

The Kirk Spook

By E. G. Swain

Before many years have passed it will be hard to find a person who has ever seen a parish clerk. The parish clerk is all but extinct. Our grandfathers knew him well—an oldish, clean-shaven man, who looked as if he had never been young, who dressed in rusty black, bestowed upon him, as often as not, by the rector, and who usually wore a white tie on Sundays, out of respect for the seriousness of his office. He it was who laid out the rector's robes, and helped him to put them on; who found the places in the large Bible and Prayer Book, and indicated them by means of decorous silken book-markers; who lighted and snuffed the candles in the pulpit and desk, and attended to the little stove in the squire's pew; who ran busily about, in short, during the quarter-hour which preceded Divine Service, doing a hundred little things, with all the activity, and much of the appearance, of a beetle.

Just such a one was Caleb Dean, who was clerk of Stoneground in the days of William IV. Small in stature, he possessed a voice which Nature seemed to have meant for a giant, and in the discharge of his duties he had a dignity of manner disproportionate even to his voice. No one was afraid to sing when he led the Psalm, so certain was it that no other voice could be noticed, and the gracious condescension with which he received his meagre fees would have been ample acknowledgement of double their amount.

Man, however, cannot live by dignity alone, and Caleb was glad enough to be sexton as well as clerk, and to undertake any other duties by which he might add to his modest income. He kept the churchyard tidy, trimmed the lamps, chimed the bells, taught the choir their simple tunes, turned the barrel of the organ, and managed the stoves.

It was this last duty in particular, which took him into church 'last thing', as he used to call it, on Saturday night. There were people in those days, and may be some in these, whom nothing would induce to enter a church at midnight; Caleb, however, was so much at home there that all hours were alike to him. He was never an early man on Saturdays. His wife, who insisted upon sitting up for him, would often knit her way into Sunday before he appeared, and even then would find it hard to get him to bed. Caleb, in fact, when off duty, was a genial little fellow; he had many friends, and on Saturday evenings he knew where to find them.

It was not, therefore, until the evening was spent that he went to make up his fires; and his voice, which served for other singing than that of Psalms, could usually be heard, within a little of midnight, beguiling the way to church with snatches of convivial songs. Many a belated traveller, homeward bound, would envy him his spirits, but no one envied him his duties. Even such as walked with him to the neighbourhood of the churchyard would bid him 'Good-night' whilst still a long way from the gate. They would see him disappear into the gloom amongst the graves, and shudder as they turned homewards.

Caleb, meanwhile, was perfectly content. He knew every stone in the path; long practice enabled him, even on the darkest night, to thrust his huge key into the lock at the first attempt, and on the night we are about to describe—it had come to Mr Batchel from an old man who heard it from Caleb's lips—he did it with a feeling of unusual cheerfulness and contentment.

Caleb always locked himself in. A prank had once been played upon him, which had greatly wounded his dignity; and though it had been no midnight prank, he had taken care, ever since, to have the church to himself. He locked the door, therefore, as usual, on the night we speak of, and

made his way to the stove. He used no candle. He opened the little iron door of the stove, and obtained sufficient light to show him the fuel he had laid in readiness; then, when he had made up his fire, he closed this door again, and left the church in darkness. He never could say what induced him upon this occasion to remain there after his task was done. He knew that his wife was sitting up, as usual, and that, as usual, he would have to hear what she had to say. Yet, instead of making his way home, he sat down in the corner of the nearest seat. He supposed that he must have felt tired, but had no distinct recollection of it.

The church was not absolutely dark. Caleb remembered that he could make out the outlines of the windows, and that through the window nearest to him he saw a few stars. After his eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom he could see the lines of the seats taking shape in the darkness, and he had not long sat there before he could dimly see everything there was. At last he began to distinguish where books lay upon the shelf in front of him. And then he closed his eyes. He does not admit having fallen asleep, even for a moment. But the seat was restful, the neighbouring stove was growing warm, he had been through a long and joyous evening, and it was natural that he should at least close his eyes.

He insisted that it was only for a moment. Something, he could not say what, caused him to open his eyes again immediately. The closing of them seemed to have improved what may be called his dark sight. He saw everything in the church quite distinctly, in a sort of grey light. The pulpit stood out, large and bulky, in front. Beyond that, he passed his eyes along the four windows on the north side of the church. He looked again at the stars, still visible through the nearest window on his left hand as he was sitting. From that, his eyes fell to the further end of the seat in front of him, where he could even see a faint gleam of polished wood. He traced this gleam to the middle of the seat, until it disappeared in black shadow, and upon that his eye passed on to the seat he was in, and there he saw a man sitting beside him.

Caleb described the man very clearly. He was, he said, a pale, old-fashioned looking man, with something very churchy about him. Reasoning also with great clearness, he said that the stranger had not come into the church either with him or after him, and that therefore he must have been there before him. And in that case, seeing that the church had been locked since two in the afternoon, the stranger must have been there for a considerable time.

Caleb was puzzled; turning therefore, to the stranger, he asked 'How long have you been here?'

The stranger answered at once 'Six hundred years.'

'Oh! come!' said Caleb.

'Come where?' said the stranger.

'Well, if you come to that, come out,' said Caleb.

'I wish I could,' said the stranger, and heaved a great sigh.

'What's to prevent you?' said Caleb. 'There's the door, and here's the key.'

'That's it,' said the other.

'Of course it is,' said Caleb. 'Come along.'

With that he proceeded to take the stranger by the sleeve, and then it was that he says you might have knocked him down with a feather. His hand went right into the place where the sleeve seemed to be, and Caleb distinctly saw two of the stranger's buttons on the top of his own knuckles.

He hastily withdrew his hand, which began to feel icy cold, and sat still, not knowing what to say next. He found that the stranger was gently chuckling with laughter, and this annoyed him.

'What are you laughing at?' he enquired peevishly.

‘It’s not funny enough for two,’ answered the other.

‘Who are you, anyhow?’ said Caleb.

‘I am the kirk spook,’ was the reply.

Now Caleb had not the least notion what a ‘kirk spook’ was. He was not willing to admit his ignorance, but his curiosity was too much for his pride, and he asked for information.

‘Every church has a spook,’ said the stranger, ‘and I am the spook of this one.’

‘Oh,’ said Caleb, ‘I’ve been about this church a many years, but I’ve never seen you before.’

‘That,’ said the spook, ‘is because you’ve always been moving about. I’m flimsy—very flimsy indeed—and I can only keep myself together when everything is quite still.’

‘Well,’ said Caleb, ‘you’ve got your chance now. What are you going to do with it?’

‘I want to go out,’ said the spook, ‘I’m tired of this church, and I’ve been alone for six hundred years. It’s a long time.’

‘It does seem rather a long time,’ said Caleb, ‘but why don’t you go if you want to? There’s three doors.’

‘That’s just it,’ said the spook, ‘They keep me in.’

‘What?’ said Caleb, ‘when they’re open.’

‘Open or shut,’ said the spook, ‘it’s all one.’

‘Well, then,’ said Caleb, ‘what about the windows?’

‘Every bit as bad,’ said the spook, ‘They’re all pointed.’ Caleb felt out of his depth. Open doors and windows that kept a person in—if it was a person—seemed to want a little understanding. And the flimsier the person, too, the easier it ought to be for him to go where he wanted. Also, what could it matter whether they were pointed to not?

The latter question was the one which Caleb asked first.

‘Six hundred years ago,’ said the Spook, ‘all arches were made round, and when these pointed things came in I cursed them. I hate new-fangled things.’

‘That wouldn’t hurt them much,’ said Caleb.

‘I said I would never go under one of them,’ said the spook.

‘That would matter more to you than to them,’ said Caleb.

‘It does,’ said the spook, with another great sigh.

‘But you could easily change your mind,’ said Caleb.

‘I was tied to it,’ said the spook, ‘I was told that I never more should go under one of them, whether I would or not.’

‘Some people will tell you anything,’ answered Caleb.

‘It was a Bishop,’ explained the spook.

‘Ah!’ said Caleb, ‘that’s different, of course.’

The spook told Caleb how often he had tried to go under the pointed arches, sometimes of the doors, sometimes of the windows, and how a stream of wind always struck him from the point of the arch, and drifted him back into the church. He had long given up trying.

‘You should have been outside,’ said Caleb, ‘before they built the last door.’

‘It was my church,’ said the spook, ‘and I was too proud to leave.’

Caleb began to sympathize with the spook. He had a pride in the church himself, and disliked even to hear another person say Amen before him. He also began to be a little jealous of this stranger who had been six hundred years in possession of the church in which Caleb had believed himself, under the vicar, to be master. And he began to plot.

‘Why do you want to get out?’ he asked.

'I'm no use here,' was the reply, 'I don't get enough to do to keep myself warm. And I know there are scores of churches now without any kirk-spooks at all. I can hear their cheap little bells dinging every Sunday.'

'There's very few bells hereabouts,' said Caleb.

'There's no hereabouts for spooks,' said the other. 'We can hear any distance you like.'

'But what good are you at all?' said Caleb.

'Good!' said the spook. 'Don't we secure proper respect for churches, especially after dark? A church would be like any other place if it wasn't for us. You must know that.'

'Well, then,' said Caleb, 'you're no good here. This church is all right. What will you give me to let you out?'

'Can you do it?' asked the spook.

'What will you give me?' said Caleb.

'I'll say a good word for you amongst the spooks,' said the other.

'What good will that do me?' said Caleb.

'A good word never did anybody any harm yet,' answered the spook.

'Very well then, come along,' said Caleb.

'Gently then,' said the spook; 'don't make a draught.'

'Not yet,' said Caleb, and he drew the spook very carefully (as one takes a vessel quite full of water) from the seat.

'I can't go under pointed arches,' cried the spook, as Caleb moved off.

'Nobody wants you to,' said Caleb. 'Keep close to me.'

He led the spook down the aisle to the angle of the wall where a small iron shutter covered an opening into the flue. It was used by the chimney sweep alone, but Caleb had another use for it now. Calling to the spook to keep close, he suddenly removed the shutter.

The fires were by this time burning briskly. There was a strong up-draught as the shutter was removed. Caleb felt something rush across his face, and heard a cheerful laugh away up in the chimney. Then he knew that he was alone. He replaced the shutter, gave another look at his stoves, took the keys, and made his way home.

He found his wife asleep in her chair, sat down and took off his boots, and awakened her by throwing them across the kitchen.

'I've been wondering when you'd wake,' he said.

'What?' she said, 'Have you been in long?'

'Look at the clock,' said Caleb. 'Half after twelve.'

'My gracious,' said his wife. 'Let's be off to bed.'

'Did you tell her about the spook?' he was naturally asked.

'Not I,' said Caleb. 'You knew what she'd say. Same as she always does of a Saturday night.'

This fable Mr Batchel related with reluctance. His attitude towards it was wholly deprecatory. Psychic phenomena, he said, lay outside the province of the mere humourist, and the levity with which they had been treated was largely responsible for the presumptuous materialism of the age.

He said more, as he warmed to the subject, than can here be repeated. The reader of the foregoing tales, however, will be interested to know that Mr Batchel's own attitude was one of humble curiosity. He refused even to guess why the *revenant* was sometimes invisible, and at other times partly or wholly visible; sometimes capable of using physical force, and at other times powerless. He knew that they had their periods, and that was all.

There is room, he said, for the romancer in these matters; but for the humourist, none. Romance was the play of intelligence about the confines of truth. The invisible world, like the visible, must have its romancers, its explorers, and its interpreters; but the time of the last was not yet come.

Criticism, he observed in conclusion, was wholesome and necessary. But of the idle and mischievous remarks which were wont to pose as criticism, he held none in so much contempt as the cheap and irrational POOH-POOH.