**The Meeting With Enourabi**

Gurval led the party straight to the mougev of Enourabi which, to Shonagh’s surprise, was no different from any of the others in the ker. She didn’t know what she had expected, but she did think that there might have been a special, more distinctive, mougev for the leader of the hill folk, or at least some symbol or banner signifying the mougev of someone important. Obviously the folk beneath the Hill didn’t put much store by outward show!

The appearance of Andrew and Shonagh caused most of the folk of the ker to take notice, but when they saw that they were with Gurval and Kozhiadez they looked, but said nothing. The fact that they were with these respected members of the community was enough to gain them acceptance by the folk. Yet, a few of the folk would have loved to have heard where they came from and what they were doing there, but were too polite to ask. They knew that if they had to know, someone would tell them.

Gurval led them to a mougev that was close to the granite stage, ‘I’d like you to bide in here for the time being,’ he said. ‘Once we’ve come to some decision about Beuneg, then I’ll ask Enourabi if he can help you. It’s a pity these are sic troubled times or else I’m sure we’d find a rapid answer to your problem, but I’m sure you understand the position?’

Andrew answered for both of them, ‘Of course, you hae to sort oot this problem. Dinna worry about us, we’ll be fine here; won’t we Shonagh?’

‘Yes,’ said Shonagh, ‘we’ll see you when you get through with the meeting.’

Andrew, Shonagh, Danny and Tourz went into the mougev and the young people were delighted to see, that from this mougev, they would have a very good view of the meeting because the door over-looked the clearing in front of the platform. Danny and Tourz settled down together beside a bowl of milk and Shonagh noticed that a meal of berries and nuts had been left out for them, but where it had come from and how the folk knew that they would be coming, she had no idea.

As they sat and waited, they chatted away about rather unimportant things although both were dying to clear their minds of the problems that they both felt faced them. It was Shonagh who finally applied her mind to their problems, ‘What are we going to do, Andrew, if Enourabi canna or winna help us? They’re nae duty bound to help us and they might be frightened that we’ll tell others on the ootside aboot them. It’s pretty plain that they dinna want ower much to do with the world ootside.’

‘Aye, I ken,’ said Andrew, ‘I’ve been thinking aboot that mysel. I suppose we’ll need to promise nae to say a word aboot them when we get oot.’

Shonagh interrupted, ‘You mean *if* we get oot!’

Andrew shook his head, ‘No, no, Shonagh. They’ve nae reason to keep us here. What good would that do them? Even if we did say something to somebody when we get oot, who’s going to believe us? Everybody will just think we’re a couple o havering bairns!’

‘Maybe so, Andrew, but will Enourabi and the folk think like that? I mean, if you were Gurval, would you believe that everybody ootside will just ignore us? He treats us as adults, he’ll expect the folk on the ootside to do the same. I dinna think it’s gan to be as easy as all that to persuade them that we’ll never mention they exist. I mean, we might just do it by accident. We could hardly help it and, even if we only mentioned it between oorsels, somebody is bound to overhear sometime!’

Andrew tried hard to find a comforting answer for Shonagh, but couldn’t. ‘Yes, you’re right,’ he said, ‘and we’re going to have to explain our absence to our parents. They’re bound to want to ken where we’ve been and why it’s taken us so long to get back. They might even have alerted the police or the mountain rescue people to start a search for us.’

Shonagh’s face suddenly darkened, ‘Andrew! How long hae we been inside the Hill? I’ve no idea. We’ve travelled miles underground, rested, had wounds dressed, been attacked by boars, eaten food, drank goat’s milk! - we’ve done all sorts of things that take up a lot of time, yet I’ve no sensation of time passing at all! Why?’

Andrew was equally mystified, ‘I’ve nae idea. I’m like you, not only has time passed but I don’t seem to feel as though time is passing and I don’t feel tired or sleepy. Life under Bennachie is certainly strange and nae easily explained; especially by me! Nae even oor fathers could explain the absence o time!’

‘Well, I suppose all we can do is just wait and see what will happen and hope for the best. They’ve all been very kind to us so far, so I dinna suppose they’ll do us any harm or try to keep us here by force. They dinna like harming anybody or anything and they value folk and their families so I suppose they wouldna like to stop us getting back to oors and I feel sure Gurval and Enora would help us no matter what.’ Shonagh’s optimistic note was not enhanced by the worried look on her face.

They were interrupted by one of the folk they hadn’t seen before. ‘You are the folk frae abeen the hill that Gurval brought with him?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ answered Shonagh. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No, nothing wrong,’ answered the messenger, ‘but Enourabi would like to speak to you before the meeting. If you’ll follow me I’ll take you to him.’

They followed the man along a granite path and came to the mougev of Enourabi. They were both a little apprehensive about what to expect, and their recent discussion hadn’t helped to calm their fears. What would he look like? What would he say to them? Would he refuse to offer them help to get back outside?

They entered the mougev and what they saw was something of an anti-climax for, while a group of the folk, including Gurval and Kozhiadez, sat against one of the walls quietly chatting to each other, they were faced by a man who looked no different from the others except in that he had long, grey hair that hung well down his back, but had none on top of his head. He was stirring some sort of mixture in a pot and humming quietly to himself. At last he looked up and smiled at them. ‘Come here, let me meet you,’ he said in a soft, kindly voice. He held his hands out in the traditional greeting and smiled warmly at them as their palms circled gently around.

‘Sit down beside me,’ he said, ‘we hae much to discuss and we’ll be better off if we are comfortable doing it. You’ll maybe take some o my mushroom soup? I’m famous for it or so I like to think. Here’s a bowl for you, lassie. Is it Shonagh your name is?’

Without stopping to think Shonagh accepted the bowl and muttered a stumbling, ‘Aye, Shonagh, that’s right.’

‘Now you, Andrew. I hope you like mushrooms. We’ve plenty o real beauties here under Menez. Very good for you and they make grand soup,’ said Enourabi handing Andrew a bowl.

As they supped Enourabi continued to talk, ‘You’ll realise we hae problems o oor ain at the moment. Your problem will take a wee bittie o sorting oot, but I think we can handle that withoot too much bother. Gurval has agreed that, once we’ve settled matters with Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel, he’ll help you to get back to the ootside. I’ll gie him the necessary instructions and you should be fine. You’re both fit enough looking and I’m sure you’ll be able to manage the climb.’ He suddenly interjected in a very concerned voice, ‘Is the soup all right?’

Both Shonagh and Andrew nodded vigorously, for they were really enjoying the mushroom soup. ‘Better than anything I’ve tasted before,’ said Andrew. ‘Just magic!’ said Shonagh and by the look on Enourabi’s face you would have thought they had just given him a million pounds!

‘That’s what I really wanted to hear. A man likes to think his soup is appreciated! There is a problem, of course, about your return to the ootside, but I can promise you it winna hurt you in any way and make nae difference to you at all. It’s something we hae to do to protect oorsels, but, of course, you have to agree. We have to make you forget you’ve ever been here or you might just mention it to the folk ootside and that wouldna do at all,’ said Enouirabi solemnly.

‘What exactly happens to us, then?’ asked Shonagh calmly and with apparent unconcern.

‘I’ll do nae mair than put my hands on your head and look into your eyes. For a wee while, nae time at all, you’ll feel a wee bittie faint, then you’ll be right as rain. I’m just gan to pit a suggestion into your head and that will protect us in case you say something on the ootside that might cause folk to come looking for us. We widna like that to happen again.’

‘That seems O.K. by me. O.K. with you, Shonagh?’ asked Andrew, who felt he could trust the aneth folk completely.

‘No problems,’ replied Shonagh, ‘ but what I would like to ken, Enourabi, is why you said you wouldna like that to happen again. When did folk come here afore?’

Enourabi looked serious for just a moment, ‘Well, we’ve had quite a few instances when folk ended up aneth the hill. I think it has always been by accident; och, they’ve come into a cave somewhere on the hills and managed to discover one o the wee ventilation holes that are dotted aboot. Sometimes wee earth falls open them up. I suppose that you found one o them and that’s why you’re here.

‘But even some o the accidents hae caused us problems. There’s been a fair puckle battles in this area. You’ll hae heard o the Romans? Well, they had a battle here and a few o them who’d been wounded, or just left behind, crawled for safety into some o the caves. We had to bury maist o them but we helped one or two to get away.

‘Even worse happened after the Battle o Harlaw. Mony a Gael and North-easterner was left behind that day and mony a bairn was left withoot a father. We had a lot o clearing up to do then and a lot o men to send on their way. We’d stopped all contact with the ootside folk long before that, but Harlaw convinced us that we’d need to hide oorsels away for good.

‘Mind you, the worst problem we had, had nothing to do with battles or killing at all. They started a quarry on Menez. O there’d been quarries on the Hill before and none had ever threatened us, but the lintel quarry did. The folk that used the quarry never kent we were here, but they very nearly dug right in on top o us!’

‘I’ve heard o the lintel quarry and been there too,’ said Andrew. ‘Mind, Shonagh, we went up there last Spring. It’s beside Little Oxen Craig. The granite slabs were used to make support lintels for door and windows in houses.’

‘That’s the one,’ said Enourabi. ‘Well, they started to quarry there after really heavy rain had exposed a good seam o granite. They remade the road that had been there a long time before and worked the granite for quite a while. But, they were getting gey close to breaking in on top o us. Now, they didna ken that, but none the less we were worried aboot it I can tell you. We spoke to Doue and we’d a lot o meetings and, whether it was Doue or fate, call it what you like, alang came another terrible night and day o rain. Wild and terrifying it was, but, at the end o the storm, the road to the quarry had been washed away and the quarry never opened again. Since then there’s been nae real quarrying on Menez so we’re fine pleased and feel a lot safer. But you’ll maybe see why we’re nae that keen on folk coming doon here. You’re world would need to change quite a bit before we’d feel at hame in it.’

Shonagh nodded in agreement, ‘I can see what you mean, but the world ootside is nae like that all the time. It’s nae all battles and destroying the land. A lot o folk hae put the land to good use.’

Enourabi smiled, ‘ Och, I ken that. There’s far mair good than there’s bad ootside, but there’s still ower mony bad for us just yet. Maybe someday we’ll venture oot into your world when you’ve really got everybody and everything sorted oot.’

‘I really hope you do,’ said Shonagh, ‘I think there’s a lot we could learn frae your folk. Tell me, Enourabi, will we forget everything we’ve learned once we return to oor families?’

‘ You’ll forget a lot o it,’ replied Enourabi, ‘but, some o the good things will bide. Mind, I’m fairly sure that you’re good folk as it is; you’ll maybe just be a wee bit better.’

Gurval interupted their meeting, ‘I think it’s time we met with the folk, Enourabi. Most o the folk seem to hae arrived at the meeting place and we shouldna keep them waiting.’

‘No, Gurval, you are right,’ affirmed Enourabi, ‘ this is maybe the maist important meeting we’ve ever had because we are gan to take action against one o oor ain folk.’

Andrew couldn’t resist interrupting, ‘Beuneg is one of your folk! Hasn’t he always been your enemy?’

‘Nae a bit o it,’ replied Enourabi, ‘in fact he was once one o the elders, just like Gurval and Tual. But, you see, he was never pleased when decisions didna go alang the way he wanted them. He’d get upset and rant and rave. You get folk like that and we never paid much heed, but he got worse and worse till the time came when he cut himsel off frae us. He went and lived in a mougev right on the ootskirts o Menez and started to gather round himsel a lot o Kah Du-Kel. At first he was mair a bother than anything else, like an itch you couldna scratch, but he got worse and worse and so did the cats.

He started letting them ootside Menez at night and they attacked beasts like sheep and wild game on the ootside. Naebody cared aboot the game, a few rabbits and hares, but fairmers didna like their sheep being killed, and then all the stories started aboot panthers and pumas and beasts o that kind. That suited us as lang as it kept the ootside world frae bothering us, but the Kah Du-Kel got to like the killing and they’ve caused a lot o trouble here aneth Menez. Beuneg wasna above using them to get up to all kinds o tricks some o them causing injury and death. That isna any good, and he never gets any better. Something needs to be done and we’ll hae to do something aboot it.’

The elders lined up behind Enourabi and they left the mougev and walked slowly along the path and assembled on the granite platform. There was a large group of folk, numbering around 200, gathered in the space in front of the platform and a few more stood outside their mougev. The crowd showed no emotion and stood quietly and patiently awaiting the words of their elders.

At first, Shonagh and Andrew weren’t quite sure what they should do, but Gurval had motioned to them to follow him and they found themselves on the platform alongside Gurtval and Enora. Aware of the seriousness of the occasion they kept very quiet and waited as expectantly as everyone else to see what the decision of the elders had been. Danny and Tourz had followed them also, but they, as if knowing that this was a serious occasion, stayed on the path and did not come on to the platform.

The silence was almost tangible as Enourabi took a step forward and held out his arms, with the palms of his hands bent upwards, in the usual form of greeting, towards the waiting gathering. The crowd responded in the same way and for a just a moment each communicated with the other in a silent, but impressive, ritual. Shonagh could feel the excitement growing within her as the group, following Enourabi’s example, slowly lowered their arms. Enourabi bowed his old head slightly and made to address his folk.

The decision of the elders would soon be made known.