

The Middridge Faeries



The little village of Middridge lies between Newton Aycliffe and Shildon in County Durham. There's an old quarry there, very near what is known locally as 'the faerie glen.'

Long ago, when summers seemed longer and warmer, there was a boy at Middridge who was prone to boasting. Everybody knows someone like this, they are called Clever Dick, or Smart Alec, or, like the boy from Middridge, Know-it-all Jack. It didn't matter what the subject was, the chances were he'd done it, seen it or been there. One day, some of the boys from the village were busy gathering and eating brambles from the hedgerows and they talked of the faeries that lived in the quarry and underground round and about. Most agreed that they were not friendly and remembered the warnings they got from parents and grandparents about leaving them well alone. Jack, as usual, knew different. He said that the whole story was just a pack of lies told to the little one to frighten them and keep them away from the quarry.

"Anyone who believes that is stupid!" he said. He always said that at the end of a statement because it meant that anyone who disagreed with him would not feel like saying

so in case the others thought they really were stupid. This time, however, one of the boys was so fed up with Jack and his wild boasts that he spoke up.

“Just how do you know that?” he asked.

“Why, because nobody that I know of has ever seen a faerie,” replied Jack.

“But that’s because nobody was ever brave enough to ride around the quarry nine times,” said the other boy. “And no one ever will, because if they do, the faeries will come above ground and deal with them!” Jack still insisted that the faeries did not exist and called the other boy stupid. When asked if he would dare ride around the quarry, he laughed and said of course he would but he did not own a horse. Jack stopped laughing, however, when the other boy offered the loan of his father’s horse.

“You could ride round the quarry right now,” he said. “It’s Sunday and the men are not working.” All the boys looked at Jack and he realised that he had backed himself into a corner with his boasting. If he refused to accept the challenge he would look cowardly in front of his friends. So he reluctantly accepted and told the other boy to borrow the horse. Then they arranged to meet back at the stable an hour later.

By the end of the hour all the boys had returned. Jack looked very confident, and he mounted in a cheerful mood.

“Well,” he said, “We’ll see now if there are faeries in the quarry!” And off he went amid the cheers of his pals who were only too happy it was not any of them who was to prove or disprove the old stories. They stayed right where they were, at the stable a good way across the fields.

Now, Jack was a boastful boy but he was also quite bright. During the hour it took to get the horse, he had talked to his grandmother and asked what he should do if he were ever chased by faeries. She told him that no faerie could pass by rowan bark without stopping to pick it up. So he went immediately to a rowan tree he knew and stuffed his pockets with bark. He felt he would be safe either way, and went off to prove the tales wrong.

When he arrived at the edge of the great pit, however, his courage waned just a little and as he peered into the depths below he began to wish his task was complete and he was safely back home. Digging in his heels, he walked the horse slowly all the way around the edge of the quarry. Once he completed the first circuit, he stopped to listen, but he heard nothing and this gave him more confidence. As he progressed, he rode faster and faster until after he had circled the quarry for the ninth time and still could hear nothing, he called out:

“Ye faeries, ye faeries
Wi’ yer iron gads,
Dare not fight
Us Middridge lads!”

But even before his laughter had stopped echoing, a spine-chilling cry came from the quarry.

“If your horse is not well-hayed and fed,
I’ll catch you up and see you dead!”

Then blood drained from Jack’s face and he stayed only long enough to hear something scurry up the quarry face and not a second longer. He spurred the horse and rode as he never had before, head down and back straight. But in no time he heard a scuffling right behind him. Thinking quickly, he threw a handful of rowan bark flakes into the breeze and the faerie stopped dead in its tracks. Jack kept riding as fast as he could and it was just as well, for just as he arrived at the stable and crashed down from the horse, the faerie released a spear. It missed only by a hand’s width and gouged a large hole in the doorpost by the cowering boys.

You may be sure that none of them taunted the faeries and, if you ever go to Middridge, maybe one of the village folk will show you the mark in the doorpost that the faerie spear made.

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