

TREE OF GHOSTS

A Short Story by Kit Thornton

Plick! Something small and hard fell on my head. Plick! There was another. They were acorns, and as I heard the merry tinkling laughter from high above me in the oak tree against which I sat, I knew that it was not by mischance that these acorns had fallen upon me. Thus began the strangest incident I have ever experienced in more than thirty years of walking in the hills and valleys around my home.

Early that morning I had set out on foot in the September sunshine determined to travel further than usual, to explore the valley beyond the mountain ridge that was normally the limit of my walks. I loved the scenery and the solitude; I rejoiced in the thought that, despite all the sadness and misery of the world beyond, here I was at one with the land, where little had changed in hundreds of years.

Eventually I reached the ridge and, pausing to sit on a rocky outcrop, I gazed in awe at the scene laid out before me. Row upon row of mountain ranges, each appearing a paler shade of grey than the one in front of it until, in the furthest distance, they blended seamlessly with the pastel sky. Directly below me the land fell away gradually to the valley floor through which meandered the silver thread of a river, and beside this river I could see several small copses, probably of oak, beech and alder. Even at this distance I could see the first tinges of autumn staining the topmost leaves of the trees a russet brown.

I was hot after the exertion of the climb up to the ridge and beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, so I rose from the rock and set off down the mountainside towards the nearest copse where I determined to rest beneath the shade of the trees and enjoy the packed lunch that I carried in the bag on my back.

As I approached the copse by an old track I noticed two black birds sitting together on the top rail of an old broken gate that was almost buried in a bramble thicket. My knowledge of birds and their recognition was, I had thought, fairly comprehensive, but these were strange and quite new to me. I was sure that they were doves, but of a jet-black colour, and as they watched me I formed the peculiar impression that they had been waiting for me. At that moment they rose from the gate and flew ahead of me along the track, soon vanishing amongst the trees.

In a while I came upon a huge oak standing solitary and majestic beside the river. This ancient tree dominated the small clearing in which it stood, but it offered

shelter from the sun and so, with my face towards the river and my back against the massive trunk I settled down to enjoy my lunch. Plick! Plick! The acorns were bouncing off my head and I peered upwards into the branches trying to locate the source of the sweet laughter that accompanied this gentle bombardment.

I had no sense of danger or threat from whoever was hidden amongst the leaves so, my curiosity piqued, I left my backpack on the ground and began to climb the tree. Although not an experienced climber I had done some rock climbing in my younger days and the gnarled and knobby bark of the oak's huge trunk offered me plenty of hand and footholds. Yet the task proved tougher than I had expected and so my fingers burned as with aching limbs I flopped over the first branch, some thirty feet from the ground. My eyes were closed as I struggled to recover my breath, but my senses told me that I was not alone.

"Hello." The soft voice was very close to me. "You're the first to do that climb for many years." Opening my eyes I saw a girl and a boy, of no more than seventeen or eighteen years, sitting together on another branch, maybe six feet from the one on which I now sprawled. I pulled myself up to a more comfortable position, back against the trunk and legs dangling each side of my sturdy branch. The girl was very pretty with long blonde hair and eyes of vivid blue; her friend was lithe and handsome, with fine features and soft brown curls falling to his shoulders. Both were wearing tunics of russet brown over leaf-green shirts. Perhaps their unusual dress should have made me feel surprised, nervous even, but at that moment everything seemed just as it should be. "Who are you?" I asked.

The boy spoke again, "I am William, and this is Eleanor, although everyone calls us Will and Ellie now."

"We are ghosts," said Ellie, as if that were the most natural thing in the world. "We don't usually encourage visitors here, but we know that you are different and that you will not want to harm us."

"Not that you could, of course," added Will, "But life here is very peaceful with our friends and the many creatures that share this tree with us. We don't want outsiders spoiling it."

"Do you know that an old oak tree is often called 'a garden in the forest'?" asked Ellie. "That's because of the variety of different plants and creatures that depend upon it in one way or another. There are hundreds of kinds of lichens; fungus, mosses, ferns, ivy and even mistletoe-" Ellie smiled shyly, "and hundreds of different insects that live amongst them and in the bark of the tree. And then there are the birds that feed on the insects, and more birds and animals that eat the acorns. It's our world."

"Ellie, you talk too much," said Will gently.

I was interested, of course, but I wanted to learn more about the strange young couple sitting side by side on the branch in front of me. Could they really be ghosts? They turned to look at each other when I asked my question, as if trying to decide how much of themselves they should share with this stranger who had stumbled into their world.

“Many, many years ago,” began Will, “Eleanor and William were sweethearts, but their families were feuding and so they had to keep their love secret. Whenever they could, they would slip away to meet at this tree. But there was no future for them; no hope.”

Ellie picked up the story. “So they planned a final tryst, one last meeting when hand-in-hand they danced three times around this old oak, and then they would be together forever.”

“The two families were very angry, each blaming the other, when the two bodies were found hanging from the tree,” continued Will. “But good came out of it in time; when the anger had subsided there followed acceptance, then reconciliation, and Eleanor and William were laid to rest together beneath this fine tree. Together forever.”

“But that was a long time ago,” said Ellie. “Our families are gone now, even our villages have gone; only a few stones to remind you that they were ever there.

“We could tell you so many tales,” Ellie went on, the sweet smile having returned to her face. “We are not the only ghosts hereabouts, but you will not see the others.”

It was Will’s turn again. “The oldest is a spirit messenger of Thor, the god of thunder. The oak is his tree, as we are often reminded when he sends lightning. It’s scary but we are protected, only the unrighteous have cause to fear the lightning here.”

“And another of our friends is the spirit of the mistletoe,” added Ellie. “He told us once about the goddess of love whose son was killed by an arrow made of mistletoe. The tears she shed for her son became the white berries and since that day mistletoe means only love.” And again I saw Ellie’s shy smile.

And so we talked and talked, each speaking of our own different worlds, until it was time for me to go. We said our farewells but when I promised to return Ellie and Will suddenly became serious. “You will never return,” said Will.

“But we’ve had fun haven’t we?” added Ellie, smiling at me through the tears that had come to her blue eyes. “So you won’t forget your friends in the oak tree?”

“No, I shall never forget this day,” I said sadly as I began carefully to descend the gnarled trunk of the great tree.

Reaching the foot of the tree I looked back up to the branch to wave to my friends, but where they had been sitting were only two black doves. As I watched they flew up into the higher branches, away, out of sight amongst the leaves.

Striding back towards my home, my mind full of muddled thoughts about the strange events of the day, I met an old shepherd whom I had known for many years. After the usual greetings I asked him if he knew the ancient oak in the copse beside the river. “Yes, I remember it well from when I was a lad,” he replied. “I had first begun to tend the sheep in these hills and many times would shelter there, especially when there was thunder about. It always felt safe, but the great tree fell in a terrible storm, maybe twenty years ago it was, and people came to take away the timber.”

I was stunned, but I hid my surprise from the old shepherd. Perhaps he had misunderstood my description of the place, so I determined to return at the first opportunity.

I suppose I should have known that I would never again find the old oak tree. From a fine piece of oak wood that had long lain unneeded in my workshop I carved a marker post, and I inscribed upon it the words ‘In memory of Eleanor and William, my friends.’ This I set up on the exact spot where I knew the great tree had once stood. It was a stiff walk from my home, but often I would return to that spot in the valley to sit beside the river. Of course, there was no sign now of the ancient oak, except for my modest marker not the slightest hint of its once majestic presence dominating that small clearing. Yet always when I returned there I would find a small posy of flowers beside the marker post, with a fresh sprig of mistletoe, and never did I forget my friends from the tree of ghosts.

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(www.theladyintheloft.webs.com)*