

The Boy and the Belt

By Sallyann Couch

“Hurry up Damhnaic” shouted his father, “old Connell of the Well has seen us doing business with the monastery these past few weeks, and now fancies he’ll do the same. He’s taken to cutting reeds, boiling bones and preparing hides in the hope that he can trade with the brothers. If he gets to the gates before us, we may lose a deal, and your belly will soon know about it if we do.”

Damhnaic was 12 years old, and although the youngest of five, his father relied on him when it came to deliveries. The boy had sweet looks and great charm, and his father knew it was an asset when dealing with potential customers.

Oblivious to their banter, Muirgheal, Damhnaic’s mother was deep in thought. She stirred the cauldron of bubbling mutton broth (more water than mutton), that hung from the sooty chain and hook above the fire. In the last three years she had seen great hardship befall the land. Failing crops, hunger and disease had changed their lives forever. She remembered a time when neighbours had not needed to compete so desperately with each other in order to survive. There had been enough to go around back then, and barter had always been the way of things.

However, the family were good Christians, and their faith was never shaken by such setbacks. Thanks to the entrepreneurial skills of her husband, they now had a regular job supplying the monastery with reeds, quills, tallow and hides. In exchange they would receive commodities such as flour, fruit, metalwork or even currency.

Still stirring the pot, Muirgheal smiled a smile of optimism. *The worst must surely be over* she thought. *The crops are showing signs of doing well this year, the calves are healthy, the weather is kindly, and now the monastery provides us with work.* Her thoughts were interrupted as Damhnaic ran past her, grabbing at the woven willow panniers stored under a bench in the corner. His father’s voice was more urgent now. “C’mon boy, c’mon” he said impatiently, as he deftly packed tallow candles into leather bags. “Put down that piece of wood you are determined to blunt my knife on, and help your father here.” The boy tossed the stick over onto his bed, and ran to help his father.

Full panniers were carried outside, and old Eno’s hooves could be heard clip-clopping across the cobbled yard, as he was led up to the door of the cabin. Outside, stacked against the walls were reeds. They had been cut with hand scythes, dried and then tied into bundles with plaited honeysuckle. To transport them, they were secured to a wide leather strap placed over the old nag’s sagging spine.

Eight legs finally disappeared into the darkness, and although it would have been easier to follow the tracks in daylight, those hours were too precious. From dawn until dusk their small parcel of land, and the few remaining cattle needed constant attention.

Muirgheal closed the door on the cold night, and picked up the piece of wood Damhnaic had been carving. She marvelled at the spirals, birds and leaf shapes that her youngest boy had crafted. The incised grooves were still green, a sign that the hazel stick had not long been cut.

Big brother Jo had chopped it from the hedge for Damhnaic who was still too small to stretch across the deep ditches that ran between meadow and hedge. She turned back to the cauldron, and examined the handle of the paddle she was using to stir the stew. Damhnaic had carved the head of a horse on it last year when he had been too ill to work. His mother recognised that he was a gifted child, but had never told him.

After an hour, father, son, and the laden Eno arrived at the high walls of the monastery. They were tired, but the promise of Muirgheal's smiling welcome, a warm fire and mutton stew somehow kept them going. Their knock on the huge oak door echoed around the colonnades within. As on previous occasions, the huge door swung open, and Brother Ambrós waved them through. As man and monk unloaded the goods, Damhnaic ran up to the scriptorium. The Abbott may or may not have approved if he'd known, but Brother Aodhan, a scribe, and an advocate of education, was always pleased to see the boy who was so keen to learn.

It had been quite a shock for the scribe when Damhnaic, on his first visit to the monastery, had squeezed his head through the narrow scriptorium window in an effort to see within. Once he'd regained his composure, the monk had beckoned the boy in. He entered sheepishly, blushing and apologising as he tried to explain that he'd only wanted to see what became of the candles, quills and reeds that he and his father had delivered. However, once the boy's eyes adjusted to the light, he fell totally silent. He was awestruck by the beauty, colours and ceremony that lay before him. Brother Aodhan sat at a wooden bench set before an oak desk. To his right stood a small table covered in inkpots, cloths, quills and reeds. A piece of stiff gilt edged vellum was fastened to the slope of the desk.

On his first visit, Damhnaic noticed that the back of the monks head was as gold as the gilded page. Not a halo as the boy had originally thought, but just the candlelight shining on a tonsured scalp. The 'glowing pate' moved up and down as the scribe's eyes glanced repeatedly from the vellum to an object ahead of him.

Damhnaic did not recognise the object which sat on a coloured cloth surrounded by stone bowls containing tallow and lighted wicks. At first he thought it might be a sword scabbard, the sort of thing a king might own. The artwork and inlays being added to boast of regal status. But there were hinges on each corner. "Armour then? or what about a piece of horse harness?" These were some of the answers Damhnaic put to Brother Aodhan, who had asked the boy if he knew what it was.

"Oh no" said Brother Aodhan, his face changing in an instant from a smile to solemnity, "far more valuable than any of those things. This is the ceremonial belt of our founder, who was truly one of God's messengers. Held within are parts of his mortal attire, sacred remnants of a hallowed life. This relic has cured ills, and sealed the oaths of kings such is its power. You gaze upon bronze, silver and glass wrought by men who have learned their skills and artistry from the courts of kings in other lands. It is my task to make an image of the belt. It is by order of the Abbott that I should transfer such power and wisdom onto vellum, and for that reason Damhnaic, you know that you cannot watch me." The boy knew the routine, a chat with his friend...a quick feast for the eyes, and then back to his father and Eno. Damhnaic often dreamed about the belt and its designs. He tried to memorise some of the images, with a view to carving them later. He wondered if he too would be able to transfer 'power and wisdom' on to a hazel rod, or maybe a piece of slate.

On this particular night, as the boy opened the door to leave the scriptorium, he jumped back as the monastery bell started to clang loudly and urgently. Shouting could be heard outside, and horses whinnied. Brother Aodhan rose from his bench, and moved towards the window. Monks dashed here and there in the courtyard, holding up their robes as they ran. The scribe maintained his composure, even though a feeling of foreboding was beginning to wash over him. He had been new to the order when the raiders from over the sea had come, so he well understood fear and danger, but did not want to panic the boy.

The monastery was built on a high rocky outcrop, and Damhnaic, looking from the window, saw chaos below. People screamed, doors slammed, and fire could be seen. He was frightened, and his father was down there somewhere.

Just as the boy was about to run, a strong arm grabbed his shoulder. "Stop my friend" said Brother Aodhan calmly. "You must take this with you...I knew that God had sent you for a reason. You must take the belt and ensure its safety. Take it, hide it...and when we meet again..." For the first time Damhnaic noticed that the monk had a severe limp. "I cannot run...but you can boy, run...run like the wind for our Lord". The belt was a heavy piece, it would weigh him down...he must find his father first, that was more important. It was then that eyes met, just for a split second, and in that instant Damhnaic knew that he would do it. Brother Aodhan wrapped the cloth around the belt, and thrust it at Damhnaic. The boy grabbed it, and without saying another word, ran out of the door. He crossed the quadrangle, weaving between the panic. Noisy stampeding cattle, brought in for fear that this was a cattle raid were running everywhere. He darted between overturned vegetable baskets, burning thatch and smoke.

The main door was now blocked, and men were pushing their way in, thwarting any chance of exit. He sped to the right, into darkness, eventually reaching the base of some stone steps. They took him to the top of the wall, and he ran around it looking at the huge drop below, knowing that to jump would mean certain death. Then he spotted a possible opportunity along where the wall dipped. A grass covered outcrop a few feet below stood out against the now reddening sky. Clutching the belt he jumped, then rolled for what seemed like eternity. He felt water when he reached the bottom, and knew it was the stream that led to the marshes near his home. He splashed along the watercourse with tears burning his eyes. The fiery glow of the monastery was well behind him now. His heart beat loudly, and he sobbed uncontrollably. What of his father...and his friend Brother Aodhan? He could not bear to contemplate what might have happened to them...he just wanted to get home to his Mother.

He stumbled and fell often, but held on tight to the cloth wrapped bundle. The ground eventually evened up and he found himself on the cart track which led to Old Connell's place. His Dad did not like Connell much...he always thought he was dishonest. As he grew nearer to the old rogue's home, he heard voices. Damhnaic darted to the side of the track and into marshy uncertainty. He immediately sank in up to his knees, and without thinking he started digging into the peaty mire with his hands and a piece of a branch that lay nearby. Instincts told him that it would be too complicated to explain to anyone what he was carrying. It would create too much interest, perhaps unwelcome interest at that. Brother Aodhan had told him to hide it...he would come back later and get it. He had to take the cloth from the belt and wrap it around the branch he was using because there were huge thorns on every side of it. He placed

the belt in the hole, pushed the sloppy mud back over it and snapped two large twigs from the branch to mark the spot. He climbed back out of the marsh, and on to the track, stick and cloth still in hand. He walked towards the voices...even old Connell would be a welcome sight tonight, and might even help him home in these circumstances.

It wasn't Connell...but by the time the boy realised, it was too late.