



Jack and the Dancing Trees

Scotland

A while back now, there was a lad, Jack. A good-hearted lad, he lived with his mother in a wee run-down cottage, not much more than a hovel really. It wasn't for fecklessness or lack of effort that they lived in a hovel, for they both worked hard and made the most of the little they had. No, the reason their home was so run down, with draughts under the door and rain leaking through the roof, was because of the laird who owned the land. A bad-hearted man he was – he owned great swathes of the countryside and lived himself in a fine grand house, but he paid his workers a pittance.

Jack worked as a shepherd for the laird, out in weather fair and foul, guarding the sheep all day. From the age of six he had been tending the sheep, out in the hills and the woods, under open sky, and surrounded by the beauty of nature. And because of this beauty Jack loved his job, even on the days when the weather was harsh. As the years had passed, Jack had become so attuned to nature that he could even make sense of what the birds were saying as they sang.

Jack's mother eked a living from keeping a few hens and selling their eggs, and from gathering any fleece she found snagged on the fences. She would card this fleece, and spin it into yarn, and knit wee jumpers and shawls that she would sell or swap for meat and meal. Every day at noon she would bring Jack his piece: a sliver of cheese and a bannock. She always knew where Jack would be at lunchtime – under his favourite tree, a giant, ancient oak, known throughout the land as Auld Cruivie. Auld Cruivie stood atop the hill, towering over the beeches

and pines, where there was a fine view of the slender, silver birches below, swaying and swooning, whispering by the river's edge.

One midsummer's day as Jack rested his back against Cruivie's vast trunk, he felt something strange in the air. He couldn't quite name it, but there was an energy he hadn't felt before, and the next thing he knew, there was a huge whoosh – all the birds exploded from the trees and went rushing up into the sky, swooping and swirling above Jack's astonished face. "What's going on?" Jack cried up at them. And then he listened.

And through the cacophony of squawks and cheeps and tweets and warbles and song he heard: "Tonight's the night, tonight's the night, when the trees get up and dance! We cannae be sitting in our nests when that happens, we'd fair get battered about!" And off they flew, searching for another place to nestle down for the night. Just as they faded from view, Jack's mother arrived with his bannock and cheese.

Jack told her what he'd heard from the birds.

"Ah, so my mother was right!" she said. "For she told me that every fifty years, at midsummer, the trees leave their birth-spots to make merry and mate down by the river. And I thought it just a story. Mind now Jack, she also told me that there's treasure to be found deep down in their root holes, but it's a dangerous game to try and get it! Best you stay away from here tonight. I don't want to be losing MY treasure!"

Jack wasn't one to tell a lie. "And miss such a sight? Come on Mother!"

"If you must stay to watch, at least stay away from their birth-spots." But she knew her son well. "And if you should happen to find yourself in one, take this." She pulled out a piece of fleecy twine a good six feet long, intended for knitting. "Just in case you need it."

Jack rolled his eyes, but stuffed the twine into his pocket. Not long after his mother had left, Jack's sweetheart Mary came running over the hill towards him, stumbling in her haste. She too worked for the laird, a maid at his fine house. "Oh Jack," she panted, "the laird's in the strangest mood I've ever witnessed! He's been up in his tower, poring over old leatherbound books and almanacs, muttering about midsummer's night and buried treasure. He knows we've been courting, and told me to come

and warn you to stay well away from the trees tonight or you'll pay dearly for it! Says if he sees you anywhere near, he'll throw you and your mother out of your house!"

"Ach well, I'm good at hiding," said Jack. "I'm not missing this sight for the world!"

"I haven't got time to argue with you Jack." She sighed impatiently, knowing she was wasting her breath on him. "I'm wanted back at the house." And off she huffed.

Jack stayed out with his sheep, got them safely into their pen as the light began to dim, and found himself a hollow in the ground where he could see the trees. He lay down on his belly and waited.

Slowly the sky turned pink, then darkened to purple, and Jack felt a great trembling in the earth. His mouth fell open, his eyes widened as he saw Auld Cruivie shudder and judder and heave himself out of the ground. Great branches waving, the huge oak lumbered its way down to the river, and as it did so, the other trees lurched and heaved and followed.

Down by the river, the birch trees were waiting. Slender, silvery creatures, their leaves shimmered and shook as they too climbed out of their birth-spots and waded into the river to join the oaks and pines and beeches in a twining, circling dance.

After watching agog for some time, Jack remembered his mother's words. Could there be treasure deep down in the holes the trees had left behind? With great stealth, Jack inched forward on his belly, taking care to keep out of sight lest the laird be watching, and slowly made his way to the nearest birth-spot, that of a fine Scots pine. Peering over the rim, he saw it, gleaming in the earth – such gems! Rubies and emeralds, diamonds and pearls, salvers of silver and goblets of gold. JUST out of reach.

He'd have to climb in.

And so he did. He picked up a ring. "Oh now, if I took this for Mary's finger!" He put it in his pocket, and felt a strange feeling, like the earth had fallen a wee bit away beneath him. He paid no heed. The silver salver. "Ah now, if I took this and Mother sold it, we could mend the roof and fix the house ourselves!" Again, the ground fell, too much this time not to

pay heed. Jack looked up. The sides of the hole were taller now than they had been. He had sunk! Well, he had all he needed, best get out. He reached upwards, and to his dismay found that he couldn't reach the top of the hole – he couldn't get out! Panic growled and grew within him. What if the pine came back, and he stuck here in its birth-spot?

“Help!” he cried. And who should he see, silhouetted against the sky above him, but his sweetheart Mary.

“Ach Jack! What were you told?!” She reached down, but as much as they stretched and strained, their fingertips couldn't even touch. Then memory flashed in Jack – his mother's twine! He pulled it from his pocket and tossed it up to Mary.

“Pull!” Well, the twine was strong, and Mary was too, and with a great heave from her, Jack was pulled up enough to get a foothold and climb out of the hole and into safety. But his relief was short lived, for behind Mary loomed the laird.

“What did I tell ye? Stay away I said! I'll deal with you later...” For at that moment the laird's greed was stronger even than his spite, and he stalked off to the greatest birth-spot of all – Auld Cruivie's.

If the treasure Jack had seen had been great, Auld Cruivie's was a hundred times greater. Without a thought the laird leapt in, and feverishly began to scoop and grab, throwing all the treasure he could into a huge sack he had brought with him. And each time he did, the earth fell beneath him; each treasure he took, the deeper he sank, but he did not notice, as he was so drunk with greed.

Then the trees began to return. From where they were on the hill, Jack and Mary saw them. And right at the front, lumbering ahead with solemn purpose, was Auld Cruivie.

“We have to warn the laird! Wicked as he is, we can't just let him die!”

They stumbled towards Auld Cruivie's birth-spot, and hollered down their warnings. How deep the laird was! But he seemed possessed. Foaming at the mouth, salivating, his eyes gleaming, lit with fierce greed, he waved them away, and kept gathering, gathering, gathering... Until a great shadow loomed over them all, blacking out the moonlight. Jack and

Mary leapt out of the way. Auld Cruivie had returned. His great hulk lowered itself slowly and surely back into his birth-spot, and the laird's bones splintered and his black heart burst as the great oak settled itself down upon him. □

Adapted by Fiona Herbert (2022).

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Comments

Fiona Herbert, who adapted this story, says that this is a very old Scottish folktale combining myth and local legend with a strong environmental message: when greed preys on nature, nature will eventually prevail and lead us to disaster.

The tree mentioned in the story, Auld Cruivie, actually exists, or maybe it is one of its descendants that actually exists. It stands on the old Lumphanan road in Aberdeenshire, and is surrounded by other smaller trees. The road, once used by travellers, is still visible as a grassy track.

Fiona says that her adaptation is based on a version by the late Stanley Robertson. She says in personal correspondence:

I only met Stanley once, back in around 2007, when I was just beginning as a storyteller, but the memory is vivid. As well as Auld Cruivie –Jack and the Dancing Trees– he told horror stories really well. He was born in Aberdeen in 1940, and died in Aberdeen in 2009. He was very well-known in the Scottish folk scene as a storyteller and ballad singer. The 12th of 13 children, he left school aged 14 and had many jobs, mainly in the Aberdeen ‘fish hooses’, gutting fish at the harbour, preparing them to be sold. His family were settled travellers but went ‘summer walking’, and storytelling was a huge part of the travelling community. His aunt, Jeannie Robertson, was a renowned ballad singer and his maternal grandfather, Joseph Edward McDonald, was a storyteller; Stanley was greatly influenced by them too. Stanley wrote several plays (*Scruffie Uggie*, *The Burkers*, *Jack and the Land of Dreams*) and books (*Nyakim's Windows*, *Fish-Hooses 1 and 2*, *Land of No Death*, *Ghosties and Ghoulies*, *Reek Around a*

Campfire). He was a passionate guardian of Scottish oral traditions, and an honorary founder of the Scottish Storytelling Forum.

Fiona Herbert is a Scottish storyteller who has a keen interest in environmental tales. As well as retelling traditional tales, she also writes and performs her own stories, often based on elements of folklore and myth. Her recent work includes 'The Selkie Wife', 'Eejits and Hissy Fits' and 'Corryvreckan: Inspiralled Tales', based on the ancient Scottish creatrix the Cailleach, which was filmed for the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in 2020.

Fiona is currently creating a show, 'Shapeshifters' for the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, 2022.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 2a: Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realise these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 8b: Recognise and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

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