# A Legend of Puckaster Cove

Tony 'Monty' Hirst

***A Storynotes Collection***

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# Preface

What's in a name?

John Whitehead's *The Undercliff of the Isle of Wight* (1911) cites volume II of Roach Smith's *Retrospections, Social and Archaeological*, of 1886, as follows:

> *"Puck, Pixies, and Fairies, have left numerous records of their influence over public credulity, and the places named from them are usually associated with remains of antiquity of some kind. Puckaster, or Puckaster Cove, at the back of the Isle of Wight, is one of the localities which has attracted the attention of several writers, and some have been led to imagining that it is of Roman origin. A short time since I had an excellent opportunity of surveying Puckaster. As I approached the site I could see from landslips in remote times the dislocated masses had taken a fantastic form, something like that of a castle or fortified place, and to Puck it had consequently been assigned."*

According to A. D. Mills' *The Place-names of the Isle of Wight*, the name of Puckaster Cove derives not from the Latin *Port Castra*, but is more likely derived from the Old English words *puca* (from which we get puck), and *torr*, which together give us *"the rock or rocky hill haunted by a goblin"*.

Mills also suggests that the nearby Puckwell Farm, apparently

recorded in 1461 as *Pokewell*, derives in part from the Old English *wella*, to give us *"the string or stream haunted by a goblin"*.

If we are to go in search of fairy stories from the Isle of Wight, then — *real* fairy stories — we should, perhaps, start by looking for tales set around the location of Puckaster Cove.

And we should also consult the "honourable" Mr. Abraham Elder, teller of fantastic tales and legends about the Isle of Wight. Consulting the first edition of his book of that same name, *Tales and Legends of the Isle of Wight*, published in 1839, we see no reference to any legend of Puckaster Cove, although it does appear in the second edition of 1843 (a copy of this work can be viewed *by appointment* in the Caste Museum library collection at Carisbrooke Castle). The story can also be found in the pages of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a nineteenth literary magazine published under the editorship of a certain Mr Charles Dickens.

Here, then, is that tale re-published, along with my own version of it, originally told as part of the *'Tis Tales* storytelling set, *Island Tales* at Ventnor Fringe, 2022.

–Tony "Monty" Hirst
Apse Heath, September 2022.

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Puckaster Cove, in Barber's Picturesque

*Puckaster Cove, in Barber's picturesque illustrations, of the Isle of Wight, comprising views of every object of interest on the island, 1834.*

# A Legend of Puckaster

***As originally told by Abraham Elder, "A Legend of Puckaster", in Bentley's Miscellany, volume 5, 1839. The footnotes also appeared in the original version.***

A LEGEND OF PUCKASTER,
ISLE OF WIGHT.
BY ABRAHAM ELDER, ESQ.

John Kann was a labouring man, living in the parish of Whitewell; and, in the good old times, when fairies danced, was said to have been particularly favoured by them. This was a matter of considerable importance at the time, for he lived in a neighbourhood where they were most numerous and active. [Burton, in his Anatomy of Melancholy, tells us that "terrestrial devils are those lares, genii, fauns, satyrs, wood-nymphs, foliots, fairies, Robin Goodfellows, trulli, &c. which, as they are most conversant with men, so they do them much harm. These are they that dance on heaths and greens, as Lavater thinks with Trithemius, and as Olaus Magnus adds, leave that green circle which we commonly find in plain fields. They are sometimes seen by old women and children. Hieron. Pauli, in his description of the city of Bercino, in Spain, relates how they have been familiarly seen near that town, about fountains and hills. "Sometimes," saith Trithemius, "they lead simple people into the recesses of the mountains, and

shew them wonderful sights, &.c." Giraldus Cambrensis gives instance of a monk of Wales that was so deluded. Paracelsus reckons up many places in Germany where they do usually walk about in little coats, some two feet long. - See Anatomy of Melancholy, 15th ed. p. 124.]

Mr. Puck himself, as it was very well known at the time, used frequently to hold his court, and lead his midnight revels on a spot by the sea-side not above a mile from his house. It was a wild uncultivated place, covered with rocks, and bogs, and holes, and briers. It was generally known when he was at home by a small light being seen dancing about at midnight over the rough ground. This the neighbours used to call "Friar Rush's lantern," or "Puck's little star": the latter name, however, was the most common.

Amidst all this wilderness of rocks, bogs, and briers, there was, however, one place where the turf was extremely smooth and level; and persons passing that way by daylight used to observe those circular marks in the grass, which are everywhere known by the name of fairy rings.

One day a neighbour of John Kann's said to him, "John, I am going to build myself a house. Come, and I will show you where. It is the prettiest loveliest spot that ever was seen?"

Where do you think he took him to? To the very place where the grass was so smooth and soft, and where the fairy rings were always seen.

"Gracious me!" said John Kann. "You are not going to build here! Are you not afraid of Puck's little star? By St. Radegund you are making a fool of me!" [St. Radegund appears to have been the patroness saint of Whitewell. There was anciently a chapel dedicated to her there.]

"I'm not making a fool of you at all," said he, "but, the fact is, now that I am going to be married, I must get a house of my own to live in; besides, this would be a nice healthy place for the children when they come."

"But ain't you afraid of Puck?"

"Not at all," he answered. "Puck never hurts an honest industrious fellow like me. We have always been very good friends, and I have no doubt but that we shall continue so."

"And whom do you suppose the land belongs to?" asked John Kann.

"Why, it's just waste land, and is of no use to anybody; and the manor belongs to the Lisle family. They would never grudge a poor man's building a cottage there."

"That spot," said John Kann, "no more belongs to the Lisles than it belongs to me. It belongs to Mr. Puck; and, you think it would be a nice place for your children, do you? Do you know what happens to children that are born on fairy ground?"

"No."

"Why, then, I will just tell you. The fairies give them gin to prevent them growing any bigger, and then carry them off, and put an old wizen fairy in their place. I have known the thing happen often and often before. That child of Sukey Grundle's, you know, that was always crying and squealing, that was never her child at all, but just an old fairy. Her own little darling is no doubt at this moment doing the dirty work for some of the queer creatures in Fairy-land, scrubbing, and dusting, and slaving, and feeding their pigs, and, no doubt, getting a whop on the head every now and then with a broomstick; and, I will tell you what; it's of no use your settling here, just for the purpose of providing for your family by getting your children apprenticed out to the fairies. It's no saving at all, for

they always leave one of their own sort, that eats twice as much, and is, besides, very mischievous, in its place. You had better not interfere with Puck's little star."

Well, John Kann's neighbour took his advice; and, moreover, asked John to his wedding-feast, which took place a day or two afterwards. John passed a very merry evening; and it was late and very dark before he started to return home. There were no roads in this part of the island in those days, so finding one's way home at night was not always an easy matter. Luckily, however, for John, a friend of his, who lived near, had started just before with a lantern, and John followed the light, which was some way on before him, singing to himself as he went along.

Up-hill and down-hill, over rough and smooth, John Kann followed the light: but, somehow or other he did not recognise any part of the road as he went along. "Maybe the ale was strong, and I am a little fuddled like, though I do not feel so," thought he to himself. "Maybe, all this time I have been following a wrong person with a lantern." However, it was of no use stopping then, as he did not at all know where he was; so he followed on, and on, and on. The ground grew rougher, sometimes up-hill, sometimes downhill, amongst brambles, and rocks, and holes, but there was a firm good path under his feet all the while. When, all of a sudden a new idea flashed across his mind. "Maybe it's Puck's little star that I have been walking after all this while. What fun!" thought he to himself.

At length the light seemed to stand still, and John Kann walked up to it. However, as he came nearer, the light seemed to grow paler and smaller; and, when he got close to it, it was no bigger or brighter than a glow-worm's tail, so he was left all in the dark; but just then the moon glided out from behind a cloud, and showed him that he

was on the very spot where the grass was smooth, and the fairy rings were, and where his neighbour wanted to have built his house.

As he stood still he thought he heard the sound of music, and a multitude of tiny voices singing together in chorus. He held his breath, and listened. He could clearly distinguish the following words,

"John Kann— John Kann
Is a very nice man:
He's a very nice man,
John Kann."

He looked about for some time to see whence the voices came. At length he saw down on the ground just before him a great number of very small little people dancing hand in hand round a ring, with red and purple caps upon their heads, and little petticoats and cloaks, that looked as if they were made of gossamer. They all looked so faint in the moonlight that he thought at first it had only been the moon shining upon the stalks of grass as they waved in the wind. How lucky it was that he had heard them singing, or he might have walked on, and trod upon half a dozen of them.

While he stood there, looking at the dance, there came up to him one that looked like a very wee child of about five years of age, but his face seemed full of fun and mischief. As he came up to John all the fairies left off dancing, and stood hand in hand in a half circle round, bowing and courtesying to him, saying,

"Mr. Puck — Mr. Puck,
Give John good luck.
He's come to see
The revelry
On the fairy lea,
And to dance on his toe,

As round we go.
As round we go."

"I don't see how I can manage to dance with you," said John, "without treading upon a good many of you, and crushing you to pieces; for you see I am at least twice as big as all of you put together."

Here little Master Puck put in his word.

"John Kann — John Kann,
You great big man,
Though broad and tall.
We'll make you small,
If you'll dance with me
On the fairy lea.
There's dust on the fern —
The lady's fern,
That waves o'er the burn.
Brown stripes are seen
On its leaves of green.
Go. Fetch."

Upon which six little fairies flew away; for they had all a sort of butterfly wings growing out from behind their shoulders, which John Kann had not observed before. After a short time they returned, each bringing in his hand a small acorn-cup full of a brown powder, looking very like snuff. Mr. Puck took a pinch of it; and, walking up to John Kann, said,

"Now — now
I'll shew you how
We make the tall
Grow small. Sit down
Upon the groun'

John Kann,
You tall man."

John Kann nodded assent, and squatted himself upon the turf without more ado. Puck immediately climbed up on his knee, and then reaching up as high as he could, he caught hold of the lowest button of John's waistcoat, and then scrambled up a little higher. At length he got one of his feet firmly planted upon the edge of his waistcoat-pocket, and resting the other upon one of his buttons, he said,

"Stoop, Mr. Kann,
You tall man."

John bowed his head as he was directed, and Puck immediately crammed some of the dust up his nostrils. John Kann gave a loud sneeze, so violent, indeed, that it shook his hat clean off his head, to John's great dismay, for he thought he must have crushed to death at least a dozen of his little friends. However, they all got out of the way quicker than thought; and, standing in a wide circle round him, they set up a loud shout the moment they heard him sneeze, and kept on cheering for some time. But, what was the most wonderful part of the whole, it seemed to him that the moment he sneezed he grew considerably smaller, shorter, and thinner; yet, as his clothes fitted him just as close, they must have grown smaller at the same time.

Mr. Puck administered another pinch of the powder. John Kann sneezed again, and instantly became a size smaller. The fairies set up another shout, hurrahing like wild things. Another pinch — another hurrah, — John had got again a size smaller. This was repeated until John Kann, had become a little thing, like his neighbours; upon which he said to his friend Puck,

"Please, Mr. Puck, don't make me any smaller, or I shall grow into

nothing at all, or I might run a dangerous risk of being eaten up by accident by a field-mouse."

To which Mr. Puck answered,

"That will do
For you — for you.
Now we'll dance.
And hop and prance
With John Kann,
The little man."

They immediately prepared for a dance round the ring, and a tiny piper seated himself cross-legged upon the top of a mushroom, and began playing a lively tune. Here there appeared to be a great scramble who should dance next to John Kann, and take his hand. But Mr. Puck soon bustled up, and set matters to rights, and they began their dance. It was curious they did not the first time form a complete circle, but the string of fairy-dancers only reached half round. They footed so many steps one way, and then so many steps the other, and then cut a sort of caper before, and then another caper behind. This they repeated a great many times, singing something in chorus which John Kann did not understand. But, the reason that they did not dance the whole circle appears to me to be more curious than anything else. It was John Kann's hat, — for, the hat having been jogged off before the brown powder had taken effect upon John, it had never been reduced in size at all, like the rest of John's clothes. The next dance, however, they changed the place, and danced the whole circle.

"I dare say, sir, that this is just the reason that one sees the fairy rings on the down not always completely round. A snail has been crawling about, or there has been something else that the fairies do not like to cross."

They had not danced long in the new circle before a little fairy came fluttering into the centre of the ring, pushing the dancers to the right and left, looking himself quite violet-colour in the face, probably from fear. He shouted as loud as he could, "A rat! a rat! a rat!" Mr. Puck then shouted,

"To arms, fairies! to arms!
No war's alarms
Shall make us fear."

The dancers left their ring, and ran about in all directions in search of arms. Some provided themselves with spears formed of the reed stems of the grass, carefully breaking off the ear that the shaft might be more pointed; some seized the dry prickles of gorse, which they held in their hands like daggers; others provided themselves with the crooked thorns of the brier.

Scouts were sent out in all directions, and small parties of the most active fairies were ordered to advance, and form pickets in different directions. Then followed a few minutes of awful suspense. John Kann was terribly frightened, and he wished with all his heart, that he had never come near the fairy-ground, or become acquainted with Mr. Puck. He at first thought of hiding himself under his own hat. But, to his utter dismay there was not room enough to creep under, and he found that he was not near strong enough to lift up the brim. At length he found a stalk of ragwort, and he contrived to climb up nearly as high as the yellow flower on the top. But this was by no means a place of safety. What, thought he, could be more likely than that the rat should smell him out, and just bite off his leg, to see how he tasted: or the rat might pull him down, and begin nibbling at his head, till he had ate him all up, like a raddish.

To be eaten up by a lion or a tiger was, to be sure, a dreadful thing; but then there was something grand in the idea. It would be put in all

the newspapers; and, no doubt an account of it would be engraved upon his tomb; and so his name be handed down to posterity. But, to think of having been sniffed with brown powder till one was only a few inches high, and then to be nibbled up by a rat like a piece of toasted cheese. It was horrible! horrible! If the rat really did come that way, he considered his death as certain. No rat of any sense or taste would think of eating one of those flimsy gossamer fairies, when he could find a real bit of substantial flesh and blood. Besides, if he should prefer a fairy, they were so much more active, and would be sure to get out of the way. The fairies, too, knew all the footpaths, and nooks and corners, amongst the blades of grass. And, as for what Mr. Puck called his arms, he never saw a more complete farce in his life. What would an old rat care for spears made of grass straw, or swords made of briar thorns. It was most ridiculous, and at the same time, most melancholy.

While John Kann was thus musing to himself, and lamenting his hard fate, he was suddenly roused by a great bustle among the fairies. The cause was evident:— one of the advanced-posts had been carried, and the picket had been driven in, and a number of fairies rushed back among the others, waving their arms above their heads, and shouting,

"He comes — he comes,
Sound the alarm.
With whiskers grey
As long as my arm,"

"All's lost! all's lost," thought John Kann; and he contrived to squeeze himself a little higher up into the yellow flower of the ragwort, upon which he was perched.

Quite different was the conduct of Mr. Puck. John Kann, however, merely attributed his courage to the fact of his feeling conscious

that he was not wholesome food for a rat. Mr. Puck flourished his truncheon above his head, and shouted,

"Spears to the front.
Couch your spears.
Tickle his nose
When he appears:
And poke his eye
When he comes nigh;
He'll sneeze and wink.
And turn round, I think;
And, here's that
For, the rat!"

Snapping his fingers as he repeated the last line.

"He's a fine little fellow," thought John Kann; "nevertheless, I heartily wish I was at home."

Presently the rat was seen approaching, bending the grass-blades to the right and left, as his huge carcass passed between them. What an awful state of suspense John Kann was in. Life and death seemed to hang upon a thread.

The rat came along very leisurely, without seeming at all to be aware that he was invading an enemy's territory. Neither did he appear to notice the fairies who were drawn up in battle array before him. At length, when two of the sharp points of the grass-stalks ran up his nostril, and one or two more went into his eye, he drew back a step or two, shook his head, and winked his eye. He then began to walk on again. The fairies were, if possible, this time still more courageous, and one of them, with his lance tipped with a gorse-prick, struck the rat full in the eye. The rat stepped back again, shook his head, and then, turning round, commenced his retreat. The light troops, armed with gorse pricks and briar thorns, now charged valiantly, hanging

upon his flanks and rear, sticking the weapons into him with all their might and main.

The retreating enemy was pinched and pricked until he squealed again. His retreat was not very rapid, for numbers of the fairy army endeavoured with their utmost strength to hold him back by the tail.

The retreat of the rat, sir, I hold to have been very bad generalship; for, it is very well known that whenever a person falls in with fairies, spirits, or goblins of any sort, whatever may be the danger of going on, there is always much greater danger in turning back.

The generalship of Mr. Puck, however, seems to me to have been capital; for, with a very weak force he defeated a powerful enemy, repulsing his attack twice, and then forcing him to retreat in a disgraceful manner.

When the enemy had been fairly driven out of the neighbourhood, the fairy militia threw away their arms, and, taking off their redcaps, gave three little shrill cheers, as loud, however, as they could hollow. Their caps, you must know, were made of the flowers of the foxglove, which gave them a very knowing appearance. John Kann had had one put on him as soon as his head had grown small enough to fit it. When they had done cheering one of them cried,

"The night is fair,
And the morning air
Is swinging the blue harebells;
And the moon's faint light.
Of the waning night
To the eye of the fairy tells."

The remainder of the fairies in full chorus continued,

"A court — a court!
Our latest sport.

Sing, faines, sing!
Blow, south wind, blow;
Grow, mushrooms, grow.
All in a ring!
And a mushroom broad
In the middle sward.
For Puck, the king.
And, in midst of all
A round puff-ball.
For John's sitting."

Presently a warm air came up from the sea, and the circle round which they had been dancing, was dotted all along with little round white spots. These kept growing larger and larger. John Kann could plainly perceive that they were young mushrooms coming up. They grew, and they grew, and they grew. It was quite surprising to see how fast they rose out of the earth. Presently they began to spread out their table-shaped tops, and gradually displayed their slender stalks. While all this was going on round the ring a large catsup mushroom and a puff-ball were gradually swelling themselves out side by side in the middle.

John Kann observed all this with astonishment, and his curiosity was still more excited at the puff-ball, which was diligently puffing itself out.

"What's the puff-ball for?" said John Kann. "Why mayn't I sit upon a mushroom, like the rest of you?"

To which question he received for answer, —

"Your eye,
By and by,
Will tell you why."

Mr. Puck then hopped in merrily, and took his seat crosslegged upon the large catsup mushroom in the centre, and motioning John Kann to the puff-ball by his side, he said,

"Sit, John,
The puff upon."

Which John Kann immediately did, while all the rest of Mr. Puck's courtiers took their seats upon the smaller and slenderer mushrooms that grew round the ring. Where the tops of these mushrooms had spread out flat, they squatted themselves cross-legged upon them; but where they were sugar-loaf shaped, they sat themselves upon the point, with their legs dangling down to the edge.

Puck now endeavoured to put as much solemnity as he could into his merry face, and then thus began,

"Fays, as I call, appear, appear!
Where's Primrose?" —
"Here, Puck, here." —
"Where have you and your party been.
You were not at our ring-dance seen?" —
"We have been wandering all the night.
Frisking in the pale moonlight.
Around the fire of the glowworm's tail.
And waging war on the horned snail.
We rode on the ripple of the stream.
And we soothed the lover in his dream;
We wove the vision so soft and bright,
That he clasp'd his pillow in delight.
We sought the couch of his lady love,
And hover'd in the air above.
You would have laugh'd. Sir Puck, to see
How we tickled her fantasy.

She oped her eyes with her sweetest grace.
As though she look'd in her lover's face;
Seem'd her inmost soul to lie

In the hidden depths of her deep dark eye.
I knelt me down on her arching brow.
And peep'd through her eye at her soul below;
And then a smile, and then a frown,
And then she turn'd her eyelids down;
Bosom and face blush'd crimson red.
And a long soft sigh from her bosom fled.
The miser dream'd of his stolen gold;
The shepherd has thought of his fleecy fold:
And thence we came our Puck to see
In his royal court on the fairy lea." —
"Where's Cobweb and his Fairies three?"—
"Here upon your right hand.
We have been footing it over the sea,
And footing it over the land.
We flutter'd down the vale,
And hover'd over the hill.
And our tiny wings did sail
Round every fairy rill.
We met with Goodman Place,
As he came half drunk from the fair,
We tickled his jolly red face
As we flew along through the air.
We met in the shade of the hill
With a honey-bee alone.
Just where the fairy rill
Is a moising* down the stone.
Where the lady's fern is green.
And the cowslips blooming fair.

Where the kingcup gold is seen.
And the violet scents the air.
He had stolen the sweets from the bower
That alone for us fairies grew.
And from many a quivering flower
Had shaken the morning dew.
He was far from the poison-stings.
And aid from his pirate crew,
So we held him fast by his wings.
And brought him here to you."

* Moising, - from the verb to moise, or trickle down, whence we get the word moist, or moised. The other parts of the verb are, however, not yet obsolete in the Isle of Wight.

Here there was a kind of buzzing and struggling heard among the long grass just by, and Cobweb's three assistants were seen dragging in by main force an unfortunate honey-bee. John Kann jumped down from his puff-ball, and ran to see the fun. As he went up close to the bee. Cobweb hollowed out,

"Take care of his sting,
John Kann,
Or he'll hurt your wing.
My man."

"My wing!" said John Kann; "that's a good one!"

However, he just looked round for curiosity sake, to see what the fairy alluded to. Never was man before so astonished as John Kann was when he saw two beautiful little pale rose-coloured butterfly-wings attached to his back, just behind his shoulders. "It's very funny," said he to himself. "I suppose they must be hooked on outside. They can never be fixed on my back, and me with my coat on the while." However, upon putting his hand behind, he felt that

there were two holes in his coat, just big enough to let the wings come through.

Could he move his wings? Flip flap, flip flap — they worked beautifully.

Could he fly with them? He tried. Up he went into the air as light as a thistle-down.

Should he fly home at once? Dangerous — dangerous, thought he; there are such a terrible number of hawks about. So, after taking two or three spiral skimmings in the air, he alighted down again upon his own proper puff-ball.

He found the fairies busily employed preparing their supper from the honey and bee-bread that they had taken from their prisoner. They had scraped the bee-bread from the thighs of the bee, and were rolling them up into very small balls, somewhat smaller than the many-coloured sugarplums that pastry cooks sell under the name of fairies' eggs. This name, however, is derived from a vulgar error. Fairies never lay any eggs at all. But the very little round balls that are sometimes found where fairies have been dancing and enjoying themselves, and been suddenly disturbed, are their loaves of bread, and not their eggs.

Some others of Puck's attendants had emptied the bee's honey-bag into an acorn-cup, and were diluting it with dew-drops, which they brought one drop at a time, rolling about upon the shining flower-leaf of the buttercup. The little fellow that was acting the part of punch-maker was steadily at work, stirring up the mess with the long stamen of a honeysuckle, till he considered it sufficiently diluted for the taste of fairies. Having completed it to his satisfaction, he took off his foxglove cap, he made a bow to Mr. Puck, and another to his guest, John Kann.

"Upon my word," said John Kann, "you really do not mean that we are all to sup out of that one acorn-cup, and have nothing more than those wee wee pills to eat? Why, small as I am, I could eat twice as much as all of it put together myself."

To which Mr. Puck replied,

"As we cannot get more victuals.
We must make the fairies little.
When we have become small
The supper it will do for Fairies all,
Grow small.
John Kann remains taller:
Dust him till he gets smaller."

Immediately the operation of throwing fine brown dust up Kann's nose was resumed, till he sneezed and sneezed, and grew smaller and smaller. At length, in consequence of his head diminishing in size, the foxglove cap that he wore slipped down over his face. A fairy by his side helped him to take it off, and to put on the flower of a blue harebell, which fitted his head to a T. Upon looking round, he perceived that all the fairies had changed their foxglove caps for bluebells, — their charms apparently having no power to reduce the size of real flowers, although they could vary their own statures at pleasure.

A very merry supper they had. Mr. Puck and his friends ate and drank, and danced and sung. It struck John Kann that many of them were getting a cup too much, and that Mr. Puck himself was beginning to be a little fuddled. However, before things went any farther, Mr. Puck nodded to a fairy that was standing close to him, with the long flower of a honeysuckle in his hand; upon which the fairy put the honeysuckle flower to his mouth, as if it had been a horn, and began trumpeting away upon it. John Kann could not say that the

sound was exactly like a trumpet; but certainly it was more like a trumpet than anything else that he knew of. The moment the merry company heard the trumpet they left off feasting and singing, and became instantly silent, grave, and sober.

Mr. Puck then turned to John Kann, and said,

"Mr. John Kann,
My little man,
Though fairies like honey,
Men like money.
Is it not so?
Is it not so?"

John Kann took off his harebell cap, made a bow, and said, "Just so."

Puck continued,

"The yellow gold,
Fair to behold.
Heavy in hand.
Doth men command.
Should you like such?
Should you like such?"

John Kann here made another bow, and answered, "Very much. But the fact is," he continued, "my most worshipful little gentleman, if you were to give me all the gold in the world, I am not big enough or strong enough to carry more than one seven-shilling piece at the outside, — that is to say, unless it is your pleasure to make me tall again before you hand me over the money."

Mr. Puck got very fidgety at this ill-timed interruption, and kept waving his hand backwards and forwards in token of his royal impatience. When John Kann stopped, he continued,—-

"There is a spot that you may see
When walking on the strand,
Half the day beneath the sea,
And half upon the land.
You shall know when the morning sun
Is shining fierce and bright.
Where the treasure must be won
By the gold grains glistening bright.
The spot is marked by a stone
Pierced right through and through.
Talk not of this — go there alone,
Or bid the treasure *adieu*."

John Kann here stood up again, and made another bow. Upon which Mr. Puck said,

"Puff-ball, turn brown—
John Kann, sit down."

The puff-ball immediately began changing from its snow-white colour, as if it had been baking in an oven, and the outer skin became shrivelly all over, and when John Kann sat down again, it burst as if its covering had been no stronger than a cobweb, and immediately he was enveloped in a cloud of dust, which got into his eyes and made them smart so, that for a long time he was completely blinded. When, by dint of rubbing and rubbing his eyes, he began to see a little again, he was surprised to find all his fairy companions flown, and himself restored to his original size, sitting alone on the little level spot on the hill side, which has been described before. The sun was shining bright and clear.

"I will have a look for the gold, at any rate," thought he, "before I return home."

He descended the hill, and walked along the shore, as he had been

directed. The tide was low, and the rays of the morning sun were reflected brightly on the wet sand. After a little search, he found a large flint stone with a hole in it, lying by itself upon the level smooth sand. The sand thereabouts certainly did appear to glisten rather more than elsewhere; he took some up in his hand, and found a number of little bright grains amongst it.

"This is gold, then," said he to himself, as he cut a caper in the air from very joy. "What a lucky fellow I am! or, as my friend Mr. Puck would say,

"John Kann, Lucky man!

"It strikes me that, if I had lived in fairy society a little longer, I should have learned to talk poetry myself. But how am I to become possessed of all this gold without anybody else finding it out? — for Mr. Puck said particularly, that if anybody else found it out, there would be no more gold for me."

After turning the matter over in his mind for some time, he thought that his best plan would be to make a show of turning fisherman and collector of shells. So he bought a few lobster-pots, and set them about among the rocks in the neighbourhood, and kept a collection of ornamental shells in his window for sale; which was indeed a very poor trade in those days, whatever it may be now.

But whenever he went down to the sea side he took with him a small tub, in which he used to put sand and water, and then shake it about for some time, so that the grains of gold, being heavier than the sand, would collect together at the bottom. He used afterwards to cover the gold up with limpets and periwinkle-shells, and walk home.

Three or four times a year he used to take a trip to London to sell his gold dust, and return to the island as rich as a Jew. The neigh-

bours wondered how he made his lobster and shell trade turn out so profitably. However, nobody guessed at the fact.

Well, John Kann got richer and richer. At length he bethought himself of taking a wife to share his wealth and happiness. A rich man, as it is well known, has never much difficulty in procuring a helpmate, and John was a handsome man besides; so Betty Spooner shortly became Betty Kann. Betty, like the rest of her sex, was constantly harassed by that restless and troublesome demon curiosity. While there remained anything that she was not made fully acquainted with, she was quiet neither day nor night. She listened at keyholes, peeped into letters, cross-questioned everybody; sometimes pretending to know everything about an affair, by way of a trap to catch the unwary; or inventing a lie, by way of bait to fish for the fact with. It is but justice to her memory to say, that she did not take all this trouble and tell so many falsehoods for any selfish or interested purpose. On the contrary, she appeared to be actuated purely by public-spirited and philanthropic motives. If there was any story or bit of scandal that she thought would tend to the amusement or instruction of the neighbourhood, she endeavoured to become possessed of the treasure solely that she might distribute it among the world at large. As for keeping a thing to herself, she never had been known to do so selfish a thing in her life.

All the neighbourhood felt convinced that Betty Spooner had been induced to marry John Kann chiefly for the purpose of discovering the secret how he contrived to get richer and richer, while every one round him remained poor. However, it is quite certain that she refused a much better match to marry John Kann. Her husband was for a long time proof against all cross-questioning, notwithstanding which she contrived, bit by bit, to poke the whole secret out. But with great discretion, instead of making it known to all the neigh-

bourhood, she only told it to three or four of her chief friends and gossips, under a promise of the strictest secrecy.

Notwithstanding all these precautions, when John Kann went to work a day or two afterwards, he found a number of persons there, busily washing the sand. They did indeed find a very few grains of gold at first starting; but ever since that time neither John Kann nor anybody else has thought it worth his while to wash the sand in Puckaster Cove.

Never marry a gossiping wife.

# Puckaster Cove Fairy Tale

*This was my original — in the sense of first attempt at — retelling Abraham Elder's Puckaster fairy tale. If you go round the coast from Ventnor towards St Catherine's Point, you'll come to Binnel Bay, and Puckaster Cove. Now as I'm sure you all know, Puck, or pooka, is an old English word meaning "goblin" or perhaps, fairy. And that gives a clue as to the nature of this tale. Now, back in the twelfth century, there were no real roads around that part of the island, but there were footpaths, parts of which remain to this day. Pilgrims would land at Puckaster Bay and make their way up the cliff and along the Cripple Path, pass by Niton and go up to the holy well at Whitwell; and then they'd return along St Radegund's path, back to Puckaster Cove. A twelfth century circular walk, if you will.*

As you might expect, these paths could be treacherous, particularly at night, and about a mile from the cove there was a place that was, by turn, marshy, and boggy, and bordered by brambles. And at night, over that place, could often be seen Jack o'Lanterns, will-o-the-wisps, warning away the unwary. But in the midst of that inhospitable place was a wide, flat green space, and if you ever had chance to look at it, you'd likely as not be able to see fairy rings there. For that was the place where King Puck, the king of fairies, would hold court.

Now, one time, John Kann, who lived not far from the fairy rings, was chatting to one of his friends who lived nearby with his fam-

ily, and who was due to be married. "I surely need to build a new house," the man said, "for me and my new wife to live in", and he described the flat green space as being the ideal place.

"Are you mad?", said John Kann, "that's no place for the likes of you, nor me"; and he convinced his friend that to build a house there would be folly indeed and would surely invite no end of trouble; that the fairy folk would not take politely to their meeting place being invaded, that bad things would happen to the man and his wife, that their children would be replaced by changelings, and suchlike.

The man was persuaded, and found land for a house elsewhere, and when the time came for the wedding, John Kann was invited. At the end of the celebrations that night, and a fine celebration it was too, John Kann set out to follow a friend of his who'd left just a few moments earlier, with a lantern to guide the way.

John saw the light up and ahead, and started to follow it, but before long, he realised he wasn't taking the path he'd expected to take, particularly as it appeared to start to lead him through a patch of brambles; and then he realised that the light had stopped. And that it wasn't as bright as he'd thought, because he was closer to it than he thought. And that he was stood on the ground that his friend had wanted to build his house on. The fairy ground. And then, he heard something. It sounding like singing, or, no, a chant:

> John Kann, is a very nice man,
> He's a very nice man, is Mr John Kann.

And John looked around. And saw nothing.

And then he looked down. And he saw people. Tiny people. Tiny people dancing around and singing, chanting:

> John Kann, is a very nice man,
> He's a very nice man, is Mr John Kann.

Now John was taken aback by this, as you might be, particularly because the tiny folk seem to know who he was; and then they invited him to join them in the dance.

Now, John was much much bigger than they were, and he stuttered that he was afraid he might step on them, but they said "no problem, no problem at all" and two of them started to climb up his trousers carrying something between them, something, a cup, an acorn cup, and as they got closer he saw there was something in the cup. It looked like: snuff. At once, a pinch of snuff flicked into one nostril, and he sneezed, and he sneezed so strongly that his hat flew off. Then another pinch, and another violent sneeze, and he looked at his hat. It was much larger than he expected: a trick of the light maybe. Then another pinch, another sneeze, and John realised that with each pinch, with each sneeze, he got shorter, and his clothes shrank as he did, until he was just the size of one of the wee little folk.

John looked at his hat, which had fallen off with the first sneeze, and it was now much larger than him. But to replace, one of the fairies popped a new hat, a foxglove flower hat, onto his head, and pulled him into the dance.

And how they danced.

After a while, now breathless, King Puck called order. There were now many more fairies than John Kann had originally remembered seeing, and Puck called on the newcomers to report on what mischief they had been up to. For fairies are a mischievous folk and like nothing better than playing pranks, particularly at night. And with each report, the King laughed and called for the next. Until at last, one fine young fairy, flushed with enthusiasm, explained how they had managed to catch a bee.

"Splendid", called Puck, "then we shall feast well tonight", and the

bee was brought in, its wings strapped to its body with fine gossamer thread. And from the bee's legs, the fairy folk collected bee bread; and from it's honey sack, they collected honey into an acorn cup, into which they added fresh dew water, and made a fine punch from it.

Now, as they did this, John Kann looked on, and he said: "I may not be as big as I was, but that is surely not enough food or drink to go round" and Puck looked at him and laughed, and said, "not as we are, maybe" and the snuff was passed round again, and the fairies made themselves, and John Kann, even smaller. And as they sneezed, their foxglove hats fell off; and they replaced them with bluebell hats. And the food that had been collected from the bee was now more than plenty enough to go round. And so they sat on the mushrooms that had started to pop up in a circle around them, and John Kann was given pride of place, sat on what seemed to him a giant puff ball, next to the king.

After they had feasted, Puck turned to John Kann and said: " 'Fairies like honey, but men like money'. Is that true, John Kann, is that true?" And John said that yes, indeed, money was a good thing to have. And Puck asked him: "and do men like gold, too, the most of all?" and John said that yes, gold was surely a precious thing to behold, but that, if he were to be given any gold at all, at the size he was, that would be a trifling amount in the world of men, and …

"Enough, John Kann, enough," said Puck, "we will thank you properly, be sure of that", and he explained to John that if he were to go down to Puckaster Cove, and search there at dawn, where the beach was land half the day, and underwater the rest, that there he would find a flat stone, with a hole right through it, a stone we perhaps know as a witch's stone today. And if he were there as the sun was rising, and if he looked through the hole in the stone, he would see,

there in the sand, grains of gold too. And the gold would be there, each day, at dawn, if the tide allowed it. But that if he ever told anyone where he was getting the gold, that would be the end of it.

And with that, the puff ball under John Kann seemed to explode and he was thrown the ground, and his bluebell hat was thrown off him too… And when he looked around he saw… he saw that dawn was coming up; and next to him, he saw his hat. But not a giant hat, a normal sized hat. And of the fairies, there was no sight. Just a fairy ring of newly grown mushrooms.

Well, John got up, and brushed himself down, and wondered at the strange dream he had just had, and set to, to walk home; but as he did so, he noticed a gap in the fairy ring where his hat had been; and in the center of the ring, a burst puff ball; and next to that, a bluebell flower. And scattered around were other flower heads: foxgloves, and bluebells.

There being no-one around, John just wondered, wondered to himself whether there might be something in the story that now came to mind; about the Cove, and of the flat stone with a hole he might find there. And it was a nice morning for a walk after all. And so he went down the path, down the path to Puckaster Cove — and the tide was out – and he started to make his way along the beach, scraping it to left and to right as he made he way. And then, he saw it. A stone. A flat stone. A flat stone with a hole right through it. And as he picked the stone up, he just scuffed the sand a bit more with his shoe, a bit deeper, and looking round, self-consciously, to check no-one was watching, he lifted the stone to his eye, and peered through the hole. And he noticed something glint, something glisten, or glister, as Shakespeare might say. And, he bent down, and, and it was a grain of gold. And John Kann found himself humming, humming a tune…

John Kann, is a very lucky man,
He's a very lucky man, is Mr John Kann.

And each morning, when the tide was right, and as the sun came up, John Kann would wander down to the beach, and put the stone to his eye, and then put a handful of sand in a tub he'd carry with him. And as he'd wash the sand, the gold would gather there, at the bottom of the tub. And to hide the gold, he'd collect shells, and shellfish, and place those in the tub too. And he'd effect to sell the pretty shells, the ornamental shells, by placing them in his window. And he'd sell the shellfish too. And twice a year, he'd go up to London, supposedly to sell the best of the shells, but really to sell the gold, in secret, remembering what Puck had told him about not revealing the source of his wealth. And folk would wonder about how he seemed to be able to get such a good price from a few old shells from those silly folk in London, who obviously had more money than sense.

And by and by, a particular lady of the parish, a one person news-feed, which is to say, a well-meaning but selfless gossip, slowly weedled her way into John Kann's affections, driven in one part by his wealth, but in another by a deep seated curiosity about how he was really coming by it.

And after a while, she married him.

But still he told her nothing.

And then, one day, after weeks, after months, of being asked what he was doing, how could those shells be worth so much in London when they sold so poorly at home, she got the secret out of him.

"Just don't go around telling everyone", he told her, "or it will come to an end".

And she didn't tell everyone, to her credit. Just one or two of her

closest friends. Friends who could likewise be trusted to be discreet, if not actually keep the secret.

And so it was: the next day, when John went down to the beach, with the tide out, and the dawn rising, there were a great many people down on the beach. In fact, there were people everywhere… And whilst some of them may have found a few grains of gold that day, there was none there the next. Nor on any day thereafter.

And that is the end of the story.

# Historical Notes

According to William Henry Davenport Adams, author of the rather splendidly entitled 1884 work, *Nelson's Handbook to the Isle of Wight: its history, topography and antiquities: with notes upon its principal seats, churches, manoral houses, legendary and poetical associations, geology and picturesque localities*, the natural landing site of Puckaster Cove might well have played an important role in the export of Cornish tin from the Island:

> *Evidence exists in the local appellations that a great highway, or main road, once traversed the island from Gurnard Bay — through Rue Street, Gonneville and Carisbrooke — to Niton, where may even now be traced the remains of a large Celtic encampment. Close to Niton is Puckaster Cove, a natural harbour, well adapted to shelter the light craft of the Greek and Phoenician merchants who traded with the British for their valuable metal. … There can be little doubt but that Carisbrooke was originally a British settlement, and that it commanded or overawed the great highway of the tin trade which crossed the island from Gurnard Bay to Puckaster Cove ... in the old times a station of the Roman fleet.*

Adams also reveals that the church registers at Niton bears testament to a royal visitor:

> *The following entry is of historical value:— "July the 1st, Anno Domini 1675, Charles II, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, etc., came safely ashore at Puckaster, after he had endured a great and dangerous storm at sea.*

In *The Undercliff of the Isle of Wight*, John L. Whitehead also suggests that in millenia past, Puckaster Cove played an important role in the Island's export business:

> *An early writer states "That the Roman fleets cruised in the Channel or stationed themselves at the Isle of Wight." Inferentially the one place having a name, evidently Roman in its derivation, situated on the south side of the island, associated with the foregoing statement, must have been at Puckaster. It would be interesting to learn when the modern name was first used. The place is first mentioned in a survey of Niton, taken 6 James I (1608), where a "close" of eight acres is called Puckester. [Aug. Off., Miscl Books, vol. 431, ff. 32-47.] The allied name of Puckwell occurs in 1602, applied to a smaller enclosure. A later and more exhaustive survey was taken in 1799, when a small farm on the sea front in the immediate vicinity, "Ward's" or "Weird's" farm, has an enclosure of eleven acres named Port Castor, whilst an adjoining farm—Buddle—is described as being near Port Castor.*
>
> *The name of Buddle, given to the farm where the tin mart was situated, is singularly suggestive, meaning, in mining phraseology, "a large square frame of boards used in washing metalliferous ore." "The tin mart Itself," says Mr. Kell, "was situated in a most*

*sheltered spot in a part of the Niton fields, near to Puckaster, where the tin merchants might draw up their carts and arrange their sales with the foreign purchasers." The metal was afterwards shipped on to the Phoenician galleys from the natural harbour in the cove, now nearly effaced by the Channel waves. This cove was probably "large enough in those days to harbour a Roman fleet which was under the command of the 'Comes Littoris Saxonici,' or 'Count of the Saxon shore.'"*

*A line of castles had been built and garrisoned by a Roman legion, which was placed under the command of the Count in the 4th century.*

*"Besides holding the important fortress of Carisbrooke, the Romans in all probability had a camp at Puckaster at the extreme point of the line along which the tin passed, to protect the mart at Niton, and the embarkation of the metal from Puckaster Cove." [Adams, I. W., part iii, Antiqt., pp. 224-8, E. Kell.] Albin indeed alludes to the existence of "an artificial mound of earth of considerable height now called the 'Old Castle' which still remains a little west of the cove, on the most accessible part of the shore. Tradition affirms that this is the spot where the tin was deposited and shipped." [Albin's I. W., p.577 (publ. 1795)] Overlooking these lower fields is a small farm anciently named "Wards" or "Weirds," a name possibly derived from an early Saxon word having some relation to the defensive work known as "the Old Castle" which stood near. A gold coin of Maximus was found in the cliff above it.*

Returning to Adams', let's see in a bit more detail what he has to say about the tin trade in Nelson's *Handbook to the Isle of Wight*:

> *For Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian, also speaks of an island, named Ictta, whither the Britons conveyed the tin dug from the mines of Cornwall — as to a central depot — until it could be removed to France, and afterwards dispersed over the Continent.*
>
> *The Greek historian [see Diod. Sicul. V. 2] also records that this tin was conveyed from the mainland in carts, "at low tide all being dry between it and the island," and from this passage, and from a reference immediately preceding it, to the promontory of Bolerium (the Land's End), it has been conjectured that St, Michael's Mount is really the Ictis alluded to by Diodorus Siculus. But a recent writer [see Journ. Brit. Arch. Assoc.] has attempted to demonstrate that the ancient Ictis is the modern Wight, and we offer a brief summary of his arguments for the consideration of the reader:—*
>
> *I. It is true that now, at low water, no cart could cross from shore to shore; but then it is evident that great natural changes have taken place in the configuration of the northern coast of the island since the days of Diodorus Siculus; and it is well known that formerly between Anglesea and the mainland lay certain shallows, though now the Menai waters render it inaccessible to the pedestrian.*
>
> *II. There is evidence in the local appellations that a great highway, or main road, once traversed the island from Gurnard Bay — through Rue Street, Gonneville*

> *and Carisbrooke — to Niton, where may even now be traced the remains of a large Celtic encampment. Close to Niton is Puckaster Cove, a natural harbour, well adapted to shelter the light craft of the Greek and Phoenician merchants who traded with the British for their valuable metal.*
>
> *III. The Greek Ictis may evidently be traced in the Latin Vectis, and this similarity of sound may be accepted as no inconsiderable proof of the validity of our argument.*
>
> *IV. And there is conclusive evidence that St. Michael's Mount could never have been the Ictis of the tin-merchants, because — in the Celtic era — it was not an island, even at high water. Florence of Worcester says, "It was originally enclosed, in a very thick wood, distant from the sea six miles," and its separation from the mainland only occurred, according to the Saxon Chronicle, in 1099. For these reasons, then, we think it may finally be concluded that the Isle of Wight was the ancient Ictis, and the great depot of the famous tin trade.*

Perhaps in the framing of Elder's tale, there is some surfacing of a folk memory of a (fairy) fort, or of finding golden coins, or other valuable metals, along the beach at Puckaster? Or perhaps Elder just made the whole tale up completely?!

Whitehead also remarks on the association of St Radegund with the area:

> The parish of Whitwell comprised, in the Undercliff extension, the three estates of Old Park, Mirables, and Wolverton, belonging to the De Estur family. A member of this family built and endowed the north chapel

> for the use of the tenants on their Undercliff estates, and dedicated it to St. Radegund — the patron saint of the De Estur family.

He also tells something of her story:

> St. Radegund was a German princess, daughter of Bortaire, King of rhuringia, but living in France for many years, having been taken captive at the age of ten, and falling to the share of Clotaire, King of Soissons, was married to him, an unwilling bride, at eighteen. The riotous court life of that period caused the princess to withdraw from the court, and being of an ascetic frame of mind, to devote her time and fortune to the relief of the suffering poor around her. On her brother being violently put to death the princess claimed her liberty, and after passing from one religious house to another she finally proceeded to take the veil, a.d. 594, at Poitiers, within the domains of her husband, who gave to her the land on which a nunnery might be built, and money sufficient for all her need. These large funds were devoted to the maintenance of the nunnery with its two hundred inmates, mostly drawn from the highest ranks. In her humility the office of abbess was declined, the lady being content to perform the lowliest, meanest, and hardest duties of the big household. Despite this Radegund was no less a queen in her convent, for she ruled over the community, prescribing the rigorous measures for prayers and fasting with the necessary recreations. Her tender care for the lepers under her charge called forth the most urgent remonstrances. Notwithstanding the terrible and continued austerities she practised, the princess lived to be nearly seventy,

and, after her death, was sincerely mourned over and laid to rest, hard by the convent of which she had been the Superior for thirty years or more, “honoured in life and mourn’d in death.”