

A Magpie's Tale

By Phil Young

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Far away on the other side of the world the villagers tell a story of how the Magpie came to be and this is how it goes...

It was many, many years ago, in a long forgotten time of myth and magic, before a lot of the wonderful animals of the Earth had come into being, that there lived an old wizard. No one knew quite how old he was, but he seemed to have lived forever, all alone in an old house out in the woods.

While having magic powers could be fun and profitable, it was no substitute for having company and he was lonely. In fact he had been lonely as long as he could remember. This was because the people of the villages beyond the woods, had all grown up hearing dark stories about the old man, most of which weren't true, but still they heeded the warnings of their parents never to go deep into the trees where they might come across him or his home.

One day however, Magrita, a starving orphan girl, had strayed beyond the edge of the woods and into the dark corners between the trees looking for mushrooms, when dusk fell and she found that she was lost. It being Autumn with the cold months of Winter fast approaching, the night air soon felt cold and damp and a mist began to cling to the mossy stumps and ferns, concealing she knew not what. Quickly she hurried on in the direction she hoped would lead her back to the village.

Soon she came across a path and with a sigh of relief she turned and trotted off through the undergrowth not knowing that it was taking her deeper into the woods.

After what seemed like an hour or so Magrita decided that the direction she was going would not lead her out of the trees and as the very last rays of daylight snuck through the cracks between the tree trunks she made to turn around.

Just then she smelt smoke, and peering ahead she could vaguely see a light flickering in the distance. For

a moment, but only for a moment, she looked back up the path she had come and then at the beckoning light, trying to decide which way to go. The woods looked dark and dangerous, the light promised warmth and shelter. The choice seemed obvious and she moved off towards the distant glow.

Within minutes she came to the old man's house, protected by a low fence with a covered gate that stood ajar.

Through the window she could see the glow of the fire that produced the smoke she had smelled. No one seemed to be around. She slipped through the gate and approached the door. The big brass ring rang out as she swung it three times against the knocker.

There was no sound inside. Magrita tried again and when there was no answer, she cautiously moved inside.

The hallway was long and dark, the only light came from under the door to the room where the fire burned, warm and bright. The far end of the passage was hidden in the night, but she could just discern odd objects hanging at intervals along the walls on each side. She shivered a little and turned to tap on the door to what seemed to be the main room.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Snooooooooore", came the reply.

She jumped. It was not the response she had expected.

'Snore, grunt, snuffle, snore'. Obviously someone was fast asleep before the fire.

Magrita moved back towards the front door and looked outside. The woods were pitch black and she could feel rain on the way. Leaves shuffled round restlessly as the evening breeze picked them up, as it

swept the mist into piles down in the hollows. There was no going out there again, so she straightened herself up, tapped gently again and entered the room.

It was a large space, lined with bookshelves and pigeonholes stacked with wooden handled scrolls, brown and worn at the exposed ends. On one wall was a large wardrobe and in the centre of the room, a huge table had papers spread out on it, held in place by large lumps of vari-coloured crystals. In front of the window was an elaborately carved lectern over the front and sides of which crawled carvings of all manner of creepy creatures, their limbs entwined about each other. The sight did not make her feel good at all and she quickly reversed her decision to seek shelter in this place.

As she spun round to leave, her sack full of mushrooms swung free and brushed across a sideboard on which stood a row of flasks. With a loud crash, several of them were dashed upon the floor, their contents flowing together in the cracks between the flagstones. Vile smells and colourful vapours began to rise from the bubbling floor. Magrita stepped back in reaction bumping up against something big and soft that she could have sworn wasn't there a few seconds ago. She was right, it wasn't. The something big and soft was the recently snoring occupant of a large chair that stood in the shadows on the far side of the fireplace. He had leapt to his feet at the sound of breaking pottery and now stood glaring down at the maid. He grabbed her arms in his large, gnarled hands, the long fingernails pressing into her skin through the rough fabric of her sleeves. She tilted her head back, looked up and gave a start at the upside down sight of his craggy features.

“Ah!”

“Harrumph!” came the reply.

He pushed her roughly to one side, strode across to the window and opened the shutters, allowing the cool night breeze in to waft away the fumes. Reaching into a nearby cupboard he grabbed a jug, checked the label and removed the stopper before pouring it sparingly over the spill on the floor. The bubbling stopped and except for the crackling of the fire, silence returned to the scene as he checked that the accident had caused no lasting damage.

“Here girl.” He said. “Let’s look at you.”

Timorously Magrita stepped forward from where she leaned against a side table and into the dim light of the candle, not sure what to expect. As an orphan she had not been warned constantly about the old man of the woods but his long, dark robes, shaggy beard and wizened face made her cautious about getting too close. She had no choice however as he stepped up to her, and physically turning her around he examined her carefully.

“Have you always had this horn growing out of your back”, he asked.

Of course she had no such thing, but the comment made her jump once again.

“Horn? What horn?” She pulled free of his grip and tried reaching up between her shoulder blades. She felt nothing, not even a small lump.

He laughed. An unexpectedly pleasant sound, but one that seemed to squeeze it’s way out of his throat, as if it didn’t quite remember the way, having not been let out for many a year.

“You are a nervous one, aren’t you?”

“Well, you’re a bit....scary actually.”

“Oh, I see. Been listening to tales in the village then have we?”

“No. I don’t talk much to people in the village.”

“What about your parents then?”

“I don’t have any parents. They died years ago.”

“Then how do you live?”

“Sell mushrooms, wild fruit, beg. Whatever I can get.”

“Hmmm.” The old man stroked his beard thinking for a minute. “Can you cook?”

“Yes.”

“How would you like a job then? I live here by myself, but I’m getting on now and things aren’t as easy to do as they used to be. You could stay here, and look after the house and cooking for me. In return you’d have all the food and comforts you need? There’s a cat or two for company too. Do you like cats?”

“I’ve never had a cat, but I suppose so.”

“Well, you can’t go anywhere at this time of night in any case. I’ll show you where you can sleep and you can think about it over night and see how you feel in the morning and don’t worry, I’ll give you a key to lock your door in case you’re worried. Come on.”

He lit a candelabra and she followed him down the corridor to a room at the back of the house. Shadows played across the objects on the walls as they passed. Most of them were small carvings, of faces, man and beast, and some were framed documents, maps and diagrams. She didn’t look too hard but kept her eyes ahead on the light.

“There you go. Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“I’ll bring you something in a minute or two”, and he left the light on the bedside table of the small

bedroom where Magrita now sat on the bed, and went out.

She sat with her hands in her lap thinking about the strange turn of events, more than a little bit worried.

Turning it over in her mind she realised there really was very little choice. She had been careless in letting herself be caught so far into the woods at dusk and now this was the result. In fact, she was probably lucky to have stumbled on the place or she would have been left out in the chill of the night without any shelter and now she could hear the faint patter of raindrops on the roof. 'Yes, very lucky', she thought and shivered a touch at the thought of sitting wet and cold in the undergrowth. 'Also', she thought, 'he doesn't seem too bad. At least he's got a sense of humour, and at that age he can't be too troublesome.' She looked at the door where a large key protruded from her side of the lock. 'Good'. She arose to lock it when he knocked on the other side.

"Here you are. Just a little bread and cheese... and milk. I hope that'll do for now."

"Thank you very much. You're very kind."

"No trouble lass. Good night, I'll see you in the morning" and he shuffled off down the hall way leaving Magrita alone to listen to the rain.

She went over to the window, and wiping it with her sleeve, peered out into the darkness. Everything was pitch black except for the odd flash as the candle light reflected off rain drops on the rose bush beside the house. She shuddered a little and moving back to the bed she ate the meagre meal and fell asleep.

The next morning Magrita woke to bright sunshine falling on the quilt. She felt warm and rested. Looking around the room she saw a cosy little nest, with a

small fireplace in the corner, a big cupboard and the other usual pieces of bed room furniture. She could imagine herself living comfortably in such a place. Much better than the half collapsed cottage outside the village where she'd been staying for the past few years, with barely enough shelter to hide from the stones of the local boys. All in all it might be a good place to be, away from the taunts and the stares of the villagers, warm, cosy and fed, and with someone for company.

She had spent most of her life by herself surviving on her wits and a healthy dose of suspicion, but somehow it didn't occur to her that her usual caution was slipping away.

She turned the key and stepped out into the hallway. The back door was open and sunlight streamed down the passage. In the light of day it looked much less frightening, in fact it looked downright normal. Wafting in from the garden she smelled the aroma of pipe tobacco.

Moving to the threshold she looked out onto a substantial, and colourful garden where her host sat in a large garden chair, smoking and reading a big book, with a self satisfied look on his face. Around him grew all manner of vegetables, flowers, bushes and trees, most of which she'd never seen before.

"Good morning!" she called.

He quickly shut the book and looking round, he smiled at her.

"Good morning Lass. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes thank you. Very well."

"There's porridge on the stove and bread and things on the table, if you'd like some. If there's anything else you'd like, just look around. There's plenty of fruit here in the garden. Pick whatever you want."

Magrita's gaze scanned the garden, noticing for the first time that nearly all the plants were laden with ripe produce. She wandered over to a plum tree, picked a juicy looking specimen and continued her walk around the plot while eating it. She was right. It was juicy, in fact nicer than any plum she'd ever stolen in the past. She beamed over at the old man.

"Have something else. Go on", he urged and moving along the farthest fence line, she picked an Orange and tried to bite into it.

"Urgghh!", she'd never seen an Orange before and didn't know it had to be peeled first.

"Bring it here Lass. I'll show you. By the way what do they call you?"

"They call me all sorts of things. Usually nasty things, but my name's Magrita. What do they call you?"

"Oh they call me all sorts of things too. A bit like you, but you can call me Wyckham, or Uncle Wyck if you like."

"Wyckam will be fine."

"As you wish."

She sat down on a convenient stone beside him and they sat in the morning sunshine and talked about this and that. As the time drifted by Magrita began to feel a warmth for the old man who, like her, had been living on the edge of society as long as he could remember. He spent his days in his books writing and researching or pottering around the garden, never venturing out of sight of the house, seeing only the occasional passing traveller through the trees on the distant trail.

The house and garden lay in a hollow in the woods with a clear stream running by the back fence and the trees and ridges sheltered the glade from wind and

wild weather. Even in winter it was warm enough for plants to bloom and fruit, or so Wyckam said.

“I have everything I need for a comfortable life here” he concluded.

“What about meat. You do eat meat don’t you?”

“Oh no. Fruit and vegetables can be quite enough, but if I want milk or butter, I just call in one of the wild nanny goats from the woods. It’s getting harder though as I get older, that’s where you could help. Have you thought about what I said last night?”

Magrita was about to say that she didn’t think it was a good idea, and then she looked around at the slice of paradise about her and at the old man. Everything she had struggled so long for to survive was at her fingertips and what would a bit of work around the place be compared to the constant conniving, sneaking and scratching around for a living she’d had to put up with. Also, she’d be far away from the sneers and shouts of the villagers. A bit of peace and quiet would be nice. All in all it didn’t look like too bad a deal after all.

“Maybe I could stay a few days and see how it goes. Would that suit you?”

“Very well lass...Magrita. You just settle in and let me know if there’s anything you need.

Magrita settled in quickly and with instruction from Wyckam, was soon doing the little things around the place that he was beginning to find hard to do. Not having lived in a regular family situation, domestic chores were new to her, but she took to them with ease and found the simple routine welcome and reassuring. Before long, the old man and the young girl felt right at home with each other and totally at ease in each other’s company. During the day Magrita would work about the house and kitchen and

sometimes in the garden while Wyckham bustled around in his way, in an out and round the place, but mainly in the big study at the front of the house. He seemed to discourage his young companion from entering there, except to call him to eat, or such like and she didn't have to clean in there. Sometimes she'd call to him from the door and not hearing a reply, she'd enter to find him not there even though she could have sworn that was where he should have been. She'd wander off looking for him and soon he'd turn up again, apparently from the study, asking why she'd called. Sometimes there'd be squeaking or scuffling noises in the roof when he was missing. "Just mice", he'd say when she queried him and having slept many a night with worse than that around, Magrite would let the topic drop.

Soon she forgot that she had only intended to stay a couple of days and came to feel that the little dell with its house, garden and stream was the extent of her world. She had no desire to go out into the woods, or return to a life of hunger and cold, taunted by the village children and chased by the farmers. The garden provided a continuous supply of fresh food and when provisions like flour started to run low, another sack would appear in the pantry just in time. At first this puzzled her a little, but when queried, Wyckham would say something like, "I noticed you were running low so I got up early and ground some more". When she asked how, he led her down to the stream where a shed stood, that she somehow hadn't noticed before. It sheltered a small water wheel and grindstone. She shrugged to herself and left it at that. Soon she stopped wondering about the odd little things that continually happened about the place. She was content.

The seasons came and went and Magrite cleaned, cooked and gardened as seemed necessary and in the evenings or sometimes during the day the two

would sit and talk or he'd teach her something from his vast store of knowledge. It seemed there wasn't anything he didn't know. She learned practical things like knitting and sewing or fun things like painting and singing and it became not uncommon at all on a sunny afternoon to hear the sounds of the old man's baritone, just a little fragile, mingled with the clear soprano voice of the young girl, drifting through the woods. Of course there was no one there to hear them. No one that is, except a young woodcutter who occasionally past along the path on the nearest ridge, taking a short cut to the villages on the far side of the trees. To him the snatches of music were eerie and mysterious and he hurried on his way, eager to be out of earshot as soon as possible. His tales of these encounters, told in the local taverns and embellished as seemed appropriate, helped to keep the outside world away from the woods where he made his livelihood, and incidentally, also away from the pair in the glade.

The years passed pleasantly for Magrite as she grew from a young girl into a woman. Her memories of her cruel life outside the woods began to fade and she took to calling her companion 'Uncle Wyck'. On his part he had become very attached to her and wished many times that he was younger. Just how much younger, Magrite would never guess.

As she observed the cycles of the year passing outside the glade, Magrite, living in her sheltered hollow where she could harvest all year round, slowly began to notice that each year the winter winds and wild weather crept just that little bit more into the garden and the house was just that little bit colder during the day. Summer on the other hand brought hotter days with less water in the stream to drive the waterwheel and every time he commented on it Uncle Wyck would finish by saying, "I must be getting old ..." but Magrite never made the connection.

One winter the snow finally reached the house and blanketed everything in a thick white coat. Inside the two spent most of the day and the evenings in front of the fire. She would carry wood to keep it blazing from a pile that he showed her in the far corner of the garden and he let her into his study to stay warm.

One day soon after, she returned from the kitchen to find him stepping out of the wardrobe.

“What were you doing in there Uncle?”

“Oh, I got confused” he said, scratching his head. “Now where was I?” and he went over to a bookshelf and took down a book, flicked it open, randomly, stared at it a minute and put it back.

“Are you feeling alright?” she asked.

“I’m feeling a bit faint” he replied and moved towards his favourite chair by the fire, but on the way something odd happened. He seemed not to notice the lectern in his way and walking up to it he appeared to pass right through it fading a little as he did so.

Magrita blinked and everything was as it was before. The fire burned bright and Wyckam sat staring into the hot coals pondering something as usual. She filed the incident away for later thought.

For the next month or two the wood pile looked like it would last out the Winter, never shrinking from day to day even though the fire burned all day and night, but just as the continuous cold began to take its toll on the old man, the supply of sticks and kindling started to run down. Then one day there was a knock at the door.

The two of them started. This was a most unusual turn of events. Neither of them had spoken to another living being for years.

“Quick! Into the kitchen” he whispered and she hurried quietly off down the hallway as he moved slowly to the front door.

He opened it a crack and peered out.

“Good day Sir, or rather should I say Cold day Sir.” It was the wood cutter.

“What do you want young man?”

“May I come in? It’s freezing out here.”

“Not so fast. Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Piedlan... the woodcutter.” He said rubbing his mittened hands together and sticking them under his armpits. “I was passing up on the ridge and saw your smoke, and it being so cold this year I thought you might need some extra firewood.” He motioned to a bundle of sticks at his side against which his axe lay. He was never one to pass up a business opportunity and despite all the stories, he’d decided to see if he could make a bit of money out of the old man. In any case half of those stories were ones he’d started in the first place and if that was so, why should he trust the rest of the tales, hence his diversion to the cottage door.

Wyckham pondered for a second or two while the young man shivered in an exaggerated fashion. “Very well, come on in and bring your bundle with you”, the wood cutter followed him into the study. “Just put it down by the hearth. Now how much do I owe you?”

Piedlan quickly dreamed up an exorbitant figure to bargain from and much to his surprise the old man just said, “Wait here. I’ll be back in a moment with the money” and went out into the hallway and from there into his bedroom. As you would expect, he had very little need for money in his little world and so he didn’t carry any with him. He needed to go and organise some, out of sight of Piedlan and for that matter, out

of sight of Magrite who was by now curious about the visitor she had heard enter.

Once she had heard the sound of the old man's door closing, she slipped quietly down the hall and into the study where the wood cutter stood warming his hands by the fire with his back to the door.

At the sound of her slippers he turned, expecting it to be Wyckham. "Oh!" he said, his surprise exceeded only by his pleasure at seeing such a handsome maid.

"H.. h.. Hello" she stuttered in reply, shyness spreading like a rash across her face. Her heart pounded and she felt warm all over. There was something new and strange in the way she felt, but somehow it felt good and she smiled broadly. Without regular social contact there was no feigned coyness in her manner. "Who are you?"

"Piedlan. I've come to sell your father some fire wood."

"Oh, that's not my father. That's just Uncle Wyck. He's not really my uncle, I just call him that. I'm sort of his housekeeper, cook, that kind of thing. You haven't been here before, at least not since I've been here."

"No. No-one wants to come here. There are scary stories about the old man. They say he's a wizard or something magic like that. They reckon he'd turn you into a toad or rabbit if he caught you."

"Then why aren't you afraid?"

"Well, I started half the stories to keep people out of the trees and away from my wood supply. He's taking a long time to get the money."

"Oh we don't use money here normally. I guess he's forgotten where he keeps it." There was a muffled bang from the other room.

“Is he alright? May be we should go look.”

“No. He’ll have just bumped into something. He’s starting to lose his sight a bit. It happens all the time.” In fact it had happened on and off since she came to the house. Always when Uncle Wyck was out of sight somewhere and mainly from near the study. She’d never actually seen him bump into anything and make that sound but that’s what he said it was and who was she to doubt him.

“So there’s been just the two of you?” he said. “Here alone, for years?”

“Yes. It’s very pleasant. Uncle Wyck is very kind to me and until the last year or so the weather’s been good and we’ve had a quiet life.” A flash of her old life and the world outside flicked into her mind along with just a little curiosity.

“What’s it like out there?”

“Out where?”

“Out there, beyond the trees. It’s a long time since I’ve been far from the house.”

This was just the opportunity Piedlan had been hoping for, for as they spoke he had fallen for the beautiful young woman and to be truthful, she had begun to feel a strong attraction to him.

“Maybe I could show you sometime...soon.”

“I don’t think I should. Uncle Wyck wouldn’t like it.”

“He’s not your father. You’re old enough to make your own choices aren’t you?”

“I suppose so. Will you be coming back again? With more wood”

“Well, yes. If he hurries up and pays me for this lot”, he said motioning towards the pile on the hearth.

“I’ll think about it then and maybe you can show me when the weather’s better. I’d better go now though. Goodbye” and she slipped out the door and into the kitchen just before Wyckham returned with the money to see the bemused looking woodcutter standing by the fire.

“There you go. That should be right” he said handing over some very old looking but clearly never used coins.

“Thank you ...?”

“Wyckham, my name’s Wyckham.”

“Fine then, Wyckham. If you like I can come by with more when I’m passing to help get you through the winter.”

“Yes, yes, that would be nice, just don’t mention it in the village though, there’s a good chap.”

“If you say so. Well I’ll be going then. I’ll see you in a few days” and he moved out into the hallway and through the front door, giving a surreptitious look down the passage as he went.

She was not to be seen.

As the winter passed, Piedlan dropped by a couple of times a week with firewood and on most occasions the young couple would find a way to talk while the old man went to get the money. For some reason it always took him while and was accompanied by the strange noises of the first visit.

For several weeks all went well and they slowly got to know a bit about each other and their respective lives. Once or twice Magrite had to hide in the study when they heard Wyckham returning, but she managed to slip out afterwards and as far they knew he was still unaware that they’d met. Then one day she wasn’t

quite quick enough and he saw her disappearing into the kitchen and figured it out.

After the wood cutter had gone, he called her to the study and in stern tones suggested, almost ordered her in fact, not to talk to him again.

“He’s a no good lad that one”, he said, “Living in the woods, grubbing around in the undergrowth and swindling poor old men like me. I know he over charges for his tiny bundles of sticks. You’re best to keep away from him lass.”

“If you say so Uncle”, she replied.

Of course by now the two were quite smitten with each other and she had no intention of leaving it there, so next time he came by, she very carefully snuck into the study, quickly told him to come to her window that night and left, well before the old man returned.

The die had been cast and their fate sealed, though little they knew it.

Afterward, Wyckham queried Magrite and for the first time she lied to him, saying she had stayed in the kitchen throughout the visit.

“Good.” The old man said. “It’s for the best, you’ll see.” In fact she didn’t see at all. From what she knew of her friend he was a hard working, intelligent, kind and handsome young man and her womanly instincts drew her to him more with each memory of their meetings. She also didn’t see the jealousy that was welling up inside ‘Uncle Wyck’ but then how could she, after all, in her whole life she had never had or done anything before that would cause anyone to be jealous. She was puzzled, but determined not to let it get in her way and so she spent the rest of the day waiting for dusk to fall.

Spring was nearly upon them and evenings in the glade were returning to their regular mild temperatures. If it kept up, they wouldn't need firewood in a week or so. It was definitely time to make a move before she lost all contact with Piedlan again.

After dinner, the young woman and the old man sat by the fire for a while. He soon dropped off to sleep in his chair and she wrapped a blanket around him and placed a spark guard over the fireplace. He would wake in the morning as he had done increasingly lately, a little stiff but still in the same position.

She picked up the candle, quietly slipped out the door, down the hall and into her room, her heart pounding in expectation. The snoring from the study measured out the time as she waited for the promised tap at the window. Then it came. She leaned over, opened the casement and seeing her hearts desire outside, whispered, "I'll come straight out. Stay there."

She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and crept out the back door making a point of leaving her window unlatched, but closed and her door locked.

She felt the warmth of his caress as they fell into each other's arms. It seemed so natural.

"Come on Magrite! I'll show where I live. Once you know how to get there we can meet whenever you wish." and he took her by the hand.

She smiled in the darkness and followed him out of the garden through the front gate that still stood open, as it had the evening she had arrived all those years ago.

Through the woods they hurried, Piedlan pointing out landmarks to help her find the way in future, while she tried hard to fix them in her mind. In about an hour they came to a small clearing were his hut stood

surrounded by chopping blocks and various domestic items. A small garden awaited the spring growth just by the door. It was rough compared to Uncle Wyck's house but it looked homely enough. They went inside, out of the gathering dew.

Exactly what transpired there I wouldn't care to say, but suffice to say that it was almost dawn when the two rushed off down the path back to the glade again. Magrite was keen not to arouse Wyckham's suspicion but had left it a little late and as she slipped through the gate. Unseen by her, the old man was looking out at the first light of day from the study window.

She sneaked in the back door, into her room, and lay down. Although puffed from running home she was happy, very happy.

With the warmer weather, the wood cutter stopped coming by the house regularly. In the daylight that is. By night, he would often meet his young love and they'd spend the hours of darkness in each others arms, unaware that Wyckham knew what was going on.

During this time the old man kept the knowledge to himself, but as the months passed, Magrite started to show signs of gaining weight, something she'd not done before and soon she was looking decidedly like she was expecting a baby.

'Uncle Wyck's possessiveness, until now kept well hidden, finally bubbled to the surface and one evening he waited in the shadows for the young man to arrive.

When Piedlan arrived and Magrite had slipped outside, the old man hurried out the front door and stopped them at the gate.

"And where do you think you're taking my girl then, wood cutter?"

“We’re in love, Uncle Wyck and I’m going to be with him. I’m tired of being cooped up here. It’s very nice here but I want to see what happens out in the real world, beyond the woods.”

“In love are we? What an ungrateful girl. After all I’ve done for you. Can’t even wait until the old man dies. Going to just leave me here to rot were you?”

By now he was getting quite worked up and in the flickering light from the windows, Magrite could see objects in the house, shimmering and fading one by one. Wyckham went on raving at them.

“I’ll teach you to steal my only companion you young...” If it hadn’t been night time they would have seen his face turning red. He started to wave his hands around, and then out of the pocket of his long coat he took a shining stick.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with do you girl? Never had a clue have you? Well now you’ll find out and to your regret I’ll wager.” He scribed an arc in the air over his head with the stick and began chanting in a weird untranslatable tongue. Behind him the house itself seemed to wobble and start to fade.

“I may be old but there’s still enough power in me to teach you a lesson. Never had to face a wizard before have you?”

The young couple gasped with the realisation that all the stories had been true. He seemed such a nice, trustworthy, old man and he had been so kind to Magrite, but now all the strange incidents that she had let pass over the years suddenly made sense. Like the time he had appeared to walk through the lectern and the shimmering and fading house behind him. He was obviously slowly losing his powers and the enchanted world he had created was disappearing as he concentrated his energies on his wrath.

The two tried to turn and run, but found they could not move their feet. Tree roots had erupted from the ground beneath them and entwined themselves around their ankles, holding them fast.

“Well now. What shall I do with you two conspirators?”

“I’m sorry my love,” Piedlan said, wrapping Magrite in his arms, “If only I had my axe I could cut these roots and free us.”

“Don’t worry wood cutter. You would be no match for my friends the trees anyway.”

“Now doesn’t that look so romantic? The two of you in each others arms. So in love. Well say goodbye because it’ll be the last words you’ll ever speak” and he raised himself to his full height, seeming to stretch above the house and into the starry black night.

“Goodbye Piedlan,” she said. “I will always love you.”

“And I you, he replied.”

They kissed and as they did a bolt of blue fire exploded at the tip of Wyckham’s stick and plunging down upon the couple it enveloped them in its glow.

At the same time the old man cried aloud and began to collapse into his coat, his crumpled hat toppling into the sagging heap of fabric.

Behind it the house and garden had all but faded, disappearing with the power that had been the wizards for so many decades.

Within the glowing orb, the forms of the couple could be seen transforming; slowly, slowly shrinking and changing until standing on the bare earth stood two birds, a Raven and a Dove.

The Raven squawked and the Dove cooed back. A tear fell from her pretty eye, no longer able to understand the voice of her soul mate.

They looked around at the clearing where the house and garden had stood. There was nothing but bare earth where the wizard had kept the woods at bay for so long, using just his will; a will that had finally failed him in his old age, twisted by jealousy and the desire for love.

Circling higher and higher the two birds left the scene of their demise, the Raven heading for the wood cutters hut, the Dove following closely. At least there he thought they would be left in peace, and so they were.

They were an odd couple, the big black bird and the small white bird but the Raven defended his territory vigorously and soon no other birds dared to come near as he built a nest in the eaves of the little building.

Spring, imminent when the spell had been cast, came upon them all too soon and within a month the collection of twigs and down held two bright, speckled jewels. Eggs of a sort never before seen. The birds tended them day and night until, late in the season, there struggled forth, two chicks.

These chicks were not like either of their parents, being neither black nor white, but both. Neither were they large like the Raven nor small like the Dove, but a size in between. These were the first Magpies and they grew to have a voice loud and strong, a voice that could speak, for the old man had cursed the parents, but forgotten the babies waiting to be born.

When they had learned to fly, the babies travelled beyond the woods and into the villages where the people heard their voices and having never seen them before, asked them their name. They replied 'Magpie' after their mother 'Mag'rite and father 'Pie'dlan and they told the villagers the story of the old man, the girl and the wood cutter.

As they grew older, the Magpies had chicks and they had chicks and so on and so on until they had spread far and wide around the world. This, so the villagers say, is how Magrite and Piedlan beat the curse that they would never speak again, for you can hear their voices echo across lands from England and Australia to America and Japan in the cries of their great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grand children, the Magpies.