

— THE STALKER —

Hector Urquhart, who was one of the correspondents of the great Victorian gatherer of folk tales, John Francis Campbell, wrote in 1860 about his boyhood experiences of storytelling in Poolewe, where he was brought up:

...when I was a boy, it was the custom for the young people to assemble together on the long winter nights to hear the old people recite the tales or *sgéalachd*, which they learned from their fathers before them. In these days tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, making our clothes and shoes. When one of them came to the village we were greatly delighted, whilst getting new kilts at the same time. I knew an old tailor who used to tell a new tale every night during his stay in the village; and another, an old shoemaker, who, with his large stock of stories about ghosts and fairies, used to frighten us so much that we scarcely dared pass the neighbouring churchyard on our way home. It was also the custom when an *aoidh*, or stranger, celebrated for his store of tales, came on a visit to the village, for us, young and old, to make a rush to the house where he spent the night, and choose our seats, some on beds, some on forms, and others on three-legged stools etc., and listen in silence to the new tales; just as I have myself seen since, when a far-famed actor came to perform in the Glasgow theatre. The goodman of the house usually opened with the tale of the *Famhair Mòr* (great giant) or some other favourite tale, and then the stranger carried on after that. It was a common saying, 'The first tale by the goodman, and tales to daylight by the *aoidh*,' or guest.

The following is one of the kinds of story that would have been told during these gatherings. Such stories are sometimes called 'wonder tales' and are widely dispersed throughout many countries. This is based on a version taken down by Hector Urquhart himself in 1859, from the telling of John Campbell, a sawyer. Campbell lived in Strath Gairloch, which is not far from Poolewe.

There was a widow's son, who was always up on the hill stalking. One afternoon he was leaning up against a grassy mound, sheltering from the wind and enjoying the warmth of the sun, when he saw, way up the track, a horse and rider coming towards him. It was a handsome young man, riding a blue filly. The young man dismounted and began a conversation with the Stalker. One thing led to another, and a game of cards was proposed. As the afternoon wore on, the Stalker was doing pretty well. The stakes got higher, the Stalker and the young man ended up playing for the blue filly, and the Stalker won her. Who knows what happened to the handsome young man, but the Stalker rode the filly home and, as he was tethering her outside his house, she turned into the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. That night, in his bed, they became one.

Next morning the Stalker kissed his new wife goodbye and went up on the hill. At the end of the day when he came over the ridge and looked down on his house, he saw that the thatch had been ripped away and the furniture inside scattered about. When he got down there, there was no sign of his wife. A neighbour came out. She had seen everything. 'A giant took her,' she said.

At dawn the Stalker set off to find his wife. He travelled all day. He travelled down the deepest, darkest glens, and across rushing torrents. He travelled over the highest mountain peaks, through rain and hail and sleet and snow. As evening approached he came to a little hut on a hillside. The hut was thatched entirely with birds' feathers, feathers of hoodies on the outside and wrens on the inside. He went in. The floor was even and smooth. There were two big fires burning, and a table and a chair, but no sign of any animal or any human being. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something flying in through the door. It was a falcon holding a duck, which it dropped on the table. Then, as the Stalker watched, the falcon turned into a boy with a sharp nose and piercing blue eyes.

'Your wife was here last night with a big giant,' said the boy. 'Things weren't looking so good for her.'

'That's why I'm here,' said the Stalker. 'I'm on their trail, and woe to that giant when I catch up with them.'

'You'll catch up with them, sure enough. But before you leave you must eat and rest.'

They roasted the duck and shared it between them. Then the Stalker lay down in front of the fires. 'What will happen,' he said, 'if anything wicked comes by in the night?'



'Don't worry,' said the boy, 'I'll be watching over you.'

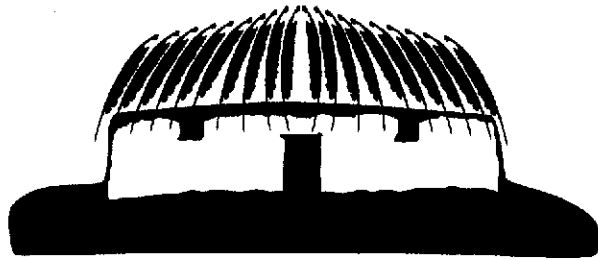
When the Stalker woke at first light there was more food cooked and waiting on the table – this time a couple of blackcocks. After they had eaten, the boy said to the Stalker, 'You should get on your way now. Good luck with your search, and if you ever need my help, just call on the Blue-eyed Falcon of Glen Feist.'

On the second day the glens were deeper and darker, and the mountain passes higher and steeper. As night came down the Stalker arrived at a little hut. This hut was thatched with the feathers of ravens on the outside and the feathers of finches on the inside. He entered. There were two fires burning, and a table and chair, but he was the only living creature there. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something bounding in through the door. It was an otter, and in its mouth was a fat salmon. The otter stood on its back legs and dropped the salmon onto the table; then, as the Stalker watched, the otter turned into a young man with a sleek thatch of brown hair.

'I saw your wife here last night with a big giant,' said the young man. 'She wasn't looking so happy.'

'That's why I'm here,' said the Stalker. 'I'm on their trail, and when I catch up with them that giant will be sorry.'

'You're getting closer, but you should eat and sleep before you set off again.'



So they cooked and ate the salmon, then the Stalker slept while the young man watched over him. In the morning there were two roasted trout on the table for breakfast. When the trout were down to the bones, the young man said, 'You should be away now. Good luck with your search, and if you ever need my help, call on Brown Otter of Sail Stream.'

On the third day the glens were so deep the Stalker could smell the brimstone, and the mountains so high he could hear the music of harps. It was in the dead of night that he saw a light far off. When he came to it, there was a hut, thatched on the outside with eagles' feathers and on the inside with the feathers of larks. He went in and sat at the table, before the two fires, and waited. A big grey hound leapt in through the door with a hare in its mouth. It tossed the hare high in the air, and the hare landed on the table. Then, as the Stalker watched, the hound turned into a wiry, grey-haired man, who said, 'Your wife was here last night along with a big giant. She certainly didn't seem pleased to be in his company.'

'That's why I'm here,' said the Stalker. 'It won't be long before I catch up with that giant, and when I find him, he'll rue the day.'

'You're right,' said the grey-haired man, 'it won't be long now; but you should eat and sleep before you set off.'

They roasted the hare and shared its meat; then the Stalker lay down in front of the fires and went to sleep, while the grey-haired man watched over him.

As the Stalker was getting ready to leave, the wiry, grey-haired man said, 'You don't have far to go now. If you ever need my help, just call on Grey Dog of the Mountain. Remember now.'

The Stalker set off on the fourth day of his journey. The glens were so deep he could feel the heat of the fires of hell, and the

mountains were so high he could hear the beating of the angels' wings. By late afternoon, when the sun was casting long shadows, he came to a ravine, and at the bottom of the ravine was a long white house. The Stalker took out his spyglass and scanned the windows of the house, and through one of them he saw his wife with a comb in her hand. Alternately she combed her hair and wept.

There was a steep, narrow path down to the bottom of the ravine. The Stalker descended. Pebbles rattled about his feet. As he crossed the burn that ran in front of the white house, a window opened and his wife leant out. 'What are you doing here? If the giant sees you, he'll kill you.'

'What did you expect me to do? I love you too much to let a giant steal you away from me.'

He climbed in through the window, and they kissed and talked for a while. Then they heard the thunderous footsteps of the giant as he entered the house. He had been out in the woods and was returning home for his tea.

'Come with me,' said the Stalker's wife, and she hid him under the bed.

'What's that smell?' said the giant when he came into the room. 'Smells like human.'

'A magpie dropped a bone down the chimney into the fire. I threw it out, but the stink still lingers.'

After supper, the Stalker's wife cuddled up to the giant. 'There's something I wish you would tell me.'

'What's that?'

'I know your heart isn't in your body. I know you keep it hidden. I wish you'd tell me where that secret hiding place is.'

The giant grunted. 'Well, if you must know, my heart is in the grey cairn at the back of the house.'

Next morning, as soon as the giant was off to the woods, the Stalker and his wife went out to the back of the house and took the grey cairn apart stone by stone – but there was no sign of any heart. When they had put the stones back in place, the Stalker's wife picked wild flowers and scattered them over the cairn. They weren't long in the house when they heard the giant returning from the woods, so the Stalker hid under the bed.

The giant entered the room. 'What's that smell? Why are there flowers on the grey cairn?'

'A magpie dropped another bone down the chimney. And the flowers are on the cairn because I know you keep your heart there, and I wanted to show how much I love you.'

'Hummph,' said the giant, 'lots of bones coming down this chimney.'

After they'd eaten, the Stalker's wife cuddled up to the giant. 'Is there something bothering you? Is there something you want to tell me?'

'Not really. Well, I did tell you a bit of a fib. Last night, when we were cuddling, I told you I kept my heart in the grey cairn, and it wasn't really true. Well, it wasn't true at all.'

'Never mind. I expect you were testing me.'

'I was testing you, but I feel bad that I didn't tell you the truth.'

'You can tell me now.'

'My heart is in that old tree stump, out in the garden.'

Next morning, as soon as the giant had set off for the wood, the Stalker and his wife went out into the garden to find the tree stump. They took the giant's axe with them. The stump was massive, but it only took the Stalker three blows to split it open. A hare jumped out, and ran off into the woods.

'Grey Dog of the Mountain!' called the Stalker, and the grey dog shot out of the undergrowth, coursing through the trees. It caught the hare by the scruff, and with a single shake snapped its neck, then brought it to the Stalker and laid it down at his feet. The Stalker took his hunting knife and slit open the hare's belly, and a fat salmon slipped out, wriggled over the grass into the burn, and began to swim upstream.



'Brown Otter of Sail Stream!' called the Stalker and a square head with two beady black eyes surfaced in the water. The otter overtook the salmon, caught it gently between its jaws and brought it to the Stalker. He cut open the fish, and a duck flew out of its belly and away up into the sky.

'Blue-eyed Falcon of Glen Feist!' The falcon dropped out of a cloudless sky and hit the duck like a thunderbolt. Out of the duck came one white egg which tumbled down and down until the Stalker's wife caught it. She had it in her grasp – the giant's heart.

Way off in the forest, thunder rolled. It was the giant, storming through the trees. As he came towards the Stalker's wife she held up the egg between a finger and thumb, so he could see it clearly. His eyes grew as wide as plates, and he cried out, 'Don't break my heart!'

The Stalker's wife, who had once been a blue filly, took the egg in her palm and squeezed hard. The egg broke, the yolk dribbled down her arm, and the giant dropped like a felled pine.

'There,' she said.

So the Stalker and his wife took one of the giant's horses and set off on their four-day journey. They travelled down the deepest, darkest glens, and over the highest mountain peaks, until at last they arrived back home. After they settled in, they threw a party for all the neighbours, and the last time I passed by there, it was still going on.