepare them for the terrible reality. For weeks my poor Gabriel hovered between life and death, and though she came round at last, thanks to the nursing of my sister and the professional skill of Dr. John Easterling, of Stranraer, she has never to this day entirely recovered her former vigor. Mordaunt, too, suffered much for some time, and it was only after our removal to Edinburgh that he rallied from the shock which he had undergone. As to poor Mrs. Heatherstone, neither medical attention nor change of air can ever have a permanent effect upon her. Slowly and surely, but very placidly, she has declined in health and strength, until it is evident that in a very few weeks at the most she will have rejoined her husband and restored to him the one thing which he must have grudged to leave behind.

The Laird of Branksome came home from Italy restored in health, with the result that we were compelled to return once more to Edinburgh. The change was agreeable to us, for recent events had cast a cloud over our country life and had surrounded us with unpleasant associations. Besides, a highly honorable and remunerative appointment in connection with the University library had become vacant, and had, through the kindness of the late Sir Alexander Grant, been offered to my father, who, as may be imagined, lost no time in accepting so congenial a post. In this way we came back to Edinburgh very much more important people than we left it, and with no further reason to be uneasy about the details of housekeeping. But, in truth, the whole household has been dissolved, for I have been married for some months to my dear Gabriel, and Esther is to become Mrs. Heatherstone upon the 25rd of the month. If she makes him as good a wife as his sister has made to me, we may both set ourselves down as fortunate men.

These mere domestic episodes are, as I have already explained, introduced only because I cannot avoid alluding to them. My object in drawing up this statement and publishing the evidence which corroborates it, was certainly not to parade my private affairs before the public, but to leave on record an authentic narrative of a most remarkable series of events. This I have endeavored to do in as methodical a manner as possible, exaggerating nothing and suppressing nothing. The reader has now the evidence before him, and can form his own opinions unaided by me as to the causes of the disappearance and death of Rufus Smith and of John Berthier Heatherstone, V.C., C.B.

There is only one point which is still dark to me. Why the chelas of Ghoolab Shah should have removed their victims to the desolate Hole of Cree instead of taking their lives at Cloomber, is, I confess, a mystery to me. In dealing with occult laws, however, we must allow for our own complete ignorance of the subject. Did we know more we might see that there was some analogy between that foul bog and the sacrilege which had been committed, and that their ritual and customs demanded that just such a death was the one appropriate to the crime. On this point I should be sorry to be dogmatic, but at least we must allow that the Buddhist priests must have had some very good cause for the course of action which they so deliberately carried out.

Months afterward I saw a short paragraph in the Star of India announcing that three eminent Buddhists—Lal Hoomi, Mowdar Khan and Ram Singh—had just returned in the steamship Deccan from a short trip to Europe. The very next item was devoted to an account of the life and services of Major-General Heatherstone, "who has lately disappeared from his country house in Wigtownshire, and who, there is too much reason to fear, has been drowned." I wonder if by chance there was any other human eye but mine which traced a connection between these paragraphs. I never showed them to my wife or to Mordaunt, and they will only know of their existence when they read these pages.

I don't know that there is any other point which needs clearing up. The intelligent reader will have already seen the reasons for the general's fear of dark faces, of wandering men (not knowing how his pursuers might come after him), of visitors (from the same cause and because his hateful bell was liable to sound at all times). His broken sleep led him to wander about the house at night, and the lamps which he burned in every room were no doubt to prevent his imagination from peopling the darkness with terrors. Lastly, his elaborate precautions were, as he has himself explained, rather the result of a feverish desire to do something than in the expectation that he could really ward off his fate.

Science will tell you that there are no such powers as those claimed by the Eastern mystics. I, James Fothergill West, can confidently answer that science is wrong. For what is science? Science is the concensus of opinion of scientific men, and history has shown that it is slow to accept a truth. Science sneered at Newton for twenty years. Science proved mathematically that an iron ship could not swim, and science declared that a steamship could not cross the Atlantic. Like Goethe's Mephistopheles, our wise professor's forte is to "stets verneinen." Thomas Didymus is, to use his own jargon, his prototype. Let him learn that if he will but cease to believe in the infallibility of his own methods, and will look to the East, from which all great movements come, he will find there a school of philosophers and of savants who, working on different lines to his own, are many thousand years ahead of him in all the essentials of knowledge.

(THE END.)

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NOT TO BE SNUBBED.

Saluted His Fashionable Friend While Coming From Work.

Circumstances forced James Keith to leave school and earn his living before he was sixteen years old. Like many another boy, he had no bent toward any particular trade, and so took the first job that offered. That happened to be with a tinsmith; and he became an expert workman. He was pretty well satisfied with his job and with the money he made at it, and he saw no reason why he should think any the less of himself because the useful work he did obliged him to soil his hands and sometimes his face.

One evening as Keith, begrimed with dust and soot, the result of a day's hard work on a hot roof, was going home, he met Mrs. Landon, an old friend of the family. Mrs. London had always liked Jim; for she honestly admired his cheerful spirit, his sturdy character, and his affectionate devotion to his widowed mother.

This afternoon, however, she had been calling upon some of her fashionable acquaintances who lived not far from Keith's home, and had unfortunately absorbed a little of the spirit that prevailed among them. It may be that Jim was a little dirtier than usual; perhaps Mrs. Landon feared that her new friends would not understand if they should see her speaking to this sooty young workman. At any rate, as he approached, she tried to avoid his eye.

But Jim felt himself quite as worthy of respect in his working clothes as in his Sunday suit. Nor had he any intention of passing an old friend of the family without greeting her. And so as he passed Mrs. Landon he took off his hat, and said, good-naturedly, "Good evening, Mrs. Landon! It's the same old Jim under all this dirt!"

Explanation.

"The 'H' is silent in so many English words."

"Maybe that is why the English drop it so often."

STRANGE CLUBS.

The Most Infamous and Famous Found in London.

Perhaps one of the most eccentric clubs now in existence is the Black Bean Club in London. The membership of this select community is strictly limited to 40 persons, each member paying an entrance fee of £10 and an annual subscription of £10.

The club assembles once a year, and at these annual meetings a bag is passed around containing 39 white beans and one black bean. The member who draws the black bean is bound by the rules to get married during the ensuing twelve months, the committee undertaking to furnish a house for him and to defray the expenses of his wedding and a honeymoon. Before the meeting is dissolved, each of the remaining 39 members has solemnly to swear that he will remain single until the date agreed upon for the next lottery.

And then, again, there is the Sighing Club, an institution founded solely for the benefit of love swains. Silence is strictly enjoined at all meetings, and the members who sit in solemn conclave, each holding a piece of ribbon, a lock of hair, or some possession of his beloved, are required to sigh at least five times within a quarter of an hour under penalty of a fine.

Suicide clubs have been comparatively common. The Man Killing Club, however, was a London institution somewhat out of the ordinary, membership being confined to persons who had slain opponents at duels. On guest nights a separate table was reserved for visitors, who had to be friends of members and to have drawn, at any rate once, an adversary's blood.

But of all the curious clubs of bygone times perhaps the most famous, or rather infamous, was the Abduction Club. This was started in 1776 by a number of young Irish bloods, who banded together to arrange for themselves forced marriages with wealthy heiresses, each member promising to assist the others.

Originating, no doubt, from a joking spirit, the idea soon developed into an accomplished fact. But when in April, 1779, two young men, named respectively Gerald Byrne and James Strange Villard, forcibly removed from the home and married the two daughters of a wealthy landowner in Waterford, the government deemed the time had come for interference.

So abduction was made a capital offense and guilty members of the club punished accordingly.

Another celebrated club that was started, but did not last, was also in London, where the members were to meet once in three months solely for the purpose of dining backwards. That is to say, the dinner began with cigars, coffee and liquors, and finished up with sherry and oysters. One such repast, however, seemed to prove quite sufficient for all the members, and on the morning after the inauguration banquet the club was informally disbanded.

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A novel experiment is that of growing two hyacinth bulbs together. Two bulbs are selected which are known to flower about the same time, although in other respects the more diverse they are the better. Each is cut from the crown to the base with a sharp knife in such a way that the central shoot is exposed, but not injured. The two larger portions of the bulbs are then tied together, the cut portions facing one another. The double bulb is then potted in the usual way. If all has gone well, a single stem comes up, while the flower may be blue on one side and pink on the other, according to the colors of the bulbs. The result is highly mystifying to gardeners who are not in the know. The experiment is often carried out by the Dutch growers, and rarely fails, if carefully executed.

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