Burd Jan and Tam Lin

ONCE, ON A WEEDY PIECE of land called Carterhaugh, there was a strange, forbidding castle. It had been many years since anyone had lived in the place. Only the rats and mice and owls claimed it for a home.

"Do not go down to Carterhaugh,” warned the parents of the lands around. “It is a place of evil. Do not go there. The Fair Folk”— and by this they meant the trooping fairies— “own it now.”

Most of the children heeded the warnings, but for a few of the more adventurous children—and they went down to Carterhaugh only on dares. They would go and leave a token, then hurry home again. But not a one of them ever went a second time.

Now, there was one child, the clan chief’s child, called Jan, who laughed at the warnings when they came in turn. “I am not afraid,” said Jan. “My father’s father’s father owned Carterhaugh. It is mine by right, though I am not allowed to claim it. When I am old enough, I shall go there and take it for my own.”

Jan’s mother and father wept to hear such talk, for Jan was their only child and dearly loved. “Do not go,” they begged. But Jan was always wilful, even as a wee child.

When Burd Jan said, “I will go to Carterhaugh,” no one doubted it was all but done.

THE YEARS PASSED and Burd Jan turned sixteen, coming into inheritance. Downstairs, family and friends had gathered for the wishing well. A fiddle was scratching away, and a piper played the old tunes of glory. Burd Jan’s hair was twisted into a red- gold braid.

Burd Jan put on birthday attire green as young willow, and pinned on a great length of Jan’s clan’s tartan.

Then off Jan went down the backstairs, without being seen, and headed to Carterhaugh, leaving the singing, dancing guests behind.

The night drew in soft, but the road grew rocky the closer Jan came to the river Yarrow. At the last Jan left the road and bounded over the heathery hills toward the tumbledown towers of Carterhaugh. Jan had only the moon to light the way.

When Jan got to the old castle, it was fully dark. Night birds called from the trees. The shadows of briars seemed sharper than the briars themselves. And the only spot of color there, besides Burd Jan, was a single red rose blooming from a thorny bush by the door.

Burd Jan was afraid, but would not show it. “Hullo, the house!” called out Jan in greeting. “Tonight I have come into my inheritance. By law I claim what is mine. This house and land belonged to my father’s father’s father, though it was stolen from him by the wickedness of the Fair Folk.”

There was a sudden rush of wind as if in answer, but nothing more.

Burd Jan smiled. “I shall take this single rose, the only thing left of beauty here at the hall. And I leave instead my pledge. I shall take back Carterhaugh from the fairies and restore it to humankind.”

Then Jan plucked the rose, though the thorns pierced their fingers and made them bleed.

No sooner had the stalk been broken than the wind blew up again, now wild and angry. The moon was suddenly hidden by a shred of cloud. And when the cloud was past, standing in front of Jan, where no one had been a moment before, was a youth that Burd Jan had never before seen, but who was so familiar that gazing upon their face was like gazing in a looking glass.

The youth was dressed as if for a wedding, with a fine kilt, a silken shirt, a velvet jacket, a silver-handled skean dhu tucked into their sock, and a silver sporran hanging from the waist.

“Who pulls the rose?” spoke the youth in a voice that was both soft and strong. “Who calls me back from the world of the Ever Fair?”

Jan laughed, “I pulled the rose, and the world of the Ever Fair is but a dream. No one lives forever. We all grow old in time.”

The youth put their head to one side and looked at Jan.

“So I once believed, too. But as I rode out hunting on a summer’s eve, I rode widdershins round yon hill. A deep drowsiness fell upon me, and when I awoke, behold! I was in Elfland. As I lay in a faint on the hillside, the queen of the Fair Folk found me and took me inside the green hill. And I have lived there ever since. Never growing older. Never dying. Fair is that land and gay, but I miss the land of the living and the warmth of a living person’s touch.”

“How long is ‘ever since’?” asked Burd Jan. “You do not look older than I am, and today is my sixteenth birthday.”

“I am ten times sixteen, older than the oldest man left outside the hill,” the youth replied.

Jan laughed again. "I cannot believe that. What is your name?”

“My name is Tam Lin.”

And then Burd Jan shivered for the first time, for Tam Lin was the name of a youth who had disappeared when Jan’s father’s father's father was a boy.

“When I rode off, this house stood upright and unbroken,” said Tam Lin. “The flowers bloomed all across the hill.”

“They shall bloom here again,” said Burd Jan. “And the towers shall once again stand tall. For I am Burd Jan and this is my house and land.”

“That I should like to see,” said Tam Lin.

“I promise you shall,” Jan said.

But at these words Tam Lin shivered, as if a cold wind had touched the back of their neck, though there was no wind at all. After tomorrow -All Hallow’s Eve- I fear I may lose my desirability to return to your world at

all. For on that night, when the human and fairy worlds sit side by side, with only the moonlight road between, the queen of the Fair Folk is so dazzling I will forget we ever met at all; I may forget this world all together.”

“Never!” said Burd Jan.

“There is naught anyone can do,” said Tam Lin.

“There is always something. . .” Jan replied.

Tam Lin sighed. “We ride over the moors, past Selkirk town, down to Miles Cross, where the sacred well stands, as the unseelie court does every seven years, and the bells and the music fill my senses, and the ride sings to sleep that part of me that remembers this land, and I have eyes for none but the queen.

“Can you refuse to ride, Tam Lin?”

“That I cannot.”

“Can you run?”

“That I cannot.”

"Is there no one to stand between?”

"Only one who truly loves me,” said Tam Lin. "But all who loved me are long dead, and the grass growing green over their graves.”

“Then I shall save you!” cried Burd Jan. “For if no one else in this human world loves you, then I must.”

“One only thing is there for me. Tomorrow night is Hallowe'en, and the fairy court will then ride through England and Scotland, and if you would borrow me from Elfland you must take your stand by Miles Cross between twelve and one o' the night, and with sacred water in your hand you must cast a compass all around you.”

“But how shall I know you, Tam Lin?” quoth Burd Jan, “amid so many knights I've ne'er seen before?”

"The first court of Elves that come by let pass. The next court you shall pay reverence to, but do naught nor say aught. But the third court that comes by is the chief court of them, and at the head rides the Queen of all Elfland. And I shall ride by her side upon a milk-white steed with a star in my crown; they give me this honour as being a knight. Watch my hands, Jan, the right one will be gloved but the left one will be bare, and by that token you will know me.”

“But how to save you, Tam Lin?” quoth Burd Jan.

“You must spring upon me suddenly, and I will fall to the ground. Then seize me quick, and whatever change befall me, for they will exercise all their magic on me, cling hold to me till they turn me into red-hot iron. Then cast me into this pool and I will be turned back into my own true self. Cast then your green mantle over me, and I shall be yours, and be of the world again.”

Then they clasped one another’s hands, and gazed into one another's eyes, and Tam Lin faded from view. BURD JAN WENT HOME. The party was still going on. If anyone had missed Jan, no one said a word. Jan’s mother saw the scratched fingers. Jan’s father saw the rose. But neither saw the mark that claiming Carterhaugh and pledging to save Tam Lin had wrought, though Jan felt it keenly.

Jan danced with youth who had fair faces and soft hands, and danced with youth who had dark faces and rough hands. But Jan danced with none who took their breath as did Tam Lin. And so Jan bid them all good night.

In the morning Jan slept late. The rose in its vase had wilted, but when Burd Jan arose, it was with blushing cheeks.

When evening came at last, Jan put on a green mantle. In a leather pocket Jan carried earth from the garden, and a bottle of sacred water taken from the well. In Jan’s head were the instructions from Tam Lin.

Jan crept out of the house and ran down the road to Miles Cross, and hid in back of the well. Jan knew it would be a long wait.

Then, when the bell in the steeple of Selkirk town tolled twelve, Jan heard the jangling of many smaller bells, and so Jan became as small as possible and watched the road without moving.

There, where the mist parted like a great gate opening, came the fairy troop. The sound Burd Jan had heard before was the horses’ harnesses, for they were bridled in gold and silver, and hung all over with bells. On each horse’s head shone a great jewel.

Burd Jan remembered all that Tam Lin had said, and let the first horse—the pitch black horse pass by. On its back was a man as fair as a prince.

And then Jan let the second horse—an oak brown horse—pass by as well. The man on its back was as fair as a king.

Then the third horse came last—white as milk, white as snow, white as the froth on the top of a wave. On its back rode Tam Lin.

Burd Jan leaped up and ran over to the white horse, and with one swift movement, pulled the rider down, holding Tam Lin fast.

Even swifter was the fairy troop, for in an instant Jan and Tam Lin were surrounded. Burd Jan looked up at the riders and saw that their faces were all beautiful but cold, and the coldest and most beautiful was the face of the Fairy Queen herself. Her dress was all the greens of the forest, and her white hair hung in a hundred braids down her back.

“Give me Tam Lin,” said the Fairy Queen, “and I shall give you all the gold and silver you see here.” Tam Lin had not told Burd Jan what to say, not knowing the queen would bargain for him. But Burd Jan never hesitated. “I have enough gold in my mother’s hair and silver in my father’s,” Jan said.

“Give me Tam Lin,” the Fairy Queen said again, “and I shall give you all the jewels on my horses’ heads.”

Burd Jan smiled. “I need only the jewels shining in the eyes of my loved ones.”

The Fairy Queen stared straight into Burd Jan’s eyes as if reading what was written in Jan’s soul. “Give me Tam Lin,” she said carefully, “and I shall give you back Carterhaugh.”

For a moment—only a moment—Burd Jan hesitated. In Jan’s mind came images of the beauty of the house, not as it could be but as it had once been. Then Jan knew that the queen was trying to throw a glamour. Jan laughed.

“I shall hold Carterhaugh whether you will it or no,” Burd Jan told the queen. “And Tam Lin, as well.”

The queen stood up in her silver stirrups and pointed a long finger at Burd Jan. “You do not hold Tam Lin even now!” she cried. A great white light poured from her fingertips.

In Burd Jan’s arms Tam Lin began to twist and shiver and groan. Tam Lin’s flesh seemed to melt and then reshape itself into that of a green, sinuous, scaly serpent, with lidless eyes and a lipless smile.

But Burd Jan held on.

The Fairy Queen laughed without mirth. “What do you hold now, Burd Jan?”

The serpent shape melted in Jan hands and reshaped again, and now Burd Jan held a lion, whose great mouth was open and whose teeth were bared and whose breath smelled of dead meat.

But still Burd Jan held on.

“What do you hold now, human child?” cried the queen.

Then suddenly a dove was struggling in Jan’s arms, and almost flew away. Then a swan was beating its giant wings in Jan’s grasp, but all was in vain, till at last the swan’s body ran like molten gold through Jan’s hands and reshaped into a burning brand.

But heedless of the searing fire, Burd Jan held on, running to the sacred well, where, at the very last moment, Jan threw the brand in. Then, Jan took the bottle of sacred water and sprinkled it into the well and over their own head.

The brand went out at once, and Tam Lin climbed out.

The fairy clothing had been burned away and Tam Lin stood in nothing but human skin.

Burd Jan threw the green mantle around Tam Lin to shade them from fairy sight. Then Jan reached back into the leather pocket and took out the earth from the garden. Jan spread it around the two of them in a great circle of protection. Tam Lin took Jan’s hands, and they turned to face the queen.

“If I had known what I know now, Tam Lin, I would have plucked out your human eyes and given you eyes of wood!” cried the Fairy Queen.

“Your power is over,” Burd Jan cried out. “For here is the daylight and Tam Lin is mine!”

Then sang the Queen of Elfland as the court turned away and began to resume its march:

"Oh Had I known, Tam Lin, Tam Lin,

Someone would borrow thee,

I'd hae ta'en out thy two grey eyne,

Put in two eyne of tree.

"Had I but known, Tam Lin, Tam Lin,

Before we came from home,

I'd hae ta'en out thy heart o' flesh,

Put in a heart of stone.

"Had I but had the wit yestreen

That I have got to-day,

I'd paid the Fiend seven times his teind

Ere you'd been won away."

The queen turned to look at the sun creeping down the road like some unearthly beast on the prowl. “We must be gone!” she cried in a voice that trilled with terror.

“Be gone!” the unseelie court answered her.

Then the queen and court rode silently away through the gates of mist, leaving Tam Lin and Burd Jan behind.

BURD JAN AND TAM LIN took back the great castle of Carterhaugh and lived there with their families and their children, and their children’s children, for many long and happy years. As happy and as even, it is said, as the bones of the herring on either side of the spine.