

## PEG O'THE WELL

Mistress Starkie sat by her youngest son's bed. In the early hours he had had one of his fits, tossing from side to side, his eyelids fluttering. Now he had settled and she held his hand.

They had tried every doctor for fifty miles around, and nothing had worked. She knew whose fault it was: Peg O'Neil. It often felt as if the wooden statue of the ever young and beautiful Peg, that stood near the spring by the river, was the real Mistress of Waddow Hall. For as long as she could remember, everyone in the hall had blamed Peg for everything and still she stood there, mocking them all.

By the morning, she had decided to send for a preacher who was known for his faith healing.

The day after, she sat at the window, looking out for him. It was about three in the afternoon when the wind dropped. The birds stopped singing and the pale cloudy sky took on a preternatural mauve tinge. Fingers of grey blue mist trailed low over the fields. Then the wind returned, this time in sharp wild gusts. It sent weather vanes spinning. Open doors slammed shut. The sky grew darker, becoming a bruised glow of green and violet. The air felt charged as though something was about to happen. Someone screamed over by the river.

"Quick," cried Mistress Starkie, "Fetch help. It must be the preacher. He should have been here by now."

Fifteen minutes later, two of the servants carried the preacher into the kitchen. One of them dragged his sodden coat from his shoulders. They sat him down next



to the range and brought blankets. His long dark hair straggled over his shoulders and he shook uncontrollably. Cook brought him a cup of hot ale with brandy and held it for him until the shivering stopped.

Mistress Starkie came in and pulled up a chair. She stared into his face, her eyes narrowed.

"What happened?"

He looked at her.

"I was coming to the Hipping stones at Brungerley..." His voice was shaking and he took a moment. "...the river was calm and the stones were high out of the water."

Mistress Starkie waited while he drank some more.

"I was half way over when a huge gust of wind hit me, and then I heard it coming. A great wave was on me, over my head. I lost my footing and went under, rolling through the water. I managed to grab a tree root from the bank. That's where they found me."

Mistress Starkie stood up. It was Peg. They said she took a soul every seven years into the river, but not this time, and never again.

"Fetch lanterns and an axe NOW," she shouted.

A few minutes later, a small procession marched through the grounds. The wind was still strong though the sky was lighter now.

Peg's expression was as calm and gentle as always. Mistress Starkie took the axe from the gardener. Everyone stepped back as she swung it as high as she could. It struck Peg's neck and sent her wooden head rolling into the pool. The wind shrieked and everyone was silent as the head bobbed and spun in the water.

No one knows if the son was cured, but a spell was certainly broken that night. From then on, whenever anything went wrong, people attacked the remains of the statue with axes and knives, chipping away until in the end there was nothing left, and no one to blame.