**The Folk Beneath the Hill**

How long they might have stared at each other is difficult to say, but the tension was broken by Danny. The ‘wee mannie’ seemed only to glance at Danny , but whenever he had done so, Danny headed towards him. Andrew was on the point of shouting to Danny to come back but before he could Danny was at the stranger’s feet and wagging his tail joyfully!

‘Well! Would you believe it! *He* seems happy enough!’ cried Andrew, and that was all that was needed to ease the atmosphere of distrust and fear that had developed with the appearance of the stranger. And what an appearance!

Shonagh and Andrew saw a small man, just over four feet in height, but obviously an adult. He had large eyes, not unlike an owl, a wide, almost grinning, mouth, a long pointed beard and fairly big pointed ears. He wore a sort of leather helmet that covered fairly long hair, a garment, that looked like a kilt and bodice combined, which was tied at the waist by a leather thong, and crude leather slippers which were held on by straps tied round his legs. In his hand he carried an axe with a thin shaft. If they were surprised by the man’s appearance they were even more surprised when he spoke.

‘Sator dallik!’ he said, obviously as surprised as they were. ‘Where did ye come frae? Ye’re nae frae aneth the Hill!’

‘Nn-no,’ stammered Shonagh. ‘Are you frae beneath the Hill?’

‘Aye, I live here as do all my folk. You must have found your way in by mistake. Naebody should come aneth the hill except the auld folk.’

‘You live here all the time?’ queried Andrew failing to keep the surprise out of his voice. ‘Here! Underneath Bennachie? You must be joking! Shonagh, we must be dreaming. This is nae real!’

‘Oh, it’s real, right enough,’ said the man. ‘My name is Gurval and my folk hae been here since the beginning. I heard the Ki and I came to see why it was barking.’

‘Ki? Did you say Ki?’ asked Shonagh.

‘Aye, your wee friend here. You’d call him a dog. Ki is the auld word.’

Andrew was shaking his head, ‘This has got me fair beat. You mean that your folk have been living here under Bennachie for thousands o years and yet naebody kens anything aboot you? How can that be? Somebody’s bound to hae seen ye sometime.’

‘Aye they seen us lang, lang ago, but too mony fights and wars made us keep mair and mair till oorsels. There were some terrible battles round aboot here and affa fights, so Enourabi thought that we’d be better if we never left the hills again. We used to go oot and when the folk you call the Picts were on the go we had some dealings with them. They fair liked all oor beasts and cut them on tae steens. Nae doubt ye’ll hae seen them?’

‘I kent you were familiar,’ cried Shonagh in triumph, ‘Rhynie man! You’re the mannie on the stone they found at Rhynie. The same eyes, the same grin, the same clothes!’

‘I dinna think that would be me, but one o us he most certainly would be.’

‘But you speak just like us,’ said Andrew. ‘How is it that you speak the same language?’

‘Och, we hear folk speaking as they go up the Hill and when they stop for a rest or to hae something to eat. You lot are great ones for speaking, but we really speak the auld tongue that was here before the Gaels came frae Ireland. We still use a lot o the auld words, but it disna matter what words you use as long as folk understand one another.’

‘How long hae you lived here then?’ asked Shonagh, her predicament forgotten as she tried to get as many answers as possible.

‘I canna tell you that, for, unlike you, we dinna hae anything like time. Things just are or they’re nae. We dinna worry much aboot time at all.’

‘You mean you dinna ken how auld you are?’ persisted Shonagh.

‘Nae idea whatsoever and I dinna think it matters all that much,’ answered Gurval, his smile getting bigger by the minute.

‘Hold on a minute,’ interrupted Andrew. ‘Who is this Enourabi that you mentioned? You said he said you should never go ootside again. Is he your leader?’

‘Enourabi kens a lot and we listen to the one that kens what he’s speaking aboot. Enourabi kens most things and we listen to what he says and just do that. Well, most o us do that. There are one or two here who dinna listen tae him.’

‘Could Enourabi get us back to the surface?’ asked Andrew, ‘that’s the most important thing at the minute.’

‘Well, we could go and ask him, but he bides a lang way frae here. First we’ll go to my mougev where we’ll get something to put on the lassie’s arm and you can get something to eat. I’ve nae doubt you’ll hae plenty o questions for me as well.’

‘I’ve one question before we go,’ said Andrew. ‘Why is it light? It should be dark under the hill, yet we can see. It’s nae all that dark.’

‘Och, that’s an easy one,’ said Gurval. ‘The rocks are granite and their full o wee specks called mica that sparkle all the time as long as they’re wet. Things are often damp here with the rain up above and the water seeping through the crust, but if it’s nae wet we just tak a wet rag and wipe the granite. It’ll soon pick up any light that’s aboot an magnify it so that the rock sparkle will gie us all the light we need. It’s nae all that bright here but there’s enough light for us to travel by. Come on noo, we’ll get to the mougev and get something to eat.’

‘Is mougev your word for a house,’ asked Shonagh.

‘We dinna hae what you’d call houses. You’d call it a cave, I suppose, but you’ll see what I mean when we get there. It’s nae far frae here.’

Although they couldn’t explain it themselves, Andrew and Shonagh, like Danny, *knew* they could trust Gurval. When he looked at them they just felt any fears or misgivings they had melt away. They introduced themselves properly and followed after him confident that he wouldn’t do them any harm or lead them into danger. But Shonagh, for a short while, began to doubt this when another obstacle seemed to bar their way and this one was living and looked dangerous. If there was one thing that did frighten Shonagh it was snakes and, as they rounded one of the many corners in the tunnel system, there, blocking their progress, was a snake!

Shonagh stared aghast and couldn’t help calling out in a strangled scream, ‘Andrew! Gurval! Look out! A snake!’

At the sound of her voice the snake reared up and began to hiss in a soft silky manner that was, as Shonagh later admitted, not unpleasant at all.

Gurval laughed at Shonagh’s fear, ‘ Na, na, lassie. That’s a naer. He’s a fine kind o a beastie.’ So saying, Gurval bent down and began to stroke the snake. ‘Surely you’ve seen him on the standing steens? He’s often called a serpent by them that ken the steens, but he’s a naer.’ Gurval picked up the naer which was now making a sound not unlike a cat purring! ‘Here, come and give him a wee pat. They like to be petted.’

Shonagh was a bit reluctant at first, but when she did touch the naer she got a surprise for it felt cosy and silky. ‘Andrew, it’s magic. It’s really super and smooth. Nae wonder the Picts put him on their stones. Come on and feel.’

Andrew duly did what he was told and although he didn’t say so, he too was surprised at how warm and pleasant he felt while stroking the naer.

‘Naer are very handy to us folk,’ said Gurval. ‘They keep the mice, rats and moles away from our stores and they ken when the Kah Du-Kel are coming and give us warning. If you ever hear the naer gie a scream then ye’ll ken that the Kah Du-Kel are round aboot and up to nae good.’

As the naer made itself comfortable around Gurval’s neck for the journey to the mougev Andrew asked the obvious question, ‘What are the Kah Du-Kel?’

Gurval’s face took on a different, less pleasant expression, ‘Drouk! Gwall drouk! Evil, very evil! They are our only enemies.’

Andrew persisted, ‘Aye, but what are they? Are they people?’

‘No! Evil black cats! They hae lost the way of beasts. We hae good cats, but the Kah Du-Kel are bigger; aboot the size o dogs, and they do what Beuneg, An Droug-Spered tells them. Beuneg gave up the auld ways for the ways o evil, Beuneg is the evil one! The Kah Du-Kel are the only craturs frae here that go ootside the hills. They go oot at night and attack sheep or calves. Anything that they can kill withoot being hurt themselves. That’s the way they are, drouk! And drouk because Beuneg tells them to be! Beuneg and his kind ignore the warnings o Enourabi.’

The same thought came to Andrew and Shonagh, but it was Andrew who put it into words. ‘They must be the black cats folk keep seeing on the roads and who are reported for attacking and killing sheep. Folk think that they’re panthers and it happens all over the north-east. How far does this tunnel system extend?’

‘I’ve nae idea,’ replied Gurval, ‘I’ve only ken oor ain area, but I’ve heard the auld folk say that Menez, or Bennachie as you call it, is the centre and all the roads lead off frae here. This is the centre o oor world. Noo let’s get going, we dinna want that wound o Shonagh’s to go and fester. Dirt does some affa things.’

They strode out, Andrew and Shonagh amazed at how quickly Gurval moved, making good time while Danny trotted along obediently and happily at Gurval’s feet and the naer, wound casually round Gurval’s neck, gave out a happy little purr to speed them on their way.

As they went Gurval explained to them that there was a whole life system under the hills centred on Bennachie, and which he felt explained the large number of standing stones, stone circles and Pictish sites that are found in the area. The Picts knew how important the Hill was and gathered in the area for protection and to worship. He also pointed out various tunnel entrances to them that led to important places in the lives of the Hill folk. One tunnel led to an underground river or ster, as Gurval called it, where twice a year the folk would gather to catch fish.

When asked to explain why they only fished twice a year, Gurval said that to take more would be too much and that his folk believed that you should only kill an animal if it was absolutely necessary and the only real reason for that was if one could get nothing else to eat or to save an animal from suffering if it was very badly hurt.

‘You mean you’re vegatarian?’ asked Shonagh.

Once she had explained to Gurval what ‘a vegetarian’ was he accepted that they were, but not quite all the time. Sometimes, for the sake of survival or when animal numbers got out of hand, they did kill animals but it hurt them to do so and the killing of animals was always followed by prayers to Doue led by Enourabi or a group of elders.

‘The beasts are our friends and have as much right to live as we have. They give us wool and skins and protect us when we need it. We should respect them - all except the Kah Du-Kel!’ Gurval spat out the words when he mentioned the black cats.

‘Brenn!’ exclaimed Gurval suddenly, ‘we are at the mougev.’

They turned yet another corner and arrived at what was indeed a cave, but a very odd one indeed. Tree roots came through the roof of the mougev and they had been woven together to form a kind of ceiling. Other roots had been cut off and fashioned into a crude door which could be put across the entrance to the mougev. Standing at the mouth of the opening of the mougev was a woman, very much like Gurval, but with much softer features. She watched them approach with a very curious, but kind, look on her face, her large eyes betraying little emotion. She stood patiently and awaited Gurval’s explanation.

Before he spoke Gurval approached the woman. They looked into one another’s eyes and then placed their hands together in front of their bodies and rubbed them gently together. Andrew and Shonagh were to discover that this was the normal greeting of friends amongst the folk under the Hill.

Gurval laid aside his axe or bouchal and introduced Andrew and Shonagh to Enora, who was Gurval’s wife.

‘Enora,’ he said, ‘I’ll need ruskenn and delenn to treat Shonagh’s arm. She scraped it when she fell into one o the shafts and we dinna want it to go bad.’

Enora took out a large earthenware jar and beckoned on Shonagh to sit down. Shonagh sat down and rolled up her sleeve. Gurval took some water, cleaned the wound, then laid some leaves on the wound. ‘These are the delenn,’ he said, ‘and this is the ruskenn which will bind them together.’ The ruskenn were strips of tree bark. ‘That should soon mend the wound, but, now, we eat. Hae we food for oor guests, Enora?’

Enora smiled. ‘We always hae food for friends. You sit doon the both of you and I’ll go and get it.’

The seats were quite large stools covered in moss and bark. They were surprisingly comfortable and Shonagh and Andrew were pleased to have a rest after the adventures they had gone through.

Just as they sat down they got another surprise because a ram appeared and strolled into the mougev. He was smaller than the rams one would see on most farms but he obviously was completely at home for he jumped up beside Shonagh and laid his head gently in her lap.

‘Tourz! Behave yourself! He gets too familiar does the tourz. Just you shove him aff if he doesn’t behave, Shonagh,’ said Enora, carrying in a large wooden bowl and placing it on a large round table.

Andrew and Shonagh pulled their seats towards the table and peered anxiously at the bowl. What would be in it? Would they be able to eat it?

Enora was aware of their predicament. ‘Try a little to see if you like it. It’s just huggenn, kraon and gwirzienn. They are very good.’

‘Berries, nuts and roots,’ exlained Gurval. ‘I’m sure you’ll hae eaten them before.’

Shonagh and Andrew began to eat, a bit tentatively at first, but they soon found that the mixture was very tasty and they ate heartily without making themselves look too greedy.

They were beginning to feel very content with themselves when suddenly Tourz raised his head sharply then, jumping off Shonagh’s lap, ran to the entrance of the mougev. In the distance a drumming sound could be heard. The drumming appeared to be getting nearer and nearer and was accompanied by loud squealing.

‘Hoch!’ cried Gurval, ‘they must be on the move again. We’ll hae to watch oorselves. We’ll try and get the door in place to keep them oot. They can be gey dangerous when they’re on the loose like this.’

‘Hoch!’ thought Andrew, ‘what on earth were hoch and what made them so dangerous?’

‘Shonagh,’ he said, ‘ you get into the mougev and let Gurval and I handle the hoch whatever they are.’

‘You’ll soon find oot,’ said Shonagh, ‘they sound as they they’re only round the corner!’