

## The Cabbage Donkey

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A bottomless purse, a magic tablecloth, three women bewitched, a greedy princess, a hero who falls asleep in a lady's lap, apples that can give you a deer's head, and apples that can take it away.

Last time I told the story of "The Three Soldiers", the tenth of John Francis Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands", which was collected in Gaelic in Islay, and published in 1860. It contained those seven motifs. Now listen to this story from Grimm's fairy tales, and see if you can recognise the seven motifs as they appear, one by one, sometimes in disguise, sometimes not. All we know about "Der Krautesel" (The Cabbage Donkey) is that it comes from German-speaking Bohemia, that it was sent by Jacob Grimm in Vienna to his brother Wilhelm in Cassel on 10 December 1814, and that they published it in 1819.

A young hunter meets a poor old woman in the forest and gives her some money. In return he receives some good advice. "You'll come to a tree," she says, "where some birds are squabbling over a cloak. Shoot into the middle of them, and one bird will fall down dead. Take out its heart, swallow it, and every morning you'll find a gold piece under your pillow. Then throw the cloak over your shoulders, wish where you want to be, and it will take you there straight away."

All this happens, and soon he is so wealthy that he thinks: "What use is all my gold if I stay at home? I'll go and see the world."

As he comes out of a dense forest he's spotted by another old woman, a witch, who's standing at one of the windows of a castle with her beautiful daughter. "Do you see that man?" she says. "He has a bird's heart in his body, from which a gold piece lies every morning under his pillow."

The young man notices the girl, and in no time he's knocking at the door. He's courteously received and well entertained, and falls in love with her. Her mother brews a potion for her to give him to drink. He vomits up the heart, and the girl swallows it herself. From now on the gold appears under her pillow, and her mother comes every morning to take it away.

Now the old witch says: "He has a wishing-cloak too, we must take it away from him." The girl is reluctant, but does as her mother says. She sits at the window and looks sadly at the distant mountains.

"Why are you so sad?" asks the young man.

"Over there is the Granatenberg where the precious stones grow. I long for them so much, but only the birds can reach them."

"I can fix that," he says. He draws her in under his cloak, wishes himself on the Granatenberg, and soon they're busy gathering precious stones from all over the mountain. He gets tired, puts his head in her lap and falls asleep. She unfastens the cloak from his shoulders, wraps herself up in it with the jewels, and wishes herself back home.

The hunter wakes up to find himself alone on the mountain, but in due course three giants come by. One says: "What sort of worm is this?" The second wants to step on him and squash him. The third says: "Leave him alone. When he climbs up higher, the clouds will take hold of him and carry him away."

When they've gone the hunter climbs up higher and a cloud carries him away. Eventually it deposits him in a cabbage-field. He's so hungry that he eats one of the cabbages. Four legs grow on him, then two long ears, and he realises that he has turned into a donkey. But he's so hungry that he keeps munching, and when he reaches a different kind of cabbage he turns back into a human being. Then he goes to sleep.

Next morning he decides to go and get revenge for what was done to him, and takes with him one of each sort of cabbage. Reaching the castle, he blackens his face so that even his own mother wouldn't know him, then knocks at the door. It's opened by the old witch. He tells her he was sent by the king to find the most delicious salad in the world, and he has it here, but the sun is withering it and he doesn't know if he can carry it any further.

The witch invites him in and asks to try the cabbage. He hands her the first kind he tried himself. Soon she, her daughter and the maidservant are all running around the courtyard in the form of donkeys. He ties them together with a rope, brings them to a miller and says: "I don't want these any more, they're too much trouble. You can have them. I suggest you give the old donkey one meal and three beatings a day, the middle one three meals and one beating a day, and the young one three meals and no beatings a day."

A couple of days later the miller comes to tell him that the old donkey has died and the other two are so sad that they can't last much longer. "Bring them back to me," says the hunter.

He gives them the other cabbage, and they turn back into the maidservant and the witch's daughter. The witch's daughter begs forgiveness, says that she loves him, that the wishing-cloak is in a cupboard, and that she'll happily vomit up the bird's heart. "Keep it," he says, "I'd rather marry you." And they live happily ever after.

So the bottomless purse has turned into a bird's heart, the tablecloth is a cloak, the apples are cabbages and the deer's head is a donkey, but other than that our seven motifs are intact.

If we now read the notes on "Der Krautesel", we discover that it was put into the Grimms' second edition (1819) in place of a tale in the first edition (1815) called "Die Lange Nase" (The Long Nose). "Die Lange Nase" is about three soldiers who receive three magic gifts almost the same as those in the Gaelic story – a purse, a cloak and a horn (in the Gaelic story it was a whistle). One of the soldiers is cheated out of the cloak by a greedy princess (as in the Gaelic story), but finds apples that make his nose grow and pears that shorten it again, and uses these to get revenge on her. "Her nose grew sixty yards around the table, sixty around her cupboard, a hundred around the castle and another twenty miles over to the town."

You can imagine the fun parents and children had with that at bed-time. I'm sorry I said once in this column that the Grimms' tales aren't as funny as the Gaelic ones. They're often darker and nastier, but they

can be hilarious. The Grimms got “Die Lange Nase” on 23 October 1813 in Cassel from one of their best informants, a local innkeeper’s daughter, Dorothea Viehmann (1755–1815), who also gave them “Cinderella”. The tale ends, just like the Gaelic one, with the hero curing the princess in three stages, then rejecting her and going off with his comrades.

So we can begin to compare our motifs. Two apples in Islay are an apple and a pear in Cassel and two cabbages in Bohemia. A deer with its antlers in Islay is a person with a very long nose in Cassel and a donkey with long ears in Bohemia.

To explain the differences you can appeal to geography. There were no donkeys in Islay, or in Gaelic Scotland generally, so a deer creeps in. Again, there were few pears or cabbages in the Highlands and Islands, at least before the eighteenth century, so apples make sense in Islay. Cabbage was, and is, a very popular vegetable in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic).

To explain the similarities, you can search backwards in time for common origins. In this case, for example, the Grimms point us in their notes to the old story of Fortunat, a version of which was turned into a play called “Old Fortunatus” by the English dramatist Thomas Dekker, who lived in Shakespeare’s day.

For the shape-shifting motif, you can go back all the way if you like to the “Metamorphoses” of Ovid, who lived from 43 BC to AD 18, and who was, significantly I think, the favourite Latin poet of the Middle Ages. John Francis Campbell heard “The Three Soldiers” in his childhood, and recalled “contriving with a companion how we would have given the cruel princess bits of different kinds of apples, mixed together, so as to make the horns grow, and fall off time about”.

You can understand such motifs any way you like. The Jacobite poet Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair must have known “The Three Soldiers”, and he probably had it in mind when he addressed King George (whom he loathed) like this:

*Ciod e do cheart-s’ air crùn  
Ach adhaircean bhith sparradh ort?  
'S cho sean ri d' chòir o thùs  
Brios òircheard bha 'n Renfriù.*

“What right do you have to the crown / Save as horns to be thrust on your head? / Your original claim is as old / As Bryce the goldsmith who was in Renfrew.” We don’t know who exactly Bryce was, but it sounds as if he had made himself a laughing-stock by putting forward a claim to the throne of Scotland, no doubt based on being a descendant of Robert Bruce and a Presbyterian.

Alastair was no great fan of the antlers symbol. He didn’t think much of MacKenzies, and went to the trouble of composing “Diomoladh Chabair Féidh” (The Dispraise of Cabar Féidh) in forty-five eight-line stanzas, with sentiments like this, referring to the MacLeans:

*Làmh dhearg is long is leóghann  
Mar chòta don aitim ud  
'S bu phrìseil ri uhd gleòis iad  
Seach cròic nam meur glaganach.*

“Red hand and ship and lion / Are like a coat for that kindred / And much more use in a fight / Than antlers whose tines rattle.” It’s his way of saying that the MacDonalds (whose symbols are the red hand, ship and lion) gave the MacLeans far more protection against the Campbells than the MacKenzies ever did. The deer’s principal attribute, as he points out over and over again, is timidity.

Now let’s throw the long nose and the donkey’s head into the equation. The long nose will remind you of Pinocchio and his fibs, the donkey’s head will remind you of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”. Bottom the weaver is rehearsing a play in the forest with his fellow-tradesmen. When he retires into a thicket the mischievous Puck gives him a donkey’s head. It frightens the daylight out of his friends. At Oberon’s command, Puck has given the beautiful Titania a potion which will make her fall in love with the first person she sees. She sees Bottom . . .

Oberon sends Puck back to take off both spells. Bottom says: “I have had a dream – past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass as if he go about to expound this dream.”

One theory is that “Titania” is Queen Elizabeth and “Bottom” is the only man she ever truly loved, the Catholic Duc d’Alençon, whom she couldn’t possibly marry. All I’d say is this. Bottom gets a donkey’s head because the storyteller wants us to laugh at him.

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