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## *The Curse of Culbin* *by Margot Henderson*

It's hard to believe, as we sit here looking over the green expanse of Culbin Forest, that this was once the biggest desert in Europe. And in the days before it was a desert, it was known as the Laich of Moray, Moray's bread basket, because of its rich, fertile land and beautiful orchards. How could it be that such a rich, fertile land turned virtually overnight into a great desert? There are some who say that it was the result of a curse.

The laird of the estate presided over the burning of local women as witches, at the same time as turning a blind eye to the smugglers who ran the coastline and who buried their treasures on his estate.

It was said he was a gambling man and there's nothing he loved more than to sit, night after night, to play for high stakes. There was one night, early November when the nights are drawing in, he sat up late one Saturday, playing with those who were willing to play, and he was on a winning streak. But just as it approached midnight, his colleagues leant back, pulled their chairs from the table and said that, for them, the game was over. And he said 'Where are you going?' and they said 'Tomorrow is the Sabbath – there's no way we can play on the Sabbath day'. And he said 'That's old wives' tales – I want to play – I don't care whether it's the Sabbath day or not. And if you won't play with me, well, I'll play with the devil himself!' And just then a wind rose up, and the doors of the manse were flown open, and in walked a dark stranger. And he stepped up to the laird's table and said: 'I heard you call my name, and I hear you want to play a game.' And he sat down at the table. 'We'll play a game of three. The first game we'll play for your land.' The laird could hardly keep his hands from shaking as he went to deal the cards. And wouldn't you know? The devil had the winning hand. 'The next game we'll play for your life.' And this game the laird won and began to laugh. But the devil silenced him with a look and said 'You may rue the day you won that game – for the next game we shall play for your immortal soul.' And they played on and on through the night. So engrossed were they in the game that the laird didn't hear the wind rise, rattling the windows, and the sound of sand against the walls. Squall upon squall of wind and sand rose up in a storm – and it's said that sometimes, when the wind turns and changes the shape of the dunes, a chimney might appear, and if you lean down and place your ear

to the chimney, you can still hear the devil laugh, and the sound of the laird bemoaning his fate, losing everything that once was his.

This is the transcript of the audio file available at  
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