

The Big Grey Man

By Cathy Whitefield

'Ye're no feart, then?' Archie asks as they walk up the track at the back of the Linn of Dee car-park.

'Feart? Why should I be feart?' Duncan looks at Archie in surprise.

'Well – its Ben Macdui we're heading for and the cloud'll be down on the top the day.'

'So what? I've not forgotten how to navigate, even if you have. Come on, man! The forecast's good; we've plenty of time. What's the worry?'

'Ye mean tae tell me ye dinna ken about Am Fear Liath Mor?' Archie shakes his head in disbelief.

Duncan doesn't answer. Archie is full of daft stories. Half the time he makes them up – like that time on Am Fasarinen when he told Duncan the last pinnacle was haunted by a climber who'd fallen to his death - and how the ghost would grab hold of the legs of unsuspecting scramblers and pull them over the edge. Duncan hadn't half-hollered when he'd felt a hand on his ankle - but of course it had just been Archie playing the fool. This Ferly Mor' will be another of Archie's pieces of nonsense.

Duncan decides to ignore him, and he puts his head down and strides out. By this time they've reached the land-rover track to Derry Lodge and are swinging their way down towards the bridge over the Lui. It's early still, and the day is cold and fresh. The clouds are high but, according to the forecast, they will drop later that afternoon. All the more reason to get a move on, and they step out along the gently rising and falling track above the flats of the Lui, past the ruins of the old shielings and along the edge of the new plantations.

From time to time Duncan points out a heron down by the river, or a group of stags high on the hill, but apart from nodding in appreciation, Archie doesn't have much to say - and that's unusual. Duncan's the one who likes to look around at things and think his own thoughts, but he doesn't often get the chance for Archie is aye blethering on. So this silence - although welcome - is uncharacteristic and oddly unsettling and by the time they reach the pinewood at the foot of Glen Derry and are tramping towards Robber's Copse, Duncan is beginning to wonder what it was he'd said. Archie doesn't even manage a grin when Duncan reminds him of one of the stories he'd told at that particular point on a previous occasion.

'Mind the Gold Tree?' he asks, nodding up into Coire Craobh an Oir where a single pine clings to the upper slopes. 'Mind you telling me it was where that Lord Thingummy had buried his gold - and all them plans we made to come back with a couple of spades? You had me going then!'

'Aye - I mind,' Archie says distractedly. Normally he wouldn't have been able to resist the urge to poke fun at Duncan's supposed credulity. Something is definitely wrong, and by the time they've struck off from Glen Luibeg and are heading up towards Sron Riach, Duncan can't stand it any longer.

'What is it then, this 'Ferly Mor'?'

Archie stops abruptly, and Duncan almost runs into him. 'Ye really dinna ken?' Archie asks with a glance up the ridge that leads to the great plateau of Ben Macdui.

'No -I really dinna ken! But see if this is one of your stories ...'

'It's no my story!' Archie objects. 'You can read it for yourself in the Cairngorm Club Journal. It was Professor Norman Collie that seen it first.'

'Who?' Duncan asks, suspiciously. Archie, when he isn't telling wild stories, is a bit of a name-dropper. 'Friend of yours, is he?'

'He's dead, you daft pillock! You mean you've never heard of Norman Collie? Collies' Ledge?'

'Oh - that Norman Collie! Sure I've heard of him,' says Duncan, who hasn't.

They head on up the track and are high on the shoulder of the Sron by the time Duncan gets the whole story out of Archie. 'Ferly Mor' - Am Fear Liath Mor - is some sort of ghost, by all accounts. Professor Norman Collie first reported it back in 1925, although his encounter had been thirty-five years before. But others have seen or heard it since - and mostly on Ben Macdui - footsteps in the mist, huge footsteps, crunching on gravel or snow; sometimes voices, sometimes music - and there are those who've seen a great grey figure, twenty feet or more tall. But everyone, whatever they've seen or heard, was gripped by an intense feeling of dread and an overwhelming desire to run, to get off the mountain; to get away at any cost.

'You believe all that?' asks Duncan, looking up at the wide scree-strewn slopes of the hill above them. The clouds have definitely dropped and it's colder now.

'Of course not!' Archie scoffs. I'm just telling you so you ken what to be feart of.'

'I'm no feart,' says Duncan stoutly.

'Nor am I', says Archie. But he is, Duncan realises. Archie, leg-puller extraordinaire, is feart.

Time to get his own back, Duncan decides, though he doesn't know how. Not yet. He thinks about it all the way up the ridge, but he still doesn't have any ideas by the time they reach the cliffs above Lochan Uaine and are into the clouds. They have dropped, as forecast, and the track is swathed in a grey mist. 'Maybe we should be getting back,' says Archie suddenly.

'What? We're almost there. We've just to skirt these cliffs and then we'll hit the Etchachan track. Listen - you can hear folk on it.'

The mist magnifies sounds. Duncan can hear a voice in the distance, but then it's blown away by a wind moaning up from the loch far below, and all they can hear are the sounds of wind and water and, once, the harsh complaint of a raven, tumbling on an updraft. Archie jumps at that and looks around wildly.

'What was that?'

'Come on, man. It was only a raven.'

Before long they reach the track and turn west, heading up the shallow slope that will bring them to the summit. Archie hesitates and seems reluctant to go on, but continuing with Duncan is evidently preferable to staying behind on his own, and he follows closely, jumping at each sound, his breathing faster than the gradient warrants, and Duncan realises that Archie is listening to the sound of their own footsteps in the granite gravel, the steady crunch, crunch, crunch. There had been something about footsteps hadn't there? Duncan stops, unshoulders his rucksack, takes a swallow of water from his bottle and, when Archie isn't looking, scoops up a handful of gravel and stuffs it into the pocket of his jacket.

After twenty minutes or so they reach the top; the cairn and triangulation point. They're alone, which is strange, for Duncan is certain he'd heard voices on the track ahead of them, but whoever it was has maybe headed north.

'Right,' says Archie, touching the cairn briefly as he always does. 'We'll get away down now.'

'Already? Come on - let's have a breather, eh? Look-the sun's coming out.'

And sure enough, it's becoming lighter, the mist more luminous. With any luck the clouds will lift and they'll be able to see Braeriach and Cairn Toul across the great gash of the Lairig. But the mist doesn't break up completely, and continues to form on the downwind side of the summit, even though the sun is shining from the south east. Duncan stands up to peer through the forming mist to see if he can make out the distant peaks. But what he sees instead - with an unpleasant loosening of his insides - is a huge grey figure.

'Christ, Archie! What in God's name's that?' 'Bloody hell! It's Am Fear Liath Mor!'

'Christ! What'll we dae?'

'Act casual. Try no tae look feart! Wave at it.'

'Wave at it!?'
'Aye - go on. Wave!'

Duncan raises his arm and waves. Amazingly, the great grey figure waves back. Then he hears a snort behind him and he turns in alarm - only to see that Archie is doubled up, tears of laughter streaming down his face.

'Ye daft pillock!' Archie gasps when he can get his breath back 'It's a Brocken Spectre! An optical illusion. Anyone would think ye'd never seen one before'

Duncan, his heart-rate slowing, raises his other arm and watches the great grey figure do likewise. Archie comes to stand beside him and then there are two grey figures waving at the two of them.

'Well, bugger me! So that's all it is, eh? Just our shadows on the mist?' Duncan is annoyed with himself at being taken in, and even more annoyed with Archie for pretending to be scared just to get Duncan's wind up. He's been had - once again. But then he remembers about the gravel. He slips his hand into his pocket and squeezes the gravel rhythmically in his palm. It grinds together with a crunch, crunch noise - like footsteps in the distance; footsteps that are coming closer.

'What's that?' Archie whispers, grabbing Duncan by the other arm. And then the blood drains from his face. 'Run!' He takes off across the plateau. 'Run, man!' he yells as he disappears. 'But -'

It's too late. Archie is already out of earshot. Duncan begins to laugh. He can hear Archie's footsteps as he runs - great bounding footsteps tearing down the mountainside. But it's strange how the footsteps don't disappear, how they seem to come closer. The mist closes in and it grows colder. His laughter shrivels to a gulp and he feels an overwhelming desire to run, to get off the mountain - at any cost.

'Wait, Archie! Wait for me!' He'd better catch up with him. The daft bugger will run off the cliff if he isn't careful. But it's Duncan who nearly runs off the cliff, tearing down the mountainside as if something is after him. He swerves at the last minute, skids along the edge and runs on and on, not stopping even after he's run out of the mist, not even after he's overtaken Archie on the way down the track. He keeps running until he reaches the bottom of Sron Riach and can see the woods of Robber's Copse ahead. Only then does he stop, wait for Archie who isn't far behind, and catch his breath. Neither of them can speak for quite a while.

'You thought it was yon ghost,' says Duncan, accusingly.

'No, I didnae.'

'Aye, you did,' maintains Duncan as they walk on. After a moment he squeezes the gravel in his pocket again - and has the satisfaction of seeing Archie go white as a sheet. 'Aye, you did,' he says. 'But it was just me all along.' He pulls out his hand and shows him the gravel.

'You ... you ...' Archie's speechless, steam practically coming out of his ears. But then he begins to laugh. 'All right, you bastard, you got me there! I admit it. See when I heard those footsteps?' He bends over clutching his ribs, gasping with laughter. 'And see when I saw that third figure in the mist? I dinna ken how you did that, though!'

'Third figure? What third figure?'

Duncan looks at Archie, and Archie, sobering, looks back at him. Then, together, they turn and look back the way they've come, up the Sron, up into the cloud. It's dropping now, a long tendril of fog reaching out down the track, lifting and falling as if it's running in huge bounds. Something darker and denser is forming at the leading edge. Something huge and grey and utterly terrifying....