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## THE MERRY DANCERS

by

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During the long winter evenings in this northern isle of Shetland, the folk of neighboring crofts often gathered in Kirstie's home to sing and dance. With his fiddle, Kirstie's Grandda played the music of the trows—the wee folk who live under the hills. He could set the lads and lasses to a quick-stepping reel, and even the feet to tapping of the Widow who had lost husband and sons to the sea. Though Kirstie played a harp and not the fiddle, she longed to make a merry music like Grandda's—music for dancing.

This was a hard task, for the harp was played nowhere else in these isles. Grandda's grandda had brought the harp over from Scotland,

for his folk had been harpers to the Highland lairds. Grandda himself had taught Kirstie how to hold the harp and set her fingers on the strings. He had sung her the learning tunes for the harp, the rhythmic measures of the auld bards, and the court music of the lairds' halls. But of all this music for the harp, none was for dancing.

One evening when the northern lights—known in the isles as the *merry dancers*—circled the sky, the crofter folk came for a dance.

"Play again, Grandda!" Kirstie said, tugging her harp close.

Young Magnie laughed. "What's that, lassie? Do you think you can play *trowie* music on a harp crafted for noble folk?"

Kirstie scowled, but Grandda set his fiddle under his chin and struck the bow across the strings. The music of the trows laughed from the fiddle. Kirstie plucked the harp strings, aiming to play in that same mocking fashion.

But didn't her music suggest sparrows flitting over fields rather than trowies leaping in moonlight? Perhaps hearing a tale would set the spring of the tune into her fingers.

"Tell again, Grandda," she said, "about you and the trows."

"I'd been at a wedding," he said, "leading the company from church to croft with my fiddle. After the merry-making, I set off to home—in the dark. In time I heard a harsh singing and a peculiar stamping from within a hill. It was the trowies having their own rant, and they spied me!

"I thought when they caught me I'd have a rough time of it, but the trowies love a fine tune. Seeing my fiddle they bade me learn their

tunes and play more besides. Round and round they pranced, 'til it's my opinion they'd have kept on 'til morning. Well, as we all know, daylight turns trows to stone. A fine fiddler I'd prove if I let my dancers meet such a fate! Giving a yell, I shook my bow at the sky. And didn't those trows catch my meaning and scurry into their hill!"

Everyone laughed. Even Widow Stowe, who had lost husband and sons to the sea, smiled.

The tale lively in her head and the tune full in her fingers, Kirstie played now, with the vigor of the trows.

"A bonnie music you have there, Kirstie," Mam said. "It puts me to mind of the gloam of green on the hills, and the soft bleating of the lambs."

"But, Mam," Kirstie said. "I'm not aiming for bonnie music!" Her hand knocked against the soundboard. The harp and its wire strings resounded—brilliant as birdsong.

"Don't be angry, lass," Mam said. "It's the harp. You can't help but hear sweetness from it. It's made for the fine music."

"I don't want to play 'the fine music'," Kirstie muttered.

"Can't be helped," Grandda said. "The harp *is* a fine thing. Its music can draw the hawk from the wren, or summon a selkie to the shore. It can bind a household to sleep or waken a weary old man to love. The harp was never meant for trowie music, lass."

"But harper music isn't my music," Kirstie said.

Grandda chuckled. "You've the touch, Kirstie, and the heart. You'll find your own merry music, lass."

The lads shoved the tables aside, clearing the room for dancing. As Grandda set up shivers on his fiddle, Young Magnie stomped, heels flying. The women whooped and shouted. But as Kirstie struck a sparkling chord, Widow Stowe drew a sharp breath.

"The sound of your harp puts me to mind of the sea," the Widow said, her face wet with tears.

Kirstie stopped. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Bundling herself and her harp, Kirstie pushed out into the winter world.

Away from the house the merry-making was but a thin scratching against the icy quiet. Green and yellow light billowed across the sky. It was the merry dancers.

How fierce the cold was! But touching the harp strings, Kirstie felt a peat-fire warmth. Her fingers drifted from note to note until she came upon a bit of melody, a slow reel from auld times.

Now, didn't it seem that a merry dancer twirled to the tune?

The dancer put her to mind of two more reels, one for the starry night and one for Yule morning.

[Illustration note: in each successive illustration, the sky shows more northern lights and first one or two, then more people gathering behind Kirstie.]

Music rippled from the harp—a gentle lilt for a court lady, an elegant lament to a king, a hymn to an island saint. New music poured forth

as well–peerie melodies suggested by the rhythm and ring of the harp itself.

The harp strings hummed like the bees in the grasses, sang of digging *taaties* from the field, and pulling fish from the sea. The harp wept of losses and laughed of weddings. It quivered with the sounds of the growing earth. *Come dance for me!* Kirstie’s music cried.

The sky was ablaze with the merry dancers. Around Kirstie gathered the crofter folk, hands outstretched.

And Kirstie set her folk to dancing.

[Illustration note: as Kirstie plays, the crofter folk dance under and with the northern lights.]