

Grandpa Jack continued, "Now, you should know right at the beginning that few folks tell the story of 'The Last Map of Root Man Charlie'... you see, the people who know this story seem to really believe it; and I've been told to ask whoever I tell it to not to let it get around; because, well, I guess it's just that somehow everyone who has known this story has been afraid that if the wrong big people found the map, they might go catch the little people, and analyze 'em or something... but anyway, I won't say anymore about that.... Just remember this: why do you suppose no one hardly ever sees a little person with wings?"

Grandpa Jack let that question sink in for a moment, and took a sip of his coffee. Then he continued:

"Now, if I got my facts straight, this story about the last map of Root Man Charlie dates back to the late 1600's. Back then, why, there were really only Indians living around these parts, but the great migration of people from Europe to this continent had begun. And I needn't tell you that among the first to try their luck on the new and mysterious continent were people looking for gold. You know it doesn't take much of a report to get people moving when they think they're gonna get rich quick....

"Anyway, already in the late 1600's, there were men from Europe here who had more than the usual enthusiasm for adventure, and who had gotten together food, tools, and a pack horse, or a donkey, and headed for the hills, to see if there was any gold.

"Now, despite the various reasons these early prospectors may have had for looking for gold, we know that the Cherokee Indians, much like many other Indian tribes on the continent, defended their territory and protected their resources. And so we might easily expect that most of the early prospectors, as they filled their saddle bags with gold, silver, and other

valuable minerals and gemstones, were accosted by the Indians for stealing, and immediately laid in a grave. But that is not what happened. We can be sure that the early prospectors met with Indians, and maybe even shared a pipe of smoke or two with them; but most Indians, and especially the Cherokee Indians then living in Western North Carolina, lived in surroundings so filled with natural resources that they did not imagine a few men gathering rocks could threaten the source of their livelihood. And so the early prospectors in Western North Carolina, during the late 1600's, experienced real difficulties only from the wild animals in the area, and not from the Indians.

"And so the early prospectors found that, if they could survive in the mountains, they could pretty much haul off anything they found. And we now know that there was a great variety of valuable minerals and gemstones in this area to be found. A good prospector then, in the mountains of Western North Carolina at that time, would have soon discovered that he was in the right place.

"Well, one of those early prospectors became known among his friends for being especially good at discovering 'the right place.' We do not know what this particular prospector's name really was, but back then he was called 'Root Man Charlie.' This was because he always carried with him some bloodroot dye, so he could draw maps of where he had been.

"Well, as it happened, Root Man Charlie was not only good at finding valuable minerals and gemstones, but he was a generous man as well. And so when he said he was going off alone, and he didn't want no company either, the other prospectors in the area, they let him go. Because, year after year, Root Man Charlie always returned to the same place in the mountains to camp for the winter. And when he did he'd always have one or

two parchment maps, drawn with bloodroot dye, that showed the location of a big mine. Sometimes it would be silver and sometimes it would be some kind of gem, but, for some reason Root Man Charlie was only looking for gold. Still, no one pressed the Root Man for his reasons. Because every year, when Root Man Charlie returned to the winter camp, he gave away the maps he'd made. And sure enough, when a man followed one of Root Man Charlie's maps, they always found what the Root Man said was there.

"So the other prospectors, they let Root Man Charlie go his own way. And they kept hoping that he would never find gold. Because one time, the Root Man had said, "Boys, every winter I make my camp right here in this spot. But if I ever find gold, you'll never see me again. I can't tell you why, but you'll never see me again."

Here Grandpa Jack paused again for a sip of coffee.

"Well, now," he continued, "one summer, one of Root Man Charlie's prospector friends was in the mountains God only knows where, setting up camp in the late afternoon, when who should he see but Root Man Charlie and his donkey, coming slowly along the trail towards his camp. Well, right away this friend of the Root Man's, who's name was Tall Bill, noticed something about the Root Man, and knew that he had somehow changed. So when the Root Man got to the camp, Tall Bill just kindly went straight to the point, and said, 'Charlie, I've known you for nearly fifteen years, but I ain't never seen you look so... low-spirited. Something happen?'

"And the Root Man said, "Something happened." But he didn't say no more.

"So Tall Bill, he just helped his old buddy with his gear, and helped him set up camp. Soon they were both sitting at the fire. Tall Bill was smoking on his pipe. Root Man Charlie, just looking at the fire.

"You'll think I've finally gone crazy," said the Root Man.

"What could be crazier than tramping through this god forsaken wilderness looking for pretty rocks?" asked Tall Bill.

"But Bill, it's my sight. I'm worried about my sight. I mean, I thought I saw them, but maybe I didn't."

"Saw who?"

"Little people with wings-- or little somethings with wings...."

"Well, what did they look like?"

"That's just it, I saw them at night. I'm not sure what they were. But they had a fire going, and did a dance. And I saw the whole thing."

"Tall Bill took a few long draws on his pipe. Then he said, 'You feelin' alright, Charlie?'"

"That's just it, Bill, I feel fine. But there was something about the dance they did Bill... I can't explain it...."

"You need something to eat?"

"No... thanks, Bill."

"A long silence."

"Well, Charlie," said Tall Bill, "I ain't never doubted your word for fifteen years, and I guess I won't start now. If you say you saw it, I believe it. Now get this thing off your chest, and tell me what you saw."

"Root Man Charlie breathed in deeply and sighed. 'Okay, Bill.... Now I'm not going to say just exactly where I was, but I was following some leads, and found a large bald mountain that, that had a nice little stream along one side of it, and I decided that I'd just set up camp there for a few days and look around. Well, I picked myself a good little grove of trees by the stream to camp at, and set up. Then I spent one day poking around the top of the bald mountain, but I didn't find anything worth checking further. Still, there was something very peaceful and beautiful about the mountain and the surrounding

area, and there were many deer, and blueberry bushes that had about a month to go, and the weather was warm enough to take a bath during the day, and, well... I just plain liked the place, and felt right settled, as if it was a home that maybe I'd been looking for over the years but never found....'

"Root Man Charlie was looking into the fire, but he didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular.

"Well, in the early evening of my first day there, I noticed that the air was planning on staying calm and comfortable for a while yet, and the stars began to fill the sky, and I just sorta decided to wander a bit, and find myself a place to lay back and look at the sky. Well, I wandered upstream a bit, and then crossed over, and found myself at a small flat clearing. There were no big trees around, and I decided that this was a good spot. So I just went and chose some thick grass near one side of the clearing and laid down, with my head facing the bald mountain. Then all the quiet and the stars and the warm air and the little noises blended together, and I don't know how much time passed, but I guess I didn't even move for near an hours time.

"Then I saw something. There was a small light. The light was moving. It was so small at first I wasn't sure I saw anything, but it seemed to become clearer and clearer, and soon it was close enough to the clearing where I was so that I could see it was a flame, with a small tail on it from moving through the still night air. But a flame in mid-air with no one around it, carrying it or nothing. I started to think of getting up and running, but I didn't. I just watched.

"I just kinda leaned up on both elbows and watched. And I saw the little flame land on the ground in the clearing, not more than thirty feet from where I was. And then the little flame became a bigger flame, like a fire... but still so small

you could've put it out with the toe end of a boot.

"Then... then, I don't know for sure Bill, but I believe I was awake... I heard some drums, and something like flutes playing, and by God Bill, I saw something start moving around the fire. At first I couldn't be sure, but when more and more of them started going around the fire, I saw that I was watching a dance, and that they were dancing in a circle around the fire. I can't say how long it lasted; even now I think I could've been dreaming, but suddenly the drums and the flutes stopped playing. And then, just as suddenly, they started playing again. And then it seemed like the dancers began leaving the circle, because soon I could not tell if anything was near the fire. Then the music stopped. Then, after a long time, the fire went out. Then I realized I was getting cold, and I just got up and found my way back to my camp.

"I got under my blankets to go to sleep, but for a long time I just lay there, looking at the stars. At times I thought I saw a bright star, with lots of little stars circling around it... There was something about the dance I saw that... that... meant something to me, but I could not understand what it was... something about how the small light came out of the dark air, and then landed, and became a fire, and a fire that people danced around.... Many, many thoughts passed through my mind that night as I lay awake under my blankets looking at the stars... but I did not know what they meant.... Sometime that night I fell asleep.

"When the early morning sunlight woke me the next day, I felt very light. I knew something. I didn't know what it was, but the nearest I can say is I felt like some kind of search was over. I had found something. Something more important to me than anything in the world. And I didn't know what it was. But it didn't matter.

"And it seems crazy now, talking about it like this, but that morning I decided that I was going to try and talk to the little people or whatever it was that danced around that fire during the night, and I was going to ask them if I could join their tribe. Doesn't it sound crazy? And yet I knew it was something I was going to do... something I had to do.

"There I was, then, that morning, gathering some wood for a fire to heat up some water for coffee, and suddenly I dropped the wood I had in my arms and began walking upstream. I crossed the stream at the same place I did during the night, and walked over to the clearing. I looked around on the ground, and sure enough, I soon found a small pile of ashes. From the fire I saw during the night. I then began talking out loud, speaking as if there was someone there who could hear me. I told them what I saw, and I asked if I could join their tribe. I asked them to tell me if I could join their tribe. I waited and listened but I heard nothing. I waited a long time, but I saw nothing and I heard nothing. I do not know if they didn't hear me or couldn't see me, or whether I even saw them during the night. I stayed there one more night to watch for their dance again, but on that second night I saw nothing. Then I began to feel sad. I decided to move on, so that I could keep my spirits up, but that ain't workin' too good. I don't care to follow leads anymore, Bill. I don't know what to do....'

"Root Man Charlie had finished talking. Both men then just looked at the fire. For a long time.

"Finally, Tall Bill spoke. 'You found the gold you was looking for, didn't you Charlie?'

"Root Man Charlie looked at Tall Bill and smiled. The Root Man's eyes were wet. 'Thanks, Bill.' he said.

"When Tall Bill woke up the next morning, he saw Root Man Charlie standing by his donkey. The donkey was packed up and ready to go. Root Man Charlie was looking at something, and did not notice that Tall Bill was awake. Tall Bill saw that the Root Man was looking at a map. Then he saw the Root Man roll the map up and tuck it into one of the saddlebags on the donkey. Then Root Man Charlie started walking down the trail, leading his donkey. Then Tall Bill couldn't see Root Man Charlie anymore.

"Tall Bill knew that Root Man Charlie was going off alone, and there was no way Tall Bill was going to follow him. He knew that Root Man Charlie was going back to that place in the mountains where he had been when he saw the little people dancing around the fire. But it was all too strange for Tall Bill. He would let the Root Man go that trail alone. And where the trail led... only Root Man Charlie knew....

"But there was a map. Tall Bill had seen it. And Tall Bill couldn't help thinking that somehow, someday, Root Man Charlie was going to give that map away too. How, Tall Bill did not know. But he knew what he saw, and he had seen that the map was different from other maps Root Man Charlie had drawn. It was a map made to last. It was a map drawn with blood root dye on a smooth deer hide. It was the last map of Root Man Charlie."

That was the end of the story.

Everyone sat so mesmerized from listening to the story that they did not notice Stanley and Laura looking at each other. Both of them looked like they were about to faint.

Then Stanley said, "Jack... are you sure the map was made on a deer hide?"

"Well," said Grandpa Jack, "let me put it this way. There'll always be parts of that story changing and changing back according

to who's telling it. But there are six main parts that are always in there:

1. Root Man Charlie was only looking for gold.
2. He found a lot of other minerals and gems, made maps of the locations, and gave the maps away.
3. If a person followed a map of Root Man Charlie's they always found what he said would be there.
4. Root Man Charlie saw a small light come out of a dark sky. He saw the light land, and become a fire. And he saw little somethings dance around the fire.
5. Tall Bill always says, "You found the gold you've been looking for, didn't you Charlie?"
- and 6. Root Man Charlie's last map was drawn on a smooth deer hide with blood root dye.

And I've never seen a person swear they're telling the truth like the people I've heard tell this story."

Stanley looked at Laura.

"Well," said Laura, "Three years ago, my mother died. Before she died she gave me something she said had been handed down in her family for generations. She said no one knew if it was a map or just a drawing... but there is an X at the bottom of it, and it's a picture of some mountains, and it's made with red dye on a smooth deer hide. And it's at our apartment...."

"Wow," said Tom, faintly.

"Should I go get it?" asked Stanley.

"Well, do you know where the place is that's drawn on there?" asked the professor.

Stanley and Laura looked at each other and shook their heads. "Nope. We haven't the faintest idea where it is," said Stanley.

"But maybe someone here will recognize it," said Kate.

"I'd like to see it," said Grandpa Jack.

"It's not really that bad outside, is it?" said the professor.

"We only live at the other end of the street," said Stanley.

"I'll go with you," said Tom.

They started getting their coats on.

"Imagine that..." said the professor, "... a story and a map, separate for nearly three hundred years, not once crossing paths, but both still surviving.... And a live elf unconscious on the fireplace mantel. What's next, Jack? What's next?"

"I don't know," said Grandpa Jack, "I don't know this story...."

Stanley opened the front door. The wind was still blowing outside, but not as hard as before, and it wasn't snowing anymore. Then Stanley and Tom went out.

Then everyone in the front room was quiet.

Then Grandpa Jack started singing:

"Oh! ye'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road
and I'll be in Scotland afore ye...."

After about twenty minutes, Stanley and Tom returned. They had the deer hide. Stanley had it inside his coat. He opened his coat and gave the clear plastic case with the deer hide in it to Laura. Laura took it and laid it on the couch. Some people knelt and other people stood. Everyone looked at it.

The deer hide was 8 inches high and 12 inches long. The hide was faded a little, but remarkably well preserved. On the smooth side of the deer hide, there were some lines drawn with some kind of red dye that had soaked into the hide. The lines clearly indicated a mountain on the left, two streams near the bottom, and a long ridge in the upper middle and right.

"I could swear I've seen that place before," said Tom.

"There's not much to go on," said Grandpa Jack, "but by God, it does look familiar...."

"It's got the same S curves in the streams that my painting has," said Mary.

"But that's not possible, is it?" said the professor.

"I'll go get your painting Mary," said Kate. She hurried down the hall to go upstairs.

"Look," said Laura, "that mountain on the left really has two peaks if you look close...."

Kate returned with Mary's painting. She set it on the couch next to the deer hide.

"Look," said Tom, "the X on the deer hide matches the clearing in Mary's painting where a small fire is burning."

"This is hard to believe," said the professor.

"The map and the painting are so close," said Kate, "it'd be hard to believe they aren't the same place."

"Could it be possible?" said the professor.

"And when a person followed a map of Root Man Charlie's," said Grandpa Jack, "they always found what he said would be there."

"But," said Tom, "lots of people go there, and no one else has seen anything like what Root Man Charlie saw."

"I'm going to call and get the weather," said Kate. She went into the kitchen.

She wasn't gone long. She came back smiling. "Guess what? All the snows going to melt. The wind blew in warm air from the south, and it's going to be near 60 and clear for the next few days at least."

"But there'll be snow all over the Blue Ridge Parkway that won't melt," said Tom, "How are we going to get there?"

"Well..." said Kate, "we'll get something with four wheel drive and put chains on it. That'll work, won't it?"

"Still," said Tom, "there's gates that close off that part of the parkway during the winter...."

"We'll take chain cutters and a hack saw," said Stanley.

"I can't believe I'm listening to this," said the professor. Then he said, "But what if we get caught. They'll never believe this...."

"We'll show 'em the elf," said Tom, "they'll believe that."

"But we could get stuck up there...." said the professor.

"But," said Kate, looking at Clear Water lying on the fireplace mantel, "he's hurt... at least we ought to try...."

"I'm for it," said Grandpa Jack.

"We'll go," said Tom and Mary.

"So will we," said Stanley and Laura.

"I'm going," said Kate.

"Can I go too?" asked Jennifer.

"We'll all go," said the professor. "But what about Dylan and Story?"

"They can stay at my house," said Mary.

"But what will you tell your parents?" asked Tom.

"Hmmm...." said Stanley.

"Oh..." said Mary, "...what if they wouldn't let me go?"

"There is that chance...." said the professor.

"And," said Stanley, "to explain all this to anyone else would take time. The elf could be dying."

"Hmmm...." said Kate.

"Well," said Laura, "I know someone who would take the kids with no questions asked... and we could just leave her an explanation in an envelope in case of an emergency...."

"Who's that?" asked Kate.

"Irene."

"Sure," said Kate, "that's it. Still, we might not find the little people right away...."

"But we need to go as soon as possible," said Stanley, "and we need to try looking as long as we can...."

"You mean days?...?" said the professor.

"If we were up there for more than a day, my parents would be worried sick...." said Mary.

"They'd probably send out an APB," said Tom.

"Well then," said Kate, "if we run into trouble up there, we'll know someone is looking for us."

"And Irene will be able to tell them where to look," said Laura.

"But someone may get hurt looking for us up there," said the professor.

"It's possible," said Grandpa Jack.

"All I can say is that little elf better not disappear while we're up there tramping around looking for his tribe...." said the professor.

"Then it's settled," said Tom.

"Oh, no," said Laura suddenly, "I forgot all about work. I'm supposed to work tomorrow."

"Me too," said Stanley.

"And I've got to work on Thursday and Friday...." said Mary.

"Well," said Grandpa Jack, "this is a family emergency. Tell them you'll be out of town for a few days."

They all looked at each other and laughed.

"Well, we couldn't really tell them the truth, could we?" said Stanley.

"Well then," said Kate, "we've got a lot of things to do. We're going to need extra clothes, sleeping bags, and food for at least four days, and enough to feed... eight people."

"Can you slip into your house and get some things without your parents finding out what you're doing?" Tom asked Mary.

"I don't know...." said Mary.

"Well," said Laura, "why don't I bring extra clothes for you?"

"And we've got an extra sleeping bag," said Kate.

"Then I'll just stop by tommorrow and tell them I'm going out with Tom for the afternoon," said Mary.

"I guess we ought to get some sleep then," said the professor.
"But someone ought to stay up with the elf here...."

"We can take shifts," said Kate.