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# THE TREE-MAN GHOST

By PERCY B. PRIOR

THE day was hot, as the July sun filled Strathspey with pulsing heat, which danced and waved along the ground. Colin Kerr and Alan Maclure trudged along on their way to Abernesby, longing for a breath of cool air or the welcome shade of a tree.

"When we reach yon tree," Colin said, "I'm going to rest awhile."

He pointed to a solitary-looking tree which grew beside a little brook—a brook which, by and by, made its way into the River Spey. The grass all round was beautifully green, but the tree looked strange. At some time it must have been struck by lightning, which had blasted its head, and left it withered and white, and given the trunk a curious tilt, so that it seemed to

stoop forward as if peering at something on the ground. Two out-flung branches, looking exactly like arms, grew on either side of it, and heightened its likeness to a human being.

One could imagine an owl making its home in it, or bats, but certainly not little singing birds. Still there was shelter under its branches, and the two weary travelers sank down thankfully on the grass.

There was an ancient ruin on the other side of the burn. An old legend told that treasure had been buried somewhere near. Colin Kerr, who was an old man and knew many ancient stories, told Alan the tale as they sat and rested. Robbers had plundered an old church and had hidden their booty somewhere among the ruins. They had been caught

and hanged, and the secret of these hidden treasures had never been revealed.

Alan's eyes gleamed as he listened. "I wish we could find it," he said. "We could live like gentlemen, Colin, and do no more work."

Colin, stretched on the grass, laughed drowsily. "There would be no blessing on it," he said. "It was stolen from the Church."

He lay on his right side as he slept, and because he was left-handed, as are all the Kerrs, his dagger hung over his right hip. Alan's eyes were attracted by the sunlight gleam on its hilt, then his eyes wandered to the face of the sleeping man. How old he looked as he slept! His bare throat almost scraggy—it would not take much to—why on earth was he thinking such things?

Colin's mouth was slightly open and he snored as he slept; he was an old man—he couldn't have many years to live—and again Alan tried to shake off the evil suggestions which were creeping like serpents into his mind. He would go to sleep, too. But it was no use. His brain was in a whirl.

Unwillingly he looked again at his companion's face. How soundly he slept! The sun was still glittering on the hilt of his dagger. Moved by an irresistible impulse, Alan put forth his hand and drew the weapon out of its sheath. But next moment he was dreadfully alarmed, for the sleeper began to moan and mutter and toss his hands about, and then Alan saw coming out of his mouth a strange, indistinct form, scarce bigger than a bumble-bee, but without wings.

It crawled along the sleeper's clothes down on the sod till it came to the brook, which it would neither fly over nor swim. It turned back and back and tried again. It did this so often that Alan stretched the dagger over the brook, and allowed

the strange insect to creep over to the other side. Alan's attention was now fixed on this strange sight. He followed it, and saw it disappear right into a part of the old ruin, which was thickly overgrown with heather and moss. It did not stay long in this place, but, crawling out again, it made its way back to the sleeper, and re-entered his mouth. Alan was so amazed he could not keep silent any longer. He gave a cry which awakened Colin.

"What is wrong with you?" Colin asked, sitting up and yawning. "You have wakened me from a beautiful dream. I dreamed I was walking through a fine, rich country, and came at length to the shores of a noble river; and just where the clear water went thundering down a precipice there was a bridge all of silver, which I crossed; and then, entering a noble palace on the opposite side, I saw great heaps of gold and jewels, and I was just going to load myself with the treasure when you rudely awoke me, and I lost all. I am going to dig in the ruins—perhaps I'll find the treasure; and if I do I'll restore it to the Church," Colin Kerr said.

"I'll help you," said Alan; but his face was evil as he said the words, and when Colin was not looking he hid the stolen dagger in his belt.

They had no proper tools, but they set to work with their hands, and, sure enough, they found, just at the place where the strange insect had entered, a hoard of gold and silver, and silver vessels, and armpieces and jewels.

"Colin," Alan whispered, "could we not keep this to ourselves? No one knows about it, and we found it."

Colin turned on him in rage. "The things belong to the Bishopric of Dornoch," he said. "Often and often have I heard my father tell the story. Remember what happened to

the man in the Bible that took the garment and the wedge of silver, and the bar of gold."

"Old wives' tales," Alan cried.

Colin, his face white with rage, turned on him with angry words. Then, like a flash, Alan had his dagger out—it flashed through the air, there was a queer choking sound, a sobbing breath, and Colin sank on his knees, fighting, with a stream of blood flowing from his throat.

"I—call—that—tree—to witness," he gasped, "that—I—have—been—foully murdered."

But Alan heeded not. He was mad with excitement, and scarcely gave a thought to the murdered man.

In frantic haste he tore up the stones, and found more buried treasure—there were gold and silver church vessels, coins far more than he could carry. He gloated over his hoard—it was all his—all his! He threw a triumphant look at the figure of the dead man—and then suddenly, for the first time, he noticed how strange the tree looked. It was almost as though it were standing peering down at him, lifting up its arms in horror. Its blasted top seemed to peep out at him from the leaves like a face.

He felt a momentary chill, but next minute he had turned to his find again—he was filling his pockets and his knapsack with the treasure.

LATE that evening he returned with a spade and buried his companion at the foot of the tree. It was not a pleasant task, and he knew that if he would stop to think he would be miserable. So in frantic haste he hid his crime, filled a sack with money, and hurried away.

It is said he went to the town of Perth to live, and that he became a wealthy man. No one knew how he had come by his money, and no one wished to make friends with him. He lived alone, and by and by peo-

ple began to notice that this unhappy-looking rich young man was always followed by a shadow. It was not his own shadow either, but that of a tree with a blasted head and strange outspread branches. One man, Harry Murray by name, went the length of saying that one evening he had seen this shadow tree, and that from its top a white and terrible face had looked out.

Alan himself pretended to be unconscious of this strange shadow, but often as he walked on the road he would stop suddenly, and so would the tree shadow. Once, impelled by some unknown force, he journeyed back to Speyside and found the actual tree just as he had first seen it. No one had ever inquired about Colin Kerr. His secret was safe. The tree with the dead man buried beneath it could not do him any harm.

That night the tree kept step with him, walking beside him, peering forward as if to look into his face, watching him, threatening him, filling him with nameless and numberless terrors.

This went on for years, so say the records, which also relate that "for all his gear, he never got a friend to bide wi' him, nor a lass to marry him. At last he was weary of it all, and went to the priest and told him the way of it." The priest listened to the strange tale.

It is said that Alan sought to enter the monastery to make reparation. All the wealth which had brought him so little happiness he restored to the Church, but the tree overshadowed him till his dying day, which came very soon after his confession.

The Reverend Dr. Forsyth, minister of Abernesby, tells that the queer tree has long since rotted away; but the Tree-Man is still to be seen, flitting—a ghost, with a tree shadow—along Strathspey.