the Glenmore Haunting

A Jigsaw Puzzle Mystery
Read the story, assemble the puzzle and find the clues. Can you solve the mystery?

Story by Alan Robbins
Naturally it was raining. Not a gentle rain but the kind of icy downpour found only at haunted houses. And Glenmore Castle was the perfect place for a haunting. It was one of those old stone castles that dot the eastern coast of Scotland. The whole colorful and violent history of the Celts and the Scots seemed to be etched in its austere towers. Not exactly the sunny spot John and Emma Steele had hoped for as they planned their next vacation. But when she won the trip in a contest, it seemed that fate had made the decision for them. Now, standing before the castle in all its menace, she wondered whose side fate was really on.

The rain drenched them as they watched the taxi disappear into the night. Shadows of the turrets overhead covered them like the hands of doom as they scurried through the front gate. But at the door, John hesitated before rapping the ornate brass knocker. It was all so trite, he thought. A cliché from a late night movie. He already knew what would happen. The door would creak, the wind would hoot, a bald butler would guide them by candlelight through the cobwebs. There would be a curse, a ghost, a murder. It was all so predictable he had to laugh.

"Funny?" Emma said, wringing her hair like a sponge. "You think this is funny?"

"You don't," he asked. "The situation. Doesn't it remind you of something?"

"It reminds me exactly of one of our vacations. One where you get blamed for a murder. Promise me that won't happen this time."

"Are you getting bored of it all, my dear?" John asked smiling his best phony smile.  "Not bored, darling," she said just as fraudulently. "Just tired of getting you off the hook."

Suddenly the huge wooden door creaked open. No need to knock, John thought, the owners of the house had seen the same movie. But that wasn't quite true. For one thing, the person who answered the door wasn't bald. She was a pleasant, lively woman in her fifties and she had elegant silver gray hair.

"Ach," she said, looking at the Steeles miserably, "you look like drowned geese, the two of you. Come in and get to the fire, quick. You'll catch your death like this."

She ushered them into the great room of the castle. As expected, there was a long medieval table in the center and beyond it a walk-in fireplace with a crackling fire. Overstuffed armchairs glowed in the firelight. There was even an elaborate display of axes and swords nearby, and an immense faded tapestry on the far wall.

But there were also a few surprises. The room was lit, not by creepy candles, but by a high-tech set of halogen tracks installed on a scaffold. A fancy CD system was playing soft jazz. There was a wide screen TV in the corner, and a cellular phone on a small table.

It was a perfect mix of the ages: chivalry meets technology.

"It's a blasted hell of a night for traveling," the woman said as she helped John and Emma peel off their wet coats.

"Not for us," Emma said brightly. "This is our kind of vacation. The gloomier the better!"

"She means your castle is very interesting," John said, trying to cloak the joke.

"That it is," the woman said. "I'm sure you'll find your stay very interesting indeed. I'm Mary. Mary Duncan MacLeod. The lady of the house, y'might say."

"Emma and John," Emma said, shaking hands.

"Why don't you sit by the fire and warm yourselves. I'll fix you up with a toddy and some biscuits. Come and let me introduce you."

""
Entering the room, Mary motioned to three other people who were sitting in chairs by the fire.

“This is Iain MacCourtney,” Mary began.

The man who shook John’s hand immediately looked suspicious. Like a weasel in a kilt. His nose even twitched as he said hello. Emma made a mental note of him. He was a fine suspect for the crime she was convinced lay ahead.

“John and Emma,” John said.

“And this is m’wife, Anita,” MacCourtney said, nodding to a woman standing behind him. She was a flirtatious woman in a bright red dress. With too much makeup and too little class.

“Pleased,” she squeaked, but didn’t seem pleased at all.

Second suspect, Emma thought. Made for the part. Emma was busy inventing a sinister plot about her when the third person chimed in.

“Charmed I’m bloody damn well sure,” said a woman rising unsteadily from another chair.

“Don’t mind her,” Mary said kindly. “She’s had one too many. As usual. John and Emma Steele, this is Tina Connacht. Tina, please try and behave yourself. Just for the weekend.”

“I always behave m’self,” Tina slurried. “It’s everyone else that’s intolerable.”

The mood among the others was chilly to say the least. But as Mary MacLeod left the room to prepare the drinks, all traces of warmth went with her and a stinging silence filled the gap. It was Iain MacCourtney, fiddling with an old lantern that sat on the mantelpiece, who finally broke the spell.

“Are y’here for the reading then?” he asked bluntly.

“No,” Emma answered politely, “we do plenty of reading at home. We’re here for the scenery.”

“He means the bloody reading. Of the bloody Covenant,” Tina explained. “You two are American, aren’t ya? I didn’t know there were Americans.”

“Oh sure,” Emma said, still trying to be friendly. “Since about 1776.”

“I mean in the family,” Tina said sharply. “I didn’t know we had American cousins.”

“They’re not family,” Mary shouted. She had returned hastily with a tray of cups and a serving dish. “And they’re not here for the Covenant! They’re guests. Now stop your pestering.”

“Guests?” Tina said with a laugh. “And why in bloody hell would they want to stay here?”

“Quiet!” Mary said to her. “Isn’t it time for you to pass out or something?”

“Actually we won the trip in a contest,” Emma said cheerily.

“A contest?” Anita MacCourtney said as she twirled a ring nervously around her finger.

“For a weekend at a haunted house?”

“No, for Kirkland’s Scottish Oatmeal,” Emma explained.

“The place is haunted, y’know,” Iain MacCourtney said. “Have y’never heard of the ghost of Glenmore Castle?”

At that, the music that had been playing softly in the background was overwhelmed by a horrible screeching sound coming from one of the outer rooms. Everybody jumped at the noise.

“The ghost?” Emma asked.

“My husband,” Mary muttered, pointing to the doorway.
The man standing there was the very image of the laird of a castle. He was a proud Scot, tall and straight, wearing a suit jacket and tie as well as a colorful kilt and high socks. The bagpipes he was playing completed the ensemble, but the sour sound coming from them destroyed any authenticity.

“Sorry,” he said putting the instrument down on the table and letting the airbag wheeze. “I thought it would make a handsome impression. Never could quite get the hang of the thing though. Hallo, I’m Kenneth MacLeod. Seventh Laird of Glenmore. Been spooking you with tales of the Bruce, have they? Don’t believe a word of it.”

“How sweet,” Emma said. “The ghost’s name is Bruce?”

“Aye,” MacLeod went on. He had taken out a small knife and was carving a tiny piece of wood with it. “He was our ancestor, Bruce of Glenmore. A real true Highlander. Fought against the British with Bonnie Prince Charlie he did.”

“Fought with everyone,” Iain MacCourtney added. “The man was a crook and a swindler. Runs in the family.”

“Your side to be sure,” Tina said, her tongue getting looser by the minute. “Iain’s an ex-convict, y’see. Tried to steal money from his company to pay off his gangster pals. How much did you embezzle, Iain? Was it half a million?”

“Look who’s talking,” Anita shot back, defending her husband. “Tina Connaiche. If it wasn’t for the family money, you’d be in prison for gambling debts by now.”

“That will be enough of that, cousins,” MacLeod said loudly. “None of us would be here if it weren’t for the Bruce. Let’s remember that and show a wee bit of respect.”

“You’re all cousins?” John asked, trying not to sound as sorry for them as he felt.

“Aye. We’ve gathered for the reading of the Covenant,” MacLeod explained. “We’re the last surviving blood members of the Glenmore Clan. Iain’s my first cousin. And Tina’s my stepsister.”

“What about the other guests?” Emma asked.

“There aren’t any,” Mary answered. She had forced a cup of toddy on her husband and was watching him intently—as if she expected some fateful outcome from his first sip. She appeared disappointed when all he did was burn his tongue.

“Are y’trying to scald me, woman?” he said, recoiling.

“Poison, more likely,” Anita mumbled.

“The castle’s closed for the weekend,” Mary said, quickly trying to change the topic. “You two are the only guests. Bit of a foul up that. But it’s no harm done.”

“What is this Covenant you talk about?” Emma asked.

“The Covenant is an ancient document,” MacLeod explained, putting the cup down and pacing before the fire. “Drawn up in 1742 by our ancestors. It’s been in a vault and guarded all this time, so they say, by the ghost of Bruce of Glenmore. To prevent anyone from stealing from the Clan. Y’can hear him howl on the first day of each year.”

“Only then?” Emma asked.

“Aye. He did howl in June one year, but that was when one of our cousins tried to break into the vault. He turned up dead in the moor the next day.”
“Wasn’t the Bruce that killed cousin Roddie,” Anita suggested. “T’was the other spirits: whiskey and rum.”

“Tomorrow,” MacLeod went on, “is the 250th anniversary of the Covenant. According to custom, it will be read aloud for the first time.”

“What does it say?”

“That he gets the estate,” Iain MacCourtney scowled, nodding toward Kenneth, “being the eldest male cousin.”

“Unless he dies first,” Mary MacLeod added calmly, “in which case it’s all divided up between us.”

“No one knows that for sure,” MacLeod replied. “None of us have read the Covenant yet.”

“Aye, cousin, so you’ve always said,” Iain replied sharply.

“Each January the first,” Kenneth explained, “I go into the vault to say a prayer for our ancestors. In the dark, that’s the custom. But I’ve never looked at the Covenant. I swear by the Bruce.”

“In other words, if you die tonight,” Emma said, “they split up the castle?”

She didn’t mean to sound quite so cold about it. She was simply caught up in the intrigue of the situation and was trying to get her clues straight. She tried a sweet smile to soften the impact, but it didn’t quite work.

“There’s a bloody good question. Give that lass a drink,” Tina Connaiche said, practically spilling hers on Emma’s lap. “That’s what we’d all like to know, m’lovely. Do we get the castle if cousin Kenneth bites the dust?”

“Aye,” MacLeod said sadly, “if that’s what the Covenant says. The castle as well as the Saber.”

“Why don’t you show our guests the book,” Iain suggested.

MacLeod walked over to a bookcase next to the arms display on the wall. Iain MacCourtney seemed to hold his breath as Kenneth reached for something on the shelf. But when MacLeod simply withdrew a leather book and handed it to John, MacCourtney exhaled in exasperation.

The book was quite old and fragile. The text inside was handwritten and included a number of black ink drawings showing utensils, coins, sceptres, and a few fancy crosses. But the most striking drawing showed a ceremonial saber encrusted with gems. According to a note in the text, one of the gems was a rare purple sapphire belonging to Prince Charles Edward Stuart.

“Nice knife,” John said, pointing the picture out to Emma.

“And worth as much as the castle itself,” the Laird said. “It’s called the Skean Jacobitus. The Jacobite Saber. T’was given to the Bruce by Prince Charles himself. For his help during the Jacobite uprising. That was before the tragic battle of Culloden Moor, of course.”

MacLeod gazed sadly at the sporran—the traditional Scottish bag—that he wore on a chain suspended from his waist. And he observed a moment of silence in honor of the battle that ended the Scottish revolt from England.

As Kenneth returned the book, Iain MacCourtney again seemed to lean forward in anticipation. Waiting for something to happen. And this time his attention was rewarded. Replacing the book on the shelf seemed to trigger a vibration. It caused one of the ceremonial axes on the wall to come loose from its mount. The ax came swinging down like a guillotine. It narrowly missed MacLeod as it landed on the rug with a lethal whomp.
“That was close, cousin,” MacCourtney said flatly, as though he were describing a soccer goal.

“Heavens,” the Laird said, trying to regain his composure. “Perhaps I should be heading off to bed.”

“Beheading is a good way of putting it,” John whispered.

“Been too many strange incidents around here lately,” Kenneth said as he left. “Like my ring of keys. They seem to be missing. I left them on the table here earlier. Anita, you were first up this morning. You didn’t take them, did you?”

“And what would I be wanting with your rusty old keys?” she asked. But the innocence in her manner was clearly an act, not a fact.

“Leave all that to us,” Mary said cheerily to John and Emma. “You two must be bone tired. Let me show you to your room.”

The room she took them to was on the second floor of the castle. It too was a perfect blend of Celtic ancestry and modern comfort. The fire burning in the small stone fireplace was from a compressed log. The luxurious four-poster bed had an electric blanket. There was even a TV in the room, hidden in an old wooden cabinet with runes on the doors.

“What a miserable bunch of people,” John said as he joined Emma under the thick plaid comforter.

“But a perfect set-up for a whodunit. They all stand to gain from the Laird’s death.”

“I thought you had enough of all that,” John said.

“Only when you’re the who whodunit!”

The soft light from the candle combined with the sound of the rain to produce a tranquil effect, and in no time at all they fell into a deep sleep.

But it didn’t last for long.

“What was that?” Emma said as she shot up into a sitting position.

John, still asleep, simply snorted.

“John!” she said, jabbing him with her elbow to wake him up. “Did you hear that sound?”

“What sound?” he muttered, his voice muffled by the quilt.

“It was horrible, like some kind of howl.”

“Bagpipes,” he muttered, but may have been talking in a dream.

“It wasn’t that kind of sound. It was ghastly. I think it was the ghost of Glenmore Castle!”

“I dint ahear a thing,” John said, laying on a thick Scottish brogue. “Gae back to bed, lassie.”

The light under the door flickered for an instant as someone, or some thing, passed by in the hallway. But John was snoring again. Emma listened for a while, but heard nothing more. So she tried to go back to sleep instead. But that was impossible. Not with one eye wide open and her hands clenched into tight fists, ready to fight the spectre when it came.

It was well past dawn when they found the body. The groundskeeper had arrived to find the door to the cellar open. Investigating further, he came upon the grisly scene then raced through the house to wake everyone.
When they heard the commotion, John and Emma quickly followed the others down into the cellar, past the wine racks, through two old stone corridors, to the vault where the Saber and the Covenant were kept.

The thick plank door to the vault was partly open. A kerosene lantern had been smashed on the floor before it. And a suit of armor overturned. Next to that, Kenneth MacLeod, Seventh Laird of Glenmore, was lying. He had been stabbed. The blood that pooled out of the wound seemed to form a question mark on the wooden floor, a sinister sign of the murder.

"It’s the ghost!" the groundskeeper said. "The ghost of the Bruce has killed Master Kenneth."

"Oh shut up, y’fool," Iain MacCourtney said. He had a bandage on his finger that Emma hadn't noticed before.

"Did anyone call the Constable?" Mary MacLeod asked.
She was standing in the shadows wiping her eyes with a white lace hanky. Considering the circumstances, she seemed remarkably composed.

"I did, ma’am,” the groundskeeper said. “He’ll be here directly."

As a matter of habit, the groundskeeper started to tidy things up. Including something lying on the floor inside the open vault door which he went to pick up. It was the Jacobite Saber, the only object out of place in the vault room.

"Don’t move anything,” Tina Connaiche said. “You’ll spoil the Constable’s fun. Fancies himself a Scotland Yard type.”

"She’s right," John Steele said. "It’s all evidence. You’d better leave everything where it is.”

Steele had a strange feeling of foreboding about the whole affair. Perhaps it was the tightness of the cellar in which they were standing. But he felt as if he was caught in it, whether he wanted to be or not. A glance at Emma didn’t ease the feeling. She was standing stiffly near the body, saying nothing.

"Why did the Laird come down here in the middle of the night?" John asked.

"I have no idea," Mary said.

"How would she know?" Anita MacCourtney suggested. "They haven’t slept together in six years. She’s in the west wing, Kenneth was over in the east. She’s biding her time until she can run off with that lover of hers."

"You’re a fine one for accusations," Mary shouted back. "You, who had your first husband murdered. Oh yes, Kenneth told me all about finding your letter of confession. And about how he threatened to show it to the police unless you moved out."

"Shut up, both of you!" Iain said. "That’s enough. You’ll put the blame on all of us."

"You’re one to talk," Tina said acidly. "Those three years in prison didn’t pay off your cronies. You still owe them the money. How do we know you didn’t murder Kenneth while trying to steal the Saber."

"You need the blasted money as much as we do!" Anita shouted. "To pay off your gambling debts. Without the estate, you’ve got nothing."

"All right!" Iain said, trying to end the squabble. "Listen to me. Now here’s what happened. Kenneth came down here to take the Saber. To stop anyone else from getting it. Someone was waiting in the shadows. A thief, see? He stabbed Kenneth with that knife and ran off."

Indeed there was a small knife stuck in the floor near the body. Right near Emma’s feet.
“But who?”
“None of us. An outsider. See what I mean?”
They did. It was a plausible story that held the hope of their own innocence. They liked that.
“But where’s the key, Iain?” Mary insisted. “The key to the vault door. It was hidden and
only Kenneth knew where. If there was a struggle, it should be lying about.”
“Blast the key,” Tina Connachie said. “We’ve got something better. We’ve got the one who
murdered Kenneth.”
“We do?” Iain said. “Who was it?”
“T’was him!”
John Steele didn’t really have to look to see who she was pointing to. But he did anyway.
And of course found that her finger was practically pinning him to the spot.
“Swell,” he said.
“The Missus can prove it,” Tina said. “Care to move aside, m’lovely?”
Emma didn’t answer. She was still standing perfectly still, her feet glued to a spot near the
body. But under the cold scrutiny of the others, she soon gave in.
“Sorry, John,” she said, taking a short step to the right.
Once she did, it was clear why she had been standing there in the first place. She was
covering something with her shoes, hoping no one would notice it. Something that had been
carved into the wooden floorboards.
“Kenneth must’ve carved it with that knife as he was dying,” Tina said.
What he had carved were two letters. The letters were JS. Which could only stand for one
person. Yet another vacation, John Steele thought, dampened by the prospect of the gallows.
“Oh no,” Steele said. “Not again.”
“John, you promised,” Emma pouted.
“No I didn’t,” he said. “Besides, there’s a better explanation.”
He had been studying the situation and had come up with a different reading of the clues.
“Sure there is,” Iain said. “I’ve told the magistrate much the same thing m’self. Many
times.”
“Someone discovered where the key was hidden,” Steele began. “That person took it and
came down here during the night to steal the Saber.”
“He’s right!” Emma blurted, as two events suddenly came together in her mind. “The Laird
realized something was going on and came down to stop it.”
“But the thief stabbed him first,” John continued. “That’s when Kenneth carved the initials
in the floor. But they don’t point to me. They point to one of you!”
“A nice little story,” Iain MacCourtney said. “But if Kenneth didn’t stop them, then what
did the thief take? That’s the Saber there on the floor, just like the picture in the book. I’m afraid
you’ve got nothing to show for all this fiction.”
“On the contrary,” Steele insisted. “The truth is right here in front of us. The identity of the
murderer, the method they used to get into the vault, and the clue to what was stolen.”

Can you solve the mystery? Assemble the puzzle and see if you too can answer the
three questions posed by the murder. Who really killed the Laird of Glenmore? How did
the murderer open the vault door? And what did the murderer steal?
The Solution:

"Hear's the hidden key", John said. "I may have some interesting fingerprints on it."

With a plate-shaped over his hand, he traced his fingers down the knurled handle. Then he carefully removed the knob used to adjust the wick. It was a skeleton key that fit perfectly into the vault door.

"Yes, but what fingerprints?" Earths MacIntyre asked.

"Here's Emma's," John replied, pointing proudly back at the Constitution. "She took the Jacobite Stater from the vault. Encouraged by the Lind Peck and stripped him of it. That's why there's no blood on the knurled stick in the floor."

"And after? The knife was used to cut the initials—TC—in the floor," John went on. "When she saw the letters, knowing she couldn't escape the trap, she was holding the key back in the forest. When she saw the letters, she jumped into the forest."

"But the Stater is still here on the ground. Mary said.

"No duh, Emma said.

She walked over to a spot on the floor near the stone wall where a chain was hanging and picked up a luster, perhaps a necklace.

"This must have fallen from the room," John said. "Take it."

"No, the purse sticking from there must have fallen from the room," John said. "Take it, too."

"Then you're saying, Emma said, "the Pocahontas was peeking into the vault?"

"Do you know?"

The Solution, Part 2:

John looked at the room. "Now you're asking," he said. "That's an easy one."

"Other than a couple of books and some papers in the desk?"

"Not bad," John said. "It's a fairly easy riddle."

"Tell me, John," Emma said. "What's your story?"

"I don't know," John said. "I've just one problem with your story. How did the Constitution know someone was peeking into the vault?"

"I'm not sure," Emma said. "But I think it could be the key to the puzzle."

"And now, John," Emma said. "Let's get back to the search."

"I'm not sure," John said.