

CASE XII

## The Grey Piper

*And the Heavy Coach of Donaldgowerie House, Perth*

By Elliott O'Donnell

Donaldgowerie House, until comparatively recent times, stood on the outskirts of Perth. It was a long, low, rambling old place, dating back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. At the time of the narrative it was in the possession of a Mr. Whittingen, who bought it at a very low price from some people named Tyler. It is true that it would cost a small fortune to repair, but, notwithstanding this disadvantage, Mr. Whittingen considered his purchase a bargain, and was more than satisfied with it. Indeed, he knew of no other house of a similar size, of such an imposing appearance, and so pleasantly situated, that he could have bought for less than twice the amount he had paid for this; and he was really very sorry for the Tylers, who explained to him, in confidence, that had they not been in such urgent need of money, they would never have sold Donaldgowerie House at such a ridiculously low figure. However, with them it was a question of cash—cash down, and Mr. Whittingen had only to write out a cheque for the modest sum they asked, and the house was his. It was June when Mr. Whittingen took possession of the house—June, when the summer sun was brightest and the gardens looked their best. The Whittingen family, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Whittingen, two sons, Ernest and Harvey, and three daughters, Ruth, Martha, and Mary, were, as one might gather from their names alone, plain, practical, genteel, and in fact very superior people, who were by no means lacking in that exceedingly useful quality of caninness, so characteristic of the Lowland Scot to which race they belonged. Mr. Whittingen had, for years, conducted a grocery business in Jedburgh, twice filling the honoured and coveted post of mayor, and when he at length retired into private life, his friends (and it was astonishing how many friends he had) shrewdly suspected that his pockets were not only well lined but full to bursting. Acting on the advice of his wife and daughters, who were keen on social distinction, he sent Ernest to Oxford, conditionally that he should take Holy Orders in the Church of England, whilst Harvey, who, when scarcely out of the petticoat stage, displayed the regular Whittingen talent for business by covertly helping himself to the sugar in his father's shop, and disposing of it at strictly sale price to his sisters' cronies in the nursery, was sent to one of those half preparatory and half finishing schools (of course, for the sons of gentlemen only) at Edinburgh, where he was kept till he was old enough to be articled to a prosperous, exceedingly prosperous, firm of solicitors.

The girls, Ruth, Martha, and Mary, had likewise been highly educated, that is to say, they had remained so many years at an English seminary for young ladies, and had been given a final twelve months in France and Germany to enable them to obtain "the correct accent."

At the time of the story they were as yet unmarried, and were awaiting with the most laudable patience the advent of men of title. They were delighted with their new home (which Ruth had persuaded her father to christen "Donaldgowerie," after the house in a romantic novel she had just been reading), and proud of their gilded premises and magnificent tennis lawns; they had placed a gigantic and costly tray in the hall, in confident assurance that it would speedily groan beneath the weight of cards from all the gentry in Perthshire.

But please be it understood, that my one and only object in alluding to these trifling details is to point out that the Whittingens, being entirely engrossed in matters mundane, were the very last

people in the world to be termed superstitious, and although imaginative where future husbands' calls and cards were concerned, prior to the events about to be narrated had not an ounce of superstition in their natures. Indeed, until then they had always smiled in a very supercilious manner at even the smallest mention of a ghost.

September came, their first September in Donaldgowerie, and the family welcomed with joy Ernest and his youthful bride.

The latter was not, as they had fondly hoped (and roundly announced in Perth), the daughter of a Peer, but of a wealthy Bristol draper, the owner of a house near the Downs, whose son had been one of Ernest's many friends at Oxford. The coming of the newly-married pair to Donaldgowerie brought with it a burst of birdlike gaiety. All sorts of entertainments—musical “at homes,” dinners, dances, tennis and garden parties, in fact, every variety that accorded with the family's idea of good taste—were given; and with praiseworthy “push,” for which the Whittingens had fast become noted, all the County was invited. This splendid display of wealth and hospitality was not disinterested; I fear, it might be not only accounted a “send off” for the immaculately-clad curate and his wife, but also a determined effort on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Whittingen to attract the right sort of lover for their girls. It was during the progress of one of their alfresco entertainments that the scepticism of certain of the Whittingens with regard to the supernatural received a rude blow. Martha, Mary, and two eligible young men, friends of Harvey's, having finished a somewhat spirited game of croquet, were refreshing themselves with lemonade, whilst they continued their flirtation. Presently Mary, whose partner declared how much he should like to see some photographs she had recently had taken of herself, with a well-affected giggle of embarrassment set off to the house to fetch her album. The minutes passed, and, as she did not return, Martha went in search of her. The album, she knew, was in their boudoir, which was situated at the end of the long and rather gloomy corridor of the upper storey. Highly incensed at her sister's slowness, she was hastening along the corridor, when, to her supreme astonishment, she suddenly saw the figure of a man in kilts, with a bagpipe under his arm, emerge through the half-open door of the boudoir, and with a peculiar gliding motion advance towards her. A curious feeling, with which she was totally unfamiliar, compelled her to remain mute and motionless; and in this condition she awaited the approach of the stranger. Who was he? she asked herself, and how on earth had he got there, and what was he doing? As he drew nearer, she perceived that his face was all one hue,—a ghastly, livid grey,—and that his eyes, which were all the time fixed on hers, were lurid and menacing,—so terrible, in fact, that she turned cold with fear, and felt the very hair on her head beginning to rise on end. She opened her mouth to shriek, but found she could not ejaculate a syllable; neither could she, even with the most desperate efforts, tear her feet from the floor. On came the figure, and, without swerving either to the right or left, it glided right up to and through her; and, as she involuntarily turned round, she saw it disappear through a half-open staircase window, at least twenty feet above the ground outside. Shaking all over with terror, and not understanding in the slightest what to make of it, Martha ran to the boudoir, where her heart almost sprang out of her body at the spectacle of her sister Mary stretched at full length on the floor, her cheeks ashy pale, her lips blue. Martha at once made a frantic rush to the bell, and, in a few minutes, half the establishment, headed by Mr. Whittingen, poured into the room. With the aid of a little cold water, Mary speedily recovered, and, in reply to the anxious inquiries of her sympathetic rescuers as to what had happened, indignantly demanded why such a horrible looking creature as “that” piper had been allowed not merely to enter the house but to come up to her room, and half frighten her to death. “I had just got my album,” she added, “when, feeling some one was in the room, I turned round—and there

(she indicated a spot on the carpet) was the piper, not ten paces away from me, regarding me with the most awful look imaginable. I was too taken aback with surprise to say anything, nor—for some unaccountable reason—could I escape, before he touched me on the shoulder with one of his icy cold hands, and then commenced playing. Up and down the floor he paced, backwards and forwards, never taking his hateful glance off my face and ever piping the same dismal dirge. At last, unable to stand the strain of it any longer, and convinced he was a madman, bent on murdering me—for who but a lunatic would behave in such a way?—I gave way to a violent fit of hysterics, and fainted. Now tell me who he was, and why he was permitted to frighten me in this manner?” And Mary stamped her feet and grew vicious, as only her class will when they are at all vexed. Her speech was followed by a silence that exasperated her. She repeated her inquiries with crimson cheeks, and then, as again no one responded, she signalled out the head footman and raved at him. Up to this point Mr. Whittingen had been dumb with amazement. The idea of a strange piper having the twofold effrontery to enter his house and proceed to the private and chaste sanctuary of his highly respectable daughters, almost deprived him of breath. He could scarcely believe his ears. “What—what in the name of—what does it all mean?” he at length stammered, addressing the unfortunate footman. “A piper! and without any invitation from me, how dare you let him in?”

“I did not, sir,” the luckless footman replied; “no such person came to the door when I was in the hall.”

“No more he did when I was there,” chimed in the second footman, and all the other servants vociferated in a body, “We never saw any piper, sir, nor heard one either,” and they looked at Mary reproachfully.

At this Mr. Whittingen looked exceedingly embarrassed. In the face of such a unanimous denial what could he say? He knew if he suggested the servants were untruthful they would all give notice to leave on the spot, and knowing good servants are scarce in Perth as elsewhere, he felt rather in a fix. At length, turning to Mary, he asked if she was sure it was a piper. “Sure!” Mary screamed, “why, of course I am, did I not tell you he marched up and down here playing on his disgusting bagpipes, which nearly broke the drum of my ear.”

“And I saw him too, pa,” Martha put in. “I met him in the corridor, he had his pipes under his arm, and the most dreadful expression in his face. I don’t wonder Mary was frightened.”

“But where did he go?” Mr. Whittingen cried.

“You would not believe me if I told you,” Martha said, her cheeks flushing. “He seemed to pass right through me, and then to vanish through the staircase window. I have never been so terribly upset in my life,” and, sinking on to the sofa, she began to laugh hysterically.

“Dear me! dear me! it is very odd!”

Mr. Whittingen exclaimed, as Mary handed her sister a wineglass of sal-volatile. “They can’t both have been dreaming; it must—but there, what a nonsensical notion, there are no such things as ghosts! Only children and nursemaids believe in them nowadays. As soon as you have quite recovered, my dears, we will return to the garden, and I think that under the circumstances, the rather peculiar circumstances, ahem! it will be better to say nothing to your mother. Do you understand?” Mr. Whittingen went on, eyeing the servants, “Nothing to your mistress.”

The affair thus terminated, and for some days nothing further happened to disturb the peace of the family. At the end of a week, however, exactly a week after the appearance of the piper, Mary met with a serious accident. She was running across the croquet lawn to speak to her sister-in-law, when she tripped over a hoop that had been accidentally left there, and, in falling, ran a hatpin into her head. Blood poisoning ensued, and within a fortnight she was dead. Martha was

the only one in the house, however, who associated Mary's accident and death with the piper; to her that sinister expression in the mysterious Highlander's eyes portended mischief, and she could not but suspect that, in some way or another, he had brought about the catastrophe. The autumn waned, and Christmas was well within sight, when another mysterious occurrence took place. It was early one Sunday evening, tea was just over, and the Whittingen family were sitting round the fire engaged in a somewhat melancholy conversation, for the loss of Mary had affected them all very deeply, when they heard the far-away rumble of a heavy coach on the high-road. Nearer and nearer it came, till it seemed to be about on a level with the front lodge gate; then to their surprise there was a loud crunching of gravel, and they heard it careering at a breakneck speed up the carriage-drive. They looked at one another in the utmost consternation.

"A coach, and driven in this mad fashion! Whose was it? What did it mean? Not visitors, surely!"

It pulled up at the front door, and the champing and stamping of the horses vibrated loudly through the still night air. Sounds as of one or more people descending were next heard, and then there came a series of the most terrific knockings at the door. The Whittingen family stared at one another aghast; there was something in those knockings—something they could not explain—that struck terror in their souls and made their blood run cold. They waited in breathless anxiety for the door to be opened; but no servant went to open it. The knocks were repeated, if anything louder than before, the door swung back on its hinges, and the tread of heavy footsteps were heard slowly approaching the drawing-room. Mrs. Whittingen gave a low gasp of horror, Ruth screamed, Harvey buried his face in his hands, Mr. Whittingen rose to his feet, and made desperate efforts to get to the bell, but could not stir, whilst Martha rushed to the drawing-room door and locked it. They then with one accord began to pray. The steps halted outside the room, the door slowly opened, and the blurred outlines of a group of ghastly-looking figures, supporting a grotesquely shaped object in their midst, appeared on the threshold. For some seconds there was a grim silence. It was abruptly broken by a thud—Ruth had slipped from her chair to the floor in a dead faint; whereupon the shadowy forms solemnly veered round and made their way back again to the front door. The latter swung violently open, there was a rush of icy wind which swept like a hurricane across the hall and into the drawing-room, the front door then slammed to with a crash, and the coach drove away.

Every one's attention was now directed to Ruth. At first sal-volatile and cold water produced no effect, but after a time she slowly, very slowly regained consciousness. As soon as she had recovered sufficiently to speak, she expressed an earnest desire that no reference should ever be made in her presence to what had just happened. "It was for me!" she said in such an emphatic tone as filled her audience with the direst forebodings. "I know it was for me; they all looked in my direction. God help me! I shall die like Mary."

Though greatly perplexed as to what she meant, for no one excepting herself had been able to make out the phenomena with any degree of distinctness, they yielded to her entreaties, and asked her no questions. The servants had neither heard nor seen anything. A fortnight later, Ruth was taken ill with appendicitis; peritonitis speedily set in, and she died under the operation. The Whittingens now began to wish they had never come to Donaldgowerie; but, with the astuteness that had been characteristic of the family through countless generations of fair days and foul, they took the greatest precautions never to drop even as much as a hint to the servants or to any one in the town that the house was haunted.

A year passed without any further catastrophe, and they were beginning to hope their ghastly visitors had left them, when something else occurred. It was Easter-time, and Ernest, his wife,

and baby were staying with them. The baby, a boy, was fat and bonny, the very picture of health and happiness.

Mrs. Whittingen and Martha vied with one another in their devotion to him; and either one or other of them was always dancing attendance on him. It so happened that one afternoon, whilst the servants were having their tea, Martha found herself alone in the upper part of the house with her precious nephew. Mr. Whittingen had gone to Edinburgh to consult his lawyer (the head of the firm with whom Harvey was articulated) on business, whilst Mrs. Whittingen had taken her son and daughter-in-law for a drive. The weather was glorious, and Martha, though as little appreciative of the beauties of nature as most commercial-minded young women, could not but admire the colouring of the sky as she looked out of the nursery window. The sun had disappeared, but the effect of its rays was still apparent on the western horizon, where the heavens were washed with alternate streaks of gold and red and pink—the colour of each streak excessively brilliant in the centre, but paling towards the edges. Here and there were golden, pink-tipped clouds and crimson islets surrounded with seas of softest blue. And outside the limits of this sun-kissed pale, the blue of the sky gradually grew darker and darker, until its line was altogether lost in the black shadows of night that, creeping over the lone mountaintops in the far east, slowly swept forward. Wafted by the gentle breeze came the dull moaning and whispering of the pine trees, the humming of the wind through the telephone wires, and the discordant cawing of the crows. And it seemed to Martha, as she sat there and peered out into the garden, that over the whole atmosphere of the place had come a subtle and hostile change—a change in the noises of the trees, the birds, the wind; a change in the flower-scented ether; a change, a most marked and emphatic change, in the shadows. What was it? What was this change? Whence did it originate? What did it portend? A slight noise, a most trivial noise, attracted Martha's attention to the room; she looked round and was quite startled to see how dark it had grown. In the old days, when she had scoffed at ghosts, she would as soon have been in the dark as in the light, the night had no terrors for her; but now—now since those awful occurrences last year, all was different, and as she peered apprehensively about her, her flesh crawled. What was there in that corner opposite, that corner hemmed in on the one side by the cupboard—how she hated cupboards, particularly when they had shiny surfaces on which were reflected all sorts of curious things—and the chest of drawers on the other. It was a shadow, only a shadow, but of what? She searched the room everywhere to find its material counterpart, and at last discovered it in the nurse's shawl which hung over the back of a chair. Then she laughed, and would have gone on laughing, for she tried to persuade herself that laughter banished ghosts, when suddenly something else caught her eyes. What was it? An object that glittered evilly like two eyes. She got up in a state of the most hideous fascination and walked towards it. Then she laughed again—it was a pair of scissors. The nurse's scissors—clean, bright, and sharp. Why did she pick them up and feel the blades so caressingly with her thumb? Why did she glance from them to the baby? Why? In the name of God, why? Frightful ideas laid hold of her mind. She tried to chase them away but they quickly returned. The scissors, why were they in her fingers?

Why could not she put them down? For what were they intended? Cutting! cutting thread, and tape,—and throats! Throats! And she giggled hysterically at the bare notion. But what was this round her waist—this shadowy arm-like object! She looked fearfully round, and her soul died within her as she encountered the malevolent, gleeful eyes of the sinister piper, pressed closely against her face. Was it she he wanted this time—she, or—or whom—in the name of all that was pitiable?

Desperately, as if all the lives in the universe and the future of her soul were at stake, did she struggle to free herself from his grasp—but in vain; every fibre, every muscle of her body was completely at his will. On and on he pushed her, until foot by foot, inch by inch, she approached the cradle, and all the while his hellish voice was breathing the vilest of inspirations into her brain. At last she stood by the side of the baby, and bent over it. What a darling! What a dear! What a duck! A sweet, pretty, innocent, prattling duck! How like her mother—how like her handsome brother—how like herself—very, very like herself! How every one loved it—how every one worshipped it—how (and here the grey face beside her chuckled) every one would miss it! How pink its toes—how fat its calves—how chubby its little palms—how bonny its cheeks—and how white, how gloriously, heavenly, snowy white—its throat! And she stretched forth one of her stubby, inartistic fingers and played with its flesh. Then she glanced furtively at the scissors, and smiled.

It was soon done, soon over, and she and the grey-faced piper danced a minuet in the moonbeams; afterwards he piped a fare-well dirge,—a wild, weird, funereal dirge, and, marching slowly backwards, his dark, gleaming eyes fixed gloatingly on hers, disappeared through the window. Then the reaction set in, and Martha raved and shrieked till every one in the house flew to the rescue.

Of course, no one—saving her father and mother—believed her. Ernest, his wife, and the servants attributed her bloody act to jealousy; the law—to madness; and she subsequently journeyed from Donaldgowerie to a criminal lunatic asylum, where the recollection of all she had done soon killed her. This was the climax. Mr. Whittingen sold Donaldgowerie, and a new house was shortly afterwards erected in its stead.