

## CHAPTER XIV

### BLACK MAGIC

#### I

PEOPLE would often tell me that I should do something about the ghosts. It was an easy thing to say. But, what was I to do? Certainly, a man had come to lay the ghost in my Regent Street flat—but that was long ago and I no longer even remembered his name. And, I remembered that, after being laid the spectre had returned once again, and that visitation had been worse than all his previous ones combined. I was not eager to repeat such an experience.

And I was busy with the farm and My Lady's domain and had little time to devote to hauntings. I had become accustomed to the ghosts and they no longer worried me, except in that they frightened my friends away. That was annoying.

I knew they were there, and accepted them as something I did not understand and could not control.

I doubt that I should ever have taken any active interest in them if it had not been for Denis Conan-Doyle.

One day he came over to show me a new racing car he had bought. After inspecting his speed-king, we wandered round the farm and then I mentioned some of the mysterious things that had happened.

"But this is serious, old boy," he said when I related the episode of the heat-wave. "You are up

against something bigger than you think. These haunts are obviously evil."

"They are not exactly nice ones," I admitted, "but they can't hurt me."

"Strange things have happened. You should treat this seriously."

I laughed, but I saw that he was grave and did not agree with my flippant attitude.

"I don't like to think of you being here alone," he said after a while. "I know a chap I would like to bring down, he is the very man to tackle this business. Unfortunately he starts for the South Sea Isles in a few days' time as one of the crew on a sailing boat—he does that sort of thing. But I'll try and get into touch with him to-night."

I hoped he would, for I liked the sound of this man . . .

Knowing that Denis works quickly I was not surprised when he telephoned me on the following afternoon to say he was bringing his brother Adrian over for the night, also the man he had mentioned, as the intended cruise had been postponed. They arrived for dinner, and thus I met Ronald Kaulback, who was shortly afterwards to make his name as an explorer.

After dinner Ron said he would like to roam round the house alone. This he did, while the rest of us remained in the big room. He returned looking somewhat tired, and on being asked what he thought of the place, said:

"I must confess to having felt the most intense fear I have ever known."

"Where?" I asked.

It had been in the room where I had always felt the strange atmosphere.

Adrian went to investigate, leaving Denis and me sitting on a sofa at one side of the fireplace, while Ron sat on another opposite. I was talking so



intently to Denis that I did not notice that Ron was not joining in the conversation, until Denis suddenly interrupted me by saying :

"Look at Ron!"

I looked. He was lying back on the sofa. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing in an extraordinary way, as though gasping for breath.

"Wake up, Ron!" said Denis, but he did not appear to hear.

"Something is wrong!" Denis ejaculated, and jumping up he seized Ron's hand, which he started to rub. "Hold his other hand," he added.

I did not obey. I had seen a faint shadow creeping round Ron's neck, and I rushed round the sofa and flung my weight against the space directly behind him. I put all my strength into that movement, and then it was only just enough to enable me to get my hands up to Ron's neck, pressing all the time against an invisible force. I just managed to keep my hands on him, though the weight, over me too, was terrific, and I knew I could not hold out for long. Needing every ounce of strength I possessed, I dared not even speak to Denis, who was chafing Ron's hands.

Fortunately, Adrian re-entered the room at that moment, and sensing something of what was happening, ran round to me . . . and so together we fought against a weight the origin of which we could not see, and the quality of which I can only describe as being a *solid* substance.

We broke it . . . how, I don't know. When Ron came round, he was quite unaware of anything that had happened, except that he had felt a strange tiredness creeping over him, and then had fallen asleep. One thing was certain—he had been very near to being strangled.

Denis was worried that the "force" should have set itself so deliberately against Ron, and thought I

treated the whole thing in too light a manner. I now realise that he was right, but at the time it was all so exciting that I could not help being thrilled by such unusual events.

The following morning, Denis, Adrian and Ron departed, but before they left I asked Ron if he would come again, and stay a few days. I somehow felt that if anyone could help to unravel the mystery it was he. Besides, I liked the tall young man, with his very frank eyes. He gave me a clear look, and said :

"Yes—I want to. You are not going to stay here alone. I don't know when my boat leaves—at present it is indefinite—but till it does, you can count on me, and whatever happens, I will see you through. You understand?"

I nodded. I *did* understand. I knew that he was the type of man who, when once his hand was on the plough, would not leave go till the field was ready for sowing.

"I must go up to town now," he continued, "but I'll be back to-morrow."

But he telephoned me from London that afternoon, telling me to meet him at Tunbridge Wells that same evening. He had galloped through all his business, so as to return to Branden before dark . . . That is like Ron.

## II

For some weeks Ron and I were alone at Branden—alone with the elementals. Ron had much strange knowledge and soon I became very interested in the haunt. There was something much bigger connected with it than I had at first imagined—something that needed to be unravelled. No longer did I try to ignore the strange happenings, on the contrary I endeavoured to encourage them.

The ghosts now became very active, and would



appear in far more definite shape than they had previously done. We grew to know several of them by sight—there seemed to be a considerable number, of different shapes and substance. Of the many shadowy forms that haunted the house, there were three that often appeared in human guise. The little old woman dressed in grey frequently wandered around; she always seemed to be searching for something—what it was I could not tell. The foul creature, Tarver, visited us several times. Then there was another man I have not yet mentioned; he was short, and thickly built, and though very ugly to look at he never caused me any repulsion. I felt sorry for him, as he always looked very unhappy. This man's name, we later discovered, had been Hunter.

There was also the strangest of cats, which we saw very often. It had a small black body, and furry wings, which were not noticeable when it was on the ground, but only when it jumped out of the wall, as it frequently did. This cat was very busy. It ran all over the house, and caused a lot of fear, for it was impossible to touch it. A temporary servant I engaged, to whom I naturally said nothing about ghosts, told me he was often awakened by a cat coming through his window and jumping on the bed. At first he had thought it was one of my cats, until he found that when he tried to touch it the animal vanished. That frightened him considerably. I thought it best to admit that I knew the cat by sight, and told him it could not hurt him—but this did not seem to reassure him. What this cat was, or ever had been, is a mystery. It certainly made strange noises, that can best be described as a mixture of purring and flapping of wings.

The shadowy form continued to appear, in the big room, about seven o'clock when anything very unusual was to occur later in the night—it now became a frequent visitor. Ron and I invariably saw it simul-

taneously. To eliminate the possibility of being influenced by imagination, we arranged not to mention anything either of us saw or heard until it had passed. By this means, we knew we had both seen or heard it without any suggestion from the other. But most of the things that happened were so startling that there was no question of their authenticity.

It would take too long to tell of all the strange things that happened, for they were numerous and often similar in nature. Several mediums and well-known spiritualists visited us, and though unknown to one another, each told the same story—that we were dealing with the aftermath of black magic.

Thus I met Mrs. C.

I had previously pictured mediums as strange, fantastic creatures, clad in odd raiment. It was therefore a great surprise to meet a very pretty and well-dressed woman. Besides beauty she has the greater gift—charm. A *joie de vivre* and spontaneous gaiety makes life good fun when in her company. Yet despite her natural manner she has a sense that few possess and can tune into things that are incomprehensible to the average.

She had visited houses haunted in much the same manner as mine in France, where black magic and Satanism have been more widely practised than in England. She said that Branden was haunted by the evil spirits of those who at one time had practised black magic there, as well as the souls of their victims who had been earth-bound after death: the evil influence around the place had brought disaster to many who had lived there before me—which I later discovered was true.

The evil spirits, I learned, resented my coming, as they wanted the place where they had perpetrated their nefarious practices to themselves; the elements had now concentrated all their forces on trying to make me depart; things would get worse, and if I



left the house would never again be fit for human habitation, but if I stayed I should win through and the evil influences would depart within five months. And this came true.

She warned me that I was facing dangerous forces and would have to keep absolute control of myself; be prepared for the unexpected during the forthcoming months, and never give way to fear—a warning that was to stand me in good stead.

And then she made an extraordinary statement: “You had to come here,” she said; “it was ordained by higher forces. However much you had resisted, you would have had to come in the end. It is for you to drive these influences away.”

And I remembered how, in the house-hunting days, I had resolutely refused to see the place called Branden, and then had fallen on it by chance and immediately known that the place was to be mine. I recalled how my friends had tried to put me off buying it, and how I had turned a deaf ear to their advice. Yes! it certainly seemed that some force had brought me to the house that had so long stood empty.

Mrs. C. told me many strange things about Branden—and from her statements I was afterwards able to trace a lot of its history. When one has a clue to work on it is easy to trace the past. And all the things she foretold about the future (and she said a great deal more than I have recorded) came to pass just as she prophesied.

### III

From Mrs. C. I gleaned much knowledge of the ancient rituals of black magic, and with this knowledge was able to explain many curious geographical features at Branden—the foul-smelling moat, for instance . . . but of this I will tell you later.

The lie of water is an important feature in black



MAGIC WATER



magic rituals ; circles, squares and triangles are also used with intent. In the old days, a house arranged for black magic would face squarely towards the four points of the compass, with magic circles and water guarding it on each side. The south side needed the most protection, for in all rituals the magician faced north, with his back to the south.

Magic circles guarded the entrances and the place where sacrifices were made and rituals held. These circles were made of human bones—usually those of babies. When we lifted the floor at a spot that Mrs. C. marked, we found fragments of very small bones that could only have been those of a baby.

## IV

It was good to know the cause of the strange manifestations in the house. To know that they were going to get worse, and that I had to disperse them by putting up with their antics (and to what lengths might they not go ?), was not so good. It was a great comfort to know that Mrs. C. would support me, and that if matters became very difficult I could always ring her up.

I was glad that Ronald Kaulback was with me, for those days became nerve-racking times. Now that I knew more about the ghosts, I felt I must be ever on the alert, for I wondered if, now they were appearing so frequently, they might not do some mischief.

But the day too quickly came when Ron had to depart. His cruise had been cancelled, so, ever anxious for strenuous adventure, he had arranged to explore unknown Thibet with Kingdon Ward. But he has since told of his adventures in *Thibetan Trek*.

I was sorry, very sorry, to lose him. And now I was alone with the spectres of Branden.

But before I tell you more of these uncanny experiences and how I learnt the meaning of fear and finally



came face to face with Tarver, I will revert to the happenings on the land. For ghosts or no ghosts the restoration of My Lady's realm continued, and this is the story of that restoration and not purely a ghost tale.

## CHAPTER XV

## MY BIRDS

## I

THE chicken-house had been set up away by the wood. I hoped that the hens would keep to their sylvan domain, for no atom of my affections ever falls upon chickens—except when they are cooked—and the last thing I wanted was to have them cackling and pecking around the house.

I dislike hens—chicks, pullets, cocks, cockerels, and all of the tribe. They are annoying, greedy, and always in the way. But I did not mind their filling the wood with cock and hen noises, scratching up the leaf-mould, or roosting in the trees, provided that they gave me eggs in return. But . . . would they do any of these things? Not they! As soon as they were let out of their run they made a straight line for the house, walking in and out of it as if they owned the place. They scratched trenches all round the plants, presumably to examine the roots . . . faced impending death from the cars with callous sang-froid . . . in fact, they were utterly impossible.

Eventually we ran wire-netting round the barn field, but even this formidable barrier did not greatly hinder their oncoming march, for, finding their usual passage barred, they strutted back over the meadow, went through the wood they had so long refused to enter, and came down the lane, with much clucking and clacking, to appear once more upon the doorstep.

I gave it up. I could not battle with them any more, and retired from the fray. They had won the war, and what is more, they have never ceased to tell me of