

Case I

The Death Bogle

Of the Cross Roads, And

The Inextinguishable Candle

Of the Old White House, Pitlochry

By Elliot O'Donnell

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 (least-ways 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.

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 so me 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.

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

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 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 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 stillness 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 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.

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.

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 Cohn 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 Cohn 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:—

THE INEXTINGUISHABLE CANDLE OF THE OLD WHITE HOUSE

There was once a house, known as “The Old White House,” that used to stand by the side of the road, close to where you say the horse first took fright. Some people of the name of Holkitt, relations of dear old Sir Arthur Holkitt, and great friends of ours, used to live there. The house, it was popularly believed, had been built on the site of an ancient burial-ground. Every one used to say it was haunted, and the Holkitts had great trouble in getting servants. The appearance of the haunted house did not belie its reputation, for its grey walls, sombre garden, gloomy hall, dark passages and staircase, and sinister-looking attics could not have been more thoroughly suggestive of all kinds of ghostly phenomena. Moreover, the whole atmosphere of the place, no matter how hot and bright the sun, was cold and dreary, and it was a constant source of wonder to every one how Lady Holkitt could live there. She was, however, always cheerful, and used to tell me that nothing would induce her to leave a spot dear to so many generations of her family, and associated with the happiest recollections in her life. She was very fond of company, and there was scarcely a week in the year in which she had not some one staying with her. I can only remember her as widow, her husband, a major in the Gordon Highlanders, having died in India before I was born. She had two daughters, Margaret and Alice, both considered very handsome, but some years older than I. This difference in age, however, did not prevent our being on very friendly terms, and I was constantly invited to their house—in the summer to croquet and archery, in the winter to balls. Like most elderly ladies of that period, Lady Holkitt was very fond of cards, and she and my mother used frequently to play bezique and cribbage, whilst the girls and I indulged in something rather more frivolous. On those occasions the carriage always came for us at ten, since my mother, for some reason or other—I had a shrewd suspicion it was on account of the alleged haunting—would never return home after that time. When she accepted an invitation to a ball, it was always conditionally that Lady Holkitt would put us both up for the night, and the carriage used, then, to come for us the following day, after one o’clock luncheon. I shall never forget the last time I went to a dance at “The Old White House,” though it is now rather more than fifty years ago. My mother had not been very well for some weeks, having, so she thought, taken cold internally. She had not had a doctor, partly because she did not feel ill enough, and partly because the only medical man near us was an apothecary, of whose skill she had a very poor opinion. My mother had quite made up her mind to accompany me to the ball, but at the last moment, the weather being appalling, she yielded to advice, and my aunt Norah, who happened to be staying with us at the time, chaperoned me instead. It was snowing when we set out, and as it snowed all through the night and most of the next day, the roads were completely blocked, and we had to remain at “The Old White House” from Monday evening till

the following Thursday. Aunt Norah and I occupied separate bedrooms, and mine was at the end of a long passage away from everybody else's. Prior to this my mother and I had always shared a room—the only really pleasant one, so I thought, in the house—overlooking the front lawn. But on this occasion there being a number of visitors, belated like ourselves, we had to squeeze in wherever we could; and as my aunt and I were to have separate rooms (my aunt liking a room to herself), it was natural that she should be allotted the largest and most comfortable. Consequently, she was domiciled in the wing where all the other visitors slept, whilst I was forced to retreat to a passage on the other side of the house, where, with the exception of my apartment, there were none other but lumber-rooms. All went smoothly and happily, and nothing interrupted the harmony of our visit, till the night before we returned home. We had had supper—our meals were differently arranged in those days—and Margaret and I were ascending the staircase on our way to bed, when Alice, who had run upstairs ahead of us, met us with a scared face.

“Oh, do come to my room!” she cried. “Something has happened to Mary.” (Mary was one of the house-maids.)

We both accompanied her, and, on entering her room, found Mary seated on a chair, sobbing hysterically. One only had to glance at the girl to see that she was suffering from some very severe shock. Though normally red-cheeked and placid, in short, a very healthy, stolid creature, and the last person to be easily perturbed, she was now without a vestige of colour, whilst the pupils of her eyes were dilated with terror, and her entire body, from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, shook as if with ague. I was immeasurably shocked to see her.

“Why, Mary,” Margaret exclaimed, “whatever is the matter? What has happened?”

“It's the candle, miss,” the girl gasped, “the candle in Miss Trevor's room. I can't put it out.”

“You can't put it out, why, what nonsense!” Margaret said. “Are you mad?”

“It is as true as I sit here, miss, Mary panted. “I put the candle on the mantelpiece while I set the room to rights, and when I had finished and came to blow it out, I couldn't. I blew, and blew, and blew, but it hadn't any effect, and then I grew afraid, miss, horribly afraid,” and here she buried her face in her hands, and shuddered. “I've never been frightened like this before, miss,” she returned slowly, “and I've come away and left the candle burning.”

“How absurd of you,” Margaret scolded. “We must go and put it out at once. I have a good mind to make you come with us, Mary—but there! Stay where you are, and for goodness' sake stop crying, or every one in the house will hear you.”

So saying, Margaret hurried off,—Alice and I accompanying her,—and on arriving outside my room, the door of which was wide open, we perceived the lighted candle standing in the position Mary had described. I looked at the girls, and perceived, in spite of my endeavours not to perceive it, the unmistakable signs of a great fear—fear of something they suspected but dared not name—lurking in the corners of their eyes.

“Who will go first?” Margaret demanded. No one spoke.

“Well then,” she continued, “I will,” and, suiting the action to the word, she stepped over the threshold. The moment she did so, the door began to close. “This is curious!” she cried. “Push!”

We did; we all three pushed; but, despite our efforts, the door came resolutely to, and we were shut out. Then before we had time to recover from our astonishment, it flew open; but before we could cross the threshold, it came violently to in the same manner as before. Some unseen force held it against us.

“Let us make one more effort,” Margaret said, “and if we don't succeed, we will call for help.”

Obedying her instructions, we once again pushed. I was nearest the handle, and in some manner,—how, none of us could ever explain,—just as the door opened of its own accord, I slipped and fell inside. The door then closed immediately with a bang, and, to my unmitigated horror, I found myself alone in the room. For some seconds I was spellbound, and could not even collect my thoughts sufficiently to frame a reply to the piteous entreaties of the Holkitts, who kept banging on the door, and imploring me to tell them what was happening. Never in the hideous excitement of nightmare had I experienced such a terror as the terror that room conveyed to my mind. Though nothing was to be seen, nothing but the candle, the light of which was peculiarly white and vibrating, I felt the presence of something inexpressibly menacing and horrible. It was in the light, the atmosphere, the furniture, everywhere. On all sides it surrounded me, on all sides I was threatened—threatened in a manner that was strange and deadly. Something suggesting to me that the source of evil originated in the candle, and that if I could succeed in extinguishing the light I should free myself from the ghostly presence, I advanced towards the mantelpiece, and, drawing in a deep breath, blew—blew with the energy born of desperation. It had no effect. I repeated my efforts; I blew frantically, madly, but all to no purpose; the candle still burned—burned softly and mockingly. Then a fearful terror seized me, and, flying to the opposite side of the room, I buried my face against the wall, and waited for what the sickly beatings of my heart warned me was coming. Constrained to look, I slightly, only very, very slightly, moved round, and there, there, floating stealthily towards me through the air, came the candle, the vibrating, glowing, baleful candle. I hid my face again, and prayed God to let me faint. Nearer and nearer drew the light; wilder and wilder the wrenches at the door. Closer and closer I pressed myself to the wall. And then, then when the final throes of agony were more than human heart and brain could stand, there came the suspicion, the suggestion of a touch—of a touch so horrid that my prayers were at last answered, and I fainted. When I recovered, I was in Margaret's room, and half a dozen well-known forms were gathered round me. It appears that with the collapse of my body on the floor, the door, that had so effectually resisted every effort to turn the handle, immediately flew open, and I was discovered lying on the ground with the candle—still alight—on the ground beside me. My aunt experienced no difficulty in blowing out the refractory candle, and I was carried with the greatest tenderness into the other wing of the house, where I slept that night. Little was said about the incident next day, but all who knew of it expressed in their faces the utmost anxiety—an anxiety which, now that I had recovered, greatly puzzled me. On our return home, another shock awaited me; we found to our dismay that my mother was seriously ill, and that the doctor, who had been sent for from Perth the previous evening, just about the time of my adventure with the candle, had stated that she might not survive the day. His warning was fulfilled—she died at sunset. Her death, of course, may have had nothing at all to do with the candle episode, yet it struck me then as an odd coincidence, and seems all the more strange to me after hearing your account of the bogle that touched your dear father in the road, so near the spot where the Holkitts' house once stood. I could never discover whether Lady Holkitt or her daughters ever saw anything of a superphysical nature in their house; after my experience they were always very reticent on that subject, and naturally I did not like to press it. On Lady Holkitt's death, Margaret and Alice sold the house, which was eventually pulled down, as no one would live in it, and I believe the ground on which it stood is now a turnip field. That, my dear, is all I can tell you.

“Now, Mr. O'Donnell,” Miss Macdonald added, “having heard our experiences, my mother's and mine, what is your opinion? Do you think the phenomenon of the candle was in any way

connected with the bogle both you and I have seen, or are the hauntings of 'The Old White House' entirely separate from those of the road?"