The Coombe

A Case of a Wiltshire Elemental

By Elliot O'Donnell

People are not half particular enough about new houses. So long as the soil is gravel, so long as the rooms are large and airy, the wall-papers artistic, and there's no basement, the rest does not matter; at least not as a rule. Few think of ghosts or of superphysical influences. And yet the result of such a consideration is what would probably weigh most with me in selecting a newly built house. But then, I have had disagreeable experiences, and others I know have had them too.

Let me quote, for example, what befell my old acquaintance, Fitzsimmons. Robert Fitzsimmons was for years editor of the *Daily Gossip,* but finally retired from the post owing to ill health. His doctor recommended him some quiet, restful place in the country, so he decided to migrate to Wiltshire. After scouring the county for some time, he alighted on a spot, not very far from Devizes, that attracted him immensely.

It was prettily wooded, at least he called it prettily wooded, within easy walking distance of the village of Arkabye, and about a quarter of a mile from the site of an ancient barrow that had just been removed to make way for several cottages. Fitzsimmons loved beeches, particularly copper beeches, which he noticed flourished here exceedingly, and the thought of living surrounded by these trees gave him infinite satisfaction. He finally bought a small piece of land in the coombe, getting it freehold at a ridiculously low figure, and erected a house on it, which he called "Shane Garth" after a remote ancestor.

The first month seems to have passed quite uneventfully. It was true the children, Bobbie and Jane, said they heard noises, and declared someone always came and tapped against their window after they were in bed; but Fitzsimmons attributed these disturbances to mice and bats with which the coombe was infested. One thing, however, greatly disturbed his wife and himself, and that was the naughtiness of the children. Prior to their coming to the new house they had been as good as gold and had got on extremely well together; but the change of surroundings seemed to have wrought in them a complete change of character.

They were continually getting into mischief of some sort, and hardly a day passed that they did not quarrel and fight, and always in a remarkably vindictive manner. Bobbie would creep up behind Jane, and pull her hair and pinch her, whilst Jane in revenge would break Bobbie's toys and do something nasty to him while he slept.

Then their language was so bad. They used expressions that shocked everyone in the house, and no one could say where they had picked them up. But worst of all was their cruelty to animals. The nurse came to Mrs. Fitzsimmons one morning to show her a fowl that was limping across the yard in great pain. Bobbie had pelted it with stones and broken its leg.

He was punished; but the very next day he and Jane were caught inflicting the most abominable tortures on a mouse. Jane rivalled the Chinese in the ingenuity of her cruelties. She scalded insects very slowly to death, and scandalised the village children by showing them a rabbit and sundry smaller animals which she had vivisected and skinned alive.

One does occasionally hear of epidemics of cruelty breaking out in certain districts. A year or two ago, cats came in for especially bad treatment in the neighbourhood of Red Lion Square, and the culprits, girls as well as boys, were invariably excused, it being suggested that the war had excited their naturally high spirits. I remember, too, in Cornwall, not so very Long ago, children being seized with a mania for torturing birds. They caught them with fish-hooks, and never grew tired of watching them choke and writhe and otherwise distort themselves in their death agonies. In Wales, too, there are periodical outbursts of similar passions. Some years ago a child was prosecuted in South Wales for pulling a live rabbit in half; but the magistrates acquitted the accused on the plea that it was only following the example of nearly all the other children in the district. Well, Robert Fitzsimmons wondered if his children had fallen victims to one of these epidemics, and he suggested to his wife that they should be sent away to a boarding school. To his astonishment, however, Mrs. Fitzsimmons took a more lenient view of their conduct.

"It's no use being too hard on them," she said. "I don't believe for one moment that Bobbie and Jane realise that animals can feel as we do—that human beings have not the monopoly of the nervous system. We must get a governess—someone who can explain things to them with tact and patience, and not get out of temper, like you do, Robert. The children must be treated with kindness and sympathy."

Fitzsimmons could hardly believe that it was his wife speaking; she had been such a keen champion of animals, and had boxed the ears of more than one London ragamuffin whom she had caught ill-treating a dog or cat. However, he gave way, and agreed that the children should be committed to the care of a benevolent old lady whom Mrs. Fitzsimmons knew, and who might be engaged as governess and domiciled in the house. This matter was barely settled when Mr. Merryweather, an artist friend of Robert Fitzsimmons, came to stay at Shane Garth, and it was on the evening after his arrival that Fitzsimmons first came to realise that the coombe was haunted. He had been out all day fishing, alone, his friend, Merryweather, being engaged painting a portrait of Mrs. Fitzsimmons and Jane; and the evening having well set in, he was now on his way home. Passing the site of the ancient barrow, he could see in the hollow beneath him the welcome lights of Shane Garth. He paused for a moment to refill his pipe, and then commenced to descend into the coombe. It was an exquisite night, the air warm and fragrant with the scent of newly mown hay, the moon full, and the sky one mass of scintillating stars. Fitzsimmons was enchanted. Again and again he threw back his head and drew in the air in great gulps. When halfway down the hill, however, he became aware of a sudden change; the atmosphere was no longer light and exhilarating, but dark, heavy, and oppressive.

He noticed, too, that there were strange lights and that the shadows that flickered to and fro the broad highway continually came and went, and differed, in some strangely subtle fashion, from any shadows he had ever seen before. But what attracted his attention even more was a tree—a tall tree with a trunk of the most peculiar colour. In the quick-changing light of the coombe it looked yellow—a lurid yellow streaked with black after the nature of a tiger's skin—and Fitzsimmons never remembered seeing it there before. He halted for a moment to look at it more intently, and it seemed to him to change its position. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming and looked again. Yes,

without a doubt it was nearer to the roadway, and very gradually it was getting nearer still.

Moreover, although the night was still, so still that hardly a leaf of any of the other trees quivered, its branches were in a state of the most violent agitation.

Fitzsimmons was not normally nervous, and on the subject of the superphysical he was decidedly sceptical; but he could not help admitting that it was queer, and he began to wonder whether there was not some other way of getting home. Ashamed, however, of his cowardice, he at length made up his mind to look closer at the tree, and ascertain if possible the cause of its remarkable behaviour. He advanced towards it, and it moved again. This time the moonlight threw it into such strong relief that it stood out with photographic clearness, every detail in its composition most vividly, portrayed.

What exactly he saw, Fitzsimmons has never been prevailed upon to say. All one can get out of him is "that it had the semblance to a tree, but that the semblance was quite superficial. It was in reality something quite different, and that the difference was so marked and unexpected that he was immeasurably shocked." I asked Fitzsimmons why he was shocked, and he said, "By the obscenity of the thing—by its unparalleled beastliness." He would not say any more. It took him several minutes to sum up courage to pass it, and all the while it stood close to the roadside waiting for him. Fitzsimmons had been a tolerably good athlete in his youth—he won the open hundred at school—and though well over forty, he was spare and tough, and as sound as a bell with regard to his heart and lungs. Bracing himself up, he made a sudden dash, and had passed it, by some dozen or so yards, when he heard something drop with a soft plumb, and the next minute there came the quick patter of bare feet in hot pursuit. Frightened as he was, Fitzsimmons does not think his terror was quite so great as his feeling of utter loathing and abhorrence. He felt if the thing touched him, however slightly, he would be contaminated body and soul, and would never be able to look a decent person in the face again.

Hence his sprint was terrific—faster, he thinks, than he ever did in the school Close—and he kept praying too all the while.

But the thing gained on him, and he feels certain it would have been all up with him, had not a party of cyclists suddenly appeared on the scene and scared it off. He heard it go back pattering up the coombe, and there was something about those sounds that told him more plainly than words that he had not seen the last of it, and that it would come to him again. When he entered the house he encountered Merryweather and his wife together, and he could not help noticing that they seemed on strangely familiar terms and very upset and startled at seeing him. He spoke to his wife about it afterwards, and though she vehemently denied there was any truth in his suspicions, she could not meet his gaze with her customary frankness. Merryweather was the last person on earth he would have suspected of flirting with anyone, and up to the present time Mrs. Robert Fitzsimmons had always behaved with the utmost propriety and decorum; indeed, everyone regarded her as a model wife and mother, and particular, even to prudishness.

The incident worried Fitzsimmons a great deal, and for nights he lay awake thinking about it.

The governess was the next person to experience the hauntings. Her room was a sort of attic, large and full of quaint angles, and it looked out on to the coombe. Well, one night she had gone to bed rather early, owing to a very bad headache which had been brought on by the behaviour of the children, who had been naughty with a naughtiness that could

scarcely have been surpassed in hell, and was partly undressed when her eyes suddenly became centred on the wall-paper, which had a curious dark pattern running through

She looked at the pattern, and it suddenly took the form of a tree. Now some people are in the habit of seeing faces where others see nothing. The governess belonged to the latter category. She was absolutely practical and matter-of-fact, a typical Midland farmer's daughter, and had no imagination whatever. Consequently, when she saw the tree, she at once regarded it in the light of some peculiar phenomenon, and stared at it in open-mouthed astonishment. At first it was simply a tree, a tree with a well-defined trunk and branches. Soon, however, the trunk became a vivid yellow and black, a most unpleasant, virulent yellow, and the branches seemed to move. Much alarmed, she shrank away from it and clutched hold of the bed. She afterwards declared that the tree suddenly became something quite different, something she never dare even think of, and which nothing in God's world would ever make her mention. She made one supreme effort to reach the bell, just touched it with the tips of her fingers, and then sank on the bed in a dead swoon.

She told her story next morning to Mrs. Fitzsimmons, and although asked on no account to breathe a word of it to the children, she told them too. That night she took her departure, and Mrs. Fitzsimmons refused her a character. Curious noises were now frequently heard in the house. Door handles turned and footsteps tip-toed cautiously about the hall and passages at about two o'clock in the morning.

Mrs. Fitzsimmons was the next to have a nasty experience. Going to her room one evening, when everyone else was at supper, she saw the bed valance suddenly move. Thinking it was the cat, she bent down, and was about to call "Puss," when a huge striped thing, shaped, so she thought, something like the trunk of a much gnarled tree, shot out and, rolling swiftly past her, vanished in the wainscoting. She called out, and Fitzsimmons, who came running up, found her leaning against the doorway of their room, laughing hysterically.

Two days later, on his return from another fishing expedition, he found that his wife had gone, leaving a note for him pinned to the dressing-table.

"You won't see me again," she wrote. "I'm off with Dicky Merryweather. We have discovered we love one another, and that life apart would be simply unendurable. Take care of the children, and try and make them forget me. Get them away from here, if you possibly can. I attribute everything—my changed feelings towards you, and Bobbie and Jane's naughtiness—to the presence of that beastly thing."

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Of course it was a terrible blow to Fitzsimmons, and he told me that if it had not been for the children he would have committed suicide there and then. He was devotedly attached to his wife, and the thought that she no longer cared for him made him yearn to die.

However, Bobbie and Jane were dependent on him, and for their sakes he determined to go on living.

A week passed—to Fitzsimmons the saddest and dreariest of his life—and he once again came tramping home in the twilight.

Not troubling now whether he saw the ghost or not, for there was no one to care whether he was good or bad, or what became of him, he slouched through the coombe

with his long stride more marked and apparent than usual. On nearing the house and noticing that there was no bright light, such as he had been accustomed to in any of the front windows, but only the feeble flare of the oil lamp over the front door, a terrible feeling of loneliness came over him. He let himself in. The hall was in semi-darkness, and he could hear no sounds from the kitchen. He could see a glimmer of light, however, issuing from under the kitchen door, and he promptly steered for it. The cook, Agatha, was sitting in front of the fire, reading a sixpenny novel.

"Why is the house in darkness?" Fitzsimmons asked angrily. "Surely it is dinner-time."

The cook yawned, and looking up at Fitzsimmons, said: "It's not my place to light up. It's Rosalie's."

"Where is Rosalie?" Fitzsimmons demanded.

"I don't know," the cook replied. "I can't be expected to know everything. The cooking's enough for me—at least for the wages I get. Rosalie's been gone somewhere for the last two hours. I haven't seen or heard anything of her since tea."

"And the children?" Fitzsimmons inquired.

"Oh, the children's all right," the cook answered—"at least I suppose so; and, you bet, they'd have let me know fast enough if they hadn't been. I don't know which of the two hollers loudest."

"Well, get my supper, for mercy's sake, for I'm famishing," Fitzsimmons said; and he stalked back again into the darkness.

After groping about the hall for some time and knocking over a good few things, he at length put his hands on a match-box, and lighting a candle made straight for the nursery. The children had got into bed partially undressed, and were sound asleep, with their heads well buried under the bedclothes. Fitzsimmons contrived to uncover their faces without waking them, and kissing them both lightly on the forehead, he left them and went downstairs to his study. Here he drew up a chair close to the fire and, throwing himself into it, prepared to wait till the gong sounded for supper. A slight noise in the room made him look round. Across the window recess, from which the sound apparently came, a pair of heavy red curtains were tightly drawn. Fitzsimmons rather wondered at this, because Rosalie did not usually draw the curtains before she lighted up; so he was still looking at them and wondering, when they were suddenly shaken so violently that the i-petal rings made a loud rattling and jarring on the brass pole to which they were attached. Fitzsimmons watched in breathless anticipation. Every second he expected to see the curtains part and some ghoulish face peering out at him. Drawn curtains so often suggest lurking honors of that description. Instead, however, the curtains only grew more and more agitated, shaking violently as if they had the agile. Then, all of a sudden, they were still. Fitzsimmons rose and was about to look behind them, when they started trembling again, and the one nearest the fireplace began to bulge out in the middle. Fitz-simmons stared at it with a sickening sense of fore-boding. At first it had no definite form, but, very gradually, it assumed a shape, the shape he felt it would, and moved nearer him. For some seconds he was too overcome with horror to do anything, but his recollections of what it had looked like in the coombe that night, and his utter detestation of it, increased his fear, and in a frenzy of rage he snatched up a revolver from the mantelpiece and fired at it. Fitzsimmons thinks it was the bullet that made it suddenly collapse; but I am inclined to think it was the sound of the report—as sound undoubtedly does, at times, bring about dematerialisation. There are, I think, certain sounds that

generate vibrations in the air favourable to the manifestation of spirits, and other sounds that create vibratory motion destructive to the composition of what are termed ghosts. And here was an instance of the latter. Fitzsimmons waited for a few minutes, until he felt sure the thing was gone altogether, entirely quit of the premises, and then, revolver in hand, pulled aside the curtains.

The next moment he reeled back, stupefied with horror. Lying at full length on the floor, her white face turned towards him, with a hideous grin of agony on her lips, was Rosalie.

"Good God!" Fitzsimmons said to himself. "Good God! I've killed her. What in Heaven's name can I do?"

He deliberated shooting himself; and then the cries of the children, who had been wakened by the noise, reminding him of his duties to them, he grew calmer, and telephoned at once for the nearest doctor. The latter, happening to be at home, was speedily on the spot.

"You say you shot her," he remarked to Fitzsimmons, after he had examined the body very carefully. "You must be dreaming, sir. There's not the slightest sign of any bullet. Moreover, the girl's been dead at least two hours. From the look of her, I should say she died from strychnine poisoning."

The doctor was right. The girl's death was due to strychnine, and from the bottle that was found in her possession and a message she scribbled on the study wall, there is no doubt whatever she committed suicide. "I was a nice enough girl till I came here," she wrote, "but it's the coombe that's done it. Mother warned me against it. Coombes make everyone bad."

After this, Fitzsimmons decided to clear out. Indeed, he could hardly have done otherwise, for Shane Garth was now placed under a rigorous ban. Agatha left—she did not even wait till the morning, but cleared out the same night—and after that it was impossible to get a woman to come in, even for the day. Consequently, Fitzsimmons had not only to cook and look after the children, but to do all the packing as well. At last, however, it was all over, and the carriage stood at the door, waiting to take him and the children to the station. As he came downstairs, followed by Bobbie and Jane, someone, he fancied, called his name. He turned, and Bobbie and Jane turned too.

Bending over the balustrades of the top landing, and looking just like she had done in her lifetime, save perhaps for the excessive pallor of her cheeks, and a curious expression of fear and entreaty in her eyes, was Rosalie.

She faded away as they stared, and close beside the spot where she had stood, they saw the dim and shadowy outline of a gnarled tree.