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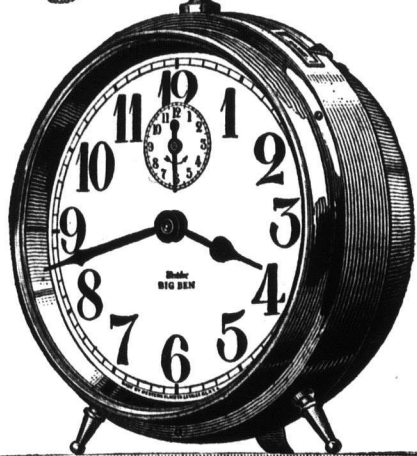
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Big Ben



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The Laird of Glengowan

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Peter Grant

YOU are up with the lark, Miss Wynne.

"Why, Mr. Murray! how you startled me. I thought I was the only creature abroad in the glen at this early hour."

"Well, you see you are mistaken. I, too, love to drink in the beauty of the Highlands at this most fascinating hour."

"Which shows your good taste," replied the young lady. "This sunrise is certainly a rich reward to the early riser."

Rhoda Wynne, accustomed to the tamer beauties of England, gazed enraptured upon the majestic panorama of mountain, vale and stream unfolded before her. From the eastern sky, rich with its golden glow, the first beams of the sun cast long, slanting shadows over the peaceful vale of Glengowan.

Green fields, interspersed with patches of rich, yellow corn, sloped upward to the foothills of the mighty Grampian mountains, where they merged in the rich pink-purple of the Scottish heather. From the narrow glen, back among the hills, the Gowan stream foamed and rippled down the broad valley, beneath the shade of graceful birch and alder trees, to its junction with the river Alvin.

"This glen might well be called the abode of peace," the young lady said, after a pause.

"Your words would fitly describe it this morning," replied her companion, "Yet this spot was the scene of many stirring events of history in the years that are passed. Around yonder grassy hillock the fairies in olden times were said to dance in the moonlight, and within the mound was said to be a secret chamber in which they imprisoned their captives."

"Do you believe in fairies?" she asked, with manifest astonishment.

"I was taught to do so in my childhood, and the impression still remains. But the grace and beauty of the modern fairies who now haunt the glen far outdo the fabled charms of the ancient variety."

There was sincere admiration in Harold Murray's voice as he spoke these words. For she was wonderfully fair, this young English girl who was now making her second visit to the glen.

Her frank, blue eyes were full of that earnest trustfulness that characterizes the unspoiled girl of the middle classes. Her dress of soft, filmy blue material, was loose at the throat, and modeled so as to give free play to her lithe, active limbs, developed by outdoor exercise. Her loose, fair hair rippled in the gentle breeze, and she bore in her hand a freshly plucked rose, bathed in early dew.

In her morning walk by the Gowan stream she had met Harold Murray, the laird, or proprietor of the Glengowan estate. During her former visit the two had formed a pleasant acquaintanceship, which both were frankly pleased to renew. A vigorous man of affairs at twenty-five years, Harold Murray possessed much of the boyishness that seems inseparable from the character of the Highland clansman. His tall, athletic frame was displayed to advantage in his hunting suit of gray tweed, the knee breeches substituting rather tamely, for the kilts of his warlike forefathers. His cap was carried in his hand, revealing a wealth of dark hair clustered around a shapely head. His clear cut face, with dark mustache, was bronzed with the hue of perfect health, while his dark eyes betokened strength of character and decision.

"Where are you staying, Miss Wynne?"

"With my friends, the Winstons, the same as last year," she replied.

"The glen owes them a debt of gratitude for bringing you North again this year," he said, heartily.

"You are very kind." The color was mounting her cheeks. "I was so charmed with Glengowan last season that I looked forward with pleasure to meeting my friends again."

"The feeling is mutual, I assure you. The poofers folk of the glen call you their ministering angel."

"I am glad they like me, and appreciate the little things I did for them," she said, simply.

"Like you! They adore you!"

The girl smiled in acknowledgement.

"I do not wonder," she said, "for her enraptured gaze, as she gazed upon the vale of beauty, that the laird of Glengowan is so wedded to their simple homes that eviction, to them, is as bitter as death itself."

He bowed in acquiescence.

"You know the hearts of the people, Miss Wynne. You have heard the tales of their joys and sorrows, and they were true."

The young laird had cause for thought. Even as they spoke they were passing the ruins of a farm home, situated by the picturesque stream. The scene was expressive of the most hopeless desolation. The roofless walls looked accusingly to the sky. Around the deserted fireside were scattered fragments of household pottery. The plaster was still blackened with the smoke of the peat fires that once had blazed on the hospitable hearth. Weeds and nettles flourished among the hearth stones where, in the old days, Highland lads and lasses had gathered around and told their tales of love and war.

Dark days had come upon the glen when southern millionaires offered high rents for game preserves. Then thriving homesteads were broken up, and loyal clansmen, their wives and little ones, were driven away to make room for the red deer. This had happened during the lifetime of his uncle, Chief MacBayn, and the unrighted wrongs of his people still lay heavily upon Harold Murray's generous heart. Some of the evicted families he had already restored to their homes, but the work, in which Rhoda was deeply interested was still far from complete.

"I notice that you have carried out some of the requests I made of you last year in the way of repatriating your people, Mr. Murray," Rhoda said, after a brief silence.

"Yes, I have done a good deal."

"Has Widow Gowrie received back her little farm yet?"

"She has, and she now calls herself the happiest woman in the glen."

"Has Red Duncan got back his hill pasture?"

"He has, my liege lady."

"Has Mrs. MacRae received a pig to replace the one that died?"

"Yes, she came and got the choice of my whole farm litter!"

"Thank you, Mr. Murray, for doing my bidding," Rhoda spoke with deep feeling. "Good deeds bring their own reward."

"The reward may come, but not yet," he replied, with a trace of bitterness in his voice. "The people blame me for what my forefathers did. And even when I undo the wrongs they did, I get but little credit for it. They love you, but they seem almost to hate me. So I feel discouraged and unhappy."

"I am surprised," she said, gently. "You, who have made so many homes happy, should have the happiest one of all."

"Glengowan Castle is the loneliest spot in the country." There was a note of pathetic sadness in the young man's voice. "Since my mother died, two years ago, I have had no home life, and my heart cries out for love, for sympathy, and for help in my undertakings."

The girl's head was bent, and her face, flushed with intense feeling, was averted, but she did not withdraw the hand which he took in his own.

"The people love you, Miss Wynne," he went on, speaking with intense earnestness. "I am of the people and I love you, too. We feel that you belong to us. Rhoda, I have loved you since first we met. Will you be my wife?"

The girl hesitated long before replying. But her answer, at last, was decisive.

"My heart says yes, Harold. I love Glengowan, I love its people, and I love you."

"Thank heaven! I have no more to ask."

The young man would have clasped her in his arms, but, evading his embrace, she said gently:

"There is one very important thing that you must ask; the consent of my uncle and guardian, the Honorable George Hardwick. He is sole arbiter of my destiny."

"Then heaven help me!" exclaimed Harold, in genuine dismay. "I met your uncle in London last winter, and he made no secret of the fact that he detests Highlanders."

"Uncle George's prejudices are very