

REMINISCENCES  
OF  
AN OLD COMMERCIAL.

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No I.

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THE QUEEN AND THE DEESIDE PEASANTS.

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“The heart has tendrils like the vine,  
Which round another's bosom twine,  
Outspringing from the parent tree  
Of deeply-planted sympathy.” — *Browning*.

Anything authentic that can bring out the real traits, womanly wisdom, and tact that endear her to all with whom Her Majesty comes in contact around “Her ain Highland Hame” must be interesting to her subjects. It is not merely as a Queen that the common people love and respect Her Majesty. She enters their hearts through the doors of their humble sheils, and sympathizes with them in their trials and troubles, and assists them with her counsel and advice. Their lives, and their lives' history are all known, and most of the menials of the royal palaces are drafted from the lowly sheils on Deeside. How much better would it be to have a few lords-in-waiting made up from the same stock. Love, loyalty, and true devotion are nowhere more firmly rooted than in the highland heart. It is now thirty-three years since I had occasion to do business with Mr. James McKenzie, general merchant, Ballater. I remember driving him up to his father's house at Alt-na-Quithasach, Loch Muick, in the autumn of 1862. The road was only in the course of formation, and there was no stable to put up the horse. His father occupied one of the cottages, and the Queen resided occasionally in the other, which is fully described in her book—“Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands”—where a sketch by the Queen is also given of the sheil. I remember we had dried venison at lunch, firm and sweet, it cut like cheese. It was a gift from the Queen to McKenzie, who received a similar gift every year. When he was a lad of twelve years the Queen entered the cottage one morning while he was at his morning meal—

porridge and milk—and taking up a horn spoon, a kind of spoon generally used in that district, partook of several spoonfuls out of his dish, and laying her hand on his head, said, “James, now you can say you have supped porridge and milk with the Queen.” It is in such touches of nature that has made the Queen’s life on Deeside so happy, natural, pure and loveable. There is no fear, awe, or dread in her presence, and Her Majesty rejoices with those that do rejoice, and weeps—tears in reality—with those who weep.

The Queen is enthroned far higher in the hearts of her people around her at Deeside than when she is presiding at the receptions of the aristocracy in their pride, pomp, and grandeur.

#### THE QUEEN’S OWN SHOP (property built by her).

The late John Symon, general merchant, Balmoral, was a very quiet, respectable, plodding, pawky, canny individual. So canny and so careful was he in his purchases that he actually required a whole day to select, from samples, an ordinary parcel which most buyers could have selected with ease in a couple of hours. But if the worthy old merchant was slow in buying he was always sure and prompt in paying. When I first made his acquaintance in 1862 he had a very small house and shop, having narrow low windows with small panes of glass, similar to the other cottage windows in that district. The premises stood on the Balmoral estate, and consequently belonged to Her Majesty, by whom they were remodelled and renewed prior to 1870 (the date to which this refers.) Mr. Symon’s house and shop were situated at the east entrance to Balmoral Castle, and commanded a fine view of a very long avenue leading to the royal residence. One autumn evening, in the above year, saw the writer at Mr. Symon’s shop-door with a trap containing six cwts. of drapery samples, from needles to broadcloth, representing one of the largest dry goods establishments in Scotland. After the usual preliminary talk, business was commenced, and the old gentleman went through books of buttons, cases of cottons, flannels, linens, dresses, and tartans, making his selections warily, as usual, from 9 a. m. till about noon, assisted by his wife and one or two daughters, when one of his daughters said, “Oh! here’s the Queen comin’.” I had no idea there was so much “smeddum” or activity in Mr. Symon until I saw him bundling up and stowing away the samples he had been looking over. “Come awa’, min, an’ help me tae get them oot o’ the road,” he said to me.

I had been a little soured at him keeping them all exposed and mixed up, so I stepped outside and left him to clear them as best he could. My trap was standing unyoked about twenty yards from the shop, and taking my stand beside it I observed Her Majesty and the Princess Louise coming along the avenue followed by the stalwart John Brown, who was clad in Highland costume of dark brown, and a Glengarry cap. A few yards behind, a carriage, drawn by a pair of greys, followed. I observed when the Queen turned and addressed John Brown he doffed his cap while replying. The Queen and the Princess Louise entered the shop, John Brown remained outside, while the carriage was ordered to take a turn round by the distillery. In a little Mrs Symon made her appearance at the front door and beckoned John Brown, who entered, and after staying in long enough to swallow "high twal," came out smacking his lips and took his station beside me. While we were having some general conversation, the Queen made her appearance at the shop door with a poodle which she made stand on its hind legs, spin, walk, etc. She then re-entered the shop and remained there for about half-an-hour, when she emerged with the Princess, and was followed up by John Brown. They went off in the direction the carriage had taken.

On entering the shop I was accosted by Mrs. Symon with a long Scotch screed, somewhat as follows:

"I sis-sure you! you micht think muckle o' yersel' the day. I never heard the Queen or ony ither bodie speerin' sae muckle aboot onything or onybodie as fat she speered aboot you, an' your button books, patterns, patches, and swatches a' lyin' aboot there, fa' you were and far you cam' frae. She was astonished at hearin' you cam' frae Glesca' a' the wye." "Why did you not call me in to assist you in selling a parcel to Her Majesty?" I said. "Gae wa', min," said she, tossing her dress cap and making the ribbons and flowers in it flutter, "you trav'lers are nae better than common hawkers." I admitted the fact, but reminded her that—

"An honest man, though ere sae puir,  
Is king o' men for a' that."

I asked her, although dealing with Royalty, if the text did not apply to her case—"As the driving of a nail between two stones so is the evil in buying and selling." "She never saw that in the Bible," she replied. "Well it is in the book adjoining it, the Apocrypha," I said, and after a little more banter I spent a couple

of hours to good purpose. I found the old merchant was in grand fettle, after having sold the Queen a large quantity of different materials, which were to be gifted away by Her Majesty to the aged, infirm, and poor around her much loved Highland Home.

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### **THE HARPER'S SONG.**

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“ Mother, why does the wintry wind  
 Moan so sadly amongst the trees ? ”  
 “ Child, there’s a Harper old and blind,  
 Whose Harp is the air and whose Song the breeze,  
 And day and night when the wild winds blow  
 He is singing of seasons long ago—  
 Buried by Time long since from sight—  
 Their dirge he is playing with all his might.

“ Sometimes he singeth, and with the strain  
 He mingles teardrops of snow or rain ;  
 He weeps so often, the flowerets know  
 That the rain and the hail and the drifting snow  
 Are olden sorrows, and through his grief  
 They spring to bud and blossom and leaf,  
 Till his sadness is changed, in their Summer glee,  
 To pæans of joyous melody.

“ From quivering harpstrings this Harper hoar  
 Scatters o’er earth his golden store  
 Of garnered sunlight from Summer’s breath,  
 Ere his wintry dirge of pain and death  
 Fills the gray sky and the ocean wide—  
 Fills the white vale and the mountain side ;  
 His gayest tune is of Autumn born,  
 With its chorus of birds and of rustling corn.”

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WHIPPING THE CAT.

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“Industry begets a love of gain.”—*Goldsmith*.

Heigh Ho! How time does pass, and what changes it does bring about! I was never more strongly struck with the force of these truths than when on a visit lately to Kirriemuir, which has risen into fame as Thrums. Forty years ago it was a comparatively small burgh, whose inhabitants were quiet, staid, frugal, and industrious, in striking contrast to the hurrying, bustling citizens, whose speech, walk, and bearing now-a-days say—as plain as language can express it—business! What signified the improved and altered appearance of the place to me? My thoughts were away with this friend and the other now gone—this and the other acquaintance now left—and few, very few, of the then familiar faces now to be seen. Memory pictures and places their forms before me. In imagination, I can hear their well-remembered voices, and I laugh with them still as their sallies of wit ring in my ear. The last evening I spent there when on the road was with a very old friend and companion, one of the oldest—if not the oldest—traveller on the road, along with one of my oldest and best accounts on the journey—alas! both are now gone. The latter’s life history, his early struggles, of which he gave us a summary that night, I shall never forget, and feel how inadequately I can describe them. I shall confine myself to his “Whippin’ the Cat” epoch, and relate it as nearly as I can in his own language.

“Weel, ye see, my father bein’ a puir wirkin’ man it cudna be expedit that he cude affuird to gie me muckle schulin’, as there was a big faimly o’ us a’ thegither. We got a fell smatterin’ o’

readin' an' a roond or twa o' the single carritchers frae himsel'. Syne ony little trifle o' coontin' an' writin' that ever I got was frae a fell clever sort o' a billie, a stane mason to trade, an' only took up a forenicht schule in the winter time. There wisna sic a thing as a day schule ava whaur I wis brocht up, an' in my young days a loon wis considered weel aff gin he got his meat for herdin' or for ony orra scutterin' wark. It wis a great ferly in thae days to get a trade at ane's finger ends. I mind hoo prood I wis to get awa' an' learn to whup the cat.

"I canna tell you hoo the tylerin' cam' to be ca'd this unless pussie got mair drubbins than usual, seein' there wid be by-ordinar' temptations in her wye on account o' strangers bein' in the hoose. At a' events I gaed to sair oot my time, for four years, for naething but my meat an' a bit dud or twa, gin I got on an' behaved mysel', but there was nae richt bargain aboot this, just a wurd o' mou', as a' sic-like bargains were in thae days. We had to be up an' stirrin' by the screech o' day, an' aften had to trudge for miles to oor wark, whilk weel-a-wat we had nae want o'—aye far mair than we cou'd ha' oor faces till. I've seen us bespoke for mair than twa months, an' sometimes shew'd for a haille week on end in ae hoose, whaur there wid be a fell curran o' laddies to clead. Bein' but a lawthie mysel', I cou'd sympatheese wi' the wee loonies, in their great glee, as they sat an' watched, an' e'e the ae leg an' syne the tither arm steekit on. The fouk were aye a' very kind to us; we got the best o' meat an' a' thing else the hoose cou'd affurd. Gin it contained onything better than anither it wis aye putten doon afore us; gentle an' semple vied wi' ane anither in this respect, an' gin we had a nicht or mair to stop at ony place, we aye got sheets an' beddin' white as caa'k. Newspapers were a michtie scarce crap in thae days, an' unco little stramash or excitement o' ony kind. We kent fully as muckle as the maist o' fouk fat wis gaen on aroond us; wi' haein' tae shift aboot sae muckle, bein' a hantle ootwith an' hearin' the maist o' fouk's stories.

"There wis nae hurry-scurry in thae days—there wis nae occasion for that ava. Fouk joggit alang bran canny-wyse, an' maybe cam' as near the mark as they dae yet for a' the strushie they mak'. Oor maister juist charged a shillin' i' the day for his ain wark, an' fourpence the piece for us billies, oor meat forby. We made up new claes an' mendit auld anes, haid nae set 'oors or rules, but conformed in a' things wi' the custom o' the hoose we

wrocht in for the time being. The maister wid crack wi' the guidman or the guidwife, as the case micht be, while we wou'd hae oor ain diversions wi' the young fouk, an' got question aboot wi' them, an' joined in the family worship whaur it was observed. It wis a very different wye-a-doin' a' thegither frae the ongains noo-a-days. Nane o' the wimen-fouk had gum-flo'er bonnets, an' ye widna seen a billie wi' a lum hat: guid snod snoods the wimen-fouk wore, an' braw braid guid blue bonnets crooned oor ain taps. I dinna ken if heids be ony better ootwardly or inwardly wi' a' the cheenge; for a' their cuts an' capers wi' claes, I quiestan if they're ony better for them a', or gin they keep the heart ony better or sae weel in its ain place. Wi' sae mony projects, learnin', an' manners, I hae my ain doots gin they hinna tint a fell lot o' guid auld farrant common-sense; I am gyein sure they hinna keepit a grup o' the hamely links that bun' the community thegither as ae family. Wi' a' their fashions an' grandeur to the ootward appearance, are they ony mair comfortable, couthie, or content sin' the days o' auld langsyne, when me, an' the like o' me, gaed whuppin' the cat frae place to place an' shew'd awa' in cotter hoosie or muckle ha'? I diinna look upon thae days wi' ony sin, shame, or disparagement in the least, neither diff I tell you o' them for a boast. I am neither happier nor ony better this day than fat I wis gaen roond the country wi' my guid God-fearin' master whuppin' the cat."

My friend afterwards detailed in his own characteristic style how as a boy he pictured out a shop of his own when on a visit to the burgh. By his own industry and perseverance he got his wish accomplished, and for fifty years he was one of the leading merchants and public benefactors in the place. He also took a young man for his partner in his old age, who ultimately became his successor.

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No. III.

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THE WRAITH OF TUMMEL BRIDGE.

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“ Can’ ye by Athol, lad wi’ the philabeg,  
Doon by the Tummel an’ banks o’ the Garry ? ”

MANY years ago I had occasion to visit Tummel Bridge Inn at least thrice a year. I have driven the district in all seasons, and seen this wild and romantic district in all weathers. In the autumn of 1868 the shadow of Schiehallion was thrown o’er the valley of the Tummel, one evening, ere I left the village of Kinloch Rannoch for Tummel Bridge Inn. The sun had disappeared behind the high and rugged western hills of Rannoch, leaving its gloamin’ gloom on Dunalister’s birken shaw. Business for that day was at an end, and I leisurely allowed my horse to climb at walking pace each snag and steep brae. After passing Dunalister the road slopes and winds in keeping with the tumbling river. The road at that period was very narrow and winding, and in many parts very steep. With a mind at ease, a landscape unlit, the noise of the river and the whirr of the startled grouse, I was contemplating a happy evening with my friend the host of Tummel Bridge Inn.

In this mood, and giving my horse rein, who knew his journey’s end was near, I espied a form in flowing robes on the road before me. At first sight I imagined it was a gipsy—one of that tribe of wanderers to be met all over that lonely district. I was a little astonished, however, at the figure keeping the same distance in front, although my horse had increased the pace. The form kept ahead, and finally vanished from my view on a sharp turn of the road where a clump of natural birches grew on a small knoll.



The incident would in all likelihood have passed unheeded from my recollection had not the following incident occurred that same night, and which has cost me not a little thought, and to this day I am unable to unravel the mystery connected therewith. Fifteen minutes or so from the time that the female form had disappeared, I had arrived at the inn of Tummel Bridge. The horse was unharnessed, stabled, and made comfortable for the night. The landlord and I had supper, and giving and getting the news of the district, newspapers at this period being very few and far between in that quarter. In this manner we sat discussing the affairs of trade, of Church and State, and in a happy, brotherly, and friendly manner spending the night. Not a sound save the sigh o' the Tummel disturbed us in our conversation, till we were preparing to part for our respective apartments. All on a sudden the barking and howling of dogs took place, of which there were, with collies and terriers, at the very least half-a-dozen in connection with the establishment. "What is the row?" I enquired of the landlord. The landlord, whose face I observed grew very pale, although usually sunburnt and ruddy, muttered some sentences or other in Gaelic, of which I knew nothing, and said to me in English, "Will you put on your boots and go out and see what it is?" The dogs still continued to bark, and when we got to the door we found manservants and maidservants with lanterns lit searching the farm-steading and outside premises. Nothing was to be seen, and no one could account for the disturbance. The servants and others gave their impressions expressed in Gaelic, and the dogs got orders in the same language to cease their noise. The landlord, taking a lantern from one of the servants, asked me if I would accompany him, which I did. He then told me that his servant informed him in Gaelic that it was a wraith he had seen. It had appeared in various forms of late, but to-night it came in pure white, and made straight for the Free Church Manse. The dogs had followed it to the door of the Manse, and the minister, who was a very old man and a bachelor, was away from home. The landlord had charge of the premises in his absence, and having the key in his pocket he went away, although drawing near the hour of midnight, to inspect the house. There was no roadway proper, merely a grass-covered path with tufts of heather and bent that led on to the manse, which proved to be a lonely, dreary abode, about two hundred yards distant from the inn. On reaching the

manse and gaining an entrance, I remember of observing all the doors, windows, shutters, and floors being patched and pasted over with old newspapers to keep out the wintry winds and mountain blasts. There was not a vestige of life to be seen, and collie and terrier failed to trace the cause of the disturbance, from anything we could scan, within the walls of the old manse. We returned, as wise as we left, to the hotel, but before going to sleep I remembered the form that I had seen vanishing from my view at the foot of Dunalister brae. Neither then nor at any time have I ever believed in wraiths, witches, or warlocks, and it was with mixed feelings that I read of the old minister's death before I again had occasion to visit Tummel Bridge. The wraith had been seen again after that time, but led to a house at a good distance, and on the opposite side of the river. On being told this circumstance I again threw off incredulity, and had little difficulty in my own mind of making light of the wraith. Alas, however, death came and carried off one in the prime of her life—the summons came with suddenness—with startling effect on the neighbours in that quiet and secluded spot. Within a year the landlord himself was overtaken by death, and in a very sudden manner. Mr. James Menzies of Tummel Bridge Inn was a comparatively young man, not over forty years of age. He was strong, well-knit, agile, and a thorough highlander, as his name implies. He was taken ill at Kenmore one afternoon, with great difficulty was able to be driven home, and in a couple of days breathed his last. His sister, who conducted the hotel till about ten years ago, rehearsed all the circumstances regarding his death, which coincided in every detail with his own belief in the wraith, while he was in life and the best of health. I had my own thoughts then, and allowed others to form their own impressions of the wraith said to have been so often seen at Tummel Bridge. The most difficult part to understand was the part played by the dogs—their wild howling and barking. I could only account for this by their having an enemy in the mountain fox, by no means a stranger in those wilds. It is now a good many years since I last visited the locality, but I have often thought of the incident. So far as I am aware, not one is now alive at Tummel Bridge, when the wraith was said to be seen in 1868. The only links that go to make up the chain of evidences for the wraith at Tummel Bridge are the weird, wild, lone, and homely homes of a warm, affectionate, kind, true, but illiterate people. They found

their faith in the supernatural through the Gaelic. Theirs is the gospel of witch and warlock, frets, dreams, and every form of ancient superstition. They live, move, and have their being and belief in the unseen, with as firm a faith as that which is seen through the eyes of sense.

