

TRAVELLERS' TALES

The Coppice Merchant's Tale

In the middle of a dark woodland a coppice merchant chopped away at the bole of a birch tree. When it fell he saw for the first time a man on horseback watching him.

"Do you have permission to do what you're doing?"

"Yes, sir. My name's Campbell. I work for the Lord of the estate. Lord Crinnon."

"Interesting. I wasn't aware he had any servants working on his land. I thought they were all tenant farmers and such like." The man's horse snorted.

"I don't work for Lord Crinnon, sir. I pay him a fee for the coppice rights and then-"

"You pay him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Money?"

"That's all he'll accept, sir."

"Interesting." The man's horse waited for a decision. "Do you pay everyone for these coppice rights?"

"That's the usual procedure, sir. Will you be looking to have some woodland coppiced?"

"Aye. I think I might. You pay me, you say?"

"Yes, sir. I pay you."

"What's the catch?"

"There's no catch, sir. If you're interested you'll find me in the Swan Tavern. We can sign a contract if you wish."

"I'll bear it in mind. Extraordinary." And off he went, his heavy horse crashing through the bracken, the man heaving and rising to keep the beast going.

After the poles were sorted and the brushwood gathered and the chopped boles covered to stop the deer from eating what was left, Campbell loaded his small cart with a small amount of wood for his own fire. No snigging today, his horse pulled the cart to the Swan Tavern, settled outside with a hay bag and water and took notice of Campbell when he went inside for a quick drink.

The quick drink turned into a long negotiation. "You're a man of your word. Shelps is the name. You may have seen it over the front door of the bank."

"The bank? You own the bank?"

"Yes. Now tell me more about this coppicing."

Campbell explained his work. How he cuts down trees, thins out trees, sorts and arranges different species for different uses. Leaves the wood in better shape than when he found it with space to breathe and light to grow.

Shelps wasn't interested. "How much do you pay per acre?"

"What species?"

"Species? I don't know, I'm a banker not a woodcutter. A bit of oak I suppose. Birch. That's the white stuff isn't it?"

"Birch has white bark, yes."

"Well that's about it. So, a price."

Campbell took out a pencil and a thin scrap of paper. He wrote his offer and turned it to Shelps who held the paper at the very edge as if it were poisonous. "I like the price, but not this rag you've written it on."

"My wife made it. The paper. That's a bit I tore off, but she normally makes beautiful sheets of paper from wood pulp and grass-"

"Yes, yes. Listen, I went to have a word with Lord Crinnon, get the score on this coppicing palaver. Here's my offer." He had a scroll, a cylinder of thick paper wrapped around a heavy walnut handle. "This is paper," he said. "When you're as successful as me you'll write on paper as thick as this. Go on, feel that. Go on. Run your fingers over that."

The fibre was heavy, the texture rough and the edges cut without care, but Campbell agreed it was the symbol of status. Only a wealthy man would be able to afford paper of this quality. And across its pitted surface a hand written contract. Coppice merchant to thin the woodland, extract the timber, leave it tidy and productive for another season. Shelps held the handle, Campbell held down the lower edge as he examined the clauses.

"All seems in order, sir," said Campbell. "More or less identical to the agreement I have with Lord Crinnon."

"Good. Hold that edge down while I sign it." Shelps produced a quill pen as magnificent as the scroll and added his flamboyant signature. Campbell took his time signing, any chance to hold a pen as superb as the one in his hands now.

"Good, excellent. You'll start soon presumably?"

"As soon as I finish at Lord Crinnon's estate. Three days. I can start Thursday, sir."

"Good, excellent." Shelps dragged himself away from the table and blundered out of the tavern.

Thursday came, a fine day, a light breeze tempting the woodland leaves to whisper and chatter. When the light began to fade, Campbell tidied the area where he had been working and loaded his cart with ash logs for next season's heating and some hazel poles to repair part of the fence behind his house.

As the horse emerged from the woodland edge where the track met the lane, Campbell was stopped by Shelps. "Productive day, sir?"

"Yes, very good. Some nice wood. Once the ash has dried out it will make-"

"What's all this then?" Shelps aimed his horse at Campbell's cart.

"That's some wood for the fire and a few poles to repair a fence."

"Have you paid for it?"

"Paid for it?"

"Yes. Paid for it. The agreement was for you to leave what you cut down. You're allowed one cart load for yourself."

"One cart load? My agreement with Lord Crinnon-"

"I'm not Lord Crinnon." Shelps carried a leather satchel over his shoulder and inside the satchel was the scroll that Campbell had signed. "You remember our agreement, sir." He unrolled the scroll, but when he held it out the paper was longer than Campbell remembered. He stepped forward to read it and saw for the first time several clauses that he wouldn't normally agree to.

"I don't recognise this contract, sir."

"Is that not your signature?"

It was. At the end. Campbell's name in his own handwriting. The last entry written on the heavy paper. At the top, below the heavy handle and previously hidden, a preamble. *The coppice merchant shall entitle himself to one cartload of extracted timber. The remaining timber left for the use and profit of the estate of James William Earnest Shelps.*

"As I said, sir. Is that not your signature?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then I suggest you fill that cart as best you can, because that's all you're taking home with you."

There was enough light left for Campbell to return to the wood and find as much timber as he could carry, but as he balanced the final large logs of oak he heard a hideous crack, a groan and his cart slumped to one side where the axle had split under the weight. The load was tipped into the bracken.

No cart. No wood. No way to make a profit and his horse still needed feeding. Campbell had one coin in his pocket and he spent it on a glass of ale in the Swan Tavern. He didn't even have the luxury of drinking it all. A drunken customer pulled away from the bar, lost his footing, slammed into Campbell's table and spilled half the beer across the table top. He tried to clean up the mess, but when Campbell lifted the soaked beer mat he noticed some of the ink had stained the table top. He studied the beer mat, squeezed it between his fingers and stared at the ink left on his skin.

With a handkerchief he dried his hands and took the scrap of his wife's paper out of his pocket. Holding it up to the light he saw the fibres, the traces of cut rose petals and imperfections from the hand making process. But more importantly, he could see the hazy outline of the landlord.

Campbell arrived home well after midnight. A joint effort between him and his horse had guided the stricken cart and its unstable load back to his house nestled on the edge of a small birch stand. It stood in darkness, but when he finally found the front door and entered his small living room the silhouette of his wife Sara sat in front of a dying fire.

"What happened?" she said.

"A lot." Campbell slumped onto the chair facing her. "I've been cheated. The cart is damaged. And the wood."

"The wood?"

"There's maybe enough to last us a week, maybe two. Once it's dried that is."

"Who cheated you? This new client? Shelps?"

"Yes. Thick paper. It wasn't the thickness of his paper it was the length. He had clauses hidden in the contract where the paper was rolled up. It's my fault. I should have checked."

"It's not your fault. You're the victim. How can it be your fault?"

"I should be more careful, Sara. It's not just my livelihood, it's you too."

"Well it's done now. Self-pity over. What are you going to do about it?"

He didn't know. There was an embryonic plan about to emerge, but like a stubborn cloud covering the sun the light would not burst through. Sara urged him to talk.

"This paper," he took the scrap out of his pocket. "Do you have any more sheets like this?"

They waited until morning and then went into Sara's small woodshed where she made the paper. On the shelves she rummaged for several sheets, but each one she chose was the wrong type. Campbell would feel it between his fingers. "Too thick."

"Too thick? You said Shelps had paper as thick as a table top."

"Exactly. That's not what I want. I want paper as thin as this scrap I have here."

Sara found a sheet that Campbell was happy with. He folded it and tore it in half and then tore the halves into quarters, rolled them up and headed off to the bank for a loan. Shelps was right, his name was over the door, but he wasn't around when Campbell approached a desk and asked the man sat behind it if he could have a loan for a new cart and a down payment on a coppice.

Agreement in place with surprisingly favourable terms, Campbell bought himself a new cart, harnessed his horse to it and headed for the large house where Shelps lived when he wasn't out cheating people.

He settled his horse and rang the doorbell. A butler answered and led Campbell into a side room. "Your card, sir," he said with his nose raised.

"I don't have a card. Can you tell Mr. Shelps it's Mr. Campbell, the coppice merchant."

"Oh. Had I known you were a tradesman I would have directed you to a more appropriate entrance. Please do not sit down on any of the chairs in this room. I shall inform the master of the house you are here."

After the butler left Campbell muttered, "I shall inform the master of your undesirable proximity. . . ."

"Mr. Campbell." Shelp's voice blew into the room followed by his quick footed person.

"Come to apologise have you?"

"Apologise? No, sir. Came to ask if I could continue working on your land. I hadn't finished when my cart broke, but I've got a new one"

"Yes, yes. You're in breach of contract, sir. I can't trust you. I'll find another coppice merchant. Good day."

"I'm the only coppice merchant in the county, sir. Perhaps a new contract. One that we can both agree on."

"And then you do what you want. You're a crook, Mr. Campbell. A law unto himself and I no longer wish to do business with you."

Perhaps if he saw the contract Campbell had written. He took the sheets out of his inside pocket, flattened them on a table and waited for Shelps to examine the clauses.

"That's more than you offered to pay the last time. I thought you had no money."

"I was able to obtain a loan."

"A loan? Not from my bank, I hope."

"Yes, it was."

Shelps rolled his eyes. "If you default on the loan, sir, I will repossess your house and everything you own."

"I won't default. Your manager was happy with the terms and signed the agreement willingly. The last contract between us was a genuine mistake on my part and I need the work. It's my livelihood."

"Yes, it is. You're a shoddy businessman, sir. And this paper." Shelps was reluctant to even touch it. "Can't your wife make anything thicker than this, it's like, like I don't know. Water."

"But still a binding contract, sir."

Shelps grumbled and fumbled for his pen. Couldn't find one so rang a bell and summoned the butler again. "A pen. My pen. Find it if you will."

"Of course, sir." The butler limped out and a moment later limped back with the same flamboyant quill pen Shelps had produced to sign the last contract.

"Won't surprise me if the tip cuts through this tissue paper." With great delicacy he signed the contract, handed the pen to Campbell who signed his own name with equal care.

"Your butler says I came to the wrong entrance," said Campbell.

"Did he?" Shelps took the pen and handed it back to his docile servant. Campbell separated the sheets of paper, took the one below the sheet Shelps had signed, folded it and handed it to the butler, hoping the combined weight wouldn't be too much of a struggle.

"I'll get on with my work, Mr. Shelps."

"Yes. And kindly stick to the contract, sir, otherwise I will sue."

Campbell was shown the door and left to find his way back to the woodland where his tools remained from the previous contract. The oak saplings were plentiful, ash the perfect girth for firewood, and several mature hornbeams were ready to be felled. In all, the crop would make a handsome profit if he could transport it away.

But he wasn't worried about that.

His next test came at the end of the day. Campbell loaded his new cart which was strong enough to take a much heavier load and headed home, but once again where the track met the lane Shelps waited on his belligerent horse.

"Can't trust you, sir. Had to make sure you weren't going to cheat me again." He paced around the cart. "There's a lot there. What are you up to this time?"

"I'm not up to anything. I'm sticking to my side of the contract as we agreed."

"Half the woodland is on the back of this cart."

"I know. And the other half will be on the back of it tomorrow."

"I think not. I shouldn't have to keep doing this." He took his leather satchel and searched inside for the new contract. "You seem to have no respect for agreements, sir. Would you care to read what you've signed?"

"Perhaps you can read it to me. I don't have my glasses."

Shelps unfolded the contract and read the clauses out loud. "I the undersigned, for the sum agreed. . . ." He scanned the handwritten paragraphs, "Here you are. The contract will entitle me to remove as much wood as is commercially viable, allow me to remove as much wood as I need for personal use, the amounts being what the woodland will offer without loss or damage to the . . . wait a minute. I didn't agree to this."

Campbell poked the paper. "Is that not your signature, sir?"

It was. Every letter, every flourish, even the quick underlining of the surname. Shelps could not contradict its authenticity. He puffed and yanked at the reins when his horse grappled with the bit.

"I'm sorry if you're not happy with the terms," said Campbell, "but you did sign it."

Unable to respond Shelps heaved his horse and himself away from the cart and its generous load. His complaints fought with the clattering of hooves until his displeasure was replaced by the jubilant birdsong of the wood.

After returning home, Campbell unloaded the cart, settled his horse and joined his wife at the table. "Successful day?" she said.

"Not bad." Campbell sat down and placed two sheets of paper on the table. One blank, the other full of handwritten contract clauses and signed by Shelps. He flipped the paper over and felt the ink on the back. It was dry now.

"Did it work?" Sara sat down and started to eat.

"It worked perfectly. This is the sheet he read and signed," he held it up to the light and gazed at Sara's hazy outline visible through the writing, "but he's got the copy that was underneath. The one he signed but didn't read."

Sara paused a moment and said, "You know you could do this again. I can make more paper just like that. You could make every contract work in your favour."

Campbell had considered the idea on his way home. He shook his head. "No. Twice is enough."

Sara smiled. And then a question puzzled her. "Twice?"

The following day on his way to the forest Campbell went via the village and passed the bank just as the manager was opening up. "Good morning."

"Good morning? What's so good about it?" The manager pointed a rolled up sheet of paper at Campbell's horse. "This, this rolled up rag. Mr. Shelps called at my house last night frantic. Almost lost my job because of you. This contract, sir, was not the one I signed."

"Yes it is," said Campbell. "It has your signature on it, does it not?"

"Yes, well, yes. It has my signature on it. But I did not agree to the repayment terms." He tore the sheet when he unrolled it. "The repayments shall be due only when the extracted wood is sold in its entirety."

"Yes."

"But some of the wood is for your own use, it will never be sold."

"Yes."

"But. . . ."

"But what?"

The manager shook the contract again.

"Look at it," said Campbell. "Is that not your signature at the bottom? If you don't mind, sir, I have work to do. Good morning." And he left him to quiver and shake knowing that somewhere Shelps was in his house quivering and shaking with equal frustration, caught out by the shortcomings of cheap porous paper and ink's unwitting desire to pass right through it.