



People of Peace

Scotland

Once in Scotland there was a bonny bay, between two arms of rock, looking out to the sea. There was a fine sandy beach, and above it a row of small cottages. Stuck in the sand were the bones of an old boat, washed ashore long ago. And beyond the beach were green fields, full of cows and sheep. Finally, above everything were the hills apart from one wee hill that stood on the edge of the farm right by the beach.

In one of the cottages there lived an old seas captain. Once he had travelled the seven seas, but now he stayed at home and watched the big ships sailing by. He was a cheerful, well liked old fellow, and everybody called him 'the Cap'n'.

One day the Cap'n was strolling along the shore when he spotted the farmer's men hacking and digging at the wee hill above the beach. 'What are you doing' he asked them.

'It's the farmer,' they said to the Cap'n, 'he's wanting to clear the ground and make it part of his field.'

'Levelling the old hill for such a tiny pocket of land?' says the Cap'n. And the men looked at their feet, shamefaced at the tightfistedness of their boss, the farmer.

'And that's not all,' says the youngest laddie, 'it's the wee folks' hill. No good will come of knocking it down.' Then he looked round to see who was listening. 'It's a fairy mound,' he whispered.

‘Havers,’ said the other men, and they started hacking and digging the earth again.

That night, after his supper, the Cap’n was tamping his pipe for a smoke, and taking a wee dram of whisky, as was his custom, when there was a knock at the door. So, he went to the door and looked around, since it was dark. He could not see who had knocked till he looked down and there was a wee man on the threshold, no more than three feet high. ‘Good E’en to you, sir,’ says the Cap’n.

‘And to you, Cap’n’ says the wee fella looking up, ‘but it’s not a good evening for us, since we’re needing some help.’

‘From me?’ says the Cap’n, wondering who in all the world the wee man might be.

‘Aye well,’ says the wee man who had a long beard and a feather in his bonnet, ‘that skinflint of a farmer has dinged down our house, so we need you to take us to the Isle.’

‘What Isle?’ demanded the Cap’n.

‘The Isle of I, as you might know,’ and the wee man pronounced ‘I’ like ‘EE.’

The Cap’n was baffled. For one thing he did not know any island of ‘I’. And for another he had no ship to sail to any Isle.

‘How many of you are there?’ asked the Cap’n, ‘for you can rest here tonight if it’s any help to you.’

The wee man on the threshold never spoke a word in reply, but he pointed towards the beach. As his eyes grew used to the darkness, the Cap’n could see a throng of wee folk. They were bustling about on the beach, carrying bundles of pots and pans, sheets and blankets and all kinds of things on their backs and their heads. There were men and wee women, and children standing around glum and out of sorts. He could not count the crowd.

‘Aye, I see now,’ says the Cap’n, ‘And I would like to help you, but I don’t have a boat to my name. I’ve retired from the sea.’

‘That’s not a problem, if you take your jacket,’ says the wee man, and he started pulling the Cap’n down to the shore, tugging at his trousers as they went.

Standing on the beach, the Cap’n could not believe what he saw. For amidst the wee people, those bones, the skeleton of the old boat, which was wrecked long ago, were growing out of the sand. And the sides were back on the hull, and the deck timbers spread back and then the mast and even cross spars for the sails. And as he stared, the wee women flapped their dish towels which turned into sails, blowing in the breeze.

‘All aboard,’ cried the wee man, as the whole crowd put their shoulders to the hull, and pushed the bonny new boat into the sea. ‘Quick, all aboard, for the Cap’n is ready to sail.’

And when he took his place at the wheel, all the little people scrambled and tumbled into the ship till it was bobbing on the waves, full of folk. The Cap’n was pleased and proud to be in charge of a ship again, as he set course out of the bay, turning towards the open sea.

‘Where is this island of I?’ he asked the wee man with the long beard and the bonnet with a feather. ‘Don’t fret, Cap’n,’ replied the wee fella, ‘the ship knows its own way. Just put your hand to the wheel and hold her steady. We people of the earth don’t have the skill.’

And without any bother the ship turned north north-west and the wind swelled full the sails which were like a multi-coloured patchwork. And soon the boat was flying through the dark like a Solan goose winging its path homewards.

And as the Cap’n held the wheel steady, he realised by the stars where they were heading. And he remembered that ‘I’ was the old name for Columba’s Isle - Iona on the western sea.

And as that thought came into the Cap’n’s head, in the blink of an eye, the boat was nosing into a bonny bay between two arms of rock. And there was a fine sandy beach, and beyond it the hills, but two small mounds stood above the beach, one on the right side and another on the left.

The Cap'n beached the boat gently on the sands, and the wee folk were tumbling out onto the shore, when to his amazement, another host of little people came running along the beach to rescue the strangers from any harm in the breaking waves.

'O friends, friends, the farmer dinged down our bonny home. We've no hill left to call our own,' cried the boat people. And they wept and swabbed their cheeks with dish cloths.

'Don't fret, don't take on, stay here with us. For we have two homes!' And the wee folk of Iona pointed to the two mounds above the beach.

What a stramash and a commotion there was with hugging, dancing and singing, as the wee folk from the boat became mixed up with wee folk of I. But bit by bit they sorted themselves out and started to carry the bundles of pots and pans, and blankets and dish towels up the beach to the travellers' new home.

'I'll need to be getting home myself,' said the Cap'n, who was watching, pleased and proud of his part in the night's events.

'Aye, Cap'n' says the wee man with the long beard and the bonnet with the feather. 'Don't fret as the boat will take you home safe and sound. But have this wee box for your trouble yet don't be opening it until you get there.'

'I need no reward for helping out,' said the Cap'n, accepting the tiny box. 'It's been a pleasure, so it has.'

'It's just a small minding of your friends,' smiled the wee fella, 'a blessing from the people of peace.'

So, the Cap's steered away proudly at his wheel, while all the wee folk gathered on the beach to wave. In the blink of an eye, he was back in his bay with the row of cottages. The boat ran herself aground and dwined back into the sand till it was no more than sticking up banes of rotten timber.

But the Cap'n was already fast asleep in his bed. The next morning came in fair and clear, so the Cap'n walked out to take the air. Everything appeared unchanged from the day before, even the ugly

wound where the farmer's men had torn down the mound above the beach.

It was as if the whole night had been only an old sailor's dream. But then the Cap'n felt the tiny box in the pocket of his sea jacket, and when he opened the box with his pinkie, it was full of golden coins, the kind that sank to the bottom of the sea long ago.

And truth to tell, the Cap'n was happy all his days, As for the skinflint farmer he was always miserable and moaning, since the wee bit of land where he cleared the mound yielded nothing but thorns an thistles all his born days.

As far as I know, the wee people of peace are still living on the Isle of Iona, in those twice happy homes. And they aye give their blessing to those who shield the stranger from harm and shelter the oppressed. And may it aye be so with mortal folk. That's my tale wound up till another time, another place. □

Adapted by Donald Smith (2019), from the telling of Scots storyteller, Ewan McVicar.

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Comments

The Earth Charter was written in the years prior to the awful waves of migrants and refugees who, from the countries of the planetary south, are arriving at the gates of the rich northern countries. Perhaps that is why the Earth Charter does not deal directly with the rights of migrants and refugees, although it still contemplates them in its Principle 9c, where it speaks about the ignored, the vulnerable, those who suffer.

Without a doubt, this story, included just at the last moment in this first instalment of The Earth Stories Collection –a courtesy of Donald Smith– was possibly the most necessary story for the times we are living. These times when, in the United States, small children of migrants are separated from their families, when insensitive Europe watches the documented death of 35,597 migrants and refugees from

1993 to September 2018, most of them drowned in the Mediterranean Sea (United, 2018).

Lastly, it was a totally necessary Scottish story, which amazingly hit the target for a research and a work carried out by a Spanish migrant, who found in Scotland the shelter and support that his own country did not give him in his most difficult times; a Spaniard who carried out in Scotland the research that has given rise to The Earth Stories Collection.

Sources

Taken directly from the Scottish oral tradition, specifically from a story told by the storyteller Ewan McVicar, adapted and written by Donald Smith.

United (2018, September 30). Lista de 35.597 muertes documentadas de personas refugiadas y migrantes, consecuencia de las políticas restrictivas de la “Europa Fortaleza” [List of 35,597 documented deaths of refugees and migrants, as a result of the restrictive policies of the “Fortress Europe”]. *El Periódico*. Retrieved from <https://estaticos.elperiodico.com/resources/pdf/2/6/1549639591362.pdf>.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

Principle 13a: Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.

