

Scottish Ghost Stories

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By Elliott O'Donnell

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Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	5
Bibliography	9

Chapter 1

Several years ago, bent on revisiting Perthshire, a locality which had great attractions for me as a boy, I answered an advertisement in a popular ladies' weekly. As far as I can recollect, it was somewhat to this effect: "Comfortable home offered to a gentleman (a bachelor) at moderate terms in an elderly Highland lady's house at Pitlochry. Must be a strict teetotaller and non-smoker. F.M., Box so-and-so."

The naïveté and originality of the advertisement pleased me. The idea of obtaining as a boarder a young man combining such virtues as abstinence from alcohol and tobacco amused me vastly. And then a bachelor, too! Did she mean to make love to him herself? The sly old thing! She took care to insert the epithet "elderly," in order to avoid suspicion; and there was no doubt about it—she thirsted for matrimony. Being "tabooed" by all the men who had even as much as caught a passing glimpse of her, this was her last resource—she would entrap some unwary stranger, a man with money of course, and inveigle him into marrying her. And there rose up before me visions of a tall, angular, forty-year-old Scottish spinster, with high cheek-bones, virulent, sandy hair, and brawny arms—the sort of woman that ought not to have been a woman at all—the sort that sets all my teeth on edge. Yet it was Pitlochry, heavenly Pitlochry, and there was no one else advertising in that town. That I should suit her in every respect but the matrimonial, I did not doubt. I can pass muster in

any company as a teetotaller; I abominate tobacco (leastways it abominates me, which amounts to much about the same thing), and I am, or rather I can be, tolerably amenable, if my surroundings are not positively infernal, and there are no County Council children within shooting distance.¹

But for once my instincts were all wrong. The advertiser—a Miss Flora Macdonald of “Donald Murray House”—did *not* resemble my preconception of her in any respect. She was of medium height, and dainty build—a fairy-like creature clad in rustling silks, with wavy, white hair, bright, blue eyes, straight, delicate features, and hands, the shape and slenderness of which at once pronounced her a psychic. She greeted me with all the stately courtesy of the Old School; my portmanteau was taken upstairs by a solemn-eyed lad in the Macdonald tartan; and the tea bell rang me down to a most appetising repast of strawberries and cream, scones, and delicious buttered toast. I fell in love with my hostess—it would be sheer sacrilege to designate such a divine creature by the vulgar term of “landlady”—at once. When one’s impressions of a place are at first exalted, they are often, later on, apt to become equally abased. In this case, however, it was otherwise. My appreciation both of Miss Flora Macdonald and of her house daily increased. The food was all that could be desired, and my bedroom, sweet with the perfume of jasmine and roses, presented such a picture of dainty cleanliness, as awakened in me feelings of shame, that it should be defiled by all my dusty, travel-worn accoutrements. I flatter myself that Miss Macdonald liked me also. That she did not regard me altogether as one of the common herd was doubtless, in some degree, due to the fact that she was a Jacobite; and in a discussion on the associations of her romantic namesake, “Flora Macdonald,” with Perthshire, it leaked out that our respective ancestors had commanded battalions in Louis XIV’s far-famed Scottish and Irish Brigades. That discovery bridged gulfs. We were no longer payer and paid—we were friends—friends for life.

¹ Of this root, several varieties are imported.

A lump comes into my throat as I pen these words, for it is only a short time since I heard of her death.²

A week or so after I had settled in her home, I took, at her suggestion, a rest (and, I quite agree with her, it was a very necessary rest) from my writing, and spent the day on Loch Tay, leaving again for “Donald Murray House” at seven o’clock in the evening. It was a brilliant, moonlight night. Not a cloud in the sky, and the landscape stood out almost as clearly as in the daytime. I cycled, and after a hard but thoroughly enjoyable spell of pedalling, eventually came to a standstill on the high road, a mile or two from the first lights of Pitlochry. I halted, not through fatigue, for I was almost as fresh as when I started, but because I was entranced with the delightful atmosphere, and wanted to draw in a few really deep draughts of it before turning into bed. My halting-place was on a triangular plot of grass at the junction of four roads. I propped my machine against a hedge, and stood with my back leaning against a sign-post, and my face in the direction whence I had come. I remained in this attitude for some minutes, probably ten, and was about to remount my bicycle, when I suddenly became icy cold, and a frightful, hideous terror seized and gripped me so hard, that the machine, slipping from my palsied hands, fell to the ground with a crash. The next instant something—for the life of me I knew not what, its outline was so blurred and indefinite—alighted on the open space in front of me with a soft thud, and remained standing as bolt upright as a cylindrical pillar. From afar off, there then came the low rumble of wheels, which momentarily grew in intensity, until there thundered into view a waggon, weighed down beneath a monstrous stack of hay, on the top of which sat a man in a wide-brimmed straw hat, engaged in a deep confabulation with a boy in corduroys who sprawled beside him. The horse, catching sight of the motionless “thing” opposite me, at once stood still and snorted violently. The man cried out, “Hey! hey! What’s the matter with

² Genuine chrome yellow should not effervesce with nitric acid.

ye, beast?” And then in an hysterical kind of screech, “Great God! What’s yon figure that I see? What’s yon figure, Tammas?”

The horse suddenly broke the spell. Dashing its head forward, it broke off at a gallop, and, tearing frantically past the phantasm, went helter-skelter down the road to my left. I then saw Tammas turning a somersault, miraculously saved from falling head first on to the road, by rebounding from the pitchfork which had been wedged upright in the hay, whilst the figure, which followed in their wake with prodigious bounds, was apparently trying to get at him with its spidery arms. But whether it succeeded or not I cannot say, for I was so uncontrollably fearful lest it should return to me, that I mounted my bicycle and rode as I had never ridden before and have never ridden since.

Chapter 2

The boy immediately raised himself into a kneeling position, and, clutching hold of the man's arm, screamed, "I dinna ken, I dinna ken, Matthew; but take heed, mon, it does na touch me. It's me it's come after, na ye."

The moonlight was so strong that the faces of the speakers were revealed to me with extraordinary vividness, and their horrified expressions were even more startling than was the silent, ghastly figure of the Unknown. The scene comes back to me, here, in my little room in Norwood, with its every detail as clearly marked as on the night it was first enacted. The long range of cone-shaped mountains, darkly silhouetted against the silvery sky, and seemingly hushed in gaping expectancy; the shining, scaly surface of some far-off tarn or river, perceptible only at intervals, owing to the thick clusters of gently nodding pines; the white-washed walls of cottages, glistening amid the dark green denseness of the thickly leaved box trees, and the light, feathery foliage of the golden laburnum; the undulating meadows, besprinkled with gorse and grotesquely moulded crags of granite; the white, the dazzling white roads, saturated with moonbeams; all—all were overwhelmed with stillness—the still-

ness that belongs, and belongs only, to the mountains, and trees, and plains—the stillness of shadowland. I even counted the buttons, the horn buttons, on the rustics' coats—one was missing from the man's, two from the boy's; and I even noted the sweat-stains under the armpits of Matthew's shirt, and the dents and tears in Tammas's soft wideawake. I observed all these trivialities and more besides. I saw the abrupt rising and falling of the man's chest as his breath came in sharp jerks; the stream of dirty saliva that oozed from between his blackberry-stained lips and dribbled down his chin; I saw their hands—the man's, square-fingered, black-nailed, big-veined, shining with perspiration and clutching grimly at the reins; the boy's, smaller, and if anything rather more grimy—the one pressed flat down on the hay, the other extended in front of him, the palm stretched outwards and all the fingers widely apart.

And while these minute particulars were being driven into my soul, the cause of it all—the indefinable, esoteric column—stood silent and motionless over-against the hedge, a baleful glow emanating from it.

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I described the incident to Miss Macdonald on my return. She looked very serious.

“It was stupid of me not to have warned you,” she said. “That that particular spot in the road has always—at least ever since I can remember—borne the reputation of being haunted. None of the peasants round here will venture within a mile of it

after twilight, so the carters you saw must have been strangers. No one has ever seen the ghost except in the misty form in which it appeared to you. It does not frequent the place every night; it only appears periodically; and its method never varies. It leaps over a wall or hedge, remains stationary till some one approaches, and then pursues them with monstrous springs. The person it touches invariably dies within a year. I well recollect when I was in my teens, on just such a night as this, driving home with my father from Lady Colin Ferner's croquet party at Blair Atholl. When we got to the spot you name, the horse shied, and before I could realise what had happened, we were racing home at a terrific pace. My father and I sat in front, and the groom, a Highland boy from the valley of Ben-y-gloe, behind. Never having seen my father frightened, his agitation now alarmed me horribly, and the more so as my instinct told me it was caused by something other than the mere bolting of the horse. I was soon enlightened. A gigantic figure, with leaps and bounds, suddenly overtook us, and, thrusting out its long, thin arms, touched my father lightly on the hand, and then with a harsh cry, more like that of some strange animal than that of a human being, disappeared. Neither of us spoke till we reached home—I did not live here then, but in a house on the other side of Pitlochry—when my father, who was still as white as a sheet, took me aside and whispered, 'Whatever you do, Flora, don't breathe a word of what has happened to your mother, and never let her go along that road at night. It was the death bogle. I shall die within twelve months.' And he did."

Miss Macdonald paused. A brief silence ensued, and she then went on with all her customary briskness: "I cannot describe the thing any more than you can, except that it gave me the impression it had no eyes. But what it was, whether the ghost of a man, woman, or some peculiar beast, I could not, for the life of me, tell. Now, Mr. O'Donnell, have you had enough horrors for one evening, or would you like to hear just one more?"

Knowing that sleep was utterly out of the question, and that one or two more thrills would make very little difference to

my already shattered nerves, I replied that I would listen eagerly to anything she could tell me, however horrible. My permission thus gained—and gained so readily—Miss Macdonald, not without, I noticed, one or two apprehensive glances at the slightly rustling curtains, began her narrative, which ran, as nearly as I can remember, as follows:—

“After my father’s death, I told my mother about our adventure the night we drove home from Lady Colin Ferner’s party, and asked her if she remembered ever having heard anything that could possibly account for the phenomenon. After a few moments’ reflection, this is the story she told me.

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