

The Beast of the Bounds

Told by Louise Farnall

[Folk Music]

There was a time when the boundaries of parishes, farms and towns were not kept by written word and drawn line, but by memory alone.

Our young hero Jack, a fine cap upon his head, is walking his very first beating of the bounds, an ancient ritual, the oldest of legal ceremonies. This was to commit to memory which land was his, which was hers, which was yours. And Jack – he was to learn the land he would inherit.

Striding proudly alongside his father, they pass familiar sights – farm, field, thicket, paths worn by hoof and heel, until, at the very boundary of the village, they reach a dense copse of trees where Jack has never been.

A few paces into the thick forest and Jack sees something that makes his blood run cold. A snout. A snarl curling over white teeth. Thick black fur. There in that thicket! There between those trees! Something armed with paw and claw. Jack shrieks and runs as fast as his legs can carry him out of the forest and away from the beast.

A short while later, after the beating of the bounds is done, Jack's father finds the young boy cowering at the very edge of the forest. Upon learning what Jack has seen, he knows it for what it is: the black dog, a barghest, omen of death. And fearing that his son is now cursed, he sends Jack away, never to return.

One year passes. Two. Now three. Now four. Ten summers come and ten winters go. And one very cold winter's night, Jack's father dies. A week later, a stranger returns with a fine cap upon his head to reclaim the land he has now inherited.

The villagers are not so sure about this stranger in their midst.

‘We don’t know him.’

‘So what if it is Jack. He’s cursed.’

‘If we let him stay, we’ll end up cursed too.’

‘But what of his right to the land?’

‘Make him prove it. Make him lead a beating of the bounds.’

Jack knows full-well the villagers’ challenge is impossible – he never completed a beating of the bounds – but what choice does he have.

And so, the very nervous young man begins the beating. He sets off first for familiar sights – farm, field, thicket, paths harrowed by hoof and heel. Until the very boundary of the village and a dense copse of trees.

A few steps into the woods and Jack sees something that pulls at the fear seated deep in his chest. A snout. A snarl curling over those white teeth. And thick black fur. The barghest. Knowing that this was where he had failed so many years before, Jack straightens his spine and marches steadfastly towards the beast.

Much to his surprise, it turns, walks a few paces and looks back as if asking Jack to follow, as if it had been waiting for him all this time. They walk together as the barghest leads Jack around the boundary of the village. And he realises his father was wrong. It was not an omen of death. It marked the boundary between life and death. Between his land, her land, your land.

And so, in years to come, when Jack would take his son on the beating of the bounds, he would greet the black dog, the barghest, as an old friend, and they would walk through the woods together.