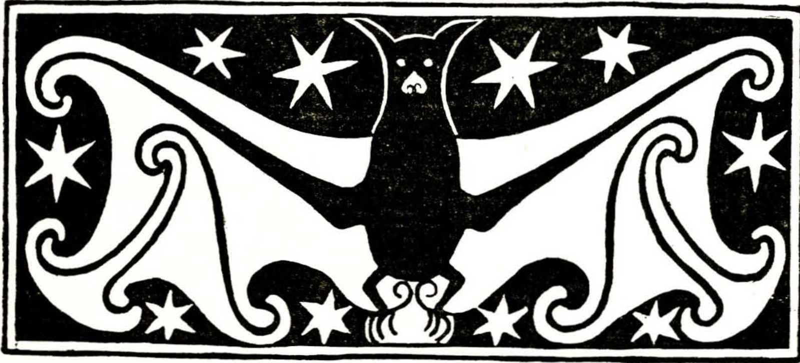

COBWEB HALL

I KNOW an old house, situated in the Merse of Berwickshire, which from its deserted and neglected air has received the name of Cobweb Hall. This house has a story. Indeed, though efforts have repeatedly been made to let or to sell it, these have long since been abandoned as useless, for the building seems never to have recovered from the injury inflicted on its reputation by a series of events which took place a good many years ago. The house is not haunted, but it is shunned, which perhaps is worse. Until it was allowed to fall into disrepair, 'Cobweb Hall' must have been a desirable residence enough. It is commodious, and not without pretension to architectural dignity, in the form of castellated work over the front. As is shown by its name, it takes rank as a building above the manses and the better sort of farm-houses, and among the 'halls.' The red-berried barberry plant now pushes up strongly against the white 'harl,' or rough-cast, of its walls; and round about it there is a dark neglected shrubbery, originally laid out with box-edged walks and planted with laurels and with tufts of the old-fashioned butcher's broom, but now intersected by beaten tracks where tracks have no right to be, and defaced with little circular hollows, the work of hens. Here, in early spring, the yellow

aconite flourishes, in the shade under the trees. There is a bottle-green flaw in the out-house window-pane, and one notices that the back door seems to be the only one which has been used this many a day; but there is little or nothing else to catch the eye outside. However, if you raise yourself on the window-ledge, and peep through a chink between the closed shutters into the interior, you catch a glimpse of desolation indeed. The bare boards are painted over with the droppings of birds which have found their way into the house through broken windows, and which, not having always been able to find their way out again,—as a feathered corpse or two shows,—have sometimes died of starvation. And assuredly the mansion has earned its nickname of 'Cobweb Hall.' It is now supposed to be looked after by a care-taker, who seems to use it for her own purposes, and who never visits it except by daylight. Adjoining the little shrubbery there is a cornfield, and a mile or two away, on much lower ground, a sea-board village. It is said that this village was once famed for the smuggling enterprise of its inhabitants, and that its shaggy-locked outlandish headmen would sometimes meet together in the ale-house at night with deeds of violence in their pipes, and murder in their cups. But this is by the way.

Long ago things were very different in the house. Carpets then covered the floors, the hearths were warm, smoke rose from the chimneys, and thrice a day a comforting smell of cooking filled the kitchen. 'Cobweb Hall'—then known by a very different name—was the abode of Miss Clinkscales, the only daughter of the writer and usurer of that name, who had made a pile of money by his business in the neighbouring county town. For a time, after her father's death, Miss Clinkscales had kept house for her brother—who had bought landed property in the county with a part of the handsome fortune which he had inherited. And when, somewhat late in life, this brother married, she had preferred living on in the country to moving into the county town. She was a lady of a very independent character, who would have her own way in all things,

and who was considered a little eccentric. Well, Cobweb Hall —I shall adhere to the nickname—was at that time in the market. It was in one respect a suitable enough residence for a single lady of good means, consisting as it did of a first-rate house, and having only a modicum of land attached to it. Miss Clinkscales bought it, and took up her abode in it, carrying her various theories strenuously into practice in her daily life.

At this time she was in the prime of life, and did not suffer from the solitariness of her dwelling; for, though a slight tendency to parsimoniousness (as was said) prevented her receiving visitors to stay with her, she received numerous callers, and, being of an active disposition, she was able to get about as she pleased. But when, with the lapse of years, she had become old and crippled by rheumatism, it was different. Then her visitors would often advise her to move into the town. (She had some very assiduous visitors, whose attentions she attributed to the fact that she was old, rich, and heirless.) They said it would be so much more cheerful for her there, that she would be within easier reach of a doctor, and so on. But Miss Clinkscales had systematically throughout life regarded advice as an impertinence, and her native wilfulness, or strength of character, had not shared in the decline of her physical powers. She answered drily enough that she never wearied when she was alone.

'But do you think it is safe? Are you not afraid at nights in this big house all by yourself?'

The idea latent in the interlocutor's mind was the fact—well known in the neighbourhood—that the old lady kept a large sum of money in the house, a distrust of banks being one of her crotchets. But she was not to be drawn. She merely replied, without testifying to the smallest gratitude for the solicitude displayed on her account:

'Oh, don't distress yourself! Nobody would harm an old body like me: and, besides, I have Weir to protect me.'

Machell Weir was Miss Clinkscales' manservant. He had been with her for a good many years, and she had the greatest confidence in him. Some people thought this confidence mis-

placed, and ventured to hint as much to the old lady, supporting their view of the case, when required to do so, with various vague tales and rumours. But Miss Clinkscales was not used to encourage interference in her private affairs. And so, with truly Scottish candour, she would reply that, though old, she was not blind; and that she believed she could distinguish as well as another between those who were genuinely devoted to her interest, and such as were officiously active in her affairs for reasons of their own. She added some sound observations upon minding one's own business, and tagged them with a scriptural quotation touching tale-bearers. It will be seen that the old maiden lady had entire confidence in her own judgment. As became the daughter of a good business man, she had made her will long ago—a will in which no mention of any of her friends' names occurred. But she saw no occasion to make this fact public; and, indeed, she considered that the ruling and bullying of a group of expectant sycophants and legacy-hunters was a legitimate pleasure, vouchsafed to her as a small compensation amid the privations of an infirm old age.

The butler merits a word of description. In person he was thin and pale. He had a soft voice and a conciliating manner. But the striking thing about him was that, though he was barely forty, his hair and his whiskers (which he wore long) were snow-white, and had been so since he was twenty. Now, a man whose appearance is marked by an incongruity of this kind goes through life, by no fault of his own, under a disadvantage. For it is apt to seem as though Nature herself were furthering duplicity in him, or else, perhaps, marking him out as a person different from others, and against whom it behoved others to be on their guard. This, perhaps, was the reason why Machell was no favourite with the world.

However, he satisfied his mistress, and that was the great thing. She liked his obsequious manner—there is no accounting for tastes—and had conceived a high opinion of his character. And, indeed, as she lived latterly confined to two rooms, perhaps it was not very difficult for the butler to keep up

appearances in regard to all that met her eye. He was singularly attentive in his inquiries for her health; he was quiet and home-keeping. And, as she had been very kind to him, she naturally believed that he cherished an affection for her. It is needless to say that this sort of two-and-two-make-four cannot always be depended on when human nature is involved in the calculation.

One night Miss Clinkscales retired to rest as usual. The next morning a maidservant on approaching her mistress's bedroom, which she had expected to find as usual in darkness, was surprised to see light under the door, and on entering discovered that the shutter of one of the windows, and, indeed, the window itself, stood open. By the light thus admitted the maid beheld a scene which appalled her. A cupboard near the bed had been forced open and ransacked, some of its contents being scattered over the floor. The bed-clothes had also been dragged from the bed, and were saturated with blood, and upon them with the throat cut lay the body of Miss Clinkscales.

On seeing this sight, the maid turned and fled shrieking from the room. Instinctively she ran for protection to the pantry. The butler was not within, nor, when the other servants, summoned by her cries, had collected around her, did he make his appearance. This was thought strange. The alarm was raised, and in due course the authorities arrived upon the scene. There was no possible room for doubt that Miss Clinkscales had been brutally murdered, and as by this time it also seemed certain that the butler had disappeared, suspicion at once attached itself to him. A search was made, but led to no practical result. The fact was, however, elicited that a large sum of money, in gold and bank-notes, had been abstracted from the cupboard in the murdered lady's room.

The police at once set to work, and took every possible measure to trace the missing man. A description of him was circulated, and a reward offered for such information as might lead to his apprehension. Inquiries were also set on foot with a view to

trace the stolen bank-notes, or to bring to light suspicious transactions in gold. Meantime all passengers embarking from the neighbouring seaport were subjected to scrutiny. All this, however, led to nothing. There was, as usual, no dearth of apparent clues and of plausible rumours. For instance, it was stated that a man answering to the description of the suspected criminal had been encountered on the high road near Cobweb Hall, in the grey of the morning following the murder. He was heavily laden, and had appeared anxious to avoid observation. Again, a story got about to the effect that an unknown man, who carried a bundle, had called for refreshment at a lonely inn upon a neighbouring moor, and that on hearing horse's hoofs approaching along the road he had left his drink untasted, shouldered his bundle, and made off. The authorities spent a good deal of time in following up these clues —time which in the end proved to have been wasted. They also made two mistaken arrests. One man also came forward of his own accord and voluntarily gave himself up as the murderer of Miss Clinkscales. He was committed: but upon inquiry his story was proved false, and he had to be liberated, leaving the police no further advanced than they had been before. In a word, the utmost efforts of the authorities remained unrewarded, and at last it almost seemed as though the butler must have melted into thin air.

During the whole of this time it would be difficult to exaggerate the excitement which prevailed in the surrounding district. The unfortunate lady had been so long and so well known in the neighbourhood that her death by murder created an immense sensation, and her funeral was the largest ever witnessed in those parts. The excitement was, of course, increased by the mysterious disappearance of the butler. He had always been disliked; and to him, of course, the popular voice unanimously and unhesitatingly attributed the authorship of the deed. Nervous women, thereupon, became unable to remain in the house alone for fear of him, and in short, for a time, the sole subjects which filled men's minds in the surrounding country

were the murder at Cobweb Hall and the efforts of the police to apprehend the murderer. From far and wide people flocked to visit the scene of the murder, the number of visitors being especially large on Sundays; and wherever two persons met, the chances of the butler's capture formed the topic of conversation.

At last, however, the excitement began to wear itself out. When a fortnight and more had passed, it seemed that the prospects of the murderer's being taken were few. The public accordingly blamed the authorities for having allowed him to slip through their fingers, and began to return to their ordinary placid existence. About this time, however, an incident occurred which partially revived the excitement.

The women-servants employed by the late Miss Clinkscales still remained at the Hall, in charge of the house. Late one night, one of these, a young girl, entered the kitchen where her fellow-servants were seated, deadly pale, and in a fainting condition, and gasped out that she had seen the butler's ghost in the shrubbery. There were two male visitors in the kitchen at the time, keeping the women company. Without waiting to hear more, these men rose, took a lantern, and sallied forth together; nor did they return until they had thoroughly beaten every bush in the grounds. They discovered nothing. In the meantime it had been elicited from the terrified girl that, in returning through the shrubs from a stolen interview with a sweetheart close at hand, she had suddenly beheld the white face of the butler peering up at her, as it seemed from the ground. This extraordinary statement was canvassed at great length. But as it was well known that the girl's nerves—never of the strongest—had been much shaken by the recent terrible occurrence, people generally agreed in the end that she had been the victim of a delusion.

Time passed on. The murder had been committed in summer, and the autumn now arrived. The harvest had begun, and in due course it came to the turn of the field adjoining the shrubbery at Cobweb Hall to be harvested. It had been sown

with beans. Accordingly the rigs were duly opened out, and a mixed party of men and women 'shearers' assembled to execute the work. The day was fine, but there were not wanting indications that the weather was about to break; and so the farmer, when he visited the field at mid-day, impressed upon his workers the necessity of getting on with the work as quickly as possible. Consequently when labour was resumed after the dinner-hour, at the suggestion of the steward, what is locally known as a 'kemp,' or strife, was inaugurated. That is to say that the ground and the strength of reapers were alike equally divided, a portion of ground was assigned to each band of reapers, and a race was started which should get its task completed first. Beneath the rays of a vertical sun, shining in a cloudless sky, the reapers set to their work with a will. The field was a large one, the season had been fine, and the crop was heavy. They toiled all the afternoon. Among the toilers at one side of the field was a girl employed in binding. Happening to stand erect, to straighten her back, in the interval of tying two sheaves, this girl observed the beanstalks at some distance in front of her shaken, as though a dog were running among them. There was no dog that she knew of in the field; still there was nothing very surprising in what she saw, and she made no remark upon it at the time. The strife continued. In time only a comparatively narrow strip of the crop remained standing. The race promised to be a close one, and either party began to strain every nerve to win. Again the girl saw something which puzzled her. As the man to whom she was attached as binder gathered an armful of beanstalks towards him, preparatory to severing them with his sickle, it seemed to her that his action laid bare a part of something which appeared to be lurking in concealment. As swift as light this something was withdrawn into the covert of the standing beans. The binder could almost have sworn that it was a man's foot and leg. But this was surely impossible! The dazedness resulting from the heat, from stooping, and from prolonged monotonous exertion,

she concluded, must have deceived her. Besides, this was no time for idle words; so she told herself that it must have been some beast that she had seen, and again she said nothing aloud.

And now but one double ridge remained to reap. The rival parties took opposite ends of the field, and then began to draw eagerly towards each other, laying the beans low before them as if for life itself. All around them the field was cleared, and the sheaves tied with 'whippies' neatly set up, in stooks of twelve, 'toward the mid-day sun,' as the reapers say. A glorious afternoon's work had been accomplished, and the farmer who had been watching from a distance now came forward to see the last stalks levelled with the ground, and to compliment his workers.

'Hillo!' cried he, 'what have we here?'

And then, plunging his arm into the midst of a forest of beans a few yards square, he dragged out of it, by the trouser-leg, into view of the astonished labourers, the form of the miserable butler, shrieking like a wild animal, feebly resisting, and trying to hide his face in the ground. The workmen had been too much absorbed in their work to notice him before. And the reason why he had allowed himself to be captured became apparent when it was discovered that one of his legs was broken.

Whilst he was in prison awaiting execution, the murderer—who for a man in his station of life was an excellent scholar—wrote a confession. This document was printed as a pamphlet, and sold for a penny. It had an immense circulation at the time, but is now extremely rare; and from a copy of it in my possession a number of the details incorporated in this narrative have been drawn. It is certainly a curious composition—written with some pretence of style, and abundantly besprinkled with religious sentiments. A fatuous vanity, which would scarcely have been looked for in the author, peeps out at every turn. He seems to feel himself to be, after all is said, a sort of hero with a difference, and he tells

his tale with unction, and with a certain impudence of candour. Perhaps this excessive outspokenness may be explained as being the natural reaction after concealment; or perhaps the murderer was one of those weak characters who seem to crave for notoriety, no matter of what kind—or, shall we say—to bid for the sympathy which has been denied them in life, no matter how insanely, to the last.

The confession opens with an account of the writer's early years, and, if his story is to be believed, it is to hardships and persecutions endured in childhood and youth that the corruption of a character naturally mild and amiable are to be traced. Reading between the lines, however, I incline to judge differently. To me it seems that Machell Weir must have had rather the nature of the spoiled than of the ill-used child, for it is quite obvious that he made most excessive demands upon life: he was not by any means one to be 'thankful for small mercies.' Plenty of money, liberty, and independence—to name only a few of them—were among the things to which he thought himself by right entitled. In due course, after mature consideration, he came to the conclusion that there was only one way of obtaining these things, and with some reluctance he decided that he must have recourse to that one way. It is true that it involved the death of his mistress, but that was a mere accident for which he could not be held responsible. He expressly tells us that he had no innate preference for injuring others. His simple aspirations were comprised in the desire to do good to himself.

But, after arriving at a decision, he still hesitated to proceed to action. Perhaps it may occur to the reader that natural compunction, together with the recollection of benefits received at the hands of his victim, may have restrained him. This does not appear. The fact seems rather to have been that Machell was an arrant coward, who (much as he might wish to do so) was unable to brace his nerve to attack even a defenceless old woman. Thus for a long time he continued to hesitate. His plans, meantime, were matured down to the

smallest detail. Time slipped on, and the old lady's health steadily declined. The butler knew from her own lips that she had mentioned him in her will. Might he not have let things take their course, one asks? Apparently not. For some reason or other—perhaps because he did not quite wish after all that Death should rob him of his prey—considerations such as are mentioned above seem to have weighed with him as incentives rather than as deterrents. In the meantime he had discovered that courage, like inspiration, is among the things which may be found in a bottle. The next paragraph, which is curious, I quote word for word from the confession.

'At last, one night, it seemed to me—I know not why—that the time to act had come. I waited till my fellow-servants had retired to rest, and all was still. Then I took a step which to others may seem unimportant, but which to me was full of meaning. I shaved. In all my many previous mental rehearsals of the crime which I now meant to commit, this had invariably been my first step; and I regarded it as a step which—once taken—left me no room for turning back. Ever since I had arrived at man's estate, my long white whiskers had been my pride. As I looked myself in the glass, I sometimes thought—I am sorry if there was anything wrong in the thought—that they gave me an air which might have become an Elder of the Church, or even a Minister. But, though it cost me something to part with them, I could not but see that such a pair of whiskers were not desirable appurtenances in a man who, for reasons of his own, might seek to avoid observation. I shaved them off; and, having done so, I swallowed a dram and slipt the razor—upon which I had put a fine edge—into my pocket. Then I began to mount the stairs.'

The stairs creaked, and to the villain's excited fancy every creak was like a pistol-shot. He began to dread discovery, and his supple brain spun lies to account for his presence on the staircase in the event of a surprise.

I willingly spare the reader the horrible details of the scene in the bedchamber. They were too much even for the murderer, and when he turned to ransack the cupboard he was scarcely in possession of his faculties. The action of his senses was uncertain, and his trembling bloody fingers bungled and blundered, refusing to obey him. At last, however, he espied his booty. He seized it; but at that very moment he heard a sound which made his blood run suddenly chill. It was a footstep deliberately advancing along the passage toward the bedroom door. Frantic with terror, he delayed no longer, but sprang to the window, threw up the sash, and flung himself out on to the gravel below. There, half stunned by his fall, he lay and listened until it became clear to him that the alarm had been a false one, the footstep an hallucination of his disturbed brain.

He would have risen to his feet; but now he found that retribution had fallen upon his wickedness indeed. He was powerless to stand upright! The bedroom was on the first floor, and in his fall from it he had broken one of his legs. The discovery overwhelmed him with despair—'as if night were to come on suddenly in the middle of the afternoon.' Flight was now out of the question, and in concealment lay his only chance of avoiding discovery. With great pain he managed to drag himself to the neighbouring field, and there, keeping himself alive by feeding upon the beans, he had lain hidden ever since the murder.

He makes a desperate attempt to excite compassion by a moving account of his sufferings during this time. The pain in his leg was never quiet for an hour together; the fear of discovery never left him. More than once, whilst he lay hid amongst the beanstalks, parties of visitors to the scene of the murder had passed within a few yards of him, and he had distinctly heard them eagerly discussing the chances of his capture. His constant terror was lest a dog should scent out his whereabouts. Then he dwells upon the agonies of privation which he endured. He durst not approach the stream

whence he drank by daylight, and thus he would often have given 'more than a hundred pounds'—for he still clung to the plunder for which he had paid so dearly—for a few drops of water. On the night when the maid had seen his ghost, he had crept out from his concealment in the hope of stealing food from the hen-troughs or the pig-sties. He winds up with an agonised appeal for mercy: 'I have already suffered the pain of more than twenty deaths: surely my crime is fully expiated, and the law has nothing to gain in depriving me of my miserable life.'

His arguments, however, were not held to be convincing, and to the general satisfaction he was duly hanged. But 'Cobweb Hall' has remained untenanted to this day.

GEORGE DOUGLAS.