

The Magpie and the Rat.

This is the story of a magpie, a rat and a very old man. It is about their friendship and the adventures they share as they battle the forces of evil on their journey to fulfill the old man's wish to die in his homeland.

The Captain was worried. He had been forced to sail his damaged ship into port for repairs. A severe storm had snapped one of the masts and shredded the sails. He had never been in this harbour, but it was the closest one to the place where the storm disabled the ship.

The sailors muttered amongst themselves. There was the devil about. One moment a clear sky, the next a raging wind that drove the rain so fiercely, it sprayed the ship horizontally. Each bullet of rain was like a cannon ball the size of a man's fist covered with spikes of ice. All the sailors were bleeding from jagged slashes and two were lost overboard.

When the repairs were completed, the Captain made ready to continue his journey. He was told the cook had been seen walking off the ship. He had said he was going for provisions but didn't return. The crew looked in all the streets and shops, but he wasn't to be found. The Captain knew he couldn't sail without a cook. The crew would mutiny.

The cargo was destined for a country many weeks away. It would be the longest trip he had taken. He took the job because of the very large amount of money he was offered.

Night was approaching, and the searchers returned to the ship. In a narrow alley one of the sailors found the cook's shoes. They glowed a soft green colour. The sailor bent down to collect them when a shaft of green light, coming from the sky, dazzled him. The sailor stepped back in fright and together they all hurried to the ship. They gasped in unison when the cook's shoes grew wings and flew along the green beam towards the heavens.

The Captain told the crew, he would set sail the following day. He told a lie. When asked, he said he had found a cook while they were searching. He knew he would have to be the Captain and cook.

It was a strange Island the ship had visited. There were few people about and they were disinclined to speak. It was continuously bathed in a weak green light. When asked why, the Islanders just shrugged their shoulders without answering.

The Captain set off to finalise his accounts and order provisions for the trip. Hypnotized, he followed a star that shone with a strong green light. It was positioned level with his eyes and about ten paces ahead. Inside the star a hand beckoned and a voice said,

‘Go into the tavern on the corner of the next street.’

shortly after the voice, a dog joined them as the Captain continued to follow the pulsing green star. He closed his eyes, shook himself free of its spell and turned back. The dog gave a low growl and created a green barrier of light that couldn’t be penetrated. Opening his eyes, he turned, and again came under the star’s spell, following it with the dog walking one pace behind. The Captain stopped outside the tavern. The dog, sitting on its haunches, drew the Captain in, its eyes lighting the path with twin green beacons.

The ceiling was low. Smoke drifted from pipes being smoked by rough coated men. Their pipes were fused to their faces, faces that didn’t have eyes, mouths or noses. Instead of fingers, each hand had five talons. Though frightened for his safety, the Captain was unable to walk to the door.

A large man stretched his arm and pointed with his five talons towards an old man sitting at a table that was the furthest from the dim candlelight. The same voice he had heard before, drifted to his ears.

‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

The dog was resting at the old man’s feet. There was a magpie perched on his shoulder. Again, the dog’s eyes lit the way with shafts of green light coming from its eyes. As he sat down, the magpie slowly circled above the Captain’s head, chortling quietly.

The old man didn’t move, and his eyes also had green shafts of light which danced on the Captain’s hair shirt. the Captain’s head hurt as it absorbed the instructions from the voice.

‘Go back to your ship. I have an important cargo to send to Biddlecup. I will buy your cargo. The changeover will take place tomorrow. You will find men at the jetty waiting for your orders. I will give you money to cover your expenses.’

The old Man left the tavern leaning on a gnarled walking stick, the handle curved like a shepherd’s crook, except the hook was a single talon. It gave off a beam of green light that lit the path, forcing the darkness back to the shops

and the side streets. With the magpie still circling, the Captain followed, hypnotized by the old man and the green light. They'd walked a good distance with the dog following not more than five paces behind.

The Captain heard the melodious chortling of the magpie as he bent over to collect a parcel it had dropped at his feet. When he straightened, the bird, the dog and the old man were nowhere to be seen. The area was dark with no moon. There was a green light that shone on a small patch of road. Still hypnotized the Captain followed the light which remained five paces in front of him.

When the ship was in sight the light disappeared and the Captain hurried to his cabin. On the table there was the most splendid meal he had ever seen; several courses of food from different parts of the world, gold rimmed porcelain tureens full of stews and a choice of soups. Without questioning where it had come from, there was nothing like this on his ship, he soon ate it all and drank the most superb wine.

He pulled out the package the magpie had dropped. He was startled by the amount of money. He reckoned enough for a stronger, bigger boat and much left over. It must be a sacred cargo he would be carrying. He turned around and saw the dishes had been replaced by maps and the ship's log.

He was dizzy and lay on his bunk, thinking to take a rest but didn't wake until just before day break.

Good to his word, the old man had provided men to unload the ship and load it with the replacement cargo. Though they had the shape of normal strong men they had no ears, eyes, nose or mouth, and their hands were shaped as a bird's foot with five talons for each finger. The new cargo was in rectangle boxes made of heavy planks of wood, sealed with a message on each one saying that they were never to be opened. The word, never was written with lettering twice the size of the rest.

His crew were frightened and said where was the cook and what was the new cargo. The Captain had all this money the old man had given him, so he doubled the sailor's wages and said he had found a cook and that the new cargo was safe. He hadn't seen his original cargo; the ship was empty and ready for the heavy boxes when he went ashore.

With the loading of the ship completed, the men dissolved into the sky. He was pleased the sailors were aboard the ship preparing to sail so hadn't seen the labourers disappear.

They were about to sail. The Captain had asked everywhere for a cook without success. He had lied to the crew, saying the cook was running late and would join them shortly. None of the sailors would cook. They would mutiny first. He was about to walk up the gangplank and cast off when an old man shuffled quickly forward leaning on a gnarled walking stick, a green light shining from its talon. There was a magpie sitting on his left shoulder. It was the man from the tavern, but the Captain didn't remember meeting him, nor could he recollect how the cargo was loaded.

The Old Man stopped a few paces away. Green beams of light from his eyes played on the Captain's chest. The magpie circled round the old man's head and he heard the voice.

'Captain, I must come aboard. I will travel to Grannaland with you. Many years ago, as a small boy I left my homeland and it is now time to return. I have little time left and wish to be buried with my family.'

This was an odd request as he always had difficulty raising a crew for this voyage. Of all the voyages, he had taken over many years the most frightening ones were always to Grannaland. In fact, to get any crew at all he would make up a story of some mystic land, a land of gentle slopes, as much food as anyone would want, and continuing warm sunshine.

With a troubled mind, no cook and a strange cargo, a cargo he was forbidden to inspect, but didn't know why, he looked hard at the old man. There was something about him that made him uneasy. He was about to refuse his request, thinking he would bring bad luck, when the magpie perched on the Captain's arm, cocked its head to one side and softly chortled,

'I will cook for your crew.'

Startled, the Captain shivered at having his mind read so easily and turned abruptly away. It was a cook he needed, but not this one. He sensed a power within the old man that disturbed him, and the tingling sensation and shivering remained as he walked towards his ship. As he approached the gangplank he heard the most beautiful melody. He immediately looked up and saw the magpie flying slowly around his head. He looked at the old man as the chortling continued, the Captain, mesmerized, heard the echoes of his voice,

'I need a cook; will you cook for my ship this voyage?'

The old man smiled as he glided up the gangplank and followed the Captain onboard. The magpie had disappeared, but he heard its chortling mingling with the words,

‘I will cook for you and your crew. You will never have tasted such food in all your travels.’

The Captain was confused. The old man hadn’t spoken a word, yet he knew he had a cook for the voyage and that the old man would sail home with him. He had an uncomfortable feeling he had seen the old man and the bird before but couldn’t bring the memory forward.

It was nearly dark, the wind was picking up, clouds hung heavy on the horizon, the Captain needed to sail. As he passed the galley he saw the magpie sitting on a ledge, one eye cocked towards a pan with food cooking, a pot of water bubbling, and the old man sitting in the corner, eyes closed, not a twitch. It was as if he had been calved and placed there as an ornament. The Captain’s skin crawled and the hairs on the nape of his neck stiffened. He paused listening to the soft voice of the magpie crooning to its owner, then continued to the bridge.

There were shouts aloft as the sails were unfurled, the anchor stowed on board, the ship to shore ropes coiled. They made their way slowly out of the harbor, past the breakwater and on to the open sea, the ship responding to the swell as the wind strengthened.

The shores of the Island were empty of people and there were no ships to be seen, but there was an empty dinghy, drifting. The Captain steered his ship to avoid the dinghy, but it moved into the ship’s path. Try as he might he couldn’t avoid it.

As it scraped along the hull a very large, coal black rat, jumped aboard and disappeared through a tangle of ropes. There was a loud squawk from the magpie as it flew to the edge of the ship. With head tilted and wings flapping, it watched the tail of the rat disappear. The magpie followed as it chortled with excitement. The Captain was sure the magpie knew the rat, and that this meeting had been arranged. This was not going to be a trouble-free voyage. The dinghy continued to scrape the ship’s hull as it drifted astern before disappearing into the night.

Shortly after the rat came on board the old man called for the crew to have dinner. The Captain went to his cabin. As the cabin boy laid out the food and set the table, he didn’t recognize the cutlery. The plates were gold rimmed and

were made of the finest porcelain. The spectacle of the night before not remembered, even as a dream.

‘Boy, tell me the story of this plate ware?’

‘Cook gave it me.’

‘He must have had it loaded with the cargo. Thank you.’

It was indeed a magnificent meal with a flavour he had never experienced. Perhaps the voyage would be trouble free after all. Completing his meal, the Captain took his usual evening inspection of the ship before turning in. All seemed well. The wind was favorable, there was a gentle swell and no storms threatening. The helmsman and navigator were on the bridge, the course set as The Captain instructed. He retired to his cabin.

That night, The Captain recorded in his ship’s log that the dinghy was empty save some very white bones lying on the bottom, some brine slopping with the rocking of the dinghy. He didn’t record the old man, the magpie or the rat. He also didn’t mention the green light and how it glowed brighter as the rat jumped aboard. He wasn’t sure if they existed.

Anybody watching the ship from the shore as it sailed past would see that it was bathed in green light.