

CASE VIII

The Drummer of Cortachy

By Elliot O'Donnell

What ancient Scottish or Irish family has not its Family Ghost? A banshee—the heritage of Niall of the Nine Hostages—is still the unenviable possession of his descendants, the O'Donnells, and I, who am a member of the clan, have both seen and heard it several times. As it appears to me, it resembles the decapitated head of a prehistoric woman, and I shall never forget my feelings one night, when, aroused from slumber by its ghastly wailing, I stumbled frantically out of bed, and, groping my way upstairs in the dark, without venturing to look to the left or right lest I should see something horrible, found every inmate of the house huddled together on the landing, paralysed with fear. I did not see it on that occasion, but on the following morning, as I had anticipated, I received the news that a near and dear relative had died.

Possessing such an heirloom myself, I can therefore readily sympathise with those who own a similar treasure—such, for example, as the famous, or rather infamous, Drummer of Cortachy Castle, who is invariably heard beating a tattoo before the death of a member of the clan of Ogilvie.

Mrs. Crowe, in her *Night Side of Nature*, referring to the haunting, says:—

“Miss D., a relative of the present Lady C., who had been staying some time with the Earl and Countess at their seat, near Dundee, was invited to spend a few days at Cortachy Castle, with the Earl and Countess of Airlie. She went, and whilst she was dressing for dinner the first evening of her arrival, she heard a strain of music under her window, which finally resolved itself into a well-defined sound of a drum. When her maid came upstairs, she made some inquiries about the drummer that was playing near the house; but the maid knew nothing on the subject. For the moment the circumstance passed from Miss D.'s mind, but, recurring to her again during the dinner, she said, addressing Lord Airlie, ‘My lord, who is your drummer?’ Upon which his lordship turned pale, Lady Airlie looked distressed, and several of the company, who all heard the question, embarrassed; whilst the lady, perceiving that she had made some unpleasant allusion, although she knew not to what their feelings referred, fore-bore further inquiry till she reached the drawing-room; when, having mentioned the circumstance again to a member of the family, she was answered, ‘What, have you never heard of the drummer boy?’ ‘No,’ replied Miss D.; ‘who in the world is he?’ ‘Why,’ replied the other, ‘he is a person who goes about the house playing his drum, whenever there is a death impending in the family. The last time he was heard was shortly before the death of the last Countess (the Earl's former wife); and that is why Lord Airlie became so pale when you mentioned it. The drummer boy is a very unpleasant subject in this family, I assure you.’

“Miss D. was naturally much concerned, and indeed not a little frightened at this explanation, and her alarm being augmented by hearing the sounds on the following day, she took her departure from Cortachy Castle, and returned to Lord C.'s, where she related this strange circumstance to the family, through whom the information reached me.

“This affair was very generally known in the north, and we awaited the event with interest. The melancholy death of the Countess about five or six months afterwards, at Brighton, sadly verified the prognostications. I have heard that a paper was found in her desk after her death, declaring her conviction that the drum was for her.”

Mrs. Crowe goes on to explain the origin of the phenomenon. According to legend, she says, there was once at Cortachy a drummer, who, incurring the jealousy of the then Lord Airlie, was thrust into his own drum and flung from a window of the tower (in which, by the way, Miss D. slept). Before being put to death thus, the drummer is stated to have said he would for ever after haunt the Airlie family—a threat he has obviously been permitted to fulfil.

During one of my visits to Scotland, I stayed some days in Forfarshire not far from Cortachy. Among the visitors at my hotel was a very old gentleman of the name of Porter, who informed me that, when a boy, he used to visit some relatives who at that time, lived within easy walking distance of Cortachy. One of these relatives was a lad of about fourteen, named Alec, with whom he had always been the closest of friends. The recollection of their many adventures evidently afforded Mr. Porter infinite amusement, and one of these adventures, in particular, he told me, was as fresh in his mind as if it had happened yesterday.

“Looking back upon it now,” he said, with a far-away look in his eyes, “it certainly was a strange coincidence, and if you are interested in the hauntings of Cortachy, Mr. O’Donnell, you may, perhaps, like to hear the account of my ghostly experiences in that neighbourhood.”

Of course I replied that nothing would give me greater pleasure, and Mr. Porter forthwith began his story.

“One misty night in October, my friend Alec and I, both being keen on rabbiting, determined to visit a spinney adjoining the Cortachy estate, in pursuit of our quarry. Alec had chosen this particular night, thinking, under cover of the mist, to escape the vigilance of the keepers, who had more than once threatened to take him before the laird for trespassing.

“To gain access to the spinney we had to climb a granite wall and drop on the other side—the drop, in addition to being steep, being rendered all the more precarious by reason of the man-traps the keepers were in the habit of setting. When I got astride the wall and peered into the well-like darkness at our feet, and heard the grim rustling of the wind through the giant pines ahead of me, I would have given all I possessed to have found myself snug and warm in bed; but Alec was of a different ‘kidney’—he had come prepared for excitement, and he meant to have it. For some seconds, we both waited on the wall in breathless silence, and then Alec, with a reckless disregard of what might be in store for him, gently let himself drop, and I, fearing more, if anything, than the present danger, to be for ever after branded as a coward if I held back, timidly followed suit. By a great stroke of luck we alighted in safety on a soft carpeting of moss. Not a word was spoken, but, falling on hands and knees, and guiding ourselves by means of a dark lantern Alec had bought second-hand from the village blacksmith, we crept on all-fours along a tiny bramble-covered path, that after innumerable windings eventually brought us into a broad glade shut in on all sides by lofty trees. Alec prospected the spot first of all to see no keepers we’re about, and we then crawled into it, and, approaching the nearest burrows, set to work at once with our ferrets. Three rabbits were captured in this fashion, and we were eagerly anticipating the taking of more, when a sensation of icy coldness suddenly stole over us, and, on looking round, we perceived, to our utmost consternation, a very tall keeper standing only a few yards away from us. For once in a way, Alec was nonplussed, and a deathly silence ensued. It was too dark for us to see the figure of the keeper very distinctly, and we could only distinguish a gleaming white face set on a very slight and perpendicular frame, and a round, glittering something that puzzled us both exceedingly. Then, a feeling that, perhaps, it was not a keeper gradually stole over me, and in a paroxysm of ungovernable terror I caught hold of Alec, who was trembling from head to foot as if he had the ague. The figure remained absolutely still for

about a minute, during which time neither Alec nor I could move a muscle, and then, turning round with an abrupt movement, came towards us.

“Half-dead with fright, but only too thankful to find that we had now regained the use of our limbs, we left our spoil and ran for our lives in the direction of the wall.

“We dared not look back, but we knew the figure followed us, for we heard its footsteps close at our heels; and never to my dying day shall I forget the sound—rat-tat, tat, rat-tat, tat—for all the world like the beat of a muffled drum.

“How we ever managed to reach the wall I could never tell, but as we scrambled over it, regardless of man-traps and bruises, and plunged into the heather on the other side, we heard the weird footsteps receding in the direction of the castle, and, ere we had reached home, the rat-tat, tat, rat-tat, tat, had completely died away.

“We told no one a word of what had happened, and a few days after, simultaneously with the death of one of the Airlies, we learned, for the first time, the story of the Phantom Drummer.

“I have little doubt,” Mr. Porter added, in conclusion, “that the figure we took to be a keeper was the prophetic Drummer, for I can assure you there was no possibility of hoaxers, especially in such ill-omened guise, anywhere near the Cortachy estate.”

Poor old Mr. Porter! He did not long survive our *rencontre*. When I next visited the hotel, some months later, I was genuinely grieved to hear of his decease. His story had greatly fascinated me, for I love the solitude of the pines, and have myself from time to time witnessed many remarkable occult phenomena under the shadow of their lofty summits. One night, during this second visit of mine to the hotel, the mood to ramble came upon me, and, unable to resist the seductive thought of a midnight stroll across the bracken-covered hills, I borrowed a latchkey, and, armed with a flask of whisky and a thick stick, plunged into the moonlit night. The keen, heather-scented air acted like a tonic—I felt younger and stronger than I had felt for years, and I congratulated myself that my friends would hardly know me if they saw me now, as I swung along with the resuscitated stride of twenty years ago. The landscape for miles around stood out with startling clearness in the moonshine, and I stopped every now and then to drink in the beauties of the glittering mountain-ranges and silent, glimmering tarns. Not a soul was about, and I found myself, as I loved to be, the only human element in the midst of nature. Every now and then a dark patch fluttered across the shining road, and with a weird and plaintive cry, a night bird dashed abruptly from hedge to hedge, and seemingly melted into nothingness. I quitted the main road on the brow of a low hill, and embarked upon a wild expanse of moor, lavishly covered with bracken and white heather, intermingled with which were the silvery surfaces of many a pool of water. For some seconds I stood still, lost in contemplating the scenery,—its utter abandonment and grand sense of isolation; and inhaling at the same time long and deep draughts of the delicious moorland air, unmistakably impregnated now with breaths of ozone. My eyes wandering to the horizon, I detected, on the very margin of the moorland, a dense clump of trees, which I instantly associated with the spinney in my old friend Mr. Porter’s story, and, determining that the renowned spinney should be my goal, I at once aimed for it, vigorously striking out along the path which I thought would be most likely to lead to it. Half an hour’s brisk walking brought me to my destination, and I found myself standing opposite a granite wall which my imagination had no difficulty in identifying with the wall so well described by Mr. Porter. Removing the briars and gorse prickles which left little of my stockings whole, I went up to the wall, and, measuring it with my body, found it was a good foot taller than I. This would mean rather more climbing than I had bargained for. But the pines—the grim silence of their slender frames and gently swaying summits—fascinated me. They spoke of possibilities few could see or

appreciate as I could; possibilities of a sylvan phantasmagoria enhanced by the soft and mystic radiance of the moon. An owl hooted, and the rustling of brush-wood told me of the near proximity of some fur-coated burrower in the ground. High above this animal life, remoter even than the tops of my beloved trees or the mountain-ranges, etched on the dark firmament, shone multitudinous stars, even the rings round Saturn being plainly discernible. From the Milky Way my eyes at length wandered to the pines, and a puff of air laden with the odour of their resin and decaying brushwood decided me. I took a few preliminary sips of whisky, stretched my rusty limbs, and, placing one foot in a jagged crevice of the wall, swarmed painfully up. How slow and how hazardous was the process! I scratched my fingers, inured to the pen but a stranger to any rougher substance; I ruined my box-calf boots, I split my trousers at the knees, and I felt that my hat had parted with its shape for ever; and yet I continued the ascent. The end came all too suddenly. When within an ace of victory, I yielded to impulse, and with an energy the desperate condition of my skin and clothes alone could account for, I swung up, and—the outer edge of the wall melted beneath me, my hands frantically clutched at nothingness, a hideous sensation of falling surged through my brain, my ears and eyes filled to bursting, and with a terrific crash that seemed to drive my head and spine right through my stomach, I met the black, uprising earth, and lost consciousness.

Providentially for me, I had pitched head first into a furze bush which broke the fall, otherwise I must have met with serious injury. As it was, when I recovered my momentary loss of consciousness, I found that I had sustained no worse harm than a severe shaking, scratches galore, and the utter demolition of my clothes! I picked myself up with difficulty, and spent some time searching for my hat and stick—which I at length discovered, lodged, of course, where one would least have thought of looking for them. I then took close stock of my surroundings, and found them even grimmer than I had anticipated. Though the trees were packed closely together, and there was much undergrowth, the moonbeams were so powerful and so fully concentrated on the spinney, that I could see no inconsiderable distance ahead of me. Over everything hung a solemn and preternatural hush. I saw shadows everywhere—shadows that defied analysis and had no material counterparts. A sudden crashing of brushwood brought me to a standstill, and sent the blood in columns to my heart. Then I laughed loudly—it was only a hare, the prettiest and pertest thing imaginable. I went on. Something whizzed past my face. I drew back in horror—it was a bat, merely a bat. My nerves were out of order, the fall had unsteadied them; I must pull myself together. I did so, and continued to advance. A shadow, long, narrow, and grotesque, fell across my path, and sent a thousand and one icy shivers down my back. In an agony of terror I shut my eyes and plunged madly on. Something struck me in the face and hurled me back. My eyes opened involuntarily, and I saw a tree that, either out of pique or sheer obstinacy, had planted itself half-way across the path. I examined its branches to make sure they *were* branches, and continued my march. A score more paces, a sudden bend, and I was in an open space, brilliantly illuminated by moonbeams and peopled with countless, moving shadows. One would have to go far to find a wilder, weirder, and more grimly suggestive spot. As I stood gazing at the scene in awe-struck wonder, a slight breeze rocked the tops of the pine trees, and moaning through their long and gloomy aisles reverberated like thunder. The sounds, suggesting slightly, ever so slightly, a tattoo, brought with them vivid pictures of the Drummer, too vivid just then to be pleasant, and I turned to go. To my unmitigated horror, a white and lurid object barred my way. My heart ceased to beat, my blood turned to ice; I was sick, absolutely sick, with terror. Besides this, the figure held me spellbound—I could neither move nor utter a sound. It had a white, absolutely white face, a tall, thin, perpendicular frame, and a small, glittering,

rotund head. For some seconds it remained stationary, and then, with a gliding motion, left the path and vanished in the shadows.

Again a breeze rustled through the tops of the pine trees, moaned through their long and gloomy aisles, and reverberated like thunder; rat-tat, tat, rat-tat, tat—and with this sound beating in my ears, reaction set in, and I never ceased running till I had reached my hotel.