

# Mallie an da paets

## (English translation)

Robbie and Mallie had four bonnie children. They had no croft, but Robbie was a sailor and he sent home money to feed the children, for they were big eaters, as strong healthy children are.

Then came word that Robbie had been lost; his ship had sunk out in the grey stormy seas. And Robbie would never be home again. There would be no more money to buy food with. Poor Mallie had great difficulty in finding food for her children. But she got some work from the ladies at the big House, sewing dresses and blouses and such like for them, and that helped a little.

One night the kids came tearing in, the door thumped back off the wall. ‘Oh Mam, we’re starving! Give us something!’ and she said, ‘Oh bairns, I haven’t a thing left, except for one plate of barley meal and I was keeping that to mix with water for your breakfast tomorrow!’

‘But Mam, we’ve got a bellyache. We’re so hungry.’

And so they were. So at last Mallie said, ‘All right, then. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Take a cup, each of you, and go next door to old Rebecca, for she has a croft and a cow, and hens, and sheep. And ask her for a cup of milk and a bannock, for you’re starving hungry. And she’ll maybe give you each a piece of mutton too.’ For Mallie knew that Rebecca had a larder full to bursting with food.

And so they each took a cup, and they went over to old Rebecca’s house. And the night was coming down.

And they were just nearing the door when the oldest boy said, ‘Hey! Look at that wee man!’ And they saw a wee man peering at them round the corner of the yard dyke. And he had a grey beard, and had on a grey hat, and his clothes were grey. And when he saw them looking at him he drew back.

So the eldest boy said, ‘Come on, and we’ll see who it is!’ And they ran around the corner of the yard dyke. But there was nobody there. Nobody at all.

And so they went in, each with a cup in their hand. And Rebecca’s lamp was lit and she was sitting spinning at a lovely warm fire.

And when she heard the errand she said, ‘I have no milk and bread to give you! I need my milk for my cats! So you needn’t come here seeking milk! Go on, out of here with you! There’s nothing here for you! Clear out of my house at once!’

And they came home. And Mallie said, ‘Oh well, then, just go to bed and cuddle down and fall asleep. And I’ll have a plate of barley gruel for you in the morning.’ [Barley gruel was a kind of rough porridge.]

So the children did this. And the littlest one fell asleep crying. For she was just four, poor wee lass.

So Mallie was sewing away busily, trying to get this garment finished, and she was working with the light of the peat fire; when the door opened and in over the floor came a wee man. He had a grey beard, and a grey hat, and his clothes were grey. And she knew that this was one of the Hill Folk. But Mallie was not at all afraid, and she said, ‘Come in to the fire and warm yourself. Is there anything I can give you?’

He said, ‘I think you can help me. My wife has been very ill, but now she’s getting better. And the thing she craves above all other foods is a bowl of barley gruel.’

‘Oh my,’ said Mallie, ‘I have a plate of gruel for the bairns’ breakfast tomorrow morning. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll divide it in two. See, take that to your wife and I hope it does her good, and she’s soon better again.’

And the Hill Man took the barley gruel, and he turned to go, and he said, ‘I shall not forget your kindness.’

And away he went.

Now the fire was dying down and still she had a lot to sew up, so Mallie reached for a peat to lay upon the embers, but there were none left. So she had to go to the stack on the hill to fill her basket. And before she set off she looked at the sleeping children to see that they were all right. And then she took a cup of cold water out of the water pail. For there was nothing else in the house.

Away out to the stack, far across the moors, she travelled. The night was calm and still, not even the sea made a murmur. Far in the distance a dog barked. And the moon was full, and shining in a cloudless sky.

Home Mallie came with her load of peats. But so tired was she that she set down her basket on the hearth. And she laid herself down on the chair close by and she fell sound asleep.

In the morning Mallie wakened cold and stiff, and the fire was out. So she set about rekindling it so that she could have a pot of hot gruel for the bairns. The wood caught light and she broke a peat in two so that the fire would soon blaze up. And just with that, she heard a clink upon the hearth! She looked, and found a gold coin! Oh Father, this was something! Mallie turned it over in her hand. She had heard about people finding things among the peats on the moor, a good brooch, a ring and so on. With a light heart she broke open a second peat. And out fell another gold coin! No, no, this couldn't be right! And she broke open a third peat – a third gold coin fell clinking upon the hearth!

‘This is the reward from the Hill Folk!’ she whispered.

‘Bairns! Bairns! Rise and hurry here this minute! Come and see this at once!’

They came rubbing their sleepy eyes. And every peat they broke open had a gold coin inside!

Mollie gathered them all in a pile upon the table, and her face was shining with happiness.

‘We’ll be able to buy a croft now, a little farm! And we’ll buy sheep, and a milking cow, and hens! And we’ll have mutton and eggs and milk. And we’ll never be hungry again!’

And this is what they did.

Ah, but old Rebecca came to hear of it. And she considered that, if Mallie had got money from the Hill Folk, they would give her some too, an old body living by herself. So she took the biggest basket she had – a creel – and away she went to her hill stack and came home with just what she could drag. And she opened a peat to see the lovely shining gold fall out.

Something did fall out. But it wasn't a gold coin.

You'll never guess what fell out of old Rebecca's peat! No, you'll never guess in a hundred years!

Shall I tell you?

It was a mouse. A living mouse!

Yes, every peat had a living mouse in the heart of it!

And she wakened her fat cats to eat them. But the cats had never seen such a swarm of mice – the floor was covered with them. And she flung open the door to call them out. But they just ran round and round. And it was the cats that ran out! And they were never seen again.

And the mice jumped up on the table and the dresser and into the larder. And Rebecca took a swipe at them with her apron. And down came her clock in smithereens and her bonnie plates, all smashed. And she was never clear of mice for ever more.

And the day came when she looked in her pantry for something to eat. And her bread was just crumbs. Her butter was all eaten. Her meat and cheeses had all gone. And a dead mouse was floating in her milk jug.

And she took a cup in her hand. And she went over to Mallie's house. And she said, 'Mallie, I wonder if I could ask you for a cup of milk and a bannock for I'm starving.'

And what do you think Mallie said to her?

'Yes, yes! Of course you can get that! Don't ever go hungry! You can get that anytime, as long as you live!'