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THE TRUE STORY OF BETTIE WILLCOX AND HER CLOCK.

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"MAY I DRINK TEA AGAIN UNDER ITS SHADOW."

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CHAPTER I.



AMONG many little curios and mementos of travel, I have a small hank of yarn, half silk, half thread, such as the finest harness shawls that our great grandmothers wore were made of in Paisley. Beside it is a bit of wood from an old pear tree—the very tree Lady Nairne wrote of in her charming ballad, called “The Auld House.” The auld house is that of Gask, where Lady Nairne* was born about the year 1773. Up the tree I allude to one of the Laird’s (Oliphant of Gask’s) men-servants climbed to give to his master, through the window of his bedchamber, the news of the defeat at Culloden; and of it Lady Nairne, a daughter of the Laird, wrote:—

“Still flourishing the auld pear tree
The bairnies liked to see,
And oh, how aften did they speer
When ripe they a’ wad be?”

At the auld house o’ Gask, Prince Charlie once found refuge. The song says:—

“The ledly too, sae genty
There sheltered Scotland’s heir,
And clipt a lock wi’ her ain hand,
Frae his lang yellow hair.”

At the house of Gask, too, was the mountain ash that Lady Nairne has written of in *The Rowan Tree*, and up a lane in the parish of Gask the “Laird o’ Cockpen,” as she relates so wittily, came to woo Mistress Jean when she was “making the elderflower wine.”

My old friend Mrs. Duncan, who gave me the yarn and the bit of wood, is a great granddaughter of the land steward of the auld Laird o’ Gask, and one of his daughters, her great aunt, was christened Carlina, in honour of Prince Charles Edward and his visit.

This Mrs. Duncan it is who sits by her wheel—at which she earns her daily bread—in our picture. She too it was who told me the story of the high clock, and her own story I have given in the pages of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The skein of yarn I prize was part of some left over after the knitting of three pairs of stockings, that may, like the clock, be called historical.

In the gloaming, after an eventful day in the month of April, 1746, a little girl about four years old was playing alone beside a burn that ran noisily through the small ancient town of St. Ninians, near to Stirling. She did not feel lonely; in fact, it was delightful to her just to be quiet, and to linger beside the merry stream, playing with bits of wood and pebbles, and throwing them into the running water. The whole community of the township—it was not much more than a straggling village, with a long main street that ran down the hill to the stream, and up a steep ascent again, with substantial stone houses and cottages on

either side—was moved to its very core by the passing through of a portion of the English army on its way south after the battle of Culloden.

A party of soldiers were drinking in a hostelry near-by the burn, and amongst them was the father of the little girl who was playing beside the water. He was a paymaster-sergeant, who, as long as his wife lived, had been a respectably-conducted man, and a good father to his two children. Their mother had, however, lately died, and the man, partly through trouble, and partly because it was a common failing with men of his calling, had during the march been drinking freely. Now and again the playing child glanced towards the hostelry, but the noise there and the excitement frightened her a good deal. Though the mother had followed her husband into Scotland, so as to be near in order to influence him, as she had always done, for good, she had kept her children in as quiet a lodging as she could procure in the town of Perth, and little Bettie shrank from the jokes and the rough talk of the soldiers as from something she was unused to. The shades of evening were closing in, Bettie had wandered a little further away; the men were hastily ordered to march on; and in the bustle and haste, probably still more in the confusion of mind induced by strong drink, the paymaster-sergeant forgot his little daughter, and later on the poor child was found crying bitterly beside the burn. Happily for her, it was good Antony Dunning, the ruling elder in the parish church, who heard her cries and took the deserted bairn to his own home near. She could just tell him that her mother was dead, that her own name was Bettie Willcox, and that her father had left her to go and drink with the soldiers, and that was about all. So long as her kind friend lived Bettie was well cared for in his home; she received as good an education as the little town afforded, but always understood that, when she was old enough, she would go out into the world and earn her own living. Bettie never heard of her father again, and soon, in the regularity and comfort of her new life, he seemed to be forgotten. I mentioned another child—a boy that was—but he also was dropped and forsaken at some other point in the march south. It was many years before brother and sister met again, and then Bettie had walked many a weary mile to see him, after hearing from a stray pedlar that he knew of one of the same name as herself—and having a similar story—in a distant town.

The girl was sent to service, when she was considered old enough, up into the moorlands a few miles away, to a farm, and there she met the man who was father to her son John Duncan, with whose story our clock is more intimately connected. Whether this man died soon afterwards, or whether he simply ceased to care for Bettie and her boy, I do not know; but when John was a lad of about fourteen, full of spirit, and having a desire to see the world, he and his mother, under her maiden name, were living in the same village where she had been forsaken by her own father in her childhood, and were dependent on her exertions for their means of subsistence. To sea the boy was determined to go; so, although it pained the mother sorely to part with her only son, she went with him to Alloa, on the Forth, and there apprenticed him to Robert Spittal, master of a sailing-vessel called the *Ann Spittal*, of Alloa. Then she returned to her lonely little home, to work hard and to pray for the boy. Now and again he came to see her when his vessel was in port, but at last he left for a longer voyage than usual, bidding his mother keep up a good heart until they should meet again.

CHAPTER II.

“Wha wad ha’e thocht it,
Stockings wad ha’e boucht it?”

THAT time, which Bettie was always looking forward to, was very much further distant than John or she ever could have dreamed of. Those were times of suspense and uncertainty to parted friends. War after war broke out in Europe, and Bettie did not hear much of her son for several years; and then the news was brought her that he, like many another youth, the hope of his parents, had been kidnapped by a press-gang, and forced to enter the navy; and that he had been taken prisoner later in the Baltic, and was then detained in St. Petersburg, whence he would probably soon be sent to the awful wilds of Siberia.

To many women there would have appeared no possibility of help or comfort in such a case. A poor, friendless sailor in a far-off land, cut off, apparently, from all communication with his country, nothing could be done for him. So Bettie’s neighbours all told her; but the Englishwoman came of a good stock, and she was a determined woman, with plenty of spirit, and dauntless where her son was concerned.

Some of you who read this may have heard a charming story called “The Czar.” It is a faithful history of Alexander I., Emperor of Russia, and it tells how noble and generous a heart he had, and how faithfully he served his God, and how true he was to the interests of his people. In some way his fame had reached even the little town of St. Ninians, and one evening, as the troubled mother sat cogitating in her chair as to how she could reach the heart of the great emperor, the happy idea occurred to her that she would send him the present of some extra fine stockings of her own knitting, and a letter with them begging him to set her only son at liberty.

Had she been a weaker-minded woman, the neighbours would have laughed at and deterred her from this homely project. But Bettie’s soul was firm, and her instincts were sure. She thought only how she could procure yarn that was worthy of the emperor, and that she said she could only get in Paisley, some thirty miles distant.

One can imagine the brave woman closing her little house and walking away over roads harder to travel on than we know of nowadays, taking perhaps all the money she had to buy the beautiful yarn, which was a mixture of silk and thread, and in colour a pale indigo blue. And when she arrived at home again how quickly she would set to work on the long stockings, knitting in thoughts of love and yearnings for her boy.

“Eh, but she was a braw knitter!” said my friend, as she told me the story, and showed me the very chair, now almost in pieces, in which Bettie sat as she knitted. “An’ they were in a bonnie pattern, what used to be called ‘the sea wave’ an’ ‘the walls o’ Troy.’” She thought of her sailor and the cruel war when she chose those.

And when at last the three great pairs of stockings were finished, Bettie went quietly to an odd character who wrote all the letters for the working folk of the town. “Just pit in ’t what I’ll say to ye,” said she; and he, being a wag, and not believing for a moment that the letter would ever reach the august Czar, obeyed her literally. The following is an exact copy of that letter; the man who wrote it gave also a copy of it to a well-known inhabitant of Stirling, with whose son I have talked this story all over.

“St. Ninians by Stirling,
“April 2nd, 1804.

“Unto the Most Excellent Alexander Emperor of that Great Dominion of Russia and the Territories there Unto belonging Etc.

“Your Most Humble Servant Most Humbly begs your Most Gracious Pardon for my

* After writing the above, I found in last November’s number of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, there is a beautiful account of the Auld House o’ Gask and Lady Nairne, *née* Caroline Oliphant, by Professor Blackie. I advise those of our readers who have access to a library to read it, and they might also read, “An Historical Clock,” for the sake of fuller details of the later history of Bettie’s clock, in the same magazine for October, 1890.

boldness in approtching Your Most Dread Sovering for Your Clemency at this time. My Sovering the conclusion of this Freedome is on account of My Son whose name is John Duncan aged 26 years who was Prentiss with Robert Spittle his Master Captain of the *Ann Spittle* of Alloa at the time of the British Embargo in Your Soverings dominion in Russia and is the only support of me his Mother and Besaide I have no other freene for My Support to accept of this small Present from Your Ever Wellwisher whilst I have Breath. The said Present is three pair of Stockens for Going on when your Sovering goes out a hunting. If your Sovering were pleased to Accept of this and favour me with an answer of this by the Bearer and lett me Kno what Family of Children Your Sovering has I will send some Stockens for them for the Winter before the Winter comes on also what Sons and Dochters you might have.

"Most Dread Sovering I am Your Most Obedient Servant Till Death.

"(Signed) ELIZABETH WILLCOX.

"N.B.—Please to Direct to me to the care of Robert Rennie, Baker in St. Ninians by Stirling."

I should have said that just about the time the stockings were finished Bettie heard that a vessel was sailing from the port of Kincardine on Forth, some twenty miles or more away, for St. Petersburg.

With her parcel and the letter she started away, on foot, as when she went for the yarn. How full her heart must have been, and how many prayers she would send up to Him who is ever the friend of lonely, trusting women as she journeyed alone to the waterside. With a good-natured laugh the skipper took charge of her package, but without giving her much hope of its ever reaching its destination.

Fortune favoured the brave woman, however, for very soon after the vessel reached St. Petersburg, a young Scotsman, Dr. James Wyllie, who himself hailed from Kincardine on Forth, came down to have a crack with the captain, and to hear all the news of his native town. He had lately been appointed physician to the Emperor Alexander, and no one could better carry out the poor mother's commission than he could. No one better understood the simple goodness of the Czar, and at once he took charge of both packet and letter.

So moved by the mother's love and sorrow was the great Alexander, touched, too, by her confidence in his kindness, that he not only gave orders for the immediate release of John Duncan, but he also ordered a hundred pounds to be paid through the Russian Embassy to the baker at St. Ninians for Mistress Bettie Willcox!

A happy mother was Bettie. One picture the joyous meeting when due time had elapsed; and how rich she would feel with that hundred pounds. The neighbours were all filled with

amazement, and many with envy; and John, the hero of the little town, would be telling his story over and over again to the untravelled companions of his boyhood.

Soon he had to go again, for he still belonged to the navy; and then Bettie, who had always longed to possess "a high clock" such as all other women who were at all "house-proud" secured for themselves in those days, went quietly to a certain Mr. David Somerville, who was a noted clockmaker of that time, and gave him an order for one of the very best that could be made. John hoped to marry shortly, and the clock would always be a valuable heirloom. The face of it was sent away to Glasgow to be painted, as Bettie desired that no expense should be spared in the matter. "The case is mahogany, made in the Chipendale style, inlaid with boxwood. It is an eight-day clock, and the dial-plate is of finely wrought brass. On the door is that shell of inlaid work so familiar to us in furniture of the same period; lower down there is a bird, whilst a running pattern of fine scroll-work ornaments the sides and the top. On each side above the face is the badge of the Prince of Wales's feathers, finely inlaid.

"There are coloured pictures outside the dial at the four corners. On the right hand stands the Emperor Alexander of Russia, the father of Nicholas. He is represented as a fine, stately personage, in a long flowing crimson cloak lined with ermine; on his head is the imperial crown, and in his hand a sceptre or wand, with which he is pointing to a fleet of ships 'on a painted ocean' above the dial-plate. These are not all 'idle,' however, for one of them moves to and fro on a wave with each swing of the pendulum. Opposite to the emperor, in the left-hand corner, a comely-looking woman stands knitting a long and capacious stocking. She is dressed in the straight, short gown without a waist, belted high up under the bust, that was worn about ninety years ago. In the corner below her, on a sea-beach in front of some men-of-war, is a well-dressed gentleman of the same period; opposite to whom, underneath the emperor, a pretty young woman stands at a cottage door with a plump babe in her arms, the very picture of 'smiling content.'

"Over all yon there used to be a piece of wood," said the owner of the clock, as she showed it to me, 'and it had this inscription on it—

"'Wha wad ha'e thought it,
Stockings would ha'e boucht it?'"

Unfortunately, the inscription, which was on a separate bit of wood put across the top, has been removed, and got mislaid in the various movings the clock had to undergo. This is a pity, as the lines were, I believe, specially made, or possibly adapted, to suit their present purpose.

John, after this date, was taking part in

some of the great historical events of our country. He was on board the *Shannon* when a great sea duel was fought between that vessel belonging to the Royal Navy, and the American frigate the *Chesapeake*, on the first of June, 1813. Before that, too, he had been in his ship off Corunna, in Spain, at the time of the battle there in 1809—that celebrated one, when the gallant Sir John Moore was mortally wounded. You have nearly all of you learned those famous lines beginning—

"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corpse to the rampart we hurried."

Corunna has another tragic association for myself, the writer of this little paper; for in that town I landed alone from a little rowing-boat full of Portuguese sailors who could not understand a word I said, after being shipwrecked in the mail steamer *Douro*, in March, 1882. A forlorn-looking figure I was, without stockings or hat, my hair flying in the wind and rain; but, fortunately, with a good Harris tweed ulster over my night-clothes. I call it a tragical association, because, although I was mercifully preserved alive, great numbers lost their lives in that disaster.

John Duncan brought many pretty curios home with him from abroad, which my Mrs. Duncan—the one in our picture, telling me this story—still treasures. They were brought mostly as part of his young bride's flittin'—the old Scotch term for the wedding outfit.

The mother of Dr. Wyllie, the Czar's physician, was then living in Kincardine on Forth. She invited Mistress Bettie Willcox to come and see her; and away Bettie "traivelled" again. A proud woman, indeed, was the sailor's mother, as she and the mother of the emperor's own doctor drank tea together out of beautiful tea-things—a present from Alexander of Russia to Mrs. Wyllie.

The kindly nature of the great Czar prompted him to honour the old Englishwoman further. Some time later a grand personage called at Bettie's house. Unfortunately, she was from home at the time, which was a great sorrow to her, although she always spoke with much pride of that visit. The gentleman told the neighbours he was connected with the Russian Embassy, and that he was the bearer of a message of goodwill from the Emperor Alexander to Mistress Bettie Willcox.

And so the historical part of our clock's story ends. The sailor, John Duncan, left it to his son John, who was the husband of my friend the present possessor of it. It always goes by the name of "the Emperor," and it ticks as gallantly and as faithfully as it ever did. May it long do so. And may I drink tea again under its shadow, as the great old-fashioned wheel at which my friend earns her living, drones and booms under her busy hand; she turning to me from time to time as some quaint bit of old Scottish life occurs to her which she thinks would take my fancy.

A BATTLE WITH DESTINY.

By JOHN SAUNDERS, Author of "The Lion in the Path," "Abel Drake's Wife," etc.

CHAPTER XVII. EXPLORING.

AS Beth rejoined Jeanie and Sybil, she asked, "Where shall we go first?"

"We'll visit all the rooms opening from the hall," said Jeanie. "Come, Sybil"—putting an arm round her waist—"come and look at the remnants of departed grandeur. Here's the drawing-room. Why, it's locked!" They opened the door. The room was in darkness,

and when lighted by the raising of the blinds, appeared clothed in dust sheets. It was a noble apartment, and bore evidences of recent restoration. The cream and gold of its walls and the lofty ceiling, added to its ghostly drapery, made the room appear to the girls even larger than its real extent.

"It's been painted and done up," said Beth, almost in a whisper, as though awed by the huge, cold, white room.

"Yes," answered her sister, as they passed out, "grandfather had several of the rooms repainted;" but she did not remind Beth for what purpose they had been done in connection with the sad events of that time.

The next door was likewise locked. It was that of the small or inner drawing-room. This also had been painted, gilded, and re-decorated. The girls passed on in succession to the library,