

Tales of Wonder and Magick©

By the Storyteller (Nic O'Connor) for Gylden Fellowship

Foreword

In the preface to my book of winter ghosts and monsters (**Winter Chills**, can be downloaded for free from www.gyldenfellowship.co.uk), I referred to the **origin and to the provenance of folk tales**. With spectres, it's not so hard to supply verifiable names, locations, dates and testimony, even if one does not believe totally in the existence of spooks.

This collection of 24 tales is a bit broader than ghosts. To be sure, we'll encounter all manner of monsters and strange creatures, but there's a sprinkling of magick too. Some folk laugh at this point and say there's no such thing, apart from theatrical conjuring. I'm here to say they're quite wrong. Magick is a force of nature that can be used by anyone, not just stage magicians. One can't see electricity or the wind, but you can see its effects in lightning storms or in the breeze in the trees. Magick is the same and one can discern magick in its effects.

All tellers of tales seek to embellish their stories for their listeners. That holds as true for a Celtic or Saxon storyteller as a performance artist today who recounts Arthurian legends. The Saxon audiences loved epic tales and I'll try to include as many such stories as I can. The following tales come from many cultures and ages, from the Ancient Egyptians to First Nation tribes and more from our own history.

It is worth saying too that these tales are all designed for **performance**, perhaps in a community group setting or for reading to a child at bedtime, albeit some of the tales may be a little scary for younger children! Most of these tales reflect common folklore tropes, motifs that recur in differing forms. An example of a folklore trope is that time passes differently in the world of the fae, the sidhe or the dwarfs. Another trope is the inclusion of popular creatures to test the bravery of heroes.

Tales involving **dragons** were always popular down the ages, but different cultures imagined various types of dragons. The Norse-Germanic tradition saw them as fire-drakes – like Smaug in the *Hobbit* or as the creature that killed Beowulf. The Saxons had different dragons, poisonous wyrms that inhabited caves or forests and ate people. Other variations include knuckers, wyverns and basilisks. Here's a true tale of **wyrms** from our history.

Once upon a time, over 1100 years ago, there was a small village called Wermehalte. That was its recorded name in the Domesday Book, but the vill itself had been settled for at least 200 years before that. It was literally carved out of the middle of a forest in what we might call

Middlesex, but in those days, much of the land to the west of London was either deep forest or sandy heathland.

Not too many people lived in Wermehalte. Its name came from the Saxon terms for dragon (wurm) and forest (halte). Basically, it was an area of trees, frequented by wyrms. These were not basilisks or fire-breathers, but much, much worse – large, green serpents with poisonous fangs, perfect for hiding amongst trees and thick undergrowth.

Consider the danger, if you can – each time a villager went to collect firewood or a child went to pick blackberries or mushrooms, was that a sudden movement in the bracken? Was the green of the leaves hiding the scales of a wurm? Over the years, many children went to forage for food and never returned home; likewise, several unwary travellers strayed into the woods and only their remains were found by the path.

Finally, the situation became so bad that King John ordered the vill of Wermehalte to be emptied and the homesteaders were moved to other places, far from the forest. This cunning plan didn't really work though, as the starving green wyrms began to attack other small settlements on the edges of the woods. So, the king ordered the forest to be razed to the ground – all the trees were felled and it became a scrubland of bracken, old stumps and brambles. Where did the wyrms go?

Some left, ending up in other places and other tales, such as Clendon, St Leonards and Basingstoke. Others, it is said, dug caves under the hills and still sleep underground. Over the centuries, London expanded and factories or houses were built, but still the wasteland of Wermehalte stayed untouched. Until 1874, that is, when the Victorians decided to build on the site – and this is now the location of Wormwood Scrubs!

There are more dragons to come in the stories. But what about **dwarfs or goblins?** Dwarfs have an interesting myth-pool of their own, with a folk character that was a skilled smith and rock worker, known as a *dvergr* (Old Norse), *dweorg* (Old English), *twerg* (Old High German) or *dwergaz* (Proto-Germanic). In Anglo-Saxon areas, the idea of a goblin that was the opposite of an elf/ puca/ pook took the name of a *dwergl*. And the dwarf character evolved over the centuries from the gnomes of Paracelsian law, ruled by King Ghob – from whom we derive the word, *goblin*. More about goblins later, but now, off we go with the traditional opener, **“Once upon a time”**.

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1. *The Great Bear*

This story occurs in many tribes, but the tale is definitely an Iroquois nation (Cayuga tribe) legend, because the name, Nyah-gwaheh, means "Great Bear" in Cayuga.

There were four hunters who were brothers. No hunters were as good as they at following a trail - they never gave up once they began tracking their quarry. One day, in the moon when the cold nights return, an urgent message came to the four hunters. A great bear had appeared, so large and powerful that many were afraid that it must be some kind of monster. Children no longer went out to play in the woods and the long houses of that village were guarded each night by men with weapons. Each morning, when the people went outside, they found the huge tracks of the bear in their village.

Picking up their spears and calling to their small dog, the four hunters set forth for the village, which was not far away. As they came closer, they noticed how quiet the woods were: no signs of rabbits or deer and even the birds were silent. On a tall pine tree they found the scars where the great bear had reared up and made deep scratches to mark its territory. The tallest of the brothers tried to touch the highest of the scratch marks with the tip of his spear. "It is as the people feared," the first brother said. "This one is Nyah-gwaheh, a monster bear." The second brother said, "'But what about the magic that the Nyah-gwaheh has?"

The first brother shook his head: "That magic will be no good if we find its track." The third brother said, "That's so. I have always heard from the old people that such creatures can only chase a hunter who has not yet found its trail. When you find the track of the Nyah-gwaheh and begin to chase it, then it must run from you." The fourth brother, who was the fattest and laziest, merely said: "Did we bring enough food to eat? It may take a long time to catch this big bear. I'm feeling hungry."

Soon, the four hunters and their small dog reached the village. It was a sad sight to see, with no fire burning in the centre of the village and the closed doors of all the long houses. Men were on guard with clubs and spears and people looked hungry.

The elder sachem of the village came out and the tallest of the four hunters spoke to him: "Uncle," the hunter said, "we have come to help you get rid of the monster." Then the fattest and laziest of the four brothers spoke. "Uncle," he said, "is there some food we can eat? Can we find a place to rest before we start chasing this big bear, because I'm tired?"

The first hunter shook his head and laughed, "My brother is only joking, Uncle. We are going now to pick up the monster bear's trail." The sachem spoke, "I am not sure you can do that, nephews. Though we find tracks closer and closer to the doors of our lodges each morning, whenever we try to follow those tracks, they disappear."

The second hunter knelt down and patted the head of their small dog. "Uncle," he said, "That is because they do not have a dog such as ours. He can see any tracks, even those many days old." "May the Creator's protection be with you," said the elder sachem. "Do not worry, Uncle," said the third hunter. "Once we are on a trail, we never stop following until we've finished our hunt." "That's why I think we should have something to eat first," said the fourth hunter, but his brothers did not listen. They nodded to the elder sachem and began to leave. Sighing, the fattest and laziest of the brothers lifted up his long spear and trudged after them.

They walked, following their little dog. It kept lifting up its head, as the trail was not easy to find. The fattest and laziest hunter complained, "Brothers, don't you think we should rest. We've been walking a long time." His brothers paid no attention to him. Though they could see no tracks, they could feel the presence of the great bear and knew that if they did not soon find its trail, it would make its way behind them. Then they would be the hunted ones.

The fattest and laziest brother took out his pemmican pouch so he could eat while they walked along. He opened the pouch and shook out his food, but instead of the pemmican, pale squirming things fell into his hands. The magic of the Nyah-gwaheh had changed the food into worms. He shouted with anger, "Let's hurry up and catch that big bear! Look what it did to my pemmican." Meanwhile, like a pale giant shadow, the Nyah-gwaheh was moving through the trees close to the hunters. Its mouth was open as it watched them, its huge teeth shone and its eyes flashed red: soon it would be behind them and on their trail.

Just then, though, the little dog lifted its head and yelped. "We have the track of the Nyah-gwaheh," said the brothers. "Big Bear," the fattest and laziest one yelled, "we are after you, now!"

Fear filled the heart of the great bear and it began to run. The four hunters saw a gigantic white shape and, with loud hunting cries, began to run after it. The great bear's strides were long and it ran more swiftly than a deer. The four hunters and their little dog were swift too and did not fall behind. The bear's trail led through the swamps and the thickets, easy to read as the bear pushed over everything as it ran, even big trees. On and on they ran, over hills and through valleys. They came to the slope of a mountain and followed the trail higher and higher, every now and then catching a glimpse of their quarry over the next rise.

Now the lazy hunter was getting tired of running. He pretended to fall and twist his ankle. He called, "Brothers, I have sprained my ankle. You must carry me." So his three brothers did as he asked, two of them carrying him by turns while the third hunter carried his spear. They ran more slowly now because of their heavy load, but they were not falling any further behind.

The day had turned into night, yet they could still see the white shape of the great bear ahead of them. They were at the top of the mountain now

and the ground beneath them was very dark as they ran across it. The bear was tiring, but so were they. It was not easy to carry their fat and lazy brother. The little dog was close behind the great bear, nipping at its tail as it ran.

"Brothers," said the fattest and laziest one. "Put me down now. I think my leg is better." The brothers did as he asked. Fresh and rested, the fattest and laziest one grabbed his spear and dashed ahead of the others. Just as the great bear turned to bite at the little dog, the fattest and laziest hunter levelled his spear and thrust it into the heart of the Nyah-Gwaheh. The monster bear fell dead.

By the time the other brothers caught up, the fattest and laziest hunter had already built a fire and was cutting up the big bear. "Come on, brothers," he said. "Let's eat. All this running has made me hungry!" So they cooked the meat of the great bear and its fat sizzled as it dripped from their fire. They ate until even the fattest and laziest one was satisfied and leaned back in contentment. Just then, though, the first hunter looked down at his feet. "Brothers," he exclaimed, "look below us!"

The four hunters looked down. Below them were thousands of small sparkling lights in the darkness which, they realised, was all around them. "We aren't on a mountain top at all," said the third brother, "We are up in the sky." And it was so: the great bear had indeed been magical. Its feet had taken it high above the earth as it tried to escape the four hunters. However, their determination not to give up the chase had carried them up that strange trail.

Just then their little dog yipped twice. "Look at the great bear!" said the second hunter. The hunters looked. There, where they had piled the bones of their feast, the great bear was coming back to life and rising to its feet. As they watched, it began to run again, the small dog close on its heels. "Follow me," shouted the first brother. Grabbing up their spears, the four hunters began to chase the great bear across the skies once again.

So it was, the old people say, and so it still is. Each autumn the hunters chase the great bear across the skies and kill it. Then, as they cut it up for their meal, the blood falls down from the heavens and colours the leaves of the maple trees scarlet. They cook the bear and the fat dripping from their fires turns the grass white.

If you look carefully into the skies as the seasons change, you can read that story. The great bear is the square shape of the constellation with the hunters and their small dog (which you can just barely see) close behind. When autumn comes and that constellation turns upside down, the old people say. "Ah, the lazy hunter has killed the bear." But, as the moons pass and the sky moves once more towards spring, the bear slowly rises back on its feet and the chase begins again.

2. *The Hound of Anubis*

This tale comes from the ancient mythology of Egypt, in the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty, roughly about 1300 BCE during the reign of the glorious Pharaoh Tutankhaten. It concerns the legendary pilgrim, **Sadiki Anput**, who was a devoted follower of the god, Anubis, and who travelled from temple to temple, from Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri to Cynopolis.

Anubis himself was an ancient god who looked after the pharaohs, protecting them after death as they crossed to the underworld. Sadiki visited each shrine, making offerings to her god at each one and Anubis looked with favour upon his devoted pilgrim.

Sadiki had a faithful companion on her travels. As she worshipped Anubis, her companion was a loyal hound, fleet of foot and generally affectionate. The dog even resembled the tomb sculptures of Anubis. After a while, Sadiki came to visit the Anubis shrine at Karnak, near to the temple of Amun.

As she laid her offering at the statue of Anubis, some of the priests were muttering to themselves and pointing at Sadiki's hound. When she asked them, a priest told her that she must be beloved of the god as her hound resembled Anubis in every way. At that moment, there was a commotion at the temple entrance.

Sadiki was astounded to see the figure of the young pharaoh, Tutankhaten, enter the temple surrounded by priests – and all of them were pointing at her dog! The king came to her and asked if he could take her dog to be the new royal pet, due to its uncanny likeness to Anubis.

And Sadiki was invited to live at the palace too, which she did alongside her hound. After a little time, the pharaoh ordered that more such dogs should be bred and they came to be known as Pharaoh Hounds, used for hunting in Egypt and other countries. Some say that it was Sadiki herself who was responsible for introducing the Pharaoh Hound to the little-known principality of Malta, on the direct orders of Tutankhaten.

And in his temple at Karnak, Anubis smiled to himself at having rewarded both his faithful pilgrim and her equally faithful hound.



3. *The Angels of Church Woods*

Church Woods can be found near Oxted in Surrey, but there is no church located there. This is the tale of how the woods came by their name in the Middle Ages.

Some 700 years ago, the woods covered a much greater area, including Oxted, Limpsfield and much of Titsey. There were a few farmsteads and isolated hamlets, such as Westerham and Woldingham. And in the woods was a large open space that was a dancing place for the faery folk – elves, pixies and sylphs. Of course, no humans could see such creatures except for the young daughters of local farmers, but no-one listened to such tales. And on nights, when the skies were clear and the full moon shone down, the space was full of dancing elves.

But some half-stories persisted about winged creatures in the woods and, after a while, the men of Titsey village decided to build a church right there in the open space, because the winged creatures were obviously angels from on high and that area must be a holy place. Some of the young girls protested, but their parents shushed them for making up faery stories.

So, the day dawned when the foundation stones of the new church were laid and the builders started on the walls too. **But** that night was a full moon in a clear sky and, during the night, the woods rang with wailing cries from the place of the new church-to-be. In the morning, the people of Titsey discovered that all the half-built walls of the church had been torn down and the stones scattered.

All through that week, the same thing happened. Each day, the villagers tried to build the church, only to find it in ruins the next day. Finally, the village elders decided that they must have offended the angels and the solution was to build in another place, closer to the village. The foundation stones were removed and the new church was constructed much closer to what we now know as Oxted. And this church remained up, namely no destruction from angels or anything else!

But the woods gained the name of Church Woods and the faery folk may still dance in the large open space. But, 700 years later, something else was built not so very far away and that was Clacket Lane Service Station on the M25.

4. *The Discovery of Fire*

This is a tale from the First Nation Alabama tribe.

In the beginning of the world, it was Bear who owned Fire. It warmed Bear and his people on cold nights and gave them light when it was dark. Bear and his people carried Fire with them wherever they went.

One day, Bear and his people came to a great forest, where they found many acorns lying on the forest floor. Bear set Fire at the edge of the forest, and he and his people began eating acorns. The acorns were crunch and crisp and tasted better than any other acorns Bear and his people had ever eaten. They wandered further and further away from Fire, eating the delicious acorns and seeking out more when the acorn supply grew low.

Fire blazed up merrily for a while, until it had burned nearly all of its wood. It started to smoke and flicker, then dwindled down and down. Fire was alarmed - it was nearly out - "Feed me! Feed me!" Fire shouted to Bear. But Bear and his people had wandered deep into the forest by then and did not hear Fire's cries.

At that moment, Man came walking through the forest and saw the small, flickering Fire. "Feed me! Feed me!" Fire cried in despair. "What should I feed you?" Man asked. He had never seen Fire before. "I eat sticks and logs and wood of all kinds," Fire explained.

Man picked up a stick and leaned it on the North side of Fire. Fire sent its orange-blue flames flickering up the side of the stick until it started to burn. Man got a second stick and laid it on the West side of the fire. Fire, nourished by the first stick, burned brighter and stretched taller and eagerly claimed the second stick. Man picked up a third stick and laid it on the south side of Fire and laid a fourth stick on the East. By this time, Fire was leaping and dancing in delight, its hunger satisfied.

Man warmed himself by the blazing Fire, enjoying the changed colours and the hissing and snapping sound Fire made as it ate the wood. Man and Fire were very happy together and Man fed sticks to Fire whenever it got hungry.

A long time later, Bear and his people came back to the edge of the forest, looking for Fire. Fire was angry when it saw Bear. It blazed until it was white-hot and so bright that Bear had to shade his eyes with both paws. "I do not even know you!" Fire shouted at Bear. The terrible heat rolling off Fire drove Bear and his people away, so they could not take it and carry it away with them. And now Fire belongs to Man.

5. *Love at First Sight*

There was once a young princess who could not make up her mind about anything. Her nickname around the palace (but never to her face) was "All-of-a-dither". Many young men had come to her father, the king of that country, to ask for her hand in marriage, but she simply could not choose between them.

So, the king decided to ask his advisers and magicians for help, but they could only suggest local customs and love potions. It was not good enough and the princess, Giulietta, still dithered over all her different suitors.

It was coming up to Valentine's Day and the king saw his chance to persuade Princess Giulietta to pick a husband. Many of the rustic folk used traditional ways to choose husbands, e.g. all the names of a girl's suitors were written on pieces of paper and put in a clay bowl; the girl would then pick out a name at random. Other young folk carved wooden love spoons, decorated with hearts, to be given as gifts to their lovers.

The problem was that the princess could not pick a suitable method for choosing her husband and neither could the king. What could they do? Luckily, there was a cunning man who had the reputation of solving all types of problems, both medical and matters of the heart. He had no real name, but he was very popular and people referred to him as "Victory of the people".

The king sent for the cunning man, who came to the palace at once. He was asked for his advice. The cunning man looked at the king and said, "Sire – this matter is simple. We have to take our guidance from the birds of the air, because another name for Valentine's Day is the Birds' Wedding Day. What your princess must do is to look to the sky on Valentine's Day and the first bird she sees overhead will show her future husband: a robin means she'll marry a sailor, a sparrow means she'll marry a commoner and a goldfinch means that she'll marry a rich man."

The king wondered at this, but his daughter agreed and they waited for Valentine's Day. The big day dawned and Princess Giulietta looked to the sky and the first bird she saw was an owl. She ran inside to tell her father, who sent for the cunning man.

When asked what the owl meant, the reply was this: "Sire, the owl is always seen as a sign of wisdom and long life – your daughter should seek someone who can give good advice and make decisions." The king laughed and so did his daughter – the princess decided to marry the cunning man immediately and the wedding was arranged.

6. *Faery Ointment*

Once upon a time there was an old woman, who had worked as a nurse and still helped people in Tavistock, with minor ailments and midwifery. One night in the dead of winter, about twelve o'clock in the morning, the old woman had just got comfortably into bed, when there was a loud rapping noise on her cottage door. She was startled and alarmed by the call, but arose from her bed, and soon learned that the summons was a hasty one, asking her to attend on a patient who needed her help.

She opened her door and there stood a strange, squint-eyed, little, ugly, old fellow, who had an unchristian look about him. Although not keen on the errand, the old woman dared not resist the command to follow him at once and attend upon his wife. "His wife!" thought the good dame, "May Heaven forgive me, but as sure as I live, I be going to the birth of a little devil."

A large coal-black horse, with eyes like balls of fire, stood at the door. The ugly old fellow, without more ado, whisked her up on a high pillion in a minute, seated himself before her and away went horse and riders, as if sailing through the air, rather than trotting on the ground. Soon they set down at the door of a neat cottage; there were a couple of children and her patient was a decent-looking woman.

A fine, bouncing baby soon made its appearance, who seemed very bold on its entry into life, for it gave the good dame a box on the ear. As with all good old nurses, she declared it to be a sweet little thing. The mother said nothing to this, but gave nurse a certain ointment with directions that she should rub the child's eyes gently with it.

The nurse performed her task, though she thought it odd and wondered what it could be for. Perhaps, if a good thing, she could try it on her own eyes. Not so – a great change took place!

The neat cottage, and all who were in it, seemed to undergo a sudden transformation: some better and some worse. The new mother appeared as a beautiful lady clothed in white, the baby was wrapped in silvery swaddling clothes and the father seemed to have a pixie cast. The two other children sat on either side the bed's head, but looked like a couple of little flat-nosed imps, who scratched their heads or pulled the faery lady's ears with long, hairy paws.

The old nurse saw she was in an enchanted place and left quickly without saying about using the magic ointment on herself. The ugly old fellow put her on the horse and told it to take her home.

At the next market day, which was for the winter solstice, she went out to sell her eggs and who should she see, but the same, ugly old fellow, stealing sundry articles from stall to stall. She thought to herself, "Ah, I've caught you now and I could set the mayor and two town constables on you, if I chose to tell." Instead, she went up to him and asked after the

health of his wife and child. "What!" exclaimed the old pixie thief, "Do you see me today?" The old nurse replied, "See you! Of course I do and I see you are busy into the bargain."

"Do you see me so?" he cried, "With which eye do you see all this?" The nurse replied that she saw him with her right eye. "The ointment! The ointment!" exclaimed the old fellow, "Take that for meddling with what did not belong to you - you shall see me no more."

He touched her eye as he spoke and, from that hour for at least a week, she was blind on the right side, thus paying for having given in to a whim in the house of a pixie.

7. *The Chipmunk's Stripes*

Here is a story from the First Nation Seneca tribe. Long ago when animals could talk, a bear was walking along. It has always been said that bears think very highly of themselves as they are big and strong and are certain that they are the most important of the animals. As this bear went along, turning over big logs with his paws to look for food to eat, he felt very sure of himself. "There is nothing I cannot do," said this bear.

"Is that so?" said a small voice. Bear looked down. There was a little chipmunk looking up at Bear from its hole in the ground. "Yes," Bear said, "that is true indeed." He reached out one huge paw and rolled over a big log. "Look at how easily I can do this. I am the strongest of all the animals. I can do anything. All the other animals fear me."

"Can you stop the sun from rising in the morning?" said the Chipmunk. Bear thought for a moment. "I have never tried that," he said. "Yes, I am sure I could stop the sun from rising."

"You are sure?" said Chipmunk. "I am sure," said Bear. "Tomorrow morning, the sun will not rise. I, Bear, have said so." Bear sat down facing the east to wait. Behind him the sun set for the night and still he sat there. Chipmunk went into his hole and curled up in his snug little nest, chuckling about Bear's foolishness. All through the night Bear sat. Finally the first birds started their songs and the east glowed with the light which comes before the sun. "The sun will not rise today," said Bear. He stared hard at the glowing light. "The sun will not rise today."

However, the sun rose, just as it always had. Bear was very upset, but Chipmunk was delighted. He laughed and laughed. "Sun is stronger than Bear," said Chipmunk, twittering with laughter. Chipmunk was so amused that he came out of his hole and began running around in circles, singing this song: "The sun came up, the sun came up. Bear is angry, but the sun came up."

While Bear sat there looking very unhappy, Chipmunk ran around and around, singing and laughing until he was so weak that he rolled over on his back. Then, quicker than the leap of a fish from a stream, Bear shot out one big paw and pinned him to the ground. "Perhaps I cannot stop the sun from rising," said Bear, "but you will never see another sunrise." "Oh, Bear," said Chipmunk, "Oh, oh, oh, you are the strongest, quickest and the best of all of the animals. I was only joking," but Bear did not move his paw.

"Oh, Bear," Chipmunk said, "you are right to kill me, I deserve to die. Just please let me say one last prayer to Creator before you eat me." "Say your prayer quickly," said Bear: "Your time to walk the Sky Road has come!"

"Oh, Bear," said Chipmunk, "I would like to die, but you are pressing down on me so hard I cannot breathe. I can hardly squeak. I do not have enough breath to say a prayer. If you would just lift your paw a little, just a little bit, I could breathe and I could say my last prayer to the Maker of all, to the one who made great, wise, powerful Bear and the foolish, weak, little Chipmunk."

Bear lifted up his paw, just a little bit. That little bit, though, was enough: Chipmunk squirmed free and ran for his hole as quickly as the blinking of an eye. Bear swung his paw at the little chipmunk as it darted away. He was not quick enough to catch him, but the very tips of his long claws scraped along Chipmunk's back leaving three pale scars. To this day, all chipmunks wear those scars as a reminder to them of what happens when one animal makes fun of another.



8. *The Mermaid's Comb*

An old man from Cury (Cornwall) was walking along the seashore when he encountered a mermaid. She was sitting on a rock arranging her hair, and had not heard the old man approach. The tide had gone out, but there was a large pool of water next to the rock which she used as a mirror.

The old man watched her for a moment and then decided to speak. As soon as the mermaid heard his voice, she slid off the rock and into the pool. The old man tried to talk to her but the mermaid was terrified and tried to avoid him. She could not escape to the sea, because the tide was now out. The old man spoke in a soft, reassuring voice and, at last, she answered him. She was crying and begged him to leave. "I cannot," said the man, "It is not every day that I meet a merrymaid." He continued to speak to her gently and asked how she came to be on the rock.

The mermaid replied that she and her merman husband and her two merchildren had been out swimming in the ocean all day. Her husband had tired and went to rest in a small cave, while her children played in the waves, but the mermaid had been lured on to the rock by the smell of the spring flowers. Once there she had begun dressing her hair. She had not realised the danger until she heard a mortal speak to her.

"My husband is very cruel," she said, "When he wakes, he will be hungry and, if there is no food around, he may eat the children." Then she asked the old man to carry her to the sea, offering him three wishes if he would do so. The old man agreed to her plea, but said "I will not wish for riches or gold, but for the power to help others. I would like to be able to break the curses of demons, cure disease and recover the things stolen by thieves."

The mermaid agreed to his wishes and the man carried her on his back to the sea. Once in the water, she gave him her comb, and told him to come to a rock near the ocean in a few days and use it to comb the water and call her. She would appear immediately whenever he called; then she dived into the water and disappeared.

Some days later, the old man combed the waters as the mermaid had said. She appeared and began to show him how to achieve his wishes – he learned charms to cure diseases, to find stolen goods and to break curses. He did many good things with this knowledge and his family prospered. He passed the secrets down to his children, along with the mermaid's comb, which they have to this day.



9. *The Salisbury Hare*

The **Salisbury Hare** is a 700-year-old folk tale from Warminster in Wiltshire and tells of a hare that dances during a full moon. Anyone who sees the hare is said to have good luck for life, as the hare has been linked with the goddess, Ceridwen.

And so, this tale comes from 1318 when a shepherd, John Godwin, was out on Salisbury Plain with his flock of sheep at eventide. One of the ewes was due to lamb, but John could not find the ewe anywhere. He had rounded up the rest of his sheep, putting them in a small paddock, but this one ewe was nowhere to be found. John looked high and low, but with no success.

John knew that sheep nearly always give birth at night, although some lambs do arrive in the afternoon, but he was afraid that her time was almost due and she'd wandered off on her own to find a quiet spot. The problem was that all manner of vicious animals wandered the plain at night, including the occasional wolves, so it was not safe to let sheep wander unattended.

Having checked that the paddock was secure, John set off to search the land – in the moonlight - where his flock had been grazing, but there was no sign. At that moment, John noticed a movement to his right. It was not his sheep, but it was a large hare, which seemed to be stamping its back legs. As he watched, the hare started to run around him, still stamping its back legs. It ran in a wider circle and paused by a small dip in the land. Then, it ran off into the shadows.

John went over to where the hare had gone and then saw his ewe just below his feet in a small crevice. He also heard the suckling sound of a new-born lamb. There was nothing to do, but keep the sheep safe, so John picked up the lamb and walked slowly back to his paddock, followed watchfully by the lamb's mother. So all the sheep were safe and whether John had good luck for life, this tale does not tell, but his luck was good on the night he saw the hare.



10. *The Giant and the Pie*

Once upon a time there was a wicked giant who took great delight in terrorising the good folk of east Shropshire. Mainly, he stole food from barns and farms or crops in the fields. Sometimes he would pile large boulders in the River Severn, causing floods in the town of Shrewsbury.

Many attempts were made to deter the giant from making so much trouble, but no-one was successful. Knights on horseback, hunters with hounds and even gold from the Mayor of Shrewsbury's private store were not successful. The giant just liked to be a nuisance and he laughed each time the River Severn flooded from his boulders.

At last, it became obvious that weapons and gold were not the answer and the giant could only be defeated by more subtle means. The Mayor thought long and hard and remembered that, more than anything else, the giant loved his stomach and his food. So, the Mayor called all the bakers of the town together and asked which one was the best and all agreed that the best baker in Shrewsbury was Mark, who sold his bread from a little stall in the Market Hall.

The Mayor gave Mark gold and asked him if he could bake a pie fit for a giant. Mark agreed and proposed a special recipe. The pie dish was huge and there were massive chunks of meat and seasoned gravy, all finished off with Mark's finest pastry. The smell was wonderful, but what the folk of Shrewsbury didn't know was that Mark's special recipe included such ingredients as fool's conecap, destroying angel and deathcap mushrooms and large amounts of belladonna and hemlock.

As the giant approached Shrewsbury that day, the pie was pushed out to him and the Mayor shouted out that the people of the town had baked a pie in honour of the giant. The giant stopped, smelled the meat and gravy and dropped his boulders. He ate his pie in three huge mouthfuls. Then he dropped dead. Where he lay became the hill known as the Wrekin and his pile of boulders made the little hill known as the Ercall.

As for Mark, well that was very sad, because he had picked most of his special ingredients by hand before baking them in the pie. While helping to push the pie out to the giant, he had caught his finger and sucked at the cut to make it better. The moral of the story is to always wash your hands during cooking!

11. *Alice's Dream*

If you stand on the Town Bridge in Guildford and look into the River Wey, you can spot the fish in there, e.g. roach or chub. This tale dates from the 16th century and concerns a big pike that lived in the Wey, but no-one could catch it.

Maurice Abbot and his wife, Alice, lived in Guildford. He was a cloth merchant and in 1562, Alice was pregnant with their second child. Money was tight, but one night, Alice had a dream – a voice told her that if she ate the big pike that lived in the Wey, her son would become a rich and powerful man. Alice awoke and told her husband about the dream.

Problem was that many experienced anglers had tried (and failed) to catch that pike; Maurice had tried himself when younger, but he agreed to try again. He and Alice went down to the Wey several times and once they even saw the pike – Maurice tried to grab it with his bare hands, but only managed to fall in the water. People laughed, but Alice's dream had become common knowledge and Maurice had more business, with each new customer asking about the pike.

Local anglers also tried to catch the pike, but with no success and Alice was desperate – her baby was due soon. So she went down to the Wey herself with a leather bucket on a piece of rope. She put the bucket in the water, waited for a minute or so and the pike swam into the bucket. Alice hauled pike and bucket out of the water and everyone on the riverbank applauded. That night, Maurice and Alice had pike for supper and, early next morning, Alice's baby son was born. He was christened George and many wealthy townspeople offered to be his godparents, because they had heard about the dream.

The same townspeople sponsored George's education and also that of the next two of Alice's sons. And the dream's prophecy was not wrong: George went on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury, another brother was the Bishop of Salisbury and the third brother became Mayor of London. Yet George never forgot his mother's dream and he set up Abbot's Hospital in Guildford to help the poor. Now, there is a statue of him at the top of the High Street, there is a George Abbot pub and his tomb is in Holy Trinity Church.



12. *The Hunting of the Last Unicorn*

Did you know that the Royal Coat of Arms has both a lion and a unicorn on it – and the unicorn is chained, because all unicorns are fierce animals? However, you won't find wild unicorns in England any more, as they have all been hunted down and this is the tale of the hunt for the last unicorn. It is their horns that are so valuable for the making of magical medicine and we have to go back some 400 years to the reign of King James I of England for this story.

At that time, there was a group of doctors and chemists in London called the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries and they had spies all over the country, looking out for unicorns, but there had been nothing seen for years. Then, one day, a spy on the north-east coast of England sent word that a pair of unicorns had been seen near the small port of Boston in Lincolnshire. There could be no delay – the doctors sent word to the king who called for his most trusted hunter, Lord Simon Barnard of Storrington to lead the hunt.

Lord Simon set off from London with his trackers and an apothecary and after a few days, they reached Boston and met with the spy. He told them that two unicorns had been seen in the Bladon Forest not far away, but they were easily frightened and could not be seen up close. Lord Simon was not put off – after all, his ancestors had killed the last wolf in England and fought the terrible dragon at Arundel. He had a task from King James and would kill or capture both unicorns and take their horns back to him.

The hunting party approached the forest and started their search and it took many days, because the magical creatures did not want to be hunted and stayed silent in the depths of the forest. Lord Simon was becoming angry and then, he caught a glimpse of white through the trees. He crept closer and there were two pure white unicorns with gleaming horns, almost 4 feet long. Lord Simon went back to his trackers and got his horse and they rode back to the place of the unicorns – which bolted as soon as they heard him coming.

Well, the chase went on all day until, finally, the unicorns could run no more. They were stopped by the sea on one side and the hunters on the other. So they turned and fought the huntsmen (I told you they were fierce creatures) and one of them had the horn broken in the fight. But they were tiring and Lord Simon could sense victory, when suddenly both unicorns turned and ran into the sea, never to be seen again.

Lord Simon picked up the broken horn and took it back to the king, who gave it to him to keep at his home at Parham House in Sussex. If you visit Parham House now, Lady Emily Barnard lives there and the 400-year-old unicorn horn is still kept in the house. As for the unicorns, it is said that they survived and their magic kept them alive until they reached the frozen lands of the Arctic, where they and their children live still – living in the water and with very long horns.

13. *A Robber's Tale*

And it all sounded such a good idea at the time. I and some of my friends had watched the burial of a very rich cousin of the pharaoh in the Valley of the Kings. We all heard the stories of how this man had asked for his gold, silver, weapons and precious gems to be buried with him and it wasn't long until Abdul, the leader of our gang, suggested that we break into the man's tomb and take some of his riches for ourselves.

There were 5 of us in the gang and we knew that we had to move fast or else the treasure could be taken by the men that guarded the tombs for the priests. Abdul had robbed tombs before, but had never found lots of gold, so we all agreed to help him and that was when it all started to go wrong...the gods, particularly Osiris, don't like tomb robbers.

It was night-time and Abdul had managed to break through the bolts and seals on the outer tomb, but we didn't know exactly where the burial chamber was, with all the treasure inside. First, my friend Akil was caught by a secret room – a huge stone door opened for him and, as he went inside, the door fell backwards and squashed him underneath.

Another old friend, Matsu, fell into a hidden well in the passage. One minute he was there and then we heard his cry as he disappeared into this hole, seemingly without a bottom. And so, there were three of us left. Abdul was in the lead, holding a flaming torch and I was in the middle. At the rear was Iabi, also with a torch, but it was Abdul that fell victim to the next trap, which was a sharp wire set at neck height across the passage and which cut his head off.

That left Iabi and me and I wanted to go back, but Iabi said that we could have all the treasure to ourselves and I gave in. Now Iabi led the way with his flame and we followed the narrow path until we reached the burial chamber. And there was gold, silver and much wealth, but it all seemed a bit easy until Iabi picked up a large golden cup. I noticed that all the treasure seemed to be covered in a greasy substance and I wanted to shout an alarm about poison, but Iabi was holding the cup and he said nothing as he fell to the ground - dead. The flame went out and here I sit – in the dark, no food or drink, not knowing the way out and waiting for the anger of Osiris to take me to the underworld.



14. *The Statue of Amun*

The Ancient Egyptians believed that anyone could call upon a god when needed. So, here is a tale from Deir el-Medina, the village of the craftsmen who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

One day, one of the craftsmen found that a little statue was missing from his house and he informed the local authorities. The resulting investigations, however, were unable to find the missing statue, so the man was advised to call upon the chief god, Amun, for help to find the thief.

A large statue of Amun was carried in a procession through the village. In front of each door, the statue was asked whether the thief resided in that house. Suddenly, before the door of one house, the Amun's statue moved, as if it were nodding, indicating where the thief could be found.

At first, the accused man claimed to be innocent and called upon the goddess Ma'at to confirm his story. But Ma'at was the eagle goddess of justice and truth and she agreed with Amun's decision, proven by an eagle landing on Amun's statue.

With two gods against him, the thief confessed his crime and returned the little statue to the craftsman, but the thief was lucky really, because calling upon the gods wrongly was normally punished hard – by them.

15. *The Tale of the Mosquitoes*

Many winters ago, two giant mosquitoes appeared on either side of a river. These giant creatures were as tall as good-sized pine trees. As the Iroquois people paddled down the river in their canoes, these giant creatures would bend their heads and attack them with their beaks. The mosquitoes killed many people from all tribes, but the Iroquois were great canoe travellers and they never knew when the giant mosquitoes would attack and eat them.

Knowing that these giant mosquitoes were waiting to attack any canoe that floated down the river, the people began to shun this particular stream, but this was no good, because the giant creatures moved to other streams to seek their prey. Finally, one day, a war party was organised to seek out these creatures and to destroy them. Twenty warriors, in two great canoes, floated down the Seneca River where they expected the mosquitoes to be. In their hands, they held their bows and arrows and, fastened to their belts, were their war clubs and hunting knives.

Suddenly, two shadows loomed over them and a giant beak pierced one of the canoes. Giving their war cry, the warriors filled the air with many arrows. The battle was terrific! The giant mosquitoes seemed to be everywhere at the same time and, in only a little while, half the warriors had been killed.

The remaining warriors determined to die courageously. They hid behind trees and bushes and surrounded the mosquitoes, which were unable to get them because of the thick branches. The Iroquois braves buried many of their arrows in the bodies of the two mosquitoes. Finally, after most of the arrows had been shot and the supply had become low, the two mosquitoes fell to the earth. They were covered with many wounds. Immediately, the warriors fell upon them with their war clubs and, with powerful blows, they tore the bodies of the mosquitoes apart.

But this was not the end. From the blood of the two giant mosquitoes, there sprang many little mosquitoes and the air was soon filled with them. These little mosquitoes, like their grandfathers, are fond of the taste of human blood. They hate man for killing their grandfathers and are always trying to get revenge for this reason. So, this is how mosquitoes came to be.

16. *The Dwergl*

Goblins are strange creatures, if only that you never know which type of goblin you find – whether it is a pook (similar to a spriggan) or a dwergl.

Pooks are full of mischief and like nothing better than playing pranks on humans, such as stealing a cart or a bale of hay. People everywhere know where the pooks (or puca) live, because you'll see places named after them, such as a Pook Lane, Pook Hill or even Puckeridge (which means river of the goblins). But a dwergl is a very different goblin – not so much a prankster as a dangerous hobgoblin as the following tale from Northumbria shows.

One winter's evening, a traveller (let's call him Will) was trying to make his way home to Otterburn. He was keen to reach his home and family, but lost his way among the Kielder Forest. Night was coming fast and the weather was both cold and misty and Will could see no sign of any nearby villages.

But there was a hope as Will could see a small hut on a steep slope above him and there was a light inside as of a fire burning. So he climbed the slope and peered into the hut. There was a blazing fire and two chairs by the fire, but nothing else – or was there? As Will looked closer, he could see the faint outline of someone sitting in one of the chairs. He thought about turning away, but it was full night now and the mist had grown thick, so he went into the hut.

He started to ask the person in the chair if he could stay and then saw that it was a goblin, but who knew which type? So, Will sat in the empty chair and the goblin stared at him, but said nothing and then looked away. After a while the fire started to die down and Will was cold so he picked up a twig from a pile in front of the hearth and put it in the fire. The goblin looked at Will and did the same.

Soon, the fire started to die down again, so Will picked up a larger branch and put it in the fire and the goblin did the same. Next time, the fire went down, there was no more wood, but Will spotted a really large log in the corner of the room that would have lasted all night, but it seemed too heavy and he did not feel happy about asking the goblin for help. He looked at the log, the goblin stared at him and Will decided to leave the log, preferring to sleep in the cold.

Will awoke with the dawn to find that he was sleeping in the open air. The hut, the goblin and the fire had all vanished, but when he looked across to where the large log had been, there was nothing – only a complete drop to rocks below – Will was sleeping on the edge of a cliff! If he had gone for the log, he would have died and he realised that he had met a dwergl.

17. *The Feather of Truth*

This story is about 3000 years old from Ancient Egypt and shows everyone the danger of telling lies. We start with two brothers. **Ahmed** was the older brother and not a nice person at all – he was a bully, stole food or money from people and refused to work. **Yussef** was his younger brother – he worked as a farmer and could be seen around the village helping the ill or the needy.

This state of affairs might have gone on, but for a plague that swept through the brothers' part of Egypt – both Ahmed and Yussef died. In Ancient Egypt, anyone who died could only get to the Kingdom of the West (= heaven) by passing a set of tests from the gods.

1. The **River of Death** could only be crossed by boat and the newly dead had to persuade the ferryman to row them across. Ahmed and Yussef approached the ferry and Ahmed said that he was very good, sure to go to heaven and his brother was wicked, but as they were brothers, they had to travel together. The ferryman took them across the river and gave them a map. Yussef stayed quiet, not criticising Ahmed.
2. There were **12 Gates**, each guarded by a huge snake. Ahmed repeated his story to each snake so that they attacked his brother instead. Yussef survived and stayed quiet.
3. A special boat was needed to cross the **Lake of Fire** and, as with the River of Death, Ahmed persuaded the boatman to take them across. Yussef was burned, but not Ahmed.
4. The next test was a team of **42 judges** who read out a list of all the bad deeds done by the brothers, but Ahmed blamed Yussef for all of them and Yussef stayed quiet.
5. The final test took place in the **Judgement Hall of Osiris**, god of the dead. He had a special set of scales. On one side was a feather from the eagle goddess of justice and truth, Ma'at. The heart of each new dead person was put on the other side. Yussef went first – his heart was pure and balanced with the feather, so he was allowed to go to the Kingdom of the West to meet his ancestors. Ahmed's heart was heavy with all the lies he had told in the tests and all the bad deeds of his life. The scales tipped against him and Osiris called for Ammut, a crocodile goddess, to feed on Ahmed – and that is what happened.

18. *The Lion's Share*

About 3300 years ago, the Pharaoh Rameses II owned a pet lion, for two main reasons: lions were closely linked to royalty in Ancient Egypt and Rameses II loved cats. He had lots of pet cats around his palace, but they were not enough and it seemed only right that the most powerful pharaoh at that time should also have a pet lion. It lived in the palace and its name translated as Invincible in English.

Now Rameses had a problem on his borders, because the nearby Hittite Empire, under King Muwatalli II, kept crossing his borders to raid local villages or towns for loot and crops. So Rameses decided to teach the Hittites a lesson by capturing the great city of Kadesh, which was in modern-day Syria. It was a centre of trade and also a Hittite stronghold.

Thus, Rameses marched from Egypt at the head of his army, of over 20,000 men and the pet lion of Rameses came too, but there was one thing that Rameses did not know – that the gods had decided to take a hand. Or, to be more precise, one particular goddess – Sekhmet, who had chosen to help Rameses win by becoming his lion for the war. Sekhmet was the sun goddess of war, usually featured as a protector of the pharaohs (and their armies) with the head of a lioness.

When the army reached Kadesh, Rameses made a mistake. His part of the army attacked too fast, believing that they could gain a quick advantage, but they were too far from the rest of the Egyptian soldiers. In reality, the Hittites ambushed Rameses and killed most of his division – he and his lion were trapped.

There seemed to be little hope, but Sekhmet took a hand and revealed herself to Rameses and told him what to do. Under Sekhmet's guidance and protection, Rameses was able to rally his troops and they attacked the Hittites with such force that they started to retreat. And, at that point, the rest of the Egyptian army arrived to drive the frightened Hittites into a nearby river.

Rameses claimed victory in the battle of Kadesh and made a peace treaty with the Hittite king - that no more raids would be made across his borders. And, there was one more very important thing – when the Hittites surrendered to Rameses, he made sure that they surrendered to his lion as well. After all, he could not have won without the help of the gods!



19. *The Sea Serpent*

This tale comes from February 1774 and took place off the North Tyneside coast, near to modern-day Sunderland. The strange and terrible story of the Grange brothers and their encounter with a sea serpent is long remembered in that area.

There were three brothers – Simon, Peter and Joseph Grange and all of them were local fishermen. They had two small boats and went out each day: one boat with two brothers using nets to catch cod and herring to sell at market and the other brother using traps to catch crabs and lobsters. On 2 February 1774, the sea was not calm, but there had been a storm on the previous day and no fishing had been done, so the brothers set out with Joseph checking the crab traps and Simon and Peter doing the main fishing.

They cast their net early and, almost immediately, knew that there was a problem. They shouted to Joseph to row over to help them. As he started to go over, he glanced up and saw his brothers struggling with their net and he watched a vast, ribbon-like creature rear out of the net and crash down on the boat, breaking it in two. The creature had long dorsal fins and, by Joseph's reckoning, was easily 40 feet in length with snapping teeth.

By the time Joseph had rowed over, his brothers were nowhere to be seen and there were just a few fragments of wood in the water. He dived overboard, but there was no sea monster and no sign of his brothers. Sadly, he rowed home, knowing that his family would be grief-stricken, but from that day, he vowed that he would revenge himself on the sea serpent.

And that day came just the next week. Joseph had checked for crabs and taken that catch home and now he went out further with a small net for any fish that could be found. He also took several knives and a sharpened pole, in case the monster serpent showed up again. He had warned other fishermen in the village to take care when checking their nets, but hoped to kill it himself.

He stopped close to where his brothers' boat had sunk and cast his net and now there was no mistake, because he had caught something very large and close to the surface. He let it come up on its own and, as it came out of the water, Joseph was ready with his sharp pole and speared it close to the head. Too late though – the serpent crashed down and broke the boat into many pieces. But Joseph was alive and he started to swim ashore and he was rescued by another fisherman who had seen the fight from afar.

And the serpent, or rather the remains of it, washed up on the beach a few days later. It was just over 40 feet long and weighed over 500lbs.

20. *The Queen of the Pharisees*

Once there was a well-known young minstrel, John, who travelled from village to village, singing his songs and playing his tunes for board and lodging at each inn. He was well-known throughout the length and breadth of the county of Hampshire and, it is said, people had heard of John's singing from as far away as the royal county of Surrey.

It was a beautiful spring morning, not long after Ostara, when John was wandering through the alder copses and ferns near Farnham. The sun was shining, John still had a bit of cider in his flask from the grateful landlord from last night's tavern and so he sat down to strum upon his lute and compose a new song.

Unbeknownst to John, he had chosen to sit down very close to a forest place that was sacred to the færy folk. As he started to play his music, some of the nearby Pharisees heard his tune and were captivated. They went at once to call their queen to hear the wonderful songs from the minstrel.

The queen of the Pharisees came and fell in love with John's music at once and she appeared before him, dancing and swaying in the air. John, for his part, was entranced with her beauty and her grace and he played his music for her all day until the evening approached. He rose to make his way back to the inn for the night, but the queen pleaded with him to stay and play more songs.

John asked her, "How can I stay when I need to eat, drink and sleep?"

"If you stay and make music for me, you'll never need to eat or sleep again", said the queen, "I am Elleon, Queen of the Færy Folk, and you can be my favoured companion until the summer's end".

So John stayed and played music for the dancing queen of the Pharisees and, it seemed as only a few days passed, until the queen stopped her dance and looked sadly at John. "Summer is over now for you and me, but I'll never forget your songs, my love."

With that farewell, she vanished from John's sight, but it was not spring anymore. The trees were without leaves and the air was cold, but John was not young anymore – his hair was silver and he had a grey beard. The queen's dance had lasted his whole life and, at that moment, he dropped his lute and fell dead. But that was not the end, for a circle of færy mushrooms sprouted around his body and it is said that you can still see the Pharisees dancing in the circle in the autumn twilight.

(*Pharisee* is an old-English/Saxon term for the færy folk.)

21. *The Vampire Hermit*

Here is a tale from the First Nation Iroquois tribe. A woman was nervous when her husband said they were to stay in an abandoned lodge, for it contained the corpse of the hermit who once lived there, enshrined in a coffin in the loft. This old Iroquois custom was seldom used, but the hermit had insisted upon it before his death. Her husband said there was good hunting in this place and so they moved in, but the wife refused to go up into the loft where the hermit's body lay.

When her husband left to hunt, she immediately put her daughter in the sling on her back and went to look for roots and berries, staying away until her husband returned with the meat. As she prepared the evening meal, her tired husband climbed up into the loft to rest. The hut soon filled with the delicious smell of roasting meat.

She was sorting through the berries when she heard a muffled cry and the crunch of breaking bones. As she stared upward, frozen in horror, blood dripped from the rafters. She crept silently to the far corner of the room where she could see up into the loft. A skeleton with glowing red eye sockets was feasting on the body of her husband; its teeth and chin were covered with blood. Her daughter stirred restlessly at her back, and she knew that she had to get away immediately.

"I am going to run down to the stream to fetch water for the broth," she called toward the loft. "I will be right back." She took the pail and walked toward the stream, but as soon as she was out of sight among the trees, she ran as fast as she could.

She heard a terrible howl from the direction of the house as the creature heard them escaping and started to pursue. The young mother stumbled desperately through the woods, the creature's howls growing closer and her little daughter wailing in fright. The monster was gaining on her.

Finally, she shouted the Iroquois distress cry, hoping someone would be near enough to hear it. Her call was heard by the warriors from the village. She could hear the creature breathing behind her as she sprinted to the edge of the village. Here, she collapsed to the ground, but before the monster could pounce, a party of warriors burst through the gates of the village chasing the skeleton away.

They swung their torches wide and the skeleton retreated farther into the woods. The warriors chased the creature back to the hermit's house, and set fire to the cabin. As the flames covered the house, a terrible howling and roaring came from the loft. The vampire hermit fled into the woods in the form of a black shadow, never again to plague the young woman or her daughter.

22. *The Sockburn Wyrn*

Sockburn village is located on the river Tees, near Darlington in Durham and it was here, in the 12th century, that Sir John Conyers killed the Sockburn Wyrn, apparently using the sword, which is on display in the Treasury of Durham Cathedral. The village itself is quite old, having been raided by Vikings in 793 CE and the Bishop of Lindisfarne was crowned in Sockburn in 780 CE.

According to the folklore, Sockburn had been plagued by a huge flying serpent with poisonous breath, since the mid-11th century. It had desolated the area, devouring all livestock and also many people who tried to slay it.

In the early 12th century, Sir John Conyers took up the challenge to slay the beast. Before heading out, he visited a church in his full armour and offered the life of his only son to God.

Here is part of a document from the British Museum, dated 1625, which contains an early account of the story.

"Sir Jon Conyers of Sockburn, Knight, who slew ye monstrous venom and poysons wiverm or worme which overthrew and Devourd many people in fight, for the scent of poyson was so strong, that no person was able to abide it. Yet he by the providence of god overthrew it and lies buried at Sockburn, but before he did enterprise it (having but one sonne) he went to the Church in compleat armour and offered up his sonne to god, which monument is yet to see, and the place where the serpent lay is called Graystone."

After killing the wyrn, he buried it under a large stone which is still visible today. The Conyers family, which came over to England from France during the Norman Conquest was granted the manor of Sockburn in the 12th century, mainly as a result of Sir John's bravery. The sword itself was kept at Sockburn Hall until 1947, after which it was presented to the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral. The sword which is displayed in the cathedral is a special type. It is 89cm long, with a blade of 73cm and a weight of 2.86lbs. It formed part of the ceremony to greet every new bishop for Durham for 700 years.

Incidentally, in 1802, two famous poets - William Wordsworth and his friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, visited Sockburn often. The legend inspired Coleridge to write his poem, *Love*, which makes reference to the story of the wyrn. Also, Lewis Carroll's father was the rector at nearby Croft-on-Tees and it is likely that the Sockburn wyrn legend inspired his famous poem, [*Jabberwocky*](#).

23. *A Smuggler's Tale*

This story comes from the port of Gorleston-on-Sea, which is part of Great Yarmouth district today, but not always so, as the two towns were linked by the Southtown Bridge over the River Yare. In the late 18th century, the White Horse Inn was a favourite meeting place for smugglers and the best-known smuggler of the time was Samuel Leggatt.

On the opposing side were the customs officials or excisemen who had the job of collecting taxes and stopping smuggling. At the time of this story, a very successful customs officer called William Hacker was sent up to Norfolk from Cornwall to collect more excise duties. Both Leggatt and Hacker were aware of each other's reputations and Leggatt decided on a test. He wagered 50 guineas that he could bring a hundredweight of tobacco over the Southtown Bridge within 3 weeks and deliver it to Hacker's own front door.

Hacker accepted the bet. He promptly put guards on the bridge and patrolled the bridge himself too – any suspicious loads or wagons were searched. As the third week approached, Hacker doubled the bridge guards and many local folks wondered how Leggatt would respond.

The day before the deadline, a tiny ship docked on the Yarmouth side of the Yare, flying a foreign flag upside down – a common sign to warn people of illness on board. A doctor went out to the ship and found a crew member showing signs of fever and madness, so he prescribed a sedative. It was no good – next day the ship's flag was at half-mast to show the man had died. Members of the crew brought a coffin ashore, saying the corpse was a native of Gorleston and should be buried there. Permission was given for the funeral party to cross the bridge, which was now busy with onlookers waiting for Samuel Leggatt to arrive.

By noon, Hacker sent the guards away and declared that the bet was over and he'd won. Leggatt had arrived by then, but protested that Hacker had not won: in fact, if Hacker went back to his house, he'd find the tobacco at his front door and he could keep the coffin as a present from the smuggler!



24. *The Hermit Thrush*

Long ago the birds had no song. Only man could sing. Each day, man greeted the rising sun with a song. The birds, as they flew by, listened to the beautiful song and they wished they too could sing. One day the Creator visited the earth and walked around, looking at all the things he had created. He noticed, though, that there was a great silence. Something was missing.

As the Creator thought about this, the sun sank behind the western hills. Then he heard the distant sound of a drum followed by the chanting of the sunset song. The sounds pleased him, but when the Creator looked around, he noticed that the birds were also listening to the singing. "That's what's missing!" said the Creator: "Birds should also have songs."

Next day, the Creator called all the birds to the great council. The birds came from far away. The sky filled with flying birds and the trees and bushes bent under the weight of so many birds. As the Creator sat on the council rock, the birds perched and became quiet. The Creator spoke: "Would the birds like to have songs and be able to sing as the people sing?" With one voice, the birds replied, "Yes! Yes!"

The Creator gave them his answer: "At tomorrow's dawn, fly as high in the sky as you can. When you can fly no higher, it is there where you will find your song. The bird who flies the highest will find the most beautiful song."

Next morning, all the Creator's birds gathered upon the land. Excitement spread throughout the birds, except for one small brown thrush who was not excited. He was perched next to a great eagle and thought to himself, "What chance do I have of reaching the most beautiful song? This eagle is so great. I will never be able to compete with such a bird."

The eagle, eager for daybreak, took no notice of the small brown thrush near him, but the thrush had an idea. He flew to the eagle's head and quickly hid beneath his feathers. The eagle stretched his wings, "With my great wings, I will surely fly to the most beautiful song." At that moment, the first break of dawn appeared. With a great roar of wings, the birds took off and the morning sky remained dark as so many birds flew up higher and higher.

The first bird found his song. He had flown so hard, you could hear a hum coming from his wings. The hummingbird song plainly calls, "Wait, wait for me." Next, the cowbird was tired and, as he flew down to the earth, he saw many other birds weaken and find their songs. The sky began to darken once again. As the sun went down behind the horizon, only the eagle, owl, hawk, buzzard and loon flew higher.

As daybreak came the next day, only the eagle, the chief of all birds, was left. He flew steady and strong until the sun was halfway in the sky. He looked and saw he was the only bird left in the sky. He began

triumphantly soaring to the earth. The thrush awoke from his sound sleep at the back of eagle's head, hopped off the eagle's head and began flying upward. The eagle saw the thrush begin his journey, but was too exhausted to do more.

The little thrush flew higher and higher. He soon came to a hole in the sky. Entering the hole, he heard a beautiful song coming from the Spirit World. He stayed and learned the song. When he had learned it perfectly, he took leave of that place and returned anxiously to earth. He could not wait to share this most beautiful song with the others. As he came closer to earth, he could see the council rock, and he could see the great eagle, waiting for him. All the other birds waited in silence for thrush's arrival upon the earth.

The thrush, nearing the earth, no longer felt proud of his song. He began to feel ashamed that he cheated to find this song. He feared the eagle for he was the one that the thrush had cheated out of the song. The thrush flew in silence to the deep woods and hid in shame under the branches of the largest tree. He could not proudly share his song and was so ashamed that he wanted no one to see him.



There you will find him even today. The Hermit Thrush never comes out into the open, because he is still ashamed that he cheated. Sometimes, he can't help himself, though, and he must sing his beautiful song. When he does this, the other birds stop singing, because they know the song of the Hermit Thrush is from the Spirit World. That is why the Hermit Thrush is so shy and that is why his song is the most beautiful song of all the birds.