

R.S.JEPSON



*The Cat with
Eight Lives*

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by Robert Jepson

Preface

The Isle of Man; a British Crown Dependency set in the Irish Sea, a jewel of an island, rolling hills, rocky coastlines, sandy beaches, the Laxey Wheel, horse trams, steam railway, vibrant history, ancient culture and ... legends.

The Fairy Bridge - is popularly located on the main road from the capital to the airport but actually to be found down a secluded pathway in woodland. Local custom decrees a greeting being given to the faeries, or to be more precise, the little people, on passing the bridge, Woe betide anyone who would cast aspersions, disbelief, or ridicule, for bad luck or far worse will come their way.

Manx cats - a genetic defect resulted in them having no tail, though some have a small stump and are known as, you guessed it, stumpies. But there are many other accounts of why Manx cats have no tail . . .

“Watch the road Jack!” Beth shouted.

“I am, there’s something wrong with the steering!” Jack replied anxiously.

The wheel was being forced to the left. Desperately he tried to straighten the car up but it wouldn’t respond.

Moments before, they had passed the Fairy Bridge where it was customary to call out a greeting to the unseen folk.

Beth waved and gave the obligatory; “good morning Little People.”

Jack responded, “how can you believe in all that crap, Beth?”

He jammed his foot down onto the brake pedal, but it was too late. The car slid off the road. As it careered down the embankment they bounced around violently before coming to rest in a ditch, after narrowly missing a tree. During the final lurch, Jack's head slammed against the steering wheel and he lost consciousness.

Jack opened his eyes but felt disorientated. It was night and he was alone.

Moonlight pierced through the gaps in the trees and cast haunting shadows.

The trees were dense, he couldn't see a way out.

Mysterious noises came from all around. Twigs snapped, leaves rustled, and something breathed ominously, unseen.

Where was Beth? Where was the car? Feeling uncertain he stood up.

Jack felt he was too low to the ground. He was also unusually light and agile.

I must be dreaming, he thought.

“This isn’t a dream, Jack”, a taunting voice said.

“What? Who’s that?” he looked around and saw a small, humanoid figure of indeterminate gender. It was half naked and dressed in shimmering, multicoloured, flowing garments. Jack backed off in fear, he sensed a tree by the side of his head tickling

his lip, though he wasn't touching it. He saw long, fine hairs spreading out sideways from his face; his loping walk was strange. This wasn't right. He held his hand out and recoiled in shock at the sight of a black paw,“

Tell me, this is a dream, right?” he said to the figure, who was now laughing at him.

“Believe me, it's not. Follow me,” the entity said, now with a more serious tone.

The creature led him to a quiet pool.

“Take a look in the water, my friend.”

Jack stretched his head over the water and looked down.

“What the hell is this!” he shouted out.

The reflection of a black cat stared back at him. *No, no*, he thought, *I'm a 26 year old computer programmer, just an ordinary guy, this is not happening.*

“You not figured it out yet?” the figure said.

“What do you mean? Who are you?”

“I'm Tita.”

“Er, OK, *what* are you?”

“Not of your kind, I am what you people call faery, amongst other things.”

“What on earth are you talking about? There's no such thing!”

“Oh really?” Tita challenged him.

Jack was confused, nothing made any sense. Logic told him this was all imagination. But something deep in his bones sensed a complete, though odd, reality.

“What's going on here then?” another voice said.

“Oh no,” exclaimed Tita, “it's Oona!”

“Who?” said Jack, bewildered.

He saw another figure, similar to Tita but dressed in a green and red tunic with a small silver hat perched on it's head. No indication, again, as to whether it was male or female.

“Hello traveller. I'm the humble leader of this little band of other-worldly tyrants and miscreants,” said Oona, with an authoritative tone. Then he asked Tita, “what are you doing with this being?”

“I thought I'd teach him a lesson Oona. He is, or was, a human, he doesn't believe in us, I heard him say so, and being Midsummer-eve I used the power of the crystals to show him.”

“You did what?” Oona exclaimed, angrily. “You know the consequences that can lead to.”

“Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on? Lessons, crystals, fairies . . . and . . . why do I look like a cat?” He paused. “Ah, wait, yes. I've heard of this, lucid dreaming, that's it!” he said, satisfied at last.

“Oh dear,” Oona sighed. “Come Jack, sit yourself down, or perhaps crouch down, cat-man,” he gave a chuckle. “Tita, make a fire!”

With a wave of Tita's hand a gathering of twigs and leaves burst into flame, they all gathered around the fire.

Jack thought he could see figures dancing in the flames.

“Fire salamanders,” said Oona, “you see them, yes?”

“Yes, what are they?” replied Jack.

Elemental spirits Jack, much like us but they live in fire, giving it form.

“Oh,” Jack said, uncertainly.

When they were all settled, Oona said, “now, let me tell you a story, about who we are.”

He told Jack of their history. They had been around since the dawn of time, not part of human-kind but intrinsically linked to its evolution, tending to the planet and its progress. They lived outside of time, non-physical beings of a much more subtle energy vibration than humans. In earlier times during man's history, long before Jack's, people knew of their existence, only a few could see, but all believed. The Fae people helped tend the land, crops and cattle, keeping everything in order behind the scenes. But in time, man created roads and cities, along with pollution of the earth and the mind. He crushed the natural order.

The Fae retreated, not physically, but in time; far back, as they were now, visiting Jack's era only occasionally. Time is not linear as mankind thought, and so they could move through it and decide to exist *when* they wanted to, not just where. As they didn't see time as

Jack did, Oona couldn't say what year it was now, but men farmed the land and lived in houses, in tune with nature and the flow of life.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth nearby.

"Hear that?" said Oona.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Elves or goblins, they're curious. They've sensed your presence. We are neither good nor bad, but there are some out there who are wicked beyond imagining. They can't harm us in this place, it's protected. But stay close, you'll never see home again if you get mixed up with the likes of them."

"So what am I doing here, when can I go home?" Jack pleaded.

"Ah, well," Oona continued, "Tita is of a playful and rather mischievous disposition, he seems to have taken offence to your disbelief. Throughout the year there are certain dates when portals, I think that's how you would term them, can be opened and physical beings are able, with our help, to move through time. He's rather impetuous but should never have done this. You're in a bit of a predicament lad."

"You haven't answered my question. How do I get out of here?"

"In time. I'm enjoying this little chat, it's not everyday you get to talk to a cat with a human mind."

"I thought you were supposed to have wings?" said Jack, trying nervously to find something to say.

"We are beings of thought energy Jack. We have wings when we desire to have them mostly to entertain humans, give them what they expect."

"Oh." Jack's head was spinning. The darkness closed in around him, clinging like an oily coat. Fear gripped him; could this really be happening? Dark visions of evil things out in the woods sprang up in his mind. He tried to ignore them, he felt some dubious safety here with Oona.

"And what about this cat business then?" said Jack.

"Ah now, cats are our favourites. There are myths amongst your kind that they are witches familiars, which is true to an extent. But it was us that gave them their nine lives. They have a beauty and sweetness of personality that endears them to us and we help them

in many ways. Tita has exchanged, temporarily I hope, your personality with the cat that usually inhabits the body you are in. Look, here comes another, Branwen.”

A sleek, slender, silver grey cat sidled into their company. Jack couldn't believe it, he felt a sexual attraction to her. He was barely taking in what Oona had told him, yet this was totally bizarre. She sniffed him and he was sure he heard her say “hi, sexy!”

“So,” said Oona, “all that remains is to get you back to where you belong, after Tita's little prank.”

“Um, well, bit of problem there,” said Tita, hesitantly.

“Problem? What problem,” Jack was edgy.

“Enlighten me, Tita!” Oona demanded.

“Mad Maddrell, the butcher, stole the crystal stone, just after I brought Jack through with it. He saw it glowing and picked it up.”

Oona sighed, “you've really done it this time, haven't you Tita, interfering with time and humans. We've got until daylight, otherwise cat-man here, is stuck.”

“Stuck? Stuck?” Jack repeated, “What does that mean?” There was panic in his voice.

“It means stuck here for good Jack, just as you are now; or at least until another magical date, when our abilities are enhanced.” Oona sounded apologetic.

“We'll have to steal it back, Mad Maddrell's house is just over there, see, where the light is shining in the window,” Tita pointed.

“But we can't enter human dwellings Tita,” Oona reminded him.

“Jack and Branwen can though.”

Branwen sidled up to Jack, her body felt soft and warm, making him think of Beth. They had only gone to visit Beth's parents to inform them they were getting married; now Beth seemed to be in another place and time, indeed she was, if Oona could be believed.

“Believe,” said Oona.

“Can you read my mind?” asked Jack.

“Yes, so can Branwen,” he gave Jack a wink, “So, Tita, do you have a plan?”

“Kind of. We can give Jack the power, in exchange for one of his lives, to see the crystal; it will shine, even through a box. He and

Branwen sneak into the house, find the crystal, bring it back and, hey presto, he goes home.”

“Sounds straight forward,” said Jack.

“Well,” continued Tita, “Mad Maddrell has a dog, an angry, ferocious dog, you'll have to be careful there.”

“And who is this Mad Maddrell character?” Jack asked.

Oona jumped in, “he's the village butcher, a wild old man with a red face and a short temper, nasty piece of work, if you wake him he'll be after you, so will his dog. Oh, and they both hate cats.”

“Terrific!” exclaimed Jack, sarcastically.

“Looks like you've no choice,” said Oona. “There's little time,” he added brusquely, “You must find the crystal and bring it here. You see that group of mushrooms over there?”

“Enchanted, I suppose?” Jack said whimsically.

“Oh yes, of course,” replied Oona, in a matter of fact way.

“So what happens then?”

“Put the crystal in the middle and that's it, a doorway will open. You walk through it and, ‘hey presto’, I think you say, you'll be home.”

“What about these special powers?” asked Jack.

Tita approached him. From his new perspective Jack estimated these people to be about knee high, to a person that is, not a cat. He sensed Tita's touch, not in a physical way, it was like a sudden burst of energy.

“Done,” Tita stated.

“What?” Jack asked.

“I've given you an extra sense, to see into the fourth dimension.”

“How will that help me?”

“There's not time to explain, it's very complicated, but just imagine this; you have a sealed box, six sides, OK?”

“Aha.”

“You focus into the fourth dimension and then there will be a seventh side, open, you can see inside. Get it?”

“No.”

“I thought you wouldn't. You've just got to concentrate, you'll see.”

“Come on then Jack, let's do it,” Branwen said in a sultry tone.

“Be careful, watch out for goblins and elves,” Oona warned.

They set off through the dark woodland. He felt cold and shadows tormented him, things seemed to be moving through the trees, following them. Branwen led the way, he admired the way she walked, the sexy wiggle of her hind quarters. *Oh, come on, get a grip*, he told himself.

The butcher's house drew ever closer, there was still a light on and movement in the house. A noise came from their left.

“Stop!” said Branwen.

“What is it?”

“Not sure.” she paused. “There! Goblins, run!”

Out of the trees lumbered three creatures the size of bears, walking on two legs, their skin was black, leathery and hairless. The faces were distorted, with luminous eyes, huge fangs and drooling mouths. Four short horns protruded from their heads. Their breathing was deep and rattling, sweat was steaming off them in the cool night air. They were hideous. Another appeared ahead of them.

“We're out of the protected area,” Branwen said as they darted to the right. “Keep moving, fast!” she added frantically.

The goblins were no match for the agility of the cats and soon they left them far behind, Jack's heart was racing. They stopped, Branwen listened carefully and then told him it was all clear, they were safe, for now.

Another power that was granted to cats by the Little People was the ability to enter houses when all doors and windows were shut. They never were though, there was always a tiny crack somewhere that a cat could squeeze through.

Branwen and Jack prowled around the perimeter until Branwen, more adept in the ways of cat life, said “there, look.”

Jack saw a window slightly ajar. They leapt onto the window ledge and looked in. The butcher was slumped on a chair, an empty jug of beer by his side and he was still dressed in blood stained clothing from his days work. He appeared to be asleep and his dog was curled up absorbing the last heat from the dying embers in the fireplace. A couple of carcasses hung on hooks in the kitchen area,

dripping blood. Jack shivered; this place had the stench of death, or evil, perhaps both.

“Can you see it?” asked Branwen.

Jack focussed his attention and scanned the room. He felt a buzz in his head and his sense of perception changed, it was strange, but he could see inside things.

“There!” Jack exclaimed, “on the table in a cloth bag.”

“I see it,” said Branwen. “Right, here’s the plan. We both go in, you grab the bag, I’ll head to the other side of the room to make a distraction if either of them awake. You’ve got to get that crystal and get out quickly.”

Branwen entered first and pushed the window open a little more to aid their escape. Jack followed and Branwen gave him a nod. They moved in different directions, Jack approached the table, jumped up and grabbed the bag between his teeth. Got it, he thought, triumphantly.

“Good, now out!” Branwen’s thoughts impinged on his mind.

He was back on the window sill, still inside the room, and waited for Branwen, He swished his tail excitedly causing a small earthenware pot to fall from the shelf. Branwen was walking along the stone floor and froze. Time seemed to slow down as she saw the object fall. Then there was a loud crash as it smashed.

“You’ve got a lot to learn about being a cat, Jack. Run for your life!” Branwen shouted into his head.

The dog awoke first; it was big and ugly with a salivating mouth full of large teeth. It barked and rose to its feet and lurched forward in pursuit as Jack disappeared through the window with Branwen in hot pursuit.

The commotion aroused the butcher. He couldn’t have been asleep for long and was wide awake. He took in what was happening, grabbed an evil looking meat cleaver from the table and rushed to the door. He kicked it open. He was already outside when the cats made their exit.

“Come here you vermin, I’ll have you!” he screamed, running towards them.

Jack and Branwen were now on the ground and running as fast as they could. The butcher was close behind waving the knife which flashed in the moonlight. He was surprisingly fast and agile for an old man.

Left and right they moved as they ran, both to avoid trees and dodge the butcher with his manically swinging knife. They were close now and could see Tita and Oona. Ahead of them lay the mushroom field. There was now some distance between them and the butcher, but the crystal was still in the bag and it would have to be taken out. Skidding to a halt Jack let the bag drop.

“Do it now!” shouted Oona.

Tita grabbed the bag, removed the crystal and placed it amongst the mushrooms. The crystal began to glow, pulsating in a myriad of colours, the air vibrated and Jack felt a tingling sensation like static electricity, then an area of intense blue light appeared before him.

“Walk through it!” Oona commanded, urgently.

At that moment the butcher caught up with them and grabbed Jack's tail, a lump came to his throat and he felt despair, there was no escape, it was all over!

“You have to go, right now Jack!” Oona called out, “you have to believe!”

Jack summoned all his strength and pulled with every part of his being as he saw the meat cleaver descending in its death swing. Suddenly, something gave. He never knew if he'd managed to pull so hard that it snapped his tail or whether the butcher sliced it with the knife, but he lurched forward into the light.

Jack found himself back in the car, Beth was fussing around him. “Jack, Jack, are you OK? You've been out of it for the last five minutes.”

“What? Um, yeah, I'm OK, I think,” he slurred. He sensed a very odd feeling as though something fundamental had changed within him. He leaned over and hugged Beth. Another couple had pulled over after seeing the accident. The young man was pleased that Jack seemed to be uninjured, but he'd already called the police and ambulance for them.

His partner, a girl in her early twenties, with flowing locks of blonde hair, had been wandering around the car, “e-ew, yuck!” she exclaimed, “you didn’t miss it after all!” she held up a severed black tail. The tail of a cat.

Jack's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide.

“You OK, darling?” asked Beth.

“Yeah, I think so.” But he felt a mild stinging sensation at the base of his spine.

He looked past the girl and saw Tita sitting on the branch of a tree. He was laughing his head off, so much so that he lost balance and fell off the branch.

“I believe!” Jack shouted.

THE END

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed this little titbit. In receiving this free story you are already signed up to my email list. I would be delighted if you would stay with me on my journey, I have many new works to published in early 2020, details are on my website.

As an independent author I rely heavily on recommendations and word of mouth and I would be super cool if you could mention my website on any of your social media, perhaps with reference to this little story, just a line or two.

Thank you, again,

Robert Jepson

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