



[www.imaginaryjourneys.co.uk](http://www.imaginaryjourneys.co.uk)

## TALL TALES & LIKELY LEGENDS

*This set of stories has been put together to inspire young writers entering the 2010 Tall Tales & Likely Legends competition with some ancient and modern examples what a tall tale or a likely legend might be and the many different styles possible. We hope it will go on inspiring tall tale tellers and likely legend makers and tellers, complementing the story game ideas in the Imaginary Journeys booklet, Tall Tale Telling (IJ201).*

*Listening to a tall tale is fun. Telling a tall tale is fun. Making up a tall tale is fun. It doesn't have to be any more than that, though it can be. Many people enjoy a good fib for the sake of it – and a tall tale is firstly a kind of glorious fib. Some such tales get passed on and become likely (or unlikely) legends, some even start to mean more as they are refined and shaped by telling. As storytellers say, the lies they tell can take you to the truth.*

*By the way, another download from the same page in the Imaginary Journeys site gives the outline of a marvellous Irish mythical heroic adventure that is, in a way, both a tall tale and a likely legend, The Voyage of Mael Dun. It's well worth comparing with the ones in this set. You can also compare them with The Elvis Costume, a tall tale in modern clothes from the Telling Fables download*

---

## TWO TALL TALES

*Tall tales can be completely fantastical and impossible or they might sound just about believable – at least, to begin with. These two tall tales are quite different. The first is freely based on an ancient Arabian story that frames a central very tall tale and uses a plot to be found in quite a lot of other traditional stories from other parts of the world. You can use the pattern in that story to make a completely different story framing a fantastical tall tale, perhaps in a modern setting. The second is a tall tale in a (fairly) modern setting that builds up more slowly. Again it gives a model for a way to build a different kind of tall tale.*

---

### **The Fisherman & the King**

There was a king who was no king. He had a crown and a throne and a palace beside the sea, he had a land that he ruled with all the many people living in it, he had ministers and courtiers and soldiers and treasures, he had all that. But he had none of the qualities a king should have. He was, in fact, a liar and rogue who had cheated his way to the throne and held it now by pure trickery and deception.

One day this false king was looking out from his palace window at his magnificent gardens and then beyond to the shore where boats with red and blue and yellow sails bobbed. 'Anything and everything is mine to command,' he mused to himself. 'On my word, any one of those boats could be sunk with all hands. On my word, any one of those boats could be filled to brimming with gold.'

At that very moment, a beautiful girl walked past the palace and made her way to the shore, where she began to cast her nets in the manner of the fisher folk. There was something proud about her, the feeling of a free spirit perhaps, something he couldn't rule, something that both irritated the king and

attracted him. He called his chief minister and pointed the girl out. 'I have decided to marry her,' he insisted. 'Bring her to me and let's get on with it.'

'Your majesty,' simpered the minister, cautiously, 'may you live forever! What you ask me to do is, however, very difficult.'

'Why?'

'This girl, oh great and noble one, is well known in this town for her beauty, for her intelligence, for her good name but principally for the many strange and wonderful tales she has told to the people. But she is already married, to a young fisherman, all for love I understand. That is why she is here fishing today. She must be doing his job for him, I don't know why.'

'That is simple. Have the husband killed and bring the girl to me.'

The minister smiled a crooked smile. 'Of course your majesty. Indeed your majesty. But we must have a reason for doing this, otherwise the people will say that your majesty is unjust and may rise up against you.' The minister had been working hard to make people believe that the king was good, you see. He could see all his hard work being wasted if the king stuck to his plan.'

'What sort of reason?'

'Hmm... now let me think... Ah ha! I have it. We will invent a law, an ancient statute, recently discovered...' The minister went on to use a lot of long words and boring explanations, which the king had trouble making sense of, but in the end he got the idea. The minister would fake an old parchment, which would explain that the king was entitled to ask any fisherman who had fished the shores near to the palace for more than three years three things on three separate days, whatever three things he wanted. If such a fisherman could not

bring these things by the following morning, then he should pay with his life or his wife.'

All this was soon accomplished and the king sent his messengers to command the fisherman to appear in front of him. Soon the hard-working young fisherman was trembling in his worn old boots before his monarch, partly from fear at being so suddenly called to the palace in front of all the grandees and nobles and partly with the fever that had kept him in his bed all that day and prevented him from going fishing.

The king spoke harshly to him, brandishing the fake parchment his minister had prepared. 'You have, I understand, fished my shores for at least seven years and in all that time, you have paid nothing to the royal treasury.'

The fisherman mumbled something to the effect that he had no idea that he should pay anything. His father had never had to pay, nor his grandfather nor his grandfather's grandfather. 'What!' shouted the king, still waving the fake document. 'Generations of you have paid nothing at all. This is very serious. The ancient law revealed in this parchment says that I can now ask you for three things. The first is a bag of a thousand gold pieces, by tomorrow morning. Otherwise your life or your wife!'

If he had been trembling when he arrived, that fisherman left the palace shaking like a dry leaf on an autumn tree when the cold wind blows. Wherever could he get that much money? He knew he only had a handful of coins to his name, most of them copper. He would have to die, there was nothing for it; he could scarcely let the wife he loved to be taken by that evil old king. Who knew what he would do with her. It was better that he should give up his life. But when he told his wife what had happened (missing out the bit about giving her up to the king to spare her feelings of course), she smiled. She was indeed clever and blessed with some strange talents. She told him to go to the well at the end of the

garden and ask the being in the well to pay for the time he had spent there and the tales she had told on his behalf and to pay for it all handsomely

The fisherman was very surprised to hear that a being lived in the well at where he had so often drawn water, since he'd never had a glimpse nor a whiff of anything strange, but he went and asked all the same, feeling foolish as he called out into the echoey dark silences of the well. A moment later, a huge, horny hand came up out of the well. He just had time to duck backwards as thumped its way up, otherwise it would have punched his head off. The hand towered above him and then dropped a small purse that jingled faintly as it fell. Then it vanished back into the damp recesses of the well.

The fisherman stumbled back to his wife in such a state of shock that he all but forgot to open the purse and almost forgot to tremble. He told his wife what he had seen, scarcely believing his own words as they tumbled out. 'But this is all it gave me,' he concluded. 'It's not much.'

'Keep this sealed up and take it to the king tomorrow,' his wife insisted, smiling secretively again. 'Perhaps he'll accept it as a first payment, you never know.'

The fisherman scarcely slept that night for fear of what the king would do, but the next morning he set out for the palace and was soon shown in to see the king, who was in a good mood – especially when he saw the size of the purse the fisherman had brought. 'So,' he chuckled, 'this contains my thousand gold pieces. Hmm... I suppose I'd better count them all. Ha ha ha!' He opened the purse and at once there was rushing sound as coin after coin gushed out of the purse in a great jangling rush, until the king and all the nobles were knee-deep in them. When all those coins were all swept up, put into bags and counted, the king had very much more than he had asked for and there was still enough change to make the fisherman a wealthy man.

The king, of course, was not happy. He beckoned his chief advisor for a private word. 'You idiot!' he hissed. 'You didn't say that he had such wealth.'

'I'd no idea, oh great one,' whispered the advisor. 'But have no fear. We will ask him something... less possible.' He quickly outlined a second request that the king could make and the king smiled wickedly as he turned to the quaking fisherman.

'We thank you for this generous payment,' he beamed. 'But I'm afraid I'm obliged to ask you for something else now. What I will require is not much. Shall we say a carpet... the finest of carpets of course, since it will be for our royal use? It must be big enough to cover every bit of the floor of this great hall here, every little bit of it. It must be woven in one piece from the finest silk and I must have it by tomorrow morning. Otherwise of course it's your life or your wife!' So saying, he folded his arms in satisfaction as the fisherman was ushered out of the hall, with those spare bags of gold of course.

Now the fisherman took the bags back to his wife. 'We must leave at once, run for it in the night. Here, look at this gold. It's enough to keep us well in some other land.'

'We'll do no such thing,' declared the wife sternly. 'Our place is here and so are our people.' She demanded to know what had happened. When the fisherman had told her all, she smiled again in a very determined way. 'If that is the case, you must go now to the cave in the cliff and ask the being in the cave for the loan of the spindle, by way of payment for all that I have done for her in the marvellous myths I have made in her name.'

If the fisherman had been surprised that there was a being in the well where he drew water, he was even more amazed to hear of a being of any kind in the cave where he hung his nets. All the same, he made his way there and uttered the request, hearing it echo all around him for a moment until he realized

that a strange form was materializing in the gloom, a shadowy, misty shape that became firmer and more real by the moment; until he realized that it was another strange, giant hand, hovering before him in the gloom, bigger than a man. It placed something in his hands and then was gone, just like the first hand, suddenly vanishing into nothing. But whatever was in his own hand was real enough. He took it out into the light and saw that it was a wooden spindle with a piece of thread clinging to it, just as if it had been pulled away from a spinning wheel. He went back to his wife who told him exactly what he must do.

The next morning, the fisherman went back to the court, carrying the spindle and the king gloated quietly as the lonely figure approached the throne, leaving his escort of stern guards. 'Where is my carpet?' he demanded.

'Oh, your royal majesty, forgive your humble servant,' the fisherman said, bowing very low (he was getting used to the ways of court, you see). 'Such a carpet as you desire would normally take all the best weavers of this land working together a whole year and more to produce.'

'So what is it to be?' the king sneered. 'Will you give your life or your wife?'

'Your majesty, if you must then take my life and let my wife live. But before you kill me, may I have one last request.'

The king felt generous now. He was going to get what he wanted. 'Certainly. Never say that I lack in the generosity that should adorn all great monarchs.'

The fisherman, to the surprise of all the court, simply asked that he should be allowed to tie the thread attached to the spindle to the foot of the throne. When he had done that, still holding the spindle, he began to walk backwards away from the throne. There was a sudden gasp from all present, as they realized what was happening. An amazing carpet was being woven there

before their very eyes, strand laid over silky strand and knotted with silky, silvery, shimmering strand at a rate so rapid that it matched the pace at which the fisherman was walking. All were stunned by the beauty and the magic of the thing. Every colour of the rainbow gleamed and glistened before them, tastefully combined in patterns of birds and trees and flowers and hunting scenes and hawks and houses. When the fisherman reached the far side of the hall, it was complete, a work of absolute perfection. They gazed in wonder and joy – all except the king and the advisor, neither of whom had any real taste for beauty.

Again the king took the advisor aside and cursed him for a fool. Why had he not said that the fisherman knew such conjuring tricks? Again the adviser insisted that all was not lost. Again he came up with a cunning plan that soon had the crocodile grin back on the king's face. 'For my third and last just and entirely lawful demand upon you,' his royal and noble majesty was soon explaining to the bewildered fisherman, 'I require a story. This story will be so impossible that I will call the teller a liar and say that is untrue. You, however, shall not tell this story. It will be told by a baby not more than nine days old. I hope I have made myself clear.'

'It's just not possible,' the fisherman told his wife, back at the small house in which they lived, once he had explained the king's request. 'Such a thing could never be. All we can do now is escape as soon as we can. I'll get the boat ready.'

But again the clever young wife refused to be daunted. 'Go now to the sea where we fish each day,' she commanded him. 'Ask the being beneath the waves to loan us the baby by way of repaying my kindness and service in the strange yarns and unlikely legends with which I have protected her.'

The fishermen went now to the familiar spot by the sea. Many the day he'd been there, alert and watching in the manner of fishermen on the lookout for a catch and never had he seen sight nor sound of a creature larger than

ordinary fish and common turtles there. Yet as soon as he spoke in his wife's name, the sea bubbled and boiled and there were two huge scaly green hands coming up out of the sea, cradling a little baby which appeared to be sleeping soundly, despite all the roaring and crashing of the waves, swaddled cosily in a green blanket woven from the seaweed. The fisherman found himself accepting the precious bundle as the large hands sank back into the sea, leaving only the cries of the seagulls and the sound of the shingle being shaken and rattled by the breaking waves. A moment later, however, he found himself fully occupied since the baby awoke and began to cry angrily in his arms. It was clearly an ordinary baby and however it was supposed to tell a story, he could scarcely imagine since it certainly could not understand a single soothing word he said to it about calming down. Nevertheless he took it gently back to his wife, who looked after it in her own way that night.

The next morning, the baby was still very much a baby. It grizzled and sobbed in his arms as he approached the palace and bawled loudly and without the slightest respect for the royal presence as he was marched to the king's audience hall by the guards, one of whom seemed to be sporting a particularly sharp-looking axe. The fisherman shuddered at the sight of it. Your life or your wife...

'Well fisherman, at least you've brought a baby. Now for the.'

'Story, your great and noble majesty!' It was the baby speaking. It had suddenly leapt like a salmon out of the fisherman's arms and was now standing upright on its tiny feet before the throne, spreading its chubby arms wide and bowing to the monarch in a courtly fashion. 'Have I permission to begin, your highness?'

'Erm... Yes indeed,' the king spluttered, trying to overcome his shock and also to keep sight of the fact that he did not, after all, have to be caught out by this strange circus act. Even if the baby could, by some peculiar fluke,

actually tell a story, he did have the choice. He certainly did not have to call it a liar, whatever it said.

The baby began its piping narration in the manner of the great court storytellers: 'It was once and only once, not twice, not thrice but once and once and once...'

"Yes, yes, yes, get on with it," said the king impatiently. He hated this kind of nonsense.

The baby looked offended. 'Your majesty does not care for such formalities? Very well, I shall simply tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, for I am not old enough to tell a lie. You see once very long ago, when I was very young, I was walking ...'

'Just a minute! You just said you were too young to lie but now you are talking about something you did a very long time ago.'

'Does your majesty wish to doubt the truth of what I say?'

'Not at all,' said the king. 'I'm sure that it's true.'

'As I was saying,' continued the baby, now rather on its dignity, 'once and once and long ago I was walking by the sea, which was the vivid, livid colour of the brightest juice of the most orange Satsuma that day, though the day before it had been purple and the day before that three shades of scarlet, two of pink with a streak or two white as milk. I strolled on emerald green sand that was sticky as syrup and rocks as smooth as polished glass and watched the black and white crabs flying around near to the shore.'

'The crabs were flying?'

'Oh yes, the crabs were flying high that day. A fair sight to see indeed, what with the fishermen's boats high in the air too.'

'What were they doing up in the air?'

'Catching the crabs of course. And the flying fish. Anyway your majesty, I came upon a seller of fruit and I bought for myself a purple peach, which I cut open using my arm's-length thumbnail since I had no knife. When I had cut it open, I saw it had no stone in the middle at all, only a ladder. I took the ladder out, leaned it against a passing cloud and climbed it all the way up to the sky.'

'You took a ladder out of a peach small enough to eat and yet it was long enough to reach the sky?'

'Oh yes, your majesty, though you are welcome to doubt me and to call me a liar if you like. It was a long, long way to climb, I can tell you that, a very long way! I got there in the end and found a castle in the air someone had been building some time or other in their daydreams. I opened the door to that castle and found there three bags full of the purest truth, which I helped myself to at once. But with the weight of that truth up on my shoulders, I was now much too heavy for the castle and I crashed down through the floor. I came hurtling down and down and down and down and I would have hurt myself very badly on the rocks, but at the last minute I jumped for it and landed in my mother's womb under the sea with all three of those bags of truth. But when at last it was time to be born, I could get not one of those bags to come with me, though I managed to cling onto a single truth and bring it along with me just far enough to get it memorized entirely.'

'What is that truth? Tell us now.' Insisted the king. All the curious lords and ladies craned forward, the better to hear what the baby was saying.

'Your majesty, the truth I brought with me was this. The king of this land is no king. He is a liar and a cheat and the only reason he is sitting on the throne now is that he has deceived everyone into believing him.'

'That is completely untrue, you little liar!' screamed the king, turning several shades of dark purple in his rage.

'Thank you,' said the baby calmly. It jumped back into the fisherman's arms and began to wail and cry like any other baby as it was carried away from that court to be returned to the ocean. No one stopped the fisherman; he left the court as a free man that day under the terms of the fake law the king and his minister had created and he and his strangely talented wife lived happily for many the long year – unlike the false king, whose reign was soon ended since everyone now knew the truth.

Storytellers, you see, only tell lies so that you can get to the truth.

© Rob Parkinson 2010

---

## **The Egg & the Bird**

I would have been eleven at the time - eleven and about four months since it was the summer holidays. We were out in the woods, my brother John, my friend Mick and I, when we found this egg. It was bigger than any egg we'd seen before and, being country children, we had seen a few big eggs. Ducks' eggs were big, goose eggs were bigger, swans' eggs could be very big, but this was larger still, almost the size of an ostrich egg I'd seen in a museum once. It was pale green with darker green blotches and it was still warm, as if it had just

been laid or perhaps had just tumbled out of a nearby nest from under its sitting mother.

Once we'd felt that warmth, we began to hunt around. Maybe the nest was somewhere nearby, up in a tree perhaps. Maybe we could find it and put the egg back. If there was a nest, we could see no sign of it. Maybe the mother bird herself was somewhere around, amongst the trees. We hid and watched and waited, but there was no sign of a large bird, only the cawing of rooks and the cooing of pigeons. In the end we decided that we would have to take it home. Mick and his dad had bred budgies for a while and he still had the equipment. We reckoned we could put the egg down in their shed - they had an incubator his dad had rigged up. Once it was safe in that, perhaps we would be able to do a more thorough hunt, find the nest or the mother and return that strange egg.

Well, we never did find either nest or mother because events took over. That afternoon, George hatched out. We called him George, I can't remember why. We decided he must be a boy straight away because, even though he was a gawky little chick with the egg yolk still smeared on his goose-pimple skin, even though he'd scarcely a feather on him as yet, there was the hint of a scarlet crest on the top of his puckered little head and a cocky sort of air to him that suggested a barnyard rooster. Mind you, I say little but George was never really small. He looked surprisingly big even then, sitting there under the warm, infra-red lamp, once the legs that must have been curled up inside that shell unknotted themselves, once he began to totter around cautiously, awkwardly, very ungainly and uncertain. I remember saying to Mick, who had excitedly called us back to his place that afternoon as soon as he spotted the egg hatching, that you would never have believed there was so much bird inside that eggshell, large though it was.

Well, during the days and the weeks that followed, George grew quickly. It was a good job Mick had quite a bit of seed left over from the budgie hobby,

because that bird had quite an appetite. Apart from the millet and the barley, though, he developed a very curious taste for raspberry jam. Mick's dad grew a lot of his own vegetables and fruit and his mum was into making jam. There were stacks of it down one side of the shed and, sometime around a week into his stay, we discovered that George loved the stuff. He couldn't get enough of it. I think we'd opened a jar and put some on his dish just for a joke and to see what would happen and he had gobbled it up, giving one of his strange strangled squawks we had learned meant something like, 'More please!'

I don't know how we managed to keep George a secret for so long but we did. We were in the midst of the balmy, hot days of the long August holidays and we had plenty of time on our hands, so we used to take him out, once he'd grown bigger. We always got him away in the early morning and smuggled him back in the evening, as it was getting dark. For some reason, we had decided that the adults wouldn't approve; they would insist we took him to a zoo or something of the sort and we didn't want that, because we were having fun and George was too.

As he grew, he was a strange looking bird and no mistake, certainly the kind of creature you would expect to see in a zoo or a jungle rather than in an ordinary English village with thatched cottages and a village green. That's why we kept him in the woods by day, at a secret camp we had there. By this time, he was as big as a turkey and the feathers on him were turning to a lurid lime green, with that scarlet crest and a streak of scarlet shading to orange down each wing. What's more, he would flap those wings on the end of his lead, as if he meant business – we had him on a lead you see, with an old dog collar my Labrador, Mambo, had worn when she was a puppy. It still had her name printed on a metal panel fixed to the leather. To this we had attached a length of rope you could pay out and lengthen when there was the space for him to poke around a bit – birds like that do seem to like to poke around in the undergrowth. He was probably finding worms and bugs to eat.

I think we had had him nearly a month when he flew for the first time. In the middle of the woods, there was a clearing that was grassy and open, so we'd let him wander on the end of his rope and he was flapping those wings around in a way we'd seen him do before. I don't think it had occurred to us that he would ever actually take off, but he did that day. It took us several seconds for me to realise that he'd done it and I was on the other end of the rope, since it was my turn to hold him. He took a little run flailing around wildly with those wings, but he'd done that before so I suppose I hardly noticed until the rope went tight and I saw that he was up in the air. He flew in a circle and then his usual squawk came out – except it wasn't the usual one, because it wasn't strangled and quiet any more, but big and full and throaty. Just for an instant as he landed in a tangle of rope, I fancied I heard an answer somewhere in the woods, but it might have been an echo.

Anyway, he did it every time after that, every time we were out in the woods and sometimes on the way home too. He got very good at it, so good he almost pulled you off the ground as he soared upwards. In fact I'm sure, had he stayed with us, he would have done just that because he went on growing till he was about the size of an emu – a green emu with long orange legs and big wings. Of course, memory exaggerate things and I was not particularly big myself at the time, so he might have seemed bigger than he was, but he was certainly big enough for Louis to climb onto. Louis was a little boy, about four or five, and he followed us whenever he could, the way some little children do - whenever we couldn't get away from him. We were always kind to him and talked to him and teased him gently in the way you do with little children, but then of course we wanted to be off and get on with whatever we were doing. We hadn't told him about George of course, wouldn't have meant to do anything of the kind. Louis was just there one day, just when we were taking George back. I don't know how he came to be out at that time, but in those days parents used to allow children to roam a lot more than they do now and he was roaming near the place where he lived. We came face to face with him as we came out of the woods. He looked at George and his eyes went enormous –

you know, they way they always describe them in books, like saucers; they really seemed that big. 'What's that?' he said in that high, squeaky little voice that could at times be so irritating – like now, when we had a secret we just knew he wouldn't be able to keep.

I don't know what we said. I can't remember how we thought of such a daft idea after that, but I suppose it was a bribe to keep him quiet. For whatever reason, we told him that he could ride on George and we lifted him up and put him astride the bird, not really meaning to let go and put his full weight on the poor bird, but sometimes things don't work out the way you mean them to. He made a grab for George's neck and the poor creature panicked, leapt and bucked us away, then sprinted off at top speed with poor little Louis clinging on for all he was worth and the rope dangling useless behind him. A moment later, they were airborne and Louis was obviously liking it because he went: 'Weeeeeee!' just as if he was on a slide or something.

Goodness knows what would have happened if he'd stayed on. Maybe he'd have flown away to Timbuktu or the Sahara desert on George, but he lost his hold and tumbled off before they had gone much above head height. Then there were the howls and shrieks as he landed and we were too busy attending to the poor little boy to notice George as he went up and up and up. Not until he was way above the trees did we look up and that was because George gave his deep, thrilling, chirring, purring squawk. Then, to our amazement, we not only heard an answering cry but we actually saw another one, half again as big. It must have been his mum or his dad, I've no idea which. But it joined him there in the air and led him away, off over the woods and beyond. We watched in a daze as they flew away and I never saw them again, but here's the funny thing. I know the rope came away because I saw it happen some time before we lost sight of him and we actually found it in the woods the next day with no collar attached to it. It was years later that I remembered about that collar and that was because I was at the top of a mountain in Scotland and I saw it there. It

knew it was the same collar because it had 'Mambo' on a rectangular tin plate attached to the leather, but I've never quite worked out how it got there.

© Rob Parkinson 2010

---

## THREE LIKELY LEGENDS

*Here are two humorous 'likely' legends from Sussex folklore from a forthcoming collection, followed by a beautiful Japanese legend for contrast. The first two are really tall tales; when we say 'likely, we generally mean 'unlikely' – but maybe just about believable. The second of these has been extended a little from the original folk legend. It was originally written in this form for a reading aloud project, so is modelled on oral style, slipping into the present tense sometimes and using 'off-the-page' phrasing. The Japanese tale is a tall tale that blurs into fantasy. Compare all three with the separate Voyage of Mael Dun story download, a different kind of tall tale/fantasy/likely legend entirely.*

### **The Half High Hat**

The mud in Sussex lanes can be particularly thick and deep. About two hundred years ago, a fellow was picking his way around the edges of the enormous puddles in just such a lane. No tarmac then, no cobbles nor even gravel; only puddles and mud, a lot of it. He was surprised to see there, right in the middle of all that mud, a hat. It was a half high hat, such as a farmer might wear, a good one all black and velvety – so far as he could see between the streaks and splashes of mud. So he thought to himself, 'I'll have that, since no one seems to want it.' And he stretched out to reach it.

It took a while to get the right angle, without falling into the puddle himself, but eventually he managed to catch it by the brim and pick it up. 'Gotcha!' he shouted triumphantly, lifting the hat above his head. A moment later, he heard a voice: 'Here, hold on. That's my hat you've got there!'

The fellow looked down to see where the voice was coming from and there, right in the middle of the mud, just where the hat had been, there was a head – a bald one, with a scribble of scruffy white hair, mutton-chop whiskers and the kind of red face you get from spending a lot of time outdoors in the fresh air or a lot of time indoors with a bottle or two. 'I'm sorry,' says the man holding the hat. 'I'd no idea you were under there. What are you doing?'

'I'm sitting on the back of my horse.'

'What horse?'

'My horse down here in this mud.'

'What's it doing there?'

'Eating the hay.'

'What hay is that?'

'Well,' the face in the mud insisted, 'the hay that's on the back of the wagon that sank here two weeks ago with all six oxen that were pulling it.'

*Version © Rob Parkinson 2003*

---

## **The Mare's Egg**

If you're wandering around the countryside somewhere north and east of Lewes, in the flatter lands beyond the big hills on which the town is set, you might see something there I've seen with my own eyes. I couldn't say exactly where it is and anyway, that would spoil half the surprise and the pleasure for you. But when you do see it, if you do, well you'll know then that these stories I tell are true, not a word of a lie in them.

It's the stone pumpkin. It's up this lane and a bit off the beaten track and there's the remains of a cottage there and then this pillar with the pumpkin on it, carved in stone and covered over with moss and with bits of grass growing out of some of the grooves. Ah, but how it got there, now there's a tale for you.

It would be a couple of hundred years ago or so that Harry Tompsett had this field just by there and it was one of those places where you could grow just about anything you wanted. There are places like that. You stick a seed or two in the soil and next day, you've got broad beans long as your arm or cabbages up to your waist. Stand there long enough and roots start growing out of your feet and branches start coming out of your ears. Harry's field was one of those places and some fine things he'd grown in there - gooseberries the size of your fist, cauliflowers as big as bushes, a carrot as tall as a tree. But it's not the story of those things I want to tell you. It's the pumpkins.

Now at that time, no one was growing pumpkins in Sussex. Harry had seen them when he'd been over in Hampshire somewhere and he liked the look of them - and the taste and the texture of 'em in some kind of a pumpkin pie they'd given him. He decided to have a go himself in that field of his. Well of course, in almost less time than it takes to tell, he'd a crop of these things coming up and looking decidedly strange to all the local folk. That's when the jokes started. Every time Harry was in the field and one of his mates came past, it was: "What you got there then, 'arry? 'orses' eggs?"

But Harry was on for that too. He didn't mind a bit of a laugh, so he'd be saying: "Yup, course. My old brood mare laid 'em last week. Gonna 'atch me out some good foals from them!"

It all became a running joke, one way and another. Which was fine, though Harry was beginning to wonder whether he'd be able to sell a single pumpkin, what with them being such a joke all around. Then one day this dealer from Brighton comes sniffing around, looking for something to buy that he could take back and sell to all the posh folks that came down from London. He didn't know much about the country, but he knew what he could fetch a good price, which he reckoned was as much as he needed to know.

Well, he happened to be passing Harry's place just as Harry was coming out from his field carrying a big pumpkin. This one had gone half soft and he reckoned he'd have to chuck it on the compost if he couldn't rescue some bits for the pot. Anyway, the dealer sees him and says: "Hello mate, what you got there?"

Harry looks down at the pumpkin and, thinking of the running joke he'd been having and pronouncing his words very carefull so that this foreigner should understand, he says, " It's a horse's egg, innit."

The dealer looks back at him and says: "Go on! Well I never. I never did see one of those before."

"Well," says Harry, keeping the joke going, "I've got a whole field of them over there." And he nodded to the pumpkins beyond the gate.

"How much d'you sell 'em for then," says the dealer, sniffing a bit of a profit.

“Oh,” says Harry, who was a bargaining man, “ I couldn’t let a good horse’s egg go for less than a shilling.”

“Oh,” says the dealer, “I couldn’t give you that much. How about threepence.”

They got down to the serious bargaining then and in the finish, the dealer got his horse’s egg for ninepence a small fortune in those days but he thought it was a good deal. Of course, Harry was trying to hide his smiles because he knew he’d had the best of it, unless the dealer really could hatch a horse from the pumpkin, which he somehow doubted.

The dealer pays up and takes his pumpkin. He was a little stout fellow, in tight white breeches, leather boots and a tailcoat, with a slick and shiny top hat sitting on the top of his slick and shiny head. There he was, waddling down the lane holding the pumpkin in front of him and thinking about all the money he was going to make when he hatched out the foal and brought it up to be a fine horse. A good day’s work he reckoned, but he was so busy doing that reckoning that he tripped over a stone in the path. He and the pumpkin both went flying.

Well the pumpkin landed with a big flop, right on the bit where it was soft so of course it squidged out all over the place. That’s the moment when the dealer should have seen how he’d been duped, but by the sheerest chance, there was a hare in the hedge and it was startled by all the commotion. At the very moment the pumpkin hit the floor and the dealer cursed, it jumped up and ran away across the field just as fast as it could.

The dealer looked up, saw the hare and instantly put two and two together and made three dozen. “That’s my horse,” he says. “ It’s got out of the egg and it’s running away.” He’s up straight away and after that hare.

Now a hare is fast and a greyhound is faster and faster still is the wind that blows over the hills and the valleys. But faster than a hare, faster than a greyhound, faster even than the wind that blows is a dealer who thinks he might lose his money. That dealer was across the field in half the time it takes to tell and he'd almost caught up with the hare when it swerved away into a thicket and the dealer skids to a halt. But even as he did that, a stag in the thicket sees him and goes cantering away through the undergrowth. The dealer sees the stag and this time, he put three and three together and makes about four hundred and fifty three, because he thinks straight away. "My god, that horse has grown quickly!". So next he's off and he's after that stag.

Well, the poor stag didn't stand a chance. He was leaping onto its back in no time at all and grabbing hold of the horns, which he'd not noticed till that moment. Whether he doubted that he'd found his horse just then, I couldn't tell you though it seemed not because he clung on tight for all he was worth. The stag bucked and rolled and leapt and shook to try to get him off. It was a big one and of course it had never been ridden before. What stag ever is? No one rides stags. A bareback broncobuster couldn't stay astride a stag. People gave up the effort a long time ago. To stay on a stag, you'd need to stick better than glue. To stay on a stag, you'd need to stick better than a barnacle. To stay on a stag you'd need to stick better than a bad memory, better than muck on the sole of a shoe, better even than a tax inspector. You'd need to stick like a miracle.

What is it that can stick better than glue, better than a barnacle, better than a bad memory or gum or a tax inspector, better even than a miracle? Well it's a dealer who thinks he's hanging on to his money. The dealer stayed on the stag and he stayed on the stag and he stayed on the stag, whilst it hurtled here and hurtled there and leapt and cavorted and bounded and leapt. He'd still be on the stag to this day if it hadn't been that the horns were ready for shedding and he was clinging onto them so hard. Because just when the stag leapt over a

hedge, they came away in his hands and he went on upwards and the stag went down and leaves the story there.

As for the dealer, well what goes up must come down in the end and that's what you call a law of life as well as gravity. There he was plummeting downwards with the antlers in his hands. Wouldn't it just be the purest of incredible coincidences that a charcoal burner had just tethered his donkey by the hedge whilst he went to do something I really don't need to tell you about behind a bush? Wouldn't it just be the most unlikely thing in the world that the dealer would fall straight out of the sky and land astride that donkey? But there we are, it's exactly what happened and that's the truth of it. WHACK! THUMP! He landed on that donkey backwards, facing its tail. And EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAW! That donkey reared up, startled and set off at a cracking pace and it was away over the fields and belting away like a hurricane well before the charcoal burner could stop doing what he'd been doing and get after him, so he leaves the story too.

But the dealer - well he was clinging on for dear life and trying to find to find the horse's head somewhere down where the donkey's tail was. Because of course now he'd put five and five together now and made a thousand and nine and was convinced this was the horse that had come out of the egg. One way or another, what with one of the stag's antlers still being in his hand, he managed to hook onto something down there and get a bit of a purchase so he wouldn't fall off. Which startled the donkey, I can tell you. It wasn't something it was used to at all.

Now a hare is fast and a greyhound is faster and the wind blowing over the hills and valleys is, as I said, faster yet. But faster still, faster even than a dealer who's lost his money, is a donkey with a stag's antler shoved up its bum. If it had been going at a fair tilt for a donkey before, now it was supersonic, jet propelled, a rocket on hooves. All the time the dealer was clinging on for dear life thinking, "This is my horse, this is my horse!" and not thinking for a moment of letting go.

Just up beyond Lewes is an old racecourse. Before it was a racecourse, it was a place where the young sons of squires used to take out their horses for a jolly good gallop and a bit of a canter. A bit of a wager too, for most of them had a lot more money than sense. So that particular morning, there were two of them, fine young fellows they were, one on a bay horse and the other on a grey, racing each other with five golden guineas to be won by the first past the old gate. They were flat out when all of sudden something whizzed past them just as if they'd been standing by the road and the London-bound carriage had swept by. Fair took their breath away and there and then they stopped to check with each other they'd not dreamed the whole thing. Because it was the dealer, who by now was positively screaming: "THIS IS MY HORSE!" facing the rear end of the donkey with a stag's antler still sticking out rather oddly from its rear end.

The donkey flashed by them and carried on for a mile or maybe three until it saw something and sniffed something in a field below that made it screech to a sudden halt, leaving deep grooves in the ground you can see to this day. There were hundreds carrots in a field just down the slope. It stopped so suddenly that the dealer was thrown hundreds of yards into a haystack, still clinging onto the antlers. As for the donkey, it forgot all about its pains, ambling down to munch those carrots - and that's exactly what it was doing when those two young fellows who'd been racing each other arrived. They reckoned the supersonic creature was a wonder that could win them many a race and a fair number of golden guineas, so they'd followed the tracks and finally found it. By that time, the dealer had climbed out of the stack, run back up to the donkey and was just coaxing it with a little of the hay for dessert.

"Gad sir," says the first young man. "A fine steed you have there. Ever thought of selling him?"

The dealer looked up, taken by surprise. But a sale's a sale and he wasn't going to miss the chance. "What's your offer?" says he.

"Well," the first young springer, "I'll give you ten golden guineas here and now!"

Ten golden guineas! Now there was a profit worth having! But before the dealer could say a thing, the other younger beau was saying: "Ah but I'll give you fifteen." Then the first was saying "Twenty!" and the second was bouncing back with "Twenty five!"

The dealer just could not believe his luck. There were these two young fellows doing all the work for him. He could hardly get a word in edgeways. In the finish, they gave him a hundred golden guineas between them there and then and took the donkey. And that's where they leave the story too. I don't know whether they ever got the donkey to repeat its performance because they didn't take the antler.

The dealer watched them going and as they did, his eyes were about the size of dinner plates with the greed. If he could make that much from just one horse's egg, how much could he make with a whole field full!

The very next day, he was back to Harry Tompsett's place with three big carts and he bought the whole field. Of course Harry drove a hard bargain and I don't know exactly how much he paid, but he probably would not have had a lot of change from those fifty golden guineas. Off he went with the pumpkins, thinking he'd have forty or fifty horses from them. Whether he did or not, and whether or not he found anyone in Brighton daft enough to buy a horse's egg, now he leaves the story at last.

As for Harry, he lived a good long life and grew and good few more crops. He had a tidy bit of money put by from that day so, after he'd paid to have his cottage renovated, he had a fine gate built to the field with two stone pillars and a stone pumpkin hand carved by his cousin, who was a stone mason.

Now what happened to the second one, I couldn't tell you. It could be in an antique shop somewhere in Sussex, something being handled and sold and passed on by a modern dealer. But the first stone pumpkin is still there, though you'll not find it easily. If you find it one day, you will be able to look at it and know that I don't stuff you up with lies and nonsense. This story I've been telling you is as true as the fact that I'm here now telling you this story.

Version ©Rob Parkinson 2002

---

## **The Painter's Horse**

The garden was a beautiful one. It stood next to the temple and there were groves of peach trees with fragrant roses rambling up the walls and fountains that tinkled softly into ponds where carp swam lazily. Yet something or someone was spoiling it. Each night, that something or someone came into that garden and ripped off fruit from the trees, trampled the beds of flowers, clouded the ponds and scared the fishes. That was very clear to the old gardener, but what was not clear was however whoever or whatever was getting in, since the garden was walled and the gates were locked at night.

The gardeners' eldest son, thinking to show how bold and clever he was, volunteered to find out by staying in the garden by night as a guard. During the night, for some reason he found it impossible to stay awake and the next morning, he was found slumbering happily at the foot of a spoiled cherry tree. The same thing happened when the gardener's second son, for the same kinds of reasons, decided to see if he could do better and show his older brother up. He too was found fast asleep, this time beside a muddied pool.

Now the gardener's third son, who was only a child, offered to take his turn. The older brothers sneered and told him he'd never stay awake, but the

next morning there he was, very excited, his eyes shining. 'Around midnight,' he told his astonished family, 'when the moon was full in the sky, the door to the temple opened and out came a horse. I saw it clearly in the moonlight, even though it was black as coal. Its eyes were like fire. It galloped through the gardens, taking whatever it chose and paying no heed to me when I tried to drive it away. At last, just before dawn, it trotted back into the temple. I would have followed it, but I was unable to open the great door.'

The brothers and the father looked at each other doubtfully, half convinced that this was some strange dream the boy had dreamed, but eventually he convinced them that they must find the priest who held the keys to the temple. This they did and, when the massive ornate door finally creaked open, they went inside to find the sacred spaces empty. 'You must have imagined it all my boy. No horse has been here. How could it have got in?' the priest intoned pompously, but just then the boy pointed at a great painting that took up most of one of the walls. There in the middle of it was a black horse with a fiery eye. 'That is the very image of horse I saw,' he insisted.

That night, the gardener, his three sons and the priest all watched together. Just as the third son had said, a little after midnight the great door flew open and out galloped the horse and began to wreak havoc in the garden. But now all of them went to chase it away and, though they could not lay a finger on it, it fled back through the temple door and vanished. They all saw now, once they had followed it in, how the horse in the painting looked exactly the same as the horse they had seen. Indeed it seemed to be laughing at them and stamping its hooves restlessly, daring them to follow.

The same happened the next night and the next, till all were in despair. There would soon be nothing left of the beautiful temple gardens. Then the third son had an idea, which he told the priest about. The priest sent for the great painter who had created the temple painting and explained the idea carefully. The painter scratched his head reluctantly, but eventually he agreed and did

what he was asked to do and they were never ever troubled by that horse again.

If you ever go to that temple, you will certainly notice that beautiful wild looking midnight black horse with its blazing eyes. You will also notice the strong tether the painter added and see how it strains to break it and escape into the garden, but can never quite do so.

*Japanese story*

*Version © Rob Parkinson 2010*

---

*All additional material © Imaginary Journeys 2010*