**At Beuneg’s Mougev**

To Shonagh and Andrew it did not seem to take any time at all to reach the area where they would find Beuneg’s mougev. As usual the folk travelled in that peculiarly rapid way they had, and that, in spite of Gurval’s injury which was bound to be causing him pain. Of course, Gurval showed no outward sign of pain and carried his bags and goaf, just like the others, with the naer clinging to his shoulders.

The folk were led on this occasion by their new-found ally, the Kah Du-Kel that had saved Gurval’s life and she seemed to know the safest passages for them to take for no attempt was made by Beuneg’s cats to halt their progress. The naer, which had draped itself around the Gurval’s neck for this stage of the journey, contented itself with just a sweet purring sound and no siren sounds were issued to alarm the travellers. None, that is, until they neared the area of the ster bras or big river.

Gurval had explained to Shonagh and Andrew that Beuneg had found himself a near impregnable mougev up above the ster bras and they had been prepared for a river crossing, but when they reached the wide plain around the river they found something that was little more than a stream which did not look very deep and was about a metre across.

The first of the naer’s shrill cries was heard just as they left a tunnel that led on to the wide, shallow banks of the river. The naer was quick to warn of enemy Kah Du-Kel in the vicinity and while they did not, at first, see any of the beasts they certainly heard their defiant roars and grumbling growls echoing in the near distance.

‘We’ll hae to travel along the banks of the ster and past the wee lochan before we get to Beuneg’s mougev,’ explained Gurval. ‘It’s in a gey difficult place to get into and we’ll need to keep the Kah Du-Kel busy while you try and get your pitons in place.’

They entered a tunnel through which the ster ran and soon came upon a clearing where a small loch had formed because the outlet was very narrow. The water in the lochan looked remarkably clear and they were able to see fish swimming in it. Shonagh regarded the loch with some surprise and wondered what the folk up above would have thought if they had known that under Bennachie there was a loch filled with fish!

Shonagh turned to Uisant, ‘The ster’s nae very big, is it?’ she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Uisant saw that she was having a wee joke at the expense of the name ‘ster bras’ that the folk used for the river, but he was quick to set the matter right, ‘Nae at this time, but it can catch you unawares. When there’s a lot o rain up abeen then the whole area floods and the river is nae only big, but fast as well. You see that narrow bit up ahead?’ Shonagh nodded in confirmation. ‘Well, there’s a lot o narrow gaps like that in the rock and that causes the river to dam up and the water flows oot really swiftly on the other side. Never trust the waters o the ster bras!’

They left the plain of the lochan and entered the narrow tunnel and although the water did get deeper and the flow increased Shonagh did not find either to be exceptional. There were times when the passage was so narrow that they had to wade through the water and bow down quite low to allow for the roof of the tunnel being rather low in places, but it was not too uncomfortable. She did worry a little about the Kah Du-Kel attacking then in this confined space, but Uisant assured her that the Kah Du-Kel did not relish water and were unlikely to attempt anything in the tunnel.

This caused Shonagh to check on the whereabouts of the cat which had joined their party and saw that it was sticking close to Gurval and making as little contact with the water as was possible.

Like most places that they had travelled there was reasonably adequate light in the river tunnel, but they were still able to see the tunnel exit quite clearly up ahead and Gurval halted the party before they reached the exit, ‘Barban and Zaig will lead the way oot o the tunnel. Just in case there’s ony o the Kah Du-Kel waiting for us.’

Shonagh looked around to discover who Zaig was for she’d never come across the name before. ‘Who’s Zaig?’ she enquired of Uisant and he explained that that was the name the Gurval had given to the Kah Du-Kel who had saved his life.

‘In the ballads o the folk there’s a story o a lassie who saved her husband by throwing herself between him and a giant hoch when the man was trapped and seemed bound to die or be maimed. The man was saved and his wife could hae been crushed or gored to death, but the hoch was that impressed by her actions that he didna attack her, but drew back and let them both escape. Her name was Zaig and lassies that carry oot brave acts are often called Zaig because o that.’ And so another Zaig entered the ballads and legends of the folk.

Barban and Zaig crept silently forward and eased their way out of the tunnel. The ster wound round in a sharp bend at this point and they had to stick closely to the rock walls as they inched their way forward. They confirmed that no party of Kah Du-Kel awaited them and the rest of the party joined them.

Shonagh saw that, while it was certainly wider at this point, the river ran slightly more swiftly, because the narrow tunnel and the sharp bend on its exit caused the water to speed up quite considerably and rebound off of the granite wall although not enough to cause any problems.

They gazed downstream and Gurval raised his goaf and pointed up to the face of a small cliff that overhung the ster, ‘There is the mougev o Beuneg and that’s where we hae to get to!’

The group turned their eyes upwards and they could see groups of Kah Du-Kel pacing and spinning round in an agitated fashion on a narrow pathway that looked as though it had been cut in the side of the rock and would obviously make it very difficult for anyone to reach the mougev unless they were allowed to do so by the guardian black cats.

Everyone in the group stayed behind a rock spur until Gurval had issued them with orders. There was no way that their visit was going to surprise Beuneg and his cats, but the less aware they were of the group’s movements the better.

Gurval lowered his voice, ‘While the main group try and get into the mougev by the path up the cliff, Barban, Andrew and Shonagh will try and get the pitons into place and see if they can reach the ledge ootside the mougev. They’ll be oot o your sight so you’ll need to keep up the attack as long as it is necessary or until I signal you to stop. Uisant will lead the attack for us and be ready to replace him if he’s driven back or shows signs o wearying. We dinna want onybody hurt if we can help it so take care. You ken what you’re gan to do, Shonagh?’

‘Aye, Barban and Andrew are going to cover me with their shields while I try to get in as many pitons as possible. We’ve plenty o rope and, if we get the pitons in place, we should be able to get up to the ledge. It’ll all depend on the main group keeping the Kah Du-Kel occupied for as long as possible and us nae being spied too quickly!’

‘Right,’ said Gurval. ‘Uisant, you move oot now and make as much din as you can. Keep the Beuneg’s attention away frae Shonagh.’

Uisant’s group moved rapidly forward making as much noise as they could to ensure the maximum attention from the Kah Du-Kel. When they reached the bottom of the cliff path they were met by a horde of snarling, screaming black cats and the roars and shouts of both attackers and defenders were ideal in covering the speedy, but furtive, dash by Shonagh and her friends as they made their way around the spur on which the mougev stood.

They reached a narrow part of the ster and cleared it at one step. Once on the other side, and out of sight of the main attack, Shonagh set about hammering the pitons into place while Barban and Andrew held stiff leather shields over her head in case they were discovered and an attempt was made to throw rocks or missiles on to them from above. They only had about seven metres to cover, but it was a difficult overhang and getting the pitons securely in place was very important. The rock was damp and this made it difficult to balance and get a good grip.

Shonagh had managed to get four pitons securely in place when a loud crash on one of the shields caused her to slip. Luckily she was only about a metre and a half above the floor of the cavern and, while she suffered no hurt, she was given a shock by the loudness and suddenness of the noise.

Shonagh joined Barban and Andrew under the shelter of their shields and tried to peer out and up to see what or whom was causing their discomfort. They edged out away from the wall to get a better view and on looking up Shonagh and Andrew got their first sight of Beuneg.

They couldn’t make out exactly what he looked like because of the angle and the height but they did hear him. Beuneg was shouting aloud and the shouts were interrupted by what can only be described as manic laughter. He seemed to be enjoying the attack and he obviously felt that the folk had no chance of dislodging him from his lair.

On a warning cry from Barban, Shonagh and Andrew ducked back under the shields as yet more rocks and myriad bits of gravel rained down upon them to the accompaniment of Beuneg’s fearsome laughter.

‘Looks like we’re stuck here for the moment,’ said Andrew. ‘You’ll never be able to get pitons properly in place as long as this barrage o rocks is going on. What do you think we should do, Barban?’

‘Nae much we can do as long as Beuneg is above us. We can just keep oor heads doon and hope we’re nae hit. If the folk attacking up the path make enough progress he’ll maybe be forced into helping the Kah Du-Kel and then we’ll be able to get on with putting in more pitons.’

It was then that Shonagh heard the noise. It started as a quiet, slow rumbling sound and it was only gradually that she became aware of it. She turned to Barban, ‘Do you hear that noise? What can it be? It’s getting louder and louder!’

Before Barban got a chance to reply they heard a loud cry from Gurval, ‘Get back! All of you! Back! Get to the other side o the ster and hold on to something secure on the other side!’

Barban reacted most quickly, ‘It must be a spate o water. It’ll be the noise o a big spate that’s echoing through the tunnels. The ster will soon be the ster bras again! We hae to get back on the other side as quickly as we can.’

But even as Barban was speaking the level of the ster had risen quite considerably and there was a noticeable increase in the rate of flow of the water. Gurval appeared and urged them to move quickly, ‘The water will be on us in nae time at all. Leave everything and get back. There are plenty o rocks and wee crags to hang on to on this side!’

Gurval was having to shout above the rising noise and the only other thing that could be heard were the wild cries and hellish laughter of Beuneg who had perched himself right on the edge of the cliff to enjoy the spectacle of his enemies being put to flight by the rushing waters of the big ster.

Shonagh was the first to enter the water and was surprised to learn that already it was nearly up to her waist. Barban followed her and it was then that disaster struck. Barban, in trying to ease Shonagh’s exit from the ster, was gently pushing her from behind when she slipped. Barban, being shorter than either Andrew or Shonagh, found herself going under the water and losing her footing. Smoothly polished river bed granite, once it was really wet, was just like ice and twice as dangerous.

Shonagh clambered up on to the dry rocky bank and saw Barban disappear under the surface. Andrew acted immediately. He jumped forward, grabbed Barban by the shoulders and forced her head above the surface of the water. He got her safely to the side and Shonagh and Gurval pulled her to her feet. Just as Andrew was about to leave the ster the river seemed to speed up and before he knew what was happening the surge of water dragged him off of his feet and swept him downstream away from the others.

Andrew appeared to be helpless in trying to arrest his movement when suddenly he felt an ‘arm’ going round him and easing him towards the bank. Andrew seemed to know that he was being helped and just let himself be guided by his rescuer. Who was his rescuer? The shouts of delight coming from the group soon let him know. The ‘arm’ that had stopped him being swept away was the long, manoeuvrable nose of a moch-dour. The water pig, an expert swimmer in all kinds of water conditions, eased its body round and pushed Andrew ashore. A potential disaster had been averted.

‘That’s the luck we’ve been looking for,’ cried Gurval, ‘but dinna hang aboot, get yourself a good grip on a rock or get yourself jammed against something that will protect you from the spate. That noise is a warning o a really big lump o water!’

Shonagh and Andrew found themselves good solid positions of relative safety and awaited the arrival of the floodwater. It must have been a wild thunderstorm up abeen if the water was going to be as bad as Gurval predicted. Gurval checked that everyone in their party, including the naer, was safe and joined the others in staring at the tunnel exit from where the water would emerge.

From his position of seeming safety, and surrounded by his faithful Kah Du-Kel, Beuneg continued to pour down scorn and hatred, interrupted only by occasional bursts of horrific laughter, on the heads of the group who were sheltering below.

From their position Shonagh and Andrew were able to get their first real view of Beuneg. He looked quite like the other folk they had encountered and it was only after regarding him closely for some minutes that Shonagh said, ‘Beuneg looks very like Enourabi!’

Gurval nodded, ‘He should. He’s Enourabi’s younger brother. That’s one o the reasons he was never content. He was forever wanting to be better than Enourabi, but he’d the wrong temperament and he could never understand why folk preferred to listen to his older brother.’

‘You mean, Enourabi is at war with his own brother! That’s terrible for him. Is that why he didna come with us?’

Before Shonagh could get an answer Gurval shouted a warning to everyone, ‘Hold tight! Here comes the water!’

And come it did. A great raging, surge of water poured out of the tunnel mouth, slammed against the corner wall of rock and shot straight at them and then across to the wall opposite. It arrived with frightening fury, tearing at their clothes and trying to force them away from the places where they had anchored themselves in such a manner that they thought their arms would would be wrenched out of their sockets.

Shonagh strove to keep her head above the water level as much as she could and it was while she was doing so that she witnessed the end of Beuneg. While the wall of water was battering the group Beuneg stood perched on the ledge outside his mougev revelling in the group’s distress. He paid scant attention to the water and as he pranced up and down jeering and yelling he did not watch the water.

The water had left the tunnel mouth as if propelled by a rocket. It reached the curve, gathering speed as it swung around the smooth curve of the wall and, like a deadly missile, launched itself in the direction of the cliff face above which Beuneg was delivering his chants of hate.

On reaching the cliff the water smashed into it and a great lump of water rose vertically in the air. Shonagh gazed in horror as the water spout rose, seemed to hover momentarily and then crashed on the heads of Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel.

Beuneg and three of the Kah Du-Kel were dashed off the ledge and fell to the ground below. Beuneg made contact with the rock on at least three occasions on his way down and on hitting the surface lay still.

The water surge seemed to pass as quickly as it had begun. Shonagh looked round to tell Gurval what had happened, but he simply nodded an indication that he, too, had witnessed what had happened. They watched while the retreating waters lapped around the still body of Beuneg and, as soon as they felt it was safe, Gurval led them across the ster to see what had happened to Beuneg.

As soon as they saw Beuneg it was plain to them all that he was dead. The fall had been too much. Andrew was amazed to see the sadness that seemed to have dropped like a shroud over the group and, as if he knew what Andrew was thinking, Gurval explained, ‘We hae lost a friend. Maybe he wasna just as good a friend as he should hae been this last while back, but for all that he was one o us and we all hae to remember that. Uisant, will you prepare the body so we can take it back to the ker? Enourabi and the folk will want to pay their respects. We’ll go on up to Beuneg’s mougev and see if we can get some idea what he’s got that gave him control o the Kah Du-Kel. Come on, the rest o you, oor job is nae finished just yet.’