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THE LOCH SPORRON MONSTER

Recent times had been good for Glensporron, and particularly for Angus MacWally, the Laird of the Estate. Unusual for Scotland, the year had been warmer and drier than previous ones, and the crops had flourished. Barns were full of grain and there were barrels of apples, and sacks of potatoes. Even the sheep seemed to like the warmer weather and their wool was the best it had ever been. This meant more than just enough food for the people living and working on the Estate; there was also plenty left over that could be sold to other places. Sometimes, these places were across the sea, and Angus had a sailing ship which could take the goods there; including woven blankets, knitted woollen jumpers, and other clothing made by the people of the Estate from Glensporron wool. The money earned from these overseas sales was making Angus quite rich.

There were some things that they were unable to make or grow themselves; things which needed much warmer temperatures than they had in Scotland; but, no worries – ships from the hotter countries brought them to Glensporron; at least they always used to. When his odd-job man Andy MacDoodle entered, the Laird was on the balcony peering out across the Loch, or lake as people outside Scotland would call it. “Where are they?” he asked Andy, “The ships bringing my bananas and coconuts should be here by now. Find out what’s happened to them MacDoodle.”

“Right away, Laird,” said Andy, sounding very nervous. This was because whenever something went wrong, he always got the blame. Hoping this wasn’t going to be one of those times, Andy hurried down to the dock on Loch Sporrion. There was a ship tied up, but it was the Laird’s; and as far as Andy knew, it should have already left with a cargo bound for England. A sailor was chatting to one of the dock workers, and as Andy approached he could hear them talking. “It was some kind of sea monster,” said the sailor, “And it was huge and really scary. Blocking the river mouth it was; and when we tried to sail past, it snapped and snarled and made an awful growly screeching sound. So we turned round and came straight back.”

“Sea monster indeed!” sneered Andy. “Sounds like you’ve been drinking too much rum.”

“I have not!” insisted the sailor. “And pretty soon any rum we have got will run out; then, unless something’s done about that monster we won’t be getting any more; or anything else that comes by sea. I caught a glimpse of two ships sailing off somewhere else; probably because they couldn’t get past the monster. You’d better tell the Laird to get rid of that bad-tempered thing or no ships will be able to leave or enter the Loch.”

Andy frowned. His day wasn’t going well so far, and he had a horrible feeling it was going to get worse. Knowing how sailors’ yarns and tales were often exaggerated, Andy said: “Before I say anything to the Laird, I have to see this so-called monster for myself. I want you to take me out of the Loch to the river mouth.”

“Not on your woolly bonnet!” exclaimed the sailor. “Our ship’s not going anywhere near it!”

There was nothing else for it. Until he knew exactly what the problem was, Andy couldn't say anything to his Laird. So he took a dinghy and rowed himself out to the river mouth. It was there alright, just as the sailor had described it; and it was blocking passage in and out of the Loch. This was exactly what he told the Laird on his return. Needless to say, Angus MacWally was not a happy Scotsman. "You have to do something about it MacDoodle!"

"Why me, Laird?" pleaded Andy. "I know nothing about monsters – I'm an odd-job man."

"You won't find a job much odder than this!" snorted the Laird. "Think, laddy, think!"

Andy was completely stumped and couldn't come up with any idea for getting rid of the monster. He even went out onto the Laird's balcony to stare at the Loch in the hopes that something would come to him. That was when he saw horsemen approaching the castle. "We have visitors, Laird," he announced. "It looks like Laird MacTatty from Glen Avergo."

"I wonder what *he* wants?" groaned Angus as he stomped out. Once in the courtyard, he asked the same question of the Glen Avergo Laird and added grumpily: "Make it quick, MacTatty. I've got important things to attend to."

Duncan MacTatty laughed. "You sure do, MacWally. Actually, I came to offer you a helping hand."

"That'll be a first!" sneered MacWally.

"Whatever," said MacTatty in a bored tone. "Now, as I see it, you have a monster of a problem." He paused to laugh again. "Two ships came to Glen Avergo today with cargos that should have been for you, but they couldn't get into Loch Sporrn. So, I told them they could offload on my dock. I now have your goods which I am prepared to deliver to you by horse and cart. Also, seeing as you can't sail your own ship out of the Loch, once the carts are unloaded, I can take your goods back to Glen Avergo and have one of the overseas ships sail your cargo to England for you."

Angus MacWally was suspicious: "What's the catch, MacTatty? What's in it for you?"

"Glad you brought that up, Angus – I'd forgotten to mention my fee. I ask a moderate thirty percent of the value of the goods, both coming and going; and I daresay the Captain of the ship taking your stuff to England will want paying. What do you think, Angus? Is that fair?"

"Fair?!!!" spluttered MacWally. "It's outrageous! Monstrous!"

MacTatty grinned widely. "Good word that. I'll leave you to figure out what to do about the one blocking your river. Meanwhile, think on my offer and let me know what you decide. Don't leave it too long – those bananas won't last forever."

Angus snarled at the backs of MacTatty and his horsemen as they rode off; then turned and stormed into his castle, growling: "That man is a rogue, a highway robber! I'll be ruined!"

Andy MacDoodle overheard his grumbling and said: "Perhaps not, Laird. I think I may have a solution."

MacWally waited. MacDoodle seemed reluctant to go on, so Angus urged: "Well?"

"The dragon," Angus replied simply. "Remember how we got rid of that?"

"With those awful musicians, you mean?" said Angus, and he rolled his eyes at the thought.

"Exactly, Laird," said Andy, quite pleased with himself. "Their music was so dreadful it frightened the fire-breathing dragon away and we haven't seen it since. I believe Balmpot and Lummox can do the same again to get rid of the sea monster. What do you think?" He watched as the Laird paced up and down, frowning and scowling; then he had stopped and was staring at his odd-job man. "So," started Andy cautiously, "Do I try to find them?"

"Don't just *try*, MacDoodle," grated the Laird, "Get them back here; and quick smart!"

Finding the two musicians wasn't as easy as Andy had thought. Despite putting the word out to areas far and wide, it was three days before news came that Balmpot and Lummox were over the border in England. Next, it took another two days and some fast horses to go there and bring them back to Glensporrn. By this time, Angus MacWally was the grumpiest Laird that

ever there was. "About time!" he yelled as Andy brought in the two performers. "Have you told them about the job, MacDoodle?"

Before Andy could reply, Balmpot said: "Have no fear, Laird. We'll sing and play it away, just like we did the dragon."

"At least this monster doesn't breathe fire," added LummoX, "Which is as well – the weather being warm like it is."

That was the plan and Andy MacDoodle was given the task of setting it in motion. The idea was for someone to row the two musicians out to the river mouth where they would start playing and singing; and their caterwauling being so unbearable, the monster should swim away. Problem one was that Andy didn't fancy rowing the boat himself, and as everyone else was afraid of the monster he was unlikely to find someone to do it. Then he remembered Numpty. He was well known for being as daft as a brush; and he was only too pleased to help his Laird. He did ask, though: "What's a sea monster?" Andy smiled, patted Numpty on the shoulder and told him not to worry about it. Problem two came a short time later.

With Numpty rowing, Balmpot and LummoX stood in the front of the boat and began to practise. Balmpot was the piper. He puffed on a tube to blow up the bag under his arm and once it was full he squeezed the air out down the pipes fixed to the bag to make a wailing sound. LummoX then joined in with his singing. It was the most horrible sound imaginable; but Numpty who was tone deaf quite liked it and decided to join in. If anything, his singing was just as bad if not worse than LummoX's. But, hey – this was about frightening off a monster, not serenading it.

As they rowed into the river, it being narrower than the Loch and with high sides, the sound kind-of echoed, and that added to the racket. Before they'd even reached the river mouth, the monster must have heard the noise; but instead of swimming away from it, he or she was coming down the river to meet it. Anyone with sense would have realised that the monster was attracted to the noise; so the best way to stop it following was to keep quiet. Unfortunately, there was no time for sense, just panic; and as they turned round and headed back to the Loch, the trio were so frightened that they played and sang even louder.

Andy and the Laird had been watching from the bank of the Loch, pleased that all seemed to be going well. Then the rowing boat appeared, and right behind it the monster. "What are those idiots doing?" spluttered MacWally. "They're supposed to chase the monster away, not invite it into the Loch!"

"I think it's different to the dragon, Laird," offered Andy. "It seems to like their music."

"Well, get out there, MacDoodle, and tell them to stop making it!"

By the time Andy had found another boat and rowed to within shouting distance, the three in the other boat were in the middle of the Loch with the monster close behind. "Stop, stop!" he yelled. "Stop playing and singing! Stop with the noise!" The trio took notice. The bagpipe wailed and groaned into silence while Numpty and LummoX stopped singing. For Andy it was a blessed relief; for the monster puzzling. It just stayed where it was and floated around on the spot.

The Laird was waiting for them as the two rowing boats reached the shore, and he was not best pleased. "Thank you very much, I don't think!" he snarled. "We're even worse off than we were before. This is all your fault, MacDoodle, you and your stupid ideas! Come up with another and get that thing out of my Loch!"

With a groan and a deep sigh, Andy MacDoodle had a quick think before giving his next orders: "While the monster is just swanning around in the middle of the Loch, I want you, Numpty, to row quietly round the shoreline to get past it; then head for the river. Balmpot and LummoX, you must hold off on your playing and singing until you are in the river. Once there, give it all you've got; and Numpty, you row like billy-o for the river mouth and the sea."

Again, Angus MacWally watched and waited. For a change, it seemed, his odd-job man had got something right; and as soon as the caterwauling started up, the monster turned and followed the sound across the Loch. It was almost entering the river, when the Laird heard loud

noises behind him – cheering and shouts of glee. Spinning round, he was confronted by lots of people crying out: “There it is – the monster of Loch Sporrn! Heh-hey!”

As the crowd gathered on the bank of the Loch to stare in wonder at the monster, a man came up to MacWally. Dipping into his sporran, he pulled out a pouch of coins and handed it to Angus. “You’re very lucky to have a monster in your Loch, Laird. Folk from all over will pay good money to come and see it, just like these people have...” The man broke off and stared. “The monster seems to be leaving the Loch. Why is that?”

“Um, er...” Angus had to think quickly. “It goes out to sea for its dinner – fish, you know.”

“But aren’t there fish in the Loch?” the man started, then realised: “Of course – it’s a big monster and it will probably have eaten all the fish in the Loch. It does come back though, doesn’t it?”

After reassuring the man that the monster would indeed return to the Loch after it had its dinner, MacWally dragged Andy aside and grated under his breath: “Take a fast horse and get to the river mouth before the monster is lured right out to sea. Tell the singing racket-makers to bring it back into the Loch.” Once MacDoodle had gone, the Laird approached the man who was presumably a tour guide. “While the tourists are waiting for the monster’s return, I’ll have some refreshments prepared for them.”

The Laird hurried back to the castle and had his staff set up tables and chairs along the banks of the Loch; and gave instructions to his cooks to prepare plenty of food. The tourists were both overjoyed and surprised with what they regarded as a highland feast; and the tour guide complimented Angus for coming up with the idea to feed his visitors. “Will this be a regular thing?” he asked. “If it is, we’ll have to charge our tourists a bit more.”

The new business venture took a while to organise and, naturally, Andy MacDoodle was given the job. The Laird had to admit that his odd-job man did well. Permanent shelters were set up along the banks of the Loch; and Balmpot and Lummox were employed to take the monster out to feed on fish in the sea. This was timed so that MacWally’s ship could leave and return safely; and any ships bringing cargo from elsewhere simply waited until the monster was well clear of the river mouth before sailing into the Loch.

So things in Glensporrn were certainly looking up. As word spread, the Monster of Loch Sporrn became famous throughout the land; and the Laird was making so much money that he added another ship and had two more docks built on the sea shore well away from the river mouth. That meant he no longer had to rely on Duncan MacTatty’s non-generosity; and that the monster could come and go from the Loch without disrupting the sea trade. Everyone at Glensporrn was happy.

The two musicians were extra pleased as well. “It was good of the Laird to give us a full-time job,” said Balmpot.

“And don’t forget the cottage,” Lummox reminded him, “Which we get for free.”

“Plus a horse and cart so that we can go to work each day,” added Balmpot.

“Just as well,” said Lummox, “Seeing as we’re miles away from the castle and anywhere else. I wonder why the Laird picked such a remote place?”

“Haven’t a clue,” said Balmpot, picking up his bagpipes. “Now, I think it’s time for practice. Shall we try that new number we wrote?”

“Good idea,” said Lummox. “Got to get it right before we play it to the monster.” In less than a minute the pair was wailing and howling to their heart’s content, the awful sound echoing across the valley.

The other side of the hills in the Glensporrn Estate, even those who lived there didn’t mind at all, because they were too far away to hear a thing.