

The Fairy Herd of Balnacnoc



In the Far North, on the Isle of Skye, there is a spit of land that juts out into the sea. It runs to the North, out into the Minch. They call it Trotternish and it's home to many wonderful things – like a serpent's spine, the Quirang snakes its way up to the point, and the Old Man of Storr stands stark from the hillside like a solitary fang. On its West Coast lies the wee port of Uig – from here, ships set sail to Harris, North Uist and the Outer Hebrides.

Every year, about this time, they have a Great Fair and this gathers people from all around to the town. They come to buy, to sell, to drink and to dance. It's quite the highlight of the season and it has that giddy quality that marks the end of Summer – the desire to drink and dance in the last of the sunlight before the long Winter sets in.

This year is no different and, as the sun rises to its zenith, the fair is full of people shouting, laughing and waving goods at each other. A lone traveller walks into the square and everyone stops to stare. He is tall but not a giant, by any means. He wears a long grey cape with a hood, but that's common enough. He has in his hand a long staff with a crook on the end, but many shepherds use the same. The reason that they stare is the Ram that stands alongside him. This is the most magnificent creature any of them have ever seen. As tall at the shoulder as a deerhound, his noble head is decked with the most amazing pair of horns – they coil in great sweeping circles, a perfect ratio, dictated by some divine Fibonacci ideal. They are filigreed with the tracery of fine gold, swirling in intricate flutes and spirals from the broad bases to the fine tips. Marvellous as they are, these *shofar* horns were not what make people stare. It's the fleece.

Someone once said that a sheep is like a cloud with a leg at each corner. If that's true then this fleece is a glorious great cumulo-nimbus of wool, a burgeoning thunderhead of floss, cut through with lightning forks of silver and lined by a incredible halo of golden sunlight. It begs the hand to touch it, to run its fingers through the waves of curling cotton candy, to make great fists in the wool and breathe in its oily scent. Put bluntly, it is the most fabulous fleece that has been seen by anyone since Jason gathered his Argonauts.

People gather round to marvel and children beg with their eyes for the chance to touch the Ram's fleece. The traveller smiles and nods and the children take turns to hug, stroke and pat the great pile of softness. The Ram stands quiet and aloof, unfazed by the attention.

After a while, the other attractions of the day lure most of the crowd away until the traveller is left with some of the children. He sits down and pulls out an apple and begins to eat it. One little girl, Ailsa, speaks up.

"You look sad!" she says, "how can you be sad when you have such an amazing sheep as this?"

The traveller smiles a sad little smile and finishes his apple.

“Ah well, I used to have many sheep like this one”, he says “but these were no ordinary sheep. Many years ago, my father was captured by the Faerie folk. He thought he was doomed to be their slave but he challenged the leader of the Fairies to a game of chance. With quick thinking and a lot of luck, he bested them and he took the Fairy Herd as his prize. Now, the Faerie folk are bound by ancient laws and, once he’d won, they had no choice but to release him and his trophy, even though they were furious!

My father soon found that the herd was magical – they could be shorn once a week and their fleeces would grow back the next day, as good as new! More than that, the wool was threaded through with real gold and silver. When spun, the cloth made was lighter than silk and would shimmer with the precious metals in its weft. My father sold this cloth to the dressmakers of the Royal Courts of Europe where it was made into fine gowns and beautiful tapestries.

He grew quite wealthy in this way but he always shared everything with his friends and family. When he knew the time had come, he passed the herd on to me and charged me to keep it safe and share all that we earned. This I have done since that day but it has not been easy.”

“Why not?” asks the wee girl.

“The herd remembers where it came from and can sense when there are Faerie lands nearby. The sheep all make for their home country and only by the kindest of words and sweetest of treats can I keep them with me”.

“Where are they now?”

“On my way here, I was tired out with walking and, in the hot sun, I fell asleep by the side of the road. When I awoke, all had fled but for this one Ram. The ground is hard from the Summer’s heat, there’s no tracks and now I have no idea where they have headed. I do not know what I am going to do”.

At this, the children exchange glances and their eyes light up with excitement. One of the eldest bites her lip and approaches the traveller.

“Sir,” she says nervously, “we may be able to help!”

“And how is that?” he asks.

“There is a place near here, called Balnacnoc, it is also known as the Fairy Glen and legend has it that they keep a castle in the heart of it. We have never been as we are not allowed to play there but we know how to get there”.

“Well it sounds like the kind of place that they would be drawn to. Do you think that you could show *me* how to get there?”

The children all nod enthusiastically.

“That said, I couldn’t accept your aid without some sort of payment” and he reaches to his belt and unslings a leather bag. He scoops out a handful of small gold coins and laughs as he sees the children’s faces.

“Remember,” he says, “I sell fine fabrics to the Royal Court – I can well afford to pay you a gold coin apiece for your help – and I’ll add another for each of my sheep that you find!”

Twelve gold coins are pressed into twelve little hands and twelve tiny fists close tight over more money than any of the children have ever even seen!

And so, as the Fair continues full swing into the afternoon, the children take the traveller by the hand and lead him and his Ram through the town of Uig. Along the shore road they go, then up the rise on the South road out of town. The sun beats down but their young legs are full of energy and they are raring to get to the search! Soon they come to the path that leads inland to Balnacnoc and, in their excitement, they skip and sing and run to where they are sure the sheep must be hiding!

As they approach the Glen, the traveller notices that the birdsong that filled the trees near the town has started to dwindle. The children lead him on – “it’s not far now!” they cry. The traveller notes that the breeze that blew from the sea has also stopped and the trees that border the path are silent and still. No birds sing now and the rabbits that studded the hillside are nowhere to be seen.

Onwards, the children pull him, laughing and calling to the sheep that must be near now. Small hillocks rear up on each side of the path, strangely they look like mountains in miniature. Even the trees seem like small versions of their normal selves. Deeper and deeper into the Glen they go, until they reach a wide, still pool, right in the heart of the Glen. Rising above it is a wee rocky crag that looks for all the world like the battlements of a mighty castle. The children leave the traveller now and spread out across the Glen, running up the little mountains and calling out cheerfully in the stunted woods. All afternoon they run and call until, finally, as the sun is lowering in the sky, they gather together in a grassy hollow behind the castle-like crag.

“Did you find anything?” asks Ailsa.

“Nothing yet” gasps one young lad, his face red and shiny from his efforts.

“Well, they must be around here somewhere!” Ailsa harrumphs.

“I don’t mind searching some more but I have to sit down for a few minutes, just tae catch my breath”.

The other children nod at this and flump down on the soft grass of the hollow. Within a very short time, each of the children has fallen asleep, worn out with the hard work and excitement of the day.

As the sun sets behind the crag, the twelve children all start to dream. They each dream of the same thing – of warm wool between their fingers, of the smell of lanolin – that oil that makes wool shine, and of the bleating of young lambs lost to their mothers. The dreams they share flow through them like a stream and they stretch their limbs, luxuriating in the mossy comfort of the hollow. Their hands relax and from their fists fall the coins that they've held so tightly all day, only now they are just the heads of daisies, crumpled from their squeezing. The twelve children sleep and dream.

The next day, the traveller walks through the town of Uig with his crook in his hand. The Fair-goers of the day before stretch and rub their eyes as they shake off the revelries of the previous evening. They stare at the traveller as he crosses the square and heads for the North road that takes you to the top of Trotternish. They stare at the magnificent Ram that walks alongside the traveller and at the twelve perfect sheep that follow faithfully in his footsteps.

Of the twelve children that searched the Fairy glen, nothing is ever heard of them again.

