

The Ghosts in Dovecot Road

a short Scary Scotland story written specially for the Corstorphine Fair

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Waverley was relieved to see that there wasn't a roller-coaster. He had been dreading it ever since Holly asked him to go to the Fair with her: that moment when he would either have to agree to go on it and frighten himself to death, or refuse to go on it and face the scornful amusement she would feel but not say anything about because she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

He could see an army thrill ride in the middle of the park, but the long queue for it would give him a ready-made excuse. Apart from that there were stalls with hot dogs and burgers and knitted animals and old books and plants and bottles and silly games like hooking the duck and home-made treasure hunts, and a band playing and a merrygoround with Noddy cars and fire-engines and double-decker buses on it, that went round really slowly so that the tinies wouldn't get frightened. It was just having to be stopped to let a screaming toddler off as Waverley and Holly went past. Waverley had every sympathy for him. He had had to get off halfway round Toyland Tours at Alton Towers to be sick not very many years before. He had claimed it was seasickness but Brenda had told

everyone 'poor little Waverley's scared of his own shadow.'

Holly's mother bought a plant in a pot - well, it was so bushy that it was more of a tree really - at one of the plant stalls. Holly offered to carry it. She held it in front of her face as they went along, in case she met anyone she knew. Holly's mother kept glancing up at the sky for signs of rain.

'We'll never hear the end of it if it rains on your Gran's Swan Protection stall.'

Swan Protection? Waverley couldn't imagine that swans needed protection from people. In his experience it was more likely to be the other way round.

Holly's granny waved a stuffed cygnet in his face as they approached.

'Here's a nice toy,' she said, exaggerating wildly as usual.

'Do you want a hand, Mum?' said Holly's mother. That was another thing Waverley didn't imagine was necessary. Holly's Granny usually looked as if she could run the whole world single-handed.

'Well, I could do with somebody to take over from Mrs Lessels for a while,' she said, gesturing in the direction of an older, spindlier version of herself. 'Would you like a break, Irene?' she shouted.

Mrs Lessels winced as the wall of sound hit her.

'No need to shout, dear... No, I'm all right. Wouldn't you like a rest yourself?'

'Oh, no, I'm fine for a while yet. You just go now...'

The argument looked like going on for some time, with neither old lady willing to admit to feeling tired. Holly's mother stood helplessly by.

'We'll just go and have a look round, then,' said Holly.

They escaped, Holly still carrying the plant in its pot and peering out from among the leaves. Waverley thought about whether to have a hot dog before or after buying a bag of the kind of blue and pink jelly frogs that had made him sick once on the top of Edinburgh Castle. It might be better to have the frogs first and get it over with.

'Do you want a ride on the horses?' said Holly.

'No.'

'Do you want to go on the Thrill Ride?'

'No.'

'Do you want to watch the husky demonstration?'

'No.'

'I didn't think you would,' said Holly with satisfaction. 'Will we have hot dogs or jelly frogs first?'

'Jelly frogs.'

They had bought twenty jelly frogs each and were heading towards the husky demonstration just for something to do while they ate, and to take their minds off the increasing nausea, when Holly grabbed Waverley's arm.

'Oh, no!'

When Holly said 'Oh, no!' in that tone of voice, there could only be one explanation for it. Waverley looked in the direction she was looking in.

Sure enough, there was Gary Wilson cycling in and out between the plodding horses and heading more or less straight for them.

'How come he always gets everywhere?'

'Quick, this way!' said Holly, ducking down a path and scurrying out of sight.

Waverley followed her. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Gary Wilson and his bike

getting tangled up in the wheels of a cart that one of the horses was pulling along for people too old, too young, too fat or too frail to ride on horseback.

'It's all right,' he called to Holly. 'He's busy with his bike.'

'Are you sure?' said Holly, coming back. Waverley had just opened his mouth to say 'Yes' when Gary Wilson came round the corner at top speed shouting 'Hey, Waverley, there's a train for you on that merrygoround' and chased them further down the path and round the corner.

'No,' gasped Waverley instead as they ran for their lives along the narrow pavement. Holly was just ahead of him, passing a funny old stone building when she tripped on something - the kerb, a tree root, her shoelace - and fell on her face. Waverley fell over her and Gary Wilson ran into them and came off his bike.

Gradually they sorted themselves out and, grabbing at each other for support, managed to stand up.

Nothing seemed to be broken except...

'Oh, dear,' said Holly, looking at the broken jigsaw puzzle that had been a plant pot and the ruins of the small tree, now with its roots sticking out all over the place.

Gary was busy checking over his bike.

'My Mum'll kill me if there's anything wrong with it.'

'What's that noise?' said Holly. A faint squeaking sound seemed to be coming from the small tree on the ground. She got down on her hands and knees to listen.

Waverley was about to join her when he heard something else.

It was a dull thudding sound followed by another... and another. It was coming closer. It

was behind him... to his left... in front... behind him again. It was all round him.

And with it came a mist, swirling in from nowhere, muffling everything and hiding the others and the tall hedge and the funny building that Holly would probably know all about, because she always knew things.

The branch of a tree suddenly waved over his head in the whiteness. He spun round. There was a large, solid-looking tree trunk that hadn't been there before. Another branch brushed against his arm. He looked for a way out, but more and more trees seemed to have rooted themselves all round.

Waverley didn't think any more but started to run and didn't stop until he had run right out of the circle of trees, out of the mist and up the path back to the park. Once there, he looked for Holly and Gary, assuming they would have run too.

Gary came whizzing up on his bike.

'Where's Holly?' said Waverley.

'How should I know?' said Gary. He jumped off his bike and let it slump sideways until it was leaning on the nearest stall.

'We'd better go back for her,' said Waverley, feeling a horrible shivery shudder of doom go through him.

'Why should we?' said Gary, but he followed Waverley anyway.

The mist crept towards them as they went back down the path. Further along the road it thickened into a wall of whiteness. They stuck close to the garden walls and tall hedges at the side of the road, and came to the circle of trees.

'Holly!' called Waverley. The sound echoed back to him as if it had bounced off the wall of mist, but somehow it had turned into a low growl:

'The tree-girl.'

Tree-girl? Holly! Yes, of course...

Holly appeared between the trees, standing framed in the branches, looking quite at home. The mist had thinned out a little around her and Waverley saw the big round shape looming up behind her.

'What's that?' he said.

'It's all right, it's only the dovecot.'

Suddenly Holly was sitting high up on a branch of one of the trees. She had something prickly in her hair... her legs looked grey and woody from this angle...

'Holly!' squeaked Waverley. 'You're turning into a tree!'

Even her fingers were starting to look green and shiny and spiky like holly leaves.

'Come down!' shouted Waverley. 'Stop messing about!'

Holly just laughed and waved these spiky fingers at him.

Waverley looked down at his own fingers and legs to make sure... no, he seemed much the same as usual. But he would have to rescue Holly. He had a feeling that she would find having a tree-trunk for legs and holly-leaf fingers might be a bit inconvenient in everyday life, and that although she might have been named after her parents' favourite tree they wouldn't want a real live tree in their family.

'Hey, where did all this smoke come from?' said Gary suspiciously, as if noticing the mist for the first time, which quite possibly he had. 'Have you been lighting a fire?'

'No, but - ' began Waverley, then stopped.

Fire? Forest fire? It was something trees would definitely be scared of.

Holly landed hard on the ground in the middle of the circle of trees.

'My legs have gone all heavy,' she complained, lifting up one foot and then the other with a great effort.

'I'm not surprised,' said Waverley. Holly's legs were rapidly turning into tree trunks - thick, grey and solid. 'Have you got any matches in your pocket?'

He knew Holly always carried a complete survival kit around with her, the contents ranging from string to sweeties and from plasters to pencils.

'That's a good fancy dress,' said Gary Wilson. 'Is there a competition?'

He prodded at Holly's leaf-fingers, pricked himself and jumped back. 'Hey, that's dangerous!'

'I think there's some in my jacket,' said Holly, ignoring Gary and speaking to Waverley. She carefully pushed back some leaves that had started to trail down across her face. 'Can you get them out?'

'Yes,' said Waverley, being brave about putting his hand in Holly's pocket and trying not to squeal as one of the leaves scratched him. He was tempted by something that felt very much like a packet of Fruit Salad Chewits, but just under it nestled a box with a rough patch along the side. He pulled it out in triumph.

'My Mum'd kill me if I had matches,' said Gary smugly.

'Go and get some sticks,' said Waverley. He had been thinking much faster than he usually liked thinking: could he set fire to one of the trees? No, Holly wouldn't approve and they probably wouldn't let him anyway. He didn't have anything in his own pockets except two pound coins and the bag of jelly frogs. He did think of taking off his jacket and setting fire to it, but he

didn't know how he would explain that to Brenda.

Just outside the circle of trees, he and Gary collected a small bundle of sticks.

Back in the circle, Waverley struck a match.

He heard a kind of grumbling, stamping sound at first, low and soft like old men in a queue. Then he put the bundle of sticks on the ground and set fire to it. Some of them were damp and just smouldered at first, then the whole thing flared up.

Gary jumped backwards away from the blaze and bumped into Waverley.

'My Mum'll kill me if I set fire to my trainers.'

Branches waved frantically above their heads, then the ground started to vibrate as the trees began to move. Just for a moment, as they loomed angrily over him, Waverley thought he had done the wrong thing. Then the smoke wafted up from the small bonfire and the trees gradually shuffled back a bit.

They were obviously not going to go right away. They seemed to be waiting for something. Waverley heard the buzzing noise again.

'It's my Mum's tree,' said Holly. 'They're worried about it.'

'Would they stop worrying if we planted it somewhere?' suggested Waverley.

'It's worth a try,' mumbled Holly. Her face was turning grey and woody and she had trouble opening her mouth wide enough to speak.

Waverley looked round wildly for a place to plant it. He saw that the gates by the dovecot were open very slightly. He pushed his way through and dug a hole, desperately scrabbling with his fingers. (Later he found his hands were covered in nettle stings he hadn't noticed at the time.) He pushed the roots of the small tree into

the hole and covered them quickly with earth, firming it so that the tree stood up straight.

A long sighing sound wafted over from the assembled trees; the mist began to disperse; the trees shuffled further away, gradually fading as they shuffled until they had completely disappeared. Waverley looked at Holly. As he looked she became less and less like a tree and more and more like herself, until the only sign that she had almost been a tree was a stray leaf caught in her hair.

They could see the way back to the park, where it was sunny and there were lots of people and noise and ordinary things happening.

They walked towards it.

'What was all that about?' said Waverley.

'The ghosts of all the trees,' said Holly with a far-off look in her eyes.

'But why?'

'They wanted to rescue my Mum's little tree because it was in danger,' said Holly.

'But why?' said Waverley. 'People drop plant pots all the time and nothing like this happens - does it?'

'We just got into the wrong place at the wrong time,' said Holly. 'There used to be a whole avenue of sycamores just there, leading to the castle. The last one blew down not long ago.'

Hmm, thought Waverley, wondering if they would ever be in the right place at the right time.

They arrived back in the park and Gary looked for his bike.

'I left it here next to this stall,' he said.

It wasn't there.

'We sold that bike you left here for us,' said the lady at the stall brightly. 'Thanks very much - it was in really good condition.'

'Come on,' said Holly to Waverley quietly. 'Let's go and have a hot dog.'

They could still hear Gary Wilson shouting when they got to the other side of the park.