

## Da Beltane Foy by John J. Graham

A crowd of about twenty to thirty had already begun to gather in the thickening darkness around the black mound of the Everabister bonfire when Hakki and Martha arrived. Ertly had built it on a knowe just north of the houses and was still piling on anything that would burn: half-rotted pieces of driftwood, old taek from roofs, heavy skyumpies from the peat-stack. As he moved round adding the final touches to his handiwork, he was followed by a group of youngsters clamouring to know when he was going to light up.

“It’s dark eneuch noo. Can you no set lowe til him?” came an eager voice.

“Na, my boy, he’s no just fairly ready yet,” Ertly replied, weighing his words with the care of a connoisseur. He liked bairns and teasing them to frustration was his way of giving an edge to their enjoyment.

He carefully placed a muckle skyumpie on the top then stepped back to survey the effect. The young ones sensed the time had come and waited tensely his confirmation.

“Noo dan,” he said, relishing the moment, “I tink he’s ready noo.” There was a pause. Then, with a tantalising tilt of his head, he said:

“He’s dat boannie – it’s a peety we hae ta burn him.”

“Oh no!” wailed the youngsters, and Ertly laughed: “Yea, we’ll laekly hae ta burn him richt eneuch. Just you wait here till I git a licht.”

He hurried off towards the house to reappear shortly carrying a lowein peat in a pair of tongs. The bairns cheered as the chunky, bow legged figure approached, the spunks spraying from the fiery brand into the darkness. He set the brand to the weather side of the bonfire and a young man shouted: “Watch dee whiskers, Ertly!”

Soon the flame began to lick upwards and within moments the bonfire was ablaze lighting up the rim of faces around it.

As Hakki watched he felt himself being gripped by a powerful sensation. The rage of the fire flinging back the shadows, the lit faces round the edge of the dark, the feeling of some gathering of strange forces all held

him rapt. An excited, “Hakki! Hakki!” by his side jerked his mind out of its blankness. It was Hansi, eyes gleaming in the firelight.

“Is dat no a braa fire?” he said, then rattled on: “Efter he’s brunt doon a bit, does du ken what we ocht ta do?”

“No,” Hakki replied, blankly.

“Jimp richt ower da heicht o ‘im. Du minds last year we jamp owre een o da sides, but dis time I’m going to loup clean owre da middle. Is du game?”

“Does du tink we’d manage it?” Hakki said. “He’s a braa muckle fire.”

“Of coorse we will. An,” lowering his voice, “does du ken dis? Scritt an some o da Heglabister boys are here. We’ll shaa dem wha can jimp da best.”

Hakki was all attention. “Is Scritt raelly here? Whaar aboots?”

“Looks du,” said Hansi. “Owre yunder wi da Tamson boys fae Kergord.”

“I dunna ken what’s pitten dem here da nicht,” Hakki said. “Lookin for trouble, nae doot.”

“An see at du keeps oot o trouble,” interjected Martha who had been standing quietly by. “Onywyne,” she continued, “I’m goin owre ta speak wi da Graven lasses. Look after deesel noo.”

“Of coorse I will,” muttered Hakki, annoyance in his voice.

“Never leet her, Hakki,” said Hansi. “Dis lasses are aa da sam.”

They moved off to reconnoitre the situation. The youngsters were milling around the fire making brave swoops towards it then retreating with skirls of excitement when threatened with flying spunks. The older folk stood and spaek, occasionally warning the bairns to watch themselves. As the blaze dwindled some of the more daring of the boys began jumping across the fringes of the flames. Loupin da Beltane Fire was considered an achievement and an assurance of luck. Even fathers jumped with young bairns in their arms. The bigger boys and young men circled the fire weighing up their tactics. To clear its centre was a mark of physical prowess, a much-prized honour. There was a concentration of activities at the weather side.

“Looks du,” said Hansi. “Scritt is gittin ready ta hae a go.”

Scritt, tall and spindly, was being urged on by a group of peerie boys, and was preparing himself for a jump. He stood clear abune the others and was making the most of the attention he was receiving.

“Git yon peerie boy oot o da rodd!” he shouted, then when the way was clear, made his run. Arms threshing and head back, he raced for the glowering crest of the blaze but at the last moment angled his leap so that he cleared the shoulder. A mutter of disappointment came from his Sooth Weisdale friends.

“What’s wrang wi dee, Scritt?” Hansi shouted. “Faerd du gits dee tail brunt?”

Scritt ignored the taunt and, head down, walked back to his friends. One of them jeered: “Dy sheeks is bigger as dy breeks, Hansi Tait! Why does du no loup da fire?”

The challenge was taken up by a group of peerie boys from Upper Weisdale: “Yis, Hansi, come on! Du shaa dem!”

Hansi glanced at Hakki, a glint of devilment in his een.

“Hae a go,” Hakki said, “an I’ll follow dee.”

Hansi threw a defiant look at Scritt and his friends then, with fists clenched and head down, ran for the fire. Hakki held his breath as his friend raced forward. Then, just as Hansi was gathering himself for the spring, a piece of burning wood slipped with a shower of sparks and fell in his path. A gasp came from the crowd and Hakki stiffened as he saw Hansi desperately try to check his stride. He slewed to the left, missed the falling brand, but the impetus of the run took his rivlined feet through the edge of the fire. The crowd had fallen silent and as Hansi walked back, limping slightly, Scritt’s voice chanted:

“Coordie, coordie, claa me nail, I’m a man an du’s a snail.”

Hakki stepped forward to meet Hansi, hunched and disconsolate.

“Never leet, Hansi. Du coodna help it. Wait du here an I’ll shaa dem.”

As he moved a few feet back to give a better run-up, a voice from the Sooth Weisdale crowd chanted:

“Hakki Hunter, clokkin dunter, laid his eggs i da hert o winter.”

The chant was taken up by the others, a chant Scritt had often taunted him with at school. Hakki felt a black fury rising within him. A blur of

memories came flooding back – of Scritt bloodying his nose and the thick trickle in his throat, of Scritt jabbing him in the behind with a pin so that he shouted involuntarily and got the tawse from the teacher, of many other insults and humiliations. He braced himself. He would show them, not just for his own sake but for the Upper Weisdale boys.

“Go on, Hakki!” Hansi urged. “Du can do it.”

He began his run and as he started something inside him told him he could do it. The glowing mound no longer daunted. He raced towards it, every muscle tensed for the leap. He reached the charred fringe, gathered himself for the spring, then launched into the air straight for the crest of the fire. He felt the wafts of hot air around him, the smoke in his eyes and throat, and then the dunt of his feet on the ground. He stumbled, but kept his feet and from all around rose the cheers. His whole being was at such a stretch of excitement that he walked back in a daze, barely aware of the buzz around him.

Hansi came to meet him, feet fairly dancing off the earth in his glee: “Boy, Hakki, du fairly cleared him.” The peerie boys were around him, faces raised in admiration. Scritt and his cronies turned their backs, sniggering over some secret joke. Hakki looked to his left and for a moment in the flickering firelight, caught Jessie looking across at him. She smiled as their eyes met and in the instant he turned away, blate but warm in the knowledge of her approval.

Several others louped the fire but only two more cleared it at its height – Gibby Anderson from Kergord, a 19-year-old Faroe fisherman, and Lowrie Tait, Hansi’s cousin, noted for his strength and dexterity. As it burned lower, the young ones began jumping and as they jumped their spirits soared to a pitch of excitement and mischief-making. There was teasing and name-calling, especially between the boys of Upper and Sooth Weisdale. Hakki and Hansi were drawn to a cluster of skirlin bairns. It turned out to be Mad Mary Louttit who was the object of their attentions, Mary, one of the quarter-poor who stravaiged the parish seeking shelter in but-end, barn, or wherever folk could find a place for them to lay their heads. These poor wandering bodies moved in a strange kind of limbo on the fringe of their community. Often eccentric, sometime demented, they carried around with their rags a robe of mystery. Mad Mary with her violent outbursts was one the bairns feared and it was only in numbers that they gained the confidence to face her. Her man had been press-ganged soon after their marriage and she had

given birth to a stillborn bairn three months later. It had turned her mind and now she wandered the parish from house to house carrying with her a burden of oaths, maledictions and strange utterances. She now stood in the midst of a bedlam of boys, a tall, raw-boned woman with an old, battered kishie on her back.

Deep chested and broad of beam, her ample contours were enlarged with layers of tattered skirts. She wore a battered felt hat under a black shawl. The bairns chanted:

“Mary, Mary had a canary up da leg o her drawers.”

As they chanted, her body crouched and she raised a threatening staff. The chant was repeated, a hint of fear lending it a shriller note. The chant came again, louder and shriller, but they had just got the first line out when Ertly broke through the ring and rounded on Mary’s tormentors:

“Aff wi you, you whalps at you are, an laeve Mary alane.”

It was said in a firm, controlled voice but with an edge of anger that quelled the bairns. As they melted away into the darkness, Mary moved slowly over to the fire. She turned her back to the now smouldering embers, drew herself to her height and with a defiant shake of her staff, shouted into the night:

“Da curse o da maiden is siccar an sair; but da curse o da weedow is ten times mair.”

The words, coming from the dark figure silhouetted against the dying embers, sent a shiver through Hakki. She lowered the staff, leaned her weight upon it and, peering into the darkness, said in a low, thick voice:

“Der some o you da nicht at’ll hae nedder fire or hoose by anidder Beltane.”

The words hung in the silence that had fallen on everyone. Nobody moved; then Ertly went over to Mary:

“Come awa inside, Mary,” he said, “an du sall hae something i dy mooth as weel as da rest.”

She mumbled something and with a glance that swept round those remaining, set off with Ertly for the house.

Hakki looked at Hansi and was tempted to laugh off the eerie feeling Mary had cast over him, but Hansi was first:

“Mary is in a richt tirse da night. I doot Uncle Ert’y’ll hae tae pit saat upon her tail.”

Hakki smiled. Hansi had a light, glancing way of dismissing difficult moments. They headed down for the Everabister dwellings and the beginnings of the Foy.

## Learning Resources

'[Beltane](#)', 1st May, is an old quarterday, the others being Hallowmas, Candlemas and Lammas. Celebrations were held at Beltane, and these included the lighting of bonfires, rather like the present Bonfire Night. These celebrations were a survival of an ancient pagan fire festival. A '[Foy](#)' is a farewell feast.

### Reading

Read 'Beltane Foy' (which is an excerpt from John Graham's novel, 'Shadowed Valley') and listen to the audio file.

### Vocabulary

Answer the questions to show understanding of some of the Scots words used in this text. If you get stuck, you can look them up using a Scots dictionary – you can use an online one at [www.dsl.ac.uk](http://www.dsl.ac.uk) – or use the glossary.

1. What does the word 'blate' mean? Choose the correct answer from below:

pleased                      shy                      uncomfortable                      surprised

2. What does 'stravaiged' mean? Choose the correct answer from below:

ruined                      pestered                      wandered                      ran

3. What does the word 'tirse' mean? Choose the correct answer from below:

sulk                      rage                      tangle                      trap

### Understanding

1. How are the people in the story celebrating 'Da Beltane Foy'?
2. What does Hakki do that impresses Jess?
3. Are Hakki and Scritt friends how do you know?
4. What happened to Mary that made her go mad?
5. How does Mary feel after hearing the children's chant?