

CASE XV

The White Lady

Of Rownam Avenue, Near Stirling

By Elliott O'Donnell

Like most European countries, Scotland claims its share of phantasms in the form of "White Ladies." According to Mr. Ingram, in his *Haunted Houses and Family Legends*, the ruins of the mansion of Woodhouselee are haunted by a woman in white, presumably (though, personally, I think otherwise) the ghost of Lady Hamilton of Bothwellhaugh. This unfortunate lady, together with her baby, was—during the temporary absence of her husband—stripped naked and turned out of doors on a bitterly cold night, by a favourite of the Regent Murray. As a result of this inhuman conduct the child died, and its mother, with the corpse in her arms, was discovered in the morning raving mad. Another instance of this particular form of apparition is to be found in Sir Walter Scott's "White Lady of Avenel," and there are endless others, both in reality and fiction.

Some years ago, when I was putting up at a friend's house in Edinburgh, I was introduced to a man who had had several experiences with ghosts, and had, therefore, been especially asked to meet me. After we had talked together for some time, he related the following adventure which had befallen him, in his childhood, in Rownam avenue (the seat of Sir E. C.), near Stirling:—I was always a lover of nature, he began, and my earliest reminiscences are associated with solitary rambles through the fields, dells, and copses surrounding my home. I lived within a stone's-throw of the property of old Sir E. C., who has long gone to rest—God bless his soul! And I think it needs blessing, for if there was any truth in local gossip (and it is said, I think truly, that "There is never any smoke without fire") he had lived a very queer life. Indeed, he was held in such universal awe and abhorrence that we used to fly at his approach, and never spoke of him amongst ourselves saving in such terms as "Auld dour crab," or "The laird deil."

Rownam Manor House, where he lived, was a fine specimen of sixteenth-century architecture, and had it been called a castle would have merited the appellation far more than many of the buildings in Scotland that bear that name. It was approached by a long avenue of trees—gigantic elms, oaks, and beeches, that, uniting their branches overhead in summertime, formed an effectual barrier to the sun's rays. This avenue had an irresistible attraction for me. It literally swarmed with rabbits and squirrels, and many are the times I have trespassed there to watch them. I had a very secure hiding-place in the hollow of an old oak, where I have often been secreted while Sir E. C. and his keepers, without casting a glance in my direction, passed unsuspectingly by, vowing all sorts of vengeance against trespassers.

Of course, I had to be very careful how I got there, for the grounds were well patrolled, and Sir E. C. had sworn to prosecute anyone he caught walking in them without his permission. Had Sir B. C. caught me, I should, doubtless, have been treated with the utmost severity, since he and my father were the most bitter opponents politically, and for that reason, unreasonable though it be, never lost an opportunity of insulting one another. My father, a strong Radical, was opposed to all big landed proprietors, and consequently winked his eye at my trespassings; but I think nothing would really have pleased him better than to have seen me brought to book by Sir B. C., since in my defence he would have had an opportunity of appealing to the passions of the local

people, who were all Radicals, and of incensing them still further against the principles of feudalism.

But to continue. I had often heard it rumoured in the village that Rownam avenue was haunted, and that the apparition was a lady in white, and no other than Sir B. C.'s wife, whose death at a very early age had been hastened, if not entirely accounted for, by her husband's harsh treatment. Whether Sir B. C. was really as black as he was painted I have never been able to ascertain; the intense animosity with which we all regarded him, made us believe anything ill of him, and we were quite ready to attribute all the alleged hauntings in the neighbourhood to his past misdeeds. I believe my family, with scarcely an exception, believed in ghosts; anyhow, the subject of ghosts was so often discussed in my hearing that I became possessed of an ungovernable curiosity to see one. If only "The White Lady" would appear in the daytime, I thought, I should have no difficulty in satisfying this curiosity, but unfortunately she did not appear till night—in fact, not until long after boys of my age had been ruthlessly ordered off to bed. I did not quite like the idea of stealing out of the house at dead of night and going alone to see the ghost, so I suggested to my schoolfellow that he should also break loose one night and accompany me to Rownam to see "The White Lady." It was, however, of no use. Much as he would have liked to have seen a ghost in broad daylight, it was quite another matter at night, to say nothing of running the risk of being caught trespassing by that inveterate enemy, Sir E. C.

At length, finding that neither persuasion, bribery, nor taunts of cowardice had any effect on my schoolfellow, who could not decide which appearance would be the more appalling, for,—he assured me I should be certain to encounter either one or the other—the White Lady, or the Laird Deil,—I gave up all further effort to induce him to accompany me, and made up my mind to go to Rownam avenue alone.

Biding my opportunity, and waiting till my father was safely out of the way,—on a visit to Greenock, where some business transaction would oblige him to remain for some days,—I climbed out of my bedroom window, when I deemed the rest of the household to be sound asleep, scudded swiftly across the fields, and, making short work of the lofty wall that formed the southernmost boundary of the Rownam estates, quickly made my way to the avenue. It was an ideal Sunday night in August, and it seemed as if all nature participated in the Sabbath abstraction from noise and work. Hardly a sound broke the exquisite silence of the woods. At times, overcome with the delightful sensation of freedom, I paused, and, raising my eyes to the starry heavens, drank in huge draughts of the pure country air, tainted only with the sweet smell of newly mown hay, and the scent of summer flowers. I became intoxicated, delirious, and in transports of joy threw myself on the soft mossy ground, and, baring my throat and chest, bathed myself in the moonbeams' kisses. Then, picking myself slowly up, I performed the maddest capers, and, finally sobering down, continued my course. Every now and again fancying I detected the stealthy footsteps of a keeper, I hid behind a tree, where I remained till I was quite assured I had been mistaken, and that no one was about. How long I dallied I do not know, but it must have been fully one o'clock before I arrived at the outskirts of the avenue, and, advancing eagerly, ensconced myself in my favourite sanctuary, the hollow oak. All was hushed and motionless, and, as I gazed into the gloom, I became conscious, for the first time in my life, of a sensation of eeriness. The arched canopy of foliage overhead was strongly suggestive of a funeral pall; not a glimmer of moonlight penetrated through it; and all beneath seemed to me to be buried in the silence and blackness of the grave.

The loneliness got on my nerves; at first I grew afraid, on^ly afraid, and then my fears turned into a panic, a wild, mad panic, consisting in the one desire to get where there were human

beings—creatures I knew and understood. With this end in view I emerged from my retreat, and was preparing to fly through the wood, when, from afar off, there suddenly came the sound of a voice, the harsh, grating voice of a man. Convinced this time that I had been discovered by a keeper, I jumped back into the tree, and, swarming up the inside of the trunk, peeped cautiously out. What I saw nearly made me jump out of my skin. Advancing along the avenue was the thing I had always longed to see, and for which I had risked so much: the mysterious, far-famed “Lady in White,”—a ghost, an actual, *bona fide* ghost! How every nerve in my body thrilled with excitement, and my heart thumped—till it seemed on the verge of bursting through my ribs! “The Lady in White!” Why, it would be the talk of the whole countryside! Some one had *really*—no hearsay evidence—seen the notorious apparition at last. How all my schoolfellows would envy me, and how bitterly they would chide themselves for being too cowardly to accompany me! I looked at her closely, and noticed that she was entirely luminous, emitting a strong phosphorescent glow like the glow of a glow-worm, saving that it was in a perpetual state of motion. She wore a quantity of white drapery swathed round her in a manner that perplexed me sorely, until I suddenly realised with a creeping of my flesh that it must be a winding-sheet, that burial accessory so often minutely described to me by the son of the village undertaker. Though interesting, I did not think it at all becoming, and would have preferred to see any other style of garment. Streaming over her neck and shoulders were thick masses of long, wavy, golden hair, which was ruffled, but only slightly ruffled, by the gentle summer breeze. Her face, though terrifying by reason of its unearthly pallor, was so beautiful, that, had not some restraining influence compelled me to remain in hiding, I would have descended from my perch to obtain a nearer view of it. Indeed, I only once caught a glimpse of her full face, for, with a persistence that was most annoying, she kept it turned from me; but in that brief second the lustre of her long, blue eyes won my very soul, and boy as I was I felt, like the hero in song, that I would, for my bonnie ghost, in very deed, “lay me doon and dee.”

Her eyes are still firmly impressed on my memory; I shall never forget them, any more than I shall forget the dainty curves of her full red lips and the snowy whiteness of her perfect teeth. Nothing, I thought, either on earth or in heaven could have been half so lovely, and I was so enraptured that it was not until she was directly beneath me that I perceived she was not alone, that walking by her side, with one arm round her waist, his face and figure illuminated with the light from her body, was Sir E. C. But how changed! Gone were the deep black scowl, the savage tightening of the jaws, and the intensely disagreeable expression that had earned for him the nickname of “The laird deil,” and in their stead I saw *love*—nothing but blind, infatuated, soul-devouring *love*—love for which no words can find an adequate description.

Throwing discretion to the wind—for my excitement and curiosity had risen to the highest pitch—I now thrust more than half my body out of the hole in the trunk. The next instant, with a cry of dismay, I pitched head first on to the ground.

It would seem that boys, like cats, cannot in ordinary circumstances be killed, and, instead of breaking my neck, I merely suffered that most immaterial injury—immaterial, at least, in my case—a temporary disendowment of the senses. On regaining the few wits I could lay claim to, I fully expected to find myself in the hands of the irate laird, who would seize me by the scruff of the neck and belabour me to pieces. Consequently, too frightened to move, I lay absolutely still with my eyes shut. But as the minutes glided by and nothing happened, I picked myself up. All was quiet and pitch dark—not a vestige of the “Lady in White”—not a vestige of Sir B. C.

It did not take me very long to get out of the wood and home. I ran all the way, and as it was still early—far too early for any of the household to be astir, I crept up to my bedroom

unobserved. But not to sleep, oh dear me, no! not to sleep, for the moment I blew the candle out and got into bed, reaction set in, and I suffered agonies of fear!

When I went to school in the morning, my equilibrium restored, and, bubbling over with excitement to tell the boys what had happened, I received another shock—before I could ejaculate a word of my experiences, I was told—told with a roar and shout that almost broke the drum of my ears, that “the auld laird deil” was dead! His body had been found stretched on the ground, a few feet from the hollow oak, in the avenue shortly after sunrise. He had died from syncope, so the doctor said, that had probably been caused by a shock—some severe mental shock.

I did not tell my companions of my night’s adventure after all. My eagerness to do so had departed when I heard of “the auld laird’s” death.