

DILEMMA – the stories behind the pictures

#1 THE JACKALOPES

Let's go. We're kicking off with the Jackalopes. The ravens are convinced that these mythical North American critters really do exist and who am I to shatter their alcohol sodden dreams of giant mutant rabbits with horns and an attitude to match?

#2 PEGASUS

Every autumn as the first leaves begin to fall Pegasus opens his aeronautical school where he teaches young reindeer how to fly and pull a sledge. He tends to favour "the glider" technique, releasing young cadets from his tail to take wing unaided once safely airborne.

Apart from the obvious, Pegasus has a couple of other super powers at his disposal. He can pass at will between the realms of the mortal/immortal and wherever his hoofs strike a solid object beautiful springs of water well up and flow in abundance.

Let's hope he doesn't clip the roof of any of those little houses as he takes off as I doubt very much whether their house insurance policies would cover them for flood damage caused by a low-flying mythological horse on a training exercise for Santa!

#3 SWEENEY RAVEN

Sweeney Raven has EARNed his seat thrice over on the pantheon of Norfolk folklore baddies along with the hell hound Black Shuck, the Hikey Sprites who live in the shadows and the Biting Imps of Loddon.

Sweeney Raven was an 18th century barber-surgeon who worked out of premises on the infamous Ber Street which lies at the heart of the red light district of Norwich.

Old Sweeney loved Malmsey wine and the ladies of the Norfolk night in equal measure and mixed business with pleasure every chance he got.

When in his cups he was flamboyant and careless with his scissors often cutting hair and mutilating ears simultaneously with one snip of his razor sharp shears.

So many of the local courtesans were missing lobes, and in extreme cases entire ears, that the butchered look became known countywide as "the Sweeney lughole". (The term "lughole" originates from Cockney rhyming slang for ears - Toby jugs/lugs).

#4 DANNY THE BEAR

Danny the bear loves honey.

He likes it set or runny.

He eats his fill then a bit more still

Until he's stuffed his tummy.

The bees don't find this funny

But the queen bee said "Don't worry.

Honey extra hot made from chilli flowers

Will soon discourage Danny."

#5 THE MUCH-MALIGNED FROG

As one might expect, The Raven Bumper Book of Children's Stories is a truly dreadful tome guaranteed to send shock waves coursing through genteel society at it's very mention.

There are no happy endings for any of the characters and most of the tales are totally unsuitable for anyone of a nervous disposition let alone small, impressionable people under the age of consent.

The Much Maligned Frog is one such harrowing saga featuring a hapless amphibian desperately striving to atone for all the widespread stitching chaos his visits inevitably cause.

The story goes that Heqet, the Great Frog Mother of Egyptian mythology, was cursed by a malicious plaster garden gnome for laying her spawn in his fishing pond.

When the tadpoles hatched and eventually morphed into froglets they were predestined to lead a life of misery unless they could somehow lift the gnomes curse by rescuing a spellbound princess from cruel captivity in a birdcage. A likely tale and all a bit far fetched even by raven standards.

We join our hero at the very moment when he is about to kiss the imprisoned bird and by so doing turn her back into a beautiful princess. What could possibly go wrong?

The Raven Bumper Book of Children's Stories is available from under the counter at Amazon and all good bookstores if you're that desperate to find out what happened next.

#6 HAMLET - ACT ONE:SEEN TWO

The Long Dog ravens are well known for their strange sense of humour and for telling old, corny jokes. Here's a few of their "piggy" ones to get your Sunday off to a porcine start.

If anyone dares so much as snigger they face an instant ban from this page and being thrown into the castle dungeons without their sewing.

What do you get if you cross a pig with a dinosaur? Jurassic pork.

What do pigs do on nice days? Go for a pignic.

Which is a pig's favourite ballet? Swine Lake.

What do pigs sing on New Year's Eve? Auld Lang Swine.

Who was the greatest pig artist ever? Pigcasso.

Why was the pig arrested? For pigpocketing.

What do you get when you play tug-of-war against a team of pigs? Pulled pork.

Who was the smartest pig ever? Einswine.

No more jokes, I promise.

#7 THE ODD COUPLE

Telegraph Cove lies tucked away on the east coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia and is the setting for an unlikely friendship between an old bull moose and a young humpback whale. The Inuit people called them the "pinnariyauyak" - the friends.

According to legend the whale had become beached one stormy night and the moose had gone down to the shore where little by little he managed to gently push and roll the exhausted creature

back into the sea. The whale stayed close to shore for several weeks and the two could often be seen swimming together in the moonlight.

The bond that formed between them was so strong that every autumn as the days began to grow shorter they were both drawn back to the cove by the invisible ties that bound them. Until one year, almost inevitably, the whale failed to appear and after a long and lonely vigil waiting for his lost friend the old moose simply lay down in the sand looking out to sea and never rose again.

#8 THE ELEPHANT & CASTLE(S)

The original Elephant & Castle was an old coaching inn mentioned by Shakespeare in his play Twelfth Night . The pub continues to open it's doors for business to this day and lies at the heart of the ancient Borough of Southwark in London.

Around the 1880's the "Elephant" was home to many members of my family and a rough old place it was too according to my long-departed Great Aunt Blanche. The actor Sir Michael Caine was born and grew up there - now not many people know that!

The Castle (or Rook) chess piece originally featured an elephant with a castle shaped howdah on its back but over the centuries the elephant was eventually dropped altogether from the game piece.

The Elephant and the ravens have a bit of history in common because at one time they both shared lodgings at the Tower of London, that great castle which stands on the banks of the river Thames.

Back in the 13th century Louis IX of France presented Henry III of England with a live elephant and it was housed in the Royal Menagerie at the Tower alongside the incumbent ravens of the day.

They not only shared common lodgings but also a fondness for strong drink and three years after his arrival in the country the unfortunate pachyderm drank himself to death on the wine which was an integral part of his daily diet. The ravens, on the other hand, were made of sterner stuff and didn't suffer so much as a dizzy spell let alone a hangover after the monumental wake they held for their roommate which was so riotous it would surely have seen them locked up in the Tower if it wasn't for the fact that they were already in residence. So no change there then. They're all playing chess at the moment, best not disturb them.

#9 THE "IN FRAGRANCE DELICTO" FOX

There's no doubt about it, Mr Fox is a very handsome looking fellow - from a distance and preferably down wind. But up close and personal it's a totally different story unless you just happen to be another fox.

He pongs, he reeks, he smells to high heaven. He's a stink bomb with four legs and a beautiful brush.

Old Reynard's superpower is his ability to exude a foul stench from his weapons grade scent glands. It's his way of saying "I'm here, can't you smell me? This is my manor and I'm top dog."

Our young Long Dog fox is just discovering that not everyone appreciates his "foxiness" so if he wants to make friends with the other critters he'd better put a can of deodorant at the top of his shopping list.

He's certainly not coming into the castle kitchen for a cup of tea and a scone until he does. That smell is enough to knock even a raven off his perch at twenty paces.

#10 KNIGHT RIDER

It's my pleasure to introduce you to the original Knight Rider - Sir Hassel de Hoff and his trusty steed KITT (which stands for Krosstitch Is Truly Thrilling).

Our bold knight errant, his gentle black mare and his two hounds called Aida and Linen because he could always count on them, used to travel from castle to castle the length and breadth of these sceptered isles righting wrongs, wrestling dragons and generally doing terribly brave deeds.

But his speciality was damsels in distress because Sir Hassel also had a very nice little sideline which pleased ladies both young and old in equal measure. He was the very first commercial traveller - The Knight Haberdasher!

Whether they were high born ladies of the manor or bawdy tavern wenches, he had something on offer that they all wanted to get their hands on - his cross stitch paraphernalia, which he would whip out at the drop of a maiden's kerchief. What did you think I was going to say?

You name it and Sir Hoff had it. Silk threads from far Cathay, silver thimbles from the souks of Constantinople, linen from Mona's fair isle, patterns from Gothenburg and the low countries, fashion ideas from the court in Paris and, quite possibly, a dose of the King's Evil which he picked up on a stop-over in Ghent.

He guaranteed to satisfy every taste and on the rare occasion someone dared to copy one of his charts he would throw back his head and bellow at the top of his voice "That's no Hassel".

He was also known to whisper softly those self same words in the ear of his very special clients but that's another story for another day.

To be continued

#THE POLKA DOT GRIFFIN

As everyone knows, the griffin is a legendary creature part lion, part eagle which in monochrome in colour which is often deemed to be boring.

Then one day in the mid 1800's along comes the eccentric eastern-European Prince Dimitrie von Griffin of Moldova, or Dim to his friends, and all that goes out of the window in a flash.

Ever since the day he first hatched high on a craggy ledge in the Carpathian Mountains Dimitrie loved to dance. Long before he learned to fly he was strutting his stuff in the nest and his parents were forever having to retrieve him from ravines as he didn't have much space to perform his steps and was constantly falling over the edge.

Somehow he managed to survive his early years and as he flew from court to court with his parents he collided head on one fateful day in Biarritz with the polka (a dance craze that was sweeping Europe like wildfire).

Dim never did anything by halves and instantly painted himself from beak to claw with brightly coloured "polka dots". Goodbye drab, hello rainbow. The Czech word for half "pulka" is a reference to the dance's small steps while in Spanish dots are called "lunares" or half moons and there, eventually, you have it – the Polka Dot!

Prince Dimitrie rapidly became an expert in the dance and cut quite a dash galloping about the dance floors of Europe covered in brightly coloured spots. He's seen here asking the Mouse Ambassador if he'd care to take a turn or two about the room whilst waiting to petition his father, the King.

And no one ever called him Dim anymore, he'd become Dotty instead although to me he'll always be totally Bonkers. Now take your partner – hop, step, close, spring and repeat.

#12 THE GRUMPY LIONCEL

In heraldry lions which form part of a group are known individually as "lioncels". In Trafalgar Square, London surrounding Nelson's Column is just such a group of four beasts known as the Landseer Lions after their creator.

It's not widely known however that before Landseer had his go, Thomas Milnes also made four stone lions which were not judged to be impressive enough and were eventually bought by Sir Titus Salt the textile manufacturer,, politician and philanthropist and sent to his model village of Saltaire, West Yorkshire where they still stand today.

This is just one of the group on his day off getting very shirty with a pretentious small bird with delusions of grandeur (just look at his little crown) who has ill-advisedly chosen to perch on the royal rump.

That's it, end of story.

#13 WOLF HOWLERS

You remember when I said no more jokes, well I was lying. I had my fingers crossed and the ravens said this means I can do it again because the promise doesn't count.

The dungeons have all been fumigated and steam cleaned since last time and the same rules apply. Immediate excommunication from the Long Dog site followed by incarceration without enough light to sew by (manacles an optional extra) for so much as a titter.

Anyone actually weeing themselves will be referred to Dr Tenna the incontinence expert in Howley Street so brace yourselves, clench those Kegels and here we go:

What did one wolf say to the other? Howl do you do?

What do you call a lost wolf? A where-wolf.

What do you get when you cross Fred Astaire with a wolf? Dances with wolves.

Why did the wolf cross the road? To prove to the possum it could be done.

What do you call a wolf that uses bad language? A swear-wolf.

What was the wolf in the butcher's shop arrested for? Chop lifting.

How do you know that a wolf has been in your fridge? There are paw prints in the butter (and sometimes poo behind the door).

What did the wolf say to the flea? Stop bugging me.

What's more amazing than a talking wolf? A spelling bee.

What happened when the wolf went to the flea circus? He stole the show.

What do you call a wolf that meditates? Aware wolf.

Where do wolves store their possessions? A were house.

Why did the poor wolf chase his tail? He was trying to make ends meet.

What do you do if a wolf eats your food? Well you certainly don't argue.

What happened when a wolf eats garlic? His breath is worse than his bite.

#14 VIOLET GREY

This is a tribute to a very special greyhound – Violet, the poster girl of Greyhound Compassion which is a UK based charity supporting small, independent greyhound rescue organisations in the UK, Ireland and Spain.

Violet is an ex-racing dog who lives and works with a lady called Marilyn Roberts, a fund raising volunteer for the charity in Shropshire. When she retired aged two and a half years Violet had been raced sixty-two times and had an unhealed broken nose to show for it all.

There is a dark and sinister side to the greyhound racing industry, because that's what it is – an industry, and not every dog is raised as a family pet in a loving home – far from it. Violet is just one of the casualties of greed with her nose having been shut in a kennel door as a pup and left untreated all the time she was being raced and exploited

Not all ex-racers lives have happy endings like Violet so if you have a spare bob or two doing nothing in your pocket this season of goodwill (or any time for that matter) you could do a whole lot worse than to donate it to a greyhound charity wherever you lives and please pop over to the Greyhound Compassion Facebook page to see for yourself what they're up against on a daily basis and the work they do.

#15 THE "STICK ON" DRAGON

Croeso. Dafydd the Dragon loved watching nature documentaries and was particularly fascinated by frogs and their ability to stick to things and climb vertical surfaces with ease.

He had never actually met a sticky-footed frog in person but in his open-plan bachelor cave on the side of Cadair Idris he had amassed quite a menagerie of creatures with adhesive powers – spiders, snails, caterpillars, flies and the like.

But somehow this wasn't quite enough to satisfy Dafydd's curiosity. It didn't hit the spot, he wanted to have a go at it himself. So off he popped down the mountain to the filling station in Dolgellau which sold everything from crampons for climbers to homemade Bara Brith and petrol too of course, to get himself a big tube of glue.

Back home, delighted with his purchase but not really having thought things through properly, he soon set about applying a liberal coat of adhesive to his extremities and that's how a couple of tourists found him a while later, stuck to the floor and covered in bugs which had escaped when he knocked over their aquarium in a panicky attempt to free himself.

You'll be pleased to hear that Dafydd didn't come to an entirely sticky end because he has joined forces with Idris the baby dragon hatched from his egg in the firebox in Ivor the Engine's cab. I think railway work will suit him well and play to his strengths – fire and steam! Hwyl fawr.

#16 CASTLE LONG DOG

Cats can be just a tad OCD at times and these two are finding it very hard to cope with not only the wrong year showing but the wrong decade to boot.

So having eyed up the fat, tempting fish swimming in the moat they marched across the drawbridge and banged on the portcullis demanding to see Alec, the IT wizard because only he has the necessary magic powers to change the date.

Unfortunately Alec, and the Magnificence (his beard), are away doing their film extra work for Netflix so little Bill was despatched to deal with the cats instead.

I've never really discovered what little Bill does around the place but he crops up from time to time in various Long Dog samplers perched on roofs, sailing a boat, flying in a balloon – that kind of thing. And occasionally his twin brother rocks up too. Be sure to give them a wave should you ever spot them – they'd like that.

Anyhow, little Bill is certainly not known for his diplomatic approach. He told them to mind their own business and to piss off, which they did. That's cats for you.

So now I've told you everything, or have I? I certainly wouldn't presume to tell you which of these images to select or indeed where to put them however much I might be tempted to do so. Go forth, be creative and, above all else, enjoy your stitching.

Jools

November 2019