



The Harp on the Wall

Now, this wasn't in my time, or in your time, or even in your grandfather's time. This was in the time when the village on Danebury hill fort was the greatest granary in the West, and the people that lived and worked there were famous for their iron work, their weaving and their music. In one of the roundhouses there was a harp player, an old woman who used to play beautiful music on her metal-strung harp. But one day she disappeared, and no-one could find out where she had gone, or any news of her at all. The harp remained silent, hanging on the wall in her empty roundhouse.

Then one cold winter's night, when the stars burned brightly in the sky and the moonlight shone on the roofs of the roundhouses, the people were startled to hear music coming from the old woman's hut. Thinking she had come back they gathered round; but when they called on her to come out, nobody answered. A boy calledlooked inside and shouted out
'There's no-one here!'

It was true. The harp was playing all by itself, strange music that none of them had ever heard before. Then the people of Danebury were frightened. One said 'It's magic; we must destroy the harp!'

Others said, 'No, send for the druids. They will know what to do.'

The druids came, armed with their staffs of office and bunches of rosemary, sage, oak, ash and thorn, which they placed around the

doorway to the roundhouse. And still the harp continued to play. The druids cautiously went inside, and sat there all night.

At dawn the sun rose over the ramparts and light flooded into the door of the roundhouse. The music stopped and the druids emerged, looking tired and worried.

“Please tell us what it is,” said the villagers. But the druids went silently to their temple and didn’t speak a word.

For several days the same thing happened. Every night, when the moon rose, the harp would play by itself, all through the night, until sunrise, when it stopped. At last the chief summoned his druids, and demanded to know what should be done.

‘The peace of my whole village is destroyed. All my people are anxious and worried. What is the meaning of this and what should we do?’

‘My lord, we cannot say,’ said the chief druid, ‘it is beyond the understanding of any of us.’

‘Then I shall order my bravest warriors to take down the harp, ride to the sea and throw it into the ocean.’

And so, early the next day the bravest warriors of the tribe took down the harp from the wall, placed it in a chariot and they all rode like the wind until they came to the sea. They ordered a fisherman to row them out into the bay and they weighted the harp with an iron bar and dropped it into the water. Down it went, out of sight, to the bottom of the sea. They rode home, their mission accomplished.

But that night, as soon as the moon rose, the sound of harp music could again be heard, coming from the old woman’s hut. The terrified villagers wouldn’t go near, but the chief strode in, and there was the harp, back on the wall playing away.

The next day he called his druids and his warriors together.

‘What shall we do?’

The eldest druid said, ‘My Lord, perhaps, as the harp belongs to the old woman, it should be the women that carry it away from Danebury. And perhaps they should not throw it in the sea, but take it into the fields and bury it.’

So this was decided on and the next day the women took the harp and spades and they walked far out into the fields, dug a deep hole and buried it. They covered it with heavy stones and then made their way back to the camp.

But that evening, when the moon shone on the roofs of the roundhouses, the Danebury villagers were terrified to hear the sound of the harp strings, singing again in the old woman’s house. Some said they should abandon the hill fort all together, because it was cursed; and even the warriors who guarded the walls looked frightened.

In the morning the chief called them all to the old pear tree in the middle of the hill fort.

‘I think we must all leave our homes’ he said. But then up spoke the smallest child.

You haven’t given us a chance yet’ she said. ‘The men can’t do it, and the women can’t do it; let the children get rid of the harp.’

The chief, the druids, the warriors and the women all looked amazed. And then the old druid said,

‘It might work, my Lord. Let the children try.’

So the smallest child took down the harp, they put it into a small hand cart and then all the children began to sing and dance, out of the hill fort and into the woods. They ran, they sang, they played games, until at last they came to a clearing and in the middle of the clearing was a fire, burning fiercely.

The smallest child carried the harp to the fire and threw it in. The strings began to ping and twang and snap; the frame caught fire and great clouds of coloured smoke rose up and the strangest music any of them had ever heard. Then the smoke turned into a great dragon and flew away up into the sky and disappeared.

As the fire died down to nothing, something began to stir in the ashes. It grew into a figure and that figure was the old Woman.

She smiled at the children, and said,
'Thank you all. That dragon put a curse on me, and made me shrink into one of the strings on my harp. Every night I called for help and at last you knew what to do and you have all saved me. Let's go home!'

The children all cheered and then they ran into the woods and found flowers, fruits and berries. They decorated the cart and sang all the way home. When the chief saw what they had done, he ordered the greatest feast ever held in Danebury, with the children and the old woman as the guests of honour.

And that's the story of how the old woman came back to Danebury. Her harp had been burnt in the fire, so she never played again. But sometimes, if you stand on the ramparts of Danebury hill fort, you may catch an echo of the wonderful music that used to be played in the roundhouses. It's still there, in the trees, in the wind that makes the grasses move, even in the calls of the birds above the trees.

This story was produced by years 4 and 5 of Wherwell Primary School and storyteller Tim Laycock.