



The Brown Man

England

It was midwinter and the man set off to climb the hill that he had climbed many times before but this time a question hung in his consciousness, did he really know this place? He decided to say goodbye to the year by watching the setting mid-winter sun. It was bitterly cold with a north wind; parts of the track turned to sheets of ice. He fell twice, feeling stupid and self-conscious. He sensed the hill was watching.

He noticed the sun was sinking rapidly as he blundered too fast through the tussock grass. Two ravens croaked above him, igniting a flicker of worry, but he had his torch so he should be able to find his way down. He reached the ridge with relief, but as he looked down, the flickering lights of the town below slowly disappeared. A mist had blown in and was gradually swirling thicker, blinding him to both the path and the setting sun. He struggled on feeling for his torch in one pocket then the next. He had left it behind. He would have to wait, so he crouched out of the wind in the lea of the rock, pulling his jacket tight around him. A feeling of dread enveloped him as he stared steadfastly into the mist and the last dregs of light drained from the sky – he would not survive a night here.

He didn't know if his eyes were tricking him, but there appeared to be a light. He was sure there were no dwellings, but the light was not moving, so he raised himself and cautiously fumbled toward it. His hands were numb and the heather snagged his unfeeling feet, but here was a shelter, a small round hut. An animal skin hung over the doorway, allowing the light to escape from a gap. The man pulled it back and looked inside, where he could see a fire with two rocks as seats...but nobody

there. Perhaps the hut of a shepherd, an old shieling? Whoever it was, he was thankful, and he sat on one of the rocks, holding his hands to the fire ... edging his boots as close as he dared. On one side there was a pile of small branches, whilst on the other two large logs. He put a bundle of sticks on the fire and watched it flare up, he waited.

Then he heard steps outside, the door covering moved and in walked a strange being, a person in all but stature, a half size person with rugged features and a tangle of wild red hair. The man shifted uncomfortably, conscious of his trespass, as the dwarf sat on the rock facing him in complete silence. He looked up, wanting to explain himself, but the dwarf's strange unspeaking countenance, though neither hostile nor friendly, made any words impotent. They sat facing each other as the fire burned down. The man reached out and put the remaining small branches on the fire, knowing they would not last long. The dwarf stared at him and then lent to the other side of the fire and raising one of the logs shattered it on his leg. He fed it, piece by piece, into the fire, which danced with a million bright, warm flames, warming him far greater than any fire he had known before - painting pictures in his mind.

He had no idea how long they sat there but, eventually, the fire died down and when he looked up the little man was staring at him, the one log remaining on the ground. He was being challenged. There was no way he could break that on his leg. He resisted but the silence hung in the air like a stretched skin until he could bear it no more and twisted his body to reach out for the log. Suddenly a cock crowed in the valley below and he noticed the first smudge of light on the far horizon. He looked round and the hut was gone, the fire had gone and the little brown man had gone. He was sitting on top of a bleak windswept rock leaning out into a void, a huge gaping chasm below. Another inch and he would have fallen, his body shattered on the rocks below.

His whole world turned upside down, he started to walk down the hill slowly, aware of every step with his eyes and ears more open than they had ever been. He saw the tiny lichen cups, the patiently waiting jewelled spider, the shimmering crystals of the rock. Everything was alive, in a way that he had not noticed before. He marvelled. □

Adapted by Malcolm Green (2022).

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Comments

As Malcolm Green, adapter of this story, points out, a version of this tale can be found in his book *Northumberland Folktales*, under the title of The Duergar of Simonside.

The Simonside Hills in Northumberland, near the Scottish border, are known to be the habitat of the duergars, an ethnic group belonging to the dwarf species who make their presence felt in the region to such an extent that some say: 'You see, people and animals may not be the only things inhabiting these hills' (Philbrook and Burguess, 2019).

It is said that the duergars, or grey dwarves, live within the hills and are not particularly friendly to humans. In fact, some say that, if a human enters their domain, he or she may disappear forever, or at least get lost in the boggy areas where the duergars lead them to, under the lure of their torches. By nature they are nocturnal beings, small in stature but robust and sullen, like all their kind. It seems that the danger of an encounter with them vanishes as soon as dawn breaks over the darkness of the sky.

We are thus dealing with archetypes of the collective unconscious which may well have influenced the creative and imaginative prose of the English J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Thompson, 2021). But these would be inhabitants of the *mundus imaginalis* – which the French philosopher Henry Corbin described in his studies on Iranian Sufism – creatures closely related to nature, so perhaps this is the origin of their animosity towards humans, destroyers of habitats.

In order to discover how Malcolm Green puts this traditional tale to use in his performances as an Earth Stories teller, see his chapter entitled "Where the Ecologic meets the Mythic", in *The Earth Stories Collection*, Volume 2.

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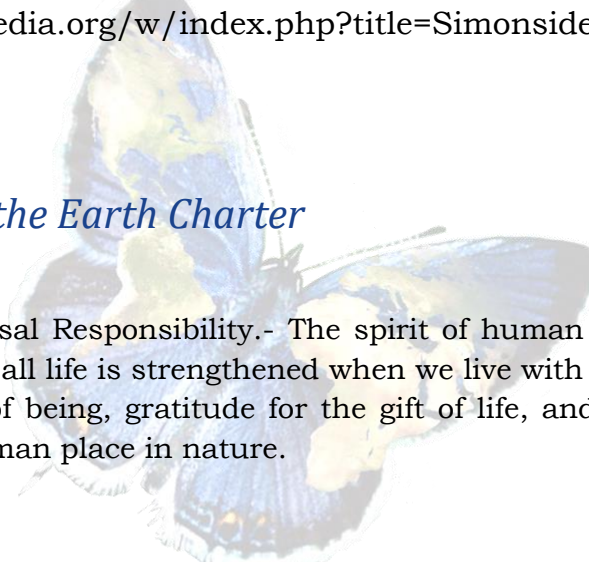
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Associated text of the Earth Charter



Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognise that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Principle 16f: Recognise that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

The Way Forward: We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.

The Way Forward: ... and the joyful celebration of life.

