

CASE VI
The Phantom Regiment

Of Killiecrankie
By Elliot O'Donnell

Many are the stories that have from time to time been circulated with regard to the haunting of the Pass of Killiecrankie by phantom soldiers, but I do not think there is any stranger story than that related to me, some years ago, by a lady who declared she had actually witnessed the phenomena. Her account of it I shall reproduce as far as possible in her own words:—

Let me commence by stating that I am not a spritualist, and that I have the greatest possible aversion to convoking the earthbound souls of the dead. Neither do I lay any claim to mediumistic powers (indeed I have always regarded the term “medium” with the gravest suspicion). I am, on the contrary, a plain, practical, matter-of-fact woman, and with the exception of this one occasion, never witnessed any psychic phenomena.

The incident I am about to relate took place the autumn before last. I was on a cycle tour in Scotland, and, making Pitlochry my temporary headquarters, rode over one evening to view the historic Pass of Killiecrankie. It was late when I arrived there, and the western sky was one great splash of crimson and gold—such vivid colouring I had never seen before and never have seen since. Indeed, I was so entranced at the sublimity of the spectacle, that I perched myself on a rock at the foot of one of the great cliffs that form the walls of the Pass, and, throwing my head back, imagined myself in fairyland. Lost, thus, in a delicious luxury, I paid no heed to the time, nor did I think of stirring, until the dark shadows of the night fell across my face. I then started up in a panic, and was about to pedal off in hot haste, when a strange notion suddenly seized me: I had a latchkey, plenty of sandwiches, a warm cape, why should I not camp out there till early morning—I had long yearned to spend a night in the open, now was my opportunity. The idea was no sooner conceived than put into operation. Selecting the most comfortable-looking boulder I could see, I scrambled on to the top of it, and, with my cloak drawn tightly over my back and shoulders, commenced my vigil. The cold mountain air, sweet with the perfume of gorse and heather, intoxicated me, and I gradually sank into a heavenly torpor, from which I was abruptly aroused by a dull boom, that I at once associated with distant musketry. All was then still, still as the grave, and, on glancing at the watch I wore strapped on my wrist, I saw it was two o'clock. A species of nervous dread now laid hold of me, and a thousand and one vague fancies, all the more distressing because of their vagueness, oppressed and disconcerted me. Moreover, I was impressed for the first time with the extraordinary solitude—solitude that seemed to belong to a period far other than the present, and, as I glanced around at the solitary pines and gleaming boulders, I more than half expected to see the wild, ferocious face of some robber chief—some fierce yet fascinating hero of Sir Walter Scott's—peering at me from behind them. This feeling at length became so acute, that, in a panic of fear—ridiculous, puerile fear, I forcibly withdrew my gaze and concentrated it abstractedly on the ground at my feet. I then listened, and in the rustling of a leaf, the humming of some night insect, the whizzing of a bat, the whispering of the wind as it moaned softly past me, I fancied—nay, I felt sure I detected something that was not ordinary. I blew my nose, and had barely ceased marvelling at the loudness of its reverberations, before the piercing, ghoulsh shriek of an owl sent the blood in

torrents to my heart. I then laughed, and my blood froze as I heard a chorus, of what I tried to persuade myself could only be echoes, proceed from every crag and rock in the valley. For some seconds after this I sat still, hardly daring to breathe, and pretending to be extremely angry with myself for being such a fool. With a stupendous effort I turned my attention to the most material of things. One of the skirt buttons on my hip—they were much in vogue then—being loose, I endeavoured to occupy myself in tightening it, and when I could no longer derive any employment from that, I set to work on my shoes, and tied knots in the laces, merely to enjoy the task of untying them. But this, too, ceasing at last to attract me, I was desperately racking my mind for some other device, when there came again the queer, booming noise I had heard before, but which I could now no longer doubt was the report of firearms. I looked in the direction of the sound—and—my heart almost stopped. Racing towards me—as if not merely for his life, but his soul—came the figure of a Highlander. The wind rustling through his long dishevelled hair, blew it completely over his forehead, narrowly missing his eyes, which were fixed ahead of him in a ghastly, agonised stare. He had not a vestige of colour, and, in the powerful glow of the moonbeams, his skin shone livid. He ran with huge bounds, and, what added to my terror and made me double aware he was nothing mortal, was that each time his feet struck the hard, smooth road, upon which I could well see there was no sign of a stone, there came the sound, the unmistakable sound of the scattering of gravel. On, on he came, with cyclonic swiftness; his bare sweating elbows pressed into his panting sides; his great, dirty, coarse, hairy fists screwed up in bony bunches in front of him; the foam-flakes thick on his clenched, grinning lips; the blood-drops oozing down his sweating thighs. It was all real, infernally, hideously real, even to the most minute details: the flying up and down of his kilt, sporan, and swordless scabbard; the bursting of the seam of his coat, near the shoulder; and the absence of one of his clumsy shoe-buckles. I tried hard to shut my eyes, but was compelled to keep them open, and follow his every movement as, darting past me, he left the roadway, and, leaping several of the smaller obstacles that barred his way, finally disappeared behind some of the bigger boulders. I then heard the loud rat-tat of drums, accompanied by the shrill voices of fifes and flutes, and at the farther end of the Pass, their arms glittering brightly in the silvery moonbeams, appeared a regiment of scarlet-clad soldiers. At the head rode a mounted officer, after him came the band, and then, four abreast, a long line of warriors; in their centre two ensigns, and on their flanks, officers and non-commissioned officers with swords and pikes; more mounted men bringing up the rear. On they came, the fifes and flutes ringing out with a weird clearness in the hushed mountain air. I could hear the ground vibrate, the gravel crunch and scatter, as they steadily and mechanically advanced—tall men, enormously tall men, with set, white faces and livid eyes. Every instant I expected they would see me, and I became sick with terror at the thought of meeting all those pale, flashing eyes. But from this I was happily saved; no one appeared to notice me, and they all passed me by without as much as a twist or turn of the head, their feet keeping time to one everlasting and monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp. I got up and watched until the last of them had turned the bend of the Pass, and the sheen of his weapons and trappings could no longer be seen; then I remounted my boulder and wondered if anything further would happen. It was now half-past two, and blended with the moonbeams was a peculiar whiteness, which rendered the whole aspect of my surroundings indescribably dreary and ghostly. Feeling cold and hungry, I set to work on my beef sandwiches, and was religiously separating the fat from the lean, for I am one of those foolish people who detest fat, when a loud rustling made me look up. Confronting me, on the opposite side of the road, was a tree, an ash, and to my surprise, despite the fact that the breeze had fallen and there was scarcely a breath of wind, the tree swayed violently to and fro,

whilst there proceeded from it the most dreadful moanings and groanings. I was so terrified that I caught hold of my bicycle and tried to mount, but I was obliged to desist as I had not a particle of strength in my limbs. Then to assure myself the moving of the tree was not an illusion, I rubbed my eyes, pinched myself, called aloud; but it made no difference—the rustling, bending, and tossing still continued. Summing up courage, I stepped into the road to get a closer view, when to my horror my feet kicked against something, and, on looking down, I perceived the body of an English soldier, with a ghastly wound in his chest. I gazed around, and there, on all sides of me, from one end of the valley to the other, lay dozens of bodies,—bodies of men and horses,—Highlanders and English, white-cheeked, lurid eyes, and bloody-browed,—a hotch-potch of livid, gory awfulness. Here was the writhing, wriggling figure of an officer with half his face shot away; and there, a horse with no head; and there—but I cannot dwell on such horrors, the very memory of which makes me feel sick and faint. The air, that beautiful, fresh mountain air, resounded with their moanings and groanings, and reeked with the smell of their blood. As I stood rooted to the ground with horror, not knowing which way to look or turn, I suddenly saw drop from the ash, the form of a woman, a Highland girl, with bold, handsome features, raven black hair, and the whitest of arms and feet. In one hand she carried a wicker basket, in the other a knife, a broad-bladed, sharp-edged, horn-handled knife. A gleam of avarice and cruelty came into her large dark eyes, as, wandering around her, they rested on the rich facings of the English officers' uniforms. I knew what was in her mind, and—forgetting she was but a ghost—that they were all ghosts—I moved heaven and earth to stop her. I could not. Making straight for a wounded officer that lay moaning piteously on the ground, some ten feet away from me, she spurned with her slender, graceful feet, the bodies of the dead and dying English that came in her way. Then, snatching the officer's sword and pistol from him, she knelt down, and, with a look of devilish glee in her glorious eyes, calmly plunged her knife into his heart, working the blade backwards and forwards to assure herself she had made a thorough job of it. Anything more hellish I could not have imagined, and yet it fascinated me—the girl was so fair, so wickedly fair and shapely. Her act of cruelty over, she spoiled her victim of his rings, epaulets, buttons and gold lacing, and, having placed them in her basket, proceeded elsewhere. In some cases, unable to remove the rings easily, she chopped off the fingers, and popped them, just as they were, into her basket. Neither was her mode of dispatch always the same, for while she put some men out of their misery in the manner I have described, she cut the throats of others with as great a nonchalance as if she had been killing fowls, whilst others again she settled with the butt-ends of their guns or pistols. In all she murdered a full half-score, and was decamping with her booty when her gloating eyes suddenly encountered mine, and with a shrill scream of rage she rushed towards me. I was an easy victim, for strain and pray how I would, I could not move an inch. Raising her flashing blade high over her head, an expression of fiendish glee in her staring eyes, she made ready to strike me. This was the climax, my overstrained nerves could stand no more, and ere the blow had time to descend, I pitched heavily forward and fell at her feet. When I recovered, every phantom had vanished, and the Pass glowed with all the cheerful freshness of the early morning sun. Not a whit the worse for my venture, I cycled swiftly home, and ate as only one can eat who has spent the night amid the banks and braes of bonnie Scotland.